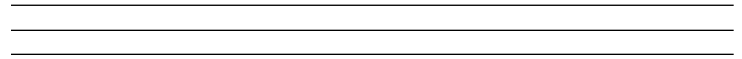


The Current



A Journal of Contemporary Politics, Culture, and Jewish Affairs

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Naming the End in Iraq

From the Editor

On the last day of June, American forces made their exit from Iraqi cities, more than six years after entering them. While over a hundred thousand troops remain in the country, they now reside on bases out of sight from most citizens, staying in the country (until the end of 2011) only to conduct special missions and to buttress Iraqi police and soldiers if called upon. The occasion was cause for celebration in Iraq. Military parades marched through cities, fireworks dotted the skies, and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki declared it National Sovereignty Day.

On the same day, thirty-three people were killed in a car bomb attack in the northern city of Kirkuk, a flashpoint for sectarian conflict (the city is close to Iraq's biggest oil fields and is a major petroleum-processing site). In some cities, including Baghdad, the streets were emptier than usual. Without U.S. troops, many feared that violence would increase, rather than decrease. To some, the declarations of national autonomy and non-American-led security seemed no more than

the self-congratulation of the political class. A housewife from Mosul (also in the north, and home to frequent violence) asked a *New York Times* reporter a pointed rhetorical question: "What kind of withdrawal is it when American forces can reach any place in only thirty minutes?" Others were skeptical for the opposite reason: "I think the Iraqi Army is only able to control the southern areas," said one store owner. "They are unable to make Baghdad and Mosul safe."

His worries proved well-founded. The following week, attacks in Baghdad, Mosul, and other cities in the north killed hundreds. Violence continued throughout the summer. One attack destroyed an entire village near Mosul on August 10. Nine days later, truck bombs hit the Foreign and Finance Ministries in the heart of Baghdad, facilities previously surrounded by blast walls but made vulnerable after Maliki's decision to have them torn down following the June 30 milestone. The attack killed nearly a hundred people and wounded over 600. Hours after the bombs detonated, Maliki backtracked

on earlier declarations that he would not call on Americans for security assistance, requesting that troops reenter Baghdad to help secure the area. The symbolic politics of liberation met the reality of instability and undiminished threat.

Maliki, in the days running up to the June 30 deadline, claimed that the occasion would mark a "great victory" for Iraq. White House Press Secretary Joe Gibbs issued a more ironical statement: "We'll keep the banner printers from doing anything crazy." His reference was to the speech made by former President George W. Bush on an aircraft carrier in May 2003. Standing in front of a large red, white, and blue banner inscribed with the words "Mission Accomplished" Bush declared, "In the Battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed." The banner became a source of derision in the violent years that followed, supplying war critics with evidence of the arrogance that had led the United States to war in the first place.

On the 30th of June, there was no celebration in the United States. Among most Americans, there was quiet. Blogs and opinion columns lit up briefly, but the consensus, in more or fewer words, was "what do we make of this?" Over the summer, media coverage decreased as violence increased. (Joe Biden felt the need to travel to Baghdad to reassure those afraid that the new administration was pushing Iraq "to the bottom of the shelf.")

The diminished attention for Iraq in the ensuing months surely has something to do with popular fatigue; poll numbers on Americans' feelings on Iraq tell us as much. Moreover, healthcare began to dominate the news cycle, and the focus of foreign affairs coverage shifted to the escalating war in Afghanistan.

Underneath this weariness for Iraq coverage and discussion, however, lay a deeper uncertainty about the future of that country and what the United States has wrought there. If this was a great victory for Maliki's Iraq, and if the dying continued in the wake of this victory, then what does victory even mean? Will it be clear to us when the United States achieves it?

In the American occupation in Iraq, the line between quitting and winning is a thin one. A memo written by Colonel Timothy Reese in July claimed, in its title, that "It's Time for the US to Declare Victory and Go Home." The message, one could say, is that simply declaring victory will make it so (Stephen Colbert made a similar suggestion to officers he interviewed during his USO stint in Iraq earlier this summer). But given the ongoing sectarian violence, a not-quite-democratic government with few years of experience, the unpreparedness of Iraqi security forces, arguments regarding the distribution of oil revenues, and the unresolved issue of Kurdish autonomy, declaring U.S. victory now will be more an act of bravura than a simple statement of fact.

To declare a successful end to a war is to claim that the aims of the war have been met. Practically speaking, a country's war aims are almost never completely clear (not to mention that the true aims of the architects of a war might differ vastly from those proclaimed in public), and they often change as the conflict wears on. The aims of the Iraq War were both variant and eventually grand. Politicians pushed the United States into war on national security grounds (weapons of mass destruction in a rogue state), and later justified a prolonged occupation on humanitarian and politically-transformative ones (keeping the lid on an incipient civil war and ensuring the growth and stabilization of an incipient democratic political system). The war was to lay the

foundation of a new political (and economic) order in Iraq.

This was not the first war fought by the United States to carry a wide-spanning vision of how the world should be. The victors, no less than the vanquished, of the Second World War had large aims, too, even if, unlike in Iraq, the question of waging war had an existential immediacy. The United States and its allies demanded unconditional surrender, and they achieved this through the near-total destruction of Germany and Japan. When the war ended, the conquerors rebuilt the destroyed nations on an unprecedented scale, both economically and politically.

In Iraq, these major projects began while the insurgency still raged. There has



A ceremony in Majaar Al Kabir, Iraq marking the June 30 withdrawal

been no postwar reconstruction, because there has yet to be a postwar. The United States, unmatched in its abilities to fight a conventional battle, rapidly routed Iraqi forces in the beginning stage of the war, just as it had during the First Gulf War. By the end of March 2003, Saddam Hussein had been deposed. Over 15,000 Iraqis, many of them civilians, were killed in this early part of the war. If not for U.S. military might and the constraints on killing innocents in a war with at least some humanitarian impulse, the losses in human life and infrastructure could have been far greater. Against more comparable military powers in the Second World War, the United States deliberately killed civilians in extensive and well-known bombing campaigns—the desire for unconditional surrender led them to embrace whatever means would most quickly achieve the defeat of the enemy, regardless of the loss in innocent life.

The rapid, and at least by comparison less devastating, defeat of the Iraqi regime exposed something the allies did not face in Germany and Japan: stark internal divisions. Saddam's dictatorship had, with violence and repression, elevated a minority of Iraq's population to ruling class status. Resentment was strong among the brutalized Shiite and Kurdish populations. The sectarian lines in the sand survived the first months of war, and by the summer the antimony between the previously dispossessed and the newly dispossessed (and, of course, the occupiers who seemed to possess all) bubbled to the surface. By the late spring of 2003, Iraqis

had neither succumbed to total moral defeat nor come together as a single nation.

The First Gulf War was a short one. The United States, content with ending the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, left Iraq without toppling Saddam's regime, destroying his army, or supporting Shiite and Kurdish uprisings. Within weeks of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Saddam was overthrown, the Iraqi Republican Guard disbanded, and sectarian conflict was just about to begin. The war did not end, and the United States did not leave. This time, the terms of victory were set much higher.

Colonel Reese's July memo claims that "the United States has met our [sic] objectives in Iraq," but he remains sketchy on the details of these objectives. After massive errors in the first years of the war, Reese writes, the United States built the Iraqi army and police into "a fighting force." Yet Reese himself provides a litany of the ways that both the government and security forces of Iraq have failed to live up to their responsibilities to the citizens of Iraq, while still arguing that they are "marginally self-sustaining" and functional enough to handle internal security. The United States, on the other hand, has "reached the point of diminishing returns." Its presence now does little to protect civilians or ensure the legitimacy and accountability of the government.

If, as Reese says, now is the time to declare victory and get out—he argues that

we should leave by August 2010, not by the end of 2011—then it will be a “victory” spurred by an inability to do more. On the military level, Reese considers the Iraq War to be a minor success, even as thousands of civilians have been killed in 2009 alone. Reese’s assessment holds that from a national security standpoint, it is unlikely that the United States could do more to ensure that Iraq does not succumb to terror and become a source of wider violence in the Middle East.

On the level of ethical judgment, the question of whether the United States has met its objectives is fuzzier. Is Iraq now a better place to live than it was before the U.S. occupation, and will it remain that way? These questions require the privileging of certain values over others: should we consider individual liberty, the strength of civil society, the smooth functioning of just political institutions, bodily safety, economic welfare, or something else, as the designator of victory? All of these have yet to be ensured, and they will most likely not be by the time the United States leaves Iraq altogether, either. It will be years after the military exit, long after the last American gun in Iraq has been fired, when we can begin to answer the question of victory and defeat in these domains.

This kind of analysis takes place only with a view to the future. Yet even if the question, “was it worth it?” cannot generate answers about what to do in Iraq now, it is still an important one to ask. Casualty estimates vary in Iraq, but at least hundreds

of thousands, and possibly over a million, people have died as a result of the war. And we must not forget that the early version of “was it worth it?”—“will it be worth it?”—was never a question for Iraqis themselves. The decision that it was worth the cost was made in Washington, D.C. Decisions about Iraq’s future should now be made by Iraqis, but this does not absolve the United States of the obligations it incurred there when the decision to go to war was made. President Obama opposed the war but knows that the country he now leads still has the responsibilities that the war has wrought.

Colonel Reese’s entreaty to declare victory in Iraq is not made in bad faith; while it downplays the uncertainties that remain, it is rooted in the factually-based hope that what the United States has done is enough to ensure peace and stability and the prediction that it can do no more. The high moral standards of victory in the contemporary age make such uncertainties unavoidable. Perhaps this prolonged doubt is an inescapable part of the type of wars that the United States now fights. If we are to take it at its word, it does not battle for Americans alone; it went to war with Iraq (in part) for Iraqis, and with Afghanistan (in part) for Afghanis. Bush’s claim that U.S. forces had “prevailed” in Iraq referred to the war fought against an enemy, not the one fought to establish and aid an ally. The United States was not victorious then because the war wasn’t just about beating Iraq. When victory crosses over from the destructive to the constructive, nothing is

certain. What is built on shaky ground can always be torn down.

