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Breaking Faith

Commentary and the American Jews

In 1963, the young editor of *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz, astonished his readers by appealing for “the wholesale merging of the races in the United States”—ending racism through “miscegenation.” His article, “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” seemed the more remarkable since, to secure the premise that too much hatred attaches to color for civil integration ever to succeed, Podhoretz confessed to the fear, envy, and contempt with which he had grown up in Brooklyn under the siege of “Negro gangs.” Those streets still seemed to him world-historical ground:

There is a fight, they win, and we retreat, half whimpering, half with bravado. My first nauseating experience with cowardice. And my first appalled realization that there are people in the world who do not seem to be afraid of anything, who act as though they have nothing to lose.

In retreat with him were other young American Jews, barely digesting their parents’ veiled reports of catastrophe abroad and also faring badly against the fascinating brutes on the block.

His own packs, or so Podhoretz insisted, could not be ruthless to the end. But Negroes would play hooky, swallow candy, and hit you in the face; Italians had surrendered only somewhat less to the state of nature. Such imaginings of Jews and gentiles may have been gleaned more from the new literary life—from, say, Saul Bellow’s novels—than

from memory: our own Louis Lepke, “Bugsy” Siegel, and “Gurrah” Shapiro are not so easy to forget. Nevertheless, Podhoretz seemed not to think his recollections just embellishments of some firmer cultural identity: his primal identity as a Jew meant getting pushed around. In fact, Podhoretz’s “Negro problem” now seems most revealing when viewed as but a complication of “our” Jewish one, of our lack of positive reasons for Judaism’s survival, which is something he wanted to concede in the article despite his old gang’s defiance: “In thinking about the Jews, I have often wondered whether their survival as a distinct group was worth the hair on the head of a single infant.”

Why survive indeed if, say, the Jews’ “dark and surly” foils took his advice, married whites—among whom, as a matter of “duty,” Podhoretz refused to exclude his own children—and melted into the pot? Could the Jews then claim to be holding back just to nurse the discontents of civility? Besides, ruthlessness could not have seemed all that unkosher to the “precocious” writer who, in *Making It* just four years later, announced that the world’s choices resolved into giving orders or taking them, grasping for money or having none, getting fame or dying in obscurity. Podhoretz was understandably vexed: “I think I know why the Jews once wished to survive (though I am less certain as to why we still do): they not only believed that God had given them no choice, but were tied to a

memory of past glory and a dream of imminent redemption.” He thought it unnecessary to add that his own cohorts are not bound in this way. They are now afflicted with choices, not the least of them how—or whether—to make something out of Jewish origins once in Manhattan, away from the Manichaeian street fights of an immigrant childhood.

I: Inventing American Jews

Far from being discreditable, Podhoretz’s reservations about the point of Jewish survival in America seemed to drive him, and *Commentary*, into a unique position of Jewish cultural leadership. The magazine succeeded brilliantly as a force for American Jewish life, especially from 1963 to 1968, because its gifted editor consciously charged it with the eclectic voice to which, he knew, thousands of educated, ambiguous American Jews could respond. Like Podhoretz, such people were “neither especially religious nor much Zionist” but were strongly drawn to the divided ambitions and political tragedies of our parents and grandparents, of our European relatives haunting us in snapshots. We had no corporate loyalties apart from the abstract obligations of citizenship, yet as individuals knew we had in common the moral confusions of being Jews. So we keenly awaited *Commentary* every month as if it were a public realm in which Jews were permitted to live on the questions.

These were good questions and the magazine treated them with deliberate skill, organizing the intellectual standards of the American Jews’ increasingly suburban and attenuated communities. *Commentary* established itself as our mail-order polity; one could, it seemed, be actively Jewish just by reading about the Jews’ history, debating the place in culture of Jewish ritual law, or discerning the American “emancipation” in the elegance of the magazine’s prose. And one could hope to be a good Jew by writing with virtuosity about issues that were on our minds. If such

sentiments were vain, the pretensions to leadership of the Conservative and Reform rabbinate seemed far more so. Only *Commentary* seemed to demand that American Jews put the record of historic Jews on our cluttered cultural agenda, and this when the practice of historical analysis—research, publish, debate—already seemed to surpass in virtue the Hala-chic obligations no one (who was anyone) was willing to fake.

I’ve been rereading the volumes published during Podhoretz’s early years at *Commentary* and I’ll review, briefly, the apparent purposes of his editorial leadership. This seems necessary since, in spite of its greater conspicuousness, the magazine has not been generating much enthusiasm among Jewish intellectuals in recent years, which probably accounts for its declining number of subscribers—60,000 in 1970, 38,500 today. Consider, for example, *Commentary*’s response to American Jewish writing in the ‘60s. It did not merely publish criticism of new novels and stories by American Jewish authors, it also provided them with an established forum to try out new material. Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Bernard Malamud each published new fiction during those years, as did younger writers as wildly different as Elie Wiesel and Mordecai Richler. Moreover, the pages were rife with responses and attacks by equivocally Jewish novelists who, while not publishing original fiction here, used the magazine to clarify their critical strategies: Philip Roth, for example, first defended his depictions of Jewish aggression here, in an essay that was itself a bright attack on bond-dinner heroes. Norman Mailer wrote a series of idiosyncratic exegeses on Martin Buber’s newly published *Hasidic Tales*.

The magazine indulged such writers, took them to express the most original inventions of American Jewish experience. Podhoretz would later acknowledge that, anyway, the writing of Mailer, Roth, Bellow, and others was “culturally all the rage in America”; but trendiness could not account for the care with which *Commentary* charted its development and subjected it to the criticism of writers

whose essays were themselves reasons for raised expectations about “Jewish” possibilities in America. Irving Howe wrote regularly, covering even the opening of a play, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Other regular critics were Alfred Kazin, George Steiner, Theodore Solotaroff, and Lionel Abel, as well as more senior members of Podhoretz’s “Family,” Lionel Trilling and William Phillips. *Commentary* also was giving a start to Robert Alter. Of course, Steiner’s pieces were very different from Howe’s: the former was claiming to see “Judaism” plain between the lines of Western European humanist philosophy, while the latter might write to evoke the values and materials of East European Yiddish culture, enjoining “dignified silence” from those incapable of mourning it with him. Very different voices, and their juxtaposition neatly made Podhoretz’s point.

No less, pluralism characterized the magazine’s approach to theological matters even when this required a good deal of moral courage. In the July 1963 issue, for example, Marc Galanter wrote a passionate dissent on the case of Brother Daniel, the Carmelite monk of Jewish origin to whom the Israeli Supreme Court had denied “Jewish nationality”—an important legal designation in Israel—because he had converted to Catholicism during the war. Arguing that the Orthodox center could no longer hold the Jews’ “spiritual dispersion,” Galanter charged that the court’s verdict seemed to repudiate the new Jewish world the Zionists had themselves helped to create:

The Jews have developed an identity much richer than a religion, a nation, or a culture—a kind of brotherhood through history that crosses unprecedented barriers. . . . No Jew or group of Jews is able to partake of all of it. The complexities of this heritage should not be reduced to the more manageable or presentable dimensions of nationality or religion, but should be kept open to the complexities of our changing experience—including the enrichments of such Jews as Brother Daniel.

Surely, Galanter—and Podhoretz—would also want to keep that heritage open even to various enrichments of the Upper West Side.

Those enrichments appeared in *Commentary* as philosophical arguments and theological styles. Martin Buber wrote about the Hasidic masters while Gershom Scholem published his initial research on the “false” messianism of the Kabbalists. Leo Strauss published 12 terse pages of “introductory reflections” on the distinctions to be derived from Judaism and Hellenism, while Hans Jonas needed less space to pose, in a stunning polemic, the tensions between Jewish- and Christian-inspired ethics, and the contributions of both to the Western tradition. Not that the Western tradition was always assumed to be precious: *Commentary* published pieces by the Marxist Albert Memmi, the Freudian rabbi Richard Rubenstein, and others who were inclined to give it a rough ride. The point is that *Commentary* aimed to achieve some consistency between American Jewish identity and the actual, various voices of American Jews: however inimical the concept of a Western tradition seemed to the Orthodox Jewish one—Leo Strauss had frankly posed these as options—the magazine could not pretend to deny the blandishments of the West at a time when most of its writers and readers were resorting to the categories and analytic methods of Western social science and cultural criticism. It was in this spirit, to take yet another example, that the anthropologist Erich Isaac considered the “enigmas” of circumcision and the dietary laws.

