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NEWS & POLITICS

Thinning the Ranks

Using vaccines as a political weapon, U.S. military leaders have wrecked the force's combat readiness and morale, current and former soldiers tell Tablet

BY CLAYTON FOX

Under pressure from Republicans in Congress, the Defense Department announced at the start of this year that it would no longer require American service members to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

The policy change faced fierce resistance from the military's top brass, including Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. In a memo sent in January repealing the requirement for soldiers to be vaccinated, Secretary Austin continued to credit the vaccine with "the many lives we saved ... and the high level of readiness we have maintained."

But critics of the military's COVID-19 policy, including active and former service members who spoke with Tablet for this article, tell a different story. They say that the requirement for troops to receive the new vaccines, which included those with natural immunity after recovering from previous COVID-19 infections, was damaging to morale and hurt the military's combat readiness. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., has repeatedly pointed to medical data which suggests that enforcing mass vaccinations on a generally young and healthy population may have actually caused an increase in non-COVID-19 related health problems in the force, though the Defense Department has not provided him or Tablet with a clear interpretation of that data.

By the time the Pentagon announced it was ending the mandate, 96% of service members across the armed forces had been vaccinated. However, a significant number of troops declined the shots, objecting on religious, scientific, or medical grounds. Of those objectors, 8,339 were kicked out of the military, a loss that was particularly acute coming in the midst of the worst recruitment crisis in 50 years, which saw the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Air Force all struggling to attract or retain members. The number of ejected objectors might continue to rise, as more service members who declined to get the jab are penalized for "refusing to obey a lawful order." Many of those who were forced out, meanwhile, were given a "general" discharge rather than an "honorable" one, putting them at a disadvantage for future employment.

While a 96% compliance rate suggests general cohesion and a functioning military, the lurking reality is that a large percentage of troops who got the vaccine appear to have done so under duress. Tablet spoke with eight active and former service people for this article who come from some of the Army's most prestigious units, as well as the Coast Guard. They paint a picture of a force that is divided and embittered

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and say that many of their compatriots resented being forced to take the shots against their will or even conscience in order to keep food on the table for their families. One soldier estimated that as many as 90% of his unit didn't want to get the shots, and that many who caved now feel they should have held out for the mandate to be repealed. Another said he only knew three people in his entire platoon that got the shots "of their own volition" prior to the implementation of the mandate.

John Frankman, who declined the shot and left the Army in July 2023 after eight years of active service, including three as a Green Beret, told Tablet, "I'm getting out specifically because of the shot, even though it's not mandatory anymore. I've lost out on enough opportunities, it doesn't seem worthwhile for me to stay in."

An Army infantryman from an elite unit who wished to remain anonymous told Tablet that he saw a senior non-commissioned officer from his unit tell a group of vaccine holdouts that they "were the reason America was in decline." A paratrooper who spoke with Tablet anonymously said that leadership in his unit began an intense campaign to pressure soldiers to get the COVID-19 vaccines months before the Army officially implemented its mandate on Aug. 24, 2021. The paratrooper says that he heard a company commander in his unit say that he would "make my soldiers' lives as miserable as fucking possible until they get the shot."

For the commanders, meanwhile, who were tasked with enforcing public health positions that turned out to be false, there are now concerns about reputational damage. "Soldiers know your position. You can say some untruths [and] no one's going to give you a hard time about that," said one former company commander. "But when you're changing the story every week and obviously just saying nonsense because your higher command is telling you that ... I saw personally that we were alienating our rank and file in a big way. We were losing their trust, and I didn't want to be a part of that."

In many cases, commanders

"They paint a picture of a force that is divided and embittered and say that many of their compatriots resented being forced to take the shots against their will."

embraced these policies with a commitment that went beyond the zeal for enforcing Army policies that is common among junior officers, according to the paratrooper. Rather, he calls the push to make soldiers get the COVID-19 vaccine the single most "divisive and destructive" event he witnessed in the military in more than a decade of service. As he would later write in a formal complaint submitted to the Army that was reviewed by Tablet, the COVID-19 vaccination "became by far the most important issue in our brigade and in the division." That memo continued:

In order to get reluctant soldiers to take these experimental vaccines, commanders [...] were encouraged to use all manners of persuasion and bullying, and even to do things that were plainly illegal (such as denying soldiers the right to attend career-enhancing military schools based on their vaccination status).

From the military's standpoint, the mandate was not just a matter of life and death but also of national security. If infections swept through the ranks due to troops refusing to take available vaccines, not only would that destroy morale and discipline, but it could also

leave the country unable to respond to an attack or emergency.

The problem with this argument is twofold: First, COVID-19 never posed a significant acute risk to healthy young people—the very demographic that overwhelmingly makes up the military—which means the vaccination drive was, at best, unnecessary. And secondly, according to several sources, the military's approach to the vaccines, rather than emphasizing combat readiness, was used as a disciplinary tool to enforce political conformity and punish independent thought and ideological dissent.

"I've seen everything from [Don't Ask Don't Tell] repealed to gay marriage legalized to people are allowed to put gay pride flags in their offices now," said a member of an elite infantry unit with over a decade of service. The jarring thing, he explained, was that the same military that boasts about its tolerance became rigidly intolerant on the question of bodily autonomy and vaccines. "You can get exemptions for religious beards if you're Muslim, you can get an exemption to wear headgear, instead of your issued hat. That's fine. I'm all for it ... If you can do the job you should be allowed to do it ... But then for a vaccine that's violating the Nuremberg Code, and all of the sudden we're the problem, that's what's bizarre to me."

Many of those who refused the vaccines did so on the grounds that the mandate violated the Nuremberg Code of ethics for "permissible medical experiments." The first line of the code reads, "The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential." Those citing the code point out that these COVID vaccines had not even finished their clinical trials at the time troops were being pressured and/or mandated to take them, and were therefore being asked to sacrifice their Nuremberg derived rights. Health authorities in the U.S. dismiss that claim on the grounds that the vaccines had received emergency authorizations and were therefore not strictly "experimental."

With two exceptions, all the soldiers who spoke with Tablet insisted that they remain anonymous—even those who are already out of the service.

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BY A.J. BERKOVITZ



One former officer in the Judge Advocate General's Corps, the Army's legal branch, said: "The fact that I am not subject to the UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice], that there is no way that they can touch me, and yet I still don't want to identify myself, should tell you something."

That attorney, along with several other soldiers interviewed for this article (all of whom come from different backgrounds and do not share a clear set of political views) painted a disturbing picture that went beyond concerns about vaccine mandates. Given how intensely polarized national debates around COVID became, the Pentagon's vaccination push—even in a best case scenario—was likely to cause some dissension in the ranks. But according to these current and former service members, the policy was not the result of medical or

warfighting needs. Rather, they say that the emphasis on vaccinations was part of a larger push to overtly politicize the military—one of the only institutions left in the U.S. that still retains a degree of broad bipartisan support.

It may be tempting to dismiss this account as merely the grumbling of an isolated group, but their concerns echo a larger public debate. A series of recent reports, insider leaks, and congressional hearings have highlighted the tension between the military's newfound adoption of ideological causes and its traditional warfighting mission. Indeed, there is no real question that the military has become more ideological in recent years since the top brass, moving in step with the White House, now openly touts the embrace of progressive diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. The debate is over whether such policies strengthen the military, as leaders from Secretary Austin down insist they do, or cripple it as whistleblowers, watchdog groups, and conservative politicians have claimed.

Last October, U.S. Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar acknowledged that the military uses racial preferences as a criteria for acceptance to military service academies like West Point and ROTC contracts. The crucial point in Prelogar's argument, and one that has been echoed by dozens of senior military leaders, including in an amicus brief filed to the Supreme Court last fall ahead of its ruling on affirmative actions policies in university admissions, is that engineering racial diversity is not simply a moral or social good but an imperative of warfighting. "It is a critical national security imperative to attain diversity within the officer corps. And, at present, it's not possible to achieve that diversity without race-conscious admissions," Prelogar testified to the Supreme Court last October.

This is how the difficult and divisive questions about vaccinations—were they really necessary for healthy young people? Did the government and medical authorities misrepresent their risks and benefits?—became truly explosive. The Pentagon now treats its medical policies, diversity goals, and national security missions as inseparable if not

interchangeable. That makes it nearly impossible for the military to do an honest internal assessment of how specific decisions affected the force and the nation's overall warfighting capacity.

While the Pentagon at present may be ill-equipped to act as its own auditor, there is still a vital need for a clear-eyed assessment of how and why the military imposed vaccine mandates, and what the consequences of those mandates have been so far.

The COVID-19 mandate forms part of a pattern of vaccination controversies in the U.S. military. In the first Gulf War, over 150,000 U.S. troops were vaccinated against the anthrax bacterium, which military brass feared might be used by Saddam Hussein on American troops. (Notably, the United States also sold Saddam spores and technology that might have allowed Iraq to produce weaponized anthrax.)

One problem with the anthrax vaccine was that any expected weaponization of anthrax would come through an inhaled exposure and the vaccine the military mandated had only been tested in humans against exposure through the skin. In spite of the fact that the anthrax vaccine wasn't licensed for prevention of disease via inhalation, in 1998, the DoD pushed forward with a militarywide mandate. Subsequently, a small group of soldiers refused to take it, with at least 500 eventually being thrown out of the military. Along the way, many were placed in military prison for their refusals.

Prior to the mandates, in 1997, a new section was added to Title 10 of the U.S. Code, the consolidation and codification of the general and permanent laws of the United States, requiring the DoD to inform soldiers any time they are being asked to take an "investigational" drug, the reasons why, and any possible side effects that might arise, as well as garner consent for administration. The only way for informed consent to be waived is by a written waiver from the president, and only if it's deemed necessary for national security. This was reaffirmed in an executive order signed by President Clinton in 1999. But, the DoD didn't consider the anthrax vaccine

investigational, in spite of it being used in an unauthorized manner, and so they didn't feel the need to get a waiver.

In 2001, then Attorney General of Connecticut Richard Blumenthal advocated for the mandates to be thrown out due to the lack of a presidential waiver and concerns about quality control issues and FDA violations in its manufacturing. He wrote a letter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld arguing that, "In effect, the military is forcing its personnel to serve as human guinea pigs for an unlicensed drug that has not been proven to be safe or effective." Blumenthal, now a Democratic senator, has taken a very different view of the COVID vaccine. In January 2021 Blumenthal told reporters, "we need these vaccines to go in the arms of our veterans, and into the arms of all Americans." Tablet has reached out to Sen. Blumenthal's office for comment on why the unlicensed COVID vaccines were different from the unlicensed anthrax vaccines. As of publication, we have received no reply.

The anthrax vaccine mandate was thrown out after six years, with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia issuing a permanent injunction in *Doe v. Rumsfeld*. But the legal backlash spurred the creation of an entirely new designation within the FDA, the Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). Codified in the 2004 Project BioShield Act, Congress created a pathway for the FDA to authorize unapproved biologics for emergency use in an imagined bioterror attack. Wasting no time, the FDA granted the anthrax vaccines an EUA in January 2005, which then allowed the military to resume anthrax vaccinations, though only on a voluntary basis. By year's end, the FDA had given the anthrax vaccine full licensure for use against inhalational anthrax, and the military mandates were back in force for troops headed to regions with a higher risk of biological warfare. Looking back, Dale Saran, a former Marine aviator and JAG who represented anthrax vaccine refusers, and who is now a civil attorney, told Tablet that he believes, "Anthrax was the trial run." Saran thinks that at least some of what drove the push for COVID-19 vaccines inside the military is simply profit.

"The biotech pharmaceutical industry saw that they could wedge their way in and get a chunk of that fat DoD pipeline."

"The biggest government contractors have always been the Raytheon's ... All of a sudden with the biodefense thing, Pfizer is like the third-largest defense contractor. The biotech pharmaceutical industry saw that they could wedge their way in and get a chunk of that fat DoD pipeline."

The first emergency use authorization for the COVID-19 vaccines was announced on Dec. 11, 2020, for the "Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine," and within days, key military installations were vaccinating soldiers on a voluntary basis. In a sign of things to come, a messaging campaign was launched to motivate soldiers to get vaccinated. The Twitter account of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division, for example, retweeted a Dec. 16 CDC posting which said, "Side effects after getting a #COVID19 vaccine are normal signs your body is building protection. Side effects may even feel like flu and might affect your ability to do daily activities, but they should go away in a few days." The tweet encouraged its members to check the CDC website for information. A few days later, on Dec. 19, the same account posted a photo of one of its commanders getting his shot, "demonstrating confidence in the scientists and medical professionals supporting #OperationWarpSpeed."

Soldiers from units across the Army told Tablet that much more pressure was being applied behind the scenes. Others, however, said that prior to the official mandate, in the words of one soldier, they "never heard another word about" the vaccines. While there is evidence that a culture of bullying and coercion had taken root pre-mandate, this largely depended upon where one was stationed, or even varied unit to unit on a single base. For soldiers in units that made the COVID-19 shot their highest priority, it became virtually impossible to refuse without sacrificing one's career. And that includes America's elite special operations units. According to former Green Beret John Frankman: "Most people got it before it was mandatory because of the pressure put on us."

Long before the latest pandemic, a review of a soldier's vaccination history was a standard part of the military's checklist required for deployment. In the case of COVID-19, however, the difference was the relative lack of risk to young and healthy soldiers, and the new nature of the vaccines. Tablet learned of one special operations unit whose scheduled deployment to train with a foreign military was canceled due to members of the team not being vaccinated—and this was before the military had even imposed a mandate and in spite of the fact that the country they were planning to train in did not require guests to be vaccinated at that time. Responding to questions from Tablet, the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs for the Army said that there was no official policy for this during the pre-mandate period. Such decisions struck a blow that was "especially difficult" in the military's most highly trained and elite units, where, as one former member told Tablet, soldiers "live to deploy."

Meanwhile, unvaccinated soldiers were being treated differently than their vaccinated peers. The vaccinated were allowed to travel freely, and granted unlimited use of gym facilities while the unvaccinated were often denied. In July 2021, leadership at Fort Knox issued more than two dozen "career-killing" GOMOR's (General Officer Memoranda of Reprimand) to unvaccinated soldiers attempting to enter buildings on base

without masks. Vaccinated soldiers were not required to mask for entry. Some installations also awarded extra days off for entire units based on the percentage of soldiers who were vaccinated, creating tension within the ranks.

One former petty officer in the Coast Guard, Andrew Larsen, told Tablet that in March and April 2021, he was not allowed to leave his base to visit family, even though they were within “the allowable ‘out of bounds’ limits of the training center.” Larsen says that he was told by officers on multiple occasions that his refusal to get the COVID-19 vaccine could potentially affect his “ability to be retained,” meaning that he could be pushed out of the service for not getting the shot. Larsen also relayed a story to Tablet about the differing treatment of the vaccinated and unvaccinated on-board his ship, the *Harriet Lane*. In July 2021, while out at sea, Larsen says that a recently vaccinated shipmate came down with COVID-19. The unvaccinated were placed in a separate berthing for three days, with “five minutes of prison yard time” a day for meals on the deck, in spite of the fact that none of the unvaccinated crew members had tested positive for COVID-19. The vaccinated, adds Larsen, were not tested at all.

On March 8, 2021, the official podcast of the 18th Airborne Corps released an episode titled “The COVID Vaccine Information War,” in which multiple soldiers were featured who had initially resisted the shots before coming around, which was framed as good behavior, while the conversation framed skeptics as fools who needed to trust their betters.

Aside from its patronizing tone, there was a more serious problem with the podcast: It presented information that was either false or so premature as to be unreliable. For example, the podcast’s guests, medical professionals inside the military, stated that mass vaccination would contribute to “herd immunity.” That claim was widely repeated during the rollout of the vaccines and used to argue that individuals had a moral obligation to get the shot for the good of their fellow citizens—or in this case their fellow soldiers.

That claim, however, was untrue—a

fact that had already been known months before the 18th Airborne Corps released its podcast. “Pfizer has presented no evidence in its data today that the vaccine has any effect on virus carriage or shedding, which is the fundamental basis for herd immunity,” Food and Drug Administration adviser Dr. Patrick Moore had stated in December 2020, following the authorization of the mRNA COVID vaccines. In a later episode of the 18th Airborne Corps’ podcast, from July 20, 2021, the same guests predicted that the delta variant would primarily affect the unvaccinated population and reiterated that there had been “no safety concerns” from the accelerated trials. One doctor, Sammy Choi, chief of research at Fort Bragg’s Womack Army Medical Center, said his pitch to troops was, “Would you do it for humanity?”

Despite differing on other details, all of the military service members who spoke with Tablet agreed that once the Aug. 24, 2021, memo came down from Secretary Austin making the mandate official, the Army went full bore getting the holdouts vaccinated with a rhetoric of divisiveness. One of the paratroopers we interviewed heard a commander tell one of his holdouts, upon getting vaccinated, “Wow. You finally did it. Welcome to the team.” Another said he witnessed a private getting excoriated by a sergeant major right after the mandate was announced, telling him “what a piece of crap he was” and that he was “a disgrace to the unit.” Jake, a former Coast Guard aviator, told Tablet that when he raised objections with a superior, he was told, “Your research is wrong. The vaccine is fine. Get it.” Or as Saran told Tablet: “It was going to be vaccine *über alles*, and rules be damned.”

The military insists, even now, that the COVID-19 vaccine mandates were a “lawful” order. But there are significant legal questions that have been raised about whether that is true. Several lawsuits have been filed by current and former soldiers against the mandates and the ongoing threat of punitive actions by the DoD against those who refused to receive them.