Obama is now deciding whether or not to ramp up the war in Afghanistan. Americans seem skeptical about the effort, probably for any number of reasons: they think the war is unwinnable, they tire of Americans fighting for the rights and safety of others, or they see this new old war as nothing but the continuation of neo-imperialist policy. Perhaps there never was a widespread cosmopolitan base of support in the United States for the Iraq War—perhaps the image of universal freedom was less important than the possibility of another attack on American soil—but whatever base there was now seems to be eroding. Iraq might succeed in the sense of the values outlined above in the coming years, but absent a quantitatively and qualitatively increased international presence, Afghanistan will almost surely not. Should coalition forces stay in Afghanistan, the prospects for a good outcome will be uncertain. As in Iraq, we will not know whether Afghanistan is truly a better place to live than it was before the invasion in 2001 until long after the United States has left. But there will be no such doubt if the United States and its allies leave now. 2009 has been one of the bloodiest years of the war, the Taliban is regrouping, and if democracy is weak in Iraq, it is openly a sham in Afghanistan. To “Declare Victory and Go Home” in Iraq requires a small leap of faith. In Afghanistan, it would be a lie.

—*Nick Serpe*
Editor-in-Chief

Letters to the Editor

*Immature Democracy: For Israel
Constitutionalism is a Matter of
Survival*

Armin Rosen, Spring 2009

To the Editor:

Israel indeed lacks a constitution among many other things, from separation of religion and state to a subway in Tel Aviv.

However, at this stage passing a constitution that will be both agreeable and workable is unrealistic. A case in point is Armin Rosen's quote of David Grossman's Arab interviewee who ostensibly laments the lack of an Israeli constitution. In fact, a heroic effort led this decade by then-chairman of the Knesset Law Committee, and current Hebrew University President Prof. Menachem Ben-Sasson, to produce a draft constitution was boycotted by the Arab lawmakers, who refused to even show up for any of his forum's many deliberations.

My conclusion, therefore, after two decades of covering Israeli politics, business,

and culture as an editor and correspondent, is that Israel must most urgently change its electoral system, which is the only one among the entire world's significant democracies where no one is elected personally or by district. Instead, Israel should adopt a regional system, where lawmakers would represent communities rather than ideas.

This too will involve a herculean effort, as the small parties will torpedo each such effort, as they already have in the past, knowing that such a system would put them out of business. Still, such a regional electoral system would compel Israeli politicians focus less on big ideological bravados and more on mundane delivery of better public services for their voters. This would in due course de-radicalize Israeli politics and eventually make it easier to adopt a constitution.

Amotz Asa-El

Wall Street Journal/MarketWatch

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Boroughing



Catcall Etiquette

Sara Deutsch

Over lunch one July day, my dining companion explained why she hated pick-up lines with such vehemence.

“They’re so vulgar. That’s not it really, though—” (a thoughtful pause) “I think I just take the compliments badly. They make me uncomfortable and the skeezeballs can tell.” I smile and nod, taking an especially

big bite of my P&W sandwich so I don’t have to agree out loud.

Because I don’t. Like any good daddy’s girl, I’ve been trained to avoid situations where I’m in peril: I walk home in pairs at night, usually, and I avoid Morningside Park after dark. I don’t talk to strangers and I definitely don’t look them in the eye. But I do listen, avidly. I’ve always had a soft spot for sidewalk appreciation, for the cooing ingenuity of the lines—the more creative, the better. To be honest, I feel flattered, though I never let my eyes veer from their

purposefully fixed stare. On days when I am in need of an ego boost, I have felt pitifully grateful for Columbia's proximity to the gracious streets of Harlem, where men of all walks of life will appreciate my inner and outer beauty, audibly.

I've often responded with a cheerful, "Thank you!" to admiring croons of, "God bless you, beautiful," or even more concisely, "I love you."

Another friend of mine once raised the perplexing questions, "What if our friends did that? And, more importantly, why don't they?" The innocent inquiry has left me perplexed: I do wonder what makes these particular men comfortable with verbalizing their appreciation for my, shall we say, assets. What keeps this particular brand of "offensive" etiquette so essentially limited to the unfamiliar streets beyond the cloistered confines of Columbia's campus?

This summer I subleased an apartment at 141st and Broadway. It's just far enough from campus to stay away, most days. Every day on my way to the subway I pick up my morning catcalls like coffee and the paper: it's routine. Young or old, black or white (as good old MJ sweetly reminds us), it is normal here to get my daily ration of soft whistles and hearty sighs of appreciation by 9 am. One night I was even offered marriage, replete with the astonishing whimper, "I'll give you twins!" It made my evening.

So imagine my surprise when, on one of the first hot days of the soggy summer, I met my first genuinely perturbing jeer. And I wasn't on the hardened streets of Harlem,

either, but on our own familiar subway platform of 110th and Broadway. While waiting for the train, I heard the abruptly recognizable woop of approval, and whirled to view a young boy of twelve or thirteen sitting on the bench behind me.

"She's got a fat ass," he rapped, "and some titties!" With each repetition of the refrain he added a new line of identification ("She's got a green iPod!" and "She's wearing a blue dress," and so on). I eyed my surroundings, noting a wilting old man in plaid shorts and a snotting toddler clinging to her pregnant mother. No one else seemed to match the adolescent's description, and I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. I was on Columbia's turf! Such disconcerting proclamations weren't allowed here. I tapped my foot impatiently on the yellow stripe, searching for headlights at the end of the tunnel.

When I finally stepped off the train on the 137th Street platform, I breathed deeply. The scent of tamales and sliced mangoes accosted me along with the subway heat. A man seated on the ground grinned toothily up at me.

"What's your name, beautiful?" he giggled.

"Good morning, sir!" I replied, beaming. What a gentleman, I thought.

SARA DEUTSCH is a junior in Columbia College studying anthropology.



Speaking Out

Danielle Ash

The first few speakers to the podium were in their seventies and eighties. Their hands trembled for the whole three minutes of individual testimony at a City Planning Commission public hearing this past summer. Each extolled a personal saga about the new construction taking place outside his or her apartment window; each spoke passionately and without pretense. “It will take away the air and the light, which are the most valuable commodities in New York City,” an elderly woman lamented. “We will have no sunlight, no light at all.”

The testimony harkened back to the stoic language of the Tenement House Act, which established height, bulk, and design regulations for residential buildings in New

York City in 1901, prompted by Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives*. Safety was also a concern: the developer would have to build a sidewalk bridge, which one resident claimed would cut off the lower several feet of her fire escape. “Now, I live on the 8th floor and that frightens me,” she said, “It’s a long jump.” Constrained by the time limit, each deferred to the “expert” on the matter—a certain neighbor in the audience whom each speaker promised “had done her homework.”

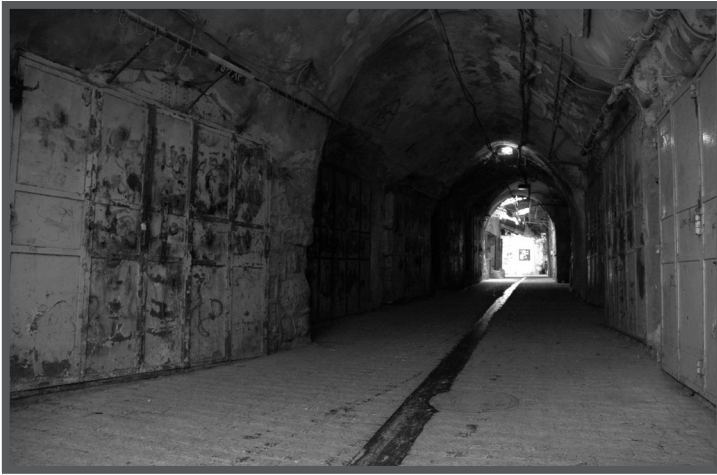
Though I didn’t realize it yet, I had been watching this sage throughout the proceedings. She had been nodding emphatically at every word, barely restraining herself from interjecting and making notes in the large pile of papers and photos she had perched on her lap. She sat in the very center of the front row. Though only slightly younger than the previous

speakers, maybe sixty or so, her long, thick hair made her appear almost teenaged. Her large, plastic-rimmed glasses magnified her eyes substantially. Upon being called by the Commission's chair, the sage began her diatribe immediately: "What they want to do is bring the building back five feet...right up on us!" The sharp, brassy timbre of her voice made the whirl of building numbers, apartments, and names she mentioned sound accusatory. She continued, holding up the developer's proposal, which she had studied vehemently as evidenced by what must have been forty multi-colored Post-It notes tucked at odd angles on every page. Her hysteria mounted: "The mantra throughout this thing, this enormous thing, which I've gone over and over, is that the neighbors are not affected or are minimally affected...we don't even exist in this report, we're a total abstraction." This was the heart of the matter: "That's the reason I wanted to come today, to make us real...I'm asking you to come up and see, make us real." Despite the Commissioner's pleas to abide by the time limits, the sage pushed onward, moving out from behind the podium to pass out the photos of her backyard and the views from the windows of each of the neighbors who came to testify. One depicted a neighbor pointing at the space between her apartment building and the wall of the adjacent site. The measurements used were arms, hips, and heads; it was the experience of the space that mattered – not the regulations, the economic impact, or the project's political implications.

Such minutiae of land use-tend, at least in my imagination, to reside entirely in the suburbs among warring old men on porches, their mangy Rottweilers, and the mischievous pre-teens running amok in their backyards. No one raised a cane here, though; no one uttered a punchy catchphrase or tussled Ron Howard's hair. Rather, the urban version of backyard squabble is inevitably of a more radical character and functions more like an episode of "Law and Order" than "Dennis the Menace." But, it's squabble just the same—one day you might be incensed enough to participate.