This is not to say that traditional Jewish modes of argument were excommunicated. The exegetic tradition was represented in Midrashic essays by Emil Fackenheim, Robert Alter, and Milton Himmelfarb—all trained as rabbis yet obviously devoted to secular philosophic learning—who provided our best view of former Rabbinic standards during the Haskalah, the period of the Jewish Enlightenment. But Orthodoxy was not, it is true, given authoritative prominence. On the contrary, so much prophesy in one magazine—as if Judaism were a load of texts dropped at the feet of highly individual critics—struck the yeshiva masters of Flatbush and Mount Royal as profound heresy. Yet the under-

standable outrage of the Orthodox community seemed a risk worth running: from the play of Mailer or, somewhat later, Harold Bloom issued our otherwise unlikely reexamination of those texts, of Torah and Talmud, Midrash, and Hebrew language. For Americans of Jewish origin, prophecy seemed not to be the culmination of traditional learning but its first step.

Another reason *Commentary* was getting Judaism the respectful attention of intellectuals was the hard-headed, exacting way Podhoretz acquired articles on Jewish history. Avoiding martyrological apologia, Podhoretz published pieces that displayed the Jews as people who could also confound themselves by vain hopes, failing ideologies, and malice. I have already mentioned the magazine's publication of Scholem's work on the movements of Jewish mystics; he also wrote about the Jews of Germany in *Commentary*, and with the measured and distant compassion of one who had made a once painful and misunderstood choice: leaving Berlin for Palestine. His work, like that of Cecil Roth on the biblical period and of Arthur Hertzberg on the modern, corresponded to what seemed an overt editorial injunction against "sentimentalizing the Jews," depicting them in Robert Alter's phrase as "a continuing parade of holy sufferers, adepts of alienation, saintly buffoons, flamboyant apostles of love." So where Yigal Yadin would be asked to proffer the political Zionist symbolism of Masada, H. R. Trevor-Roper was invited to challenge the simple-minded lessons from which, he thought, so much of modern Jewish nationalism derived.

Commentary's approach to the Jews' literary, legal, and historical products had a profound political impact on thousands of young Jewish students and scholars. It seemed to us not merely refreshing to recognize historic Jews as participating agents of their fate; this also inspired a good deal of timely action. In Montreal, for instance, a number of Jewish students (among them Ruth Wisse, and, several years later, myself) worked to establish a pilot program in Jewish Studies at McGill University—by challenging both the

existing priorities of local Jewish philanthropies and the high-minded resistance of McGill's academic committees. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that in our mind's eye was the example of *Commentary's* writers, the lure of emulating its subversions and reconstructions of Jewish life by standards worthy of our academies. I doubt that this experience in Montreal was unique: dozens of similar groups sprung up at other colleges and universities during the late '60s. Their faculties have, by now, virtually eclipsed the rabbinate as the arbiters of Jewish moral life in America.

I think *Commentary's* influence on American Jewish practice during the 1960s may itself be put in some historical perspective and usefully compared with the cultural Zionist monthlies in, say, Odessa during the 1890s; the first time the people of the book, coming to a modern city, became the people of the magazine. But *Commentary's* record in the '60s corresponds to the Zionist monthlies in another crucial respect since, like the cultural Zionists, *Commentary* supposed that historic Jews' communitarian traditions, their moral standards issuing from lapsed theology and collective vulnerability, make Jews natural candidates for modernism, scientific discourse, for "progress" in politics. I'll not recapitulate here the politics of such Zionists as Achad Haam and his disciple Chaim Weizmann, nor do I mean to press the analogy with *Commentary's* newer Jews too hard since the Zionists would not have viewed with favor attempts to modernize Jewish life in any language but Hebrew. Still, it seems revealing that in turn both Jewish intelligentsias, distant in time and space, took for granted a tradition with incipient political commitments to democratic tolerance, peace, and social improvement. *Commentary* during the '60s took social action to be the vocation in America of people who might preserve what Achad Haam had called the Jews' "spirit," their "moral genius." Which is not to say that competing moral ideologies, like those of laissez-faire conservatives, seemed indefensible. Rather, *Commentary's* writers

strongly implied what the Zionist stated: that such ideologies could not serve the needs of Judaism. Jews, rather, belonged with the utilitarians, the socialists and democrats; with people who took the emerging social good and not the individual's sensuous pleasure as the preeminent moral problem. It also seemed Jewish, I shall argue later on, to endorse the apparent goals of the Democratic party since Roosevelt, and this as a matter of principle not merely out of some immigrant habit to be shed along with economic distress.

That the Jews stand for something did not mean that *Commentary* should support every program a reform-minded Great Society Congress proposes: as early as 1963, the magazine was publishing perceptive articles by Nathan Glazer that anticipated the difficulties of reforming urban and educational institutions—even the minimal reforms being suggested by such other *Commentary* writers as Paul Goodman, Jane Jacobs, or Edgar Friedenberg. (Especially notable were the writings of Paul Goodman, to whom Podhoretz gave special encouragement; writing in an unsectarian radical spirit, Goodman helped initiate what was best in the political upsurge of the early '60s.)

Yet the democratic impulse for social reform—for having, as Glazer then put it, “the best society we can manage under the circumstances”—was never put in doubt; nor was it assumed to be doomed by some hypothetical human proclivity for infinite private gain by which Rotarians and Republicans warranted self-regulating markets. Rather Jews should presume that common plans, educational goals, ecological regulations, and social services need to be developed. That we live decently more by evolving an egalitarian culture in public than by private appropriation.

Nor did *Commentary* fail to ground such democratic ideals in the philosophical and psychological disquisitions democrats periodically need to carry on. Most important, in retrospect, were articles concerning questions we now would include in debates about “intelligence,” the impact of social impoverishment on ghetto children, and so forth.

Commentary seemed to appreciate early on the vital connection between egalitarian ideals and a view of intelligence as cultivated potential. Thus Adolf Portmann in “Beyond Darwinism” (November 1965):

The growing human being is born out of the mother's body into a second uterus in which he traverses the second half of embryonic life; this is the social uterus. Thereby we also characterize the mighty task of society; we see how much the success or failure of the individual life depends on its proper performance during this decisive early epoch.

Of course, Portmann's argument was old hat: it would have seemed obvious to Aristotle. But *Commentary* was implying by such articles what must often be reiterated in democratic societies that, in part, aim to organize themselves according to merit; namely, that the poor performance of the poor cannot be ascribed to the inherent limits of individual minds. Racists and Tories have always been able to marshal empirical evidence against inferior classes, but have never acknowledged the extent to which the societies they defend help to produce their evidence.

As with social policy, *Commentary* represented the liberal-democratic instincts of American Jews in political and economic matters, publishing scores of articles by such writers as Oscar Gass, Robert Heilbroner, Robert Leckachman, and Dennis Wrong. It similarly pursued a moderate tone on diplomatic questions, running columns by George Lichtheim, Hans Morgenthau, and others who, while by no means indifferent to the fate of democracies abroad, were also concerned about the climate for military adventurism created by evangelical anti-Communist sophistry at home. *Commentary* came out against the Vietnam War by 1965, printing a detailed report by David Halberstam, and published a devastating attack by Theodore Draper on the Dominican crisis that same year. Such positions were highly controversial then, and aimed to discredit the brinkmanship of Dulles and the Domino theory of Rusk, both of which would nevertheless pave the way for foreign disaster.

It seemed appropriate, finally, that the magazine treat Israel and Zionism with strong but equivocal admiration. For one thing, *Commentary* respected cultural fabric and so presumed its readers too ignorant of modern Israel to celebrate it without more basic information. For another, the claims of historic Zionism implied that the tangible, if modest, cultural activities of American Jews, indeed of the magazine, were unlikely or even fraudulent. (*Commentary*'s long-standing indifference to Zionist ideals had provoked the Zionist organizations to launch *Midstream* several years earlier.) Podhoretz therefore printed pieces that aimed to inform American Jews about the culture and politics of the Jewish state, but with the discretion due another country.