One of those lawsuits, *Wilson v. Austin*

(co-litigated by Saran), outlines many of the key arguments against the legality of the mandates. The primary argument of the suit cites DoD precedent established in 2008, reaffirming the 1997 rule for “investigational” drugs—that these can only be mandated in an emergency “if the President determines, in writing, that providing to members of the armed forces an option to refuse is not in the interests of national security.” In the case of the 2021 mandates, those determinations were issued by the secretary of defense, not the president. The complaint goes on to demonstrate that even after the FDA approved the Pfizer vaccine—two days before the DoD announced its mandate—the actual vials administered by the military to its soldiers continued to be of the unapproved emergency use version until at least June 2022.

The military says that the statute doesn’t apply in this case, as the EUA “Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine” is “interchangeable” with the FDA-approved Pfizer-BioNTech “Comirnaty” vaccine, according to the FDA. But neither Pfizer nor Moderna ever applied for “interchangeability” status with the FDA for those products, as is normally required for such a designation. And, in its Aug. 23, 2021, reauthorization of the EUA Pfizer product, the FDA itself acknowledged that the products were “legally distinct,” though they did insist that this wouldn’t impact “safety or effectiveness.” In addition, the plaintiffs note that the official authorization of the Pfizer “Comirnaty” vaccine, issued Aug. 23, 2021, “lists the ‘start’ and ‘end’ marketing dates as ‘8/23/2021’—in other words, it was removed from the market *on the same day* it received FDA approval.” The same sleight of hand was performed for Moderna’s “Spikevax,” the brand name for the FDA-approved version of its vaccine.

Some soldiers were willing to get vaccinated if they could take the FDA approved product, like Staff Sergeant Steven Brown, a crypto linguist in the Army. In a declaration submitted to the court, Brown states that the DoD “deceive[d]” and “coerce[d]” soldiers to take the EUA product by misrepresenting it as the fully authorized Comirnaty in “Fact Sheets,” which were distributed to



Stamp of Courage

From the Smithsonian National Postal Museum

The Dorchester, an aging luxury liner that had been converted for troop transport during World War II, was sailing from New York to Greenland when it was torpedoed by a German U-boat on February 2, 1943. A 3-cent black stamp was issued on May 28, 1948, to honor four chaplains including Rabbi Alexander D. Goode for keeping soldiers calm after the boat was hit and for giving up their life preservers to crew members. All four went down with the ship and were awarded posthumous Purple Hearts.

—Alyssa Quint

members of the military. (Peter Marks, the FDA's head of biologics evaluation, has said that the FDA used "enforcement discretion" to waive the requirement for providers to share the normal EUA consent notification.) Brown states that on Sept. 27, 2021, he told his military primary care provider he was willing to get the FDA approved vaccine, but was told it was not being provided. A General Officer Memorandum of Reprimand was placed on his permanent record and Brown was slated for involuntary separation—that is, firing—on July 1, 2022. Ultimately, Brown was not "separated" directly like many of his colleagues; the military "flagged" him, preventing reenlistment when his contract was up. According to Saran, "His career was killed because of his refusal to take the shot. Unquestionably."

While the loss of any dedicated

soldier can be a blow, pushing Brown out was especially costly, since it wasted the significant investment that goes into recruiting and training the highly specialized crypto linguists, whose initial Army schooling alone can take almost two years. Green Beret Frankman told Tablet that he heard the concerns expressed by Brown from members of his own unit. "Guys were worried it wasn't FDA approved, that's why they didn't get it ... they wanted to be ordered to take the shot so they could hold someone accountable if they got screwed up."

According to Saran, the former Marine JAG and one of the co-litigators on the suit against the Army, the single most important legal argument against the mandates is the fact that, according to the DoD's own definition of a vaccine, the mRNA products aren't vaccines at all.

According to DoD statute 6205.02, a vaccine is defined as, "A preparation that [1] contains one or more components of a biological agent or toxin and [2] induces a protective immune response against that agent when administered to an individual." Since the mRNA shots contain *instructions* for the body to produce spike protein but do not actually "contain" any of the virus (including the spike) at all, Saran and his co-litigators argue that "the mRNA shots are not 'vaccines' under DODI 6205.02."

Many of the plaintiffs in *Wilson v. Austin*, and the soldiers we spoke to, filed religious accommodation requests, in the hopes of getting an approved exception to the requirements. That, too, proved an uphill battle, with a pattern of mockery and denial. By Dec. 15, 2022, the Army had received 4,437 religious accommodation requests from active troops and had approved 119. They denied 1,797 and left in limbo the remaining 2,521. In *Coker v. Austin*, an affidavit submitted in another case against the military mandates, 18-year enlisted man Dixon Brown says that his senior enlisted leader told him, "The Bible doesn't tell you not to get vaccinated." Many others faced suspicion that their religious beliefs weren't sincere, but as just one example of sincerity, Frankman told Tablet that in making his choice he

had to consider that, "You're not just living for this world, you have to be, you're held accountable for what you do later on, when you stand before God. And it helps give you that moral understanding that ends don't justify means."

While those religious sentiments may have been fairly common within the ranks, military leadership preached a different gospel. Most chaplains encouraged vaccination, and a look at the case of the *Navy SEALs v. Biden* reveals that, according to an investigation of the Navy's procedures for evaluating religious accommodation requests, there was a "disapproval template" form but not one to process approvals. Saran provided Tablet with examples from across the military of rote responses to religious accommodation requests that belie the predetermined approach taken. As several of the Navy SEALs testified, superiors told them that "all religious accommodation requests will be denied" and that command "has no patience or tolerance for service members who refuse COVID-19 vaccination" and wants them "out of the SEAL community." One SEAL reported that his command master chief told him that the lawyers were using language like, "when they get denied"—not if.

As of Dec. 15, 2022, the Army had received 783 requests for medical exemptions from active personnel and approved only 31. In two examples from other services detailed in *Wilson V. Austin*, even seemingly valid medical exemptions were not granted. Air National Guard F-16 pilot Joshua Wilson, after 19 years of experience and two tours in Iraq, "submitted a medical exemption request ... because he has a documented allergy to the contents of the shots, a prior asymptomatic infection for COVID-19 with documented antibodies, and potential for clotting due to vein anatomy and a prior surgery. Two different medical doctors have recommended Major Wilson *not* get an mRNA shot. Notwithstanding all of this, he has been told he will likely be separated for declining." A former Naval combat helicopter pilot and current member of the Naval Reserve, Lieutenant Commander Michael Groothousen, is a cancer survivor with a medical history including

Bell's palsy, migraines, and high blood pressure. He submitted a medical exemption for the vaccines but was later told his request "had never been submitted" and was then ordered to be vaccinated by a Navy doctor he had never met. One year prior to this order, Groothousen had a confirmed case of COVID-19.

On the whole, the impression given from the lawsuits and multiple accounts provided by members of the military is of a purge that used the vaccine mandate as an excuse to cull the force. The apparatus through which these force reductions are carried out is the military's Judge Advocate General's Corps in its legal branch, known as the JAG Corps. According to the anonymous ex-JAG officer who spoke with Tablet—and who repeatedly clarified that he's neither "conservative" nor an "anti-vaxxer"—whenever the DoD wants to reduce force size in a subtle way, they utilize the JAG Corps, the Army's legal-administrative branch, "and that's precisely what happened in the context of the vaccine." At this point, he added, the lawyers are running the whole show, including combat decisions, and commanders are so scared of them, they just get in line. "That increasingly hyperliberal JAG Corps now has full sway over the policies of the DoD," he went on. "So when the DoD wants to vaccinate everyone, the people that are carrying it out are the attorneys." The JAG influence over command decisions led this former officer to decide to leave the service even before the vaccine mandates were announced.

Saran agrees with the view that the military's lawyers have become increasingly powerful. "They wanted to make use of lawyers and what they got was a politicized military out of it." And, he says, that top-down, micromanagement legalese approach has created a calloused machine, capable of enforcing orders without any "sense of higher level obligations ... It's really a will-to-power kind of thing."

This bleak picture of military culture was echoed by nearly every person who spoke to Tablet. Many of them saw the vaccine push as part of

a larger ideological reshaping of the force in which Washington and its administrators in the JAG Corps passed policies disproportionately targeting one group in particular: white, Christian, conservatives.

The flip side of the military's embrace of DEI ideology, is the targeting of holdouts who are presumed to run afoul of the "inclusion" agenda. In February 2021, some six months before the vaccine mandate went into effect, Secretary Austin ordered a militarywide "stand down" to address the "challenge of extremism in the ranks." The following April, the Pentagon announced a new "Countering Extremism Working Group" to deal with extremism. Describing the anti-extremism training implemented by the Department of Defense, one soldier said, "It's all about right-wing extremism. And definitely a climate was developing of, 'If you're a conservative, you need to watch it.'" The problem is that there is no evidence of an extremism problem in the military. In June 2021, just a few months after the working group was established, a study jointly conducted by the U.S. Military Academy and a tech company called Moonshot, found that "active duty troops are less prone than the American public as a whole to seek out information about violent extremism." Another study, published only a few months ago by the RAND Corporation found "no evidence to support the notion that the veteran community, as a whole, manifests higher rates of support for violent extremist groups or extremist beliefs than the American public."

"There's been an agenda at play that does seem to be pushing a focus on things that don't matter in what should be a militarily focused organization, such as paying for the surgeries of transgender members," said Larsen. "At the same time [that the military] is restricting, isolating, saying 'you're undeployable' [to unvaccinated soldiers] because you're medically unsafe, because you're not receiving an experimental gene therapy that hasn't even been fully tested ... that *same* organization is saying they will pay for you to receive this surgery and be stuck on these hormonal therapies that *do* literally limit your ability to

be in isolated situations in many ways," he said, referring to an Army policy issued in June 2021, a few months before the vaccine mandate, that the service would pay for transgender soldiers to receive hormone therapy, mental health care, and surgeries, where deemed necessary. "The fact that those two things occurred at the same time ... to me is just evidence of an agenda at play."

Contrary to what the Beltway image of "anti-vaxxers" might be, the service members who spoke with Tablet for this article were articulate and thoughtful and well read. One young soldier said he believes the current situation, in terms of hubris and lack of readiness, is reminiscent of the French army of the 1930s. "To put it bluntly, we're screwed." The legalistic doublespeak and ideological purging, meanwhile, brought to mind the Soviets. "They can't really put people in gulags now so they just take their career away."

Aside from whatever political agenda animates the Biden administration's DoD, the vaccine campaign also raised vital health and military readiness questions that still need to be answered. As Naval officer Olivia Degenkolb pointed out on the DarkHorse podcast in October of last year, on Aug. 21, 2021, just before the military introduced its

 **PODCAST**



UNORTHODOX

Ep. 374: Rocky Mountain High Notes

Song Exploder host Hrishikesh Hirway's new single, plus a trip Across the JEW.S.A. to Colorado

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mandate, the total number of COVID-19 deaths among the United States' 2.4 million armed services personnel was 28. By Dec. 8, 2022, that number had grown to 96. But whether the vaccines could be causing more harm than good to some of America's youngest and healthiest citizens remains an open question that is all but barred from being asked.

Much was made about the leaked DMED data presented at Sen. Ron Johnson's first COVID-19 roundtable in January 2022, suggesting that a variety of severe medical conditions had seen year-over-year increases of hundreds or even thousands of percent. Johnson sent off a letter to DoD asking for clarification on the data, only to have them respond that the data from the previous five years (2016-20) had been corrupted and made 2021 look extreme by comparison. Upon updating and correcting the historical data, the DoD claimed, some of the 2021 numbers looked like decreases. But a whistleblower approached Johnson's office this March with a new read of the corrected data, which still showed significant increases in 2021 in cases of myocarditis, pulmonary embolism, and complications of heart disease, among other conditions. Johnson followed up again with a letter to Secretary of Defense Austin, asking, "Does DoD agree with the percent changes provided by a DoD whistleblower (indicated above)? If not, why not? ... What steps has DoD taken or will DoD take to investigate whether the increases in certain registered medical diagnoses, including those above, are associated with COVID-19 vaccine adverse events?" Tablet reached out directly to the DoD, which never provided us a response. However, on July 5th, Under Secretary of Defense Gilbert Cisneros did reply to Senator Johnson's office in a letter acknowledging that in fact the whistleblowers' claims were "similar" to their own findings upon re-analysis, but attributed the dramatic increases in myocarditis, hypertensive diseases, and pulmonary embolism among members of the force to COVID infection, rather than vaccination.

As far as the troops we interviewed, none had horror stories of vaccine injury to report. On the other hand, said

one, the culture of military life is such that many guys won't go to the doctor for anything. "There's a brick wall. Don't walk around it, just keep smashing your head against it until it crumbles." But as far as how the vaccine has affected readiness, that same soldier told Tablet, "Vaccinated soldiers get COVID routinely. One sergeant has had COVID like five times, but he's vaccinated and boosted, and each time he gets COVID, it's just as bad, if not worse." Another said, "Dudes that got vaccinated had like the highest infection rates for COVID. I've never had COVID. Almost everyone in my company had COVID." That the vaccinated are more likely to catch COVID-19 than the unvaccinated has now been borne out in multiple peer-reviewed studies, including one recently published by researchers at the Cleveland Clinic.

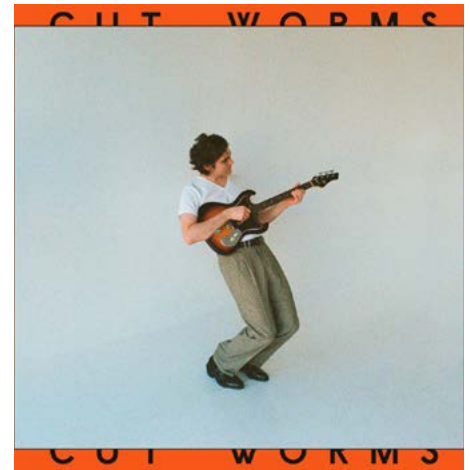
Soldiers also agreed that nothing is likely to change under the military's current leadership. Asked if there was any message he'd like to send to the Army's top brass, one infantryman replied, "I honestly don't think they would care. They've been hearing this nonstop from multiple different sources for years now. They don't care ... I'm not saying this out of bitterness or anger. That's just the way it is."

Meanwhile, despite the mandate being over, the DoD will "continue to review cases of currently serving service members who [remain unvaccinated and] did not request an exemption or accommodation on an individual basis to determine appropriate action."

In other words, despite all the evidence casting doubt on U.S. military leadership's own actions during the pandemic, the brass still has more punishments to mete out.

This article has been updated to reflect that the Department of Defense did reply this July to Senator Johnson's office in a letter that corroborated concern over increased reports of serious medical conditions among servicemembers during 2021, however attributing these to prior COVID infection, rather than vaccination. ■

This article was originally published on August 1, 2023.



Album of the Week

Max Clarke, *Cut Worms*

Max Clarke performs music under the name Cut Worms. His new album, also called *Cut Worms*, has a picture of Clarke on the cover against a white backdrop, like he's been cropped out of a photo. That's what his music sounds like, too. He creates sonic snapshots—delightful trips in the direction of 1950s and 1960s folk music that he calls "pop essentialism."

On the album's single, "Ballad of the Texas King," Clarke sings of walking along on a California night with no one at all and "no law to fight." The lyrics don't provide a clear picture of what happens next, when a long black car pulls up alongside him and offers to show him the "meaning of hell," going on to say "boy, just let me tell you, that's where you are."

He's separated from a love, urges her not to cry, tells her he's found a new song, and at the song's end promises, "I'll be right by your side from Paradise to El Paso." Is it a roundabout way to describe a move from California to Texas. But if it's all an abstract vision that gets Cut Worms from A to B, then it's a very pleasant one. He sings with emphasis as the swirling horns and guitar-picking surround him. *Cut Worms* is romantic music, evocative of a past that feels hazy and specific at the same time.

—David Meir Grossman

THE REST

→ A gunman opened fire outside of a Jewish school in Memphis, Tennessee, after he was thwarted from entering by the building's security system. After Margolin Hebrew Academy-Feinstone Yeshiva staffers alerted police, the man fled the scene before he was eventually shot by police who found him in his truck. The gunman survived and was detained following the incident. Tennessee state authorities have not yet announced charges or suggested a motive, though Assistant Chief of Memphis Police Services Don Crowe said, "I personally truly believe that we have avoided a tragedy. ... I think this suspect was going to harm somebody before the day was over."

→ Number of the Week: 40%. That's how many Americans lack confidence in the military, the lowest number in 25 years, according to a new Gallup poll. Joining analysts at RAND and a growing number of lawmakers, regular Americans from across the political spectrum worry about the state of our armed forces. Confidence among Republicans fell more than 20 points in just the past three years, while among Democrats it dropped 6 points over the past year. That decline in confidence comes just as military leaders struggle to replenish their ranks in the midst of the most significant recruiting crisis in half a century. A recent report found the army was 15,000 soldiers short of its latest recruitment goal.

→ For 10 days, four Nigerian men traversed 3,500 ocean miles while stowed away in a tiny space tied to a net above the rudder of a cargo ship. After running out of food and water, the men survived by drinking salty ocean water that splashed against the ship, while sharks and large fish lurked below the surface. "It was a terrible experience for me," said 38-year-old Opemipo Matthew Yeye, one of the four men who boarded in Lagos before being rescued by Brazilian police when the ship moved into a port in Vitoria. "On board it is not easy. I was shaking, so scared. But I'm here." Unable to sleep with the engine roaring nearby, the exhausted men hung on, hopeful the ship would take them to Europe. Landing in Brazil, two men requested help to get back to Nigeria, while the other two applied for asylum.