DANIELLE ASH is a senior in the College studying urban studies and history. A native New Yorker, she has an unhealthy obsession with the city of her birth. She can be reached at daa2101@columbia.edu.

Far-Flung



Shuttered storefronts in Hebron

Holy Hell

Armin Rosen

There is no single, agreed-upon route to the Arab side of Hebron. This gives the city the illusion of moving around constantly. Sometimes it's just past a refugee camp that's across the street from a Jewish-owned farm; the next week it could be buried inside a concrete sprawl of half-constructed houses. The dizzying network of two-lane roads that lead to the Palestinian

Authority-controlled half of the city punish those with a secure sense of direction. Even from the relatively direct, post-Oslo highway that connects the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba with greater Jerusalem, most of the 160,000 inhabitants of Arab Hebron are hidden behind the tan sandstone hills.

If you take an Arab bus to Hebron, the downtown (once you realize that Hebron even has a downtown) looks spat onto the squat hillsides, a mess of high-rises and scattershot concrete flanking a couple of broad, central avenues. Jericho smells

like orange blossoms, but Hebron smells like motor oil and burning garbage: It's assauntingly unextraordinary, thick with an exhaustion that overwhelms the *mezze* carts, the junk stores, the gaudy cut-rate furniture shops and the PA policemen in blue and brown fatigues. It's the feeling of a place where absolutely nothing worthwhile is happening, quietly acceding to the fact that it's being wasted and squeezed.

From the middle of the Israeli-controlled side of town, the *Ma'arat Hamacpalah*, a hulking accumulation of every piety and architectural style to have swept through Palestine over the past 2,000 years, looks to be in a better state of preservation than the deteriorating city that surrounds it. The deterioration, a symptom of Hebron's well-earned status as one of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's bloodiest fronts, has much to do with what Muslims and Jews believe is inside the cave that a Herodian-Mamluke-Byzantine-Crusader pastiche now totally encloses. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca and Leah are said to be buried somewhere within the *Ma'ara*, but on a weekday afternoon you might be left totally alone with the thing, wandering the empty and overgrown Fields of Macpalah (which are, startlingly, exactly where Genesis says they'd be) until the inevitable moment when an Israeli soldier or police officer asks to see your passport.

From here, the bustling Arab city is still invisible, even though it is only a football field's length away. The children of Jewish Hebron—of which there are 350, out of a

permanent population of around 800—grow up incapable of seeing the downtown of the city in which they live.

Jewish Hebron is set amidst a deserted stretch of former storefronts. I first went there on a Friday morning, with the ostensible purpose of researching a soon-to-be abandoned article on the "next generation" of the settlement movement. Months later, I would visit with an Arabic-speaking friend who could pick out signs for coffee shops positioned above the permanently-shuttered market stalls.

Israeli law forbids Hebron's Jews from settling outside of their current dwellings without the government's permission, while there's been a longstanding IDF effort to reduce Arab foot traffic on the city's single Jewish street. Halfway down King David Street, I was jarred by the sense of walking through a disquieting liminal space; not between the political entities whose borders the street partially forms, but between perfunctory everyday life and outright madness. There, to the right, was a settler making himself a cup of coffee; there's an Arab being waved through a metal detector, a soldier hunched behind a free-standing concrete bunker, a red-flagged SUV from the city's international observer force dutifully recording whatever human rights abuses might be happening on this particular, quarter-mile stretch of roadway. All of them go about their business; this mess is a sort of local routine, it would

disappear if I walked a couple minutes in virtually any direction. The middle of it even promised the static, false safety of conflict frozen perfectly in place.

King David Street wasn't always like this. The Arab marketplace roughly 100 yards from the street's pedestrian checkpoint wasn't cleared until the early days of the second intifada, which means that Hebron's settlements were once in the middle of a heavily-trafficked Arab area. Visitors to the settlement are now greeted by a sign reminding them of the Arab takeover of Jewish property near the same market after the 1929 pogrom that slaughtered and dispersed Hebron's centuries-old Jewish community. The Arabic numbering is still on most of the storefronts, and an Arabic-signed taxi stand still sits at the edge of a *shuk* (market) indefinitely closed to Jew and Arab alike.

On one of my subsequent visits to Hebron, I met an aspiring *oleh* (immigrant to Israel) from Tennessee, a 19 year-old student at a Yeshiva in a nearby settlement, strumming a guitar whose fretboard was wrapped in orange ribbon. In the middle of the Field of Macpalah, he explained to me that the occupation of Hebron, audacious and ugly as it was, fulfilled the ideal logic of a Zionism free of any self-imposed moral or political constraints. "If you look at the conflict from a religious standpoint, it becomes much simpler," he said. "The Arabs understand politics, and they think politics

are dumb. That's also what the settlers are saying. You're stuck with these issues if Israel becomes a political country."

Hebron is the end result of a Zionism crushed by moral and political restraints, locus of the impossible choices that stalk Jewish national existence. What does it mean that this locus carries all the trappings of a war zone? Pillboxes are heaped atop centuries-old buildings in the city's once-vibrant and now-depopulated Old City. The IDF, settlers and the Arab population live in a perfect economy of violence and existential suspicion. According to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, incidents of violence between settlers and Arabs are common: King David street is on slightly higher elevation than the rest of the Old City, and the streets below are covered in a metal mesh that catches whatever the settlers throw at their Arab neighbors: trash, concrete blocks, discarded electronics.

Concrete barriers manned by soldiers on monotonous eight-hour shifts dot King David Street; the soldiers' duties involve questioning stray tourists and examining travel permits for Arabs unfortunate enough to live on one of the most militarized streets on Earth. I once talked with a soldier there; he radioed his comrade about 100 yards away when a Jewish boy on a bicycle stopped to chat with him. The boy, the soldier related, had made it to the end of the block alive and well. I got the sense that both of them were extremely bored.

The Friday I first visited Hebron, I ate at a kosher pizza place next to the *Ma'ara*. A loudspeaker on top of the building directed a punitively loud acoustic recording of someone playing Shlomo Carlebach, the Singing Rabbi, in the direction of Arab Hebron, with the songs taking on a hostility that was utterly foreign to them. Moments earlier, I had permanently run afoul of the Hebron Jewish community by, of all things, looking for a place to spend *shabbos*.

"There aren't too many journalists who have spent *shabbos* at my house," the Rabbi I'd talked to on the phone had warned, grossly underestimating his ability to dissuade me. So when he found me wandering the center of Jewish Hebron in search of a Chabad house or some other place to spend the

night, he was not happy about it. "Why do you have to work behind our backs?" he asked. "How would your mother like it if I just showed up at your house?" I think he was referring to my attempt to spend *shabbos* in Hebron more than my presence there per se. But the man was consciously talking to a fellow Jew, and from that perspective (or at least from the perspective of not intentionally jeopardizing that fellow Jew's potential Sabbath observance), his vaguely threatening implication was that I needed his permission to be in Hebron at all.

After lunch I dejectedly wandered around downtown Hebron, stopping at a dust-blown schoolyard off of its central avenue, where an asphalt soccer match was being contested in front of an indifferent



crowd. I sipped on a cup of carob juice; the sort that costumed Palestinian vendors sell out of tri-spouted bronze tanks, craving the relative sanity I'd find on the other side of the Green Line, in a city less overtly in thrall to "the conflict." Then my phone rang.

The voice on the other end had a gruff intensity to it. It belonged to David Wilder, the spokesperson for the Hebron Jewish community. He wanted to see me in his office, immediately.

"Where are you?" he asked. I told him I was towards the center of the modern Arab city. "Get out there," he said. "Immediately. They'll kill you."

Where was his office? Near the *Beit Midrash* towards the center of town?

"Don't speak any Hebrew" he snapped back. "Don't let them know you're Jewish."

Wilder's office was in a hallway beneath an apartment block built flush against a concrete partition. His beard was a single, confrontational wisp; unmistakably the wisp of a beard belonging to the inhabitant of a fortress-city surrounded by people who probably wanted him dead, and protected by an army representing a state that viewed him as a political and even strategic liability. The words "militant" and "settler" are often lazily juxtaposed, but the beard would have evoked hardboiled self-confidence even if Wilder hadn't had a gun holstered at the waist.

"You know you could have caused an international incident out there" he said, claiming it was against the law for me for to leave the city's Jewish, Israeli-occupied

zone. "They'll kill you." He spent the next 20 minutes explaining that he wouldn't allow the Hebron Jewish community to be "messed with" by a prying college reporter. But at least I was still invited on his tour.

There's a story that Wilder told on his tour, during my third visit to Hebron, about a centuries-old tradition that Abraham himself once showed up for Yom Kippur services at Hebron's Avraham Avinu synagogue. The synagogue was built in the 16th Century and leveled hundreds of years later by the city's Jordanian occupiers, before being used as a cattle pen. Amazingly, one of the synagogue's centuries-old Torah scrolls was saved from the wreckage. Its parchment and lettering are as clear as they must have been 500 years ago.

The Torah scroll now resides in the ark of the rebuilt Avraham Avinu, one symbol of improbable renewal ensconced within another. In the synagogue's cramped, subterranean sanctuary, it seemed as absurd to rationalize the chaos surrounding it as to deny the possibility that Abraham had actually, literally prayed here.

For that moment, the Tennessean's logic become unassailable: Judaism vanquished Zionism, "the conflict" melted away, the empty streets and desiccated faces—nagging remnants of the rational, political world—overpowered by 4000 years of national myth coming startlingly, unexpectedly to life. Suddenly one realizes that the tombs' 2000 year-old Herodian base is, architecturally,

the closest thing to the *Beit Hamigdash* that any living Jew will see. Tel Hebron includes remnants of the city gates at which Abraham was said to have purchased the *Ma'ara*. It is place unlike most in the Torah, one that we can identify, visit, and touch.