The magazine's best writer on Israeli affairs was, after 1967, Amos Elon whose urbane reports were then unveiling the problems that would fester in the 1970s. But *Commentary* was long before publishing rare, perceptive criticism of Rabbinic-State relations (Herbert Weiner, July 1964), of Zionist organizational rhetoric regarding Jewish immigration into Israel, "*aliyah*" (Ronald Sanders, August 1965), of popular Israeli culture and fiction (Robert Alter, December 1965, and Baruch Hochman, December 1966). Perhaps the best evidence for *Commentary*'s cool and intelligent approach to these issues was the way it handled the Six-Day War, resisting, as no other institution in American Jewish life, the unrealistic euphoria that victory unleashed.

In the August 1967 issue, for example, the magazine published four brilliant pieces on the war and its aftermath. The first two, by Theodore Draper and Walter Laqueur, were about the diplomatic and military implications of the war, and they still seem models of tact and objectivity. Yet the last two now seem even more valuable as the keynotes of a new age. Amos Elon's piece reviewed the events in Israel from May 15 to the climax of the war, but also played the minor chord that Israeli moderates were striking at home. Jerusalem, Elon explained, had been precipitously annexed, and some respectable Israeli leaders were now calling for doing the same

to the entire West Bank, or for setting up a "puppet state" there, a "Bechuanaland for Arabs." If such thinking prevails, he warned, "the potential fruits of victory may be lost as they were in 1948 and 1956." This was tough talk and was followed, to the end of 1970, by equally tough-minded sequels. The best were by other prominent Israeli intellectuals—Shlomo Avineri and J. L. Talmon—who set out a judicious diplomatic strategy to engage Palestinians on the West Bank in discussions that might lead to a two-state solution.

The final piece, by Arthur Hertzberg, seemed of equal moment. The Six-Day War had, he wrote, suddenly drawn American Jews to a network of claims very different from the ones that had previously been operating with *Commentary*'s support:

The sense of belonging to a worldwide Jewish people, of which Israel is the center, is a religious sentiment, but it seems to persist even among Jews who regard themselves as secularists or atheists. There are no conventional theological terms with which to explain this, and most contemporary Jews were experiencing these emotions without knowing how to define them.

Hertzberg, it must be said, remained equivocal about such narrow political Zionist rhetoric whose triumphant revival he identified: he had, after all, given it short shrift in his book on Zionist ideas. So he could not have known that his article was the harbinger of a trend that would help sink the creative life of the magazine.

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II: Breaking Ranks

If, as Hertzberg supposed, the 1967 war was a “transforming” event for American Jews, Norman Podhoretz should not have been immune. But the next several years saw the magazine undergo a conversion more complete than any that might have been warranted by the chance to take Israel’s part—profess “Zionism”—in the face of the Jewish state’s enemies. In fact, the aftermath of the Middle East war coincided with other crucial events affecting the politics of the American left. Podhoretz’s literary career also suffered shocks that seemed to provide him the occasion to “break ranks” (as he’s recently put it) with most of the New York writers for whose good opinion he had once so diligently hustled. He’s written at length about his defection from “the movement”—*Breaking Ranks* is a book of 350 pages. I shall not presume to review the verdict he’s reached of his erstwhile friends, though I doubt that others should resist the temptation to read the book from the name-index back to the text.

Nevertheless, *Breaking Ranks* is intriguing—like all of his didactic memoirs—for what it reveals about Podhoretz’s unarticulated images of Jews, gentiles, and power. Only four pages in the book are actually devoted to the subject—to the “movement’s” incipient self-hatred or anti-Semitism—but this may be misleading insofar as Podhoretz had already admitted that he could not consider Jewish identity and interests apart from the realpolitik he had claimed to learn in the streets of Brooklyn. In this sense, the entire book is about the reappropriation of his primal view of those interests, about defying “the people in the world who act as if they have nothing to lose”: lately, the Soviets, black militants, student radicals, Communist insurgents, anti-Zionist Palestinians, and more.

No fair-minded person could fail to appreciate Podhoretz’s evolving animus: by the end of 1968, the Soviets had rearmed and incited the Arabs against Israel, had marched on Prague; this, while some American black

leaders were composing anti-Semitic and illiberal diatribes, supported openly by thousands of students who violently occupied university buildings, or were “into” drugs, and so forth. Yet, again, his revulsion from the Soviets and the New Left cannot explain Podhoretz’s growing distaste for the writers, editors, politicians, and others in the Vietnam peace camp who mainly shared his sentiments. It seems worth recalling that most of *Commentary*’s polemics around 1968 were written by some of the very “radicals” whose presumed fecklessness he meant to expose in writing *Breaking Ranks*: Norman Mailer on the “new politics,” Michael Harrington on the Democratic party, Diana Trilling on the occupation of Columbia University, and Irving Howe on the failure of New York intellectuals to stem the authoritarian instincts of the New Left. These were strong pieces that could hardly be said to be pandering to antidemocratic forces or their apologists.

In fact, Podhoretz was breaking ranks—breaking faith—with those people who were holding to the radically democratic view of politics with which *Commentary* had justifiably tried to identify American Jews for a decade, but with which he had himself admitted being at emotional odds since his youth. It is hardly clear just what precipitated the break when it came. Most of the people he would repudiate shared the assumption he suddenly and curiously denied: that the American government’s decision to intervene in Vietnam—and the brutal comportment of many American soldiers there—could be traced to some aspects of American political culture. Perhaps Podhoretz earnestly believed that this was no time to rail against American values, no matter how high-minded the motive, although such concerns did not stop him from opposing the war even when all the reasons for opposing it had not yet become clear.

More likely, Podhoretz was confounded by the wide appeal of those critics, philosophers, and folk-singers, also Jews, who invited us to see Vietnam as a product of those particular American values—money, power, fame—which he had just endorsed in

Making It, and with such obvious self-congratulation that “the Family” of New York intellectuals could not hide its embarrassment. Of course, it was no short leap from the politics of money, power, and fame to Southeast Asia; it also was not a long one to the new Republican administration, which, Podhoretz must have noticed, had more of all three than even Lionel Trilling.

It is no use dwelling on these motives, but we can hardly ignore their consequences. From 1969 on, *Commentary* gradually revamped the vocabulary by which American Jews were to consider their interests. That’s an important word—“interests”—for Podhoretz would invest it with a very different meaning from the one *Commentary* had established during the previous ten years. Where he had assumed American Jews to be an eclectic collection of individuals with incipient purposes—self-criticism, the study of Jewish history and philosophy, democratic ethics—the new *Commentary* had begun to depict us as a corporate entity with overt interests in self-promotion and gain—an “interest group.” The magazine now took our consolidation for granted, our material goals as self-evident, and began coaching us, too, on how to make it in America.

To reinforce the determination of American Jews to break ranks along with him, Podhoretz began writing editorials on all sorts of issues—from rock culture to rent control—which invited his readers to consider what seems now “good for the Jews” according to what he began to call “traditional” criteria. I shall consider that new tradition presently, but I first want to comment on two articles by other writers that epitomize the narrow and reckless style of argument by which *Commentary* sought to convince American Jews that it was no longer difficult to figure out what was good for them.

The first, by Emil Fackenheim, set the tone by using the images of catastrophe—of the Holocaust—to contrive a moral climate in which intense American Jewish solidarity could seem plausible without regard to our deteriorating cultural bonds. It also implied

the pitiless nature of mankind in general and so seemed to warrant our preoccupation with gain. It is important to emphasize that this was a new departure for the magazine, which had hitherto treated the mass murders as history so complex one required great modesty to get a grasp of it.

For example, while carefully refuting Hannah Arendt’s indictment of the *Judenrat*, Podhoretz had himself in 1963 followed her lead in presenting the Nazi’s Final Solution not as the basis for some new Jewish cosmology but as the moral burden of German culture, of Christians, as the material for psychoanalytic reasoning. It was not a Jewish moral problem in any positive sense that may attach to modern Jewish life, but *the* problem for anyone concerned with politics. This is, of course, not to denigrate the sufferings of individual Jews or the loss of the Jewish cultural center in Eastern Europe. Nor should anyone deny traditional and Orthodox Jews the appropriation of the Holocaust as an event unique to the Jews, to be absorbed into the liturgy like former catastrophes. It is to suggest, as Podhoretz put it, that there are no easy lessons to be learned except that “the victims were hopelessly vulnerable in their powerlessness.”