→ A suicide bombing left 54 dead and at least 200 wounded at a pro-Taliban political rally in Pakistan on Sunday. The event was organized by Jamiat Ulema Islam Party as it prepares for elections later this year. The party's leader, hard-line cleric and politician Maulana Fazlur Rehman, has survived multiple bomb attacks at political rallies in the past and was not at the event on Sunday. No one has come forward to claim responsibility for the attack, though several militant factions in northern Pakistan could have organized the bombing as a way to incite "confusion, instability, and unrest ahead of the elections," Pakistani security analyst Mahmood Shah told the Associated Press.

→ Billions of dollars in profits might go up in smoke as a pathogen rapidly spreading across American cannabis crops threatens to infect the nation's weed supply. The problem, growers say, is that hop latent viroid, or HLVD, can significantly reduce the potency of the psychoactive compounds of marijuana plants, a problem that cultivators call "dudding." Some critics of today's increasingly strong cannabis products say maybe that's not such a bad thing, but the big movers in the \$32 billion cannabis marketplace don't want to rock the boat with customers who've come to expect a wallop in their pipes. Growers of major operations are now struggling to contain outbreaks.

THE BIG STORY

A Pennsylvania jury sentenced antisemitic murderer Robert Bowers to death on Wednesday for his attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue that killed 11 Pittsburgh worshippers in 2018. While there was some difference of opinion in Pittsburgh's Jewish community over whether Bowers should be given the death penalty, or rot in a cell until his death, prominent members of the community have publicly backed the decision. Stephen Cohen and Barbara Caplan, co-presidents of the New Light Congregation, which lost three members at Bowers' hand, supported the verdict, writing in a statement, "Too often in the past—and not just the recent past—governments and religious authorities have looked away when murder and mayhem occurred against Jews."

According to reporting in The New York Times, the judge in the trial, Robert J. Colville, teared up while thanking the jury for their service, telling them he had never meant those words so much as in this particular case. For Tree of Life Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, who survived the attack, it's time to move on. Myers wrote, "It was a challenge to move forward with the looming specter of a murder trial. Now that the trial is nearly over and the jury has recommended a death sentence, it is my hope that we can begin to heal and move forward."

—Clayton Fox

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The Obama Factor

A Q&A with historian David Garrow

BY DAVID SAMUELS

There is a fascinating passage in *Rising Star*, David Garrow's comprehensive biography of Barack Obama's early years, in which the historian examines Obama's account in *Dreams from My Father* of his breakup with his longtime Chicago girlfriend, Sheila Miyoshi Jager. In *Dreams*, Obama describes a passionate disagreement following a play by African American playwright August Wilson, in which the young protagonist defends his incipient embrace of Black racial consciousness against his girlfriend's white-identified liberal universalism. As readers, we know that the stakes of this decision would become more than simply personal: The Black American man that Obama wills into being in this scene would go on to marry a Black woman from the South Side of Chicago named Michelle Robinson and, after a meteoric rise, win election as the first Black president of the United States.

Yet what Garrow documented, after tracking down and interviewing Sheila Miyoshi Jager, was an explosive fight over a very different subject. In Jager's telling, the quarrel that ended the couple's relationship was not about Obama's self-identification as a Black man. And the impetus was not a play about the American Black experience, but an exhibit at Chicago's Spertus Institute about the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann.

At the time that Obama and Sheila visited the Spertus Institute, Chicago politics was being roiled by a Black mayoral aide named Steve Cokely who, in a series of lectures organized by Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, accused Jewish doctors in Chicago of infecting Black babies with AIDS as part of

a genocidal plot against African Americans. The episode highlighted a deep rift within the city's power echelons, with some prominent Black officials supporting Cokely and others calling for his firing.

In Jager's recollection, what set off the quarrel that precipitated the end of the couple's relationship was Obama's stubborn refusal, after seeing the exhibit, and in the swirl of this Cokely affair, to condemn Black racism. While acknowledging that Obama's embrace of a Black identity had created some degree of distance between the couple, she insisted that what upset her that day was Obama's inability to condemn Cokely's comments. It was not Obama's Blackness that bothered her, but that he would not condemn antisemitism.

No doubt, Obama's evolving race-based self-consciousness did distance him from Jager; in the end, the couple broke up. Yet it is revealing to read Obama's account of the breakup in *Dreams* against the very different account that Jager offers. In Obama's account, he was the particularist, embracing a personal meaning for the Black experience that Jager, the universalist, refused to grant. In Jager's account, the poles of the argument are nearly, but not quite, reversed: It is Obama who appears to minimize Jewish anxiety about blood libels coming from the Black community. His particularism mattered; hers didn't. While Obama defined himself as a realist or pragmatist, the episode reads like a textbook evasion of moral responsibility.

Whose version of the story is correct? Who knows. The bridge between the two accounts is Obama's emerging attachment to Blackness, which required him to fall in love with and marry a Black woman. In Obama's account, his

attachment to Blackness is truthful and noble. In Jager's account, his claims are instrumental and selfish; he grants particularism to the experience and suffering of his own tribe while denying it to others.

In evaluating the truthfulness of these two competing accounts, it seems worth noting that Jager is something more than a woman scorned by a man who would later become president of the United States. Obama asked her to marry him twice; she refused him both times, before going on to achieve her own high-level professional successes. A student of the great University of Chicago anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, Jager is a professor of East Asian Studies at Oberlin College whose scholarship on great power politics in Southeast Asia and the U.S.-Korean relationship is known for its factual rigor. In contrast, *Dreams from My Father*, as Garrow shows throughout *Rising Star*, is as much a work of dreamy literary fiction as it is an attempt to document Obama's early life.

Scholarship aside, there is another reason to assume that Jager would be less likely to misremember an incident involving race and antisemitism than Obama. As it turns out, Jager's paternal grandparents, Hendrik and Geesje Jager, were members of the Dutch resistance, whose role sheltering a Jewish child named Greetje in their home for three years led to their recognition as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. In that context, at least, it seems quite likely that Jager would remember the particulars of a fight with Obama related to antisemitism, and be turned off by his response—while Obama's version of the fight has the feel of an anecdote positioned, if not invented, to buttress the character arc of the protagonist of his memoir, which positioned him for a career in public life.

Perhaps the most revealing thing about Jager's account of her fight with Obama, though, is that not one reporter in America bothered to interview her before David Garrow found her, near the end of Obama's presidency. As Obama's live-in girlfriend and closest friend during the 1980s, Jager is probably the single most informed and

credible source about the inner life of a young man whose election was accompanied by hopes of sweeping, peaceful social change in America—a hope that ended with the election of Donald Trump, or perhaps midway through Obama’s second term, as the president focused on the Iran deal while failing to address the concerns about rampant income inequality, racial inequality, and the growth of a monopoly tech complex that happened on his watch.

The idea that the celebrated journalists who wrote popular biographies of Obama and became enthusiastic members of his personal clique couldn’t locate Jager—or never knew who she was—defies belief. It seems more likely that the character Obama fashioned in *Dreams* had been defined—by Obama—as being beyond the reach of normal reportorial scrutiny. Indeed, Garrow’s biography of Obama’s early years is filled with such corrections of a historical record that Obama more or less invented himself. Based on years of careful record-searching and patient interviewing, *Rising Star* highlights a remarkable lack of curiosity on the part of mainstream reporters and institutions about a man who almost instantaneously was treated less like a politician and more like the idol of an inter-elite cult.

Yet when it came out six years ago, *Rising Star* was mostly ignored; as a result, its most scandalous and perhaps revelatory passages, such as Obama’s long letter to another girlfriend about his fantasies of having sex with men, read today, to people who are more familiar with the Obama myth than the historical record, like partisan bigotry. But David Garrow is hardly a hack whose work can or should be dismissed on partisan grounds. He is among the country’s most credible and celebrated civil rights historians—the author of *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *Bearing the Cross* (which won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography) and one of the three historian-consultants who animated the monumental PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, as well as the author of a landmark history of abortion rights, *Liberty and Sexuality*.

In part, Garrow’s failure to gain a hearing for his revision of the Obama

myth lay in his timing. *Rising Star* felt like old news the moment it was published in May 2017—as whatever insights the book contained were overtaken by the fury and chaos surrounding the beginning of Donald Trump’s presidency. As Trump’s incendiary carnival barker act took center stage, it was hard even for Republicans not to miss the contrast with Obama’s cerebral mannerisms and sedate family life. The idea that Obama was simply another self-obsessed political knife-fighter who played fast and loose with the truth didn’t resonate. In any case, Obama was now a footnote to history—a reminder of kinder, gentler times that the country seemed unlikely to see again anytime soon.

Yet there was also evidence to suggest that the idea Obama was no longer concerned with power or involved with power was itself part of a new set of myths being woven by and around the ex-president. First, the Obamas never left town. Instead, they bought a large brick mansion in the center of Washington’s Kalorama neighborhood—violating a norm governing the transfer of presidential power which has been breached only once in post-Civil War American history, by Woodrow Wilson, who couldn’t physically be moved after suffering a series of debilitating strokes. In the Obamas case, the reason for staying in D.C. was ostensibly that their youngest daughter, Sasha, wanted to finish high school with her class at Sidwell Friends. In June 2019, Sasha went off to college, yet her parents remained in Washington.

By then, it was clear to any informed observer that the Obamas’ continuing presence in the nation’s capital was not purely a personal matter. To an extent that has never been meaningfully reported on, the Obamas served as both the symbolic and practical heads of the Democratic Party shadow government that “resisted” Trump—another phenomenon that defied prior norms. The fact that these were not normal times could be adduced by even a passing glance at the front pages of the country’s daily newspapers, which were filled with claims that the 2016 election had been “stolen” by Russia and that Trump was a Russian agent.

Given the stakes, then, it seemed churlish to object to the Obamas’ quiet family life in Kalorama—or to report on the comings and goings of Democratic political operatives and office-seekers from their mansion, or to the swift substitution of Obama as party leader for Hillary Clinton, who after all was the person who had supposedly been cheated out of the presidency. Why even mention the strangeness of the overall setup, which surely paled next to the raw menace of Donald Trump, who lurched from one crisis to the next while lashing out at his enemies and probably selling out the country to Vladimir Putin?

In a normal country, the exhaustive report issued in April 2019 by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, which uncovered no evidence that the 2016 election had been decided by Russian actions, let alone that Trump was a Russian agent, might have been a cue for the Obamas to go home, to Chicago, or Hawaii, or Martha’s Vineyard. The moment of crisis was over. Russiagate turned out to have been a politically motivated hoax, just as Trump had long insisted.

But while the attention of Republicans in Washington turned to questioning the FBI, more careful observers could not fail to notice that the FBI had hardly acted alone. After all, Russiagate had not originated with the Bureau, but with the Clinton campaign, which having failed to get even sympathetic mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to bite on its fantastical allegations, was reduced to handing off the story to campaign press apparatchiks like Slate’s Franklin Foer and *Mother Jones*’ David Corn. The fact that the story only got bigger after Clinton lost the election was due to Obama’s CIA director, John Brennan, who in November and December of 2016 helped elevate Russiagate from a failed Clinton campaign ploy to a priority of the American national security apparatus, using a hand-picked team of CIA analysts under his direct control to validate his thesis. If Brennan was the instrument, the person who signed the executive order that turned Brennan’s thesis into a time bomb under Trump’s desk was Barack Obama.

The election of Joe Biden in 2020

gave the Obamas even more reasons to stay in town. The whispers about Biden's cognitive decline, which began during his bizarre COVID-sheltered basement campaign, were mostly dismissed as partisan attacks on a politician who had always been gaffe-ridden. Yet as President Biden continued to fall off bicycles, misremember basic names and facts, and mix long and increasingly weird passages of Dada-edque nonsense with autobiographical whoppers during his public appearances, it became hard not to wonder how poor the president's capacities really were and who was actually making decisions in a White House staffed top to bottom with core Obama loyalists. When Obama turned up at the White House, staffers and the press crowded around him, leaving President Biden talking to the drapes—which is not a metaphor but a real thing that happened.

That Obama might enjoy serving as a third-term president in all but name, running the government from his iPhone, was a thought expressed in public by Obama himself, both before and after he left office. "I used to say if I can make an arrangement where I had a stand-in or front man or front woman, and they had an earpiece in, and I was just in my basement in my sweats looking through the stuff, and I could sort of deliver the lines while someone was doing all the talking and ceremony," he told Steven Colbert in 2015, "I'd be fine with that because I found the work fascinating." Even with all these clues, the Washington press corps—fresh off their years of broadcasting fantasies about secret communications links between Trump Tower and the Kremlin—seemed unable to imagine, let alone report on, Obama's role in government.

Instead, every few months a sanitized report appears on some aspect of the ex-president's outside public advocacy, presented within limits that are clearly being set by Obama's political operatives—which conveniently elide the problems that are inherent in having a person with no constitutional role or congressional oversight take an active role in executive decision-making. Near the end of June, for example, Politico ran a long article noting

Biden's cognitive decline, with the coy headline "Is Obama Ready to Reassert Himself?"—as if the ex-president hadn't been living in the middle of Washington and playing politics since the day he left office. Indeed, in previous weeks Obama had continued his role as central advocate for government censorship of the internet while launching a new campaign against gun ownership, claiming it is historically linked to racism. Surely, the spectacle of an ex-president simultaneously leading campaigns against both the First and Second Amendments might have led even a spectacularly incurious old-school D.C. reporter to file a story on the nuts and bolts of Obama's political operation and on who was going in and out of his mansion. But the D.C. press was no longer in the business of maintaining transparency. Instead, they had become servants of power, whose job was to broadcast whatever myths helped advance the interests of the powerful.

There is another interpretation of Obama's post-presidency, of course—one shared by many Republicans and Democrats. In that interpretation, Obama was never the leader of much of anything, neither during the Trump years nor now. Instead, he was focused on buying trophy properties, hanging out with billionaires, and vacationing on private yachts while grifting large checks from marks like Spotify and Netflix—even if his now-stratospheric levels of personal vanity also demanded that every so often he show up President Biden for the sin of occupying his chair in the White House.

In the absence of what was once American journalism, it is hard to know which portrait of Obama's post-presidency is truer to life: Obama as a celebrity-obsessed would-be billionaire, or as a would-be American Castro, reshaping American society from his basement, in his sweats.

Yet the answer is, I believe, somewhere in David Garrow's book.

At bottom, *Rising Star* is a tragic story about a young man who was deeply wounded by the abandonment of both his white mother and his Black father—a wound that gifted him with political genius and at the same time

made him the victim of a profound narcissism that first whispered to him in his mid-twenties that he was destined to be president. It is not hard to see how Garrow has come to believe that Obama's ambition proved to be toxic, both for the man and for the country. But why?

As a human being who was sentient for long stretches of time between 2008 and 2017, I was, in general, a fan of Barack Obama and his presidency. What I could never understand was Obama's contempt for the idea of American exceptionalism. Even as president, Obama insisted on poking exceptionalists in the eye, saying that he believed in American exceptionalism "just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." Why would the president of the United States feel the need to disabuse his countrymen of the idea that they are special?

What made Obama's rejection of American exceptionalism seem particularly weird to me was his attachment to Abraham Lincoln, whose cadences and economy of language he urged his speechwriters to emulate. As a historian, one might plausibly argue that Lincoln was a saint who saved the Union or a monster who shed rivers of blood—or that he didn't go far enough. But there is no arguing with Lincoln's belief in the uniqueness of the American destiny, for which he sent hundreds of thousands of young men to die. Of all men, Abraham Lincoln would have been baffled by an American president who denied that America was exceptional. What did all those people die for, then? And what exactly did Obama think that Lincoln's speeches were about?

Obama's hostility to American exceptionalism also seemed linked to his hostility to Israel, or more specifically to America's identification with Israel, which finally resulted in his determination during his second term to reach his agreement with Iran—an agreement with the main objective of integrating that country into America's security architecture in the Middle East, while limiting Israel's power in the region. Again, why?

The sheer amount of political capital and focus Obama put into achieving the

JCPOA during his second term, to the near-exclusion of other goals, suggests that the deal was central to his politics. It also carries more than a whiff of the kind of politics in which the American Empire is seen not just as unexceptional, but also, in some ways, as actively evil. It was a politics born out of the confluence of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, which saw a racist war abroad being used to protect a racist power structure at home. That old alliance of civil rights, anti-imperialism, and identity politics made the Democratic Party that Obama positioned himself to lead—college-educated, corporate-controlled—seem cool, allowing it to use post-1960s radical ideology as a language to sell stuff.

In a passage of *Dreams* that reeks of neo-liberal poser-ism, Obama recalls, “I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active Black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets. We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets. At night, in the dorms, we discussed neocolonialism, Franz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. When we ground out our cigarettes in the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting bourgeois society’s stifling constraints. We weren’t indifferent or careless or insecure. We were alienated.”

But was Obama truly guided by post-1970s dorm-room stoner politics (as Garrow shows, Obama’s best friend at Harvard Law School was a white student named Rob Fisher who is now a senior special counsel at the Securities and Exchange Commission, that famed hotbed of punk-rock performance poets and structural feminists), or was he driven by some deeper radicalism?

My own read of Obama has always been that he was a skillful elite-pleaser with a radical streak that did in fact emerge from the anti-imperialist politics of the 1970s, the foundational claim of which was that equality trumps freedom. Which brings us back to Obama’s breakup with Sheila Miyoshi Jager.

I have never seen any evidence that Barack Obama has the slightest personal animus toward Jews as individuals.