The Jewish side of the complex includes a couple of hallways converted into space for studying rabbinic texts, as well as a tent synagogue in the courtyard of the surrounding mosque. On one side of the courtyard is a wrought-iron barrier with a sign hung between the girding: to the faithful, the "friend"—the *chever* of the Jews, or the *khalil* of the Muslims. It lies somewhere beneath the cenotaph behind it. The value enshrined in Hebron's very name implies a certain humbling equality. There's nothing revolutionary in friendship. It isn't the same thing as sainthood or prophethood—it's relatable and familiar; tangible, reachable.

Today, the city's name offers little in the way of description. There is nothing relatable about Hebron, and it was wild curiosity that initially drew me to it—the oddity of living a bus-ride away from a veritable war zone, the journalistic challenge of vying with the incomprehensible, and the privilege of dropping in on it unannounced, empowered with the ability to leave it at any time. I was hypnotized by the sublimated conflict that ruled over its daily routine, only to be—after four or five visits—jarred by the realization that over 160,000 Jews and Arabs actually lived there. If anything damns my initial curiosity, or the Tennessean's logic, or the logic of anyone secure in their views on

Israeli or Palestinian issues, it's that Hebron is simultaneously more important and more mundane than the symbolism it carries. Its holiness is, perhaps paradoxically, the least important thing about it.

The chamber housing the Abraham cenotaph punctuates the wall separating the Jewish-controlled courtyard from the complex's Muslim controlled interior. What contact Muslim and Jewish worshippers have with each other is mediated by the thick sheet of bulletproof glass that bisects the chamber, turning the figures on the opposite side into abstracted, faceless blurs.

ARMIN ROSEN is a senior in List College and a Senior Editor of *The Current*.



Diana Greenwald

A More Perfect Union: Obama's Image of Hope

During the 2008 presidential election, there was an outpouring of Barack Obama paraphernalia—overpriced t-shirts, “historic commemorative issues” of newsmagazines, and innumerable campaign buttons. Nothing exemplified this phenomenon better than the emergence of the “Hope” poster—a red, white, and blue abstracted image presenting Obama in three-quarters profile, with the word “hope” written in block letters along its bottom edge. This poster rose to prominence because it successfully and artistically blended key references to American presidential and political legacies that the media, the U.S. electorate, and the Obama campaign itself sought to link to the now 45th president.

Los Angeles designer, street artist and “guerilla marketing” expert Shepard Fairey

produced “Hope.” He created the poster by manipulating an Associated Press photo that showed Obama listening to a speech by Republican senator Sam Brownback at a 2006 panel on Darfur. In a January 2009 interview on National Public Radio’s *Fresh Air*, Fairey explained that he first made the poster as a “personal patriotic act” for a man whom the artist had admired since hearing him speak at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Although Obama’s campaign did clear “Hope” before distribution, it did not commission the poster. It was a grassroots effort that went “viral,” and the Obama camp later embraced it. The poster’s success indicates the power of effective guerilla marketing. That “Hope” grew from a small-scale personal effort into a nationally recognizable icon suggests that it appealed to and resonated with a wide range of people. As Fairey stated in a 2009 *Huffington Post* interview, “It became clear very quickly that that the demand for an image like [“Hope”] had not been supplied and that the Obama supporters were very hungry for it and also very motivated to spread it.”

The artist, however, has not publicly offered any further insight into or speculation about why his image in particular, as he said to NPR’s *Fresh Air*, became the “unofficial official image” of the Obama campaign. What in the “Hope” poster connected with so many people?

Huffington Post contributor Ben Arnon charted the transformation of “Hope” from pet project to national phenomenon in an August 2009 interview with Fairey and Yosi Sergant, the California “marketing/publicity guru” who helped the artist distribute and promote his image. Fairey and Sergant began the “Hope” phenomenon by printing just 700 posters in the days leading up to Super Tuesday. 350 were sold, and 350 made it to the streets of L.A. Fairey also posted a digital copy of the image on his website and sent it to large numbers of friends and acquaintances via email. Using the revenue from the early sales, Sergant and Fairey printed a few thousand more copies of the poster to distribute at major local political rallies and to send to “hubs” in cities around the country. (A ‘hub,’ according to Sergant, is one contact—like the editor of a local counterculture magazine—who receives the posters and then uses his or her own local grassroots network of friends and contacts to distribute the image around the city and its public spaces.) Online sales of prints of the poster financed the extensive spread of “Hope” throughout the United States via these targeted grassroots networks. “We’ve sold less than 2000 posters, but we’ve printed over 200,000,” said Fairey in the *Huffington Post* interview. The artist also created numerous versions of the image in several media and for various people and institutions. He went on to sell t-shirts, sweatshirts, stickers, and ultimately made a version of the poster with a photograph Obama legally owned for the campaign’s official use. Finally, he retooled the “Hope” image for the cover of Time

Magazine's December 29th issue that declared the president the 2008 Person-of-the-Year and sold nearly 500,000 copies on the newsstand (three times more than the average issue in 2008.) By the conclusion of the campaign, at least one million copies and permutations of the "Hope" image circulated throughout the United States.

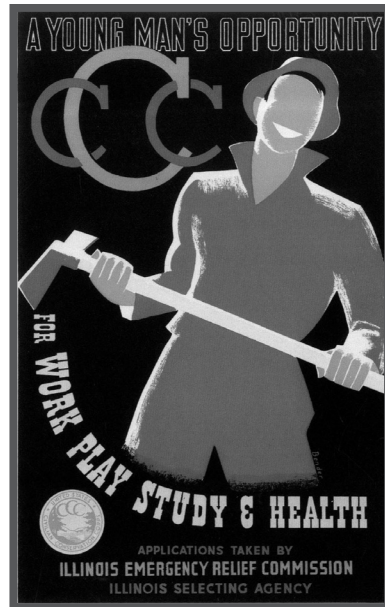
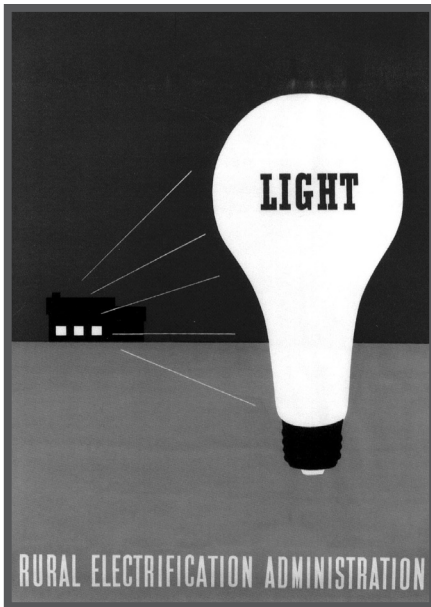
Every poster has a visual lexicon: the colors and words utilized, the quality of line, pose, size and alignment of a subject's image. Art historian Wendy Wick Reaves notes in her book, *Ballyhoo!: Posters as Portraiture*, that viewers can absorb a poster's "persuasive message on an inattentive... subconscious level" and subsequently "decode the poster." We can all look at a poster and understand in an intuitive flash "how the intersection of words and image informs us," what it means to us personally. Instinctively, we all read and interpret a poster's visual lexicon.

The lexicon of "Hope" draws on the imagery used in both political and artistic images associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and the Civil Rights movement. Hardly a completely original image, the look and feel of this poster is in fact a composite of powerful and attractive images from American visual history. Indeed, its popularity is arguably due to Americans' deeply entrenched cultural responses to these historical references—to their ability to "decode" this poster on a "subconscious level."

In his *New Yorker* article "Hope and Glory: A Shepard Fairey Moment," critic Peter Schjeldahl notes the influence of WPA (Worker's Progress Administration) propaganda in Fairey's poster. The WPA, one of the key offices President Franklin D. Roosevelt created as part of the New Deal, aimed to rescue Americans from the devastating effects of the Great Depression. WPA posters are typically characterized by their decidedly modern aesthetic. They often feature a bold and bright color palette that is expressed in distinct blocks of color, as opposed to blended shades. Men or women in the posters are highly abstracted, and they almost exclusively use simple one- or few-words-long.

Questions surrounding the current condition of the U.S. economy shed light on the appeal of "Hope"'s similarities to WPA propaganda. According to an August 2008 *New York Times*/CBS poll, the issue most important in voters' decision-making during the 2008 presidential election was the "economy and jobs." In the midst of major financial crises, it is thus not surprising that the media entertained comparisons between Obama and the early Roosevelt administration, another president who entered office in times of economic hardship. *New York Times* business columnist Joe Nocera, for example, wrote in an October 2008 column titled "Can Obama do the 'Roosevelt' Thing?" that Roosevelt was "unafraid to take bold actions" to see the country through the Depression, and now "the United States is about to get a new president who many people...believe has the potential to be another

Roosevelt.” The “Hope” poster’s quotation of WPA imagery—a clear symbol of Roosevelt’s proactive economic policies—strikes a chord with Americans’ search for a president willing to energetically navigate the financial crises of the current recession.