Victims cannot claim a privileged vantage point from which to solve political questions; not, at least, just for having been victims. Indeed, what Jewish victims could fail to find in mass murder perfect evidence for the justice of their political philosophy? Liberals, assimilationists, Communists, and Zionists, all will have theories about how the world goes wrong that anticipate how to put it right. Podhoretz was not wrong, in 1963, to confess confusion about whether the survival of Jews was worth the pain of an infant. It is not the murderers who solve the existential dilemmas that may have plagued the murdered and continue to perplex their survivors. Yet, in August 1968, Fackenheim’s new article implied, just this murderer’s inadvertent solution for the Jewish Problem, a modern revelation by which Jews could regain a common purpose, could know and promote each other in public. No shlemiels they, the transformed Pod-

Podhoretz and his fellow editors of the new *Commentary* seized upon it—its preoccupation with the “power” of physical violence—to shrug off almost every serious question that’s been raised about Jewish life from the Napoleonic Sanhedrin to the *New York Review*. The death camps, it seems, have given the Jews a new opportunity to “prepare a way for God”:

Auschwitz is a unique descent into hell. It is an unprecedented celebration of evil. It is evil for evil’s sake. Jews must bear witness to this truth. . . . They were and still are singled out by it, but in the midst of it they hear an absolute commandment: *Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler*. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel lest Judaism perish. A secularist Jew can not make himself believe by a mere act of will, nor can he be commanded to do so; yet he can perform the commandment of Auschwitz.

Now it is true that traditional Jews are supposed to act as if they too stood at Sinai, but this is something very different. Fackenheim is not asking us to take on some distinct ethical obligations, but rather to “stand at Auschwitz” in order to see Jewish survival as an end in itself. Thereby we all—even our suburban princesses—take on the prestige of victims.

Putting aside the obvious moral difficulties evoked by words like good and evil, Fackenheim’s dialectical argument cast the Jews in the role of the purveyors of absolute good, and raised the old, ironic concern of our fathers—now Podhoretz’s new one—with what’s “good for the Jews” to some apparently unambiguous ontological claim.

I’ve implied that Hitler’s main victory to be denied is a view of Jews compatible with fatuous and tribalistic criteria, the obscuring of the serious differences in culture, outlook,

and temperament between, say, Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel, Lillian Hellman and A. B. Yehoshua. But this is not the victory Fackenheim had in mind. The Jews spite the forces of Auschwitz, rather, by staying alert to their interests, by remaining tough-minded and realistic—not “cynical or otherworldly”—and so concerned to augment the material forces of Jewish “power.” The greatest Jewish act, he wrote (as if he had never heard of Mussolini), is to have Jewish babies. He once told me in Toronto that, instead of American Jews hearing the slogan “never again” from our leaders, he would have us hear a running tally of the divisions and weapons at the disposal of Israel and the Western powers. And as if such ironies were not sufficient, Jews must also reaffirm Orthodox practice at least insofar as this will ensure our cohesion.

What forces of Auschwitz specifically did Fackenheim expect his united, crusading people to defy? Can it be true that the subjects of this retribution to which he further alludes are *Commentary*’s new foils: The Palestinians, the Soviets, “anti-Semites” of the New Left, and the “appeasers” in America who fail to notice how the world may “be delivered into *their* hands”? Tyrants, terrorists, and Jew-haters are political adversaries that do Fackenheim credit. But no recognition of enemies requires Jews to surrender to apocalyptic demagoguery. It is not the “forces of Auschwitz” that turned Fackenheim into a Cold Warrior par excellence but the poverty of his own moral and historical imagination; and *Commentary* certainly did the political experience of American Jews no justice running his piece.

We should be truly naive to assume that Fackenheim’s article was meant to stand on its own, apart from Podhoretz’s new determination to see “Jewish interests” in America as everyone else’s gain. This determination obviously inspired Milton Himmelfarb’s subsequent article, “Is American Jewry in Crisis?” published in March 1969, just after Nixon and Agnew (and Moynihan) took office. Here Himmelfarb dismissed the Jews’ defensible position in politics and social life, and advised us to see ourselves as victims

worthy of Fackenheim's cosmos. Specifically, he charged that the New York liberal-democratic establishment—WASPs and anti-Jewish Jews alike—had conspired, maybe secretly, with black militants to win public concessions that could mainly hurt “ordinary Jews” whose sensible fears he then adumbrated: burgeoning welfare rolls carried by Jewish taxes, places held in universities for black children who inevitably would push out Jewish ones, and so forth. Himmelfarb's main evidence of anti-Jewish conspiracy was the political showdown between the predominantly Jewish New York Teachers' Union and the Oceanhill-Brownsville school board. Some scurrilously anti-Semitic pamphlets were published by anonymous black authors, which seemed to him sufficient reason to sound the shofar.

The tone of Himmelfarb's piece was even more disconcerting than his thesis. As if American Jews were already carrying the mantle of Jewish martyrs, Himmelfarb proceeded with exquisite sanctimony to condemn all “universal” claims—claims that, he guessed, do not specifically recognize Jewish “particularity”—as sham altruisms beneath which Jews leave themselves open to physical attack. Could Jews, for example, expect reciprocal support from the other “ethnics” in the Democratic party, from the Italians, the Poles? Jews could not: “On aid to parochial schools and smut control, they are for, the Jews are against. The Jews go to college, they do not. They hunt, the Jews do not.”

How does *Commentary* propose we deal with such extraordinary isolation and vulnerability? Settling in Israel would seem the obvious answer, but the magazine's Zionism was never strong and remained vicarious. Israel might now be a cause for celebration—the same issue boasted a piece by Gil Carl Alroy suggesting that tough, technological Israel would trounce any combination of Arab armies for a generation—but it was Israel's image, not its culture or problems, that the new *Commentary* wanted. What would “Israel” do if it lived in Brooklyn and not among the Arabs? It would, Himmelfarb

suggested, vote Republican, or at least threaten the Democrats with abandonment.

Himmelfarb had in fact begun his piece with what he thought was a revealing bit of polling. Where some 70 percent of well-heeled gentiles had voted against Hubert Humphrey in 1968, 81 percent of all Jews voted for him. This seemed to him serious evidence indeed for an American Jewish hubris to be compared to the utopianism of Rosa Luxemburg. American Jews as a whole, he contended, are in the “highest income bracket,” like Episcopalians, yet seem indifferent to their apparent class interests. New Left critics no doubt found it reassuring to see an anti-Communist such as Himmelfarb express this approving fascination for class-consciousness, but many readers were offended by the piece. *Commentary*, to its credit, printed angry letters about it. Yet the magazine proceeded undaunted in Himmelfarb's—and Fackenheim's—manner. The time had come to develop elbows.

III: Tradition

Suppose that Himmelfarb's version of American Jews is right: an interest group whose problem it is to secure its élan and income in the face of self-regarding WASPs, radicals (too often Jewish) pliant in the face of “communism,” some black free-loaders, many ethnic stiffs, and other anti-Semites. How can Jews throw their weight around in this plural American Republic? What specific policies ought to capture our imagination (or provoke our opposition), what allies are worth having? It seems to me that much of what has subsequently been called the neo-conservative position has been evolved as an implicit answer to this bad question, and that the answer itself is neither very conservative nor new, except to New York Jews. European conservatives, Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss, could not have acquiesced in putting the problem so that common material gain would have priority over the intellectual lives of our best. It should rather be granted that Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and the rest are

quite right to call themselves “liberals”—in the British sense of people who view liberty as the protection of life and property from the invasion of others—convinced supporters of the notion that all men incline to be infinite consumers of scarce utilities (such as “money, power, fame”). They claim that unhampered market societies alone accommodate such propensities efficiently, and that market incentives are our best cure for social problems, and good for the Jews for obvious reasons.

By 1971 Nathan Glazer, for example, had raised his reservations regarding the proper execution of social politics to a full-scale attack on the principle of social planning. The article—“The Limits of Social Policy” (September 1971)—demanded virtual resignation from the poor and their “radical” champions to the slaps of the hidden hand of the market. By June 1975 Glazer charged that American Jews were particularly “exposed” by the social remedies. Social policies, he assured us, will not work in America, while “traditional” solutions—presumably “growth”—would. Why should social planning not work? Because resources are too limited, programs become disincentives for wholesome work, are administered typically by professionals who prove “limited and untrustworthy” and tackle problems too complex for the “knowledge we would like to have.” The welfare programs, he charged, are especially good examples of government waste, as are those for housing—charges Michael Harrington has specifically refuted but that I’ll concede for the sake of argument.