But from his denial of American exceptionalism, and his sourness toward Israel, going all the way back to Sheila Miyoshi Jager’s account of their breakup, there does seem to be an awareness of the underlying problem posed to his politics by Jews—that is, the problem posed by Jewish group survival and their continuing insistence on Jewish historical particularity.

Progressive theology is built on a mythic hierarchy of group victimhood which has endured throughout time, up until the present day; the injuries that the victims have suffered are so massive, so shocking, and so manifestly unjust that they dwarf the present. Such injuries must be remedied immediately, at nearly any cost. The people who do the work of remedying these injustices, by whatever means, are the heroes of history. Conversely, the sins of the chief oppressors of history, white men, are so dark that nothing short of abject humiliation and capitulation can begin to approach justice.

It goes to say that nothing about the terms of progressive theology is original. It is the theology of Soviet communism, with class struggle replaced by identity politics. In this system, Jews play a unique, double-edged role: They are both an identity group and a Trojan horse through which history can reenter the gates of utopia.

Ghettos were invented for Jews. Concentration camps, too. How can Jews be “privileged white people” if they are clearly among history’s victims? And if Jews aren’t white people, then perhaps lots of other white people are also victims and therefore aren’t “white,” in the theological sense in which that term gains its significance in progressive ideology. Maybe “Black people” aren’t always or primarily Black. Maybe the whole progressive race-based theology is, historically and ideologically speaking, a load of crap. Which is why the Jews are and will remain a problem.

Obama didn’t invent any of this stuff; he was just a wounded kid trying to figure out his own place in the world and get ahead. Still, looking back, it is hard to avoid the sense that Obama himself was exceptional. He was the guy chosen by history to put something in the

American goldfish bowl that made all the fish go crazy and eat each other: America’s emerging oligarchy cementing its grip instead of going bust. The rise of monopoly internet platforms. The normalization of government spying on Americans. Race relations going south. Skyrocketing inequality. The rise of Donald Trump. The birth of Russiagate. It all happened with Obama in the White House.

To understand how we wound up here, it therefore seems necessary to start by understanding the man that so many of us refused to see outside of the myth that he created for himself. His problems are now our problems, as much as Donald Trump’s are.

That is why I went to talk to David Garrow.

What follows is a condensed and edited version of two long interviews conducted recently with the historian at his home in Pittsburgh, centering around his 2017 biography of Barack Obama, *Rising Star*.

MARTIN AND BARACK

David Samuels: At this point, the number of people involved in America’s civil rights struggle and politics you have interviewed must be in the thousands, right?

David Garrow: I would think it’s close to 2,000. The Obama book alone was 1,000-plus.

DS: In general, do you find a large gap between people’s impression of their truthfulness as they speak and the reality of what you find once you start checking?

DG: People remember happy memories very well. They purge painful memories. This is true of everybody in Montgomery, everybody who was active in the boycott. And now the children of the boycott are my age. I got a wonderful email yesterday from Sharon Campbell Waters, whose daddy ran part of the carpool operation, sending me these pictures of Alabama State U, renaming a dorm in honor of Mrs. JoAnn Robinson—the woman who actually started the boycott, whose memoir I got published.

So, everybody remembers December

of '55 to December of '56 very well. Then, in Montgomery, nothing much happens in '57, '58, '59: King's spending too much time traveling around, the Montgomery Improvement Association isn't doing much, SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] is sort of stillborn, and various people in the MIA are sniping at each other. Ed Nixon's really unhappy. Mrs. Parks has to leave and move to Detroit.

I became convinced in the early '80s that lawyers have the worst memories, which was perhaps overinformed by Burke Marshall, the Kennedy civil rights guy, who once asked me, "Remind me, did Albany happen before Birmingham? Or did Birmingham happen before Albany?" I'm thinking, "Hmm." E.D. Nixon from Montgomery is the stellar example of people who reimagine a fictional past in which they played more decisive roles than they actually did: Mr. Nixon did not choose King to head the boycott.

If I use the universe of people from the Obama book—and granted that's a whole lot closer in time—most of the memories there checked out pretty well. But Barack himself is unable to remember or acknowledge where he had shortcomings or failures.

DS: You interviewed Obama when he was in the White House?

DG: I spent eight hours talking with him on three different days. And we didn't record it, and it's officially off the record, but some of the stuff he was most energized about was, to me, hilariously inconsequential. Like, insisting that he really had been fluent in Indonesian as a third grader, or that he didn't tell several Illinois State Senate staffers that he knew Rickey Hendon could kick his butt. There are shared elements in the sensitivities.

DS: What do you see as the connection, if any, between the personal lives of powerful men and their public lives, based on your years of research on Dr. King, and your experience writing about Obama?

DG: I think one can in large part, in King's case, say these were sort of two separate lives. Because he lived it that way. He lived it as two separate lives.

DS: Might one make the same case

about Obama, but in reverse? It seems clear that Obama leads an exemplary, highly controlled private life, consuming exactly seven almonds while watching *The Man in the High Castle* or Draymond Green highlights on ESPN for stress relief.

DG: Right. Yes.

DS: In fact, I can make the case that Obama's public life was the amoral part, beginning with the toleration of genocide in Syria and the extrajudicial killing of U.S. citizens, and extending to wide-scale illegal surveillance and spying, and his now becoming the spokesperson for gutting the First Amendment in favor of government censorship of large tech platforms.

The defense of the Obama people when you talk to them is he was never touched by scandal, meaning personal scandal. And you're like, "Well, I'm sure all those people who got gassed to death in Syria or are growing up in American towns with no jobs feel just great about the fact that he never got a blow job in the Oval Office."

DG: I think a major turning point in his presidency was that whole thing where he and Denis McDonough walk around the White House grounds and he changes his mind about Syria.

DS: I don't think Denis is a reliable narrator. That's his chief of staff, and that's too much of a recognizably made-for-TV moment, a Bob Woodward moment, for me to buy it. Nor does it fit with the strategic architecture that Obama had already committed himself to. Sure, maybe Obama suddenly remembered while taking a walk in the Rose Garden that his big second-term goal was to do a nuclear deal with Iran, and that he had written Khamenei a letter recognizing Syria as an Iranian equity. But I doubt that.

DG: We've got these other people who were convinced he was going to do it.

DS: I imagine that part of being effective as president is convincing everyone within your own administration that you are at least conceivably on their side. But there's no way to bomb Syria—meaning, to bomb Iran—and also convince Iran that he was sincere about reaching a deal. He just let all the bomb Syria talk go on as long as he could to

please the hawks, before pulling the rug out from under them. That's politics.

DG: I didn't read anything beyond the simple daily coverage of this during those years, but I always assumed that his discomfort with the Israeli government was, in significant part, just a reaction to Netanyahu and disliking Netanyahu as an individual character.

DS: I once spent two and a half hours alone in a room with Bibi Netanyahu, and they were among the two and a half most excruciatingly boring hours of my life. At one point he was reciting verbatim long passages from Margaret Thatcher's memoirs. I doubt Barack Obama would have enjoyed that much. Though I do kind of cherish the idea of Bibi and Obama in the same room, each competing in an effort to demonstrate that they are each indeed the most brilliant person on earth. The other big thing they have in common, aside from their belief in their own genius, is that they are both products of the periphery of the American empire.

So, do people shape history? Do individuals matter?

DG: God, yes—for the worse. Millions of people have had their lives messed up because of Vladimir Putin. Would the Nazi regime and the Holocaust have happened without Hitler? No. Hermann Goering, Rudolf Hess, Heinrich

COLLECTION

Ending U.S. Aid to Israel

The publication on July 16, 2023, of an article by Jacob Siegel and Liel Leibovitz calling for an end to U.S. aid to Israel opened a fresh debate over a topic dominated by outdated assumptions and emotional entreaties. To deepen the conversation, Tablet invited a group that includes a retired IDF general, U.S. senators and members of Congress, former Middle East diplomats, and writers from various political persuasions to offer their thoughts on the issue. Their articles, and more from Tablet's archive, are collected at:

tabletmag.com/collections/end-us-aid-israel

Himmler, those clowns could not have created something. At the same time that I have this bizarre fascination with supremely evil characters like Putin and Hitler, I also have a somewhat parallel fascination with people who have remarkable courage, even though they're getting almost no support for it. Alexei Navalny, first and foremost. He has some inner strength that exceeds even Doc's.

Yet Doc [Martin Luther King] always believed that he was not essential, that he was accidental, and that if he hadn't ended up as him, that Ralph Abernathy or Fred Shuttlesworth or someone else would've been him instead.

DS: Do you think that's true?

DG: Yeah, in the big picture sense. Because if we go back to Montgomery, the boycott would've happened without Doc. Would it necessarily have been such a grand success? No.

How essential is the quality and tenor of his speech that night of Dec. 5 at Holt Street? You can argue the inevitability of the boycott; you can also argue, particularly about Holt Street, that that set the tenor for it, that his whole grounding in a biblical doctrine of love gave the entire enterprise its nonviolent, non-hateful quality. But once we get past the success of the boycott period, 12, 13 months, and we go through those fallow three years, the sit-ins would've happened, the Freedom Rides certainly happened without Doc. What Fred was doing in Birmingham would've happened without Doc.

Doc's essential nature is, to a significant degree, because the white press elevates him. The press makes him this symbol, and as I say in *BTC* [Garrow's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Bearing the Cross*], he realizes this is not really him, that there's him and there's this projection.

Let me say one other thing. Doc always 100 percent retained his individual self, even while realizing that there was this press creation. And when he's wearing that uniform of the black suit, little tie, and he's being so relentlessly sober whenever he's in the public eye, that's not him. That's him playing the part that he's been called into.

With Barack, I'm not sure I like the

word *binary*, but with Doc, Doc was very clear about himself and the role. With Barack, there's an extent of intertwining, there's an absence of keeping the two selves separate.

DS: But there is a before-and-after moment, which Obama writes about in *Dreams* and which you document in your book: Obama coming to Chicago, and his conversation with this motel owner when he crosses the state line.

DG: Yes, that is not there when he drives to Chicago. Bob Elia, the motel owner up there, I found him because of Marc Silverman, our wonderful law librarian at Pitt Law. Marc went back in the property records for Sharon, Pennsylvania, and told me who owned the motel where Obama stays, which he writes about in *Dreams*. And so, I found four phone numbers for Robert Elia—right on that Pennsylvania-Ohio border.

DS: I love your description of talking to Elia on the phone. But the person who actually witnesses this transformation, in which Obama becomes the person we know now, and when he begins to imagine that he has this special destiny—which turns out to be true—is his girlfriend, Sheila Miyoshi Jager.

DG: Sheila had a huge impact on me because no one can appreciate the difference between who he was and who he became the way she can.

DS: She was poised at exactly the point of inflection, in a very intimate space, just the two of them sharing this apartment in Chicago. She saw the transformation happen.

DG: Sheila was so mortified when I found those comments she posted on those various *Washington Post* stories, because she's even more of an innocent, by a long stretch, than I am. She had no idea that mouthing off when you're logged in means that anyone can identify who posted this comment.

DS: At some point as president, Barack starts calling Sheila, his girlfriend at the University of Chicago and later a professor at Oberlin—one of his three girlfriends before he marries Michelle and reestablishes a connection with her. I imagine that happened because he knew you had found her in your research for your book. Did he talk to you about that directly?

DG: Yeah.

DS: I assume he was not happy.

DG: Oh no. This is where I don't necessarily trust my memory, but I think I already knew that from Bob Bauer, Obama's lawyer, who was my go-between with Barack for months. I could not be more professionally positive about Bob Bauer. He handled an incredibly difficult, bizarre situation superbly.

DS: Why was it bizarre?

DG: It was bizarre to me because—and again, no one's ever challenged me on this, and as with the Dorothy Cotton thing [Dr. King's mistress], it was seemingly an odd decision—it was easy and automatic to let Barack read the whole typescript of the first 10 chapters and mark it up, which is what then leads to these long discussions of, "Yes, I was fluent in ..." whatever you call it, Indonesian.

Bob is Barack's lawyer, but he was also coaching me. My clearest memory, and there's nothing officially off the record with Bob, so I think I can say this, and boy, it's the clearest thing I remember of all my conversations with Bob. ... This is close to a quote: "Whatever you do, don't ask him about his father."

DS: From the author of *Dreams from My Father*, that's very strange.

DG: He's not normal—as in not a normal politician or a normal human being.

All the President's Women

DS: How did you get those three women, Obama's college and law school girlfriends, to give you Obama's love letters to them, and what was the most surprising thing you found in them?

DG: With Alex [McNear, Obama's girlfriend at Occidental College], I think she wanted to have her role known. So when Alex showed me the letters from Barack, she redacted one paragraph in one of them and just said, "It's about homosexuality."

And then sometime, right about when *Rising Star* came out, Alex indirectly sold the original, sold those letters, and they ended up at Emory. So Emory put out a press release saying, "We've gotten these rare letters by Barack Obama." And no mention of this paragraph that was too sensitive. None of the papers mentioned it. Emory didn't mention it.

So I sent one of my oldest friends, Harvey Klehr—Harvey was the guy going back to 1980 when I was trying to solve who fingered [Dr. King’s close advisor] Stanley Levison, how was it known to the FBI that Stan had been ...

DS: A communist.

DG: Yes. So I emailed Harvey, said, “Go to the Emory archives.” He’s spent his whole life at Emory, but they won’t let him take pictures. So Harvey has to sit there with a pencil and copy out the graph where Barack writes to Alex about how he repeatedly fantasizes about making love to men.

Now, Genevieve [Cook, Obama’s girlfriend in New York], Genevieve’s just a free spirit. I went to Australia to meet her. And she had had a—let me think about how best to say this—she had a subsequent relationship there in Australia that was troubled, and so she was living in a very low-visibility context. So we drove down and stayed with her and her partner for three days in the Mornington Peninsula south of Melbourne. And she was keeping a journal during her relationship with Barack, so she had all sorts of stuff.

Sheila, though, it’s unclear.

DS: What became of Alex?

DG: Alex, I haven’t heard from in about two years. There’s a wonderful woman named Margot Mifflin who was part of that whole crowd, who teaches journalism at CUNY. Margot and her husband, they’re sort of the most active of the Oxy [Occidental] crowd.

Now, Alex was living in ... I’m not very good on the Hamptons, is Sag Harbor right? Her mother was alive then. I think when she sold the letters to Emory, her excuse was that she needed money to help out with the mother’s medical conditions. I have a very clear memory of Alex being embarrassed about selling the letters.

But I can’t line up chronologically when that was in time related to when Barack starts calling Sheila again.

DS: Do you think that he starts calling her again because he needs to keep her close because she knows too much of his story, and she becomes a wild card if she no longer feels a tie to him?

DG: I think that’s accurate.

DS: How did you find Sheila?

DG: When I start reading about Barack in early ’08, I read *Dreams* and thought, “This is a crock.” It’s not history. It’s all make-believe. Who knows what the real story is?

And initially for some number of months, I thought I was only going to do a magazine article on Barack’s community-organizing years—nothing more than 8,000 words, or what have you. But it was clear from the campaign journalism that Barack had lived with a graduate student in Hyde Park during those years. But no journalist ever goes to try to locate this former graduate student he lived with, which was weird. Anyone who’s ever been in a university knows you can go find a student directory that’s going to have people’s addresses.

So I sent my research assistant Alix Lerner to do this at Regenstein Library. She pulls off this dusty old student directory from 1987-88. And we not only find Sheila, we find this nice couple who are both at NC State in Raleigh who lived upstairs from them, and who would see them in the laundry room. So there it is, in this student directory: Sheila Miyoshi Jager.

I emailed her. Sheila’s easy to find. She was then a professor at Oberlin. This was sometime in ’09. And, oh boy, I have a very conscious, extremely strong memory of how much emotional strain I was under as she sending me all of these confessional emails. Oh wow.

DS: Why did you feel it as an emotional strain?

DG: Because it’s clear she’s under incredible stress. I mean, her first email to me was, “I’m so happy that you are the person who’s discovered me.” She had had one or two experiences with the *Daily Mail*; somebody had left her a message. And then there was some other woman in that graduate-student circle whose name was also Sheila, who’d gotten a call because somebody had told somebody that they thought his girlfriend was named Sheila. So somebody focuses on this wrong woman, who’s, like, a lawyer in San Francisco.

I mean, one would think that there’d

be a journalist in America who would go look at the student directory in the University of Chicago Library in 2008.

DS: Well, you know why there wasn’t one, right?

DG: Yeah. “We’re looking for the Black guy’s white girlfriend.”

DS: I mean, why go through all that trouble to be labeled a racist and lose your job.

DG: Both with that, and with all the unpleasant stuff about Doc that was in the NARA document dump in 2018, I don’t perceive the existence of having a choice.

DS: Barack’s love letters to Alex, if they are actually love letters, are hard to read. Not just because they’re so poorly written, but because of the clear lack of any human interest in the person he’s writing to. The letters are completely performative. She may as well have been a tree or some kind of theater backdrop. Maybe all young men are guilty of this fault, but these examples seem pretty egregious.

DG: It’s pretty clear to me, and this is me putting little pieces together with Alex and with Sheila, but I’m 97 percent convinced that Barack either drafted all those letters in his journal and then made them into letters, or he wrote the letters and then copied them into the journal.

The first time—again, I can say this—the first time I saw him at the White House in the Oval, he’s sitting in that usual chair back at the fireplace. I’m at the right end of that, the couch that’s facing toward Lewinsky territory. And over on the desk, the only thing on the desk is this big pile of all his journals over the years. And he’s arranged it this way on purpose—to show me that he has them, and so he can tell me that I can’t see them. He’s got this big sack, I want to call it a cloth sack or a canvas sack, in the bottom of which are the journals. And then on the top of it is the typescript printout of my manuscript. So he’s carrying them around together.