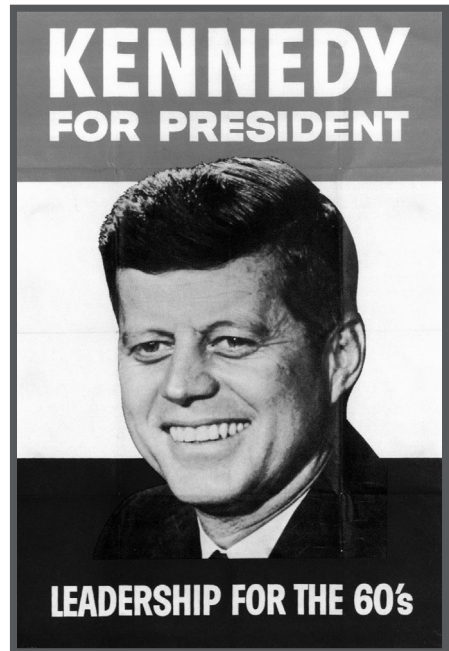
Comparisons between Kennedy and Obama were also frequently made in 2008. In his speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, Kennedy declared that at the dawn of the '60s, Americans stood “on the edge of a New Frontier... of unknown opportunities and paths... of unfulfilled hopes and threats.” Kennedy, as historian Jeanne Boydston writes in *Making a Nation: The United States and its People*, “perfectly captured the optimistic spirit of the early 1960s” as Americans’ guide to the exciting and vast “New Frontier” that promised improved social conditions for Americans and new approaches to challenging communist power. Some would also associate Obama with such seismic shifts in foreign and domestic policy and a similar aura of optimism. Obama’s early opposition to the Iraq War, his preference for diplomatic talks over military threats, and his reformist challenges to healthcare signal changes for the country. According to a November 2008 Gallup poll, “Two-thirds of Americans report[ed] feeling proud and optimistic after Obama’s election, and 6 in 10 [were] excited.” The arrival of a new, fresh and, for the first time, African-American president has once again placed Americans at the edge of a New Frontier. At least a decade-and-a-

half younger than their predecessors, both young senators arrived in the White House bathed in Americans' generally optimistic outlooks for a new political generation.

Much of the Kennedy presidential campaign paraphernalia from the 1960 election used block lettering and centered on a three-quarter profile of the young candidate looking into the distance, toward the future. Although Kennedy is shown in black-and-white photographs, instead of red, white and blue color blocks, the resemblance between the Kennedy campaign posters and the "Hope" poster is undeniable. Fairey himself cited a visual connection between Obama and Kennedy. In a February 2009 radio interview, also on NPR's *Fresh Air*, he explained how he chose a particular photo to manipulate for the "Hope" poster. His choice was inspired by "the way that Obama was looking, the angle...there are a lot of different historical photos of people like John F. Kennedy... that have this feeling of the subject knowing what lies in the future, having some sort of wisdom..." Looking at the Obama "Hope" poster thus evokes the Kennedy legacy.

Fairey's poster thus recalls two political legacies—Roosevelt and Kennedy—that observers often discuss in reference to Obama. The President and his aides have encouraged the comparisons to such revered political figures. Consider Obama's mention on *60 Minutes* that he was reading a book about Roosevelt during the transition, or the choice of Berlin, where Kennedy famously remarked "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," as the venue for his first major European speech. Obama, like any president, would like to appear as the heir to the great American presidential legacies.

It is not only in the arena of presidential



precedent that the “Hope” poster satisfies the needs of the Obama campaign/administration and the electorate. During the election, questions arose about Americans’ reactions to Obama’s African-American heritage. Could a majority of the electorate overcome a history of prejudice and vote for a black man? The answer to this question was, both for the campaign and Americans in general, to look beyond race, to work towards transcending old color divides and ethnically-based blame games. Fairey responded to this collective need by portraying Obama as neither black nor white nor a blend of both, but rather as American, with a distinctive red, white and blue complexion. This choice of palette was inspired, but it was not unprecedented.



African American artists have been abstracting portrayals of the black body since the beginning of the 20th century. In particular, artists did this during the Harlem Renaissance, another time in history where African-Americans made significant strides toward equality (especially in intellectual and cultural arenas.) Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas’s painting *Aspiration* (1934), shows three figures staring towards a shining metropolis. The two men and one woman are presumably black (at their backs is an assembly of hands in shackles, a chorus of slaves). However, they are portrayed with lavender skin and in abstract profile. Their bodies are free of the attributes that had been long caricatured by white American artists—very dark skin, wider noses, thicker lips—and their skin is an uncontroversial shade.

Abstraction of the black body, making it completely distinct from previous, racially tinged images of African-Americans, is a tradition that runs throughout African-American art history and is carried on in Fairey's poster. "Hope" makes Obama's features decidedly illustration-like and portrays his skin in non-naturalistic colors. The poster not only resonates with presidential legacies, but recalls the art of earlier movements to establish racial equality.

Ultimately, one of President Obama's speeches provides perhaps the best (indirect) commentary on Fairey's image. In his "A More Perfect Union" speech delivered in Philadelphia on March 18th, 2008, Obama said, "We hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction...We [on the campaign] saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity." The "Hope" poster provides such a "message of unity" by referencing political legacies that both Obama and his supporters hoped he would carry on. It became an icon because it is the comprehensive representation of a multifaceted political meeting between a candidate and all of his supporters—for those turning to him for economic relief (as some turned to Roosevelt); for significant shifts in policy in a newly-optimistic era (as Kennedy promised); or for the culmination of a long battle against racial prejudice (a battle fought by African-American artists and people of color for decades). Through aesthetic allusions, the "Hope" poster suggests Obama can provide all of the above. It suggests in a mere glance that Obama embodies all of these legacies and missions.



A rally of Mir Hussein Mousavi supporters

Jordan Hirsch

Dreaming About Iran

The recent “Green Wave” revolt in Iran upturned the lives of millions, from the citizens who championed its cause to the Ayatollah Khamenei himself. It also jolted many in the United States and Europe—especially erstwhile advocates of engagement with Iran—by placing their hopes for diplomacy at odds with Iran’s democratic dissidents.

The effects of this unpleasant shock seemed especially evident in *New York Times* foreign affairs columnist Roger Cohen this past month, where he spoke alongside noted Iran scholars Karim Sadjadpour and Haleh Esfandiari at a *New York Review of Books* panel on Iran at the 92nd Street Y. Cohen, previously accused of penning apologia for the Iranian regime, now expressed the full degree of his disgust with the crackdown against supporters of Mir Hussein Mousavi. “So long as people are being clubbed on the streets, so long as hundreds, perhaps thousands of people have been thrown into jail just for what they think,” Cohen argued with

characteristically vivid rhetoric, the U.S. faces a “moral imperative” to postpone engagement. “I don’t think it can be business as usual, absolutely not.”

Despite his indignation, however, Cohen claimed that he still believed in engagement. In his mind, the “moral imperative” of honoring “millions defrauded” in Iran requires that President Obama’s outreach “await a decent interval.” Yet what does a “decent interval” entail? Is diplomacy with the Ayatollah only ethically repugnant for, say, the next six months? Will we, by then, have conveniently forgotten about the Green Wave? Will it no longer be too distasteful to resume “business as usual?”

At the core of this swirling confusion of politics and morality, many conservatives contended, is a classic tale of “liberals mugged by reality”—naïve optimists rendered crestfallen by the revelation of the true nature of the Ayatollah’s rule. Indeed, the stark contrast between Cohen’s writing prior to the election and his commentary in its wake lends credence to this notion.

Cohen published a series of columns earlier this year that eagerly promoted engagement and scorned what he termed the “Mad Mullah caricature of Iran” prevalent in the United States as “misleading and dangerous.” He even confidently predicted in March that the upcoming elections would be a “genuine contest as compared with the charades that pass for elections in many Arab states.”

Cohen’s op-eds earned him a collection of critics. *Commentary*’s Jonathan Tobin labeled him a new-age Walter Duranty, the infamous *New York Times* columnist who won a Pulitzer Prize for republishing Soviet propaganda during the 1930s. *Atlantic Monthly* writer Jeffrey Goldberg called Cohen “an apologist for an anti-Semitic regime.” It thus came as no surprise to see a host of conservative opinion writers gleefully roast Cohen’s reversals, such as when *Commentary*’s Emanuele Ottolenghi posted a blistering before-and-after shot of Cohen’s writings regarding Iran. In their mind, reality had moved Cohen from inane optimism in March to admitting that he had “erred in underestimating the brutality and cynicism of a regime that understands the uses of ruthlessness” in June.

Left unanswered by the “liberals mugged by reality” theory, however, is Cohen’s unconvincing attempt to balance the “moral imperative” of bolstering Iranian protesters with his uninterrupted commitment to engagement. By no means did Cohen belatedly ally himself with President Bush’s foreign policy toward Iran; indeed, he insisted at the panel that Bush’s “radical White House” provided a useful foil to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to rally Iranians against a common enemy. Only Barack Obama, a “black American president of partly Muslim descent reaching out to the Islamic world...had placed the Iranian regime on the defensive.”

Yet even as he maintained that Obama’s “realpolitik” strategy greatly contributed to the birth of the Green Wave, Cohen bluntly attacked the President’s hesitation to stand forthrightly

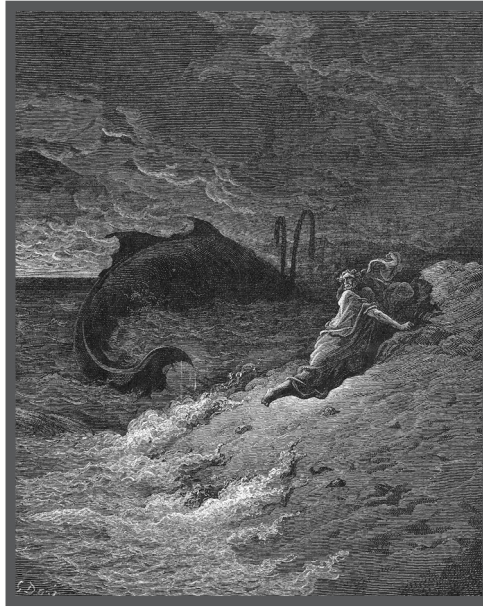
with the revolt in its early efforts. “Meddling be damned,” Cohen declared two days after the election while urging Obama to “toss strategy papers in the garbage” and recognize the magnitude of the moment. But by chiding the White House for its tepid response to the revolt, Cohen hypocritically rebuked it for carrying out the logical conclusion of the detente that he himself so heartily applauded—no matter what, do not interfere.