A close inspection of Glazer’s claims suggest only two problems that seem really intractable—scarce resources and incentives—and these are the ones Glazer really meant us to consider. The first, however, turns out to be not an assessment of how resources become scarce (through, for example, badly planned but not hopeless entitlement programs such as Social Security, chronic and structural causes of falling productivity, squandered billions of dollars in Vietnam, and so forth)—but rather a warrant for our common disinclination to support welfare measures through our taxes. This disposition he cor-

rectly hinged on the widespread conviction that these programs do not work (just what he intends us to believe), and on the fear that welfare encourages the shirking of work. So when one comes down to it, Glazer’s celebrated insights were also no more or less compelling than the claims of classical liberalism, that laboring men need to fear the pains of idleness more than the pains of work. At least, it is only because such “incentives” for work were built into Nixon’s abortive Family Assistance Program that Glazer endorsed it.

But Glazer endorsed precious little besides. What decent people can best do, he suggests, is “prevent the further erosion of traditional constraints that still play the largest role in maintaining civil society”—erosion of our common belief in productive work, respect for property, social reciprocity, which are supported by the “family, but also the ethnic group, the neighborhood, . . . the church and the *landsmanhaft*.” The real problem, revealed by his solution, is that the people in the ghettos will not work, because they are disaffected from civil life for want of traditions and family life and seem more mired in social decay than conventional welfare measures will cure.

In this sense, the neoconservative position is a powerful obfuscation, one that has been around almost as long as liberalism. Edmund Burke, too, tried to get his readers thinking about the Terror, professing “traditional” loyalty to “our King and Constitution” and to the family, while assuring everyone that such loyalty is best expressed by refraining from “indiscreet tamperings with the trade of provisions.” The market, he urged, will solve its own problems given a sufficient amount of time and faith—which is just what those whom Burke described as thrown off the “great wheel of commerce” never seem to have much of. John Stuart Mill rightly observed, anticipating the politics of the Fabians and of the New Deal, that state interventions for the purpose of enhancing equality and regulating growth was therefore a protection of the property rights in which, he thought, some of our democratic liberties were grounded, while laissez-faire ideas

menaced them by encouraging class divisions, crime, and despair. Such economic leadership is more urgent today when, as in Japan and the West European countries, government may have to act to organize credit for major corporations that are retooling or embarking on a new technology; to assure energy conservation, mediate industry-wide wage disputes, set standards for public health, and so on.

But Glazer will not even concede the use of national health insurance:

We are kept healthy by certain patterns of life . . . by having access to traditional means of support in distress and illness, through the family . . . the school . . . the neighborhood, the informal social organization. We are kept healthy by care in institutions where traditionally-oriented occupations (nursing and the maintenance of cleanliness) still manage to perform their functions.

Some of this is merely trite: no one since Pasteur would deny that clean people will stay healthier than filthy people, though we are immeasurably cleaner owing to government actions against open sewers, air pollution, bad nutrition, and so on, than we would otherwise be regardless of how much our mothers carp at us to wash. But his statement is also tendentious, for Glazer properly wants us to care about the condition of family life without identifying its overt dependence on conditions over which it (and the *landsmanshaft*) can have no control. Schools and hospitals are not “traditional” institutions merely because such “traditional” occupations as teaching and healing are practiced there. They are built by government to serve people who, by the exigencies of the market, were once kept illiterate and sick. Moreover, Glazer’s views seem indifferent to thousands of black families that have been broken as a consequence of “neighborhood” prejudices, which denied them entry during the 1940s and ’50s, when the economy was expanding at a pace that might well have substantially broadened the black middle class as it did the Jewish. And Glazer’s indifference can only be willful since in his book *Beyond the Melting*

Pot, coauthored with D.P. Moynihan, he recognized the racism of ethnic neighborhoods.

In fact, does any of this earnest concern for the family—the hinge on which neoconservatism turns—take account of the way a father’s love succumbs to self-hatred when he cannot find work? It does not acknowledge that dignified and secure employment will not necessarily exist even for blacks converted to Calvinist notions of work: that, for example, the “traditional” market forces, interpreted by shortsighted management, have wrecked some of the American auto industry putting hundreds of thousands more blacks and whites out of the jobs they had.

If Glazer were right that the families of our underclass in the great Northeastern cities have not been improved by attempted welfare measures, and that this constitutes a danger to the civil society from which Jews and others make their happier lives, he cannot be right that “benign neglect” (as Moynihan put it) is the alternative. The family needs work, medical services, safe streets, clean housing, good schools, day care, public transportation, public libraries and public television, student loans, and many other services over many years. (We certainly need to wage campaigns against illiteracy and commercial TV, more than Midge Decter’s mean-spirited ones against the women’s movement and homosexuals.) If conventional government action has not been enough to help consolidate families in the ghettos, then unconventional action might: not less spending but much, much more. But there is no use denouncing social policies that fail or seem to fail if the alternative to them is the worse failure of social life such policies were invented to allay.

Now *Commentary* flattened to a hard line on so many corresponding social issues that its once apparent commitment to eclecticism vanished. Podhoretz seemed, for example, far more exercised by affirmative action programs than he had been about the welfare state. He began publishing piece after piece (by Paul Seabury, Earl Raab, Martin Mayer, and others) denouncing affirmative action as a new form of discrimination, particularly

against Jews, who presumably have as great a stake in “traditional” conceptions of merit as they have had in the free play of market forces: “As it happens, the Jews are at this moment in an extremely good position to serve the best interests of the country as a whole by attempting to serve their own.”

I do not propose to defend all affirmative action programs, especially not those setting firm quotas that Thomas Sowell rightly condemns for patronizing blacks who don’t need them and putting others into jobs and classes they may not be able to handle. But special efforts to hire or admit nearly qualified people to these jobs and classes, on the assumption that the new experience will help them transcend the cultural deprivation of ghetto neighborhoods, is no pernicious form of discrimination. Generous people will discriminate on behalf of those who are disadvantaged, but that does not make such people bigots: the Hebrews would not have left Egypt if God had judged them then by the criteria He demanded for entering the Promised Land.

Podhoretz misleads Jewish parents, who do not need extra anxieties, in asserting that programs aiming to include a larger proportion of black students in professional schools are some kind of anti-Jewish quota just because Jewish students make up a disproportionately large number of applicants. The Supreme Court is right to acknowledge that, as a temporary remedy, race could be used as one of the many criteria admissions committees should consider when deciding on applications. Ronald Dworkin has argued that the social benefits attending an increase of black professionals constitute a compelling claim. By contrast, *Commentary*’s view of merit—presumably, strict comparisons of performance on aptitude tests, teachers’ recommendations, and so forth—seem no more an impersonal standard for merit than wealth is for guile.

But, since the advent of Milton Friedman’s disciple Thomas Sowell, we do not see advocates of affirmative action like Leon Higginbotham and Vernon Jordan honorably defended in the pages of the magazine. What we

do see are attacks suggesting that the very spirit in which affirmative-action programs are mooted is yet another conspiracy of New Class intellectuals who despise everything “bourgeois” because they are not sufficiently horrified by communism, and quotas. We also see such pieces as Irving Kristol’s “Equality,” which aimed to reassure us that “the bourgeois conception of equality, so vehemently denounced by the egalitarian . . . is ‘natural’ in a way that other political ideas are not” and that the poor, like the rest of us, need spiritual values that no economic system can provide.

I shall consider in a little while the kind of spiritual values this radical, possessive individualism is likely to generate in America, whether Kristol’s bourgeois elites will promote the tolerance Jews need. But his distinction between the purposes of the flesh and those of the spirit already concedes more than an American Jew should.

Spiritual consolation is not irrelevant to common opportunities to exert our capacities as creative men and women, to cultivate our appreciation for the works of others. This was called “humanism” before the Reverend Jerry Falwell turned the word into an epithet. Such opportunities, Kristol surely understood, have some foundation in economic claims—pianos, for example, are not free—which is not to say (what Kristol in fact needs to maintain in order for markets to work) that material interests are the only ones that count.