The letters to and from Sheila. Are we ever going to see them? Not in my lifetime or yours. Certainly not in Barack’s lifetime will those journals see the light of day. I wouldn’t be astonished if he burns them.

DS: Why? What can't he let anyone see?

DG: He wants people to believe his story. For me to conclude that *Dreams from My Father* was historical fiction—oh God, did that infuriate him.

DS: I've gotten the sense, from my read of him and from people close to him, that the pose of being a writer is actually one that he prefers in many ways to being a politician.

DG: Oh God, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

DS: So why wouldn't he want his writerliness to be revealed?

DG: He doesn't want the writerliness challenged. It's my story and I'm sticking to it. The book [*Dreams*] is so fictionalized.

DS: What's wrong with that? At this point in time, only a very naive person would think of memoir as anything other than a literary genre that is cousin to the novel. It's not history.

DG: It's so inaccurate, whether about the dynamics among the guys in Hawaii or what's going on in the community group on the far South Side. And it completely omits women. I've always thought that there'd eventually be a feminist critique of Obama because his mother and all the girlfriends—they're not there. They don't exist.

DS: I will say, from reading your book, I had the sense that all of those women seemed like they felt betrayed by him. Even the act of giving you his love letters is itself a tremendously aggressive, hostile act. They knew exactly what his response would be. They knew what they had.

DG: With Alex and Genevieve, it was so far in the past. Sheila is a whole different thing.

DS: With Sheila, you could feel the hurt, but with Alex, you could too. The anecdote that obviously came from Alex about running into Barack and Michelle in Boston or New York on a street—

DG: On Madison Avenue. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

DS: There's a million ways to be like, "Hi, this is Alex. She's an old friend from school." And then, your significant other may say later on, "Oh, did you fuck her?" You say, "Oh, no." Or "Yes." Or whatever.

DG: But you don't cross the street.

"I HAVE A DREAM" MEETS *DREAMS*

DS: So is Barack Obama the prime mover in the transformation of the American society we are living through now? Or was he simply a mannered observer, or a huge narcissist who couldn't care less about anything outside himself? You wrote the best of the Obama books, you wrote one of the best King books ... I understand the mesh of techniques that you use. I am hoping you can help enlighten me.

DG: I'm entirely certain that I understand Doc. I understand Doc far better than I understand Barack because Doc, even though he was so consistently disciplined in public, was otherwise, to people who knew him well, a completely transparent person—in his strengths, his weaknesses, and his failures.

This looms so huge to me, and I work at how to best articulate it: When I first started meeting the King people in September '79, I was 26 years old, and I had no ability to appreciate how close in time I was to 1968. It didn't seem close to me. I can picture the first time I met Dorothy Cotton. I can picture Dorothy's house, and I don't want to get off on this, but I should say it: The most profound decision I've ever made was to protect Dorothy both in the FBI book and in *BTC*. Because it was her very clear wish that she didn't want to be painted or pigeonholed as just Dr. King's, you know—it's a word that begins with *M*.

And I won't even use that word because a lot of us, not in public, have called Dorothy the real wife. And having known Dorothy and having known Coretta, it was eminently obvious to me why someone as needy of solace as Doc would spend more time with Dorothy.

Thanks to that NARA document dump from the JFK Records Act four years ago now, I know a whole lot more of the details in the understory now than I did in 1986. I've always expected someone to challenge me on why I protected Dorothy. But to me, it came very easily. I've never doubted myself about it. But back when I first heard about Dolores Evans and Chrystal, way back in '85 or so, I didn't believe it was true. I thought it was very unlikely to be true because I understood that it was mainly

coming from Don Newcomb and that Newcomb was an alcoholic. So I wrongly thought it was some guy talking in his liquor.

With *Rising Star*, without any question, how to deal with Alex and Genevieve and especially with Sheila was the most professionally demanding thing I've ever been through.

DS: I remember the first time I was struck by Obama as being a personality who existed outside the normal confines of American politics was when I went out to Denver for his acceptance speech in 2008.

DG: I think Barack in that winter of '08, '09, realized there was no way that his presidency could actually live up to the expectations. And I think even the fan-boy journalists would acknowledge, under a little bit of pressure, that it ended up being an underwhelming, disappointing presidency. It will, in the long run, be seen as a failed presidency because of the international failures.

DS: There was also a moment in *The Audacity of Hope*, which I wrote about in 2008, of a warning: Whatever happens next is on you people, not me. And I was like, that is, on one hand, a stunningly honest and upfront thing to say. It's also a complete abandonment or rejection of the responsibility that he should be embracing in this moment.

I wouldn't even say I was troubled by it. I was *baffled* by it. What does it mean? Who is this guy, and where is this guy coming from? I went back and re-read "Dreams from my Father," which I bought when it came out, and I came upon the passage where his stepfather, Lolo Soetoro, takes him out into the backyard in Indonesia and teaches him how to fight. And I said, "Wait a minute. I know this scene. Where's it from?" And then I went back and found the battle royale scene in *Invisible Man*.

DG: Right, right, right.

DS: And, of course, Ellison's *Invisible Man* ends up in a basement by himself, which is how the book begins. But the point of *Dreams from My Father* is that Obama is going to do the opposite. Instead of ending up in a basement with a bunch of light bulbs and his Louis Armstrong records, he's going to become the person who will effect large-scale

social change here in America. And again, I was like, “What a weirdly writerly thing to do.” This is clearly a highly wrought literary work of self-fashioning by a person who is in dialogue with literary sources. Or, to put it another way: I’m watching this guy make himself up.

It was funny, when I was with Ben Rhodes in the White House, one of the things that Rhodes was at pains to get across to me was that Obama wrote all of his speeches himself. Here’s the legal pad, take a look. I remember thinking, “Well, why would I think otherwise, until right now?”

I mean, of course Obama doesn’t write all his speeches himself. He’s the president of the United States; he’s got a team of seven White House employees who are paid to write speeches for him. But there was obviously a need or an instruction that had been given that Barack Obama was always to be presented as the author of Barack Obama. And by his instruction, the only book that the speechwriters were to consult was the *Collected Speeches of Abraham Lincoln*, because he was the only other president who deserved to be on the same shelf as Obama.

So the conclusion I’ve come to in time is that that best way to understand Barack Obama is that he is a literary creation of Barack Obama, the writer, who authored the novel of his own life and then proceeded to live out this fictional character that he created for himself on the page. Which is remarkable. So how do you write a biography of a fictional character authored by someone who’s deliberately created and obscured and erased their actual life and replaced that self with a fiction?

DS: The whole book’s really good, but the part that was most incredibly compelling to me is that period during which he transforms himself. Those chapters are fantastic and I think will be read forever because they’re as close to an explanation as anyone will ever have, I think, of the terrible, terrible, terrible isolation, the terrible, terrible loneliness, that the young Obama experienced before he reinvented himself as a fictional character in this incredibly American way.

“How do you write a biography of a fictional character authored by someone who’s deliberately created and obscured and erased their actual life, and replaced that self with a fiction?”

DG: Yes.

DS: Which makes Obama almost the opposite of King, right? King, on a public level, had this incredible moral compass, had this incredible ability to connect empathy to the Bible, to politics, all in one flow of perception, and then mirror that back to people in ways that they recognized and that changed them. They were dealing with a remarkable and transformative leader who changed America.

Then there was the private Dr. King, who had affairs with multiple women and made off-color jokes and drank, and his behavior was hardly in any way a model or exemplary or what we consider moral behavior. Which, in a deeper historical sense, doesn’t matter one bit.

DG: Right. The thing I wanted to highlight was that Doc, from birth up through college, lives in this loving cocoon of not just a family, but this wider community of Ebenezer and Auburn Avenue. He had the most privileged life a Black person could have in America in those years. The first time he really defies daddy is to leave to go to Crozer after he finishes Morehouse. So he’s never had a moment’s doubt about who is he, where is he from, who are his parents, who’s his family. It’s a cocoon.

The contrast to Barack could not be greater. He doesn’t know the daddy. He

sort of knows the mother. He’s living with these elderly white people, and he’s being shuttled between Indonesia and Honolulu. And both in high school and at Oxy, and those three years in New York, his friendship network is all these guys like Chandoo Hasan, who are fellow international stateless children.

DS: I think the pairing of King and Obama is an inevitable one for people in the present, at least, to make. Here’s the great civil rights leader who achieves this century-long dream of legal equality, and here’s the first Black-skinned president of the United States. Except, I can also make the argument that the pairing is fundamentally false.

DG: Doc has no choice to be Black. Barack chooses to be Black.

MLK, THE FBI, AND THE PRESS

DS: You uncovered significant new information about the extent of Dr. King’s drinking problem and his womanizing, and even acts of violence against women, which seem to me to be a meaningful addition to what we know about one of the most important figures in American history. Yet, bizarrely, no newspaper or magazine in America would print your findings.

DG: I mean, it was frustrating and bemusing—first with *The Guardian*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*. All sorts of people agreed to publish that and then went back on their word. Jodi Kantor at the *Times* was someone who tried to help me get that piece published. That’s why it got so much consideration at the *Times*, though the investigative people insisted it was a magazine issue.

DS: I remember there was a female historian who condemned you for publicizing the details of Dr. King’s sex life, which seemed like a strange position for a historian to take.

DG: The only people who were nasty about it were a trio of people whose professional history features a hatred of law enforcement. One of them had written a book about [the Black Panther and convicted murderer] Joanne Chesimard, or somebody like that.

You may have seen me say in print somewhere that there’s a very clear

distinction in FBI documents. Something that comes from an electronic intercept is 99.9 percent reliable because they were very good transcriptionists. Where FBI records are bullshit is when it's coming from human informants. Which is the whole elongated story of Dr. King being quoted as saying, "I am a Marxist." Well, Morris Childs is telling the FBI what Gus Hall said Lem Harris told him that Stanley Levison told Lem. It's like fifth-hand.

And the whole relationship between the bureau and the CPUSA was so totally fucked up because Hall and the other CPUSA hierarchy are embezzling significant amounts of money. The Childs were certainly embezzling some themselves. But the bureau is running the CPUSA. The bureau could have shut down CPUSA in about 1958.

DS: Why did you say that the idea that Dr. King had been violent toward women changed your opinion of him? It has been known for a while that Dr. King, outside of the historical role he was called into, let's say by God, was a flawed man who had issues with drinking and staying faithful to his wife.

DG: Yes. Well, a garbled version of the same story is in my FBI book from 1981. There'd been two DOJ teams of lawyers, one run by a guy named Fred Folsom, and the other run by a guy named Bob Murphy, under Stan Pottinger, who had gone back through all that stuff and had listened to it. So several of the lawyers had told me this story about a woman being treated abusively, but they attached that memory to a story about a Las Vegas prostitute. So that's what's in my FBI book, and no one had ever particularly—

DS: Oh, so it's the same story, then?

DG: It's the same story, except it's in Las Vegas with the prostitute, not the women from the Philadelphia Naval Yard at the Willard Hotel, which is the news story that was in the document dump, which I then wrote about.

The real crux of the problem with Doc was the binge drinking. But I'm very uncomfortable about emphasizing the drinking problem, because I fear that it sounds like you're making some sort of fraternity-house excuse.

DS: I doubt it happens very often that

"Something that comes from an electronic intercept is 99.9 percent reliable because they were very good transcriptionists. Where FBI records are bullshit is when it's coming from human informants."

someone, especially a public figure, is sitting there stone-cold sober and decides, "Well, you know what would be a great idea? Why don't I slap this woman across the face, in front of all these other people."

DG: I knew back in '85, '86, that by '67, '68, he had a drinking problem, because Marian Logan, a wonderful lady, described to me very powerfully, once when she was at 234 Sunset, Doc sitting on the bed drinking from a fifth of vodka, and Coretta seeing this and just not reacting. But that was Coretta's MO: Don't process things.

But I think I had assumed that it's only when things sort of get so much tougher after '65 that the drinking really amped up. And, as with that memo from the state liquor agent detailing his interview with the Las Vegas prostitute, it was news to me that the drinking was out of control as of '64.

Also, I had been under the impression for years that in addition to Dorothy, there were maybe roughly 12 other women. What the NARA dump indicates is that if you count it all up, it's about 40 to 45. And there's clearly a compulsive quality to this.

But again, making the JFK comparison, even in terms of the Willard

misbehavior—the woman who was like a White House intern, Mimi Beardsley Alford, whom [JFK] had service Dave Powers in the pool while he watched—there's no getting around the fact that that was abusive.

Now the FBI is not honest with [Attorney General] Bobby [Kennedy] about that. They keep selling Bobby on Levison, Levison, Levison.

DS: But it's actually the women that they want.

DG: Oh, yeah. Exactly. But I mean, at the same time, it is Doc's fault that he's promised the Kennedys he'll stop working with Stan. Yet all they do is create Clarence [Jones, King's lawyer] as an intermediary. And they're not bright enough to realize that Clarence is tapped too. So it is understandable that RFK and the president think that King is not being honest with them.

On the other hand, neither Burke Marshall nor any of the other guys were told about the Childs brothers. So nobody in DOJ understood how good the FBI's info was, because the FBI didn't want to share it. The first person in the U.S. government who, outside the FBI, was ever shown the real importance of the Childs brothers was Senator Frank Church in the 1970s, because they show Frank a photo of Morris with Brezhnev and say, "This is our guy."

Surveillance in the world of the '60s was much simpler because it was so much smaller, and the technology was so much more labor-intensive. Running electronic surveillance in 1965 was really expensive and demanding. You had to do an installation, and even if you didn't officially trespass in the installation, no matter where you're doing it, it is difficult. And then you've got to get a leased line from the pole outside the house back to wherever. You've got to have a room. In Atlanta they rent this special apartment at Peachtree Towers. And then you've got to staff it 24/7. And with that tap on the SCLC office ... I mean, the SCLC office has at least six telephone lines. The vast majority of what they're getting on that tap is just secretaries talking to their boyfriends or people ordering pizza.

DS: "I saw my proctologist today, and he said ..."

DG: And you're getting stuff on folks' kids. Most people who read this stuff don't realize what electronic surveillance really means in terms of how much it picks up. They've never thought about it because they've never read the raw product.

DS: But that product was rare, is the point that you're making.

DG: Oh, God. Yeah. Even at the height of Hoover, they're not running more than 68 wiretaps in the entire effing country—a third of which are on foreign embassies, a third of which are on various mafia guys.

DS: I was doing some research at the library in Maryland, the archives where Hoover's papers are. I imagine most of the good stuff is located somewhere else, but the remaining contents of Hoover's safe include letters from each U.S. attorney general, which obviously he made damn sure to procure, saying that they, as the attorney general, speaking for the president, had authorized him to conduct wiretaps. Hoover's still sitting there in the '50s and '60s being like, "I've got to cover my ass with the letter from Tom Clark, because I know that the exercise of this kind of power is not sanctioned by the U.S. Constitution."

DG: Right. Exactly.

DS: Whereas now this is a become a push-button feature of the software that these guys use. They can turn on your iPhone and have every word you speak transcribed by AI, under some phony third-hop FISA warrant rule.

DG: The technology makes it so, so much easier. One of the landmark books, nobody remembers this now, was Jim Bamford's first book on the NSA. Oh, my God.

DS: So Obama starts out as an eloquent opponent of the Patriot Act, etc., etc. By the end of his presidency, his people are unmasking intercepts of his political opponents every day, and the FBI is spying on Donald Trump.

DG: That's right.

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS BARACK OBAMA?

DS: What interests you most about Obama today?

DG: The number one thing about

Barack this past five years is how completely he's vanished.

DS: Why is he living in the center of Washington, D.C., then?

DG: Well, how much time is he spending there as opposed to Martha's Vineyard? I have no idea.

DS: Between July Fourth and Labor Day, sure. The rest of the year, he lives in a large brick mansion in Kalorama. Doesn't it strike you as weird that he's an ex-president, he's comparatively young, and he's living in the center of Washington, D.C.? The original excuse was that Sasha had to finish school. Then you could say, "Well, the opposition to Trump needs a figure to rally around." But now Sasha has graduated from USC, Trump is gone, Joe Biden was elected president, but he's still there.

DG: I never see any mentions of him.

DS: Doesn't that strike you as odd? I mean, I have heard from more than one source that there are regular meetings at Obama's house in Kalorama involving top figures in the current White House, with Secret Service and cars outside. I don't write about it because it's not my lane. There are over a thousand reporters in Washington, and yet there are zero stakeouts of Obama's mansion, if only to tell us who is coming and going. But he clearly has his oar in.

DG: I don't follow the Iranian stuff super, super carefully, but I have been puzzled at the Biden administration's continuing attachment to the Iran deal.

DS: The easy explanation, of course, is that Joe Biden is not running that part of his administration. Obama is. He doesn't even have to pick up the phone because all of his people are already inside the White House. They hold the Iran file. Tony Blinken doesn't.

DG: Rob Malley was the guy on that.

DS: Rob Malley is just one person. Brett McGurk. Dan Shapiro in Israel. Lisa Monaco in Justice. Susan Rice running domestic policy. It's turtles all the way down. There are obviously large parts of White House policymaking that belong to Barack Obama because they're staffed by his people, who worked for him and no doubt report back to him. Personnel is policy, as they say in Washington.

DS: Which to me is a very odd and kind

of spooky arrangement. Spooky, because it is happening outside the constitutional framework of the U.S. government, and yet somehow it's been placed off the list of permitted subjects to report on. Which is a pretty good indicator of the extent to which the information we get, and public reactions to that information, is being successfully controlled. How and by whom remain open questions, the quick answer to which is that the American press has become a subset of partisan comms.