It appears that Cohen’s case is not one of a “liberal mugged by reality,” but one of inherently conflicting aspirations for the direction of U.S. foreign policy. Two competing fantasies dance across his post-June 12th writing on Iran. One continues to be enthralled by Obama’s “heady, history-making” wish for rapprochement—comparable, Cohen argues, “to the China breakthrough of 1972.” The other marvels at the “limitless potential” of the three million Iranians who gathered to protest the election results, and glorifies the dissident movement.

The conflict between these two inclinations—both in Cohen’s mind, and in the Obama Administration’s policy—is unlikely to resolve itself soon. But it does reveal that Cohen, along with others, remain hesitant to embrace Obama’s “game of realpolitik” fully. Neoconservatives in particular, those much-maligned allies of President Bush, vociferously denounced Obama’s weak response to the revolt. In perfect summation of the neoconservative position, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens published an op-ed entitled “Do Dissidents Matter,” in which he contended that the “best U.S. foreign policy” is the one that backs dissidents unconditionally. In his criticism of Obama, Cohen opens the door to a near-heretical notion: that in demanding rapid and unflinching American support for the Green Wave, Stephens and the neoconservatives may have been (at least partially) *right*.

Undoubtedly, the nuance required to balance engagement with democracy promotion is incredibly difficult to strike. Obama may fear that by encouraging dissidents, he will unwittingly repeat what he perceives as Bush’s failures. To the President’s eyes, perhaps, Iran’s recent unrest only further demonstrates the ability of engagement to ignite change.

Yet ignition is not enough. Engagement can provide a spark, but perhaps only the decidedly anti-realist, American “moral imperative” can preserve the flame. For the sake of U.S. foreign policy in the coming years, let us hope that President Obama can deftly weave these two impulses into something more tangible than fantasy.



Phil Petrov
Against Fear:
Orwell and Miller in Paris

On his way to the Spanish front in 1936, George Orwell stopped over in Paris to meet Henry Miller, who had been living in France since the start of the decade. The two men had been corresponding for several months: Orwell had written admiringly of Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*—in which he had detected a “Whitmanesque enthusiasm for the process of life”—and Miller had responded with praise of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Information about the meeting is scarce, but the facts are these: in late December (the exact date is unknown), Orwell arrived in Paris and managed to locate Miller's flat, a top-floor studio that had previously been occupied by Antonin Artaud. Greetings were exchanged, and Orwell began to expound on the war that had flared up in Spain, to which Miller replied that only an idiot would voluntarily participate in a political quarrel. Stunned by the force of this position, Orwell would later recall that Miller had “felt no interest in the Spanish war whatever.” Disagreement, however,

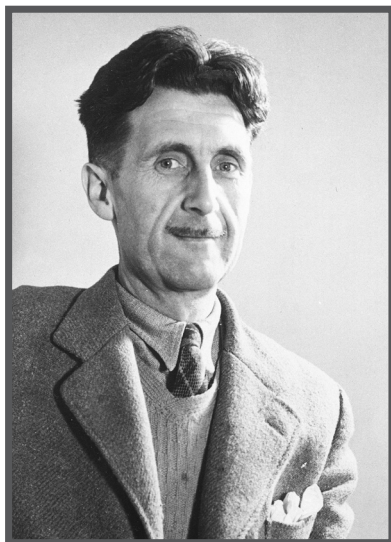
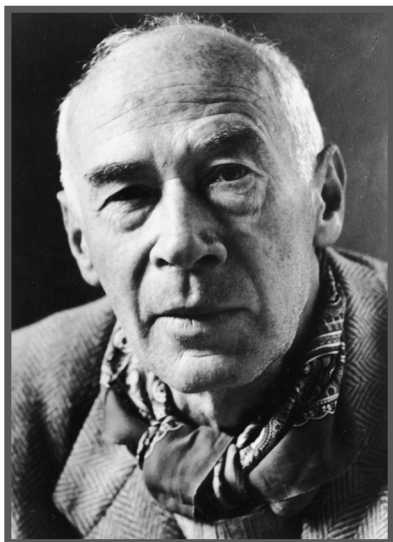
does not always beget disdain, and the meeting ended on a friendly note: as Orwell got up to leave, the impoverished Miller gave him a corduroy jacket; he was worried, it seems, that Orwell would catch cold on the front. Days later, Orwell was in Spain, where he joined the ill-fated fight against Franco, took a sniper's bullet through the neck, and found himself denounced by the Spanish Communists whom he presumed were on his side.

Animal Farm and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have burdened Orwell with the reputation of an old-style liberal, a reputation whose hold over the English-speaking world is much stronger than most intellectuals care to admit. And with equal injustice, Miller has come to be regarded as a self-absorbed surrealist who managed to close his eyes to every major public event of his lifetime. Associated with these views is a peculiar tendency to read Orwell and Miller as foils, two men divided by their opposing estimations of the value of politics. But such a perspective has little to recommend it, if only because the age-old dichotomy between the activist and the aesthete, between the social critic and the hermetic mystic, meant little to either man.

The two authors came away from their meeting with distinct impressions, a fact that would be ironic were it not for its long-term consequences. Miller took Orwell for a dogooder in the English style, a "man of principle" still attached to his umbilical cord. Even after the rise of the Third Reich proved Orwell right about the importance of Spain's civil war, Miller continued to see politics as a futile venture, and he never ceased to look upon the lanky Orwell as a kind of Don Quixote. In 1961, eleven years after Orwell's death, Miller remembered his knight-errant: "Though he was a wonderful chap in his way . . . in the end I thought him stupid. He was . . . a foolish idealist." The compassion embedded in this dismissal does little to make it palatable to contemporary readers, who will no doubt be suspicious of the ease with which Miller wrote off his acquaintance. But if Miller misjudged Orwell—and one should not shy away from stressing the if—the same cannot be said the other way around.

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Orwell published three pieces on Miller. The first was a guarded review of *Tropic of Cancer*, which had been banned on grounds of obscenity immediately following its 1934 publication. Written in 1935 for the prestigious *New English Weekly*, the review was wary in its praise (Orwell would later admit that he had not wanted to appear too enthusiastic about the work of an unknown author). The second piece, written just before the Paris meeting, was a review of *Black Spring*, Miller's second novel. This time, Orwell felt he could afford to be less cautious: "It [Miller's] is the kind of prose," he wrote, "which . . . makes me feel that I should like to fire a salute of twenty-one guns." But it was only in the third piece, a 1940 essay called "Inside the Whale," that Orwell carefully synthesized his reaction to Miller's fiction. Aside from promoting *Tropic of Cancer*, the essay revealed Orwell's mounting suspicion of politics, a suspicion that would culminate in the writing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* only a few years later.

Orwell was a reluctant polemicist, and this is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in "Inside the Whale." The essay begins by targeting a certain set of English writers: those authors of the '30s who took up politics in order to find a cause, an orthodoxy, in whose name they could crusade. What had characterized these eager-minded schoolboys, as Orwell called them, was a juvenile sense of purpose, a neurotic zeal, and a compulsive desire to attach themselves to a dogma. Desperate to find a sense of meaning, these author-activists had embraced the "political racket," and their writing had suffered as a result.



Henry Miller, left, and George Orwell

Though this critique of the literary '30s suffers from a certain obsolescence, it illustrates the painful ambivalence with which Orwell saw the relation between politics and literature. By 1935, Orwell had begun to associate politics with paranoia, a link that would occupy him, to varying degrees, for the remainder of his life. He had begun to suspect—first with hesitation, then with a note of anguish—that fear, anxiety, and schizophrenia were the inevitable byproducts of political engagement. Orwell's frustration was compounded by his sense that politics had disfigured literature, for it seemed to him that, by joining the political struggle, the authors of the day had grown neurotic, apprehensive, and judgmental. By aligning themselves with political orthodoxies, in other words, they had entered a world of evasions, mistrust, and self-deception, a world by no means conducive to the writing of fiction. The clearest expression of this position can be found in an essay Orwell published only a few years before his death: "Group loyalties are necessary, and yet they are poisonous to literature, so long as literature is the product of individuals. As soon as they are allowed to

have any influence, even a negative one, on creative writing, the result is not only falsification, but often the actual drying-up of the inventive faculties." Much has been made of the notion that Orwell lived beneath the spell of a masochistic conscience. Whether or not this is true, it is clear that he felt duty-bound to fight for his commitments, even after he had decided that politics was little more than a by-way to mental illness.

It was this ambivalence that first drew Orwell to Miller, in whose near-total apathy he saw a cheerful honesty, a kind of mental serenity, and none of the anxiety that he associated with politics. At the heart of "Inside the Whale," in fact, one finds the contention that fear debases the literary imagination: "Good novels are not written by orthodoxy-sniffers, nor by people who are conscience-stricken about their own unorthodoxy. Good novels are written by people who are not frightened." For Orwell, the strength of *Cancer* and *Black Spring* could be traced to the fact that Miller had calmly accepted the world—fascism and all—at a time when nearly everyone else was trying to change it. This ethic of nonresistance won Orwell's admiration, and Miller was treated to accolades like the following: "He is neither pushing the world-process forward nor trying to drag it back, but on the other hand he is by no means ignoring it." Miller had managed, in Orwell's view, to inhabit a particular sensibility—that of the "ordinary man," the man who, tired of struggling against the world around him, acknowledges the state of things and carries on. Aflame with the sense that Miller was a man "without fear," Orwell called him "the only imaginative prose-writer of the slightest value who has appeared among the English-speaking races for some years past."

Miller belongs among those authors who are incapable of severing their person from their prose. The bulk of his writing is autobiographical, and it is vain to distinguish between his fiction and his life, both of which were set in the working-class neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Paris where he lived the life of the hard-up literary man with no money and less fame. The characteristic mood in Miller is one of acceptance, harmony, apathy—in effect, a kind of joyful unwillingness to interfere with the course of things. His prose is marked by the realization that he is destitute and a failure, but the recognition of this fact somehow fails to cast a shadow. Passages like the following, which appear regularly in his work, are reflective of the attitude that Orwell detected in *Tropic of Cancer*:

It may be that we are doomed, that there is no hope for us, *any of us*, but if that is so then let us set up a last agonizing, bloodcurdling howl, a screech of defiance, a war whoop! Away with lamentation! Away with elegies and dirges! . . . Let the dead eat the dead. Let us living ones dance about the rim of the crater, a last expiring dance.