Still, since Kristol has anointed his contradictory bourgeois concepts as “natural,” what can be left to debate? Nothing, or so it seemed from the increasingly strident polemics that Podhoretz was demanding from his writers. Traditionalists are nothing if not consistent. For example, the theory that continuing economic expansion under laissez-faire is impossible—first proposed by Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy*—was not to be merely refuted but must be said, as in a Rudolph Klein piece, to be the work of “enemies.” Moreover, a majority of blacks were now in the “middle class” (which Scammon and Wattenberg delicately defined to include any-

one not chronically unemployed), and only “liberal” rhetoric calls this progress into question. More recently, the magazine even sought vindication for California’s Proposition 13, which Lipset and Raab asserted was mainly directed at the welfare bums Glazer had supposedly identified some years before.

None of these claims against “New Class” assumptions can match for pure venom the magazine’s hopeless campaign to revive the prestige of IQ testing as a basis for explaining inequality and merit, promoting especially the work of social scientists who have attempted to account for the black underclass as if it were, at least in part, determined by biological necessity. Again, the issue of IQ raises profound questions about what educated people mean by intelligence and learning—epistemological questions—which cannot be settled here. The effort to extrude some quantified version of intelligence may itself derive from a simple-minded view of the mind: the disease, as it were, for which it presumes to be the cure. Further attempts to link our performance in society to such criteria as IQ—to show the poor as dumber than the rich—seem a double violation of moral tact.

David K. Cohen stated just this view in the magazine as late as 1972. Yet such sensible opinions were not to last long in a magazine now committed to finding egalitarian ideals utopian and inequalities rooted in nature: for if a certain few social scientists are vilified by the New Class for searching out the genetic roots of inequality, how much more reason to assume them right.

In spite of Cohen’s article *Commentary* published (July 1972) a lively defense of Edward Banfield’s book *The Unheavenly City* (which had argued to the nifty proposition: “if the lower class were to disappear . . . the most serious and intractable problems of the city would disappear with it”). Then, as if we did not get the point, *Commentary* eventually published articles by scholars whose vigorous advocacy of IQ testing in relation to racial groups—Richard Herrnstein and Arthur Jensen—have made their work still more notorious than Banfield’s. Podhoretz even

had Herrnstein review Jensen’s latest book, *Bias in Mental Testing*, which aimed to vindicate the theoretical framework by which Jensen had earlier speculated that blacks inherit intellectual inferiorities, especially what he had called “adaptive reasoning.” He might at least of have asked Sowell to do the review in view of the latter’s interesting point that the IQs of Jews have seemed marvelously to rise since the 1920s—since, that is, more Jews have gained the education and affluence their former below-average IQs would not seem to have assured.

Of course *Commentary*’s sanctimonious view of affirmative action, its advocacy of market solutions to social problems, and implied biological warrants for both, were bound to inflame even black moderates in the Urban League and NAACP. Bayard Rustin, who’s remained sympathetic to Podhoretz’s view on diplomatic issues, once told me that he considered the magazine’s line on social questions a dishonor to the relations of blacks and Jews in New York. For *Commentary* is after all a Jewish magazine, one for which the American Jewish Committee must find a \$125,000 subvention every year. Black anti-Semitism, particularly the kind that emerged from the Black Power movement associated with the New Left, can never be condoned.

But neither are Jews exempt from demands of propriety and restraint. Of course, as Ruth Wisse’s recent Yiddish fables suggest, Jews are not to begrudge themselves the right to inflame others when their vital interests are at issue; we even have the right to be wrong. But when the editors of the most conspicuous Jewish journal are wrong in the most discreditable way, violating common standards of fairness, that is a worthy subject for public debate. Some other American Jews should be expected to respond in public and repudiate the politics that the magazine claims to be pursuing for our “own good.”

This expectation is of course also relevant to the question of the magazine’s insistence on a Jewish lockstep regarding Israel. While *Commentary* has generally maintained a balanced view of Israel’s diplomatic and military op-

tions—continuing to publish moderate pieces by Theodore Draper, Walter Laqueur, Hillel Halkin, and others who remained unimpressed by Uri Raanan's diatribes against Egypt that also appeared in the magazine—it has nevertheless printed two angry attacks on American Jewish groups that have attempted to organize support for the Israeli peace camp. The first, by Joseph Shattan, was a most irresponsible hatchet job on Breira in 1977. More recently, Ruth Wisse has adopted a merely patronizing tone to scold the American Friends of Peace Now. Wisse's indictment in fact suggested that public dissent by American Jews about Israeli actions is inherently wrong since we do not take the consequences of that country's diplomatic actions; that, anyway, Jews who speak against the Israeli government are to be compared to the shlemiels of Chelm who tried to curry favor among the goyim by condemning themselves for their suffering, and are insensible to the need for solidarity.

I've never quite understood the delight Ruth Wisse takes in imagining herself the resident of a ghetto. Nevertheless, she seems to have missed what *Commentary* once deeply grasped, that American Jews register approval and dissent as citizens of a democratic country, and in addressing Israeli problems inevitably support some rather than other Israeli politicians. Israelis make such claims as well. Such groups as Friends of Peace Now have aimed to build coalitions of support for Israel by attempting to salvage the progressive American constituency for Israeli moderates. This peace group did not consider it inappropriate for *Commentary* to publish Raanan's article, which would have had Israel disastrously break off negotiations with Egypt long before the Camp David peace process bore fruit. Raanan represented a minority opinion in Israel, and *Commentary*'s editors would also not "have to live" with the war his hawkish policies might have provoked, or the one that views such as Aloy's did help to provoke. Wisse's demurrers that her views are mindful of Israel's need for power, while "the well-known leftists" of Peace Now are not, seems so much

affectation: power must be debated and is just not as devoid of opportunities, limits, and complications as her shlemiels may suppose.

IV: The Present Danger—and Ours

The magazine's defense of "bourgeois" civilization for the sake of the Jews has given way to corresponding and false abstractions about the use of American "interests" and power in international conflicts. *Commentary* now specializes in foreign-policy articles aiming to promote greater defense budgets and diplomatic militancy. In the past, the magazine did resist the facile anticommunism that helped put half a million Americans into Vietnam in 1965—yet surrenders to it now that Podhoretz's earlier courage seems so clearly vindicated. Not that the Soviet Union's ambitions were ever to be trusted, or its regime to be admired. But *Commentary* once published Ronald Steele and others who argued that those ambitions are hardly the main problem in formulating U.S. policy toward the leaders of premodern countries and their liberation movements, for whom socialist principles mainly lead to arguable theories of economic development—often learned at Western universities—which are by no means expressions of allegiance to the Soviet empire. China—which, remember, we had intended to foil in Vietnam—may be the most striking example of how careful we must be about such distinctions, but the Egyptian case is also germane.

Notwithstanding Jeane Kirkpatrick's faith in the strength of old ways and old cultures, when America lavishes arms and aid on old military regimes in trouble, a country will indeed fall like a domino. Events in Iran should have taught us that such a lavishing can lead to megalomania and thus itself become a cause for popular disaffection. By contrast, when America keeps its hands off as in Nicaragua or vigorously pursues democratic solutions as in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, "revolutionary" regimes may soon be courting Western countries for the economic and technological support they cannot hope to get from the Soviets. Even the Angolans seem

hungry for greater ties with American firms—they are already doing brisk business with European ones and almost none with the Soviets—though Cuban forces remain. These countries will be lost to American interests if the new Administration denies them the aid they need, or keeps reading *Commentary* as therapy for our “Vietnam complex.”

But Podhoretz’s view that our hard-earned moral and diplomatic caution is a kind of nervous disorder, leaving us powerless in the face of ruthless men, seems curiously familiar—though not, as he fancies, reminiscent of Churchill pushing on alone in a nest of appeasers. If anything, Podhoretz’s accusations have done wonders for his reputation among the Republican brokers who are now operating behind Ronald Reagan’s reassuring shrugs. They already may claim to have quashed the SALT treaty, discredited Kissinger’s “détente,” and proposed the MX, the neutron bomb, the B-1, the seizing of oil fields, support for any autocratic government that is merely, in Ms. Kirkpatrick’s immortal phrase, “moderately repressive.”

Too many articles in this vein have appeared in *Commentary* over the last several years by Jeane Kirkpatrick, Robert W. Tucker, Edward Luttwak, and others to be answered all at once. Some of these, it must be said, have made a very convincing case for greater attention to NATO and to America’s conventional forces, for cutting off high technology to the Soviets, and other policies almost every responsible journal has been promoting recently, in part as a result of *Commentary*’s prodding. But two issues stand out as especially neat examples of childhood fears of cowardice masquerading as diplomatic realism, and I shall treat them in turn.