DG: I'm going back to something you said 20 minutes ago. From the get-go, I know enough intelligence community stuff that from the first time I saw it, I realized that Christopher Steele's shit was just complete crap. It was bad corporate intelligence, even. It was nonsensical.

What scared me back then was coming to understand that a new milieu had been created consisting of party operatives, the people in the FBI and the CIA who are carrying out White House policy, and the press. It is all one world now. And that's something people still seem loathe to admit, even to themselves, in part because it puts them in a state of dissonance with this new kind of controlled consensus that the press maintains, which is obviously garbage. But if you question it, you're some kind of nut.

DG: As best I understand it, Glenn Simpson personifies that world.

DS: He did five years ago. Now the question becomes, why are they still fixated on Iran after the Iran deal failed, its premises are exploded? And who are "they," exactly?

DG: Well, for Barack, everything has to be a success. Everything has to be a victory. I mean, I'm not a health policy expert by any stretch of the imagination, but I've always thought that the whole Obamacare thing was, in large part, a fraud. It's a great achievement for the health insurance industry.

DS: Obama reluctantly started talking about health care because it was Hillary Clinton's issue in 2008, and then they were like, "Well, you have to have a healthcare plan, because Hillary has her big healthcare plan." It was like, "All right, fine, I'll have one too."

I talked to the former Israeli prime

minister, Ehud Barak, who was defense minister when the Iran deal was moving toward completion. And I asked him, “Well, what do you think is motivating this?” And he said, “Well, Barack Obama’s not a normal politician. He is this strange combination of a college professor and a person who has ideas about his place in history. He decided that this deal was going to be the reason Barack Obama was going to be on Mount Rushmore. And that’s the reason that they could never let go.” I think he was right.

DG: The irony is that the number one legacy of the Obama presidency is going to be the failure to intervene in Syria and the failure to object to Russia taking Crimea and the Donbas.

DS: It’s interesting. I doubt that in the long run, Obama’s foreign-policy failures are going to be seen as the most important part of his legacy. I think future historians are going to look at the Obama presidency and see it as the moment when this new oligarchy merged with the Democratic Party and used the capacities of these new technologies and the power of this new class of people, the oligarchs and their servants, to create a new apparatus of social control. How far they can go with it, what the limits are ... you see them trying to test it out every week or so.

So my question is: Is Barack Obama the author of this new machine? Did he create it purposefully? Does it report back to him? Or is it a larger phenomenon that originated partly on his watch, due to whatever combination of personal negligence and disengagement, and his sense that it benefited the Democratic Party or personally benefited him?

DG: He has no interest in building the Democratic Party as an institution. I think that’s obvious. And I don’t think he had any truly deep, meaningful policy commitments other than the need to feel and to be perceived as victorious, as triumphant. I’ve sometimes said to people that I think Barack is actually just as insecure as Trump, but in ways that are not readily perceived by the vast majority of people. I think that’s probably my most basic takeaway.

But it does go back to *Dreams* being

“I don’t think he had any truly deep, meaningful policy commitments other than the need to feel and to be perceived as victorious, as triumphant.”

a work of fiction, that the absence of an actual personal story makes him need to compose one. For every time he says, “Oh, I spent years reading the history of the civil rights movement,” I know he read *BTC*, but I don’t think he read much else. This is someone who ... 98 percent of his reading has always been fiction, not history.

DS: Another thing I came away thinking after rereading your book was that I find Barack Obama deeply sympathetic as a person. I identify with him emotionally. Yet there was something about this fictional character that he created actually becoming president that helped precipitate the disaster that we are living through now.

For me, the crux of the issue is how Obama always refused to say the words “America is exceptional.” His famous answer was, “Well, I mean, every nation thinks it’s exceptional. So, yes, America’s exceptional in the same way Greece is exceptional.” What a funny thing for the American president to say. Exceptionalism is the main way that the country has always defined itself, and he’s just casually negated that because it annoys him that Americans make such silly claims. I think that dismissiveness was toxic, because nations, in the end, consist of shared symbols and myths. Debunking those myths, and saying the

nation is bad, is a recipe for tribalism and fratricide.

DG: I mean, I find him immensely likable and attractive, up through when he loses the congressional race in 2000. To me, there’s no question that the congressional loss creates, or deepens, or intensifies this hole that needs to be repaired, that needs to be filled.

Michelle’s childhood is a South Side version of Dr. King’s. She knows who she is, she grows up in a close loving family and extended family, and then she ends up marrying a creature from another planet.

You were starting to touch on this earlier. Barack has the ability to identify himself as Black, not just for the vast majority of American white folks, but for the vast majority of American Black folks who have roots like Dr. King’s or Michelle’s. But both groups know that this is not a representative American Black person. It’s something else.

DS: He is an administrator or guide from another planet who has come to bestow his genius upon these benighted people with whom he does not fundamentally identify.

DG: He’s not someone who retains people. Even Valerie [Jarrett] and [David] Axelrod only go back to, like, 2003 with him. There’s no real history. The only person who’s a little bit of a through line is Rob Fisher, who I think is the brightest person I’ve ever met in my life. Rob would argue with him, and the second book, when Barack is trying to get the second book finished during the campaign, *Audacity* [*The Audacity of Hope*], Rob at one point tells him that it’s a mess. And Barack is angry. You can’t tell a U.S. senator that his book’s a mess. Rob would disagree with him in intellectual, academic ways, which had been a whole part of their closeness, and Rob put lots of time into *Dreams*—or into the earlier, right version of *Dreams*.

Now, Rob and his wife went to the White House a few times. I’ve got all the details on this because I remember Rob describing them to me sitting out on that Truman Balcony. But again, and this is not the usual sort of thing I say, but Barack doesn’t want to be close with people who are his equals. None of

the people who are ostensibly his best friends are anywhere close to his equal. **DS:** I go back to the first chapter of your book, about these steel workers and all these mills closing down in Chicago and then Obama sort of deciding, “Well, we know here at the Joyce Foundation,” where he was then hanging out, “that nothing can be done to help these people. The solutions are on a national level.” At first I was, like, “Okay, whatever that means.”

But then it struck me in your telling that in fact, the place where he finds a home is not in community organizing. It’s in foundation-land, the place where foundations, foundation executives, very rich people, and politics meet. He was well spoken, Black yet white-coded, a credentialed academic, yet had some street cred because he’d been an organizer for that crucial year plus whatever, the way kids today start an NGO in order to get into Harvard.

So if Obama is the first U.S. president from the periphery of empire, he’s also the first president from the billionaire-foundation-NGO complex, which makes him the perfect mediating figure between the progressive part of the party, the billionaires, and the security state.

DG: If one compares how he gets elected to the [Harvard] Law Review presidency and then how he functions as president of the Law Review to his U.S. presidency election and term in office, at the review, he’s seen as the least ideological figure.

And he’s perfectly comfortable with the incipient, sort of Federalist Society folks like Brad Berenson. And it’s a distant, light-touch management system. He has no investment in what the content of the volume ends up being. He doesn’t write his own note because he’s not that interested in producing a work of student legal scholarship.

Flipping way forward, those first three years in Springfield, he is a very serious state legislator. But once he has the congressional loss, then the purpose of being a state legislator is to rack up paper victories. To credential himself as a candidate. So, the Law Review presidency is like going to Harvard itself; it devolves to being a credentialing

enterprise—just like what he’s doing in the state senate in, particularly, 2003, once the Dems take the majority. It’s now a credentialing process rather than an actual, personal investment in the policy substance.

But in the trends, in making himself a U.S. Senate candidate and then a presidential candidate, he loses both his interest in what had been modest but serious policy substance. And similarly, when he first gets to the Senate and he’s making that trip to Ukraine with [Indiana Sen.] Dick Lugar to look at decommissioned Soviet nuclear stuff, I think there is some actual interest and investment there. And Darfur, who the fuck is interested in Darfur? He was.

So, early on in his U.S. Senate time, I think it’s like an echo of Springfield. Some things are meaningful to him, but then he loses interest.

ROE, AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, AND THE COURT

DS: You’re looking at the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and affirmative action, all in a few months. So if this country’s politics underwent a sea change with the rise of wokeness, now we’re arguably witnessing a sea change or a correction in the opposite direction. Do you think that Martin Luther King Jr. would understand the Supreme Court ending affirmative action in higher education as a tragedy?

DG: No. Doc did not buy into identity politics.

I have this long manuscript from a guy named Ernie Austin that he sent to me in, like, 1981. Ernie was the Appalachian coordinator for the Poor People’s Campaign. The white guy. No one remembers Ernie.

I think that as the scale or depth of affirmative action has gotten greater and greater, worse and worse, the beneficiaries are now so aware of being beneficiaries that it leads them to doubt themselves. And that’s doing harm.

DS: As someone who has been a serious student of this subject for the past 45 years, how consequential is the court’s decision to overturn *Roe*?

DG: It’s a class issue. That’s the number one thing. Even before *Roe*, if you were

a woman who had your life together and could get yourself to New York, you were fine. If you had the time and the ability to buy yourself a plane ticket to New York City, you were fine. Anybody from the Rio Grande Valley needed to get, past tense, to San Antonio or Austin to get an abortion. And that’s what we’re looking at now, is that it’s a travel challenge, because there’s going to be this whole swath of states—Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas—where folks are going to need to get to New Mexico, Colorado, or Illinois.

DS: Well, that’s certainly a greater geographical challenge than the one that women have previously faced.

Oh God, yes. But again, I mean, the problem with the reproductive rights movement, going all the way back to Mrs. Sanger in the teens and the ’20s, is that the activist population has no connection to the beneficiary population. Because the beneficiary population is generally poverty-class women who have messed-up lives—and, in some circumstances, abusive life situations. But they are working-class or poverty-class people for whom the ability to get out of Pittsburgh, just to use the local geography, to fly out of Pittsburgh, would be a humongous challenge for them. They can take the bus around Pittsburgh, but how do you get to the airport? How do you get a ticket? Where do you go? Do you have an internet connection at home?

And when one knows the clinical literature on abortion demography—and you see this dramatically in Mississippi or Arkansas, Louisiana, or Texas—the women who need abortions are not the women who have time to go protest. The women who need abortions come from, almost without exception, very deprived circumstances. And an unfortunate number of them are what clinicians call “repeaters.” People for whom it’s not the first abortion. That is the number one unspeakable issue on my side of this. And clinicians are very ambivalent about that.

And again, my side has never been forthrightly honest that there is a tremendous biological and emotional difference between a 10-week procedure and an 18-week procedure. There are

plenty of clinicians who won't go past 14 or 16 because it's traumatic.

The pro-choice movement ought to be putting its resources into building and funding a travel network. I mean, don't give to Planned Parenthood, give to the local organizations that support travel. Planned Parenthood has all these executives that are getting paid over half a million dollars a year.

DS: Abortion is a weird issue for me. I don't have any religious strictures about when a fetus becomes a human soul or any of that stuff. I frankly don't understand Catholic strictures against birth control, except I guess in some kind of Norman Mailer existentialist, man-must-fuck-and-procreate-in-order-to-find-meaning kind of way. On the other hand, there's something undeniably perverse about a political movement making a woman's right to kill her fetus at any stage of development a flagship demand. Watching what happened in New York—where it became a matter for a woman and her doctor to decide whether to kill a baby as it was being delivered—it was hard not to feel that something had gone badly wrong on the pro-choice side too. Both the mother and the doctor should be put in prison because they are clearly dangerous to others. They committed murder.

DG: Anyone who's been a clinician, anyone who knows the clinical literature, who's not somehow dramatically out of touch, knows that there is just a difference in kind between an 18-, 20-, and 22-week-old [fetus] and one under 12 weeks. I remember when Fran Kissling and Peter Singer organized this thing at Princeton in 2010, where both sides came to talk to each other. Fran Kissling's been the best person on this for 30 years. I said that if there was going to be a solution on this, one side needed to agree that abortion up through 12 or 14 weeks was okay. And we needed to acknowledge that anything after 14 or 16 weeks had to require some meaningful standards. And, I said, it requires the other side to acknowledge that contraception is different in kind from abortion. And I got hissed.

But the underlying problem here is not unique to abortion. Whichever side

is best able to cabin their crazies is going to come out ahead. Now, so far, the Republicans are losing that because their crazies, I think, are more visible.

Yet as totally pro-choice as I am, there's no getting around the fact that Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, and Amy Barrett are intellectually superior justices to what the Supreme Court had in 1973.

DS: Can you imagine Obama joining them on the court?

DG: He'd be terrible because he's too lazy. This is in the book. It goes back to him being Hawaiian. At one point, he says, "I'm fundamentally lazy and it's because I'm from Hawaii." That's close to the actual quote.

DS: Have you ever thought of writing a biography of Clarence Thomas?

DG: Oh, yes. Yes. I have a huge collection of Thomas material.

DS: I have to tell you that after meeting you and thinking about your oeuvre for the past few days, it seems like the natural capstone book for you to write. It will drive everyone on all sides nuts.

DG: That would mean interviewing ... oh God, all his former clerks. Oh God. The first piece I wrote about Thomas was a *Times* Week in Review piece in the Summer of '95, after *Missouri v. Jenkins* came down, explaining that Clarence Thomas is a Black nationalist. And I managed to get that in *The New York Times*. But that was 1995. Wouldn't happen now.

Thomas has had a huge impact. And the network of former Clarence Thomas clerks. Oh my God. I mean, [the legal historian] Brad Snyder thinks that Felix Frankfurter generated an army of acolytes. Oh, wow. I mean, Thomas is at least as good.

DS: It's going to be interesting when someone like [legal historian] Brad Snyder puts Barack Obama and Clarence Thomas next to each other 50 years from now and asks his students, "Which of these two men had more of an impact on shaping the United States?"

DG: Thomas is never going to get five votes to overturn everything going back to *Palko*. And he's never gotten a second vote so far. Which shows that the vast majority of people writing about the court don't know what the fuck they're

talking about. They don't know what Chevron deference is, and they don't understand that [former Justice Antonin] Scalia was, in large part, the father of Chevron deference, because he's pro unrestrained executive power. And who have been two of the most pronounced critics of Chevron deference? Gorsuch and Kavanaugh.

I mean, the best legal news source is a one-man operation out of eastern Pennsylvania, run by a solo appellate litigator named Howard Bashman. It's called How Appealing. And he just does it as a hobby; he's done it as a hobby for 20-plus years. I bet 90 percent or more of federal judges look at it. But the quality of what's published about the court now on Slate or Vox is just so awful.

DS: Its party-line propaganda.

DG: It's just complete crap.

THE EMPEROR AND THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

DS: The Iran deal bothered you?

DG: I do find the Iran deal offensive and puzzling, yes. I mean, it's an explicitly antisemitic state.

DS: It's also a repressive theocracy that has consistently spread chaos and violence beyond its own borders. Yet the entire point of the Iran deal is that it's a mechanism to allow us to bring this foreign and repugnant thing into the American global security system, to join ourselves to it. Why?

DG: I also found the Cuba thing deeply puzzling and offensive. It's a fucking dictatorship that imprisons all sorts of truly progressive, creative people.

DS: Again, if you look at this as the revenge of the periphery of empire, these are the key symbolic issues of the periphery. Cuba, Iran. With a subtext of the Iran issue, of course, being diminishing and marginalizing Israel, because the Jews are so fucking annoying.

And, in that sense, there's only little whispers of Obama's feelings about Jews and Israel in your book, but those whispers show that you had your own thoughts about it. There's the visit to the Spertus Institute for the Eichmann exhibit, where he has this big fight with Sheila because he won't say that there's anything bad about Steve Cokely, the

Chicago alderman who at that time is accusing Jewish doctors of injecting Black babies with AIDS—Obama’s pose being that he’s too sophisticated, and at the same time too politically calculating, to see anything offensive about that. It’s just rhetoric, or an organizing tool, as he says later about Iranian Holocaust denial. You can see why Sheila gets upset.

DG: Oh, God. Yes.

DS: But historically speaking, Jews are not, or were not, a particularly American obsession, except among some morons and leather fetishists on the right. But they are a major obsession on the periphery of the American empire, where envy and fear of the mythic role that Jews supposedly play in Washington, because of Israel, are defining emotions, regardless of the facts.

So how do you talk all this foundation-land, community-organizer shit and then preside over the transformation of the country into a Gilded Age oligarchy? Maybe I just answered my own question: Obama is the Magic Negro of the billionaire industrial complex. And targeting Jews as outsiders and pushing them outside the circle was the way that the Gilded Age oligarchy consolidated itself in America, back then and also now.

DG: Another thing we haven’t touched on at all, and I mean, I’ve certainly said this in the press any number of times in years past, but I’ve always found their need to hang out with celebrities bizarre. Because the people they both were, all the way up through at least 2000, would’ve had no desire to do that. It wouldn’t have crossed their minds to be with Beyoncé and Jay-Z or Richard Branson, or you name it.

Black people in Chicago, everyone, Jerry Wright, Hermene Hartman, they’re not surprised that Barack turned into someone else. But they can’t explain why Michelle turned into someone else. I think this is clear in the book. Michelle, for years, thought that all this talk about “I’m going to be president—”

DS: Was nonsense.

DG: Yeah. She listened to 13 years of that. And then, oh, my fucking God, it happened!

“Everybody, especially white folks, thought that having a Black family in the White House would be cure for the legacy of American racism.”

DS: So maybe my husband *is* Jesus Christ, after all.