Everywhere in Miller, there is the sense that nothing matters; that every dream worth fighting for has long since been deferred; that, in a world whose course one cannot control,

the only thing left is to be cheerful, to sing songs as the end draws nigh. Miller's attitude is a familiar one, for it calls to mind a motif which is common to European literature: that of the spiritual nomad with no family, property, or attachments. But unlike so many of his predecessors—Rabelais and Rimbaud come to mind—Miller laid the emphasis on a different imperative, which was to surrender control over one's fate, to peacefully accept "the indestructible elements that have gone to make up the world." The Miller who emerges from his fiction is a man indifferent to his own well-being, a man who, by systematically discarding every trace of material comfort, has taught himself to live without anxiety. His prose, almost Gnostic in its intention, reflects his desire to treat his experiences as part of a comedy, for Miller hoped to show that he had exposed himself to the world and found nothing to be afraid of:

Nothing that had happened to me thus far had been sufficient to destroy me; nothing had been destroyed except my illusions. I myself was intact. . . . It seemed to me that the great calamity had already manifested itself, that I could be no more truly alone than at this very moment. I made up my mind that I would hold on to nothing, that I would expect nothing, that henceforth I would live as an animal.

There is a certain tranquility in this, and a calm, transcendental logic.

Orwell was the first critic to treat fearlessness as the dominant tendency in Miller's prose. It is ironic, then, that his essay on Miller has in recent decades been misread, misquoted, and maligned. Since the essay is entirely coherent, one is tempted to conclude that it has been misread on purpose, an inference which is by no means as absurd as it may seem. In 1984, for instance, Salman Rushdie published a rebuttal of what he took to be Orwell's position. After reading "Inside the Whale" as a *defense* of apathy and claiming that Orwell had wanted to keep politics out of literature, Rushdie recited the usual mantra of the liberal-minded: "The quietist option, the exhortation to submit to events, is an intrinsically conservative one. When intellectuals and artists withdraw from the fray, politicians feel safer." It follows, Rushdie continued, that Orwell was wrong to promote Miller, who wanted nothing more than to find "a path back to the womb, into the whale and away from the thunder of war." According to Rushdie, moreover, Orwell had given up politics with his tail between his legs, for the sight of Hitler, Stalin, and their devotees in the literary community was more than he could bear. Overcome by "defeatism and despair," he could no longer find the strength to continue, and "Inside the Whale" was a confession of his unwillingness to soldier on. For Rushdie, of course, Orwell's supposed apoliticism was indefensible, and Miller's writing was, for some reason, "scatological."

It is hard to tell why Rushdie described the Orwell of "Inside the Whale" as a man who "embraces and espouses" a retreat from politics. Orwell's essay, after all, stops short of advocating

apathy as a solution to the problem of politics; nor, for that matter, does it argue for a divorce of politics and literature. It merely contends that the power of Miller's prose derived from his apoliticism, that Miller wrote better than his contemporaries because, unlike the bulk of them, he never felt the need to protect himself. Orwell held that good literature required sanity and serenity, and he was convinced that, through his quasi-spiritual acceptance of things, Miller had acquired both. There is a notable difference between this position and the one which Rushdie ascribed to Orwell, namely, that he wished to avoid politics altogether. One wonders, in fact, whether there was not a degree of ideological offense in Rushdie's analysis.

While he never turned to apathy, Orwell did come to see politics as a gross misfortune, a kind of large-scale perversion that deprived writers of their composure, sincerity, and dignity. The last decade of his life seems to have been unusually painful; though he felt that there could be no exit from the burden of political activism, he found it increasingly difficult to remain enthusiastic about the struggle. By 1946, six years after "Inside the Whale," his mistrust of politics had attained a new pitch: "In our age there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics.' All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia." It is hard not to sympathize with Orwell, who witnessed in Spain the kinds of journalistic fabrications and half-truths that he would later chronicle in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and who watched as countless literary men succumbed to mediocrity, aggression, and paranoia, all out of a perceived need to defend their political interests.

By 1948, Orwell had formulated a kind of lifeboat solution to the problem of political engagement. Starting from the premise that "political discipline seems to be incompatible with literary integrity," he proposed that writers maintain a division between their artistic and ideological endeavors. "No thinking person," he wrote, "can . . . keep out of politics. . . . I only suggest that we should draw a sharper distinction . . . between our political and our literary loyalties." As the end approached, he worked frantically on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his final attempt to depict the effects of paranoia on the literary imagination. Convinced that fiction required a minimum of fear, and pessimistic about the possibility of a politics founded on anything other than psychosis, Orwell took what he saw as the only route open to him: he made a case for the absolute worthlessness of fear and anxiety, at least insofar as the literary author is concerned. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was meant to portray a world in which paranoia is endemic and meaningful literature impossible—that the causal link between the two has been neglected suggests, perhaps, that our own society has begun to treat the presence of fear in politics as a given. At any rate, it is ironic that Orwell's final attempt at literary creation was born from the Jekyll-and-Hyde-like conflicts with which he had been grappling for decades. Having decided that he could not abandon the political world, Orwell had to live with the agonizing realization that he would never be able to "devote himself to literature as single-mindedly as Joyce or Henry James." It is somehow fitting, then, that he ended his life with a

book about the very thing he deplored but could not bring himself to renounce—politics.

If anything emerges from the Orwell-Miller anecdote, it is not that the apolitical author is somehow greater than his civic-minded counterpart. In any event, there have been too many first-rate political writers—it is enough to name Heinrich Böll and García Márquez—for anyone to seriously suggest that politics is by itself sufficient to blight literature. Nor is it helpful, for that matter, to accuse Orwell of self-flagellation, of tormenting himself with an illusory sense of obligation. Orwell felt an all-too-honest duty to participate in a politics he despised, and he managed to produce powerful fiction despite his belief that political loyalties were “poisonous to literature.” In his own words, “We see the need of engaging in politics while also seeing what a dirty, degrading business it is.” That Orwell was at war with himself is undeniable; that he must not be condemned for this is equally so. The fact remains, however, that the paranoia which Orwell detected in the ‘30s has by no means disappeared from view. The impulse to protect oneself, the hunt for an antidote to the dangers of life, the hunger for a certitude that would end all risk—all of these lie at the heart of our own politics, and the rhetoric of our leaders, filled as it is with concerns for the welfare of our money and children, bears witness to the incredible solemnity with which we minister to our security.

Miller never introduced the technical innovations of a Hemingway or a Joyce, but he personified a mode of living based on the cheerful acceptance of chance and uncertainty. “What he seems to be saying,” wrote Orwell in 1935, “is that if one stiffens oneself by the contemplation of ugliness, one ends by finding life not less but more worth living.” In Miller, Orwell found a man who did not feel threatened, and rare is the mind that can imagine just how much this meant to him. In the end, his writings on Miller contain a delicate resonance: they give expression to the desire to live without fear, without hysteria, without politics. Orwell sought to embrace the attitude he discovered in Miller’s prose, but he was convinced that he could not; and though there is something sentimental about the fact that his desire went unrealized, it is hard not to detect a note of tragedy in his search for the joyful contentment that he saw in *Tropic of Cancer*.

Beneath the admiration which Orwell granted Miller, then, there lies a simple though not painless observation: that as long as fear remains the basis of civic life, politics will continue to assume the form of an interminable cockfight. As long as one remains afraid, the struggle will go on; there will forever be new foes to waterboard, and forever will one feel the need to protect oneself from threats less real than illusory. Several years before *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell saw that, by letting go, by giving up the concern with self-preservation, one could find a measure of peace. One wonders how close he came to its attainment.

Sam Kerbel

Artist and Audience

Rhyming Life and Death

by Amos Oz

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 117 Pages

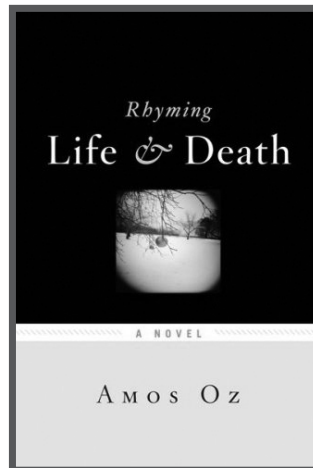
The ambiguities surrounding the meaning of artistic creations are rivaled in complexity only by those regarding the motivations of artists themselves. The public's unyielding desire to closely examine the lives of artists, to discover the most primal depths of their aesthetic visions, is as pervasive as the scrutiny of their finished products. Critics and enthusiasts have implored artists for explanations of their muses, influences, and the meaning of their creative manifestations. Their proclivity for involving themselves in politics only deepens these demands for elucidation.

The subjection of an artist to his or her audience is a common theme in film and

literature. Federico Fellini's masterpiece *8 ½* (1963), starring Marcello Mastroianni as Guido, a film director suffering from "director's block," most famously captures

this helplessness. Guido is beleaguered by the preoccupations of his producer, set designers, actors auditioning for the film, critics, and other pseudo-intellectuals. They incessantly bombard him with queries about his political views ("What do you think of the connection between Catholicism and Marxism?"), his creative process ("Could you create

something true and meaningful upon demand?"), the elasticity of art form ("In your opinion, could pornography be the most intense of shows?"), and his own



creative predilections (“Why don’t you ever film a love story?”).