The first and comprehensive issue, which Podhoretz shrewdly calls “the Present Danger,” suggests America’s “decline” in the world, owing to our presumed decline in strategic weapons, which has itself been precipitated by our “mood of self-doubt and self-disgust” after Vietnam. I think that “decline” and “self-disgust” pertain more suitably to the realm of writers’ blocks and difficulties than

they describe the reasons for decisions made by secretaries of state about strategic weapons. *Commentary*’s version of “the Present Danger” surely is more dramatic than any proposal or debate in pursuit of a solution guided by conventional thinking—as, for instance, the proposal to institute compulsory national service, which the magazine virtually ignored. Podhoretz’s views require the morale to face up to Soviet designs in the Persian Gulf even at the risk of a nuclear exchange.

Aside from its elaborate and dim view of our collective will, *Commentary*’s argument for more strategic forces and militant diplomacy actually reduces to a syllogism about Soviet intentions and capabilities that is vulnerable on many grounds. According to the official version presented by Richard Pipes (July 1977), the argument goes as follows: We and the Russians have counterforce weapons and countervalue weapons. Counterforce weapons are land-based, hence comparatively accurate missiles that can attack and incinerate the other’s missiles in hardened silos and kill a mere, say, 20 million people in the assault. Countervalue weapons (quaintly) are only accurate enough to incinerate cities, yet relatively few (300, in fact, of the 10,000 we have) would be enough to kill everybody in either the Soviet Union or the United States. We have fewer counterforce weapons than the Soviets; they think nuclear war is possible and would execute a first strike if they saw vital advantages to the risk.

This, according to Pipes, is the rub. The Soviets already have and are accumulating a sufficient number of counterforce weapons that, if launched in a surprise attack, could destroy enough of the American counterforce arsenal to leave American leaders only the choice between launching some of the thousands of countervalue missiles that remain to SAC or the submarine fleet—a step leading to the extinction of mankind—or capitulating to a Soviet dictat. Even if they never launch their strike, our knowledge that they could is enough to crack our will to oppose their power plays, as in the Persian Gulf. It is

this latter scenario that Podhoretz has specifically called our impending Finlandization. The Soviets know that we are aware of this, and therefore they may well try any number of moves against us unless we build the "shell-game" MX system.

Some further axioms are necessary to make the argument work. The first is that Soviet leaders would willingly risk sacrificing a good many of their citizens in a counterforce exchange—most likely, some of the millions of ethnic Russians who live along the trans-Siberian railway where Soviet counterforce weapons are siloed. Soviet leaders cannot, after all, expect that no American counterforce weapons would escape a Soviet first strike since American leaders would have some 30 minutes to retaliate in kind. Nevertheless, Richard Pipes assures us that the Soviets would take the risk, because having lost tens of millions in World War II the Soviet leadership would not value life as we do in the West. (By this logic, Israeli leaders should be even more keen than the Russians on military adventures. Still, let's concede the point since Pipes reads Russian and teaches at Harvard.)

Pipes's second axiom is that Soviet missile accuracy is fine enough to wipe out most of our counterforce weapons and that Soviet planners can depend on this. No one at M.I.T., it seems, is ready to concede this point—Kosta Tsipis has in fact pointed out that the Russians would have to control the winds, rain, and gravitational fields over thousands of miles to depend on it—but I shall concede it without even making the case for our super-duper cruise missiles as counterforce alternatives in their own right.

Rather, consider the essential quandary Pipes and Podhoretz envision for the American president after the surprise attack: a full 20 million Midwesterners have been killed, but American countervalue weapons remain intact, as do our conventional forces and most of our vastly superior industrial base. The same can be said for Western Europe, China, and Japan, which still can claim the resources of Africa and Latin America even if the Soviets have captured the Persian Gulf.

Can the Soviet leadership expect to withstand a conventional, protracted war waged against it by such an alliance? Can it even hope to count on its East European hostages or burgeoning Moslem populations? Granted, the Soviets would still have nuclear weapons to threaten the world's cities, but so would the United States and other nations, and the choice to capitulate or risk ending civilization could well be reversed.

Of course, Podhoretz and Pipes have presented us with a thoroughly eccentric view of American choices and Soviet risks. It assumes what the Soviets cannot, that free people will surrender their freedom at the drop of a bomb while the populations of totalitarian states will fight to the end. Did the Japanese "Manchurianize" the United States by destroying the fleet at Pearl Harbor? And as if Pipes's casuistry were not enough, Podhoretz adds the insinuation that the Japanese and others would now sell themselves to whatever country should supply them oil, even if the Soviets needed nuclear terror to win the right.

What civilized citizens would stand for this, except in the imaginations of writers so cynical about human nature that they consider all moral ideals and restraints a gloss on material gain? Are the people of democratic countries to be compared to Podhoretz's youthful gangs who retreat in the face of anybody who smacks them in the nose? Is making war the same as becoming king of the block? More to the point, is it worth throwing \$200 billion or more at our security problem to preempt a diplomatic choice so cynically conceived, especially since those dollars would procure U.S. first-strike capability, which the Soviets will have to match with trip-wire defenses that are far from reliable?

Jews have a special need to consider these arguments, not only because we've defended civilized behavior since Abraham, but because Podhoretz and Edward Luttwak (February 1975) have made support for expansive American strategic power a *sine qua non* of support for Israel. We cannot realistically expect Israel to get continuing supplies of weapons and aid, they warn, unless the American president and Congress have made an

overall commitment of playing it tough with the Russians. Moreover, in their view, converse relations of dependence also hold: so people who remain open to less hawkish solutions to Israel's problems, who would, for example, welcome an end to Israeli settlement on the West Bank and more forthright Israeli negotiations in the Palestinian autonomy talks, are just appeasers. Palestinian claims are to be compared to those of the Sudeten Germans in the Nazi years. American Jews, they conclude, should encourage all other Americans to appreciate Israel for a toughness the Czechs lacked in pursuing its interests and those of the West (August 1980 issue). Israel, in short, is nothing less than a strategic asset for the United States.

V: Good for the Jews?

Let us be clear that support for Israel in the United States has always been led by a coalition of Jewish activists and non-Jewish liberal politicians, progressive journalists, labor leaders, and so forth, who've approved historic Zionist goals because they despise anti-Semitism and have grown increasingly intrigued by Israel's democratic and cooperative institutions. This, despite the knowledge that Israel only complicates American strategic interests in the Middle East, which have historically rested with the Gulf states and their revolving protectors in the Arab world. It was this coalition—from Stephen Wise to Hubert Humphrey—that prevailed upon President Truman to recognize Israel over the strong objections of the State Department, and that has actively secured Israel's military and diplomatic requirements in Congress since the Kennedy administration.

Commentary's depiction of Israel as mainly a strategic asset since 1973 has shaken this progressive coalition. If Israel is a strategic asset—as the post-Vietnam generation has been invited to believe by our premier Jewish monthly—then perhaps it is nothing but this. And *Commentary* has made the job of ignoring our ethical responsibilities to the Jewish state even easier. In spite of Moynihan's raising of the issue in 1977, the magazine has

lately insisted that “human rights” questions (which reflect badly on Israel's policy of occupation but not on its right to a just survival) perplexed only the naifs of the Carter administration. Worse, Jeane Kirkpatrick and Carl Gershman have implied that traditional dictatorships are not assumed to be comparable to the tyrannies of communism, because the former satisfy their people's “spiritual” needs. This recipe for diplomatic support was meant to justify our support for regimes like that in South Korea; but ordinary Americans who read *Time* magazine are clever enough to note its applicability to the Egyptians and even the Saudis.

Moreover, strident arguments about Israel's indispensable power in case America should make a military entry in the Persian Gulf have tended to discredit the Jewish state on campuses and even in the liberal press where suspicion of Cold War rhetoric continues to run high. Rather, disingenuous Palestinian rhetoric about self-determination is increasingly capturing the high ground within America's progressive constituency, just when considerations of Israel's strategic worth—and Robert Tucker's revelations about its nuclear threat—have given many a pretext to become indifferent to Israel's danger.

Commentary's widely publicized turn against the “liberals” also has contributed to the political climate in which combinations of Jews and less well-educated people in the labor movement have themselves turned against liberal senators and politicians—against Church, Bayh, Mondale, and others—who have been leading Israel's fight in the Congress for a generation.