Then again, they’re all like that now. Think of the Clintons. The man from Hope. And Hillary, the great defender of children and the poor. And then its like, “Wait a minute. Did they just amass \$3 billion in a private foundation, plus a private fortune of \$300 or \$400 million within three or four years after leaving the White House?” It’s not just the Obamas. The whole system is sick.

I did some research at the Truman Library recently for a screenplay I am writing, and on the way there you drive by Harry Truman’s old house, where he and his wife, Bess, sat on their porch after he was president. They went back there because that was their house.

I remember thinking, imagine telling Harry Truman, “Hey, why don’t you sell that old house and buy three or four huge mansions in Martha’s Vineyard and Hawaii and Washington, D.C., and rake in hundreds of millions of dollars in sweetheart deals with big corporations while you’re vacationing on rich people’s yachts?” He’d probably sock you in the jaw.

DG: Allison [Davis, the head of the Chicago law firm that first employed Obama out of law school] said it to me, or maybe Allison said it to Jodi Kantor, that Barack once said to him that the

only two things he wanted were a valet and an airplane.

Everybody, especially white folks, thought that having a Black family in the White House would be cure for the legacy of American racism. Now there’s no question in anybody’s mind that on that score, that scale, the presidency was a total failure. But why are race relations, at least as people perceive them or imagine them, ostensibly well *worse* today post-Floyd than they were in 2008?

DS: It’s a great question. So many say, “Oh, well, Trump brought his white nationalism and his racism and his birtherism, and he divided people.” Which is true, except the point where race relations in America turned sour wasn’t with George Floyd in 2020; it was with BLM in 2014, and that’s squarely during Obama’s second term—well before anyone is thinking about Donald Trump coming anywhere near the White House. For 20 years before that, things had actually been better.

I think there was something corrosive about Obama’s public disengagement from the race issues that many voters, white and Black, looked to him to solve, or absolve them from. His answer was, don’t put that stuff on me. Put it back on you. Which, again, is a fine answer—except for the fact that he was president of the United States.

DG: I never paid much attention to birtherism for a large chunk of time, but I know I thought that they were making a mistake by not putting the actual birth certificate out there. And I think, in retrospect, there’s no question that it was horrific political malpractice not to put the birth certificate out there ASAP.

DS: Why didn’t they?

DG: Because Barack was so deeply contemptuous. It is comical; it is bizarrely comical to imagine he was born anywhere other than Kapi’olani Hospital.

DS: Birtherism was a classic Trump move because it found a really quick way to encapsulate a feeling that people had, even if the facts weren’t true. The literal accusation—“Oh, he was born in Kenya, and his birth certificate is a fake”—was false, and it made Obama really mad. The word they kept using was *racist*. But I was like, “Did anyone ever suggest that Jesse Jackson or LeBron

James was born anywhere besides the United States?” It was not about racism, I think—at least not primarily. It was about foreignness, un-American-ness. I think that what Obama feared was that showing the birth certificate would make his Hawaiian-Kenyan-Indonesian outsidership even more plain.

The one time I met him, we talked about rap music at a fundraiser. The thing I was struck by, having spent a bunch of time in Bali, was the way he stood and the way he held his head while he listened. I recognized Indonesia in the tilt of the head and the stillness of his body. It was very familiar. Americans don't have that kind of pose, or poise.

DG: If we go back to '08, initially, there's all that Black ambivalence about Barack as a presidential candidate, which, in his crude way, Jesse gives voice to. And certainly pre-South Carolina, I think there's a lot of perception, as there was back in Chicago—I mean, Carol Harwell said this so well: “Barack's not Black. Barack's not from here. Barack hasn't had the experiences my husband had growing up.”

So, I think it's inescapable that Barack's success in '08 is rooted in white people seeing him as an easy ticket toward racial absolution. It's a need that white people in this country have. And what we're still seeing week after week now for these past two or three years, especially with places like the *Times* and the *Post*, is that this white need for absolution was not cured by the Obama presidency. I frankly don't understand it.

DS: I think that it's culturally and intellectually part of the New England DNA, which Obama—the president of the Harvard Law Review—taps into. To me, the most profound thing that was ever written about the New England Puritans was written by Perry

“The protagonists of the grand drama of race in America are the cultural and actual descendants of the Puritans, not Black people.”

Miller, whose thesis was that the Puritans go to New England with the goal of redeeming old Europe by building a shining city on a hill whose example will put an end to all the wars in Europe. Except, of course, the example of the New England colonies has no impact on Europe whatsoever. Nobody in Prague or Vienna gives a shit about Narragansett.

At which point, the Puritans have to explain why this great vision that they have sacrificed for and died for, having essentially traveled off the map of the civilized world and gone to the 17th-century equivalent of Mars, didn't quite go as planned. And at that point, you have the American turn into self-absorption and narcissism. The fault is in us, you see. We must turn inwards and scour our souls for sin, because God is punishing us. And this is the link between both the deep narcissism and the redemptive impulse of New Englanders, which I think has been a constant in that region and in its impact on American history ever since.

DG: But we still have, in the present-day world, we have these millions of white folks who are still actively seeking absolution. And I presume that has to be grounded in an inner fear of asking themselves, “Am I unconsciously racist?” That's never been a part of me.

DS: The protagonists of the grand drama of race in America are the cultural and actual descendants of the Puritans, not Black people—who, as Americans, mainly desire the same things that other Americans do, like safe streets and decent jobs and health care and not to die prematurely from heart disease. White Puritans have more elevated concerns.

DG: Exactly. For them, 200-year-old statues are more important than five-year-old Black children.

I want to go back to something about Barack I've mentioned twice now. Barack never had any loyalty toward any of these people. Use John Kennedy as an example. I mean, whatever else we say about Kennedy, he remained intensely loyal to people who went back way before the presidency with him. Kenny O'Donnell, for example. Lem Billings was openly gay at a moment when that was hardly fashionable or acceptable. They all loved and accepted him, quite publicly, because he was Jack's best friend from prep school, and that continued after Jack was dead. Friendship was everything to them.

DS: That's because the Kennedys are from somewhere. Their communal and religious ties were real and organic, not some product of some abstract progressive ideology. Honey Fitz was the mayor of Boston. They all went to church every Sunday, or else Rose would beat them.

What do the Obamas and their circle have in common with each other? They are Ivy League people, who ran away from whatever they came from in order to become members of the credentialed elites, whose loyalty is to the system that gives them prestige—or rather, gives prestige to their degrees, of which they are the holders. Once they pair off and reproduce under the seal of Harvard or Yale, they may find it seemly to donate money to an NGO that offers microloans to female entrepreneurs in Pakistan. So why should Obama, the ultimate winner, carry on the charade that he's part of a community, whatever that means, with these people? He's happy to go on NPR and talk about meaning or Marilynne Robinson novels or whatever, to make the wine moms identify with him, so he can put one over on them.

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Jewish State and
its neighbors at
[tabletmag.com/sections/
israel-middle-east](https://tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east)

Just don't ask him to visit the hospital when you get cancer, because he'll be hanging out on someone's yacht, with the other winners.

DG: But in Springfield, there's a real community of Illinois politicians. There's a guy named Matt Jones who was very helpful to Barack, who in fact came down with some incredibly rare cancer about two, three years ago. And the person who was the centerpiece of this was a guy who was a Senate judiciary staffer named Pete Baroni, a really wonderful man. So, Pete organized some crowdfunding thing for Matt. And so,

you could see everybody in Springfield, Democratic and Republican, had donated to Matt Jones.

And then very early on in COVID, about six, eight weeks into COVID, the woman who was finance director on Barack's Senate primary run, Claire Serdiuk, up and died at age 50, leaving behind a 4-year-old. And when I went to the GoFundMe page for Claire, you could see everybody who'd worked on the Obama primary campaign, and then Claire went to SEIU [Service Employees International Union], and the folks at SEIU all donated. Anybody whom I've

interviewed in that situation, I would donate to, always have.

But Barack has no interest in any of that. It's just not there.

DS: It's like your question "Why is he at an event with Jay and Bey? Why does he want a private plane?" And the answer is, well, because those are the things that winners get.

DG: But you remain hollow.

DS: They're all hollow. That's what the system produces. ■

This article was originally published on August 02, 2023.

COMMUNITY

The Future of Russian Jewry

After more than three decades as Moscow's chief rabbi, Pinchas Goldschmidt left the country following the invasion of Ukraine. Now he's urging the Russian capital's Jews to leave, saying 'the future is not as bright as it was.'

BY HILLEL KUTTLER

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt sat at the desk of his Jerusalem office on a scorcher of a July day. Wearing a suit and tie, his monogrammed shirt cuff peeking out, Goldschmidt seemed immune to the intense heat—a quality hinting at how, of the 33 years he served as Moscow's chief rabbi, he might have weathered the last 22 during the presidency of Vladimir Putin.

But everyone has a boiling point, and Goldschmidt reached his when Russian authorities pressured him and other religious leaders to support Putin's war on Ukraine that began on Feb. 24, 2022.

Goldschmidt publicly opposed the war, departed the country, resigned his pulpit in Moscow's Choral Synagogue, and resettled in Israel, leaving behind Russia and his and his wife Dara's work:

regenerating the capital's Jewish community following seven decades of Soviet repression and building an orphanage, a school, and a *kollel*—an academy for Talmud study.

Last summer, he urged Russia's Jews to leave the country. This June, the country's Justice Ministry labeled him and several other visible opponents of the war "foreign agents," affixing metaphorical targets to their backs.

Nearly a year-and-a-half into Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Goldschmidt sees his condemning of the war and emigrating as correct. He'd been silenced "for all the years under Putin," he said. "I wasn't able to say a word."

Goldschmidt said he recognized the risk of opposing Putin. He cited Ecclesiastes 3:7: "A time to keep silent and a time to speak." The time, he said, was right to speak.

"The moment I knew that I'd be criticizing the war, that I'd be against the Russian government, I knew that I would have to leave my post as chief rabbi of the city, because the government would use its clutches to get me out or to close down the community," said Goldschmidt. "It was a decision I knew would have to result in my resignation in order not to endanger the community."

But leaving and urging others to follow didn't come easily. Goldschmidt said he spoke with friends, colleagues, and community leaders in Russia and abroad. He researched rabbis' contemporaneous responses to anti-Jewish agitation, pogroms, and the Holocaust. He sought clarity for what gnawed at him: Was the situation as dire as he thought?

"I was questioning myself in the beginning if I did the right thing or not by leaving. But as the situation evolved, there was no other way," he said. "I just feel that there's a moment when a communal leader has to tell his people that the future is not as bright as it was and we should think of other options."

As to what set his decision-making in motion, Goldschmidt recalled the events of 2022 this way: "I went to sleep in Moscow on Feb. 23 and woke up in the morning in Tehran—a different country with a different political system. I realized that under this new political reality, it would be impossible to speak for a Jewish future. It became almost impossible for a Jewish community to function."

It was a stunning end to a lengthy tenure that began when a classmate from his native Switzerland told Goldschmidt—who, while living in Baltimore, had been ordained and earned a master's degree in computer science—that Moscow's Jewish community wished to hire a rabbi.

When Goldschmidt, his wife, and their two small children—the couple would have seven; three now live in Israel and four in the United States—arrived in 1989, Russia was the behemoth of a Soviet Union at once disintegrating and evolving under the freedom-minded reforms begun by the glasnost and perestroika policies of the USSR's leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and later extended by Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin.

By reversing Russia's democratization and, later, invading Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022, Putin has yanked the country back to its Soviet days, Goldschmidt said.

That, he said, constitutes a physical and demographic threat to Russia's Jews, whose numbers aren't easily pinned down. (Goldschmidt cited estimates ranging from 90,000 to 350,000.) Approximately 100,000 Jews now seek to leave Russia, in addition to 100,000 who have already left since the war began, Goldschmidt said.

Rabbis arriving from abroad to serve Russia's Jewish communities "are being stopped at the borders" and harassed, he said, their smartphones inspected and possibly implanted with eavesdropping devices, and the philanthropic funding of Jewish institutions has shriveled due to Jewish businesspeople emigrating.

"The fact that at any communal gathering, you have two or three characters who show up uninvited—you know right away these are FSB characters," Goldschmidt said, referring to the security service that succeeded the KGB. "We are back to the Soviet era. The question is: Do Jews want to live in the Soviet Union? The answer is no."

As the situation further deteriorated last summer, Goldschmidt said, he and other Jewish officials grew concerned by two major developments: a possible military mobilization of Russian men, including Jews; and the government's closing of the Jewish Agency, a Jerusalem-based organization that helps

Jews in scores of countries to prepare to move to Israel.

Russia's Jews, he sensed, would, as in the Soviet era, be squeezed both if they remained and attempted to leave.

That's when Goldschmidt called on them to emigrate.

"I feared that as a result, it's going to be much more difficult to cross the border," he said.

Goldschmidt's son Benjamin, a congregational rabbi in Manhattan, considers his father "courageous" for urging Russian Jewish emigration. His parents had "put their whole lives" into rebuilding Moscow's Jewish infrastructure, but "a rabbinic judge must rule based on the facts in front of him," he said. "There's no rabbinical commandment that says you have to live in Russia."

"We Jews have to be optimists," Pinchas Goldschmidt said when asked whether he can imagine living again in Moscow. "One day it'll be possible to return, but when it is I don't know."

Returning his pulpit is complex, too.

"We're going to have to see what percentage of the community is still there. Number two, what the new political realities are, the economic realities," he said. "Based on that, it is going to be possible to make an educated decision."

Meanwhile, in Israel, he remains busy. He leads classes online on Jewish topics, including in Russian. He's writing two books: on how Jewish law views civil marriages and on his time in Moscow. He visits his father, Sol, 91, a retired businessman who lives nearby and has dementia. And he spends much of his time in Munich, the headquarters of the European Conference of Rabbis, which he serves as president.

In that role, Goldschmidt opposed Scandinavian countries' efforts to outlaw circumcision and kosher slaughter.

"Over the years, he hasn't been afraid to speak his mind," said Mark Levin, the Washington, D.C.-based CEO of the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, who has known Goldschmidt since before the latter served in Moscow.

The issues on which Goldschmidt has made an impact both in Moscow and with the ECR is "a long list," Levin said.

"He's one of the—I say this in all sincerity—important international figures in Jewish life in the last 20-something years," Levin said. "He's a rare combination of a diplomat and an advocate. It demonstrates his ability to meet and address all challenges."

Now, Moscow's Jews face the new reality without their spiritual leader, although synagogues, the Russian Jewish Congress, and other key organizations continue to function. Goldschmidt maintains contact with many Muscovites, while others, he said, "are afraid to talk to me" now.

"The fear of Big Brother—this has come back. It's part of life in Russia today," Goldschmidt said. He's less concerned by "street antisemitism," and more by government pronouncements, such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in May 2022 comparing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Hitler and claiming that Hitler was partially Jewish.

After Lavrov's statement, Goldschmidt said, he received reports from Moscow of "an avalanche" of antisemitic posts on social media.

"The system, which became so anti-Western and so insular—it's impossible that the system isn't going to bring with it manifestations of antisemitism," he said. "Putin is not an antisemite. But the moment there's a sign coming from above that from now on it's [antisemitism] allowed, I would be very worried about the security of Jewish institutions and every single Jew."

He's led fundraisers to assist Ukrainian Jews and visited Ukrainian Jewish refugees in Romania, Hungary, Austria, and Germany. Zelensky invited him to Ukraine, and he may lead an ECR delegation there.

Its goal would be "very simple," Goldschmidt said: "to support the Jewish community."

"The great tragedy of this war," said Goldschmidt, "is that two Jewish communities are being destroyed: the Jewish community of Russia and the Jewish community of Ukraine." ■

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LGBTQ+ at Yeshiva University: The Path Forward

Learning from the past to engage with the future

BY NETANEL ZELLIS-PALEY AND E.Y. ZIPRIS

What do you do when an institution that is essential to your Jewishness does something that your Jewishness simply cannot accept?

This is the question we—two Yeshiva University alumni—have been grappling with since the fall of 2022, when YU signaled its intention to take a case brought by its LGBTQ+ students, alleging discrimination, to the United States Supreme Court.

Much ink has already been spilled on this contentious case, a sensitive and deeply complex conflict that has been aired out in public like dirty laundry on the clothesline of American Orthodox Judaism. We are not here to offer critiques of either side. We, as alumni, understand the institutional priorities and allegiances of YU, and we know how hard the students of the YU Pride Alliance tried to negotiate in good faith for a space of their own at YU, making many sacrifices along the way.

We are here to offer a solution. And the solution to this conflict is to return it to what it started as, before it captured the attention of critics of Orthodox Judaism on the left, and religious freedom enthusiasts on the right: a conversation.

In order for this conversation to happen, however, both sides need to be ready for it. Over the course of these many months, we ourselves have engaged in discussion with fellow alumni, students, rabbis, and members of the

Orthodox community, to try to determine what this readiness entails, what groundwork needs to be laid before mutual trust and a solution acceptable to both sides can be built together. And we've come to the conclusion that there are a few foundational assumptions that need to be agreed upon before mutual trust, and certainly any kind of solution, can be built above that foundation.

We are not the originators of this approach to conflict resolution. It was our ancestor Aaron, brother of Moses, who according to the Sages (Avot of Rabbi Natan 12) brought together people in conflict by finding the common ground on which they both stood, then laying a new foundation on top of it. Sometimes, that common ground was so obviously apparent, it was surprising Aaron's intervention was necessary at all. But that's another thing we've learned as we've done this work: The personal and theological conflicts are so fraught, the positions on both sides so entrenched, that it's easy to lose sight of why we're talking about this in the first place. So, striving to emulate Aaron's example, we present here four foundations—some obvious, others less so—for renewed dialogue between YU and its LGBTQ+ students.

The first foundation draws most directly from Aaron's approach, which was to remind people in conflict of the goodness at their core: Both YU and its LGBTQ+ students simply want YU to be a place in which LGBTQ+ students feel that they truly belong. For both sides, this desire comes from a place

of love and goodwill; for the students, it's the love of the best university in the world to be an Orthodox college student, and for YU, it's the love it truly wants to extend to all of its students. The accusations aimed at both parties—of homophobia on one side and of subsumption into secular LGBTQ+ culture on the other—are unfortunate, but perfectly understandable, psychological products of the daunting task of holding two conflicting loves together at once. The students don't want to burn YU down; YU doesn't hate LGBTQ+ people. Recognizing this will make it easier for both YU and its LGBTQ+ students to see one another as collaborators, rather than adversaries.

The second foundation: deep, engaged listening. This applies to everyone who has a stake in this conflict, even if they're not immediately involved or affected by it: community members, YU alumni, rabbis. The less we actively listen the more we give precedence to our own mental model of the other person in front of us rather than the real person in front of us. How is a conversation, much less one convened for the purpose of resolving a complex interpersonal problem, supposed to progress when each conversant is simply building on top of what they think the other person thinks?

The third foundation: This is not a fair fight. Within the Jewish institutional landscape, YU is a behemoth whose actions and statements set the tone for Orthodox communal policy on a wide range of issues. Regardless of the fact that it was the students who brought the lawsuit, YU bears more of the responsibility for resolving the conflict because of its broad communal shoulders. It carries too much of the weight of Orthodox Judaism's existential angst—as Rabbi Soloveitchik might put it—to simply push away the students with sheer force. Doing so will only widen the schisms that have been forming for years within Orthodoxy, and hurt its long reputation of leading by example.

The fourth, and perhaps most important foundation is one we learned not from this work but from the devoted disability rights advocates of the 1990s who set a standard for American

community organizing: nothing about us without us. LGBTQ+ people need to be part of every conversation about their inclusion and belonging in Orthodox Judaism. It is *their* experience that is the impetus for these conversations after all. When they are not present at the table, the implication is that their presence is a problem.

The same holds true for conversations held in public—even if only one person appears to be participating in the conversation. Allow us to provide an example. An article about LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Orthodox community—such as the one published recently in Tablet by a member of the YU administration—should not need to remind its readers about the Torah prohibition on male homosexuality, and certainly not compare being gay to eating a cheeseburger. The reason is simple: When you say or write things about this issue that are either so obvious to LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews or would be considered insensitive if said directly to them, you communicate that LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews are not essential participants in the conversation.

We know these conversations can be uncomfortable, especially for people who are not LGBTQ+ themselves. It can be difficult to know what one can and cannot say because of the deeply lived sensitivities involved, on both sides. But the current situation, in which LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews are not part of these conversations or the conversations are avoided entirely, is untenable. LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews feel at best unwanted, at worst ostracized. And we've known for a while that this

“We need to start talking—and listening—to each other again.”

issue is a matter of *sakanat nefashot*, risk to life.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 6b) contrasts Aaron's approach to conflict resolution to that of his brother Moses. While Moses insisted on giving the letter of the law the final say—regardless of its interpersonal consequences—Aaron preferred to mediate between the two sides in conflict. It is noteworthy that the Talmud uses a curiously destructive phrase to describe Moses' style: “the law should pierce the mountain.” In this moment, the Moses path to an end to this conflict is clear, harshly clear even. But as the Talmud concludes, it is Aaron, not Moses, who is described by the Prophet Malachi (Malachi 2:6) as the paragon of virtue, and the one who was able to

integrate the often-competing values of *emet* (truth) and *shalom* (peace) in his leadership. It is time to let him lead the way.

We, the founders of RiseUpYU among many others in this community, wish to simply and unequivocally urge Yeshiva University and members of the Orthodox community with pulpits and power to approach this with Aaron's model in mind:

We are calling for a radical and what will be for many a deeply uncomfortable shift in the definition of acceptance.

We urge community members, clergy, and laypeople to recognize the anxiety of squaring this acceptance with halachic authority, and to put this second to the mental and physical well-being of our LGBTQ+ siblings for whom neither being LGBTQ+ nor Orthodox is a choice.

Doing this would put the emphasis of *pikuach nefesh*, saving lives, first and the discourse around Halacha and the LGBTQ+ population second. That move alone would pave the way for a halachic approach that is fully informed by the lived experience of LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews, and is ultimately more conducive to their full inclusion and belonging in Orthodox communities.

But before that happens, we need to start talking—and listening—to each other again. RiseUpYU is here to stand up for and stand with our LGBTQ+ community members, to model respectful, and authentic, dialogue and to translate thought and discourse into action. ■

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STONE COLD TRUTH

Tablet

elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies' s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left right. It's the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies, and it's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you th

Record Master Marshall Chess

The record industry dynast talks music, family, and doing drugs with the Rolling Stones

BY DAVID HERSHKOVITS

The Rolling Stones named themselves after a Muddy Waters song recorded at Chicago's Chess Records, the eponymous label started by Leonard and Phil Chess. Leonard's son Marshall was next in line, the heir apparent to a business famous for its roster of jazz and blues legends like Bo Diddley, Howlin' Wolf, Chuck Berry, and Etta James. As a kid, Marshall would rock himself to sleep on the studio floor listening to their latest tunes. The Flamingos performed at his bar mitzvah, a rare integrated affair written up in *Billboard* and *Cashbox*. It was attended by friends from the immigrant Polish Jewish synagogue; music legends Sam Phillips, Ahmet Ertegun, and Jerry Wexler; local pols; and friends among the invigorated Black population swelling with new arrivals from the South. While still in his teens, he'd ride in his father's Cadillac learning the ropes and meeting DJs and record store owners.

His first official job at the label was to oversee the label's expansion overseas. So when, in 1964, the Rolling Stones' manager called to ask about recording in the Chess studio, Marshall agreed, even though his father looked down on the long-haired "homos" from London. Now 22 and hip to the significance of the Chess catalog to blues-obsessed Brits like John Mayall, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, and, of course, the Stones, he jumped at the chance.

If Chess Records was going to keep up with the changing times, it would be thanks to Marshall. He saw that there

was a new market: teens in cars with radios, who craved more of the new and less of their parents' music. These cheeky white Brits, he hoped, would help the floundering blues label appeal to younger listeners. The Stones' first pilgrimage, in 1964, to the hallowed halls of 2120 S. Michigan Avenue—the title of an instrumental the band recorded at the studio during their visit—was a dream come true for the band, a chance to commune with the blues masters whose sounds were embedded in their musical DNA. To the Stones, Marshall was royalty, a made man. "They would kiss my balls to be on Chess Records," he says. "You have no idea. For these guys being around me was like if you were a Ford car dealer and my name was Ford."

Some 60 years later, Marshall lives in upstate New York, in a wooded compound where he likes to start his day on a stone bench facing a stream where he meditates and smokes his medicine. There's a guest house, the main house, and acres of forest where his wife, kids, grandkids and dog like to roam. We meet in his office, where he maintains the archives that span a century of American musical history. And that history isn't over yet. In 1997, Marshall and his son Jamar formed CZYZ Records, a nod to the family's Polish name before it was changed to Chess. The label's latest release is *New Moves*, a compilation of modern interpretations of blues songs from the '50s and '60s as well as a couple of new tracks. It was recorded by The Chess Project, a supergroup of hip-hop and rock 'n' roll veterans led by Keith LeBlanc, once the drummer for Sugar Hill Records' house band, and Bernard

Fowler, a touring vocalist for the Rolling Stones.

Chess, who is still recovering from two spinal surgeries, may have slowed down physically, but his stream-of-consciousness conversation is as energetic as ever. Though the history of Chess Records is well-documented—including in *Cadillac Records*, a 2008 biopic featuring Adrien Brody as Leonard Chess—Marshall's story is not as well known, which is something that he's decided to change. "I've never tried to sell myself as this character, but now I'm 81, fuck it, you know, I'm gonna go for it," he tells me. "I'm doing it to promote this album, you know, I'm still a record man. I still want to get a hit, unfortunately. Like the racehorse trainer wants to win the race."

Though we've been acquainted for several years—I live in the same area, and we've met at barbecues hosted by neighbors—it's only now that he's expressed any interest in telling his story. In fact, he's written a cheat sheet of his "Experiences/Highlights" that begins with "Born 3/13/1942" and ends with "Palenque Ethnobotany Week with Terence McKenna & the Shulgins (MDMA, Tryptamines) 1996?"

The music business was not in the cards when the Chess brothers—Leonard and his brother Phil—first opened a liquor store on Chicago's South Side in 1942. That was followed a year later by the Macamba Lounge, an afterhours club in a predominately Black neighborhood patronized by musicians, prostitutes, and drug dealers. Impressed by the musical talent around them, the brothers

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invested in a local record label, Aristocrat, which they renamed Chess Records in 1950. Leonard may have lacked musical acumen, but he did know enough to convince Chuck Berry to change a song he'd titled "Ida Red" to "Maybelline," a classic that's hard to imagine by any other name 68 years later.

As an independent label, or "indie," serving "race music," as it was then called, Chess Records prospered. It attained the status of major indie, secure in its niche until the mid-'60s, when the British Invasion, civil rights marches, antiwar protests, and the rise of the counterculture upended its business model. By that time, Chess Records had grown into an institution, complete with offices, a recording studio, record pressing facilities, and a radio station. Such was the label's stature, Marshall tells me, that Chicago Mayor Richard Daley once called Leonard for help quelling the civil rights demonstrations, telling him, "Leonard, the n*****s are on the warpath. Can you help me?"

Being young and hip, Marshall traded in his suits and ties for jeans, a mustache, long hair, and an apartment in Old Town, Chicago's hippie neighborhood. Feeling the shifting winds, Marshall launched the Cadet Concepts label in 1967 with The Rotary Connection, an interracial psychedelic group backed on its first LP by a 20-piece orchestra. Marshall convinced Muddy Waters in 1968 to record an album that fused classic Chicago blues with '60s psychedelic rock. Although critics panned it, *Electric Mud* was Waters' first record to break into the Billboard 200, and it went on to attract a cult following among hip-hop musicians such as Chuck D. Marshall was off and running.

That is, until ... "I got a phone call from this fucking phone [Leonard] had in his car. 'Your uncle and I decided to sell. Don't worry, you're gonna get enough money to do your own thing.' I was supposed to get a million bucks. And then, [in October 1969], my dad died at 52." The new owner, the GRT tape company, was looking to expand into the music business. "They made me co-president and announced: 'We're moving to New York and we're sending you to the American Management

"I lied to them. I had no money. I was in deep shit. I said, 'Look, man, I can't wait around. I would love to do something with you. We can start a label.'"

School because you have to learn how to forecast; we're a public company." After three months, he quit. "I hated it. They couldn't understand what they bought. It was the creativity, not a fuckin' balance sheet with how many albums you sold. The worst part was my dad died and he didn't leave a will. And I didn't get my million bucks."

As luck would have it, however, in 1970 Marshall learned that the Rolling Stones were dropping their label and looking for a new manager. Out of work and out of money, he called Mick Jagger: "I said, 'look, my dad died. I quit. I have nothing to do. And I hear you're looking for a new label and a new manager. There's something we could do together.'"

"Oh, Marshall, that's wonderful," Chess says, mimicking Mick's accent. Chess told him to come to Chicago. Mick couldn't. "I just got my passport held. They found amphetamines coming into the airport in London. Until it's straightened out I can't leave. You come to London."

At Mick's London townhouse, Marshall was blown away by the opulence and sophistication of the fancy old building facing the Thames River at 601 Cheney Walk. "I'm a Jew from Chicago," says Marshall. "This guy had Oriental rugs, sculpture, antiques, art work, and

a giant pile of records lying about out of their sleeves. And he puts on this zydeco record, "Black Snake Blues" by Clifton Chenier. I'd recorded Chenier ... Anyway, he started dancing and we had this great talk and he said, 'Well, we're rehearsing tonight. Come with us and meet everyone.'"

Upon entering the studio, Marshall saw the *Electric Mud* album cover "nailed to the fuckin' post. I had Muddy Waters do one of their songs, 'Let's Spend the Night Together' and they just loved that."

So Marshall pitched the Stones. "I lied to them. I had no money. I was in deep shit. I said, 'Look, man, I can't wait around. I would love to do something with you. We can start a label.' I said, we'll have a logo and you'll control everything. And I lied, I said I have some rich Texans who are gonna finance a label."

They bought it. Marshall was named president of Rolling Stones Records in 1970, setting him off in a whole new direction. The hit records kept coming, as did a growing heroin addiction he picked up along the way.

He traces the addiction to the Rolling Stones' U.S. tour in 1972, the band's first since 1969, when they'd played a disastrous free concert at Altamont Raceway in California, where a gun-wielding fan was stabbed to death by a security detail made up of Hells Angels. Jagger was afraid to return to America, having heard that there was a contract out on his life, and he wanted a doctor on the tour just in case. Marshall found a trauma specialist who seemed perfect, but he didn't realize that this doctor had his own problems. At the urging of Keith, Marshall tried some of the synthetic opioid Demerol they'd obtained from the doctor, and soon he was hooked. "And then Keith and I became, you know, drug compadres. I lived in his house. His best friend was [avant-garde filmmaker] Kenneth Anger," he says. "He was a spooky motherfucker." He remembers Anger drawing pentangles on the floor, playing weird piano music and chanting devil shit. "He was scary, dark, dark, dark. I stayed away." ■

This article was originally published on July 31, 2023.

Sea Bass on Fennel Cream

BY DANA KESSLER

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE SEA BASS

- 2 ½ lbs sea bass fillet, divided into 6 pieces**
- Olive oil**
- Salt**
- Bunch of thyme sprigs**
- Ground black pepper**

FOR THE FENNEL CREAM

- 10 oz fennel**
- 2 tablespoons butter**
- 2 tablespoons cream**
- 2 teaspoons olive oil**
- Salt and white pepper**

FOR THE CABERNET SAUCE

- 9 ½ cups Cabernet Sauvignon wine**
- 1 ½ cups Marsala wine**
- 6 oz onions, peeled and diced to size of ½ inch square**
- 6 oz carrots, peeled and diced to size of ½ inch square**
- 6 oz celery stalks, diced to size of ½ inch square**
- 6 oz leeks, sliced to ½ inch width**
- 3 peeled cloves garlic**
- 2-3 fresh bay leaves**
- Bunch of thyme sprigs**
- Bunch tarragon leaves**
- Bunch of parsley**
- 2 teaspoons whole black peppercorns**

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE SEA BASS

Step 1

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Step 2

Grease a hot nonstick pan with olive oil and roast the fish slices 2 minutes on each side, first the meat side and then the skin.

Step 3

Season the fish with salt, pepper, and thyme sprigs and transfer to roast in the preheated oven for 5 minutes.

TO MAKE THE FENNEL CREAM

Step 1

Slice the fennel into thin slices, heat the olive oil and butter in a saucepan, and sauté the fennel over low heat for about 10 minutes until translucent.

Step 2

Add the cream and cook for about 10 minutes on low heat.

Step 3

Season with salt and pepper.

Step 4

Transfer into a blender and grind into a smooth puree.

Step 5

Drain through sieve or a very thin colander for a cream with velvety texture.

TO MAKE THE CABERNET SAUCE

Step 1

Place all the sauce ingredients in a large pot and cook until boiling.

Step 2

Be careful while heating the alcohol because it may catch fire.

Step 3

Continue to cook over medium heat until the sauce is reduced by half.

Step 4

Drain and continue cooking to reduce the liquid until the sauce thickens.

FOR THE VEGETABLES

- 14 oz asparagus
- 10 oz green beans pods
- 10 oz green garden peapods
- 4 oz snow peas
- 4 teaspoons olive oil
- Salt

TO MAKE THE VEGETABLES

Step 1

ASPARAGUS: Remove the bottom third of the asparagus and peel the stems. Blanch in salted water 3 minutes, drain, and place in dish with ice water. Cool the asparagus and drain again. Cut the stems into rings 1/4 inch wide.

Step 2

GREEN BEANS: Remove the beans from the pods and blanch in salted water for about 2 minutes. Drain and place in dish with ice water. Cool the beans and drain again. Separate the beans from their skin.

Step 3

GARDEN PEAS: Remove the peas from the pods and blanch in salted water for about 3 minutes. Drain and place in dish with ice water. Cool the peas and drain again.

Step 4

SNOW PEAS: Cut off the ends and blanch in salted water for about 3 minutes. Drain and place in dish with ice water. Cool the peas and drain again.

TO MAKE THE FENNEL TUILE (BRITTLE FENNEL PIECES)

Step 1

(Should be prepared a day in advance)

Step 2

Slice the fennel lengthwise into thin slices, preferably using a mandolin, and dry overnight.

Step 3

For drying you can use an Easy Dry or alternatively the oven, where the fennel slices should be placed on bakery paper at 150 degrees for about 6 hours, with the oven door ajar.

TO PLATE THE DISH

Step 1

Heat the cream in a pot while stirring.

Step 2

Toss the all of green vegetables in a hot pan with a tablespoon of olive oil and season them with salt and white pepper.

Step 3

Arrange on a plate: a spoon of fennel cream in the center; a few vegetables in the cream; a slice of sea bass on a bed of vegetables, with roasted skin upward.

Step 4

Pour hot Cabernet sauce on the fish; season with olive oil and salt; place fennel tuile on top.

Yield: Makes 6 servings.