What has *Commentary* gained by this? The magazine will point with some pride to the appointments of Kirkpatrick and Gershman to the UN, and of Pipes to the Russian desk at the State Department. The former will no doubt use the forum also to rail against the PLO as Moynihan has done. But the choice for America's foreign-policy establishment, new and old, has never been between Israel and the PLO, which is why the Camp David accords were conceived. The

choice, rather, continues to be between support for Israel and the immediate protection of American interests in the Gulf.

Granted, these options seemed to coincide between 1970 and 1973, after Israel won the War of Attrition on the Suez Canal and seemed the only invincible policeman at America's disposal: Israel, after all, helped save Hussein's regime in September 1970, and might have been enlisted to support the Saudis as well. But this strategic hiatus did not last. The choice between Israel and the more important Arab regimes became distinct again after the 1973 war when experts as different as Henry Kissinger and George Ball both could see what Sadat openly claimed, that Egypt and the Saudis are more important allies against Soviet expansion in the Gulf than Israel's phantoms. Those phantoms, after all, may be useful only in some all-out war that is likely to ruin the oil installations for which war would be waged.

Eliyahu Salpeter, a writer for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, has remarked that most Israelis are smart enough to worry that the Saudi-connected Bechtel Corporation—the recent turf of Caspar Weinberger and George Schultz—Mobil Oil, and others are likely to have more clout in the Reagan administration than the brainy Mr. Gershman. Weinberger's recent noises about stationing American troops in Israel are nothing new and seem more a cover for arming Saudi F-15s with offensive potential than a statement of concern for Israeli lives.

This raises another important problem for Jews produced by *Commentary's* contribution to wide-scale disillusionment with democratic humanism. Although the magazine will no doubt attack such fundamental Christian groups as the Moral Majority and NCPAC in the months ahead, *Commentary* cannot escape its complicity in the far-reaching cultural consequences the New Right has wrought. Just what kind of "spiritual values" did Kristol and Glazer expect from Americans made content by "tradition," but the one, explicitly, that denies God listens to the prayers of Jews? Were our own parents such idiots for promot-

ing the urbane, communitarian values of the democratic left and resisting the amazing grace of market individualism?

A good number of American Jews, in fact, have been deeply demoralized by *Commentary's* obscuring of the actual political traditions we've had in America since 1881. Our élan has not been in our "interests" but in our roots: the sweatshops, the unions, the *Forwards*, the New Deal, the antifascist leagues, the civil rights movement; and in figures as different as Emma Goldman, Abe Cahan, Aaron Copeland, and Justice Brandeis. Their ideals are not made and unmade by income brackets, but have been the stuff of our families' dinner conversations long before we could all speak English. Such ideals entail heroes, sensibilities, moral taste, the civil religion to which we try to make converts by insisting on a sense of history.

And how can *Commentary's* regulars sensibly speak of the American Jews' traditions while no longer tolerating the writers whom the magazine once acknowledged to be the basic record of our experience? This is not a rhetorical question. *Commentary* has abandoned American Jewish writing to its ideologically primed book reviewers, and has virtually stopped publishing the fiction of our best American Jewish writers who, if Podhoretz's reformed views on Philip Roth are any indication, only serve to reinforce the conceits of the New Class. Ruth Wisse has argued that Arthur Miller, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and the rest have generated merely a literature "about Jews," but not one issuing from "the civilization and religious structure of the Jews" like the work of the talented but permanently obscure Montreal Jewish poet A. M. Klein. To be a Jewish author one must hold that a "meaningful Jewishness—whether religious, Zionist, ethnic, or any other kind—exists or deserves to exist." This is, I suppose, how the "commandment of Auschwitz" works as literary criticism.

What can American Jews be about if our own public stories are counterfeit? Consider Cynthia Ozick's reaction to Harold Bloom's book on the Kabbalah, and compare it to Marc Galanter's poignant defense of Brother

Daniel. Dismissing Bloom's claim to be confronting the God of the Fathers, Ozick writes: "The recovery of the Covenant can be attained only in the living out of the living Covenant; never among the shamanistic toys of literature." And Ozick's ungenerous sermon seems hardly unique since *Commentary* has gradually, but surely, reinstated Orthodox Judaism, really a manipulated version of it, lacking in authentic faith, as the only American Jewish practice to match Zionism in inspiring the cohesion necessary for Jews to make their fights. No more articles by anthropologists like Erich Isaac on dietary laws and circumcision. Instead, we see Robert Alter's attack on the "scientific" views of Jean Soler regarding "Kashrut," Ruth Wisse's defense of a male-only rabbinate, and Haim Maccoby's panegyrics to the Orthodox movement.

Alter and Wisse are brilliant polemicists and their pieces should certainly have been published. But can *Commentary* defend its disposition not to publish, except in the letters column, any dissenting voices especially on questions of Orthodoxy? Does it seriously expect American Jews to revive Halachic community, or that Halachic standards should entirely prevail? Have Podhoretz, Alter, and Wisse been exemplary purveyors of the living Covenant as against the "shamans of literature"? Ruth Wisse may be correct that much of American Jewish literature would seem remote to the ordinary Jews who populate the Yiddish stories she has masterfully retrieved. But then, Americans are now not ordinary Jews and might be appreciated for not having been ordinary hypocrites.

Yet *Commentary* has not even been right about the American Jewish interests for which we are supposed to brush aside American Jewish values. Whatever the experiences of their parents during the post-World War II boom, young American Jews have disproportionately benefited from government spending on welfare, science, and education, because they are disproportionately the young professionals, educators, and administrators the magazine has sought to defend in opposing affirmative action programs. Most of us live in the big Northeastern cities whose decay

can be reversed only by more federal spending on housing, mass transit, public works, pollution control, and so forth. But there is a corporate Jewish interest in social policy that is even more compelling. In an unpublished 1979 report for a major Jewish organization, Arthur Samuelson has noted that in the crucial fields of service (such as health, child care, aid to the elderly), Jewish philanthropic agencies—especially those expanded to serve non-Jews as well—were receiving 51 percent of their funds from government grants. That figure must be considerably higher today. As Samuelson observes, these agencies do more than help the indigent; they "provide the essential organizational and moral backbone" of the Jewish community itself, since fund-raising and committee work have become preeminent secular forms of Jewish identification.

Massive cuts to welfare programs, such as the ones now proposed by OMB Director David Stockman, will cause some of these agencies to collapse. Jewish educational institutions will fare no better: YIVO has been saved from bankruptcy for several years by the National Endowment for the Humanities, which seems very high on Stockman's hit-list. And how many American universities will agree to participate in the development of Jewish studies programs if further cuts reduce academic operating budgets? How many American Jewish bright but not brilliant students will be able to go to good universities when tuition is almost \$10,000 a year and loans for education are drying up? Does Glazer expect the "*Landsmanshaften*" to pick up this slack? Jewish philanthropic rates have in fact been falling as compared to the national average since peaking in the years after the 1967 War. And if American Jews were to revive their welfare institutions with a new flood of cash, would there be enough left to cope with Israel's problems?

Commentary's approving attitudes toward cuts in social spending are also helping to undermine Israel's related and crucial need for foreign aid. Government attempts to "get off the backs" of Americans may dump Israelis on their backsides. The Jewish state today

gets three times as much aid directly from the American government as it gets from American Jews. But Stockman has also insisted that foreign aid programs be cut to prepare a balanced budget by 1983. He is not alone. A Yankelovich poll in 1978 ascertained that some 72 percent of all Americans concur with Stockman that aid should be cut. Can they be expected to bail out Israel when Cleveland is permitted to default on its bonds? Does this year's reprieve guarantee next year's aid and that of the year thereafter?

Toward the end of *Making It*, Podhoretz recalls his decision to replace Elliot Cohen as

Commentary's editor. He writes.

Because Elliot Cohen had had something new to say, like it or not, *Commentary* had been charged with vitality for the first ten years which according to Edmund Wilson was the natural life span of a genuine editorial impulse; all *Commentary* had done since . . . was to insist over and over again, and in an endless variety of ways, on points which had already been made, which had already sunk in, which had no further juice in them. The moment had clearly come to say something new, and the possibility of saying it through a monthly magazine was almost certainly there.

There is, I dare say, sound advice in this. □



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