8 ½ explores Guido’s attempts to create an honest and autobiographical film (which becomes an overblown fiasco) all while trying to sort out his artistic and sexual identities. Fellini intersperses scenes from Guido’s upbringing and his sexual fantasies throughout the film in such a way that present and past, reality and fantasy, are fluid reciprocators of each other. However, critics are skeptical of Guido’s nostalgic introspection as proper grounds for a worthy film: “Do you really think your life would be of interest?” one critic asks.

Amos Oz’s beautifully sincere novel *Rhyming Life and Death*, published this past April in a sublime English translation by Nicholas de Lange, continues this tradition of the besieged artist. Oz is known in Israel for both his fiction and non-fiction, but also as an outspoken public intellectual. Unlike some of his best-known works, like *A Panther in the Basement* and *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, *Rhyming Life and Death* all but abandons topical undercurrents, yet brings us something equally powerful and relevant. Even at a stout 117 pages, *Rhyming Life and Death* successfully blends fact and fiction, persuasively conveying the intellectual and emotional desires of one such artistic celebrity called “the Author,” Oz’s unnamed protagonist and literary doppelgänger.

The novel takes place over the course of a night in the Author’s life. At the beginning, we see him fawn over a waitress at a café

while preparing himself for a reading of his latest work. Part of his preparation includes reviewing the myriad questions that he will later confront at the event:

Why do you write? Why do you write the way you do? Are you trying to influence your readers, and, if so, how? What role do your books play? Do you constantly cross out and correct or do you write straight out of your head? What is it like to be a famous writer and what effect does it have on your family?

Upon reading this opening passage, one cannot help but think that, like Fellini, Oz himself is rambling this exasperating list of uninspired questions. Indeed, the protagonist’s non-specific designation indicates that there is more than a hint of the autobiographical in *Rhyming Life and Death*.

While Guido conceals himself emotionally through memories of his past, the Author distances himself from admirers by attributing fictional lives to them, which shift in and out of his consciousness. Throughout the book, these shadowy characters become more developed, gradually blurring the line between what is real and what isn’t. As a result, the issue of whether or not to care about these imaginary characters becomes unimportant, the fantastical not any less enchantingly mundane as real life itself.

The Author’s most passionately developed characters are women, who play a crucial role in revealing the

Author's innermost desires. He can't help but stare at the café waitress—whose alter-ego, Ricky, falls in love with a soccer player, Charlie, who eventually leaves her for the winner of the Queen of Waves competition, Lucy, who is later dumped by Charlie and receives a call from Ricky in an attempt to spring a friendship out of mutual heartbreak, and so on—and delight at the "asymmetry" of her underpants discernible through her skirt. Such sensual fantasies often lead the Author toward escape into his alternate universe.

These erotic fixations do not simply bring out the Author's carnal desires; they also illustrate his weaknesses. His pursuit of Rochele Reznick, a professional reader who recites a passage from his book at the lecture, draws out his sexual apprehensiveness and comical inelegance. Rochele might struggle to speak confidently with her literary idol, but the Author, despite his intellect and critical success, is no master of human contact either.

Rhyming Life and Death achieves its autobiographical richness from the variety of peculiar characters the Author conjures from his lecture audience and his past: neighborhood temptress Miriam Nehorait, or "Mira the Horror" as the children refer to her, who lures an awkward coming-of-age poet, Yuval; the Author's Uncle Osa, who was rumored to have hidden Leon Trotsky's niece in his apartment; or Ovadya Hazzam, once a successful businessman with a blue Buick and lots of girls, now an old man with cancer dying alone in a



Guido directs the characters from his life

hospital. Oz includes little eccentric details about these characters, like Rochele's collection of matchboxes from hotels around the world, giving them a relatable and vibrant wholeness.

For those of us who aren't cultural celebrities, the Author's episodic detachment from reality and his sarcastic recantation of his admirers' questions may seem cold and pretentious. However, Oz develops the numerous dualisms present in *Rhyming Life and Death* (success and failure, fiction and reality) with such poignancy that one can look past the Author's few acerbic tendencies, which could otherwise suggest intellectual condescension. In fact, the Author's life is filled with aspirations and shortcomings similar to those of any quotidian individual or amateur artist. It becomes gradually

clear that the Author disdains incessant questioning of his creative process not because of snarkiness, but because he simply does not have control over his muses. Hard as he tries to manipulate the fictional lives of his audience, they form lives of their own accord.

At the conclusion of 8 ½, each member of Guido's life, past and present, dances with him to the tune of a band led by his younger self. Such a festive, youthful celebration is present in *Rhyming Life and Death*, where Oz gracefully demonstrates the extreme tenderness that fills an artist's life. The Author's ordinary yet fervent desires, and his willingness to explore the fluidity of his own reality, are reflected in each of his own fictitious characterizations. In Oz's portrait, artists are not absolved from the everyday concerns that fill our lives—they are just like everyone else.



Alex Berenbeim

Sleep Depraved

Over the year that I spent in solitary at Wien, I hatched a scheme to break out. I wanted my own space and thought I deserved it. To manifest this dream in reality, I needed a roommate, who I quickly found: a non-Columbia student I was acquainted with in the classical sense—I had met her a few times in person and we’d had some lengthy correspondences. I found a place. I paid for it. I moved in. I opened accounts. I took on the responsibilities of an adult. I needed a mattress. I looked around. My roommate and I went to Sleepy’s.

My roommate is a five-foot four-inch, half-Bengali, half-depending-on-the-day-Mexican-Spanish-French-German-Euro-aristocrat, hailing from San Francisco. A high school dropout, she went to a community college before transferring to NYU. Given to capricious obsessions, she still keeps herself at a remove from me, and I like it that way. She also is a bit low on cash. When she bought her mattress, she arranged for it to be delivered later that week, so that she could raise the funds from her parents to pay for it. I did not buy anything that day, although I have now convinced myself that I also wanted her bed. The next day I went to another

Sleepy's, a larger store in Harlem. I tried out a number of beds. I was able to get a hold of my mother. She yelled at me when I told her the price of these mattresses. When I was told that I was in college and shouldn't have an "expensive" mattress, the double twangs of Jewish and Catholic guilt weighed on my conscience. I wondered what my classmates would think if they saw that I had an awesome bed. The answer, I would find out, was what I already assumed. I didn't arrogantly displaying the bed; they just were jealous that I no longer had to sleep on a dorm mattress.

On the day of our joint delivery, Sleepy's sent me a queen sized dorm mattress. I had bargained with the Sleepy's sales floor associate; instead of the bed that my roommate bought, a bed that I had originally intended to get, I would get a discount on a bed set, a second-rate pseudo-Serta from International Bedding. I would get it at half price, but it would be a full set.

I was a sucker. I hadn't even tried out the bed I signed for. They dropped off my mattress, set up the frame—I had a bed. Then they brought my roommates mattress in, this bulky blue thing. It had a sign proclaiming: WARNING HIGHLY FLAMMABLE, KEEP AWAY FROM CHILDREN. They set it down in her room. The mattress men went down to get the papers. My roommate then commented that the mattress set up in my room belonged to her. The mattress men quickly corrected this error upon their return. I signed the bill and quickly ran out the door, off to a meeting, having barely given second thought to the crappy mattress now lodged in my room.

However, before I could even enter the meeting, my roommate called crying, "They took my mattress back! My goddamned parents didn't put enough money in my account."

I didn't know what to do for her. I wasn't going to pay for her mattress, not at that price, and it was then that she calmly mentioned, "They're going to bring it back next Tuesday. Hopefully my parents'll put some money in my account this time."

That evening, some friends from out of town were coming to stay at my place. There was a choice between sharing my bed or sleeping on the floor. I never meant any sexual advance, but nonetheless they took the floor.

They were the wise ones. I spent one night on that mattress, the blue board of back-death. I awoke with bruises, the bed having battered my back while I slept. I had black eyes with sags of fatty skin bowed like the worst Joseph Lierberman caricatures. My friends who had slept on the floor awoke cheerfully, albeit with loud cracks of their back as they stretched. My own back gave a thud.

I immediately set out to return the mattress. The sales floor associates were worthless props, receptive ears with no agency. No one was pulling their strings. They could only dial the number for me, while I was stuck with the mattress from hell. A mattress that at any moment could possibly self-ignite. Then I checked the tag. Not only had I purchased a second-rate mattress—the wrong mattress if you will—I had been sent the incorrect wrong mattress;

they sent me a firm, when I had I ordered a plush. I called an interchangeable Sleepy's sales associate. After relaying the error, I was told that I had a solid case, but that I would need to call customer returns. I did, and found myself in a nightmare induced by a nasty bed business's bureaucracy. I was told to call the Sleepy's associate from whom I had purchased the mattress. This conversation ended with me being told to call Sleepy's customer service. I spent the rest of the weekend yelling at people for sending me the wrong mattress, trying to renegotiate their absurd \$250 return fee.

Their argument was that I had signed off on the bed they had delivered. Whatever excuse I mustered would not suffice. I pointed out that their poorly-worded contract meant I had not received my purchase yet and could still cancel on their terms. My roommate offered her support. In solidarity she called to cancel her order. We would just buy something from Sears. She was then given a deal. She rejected the employee's price. A desperate sales person offered her the mattress at one-third its proposed value. She took it. She wasn't stupid. I was dumbfounded.

The same Sleepy's people who had folded when my roommate informed them she wanted out were giving me hell. I argued that I had been wronged, not only duped into getting a mattress that I had not intended to purchase, but was sent the wrong one on top of that. The time I was wasting dealing with these mouth-breathers was unproductive. One of the floor people's eyes popped. I huffed. I ranted. I raved. I got nothing.

While spending two hours at a Sleepy's on the phone with their regional managers, explaining how I was going to cancel my order and contact the Better Business Bureau, I accepted that I would not get my roommates' price. Hers were more pressing circumstances; they hadn't collected any money from her. I, however, had signed my life away in a hurry.

After I informed Sleepy's customer service of my ace in the hole, that I had cancelled the charge, they folded and removed their ridiculous fee, knocking off about \$100. I know that I am not likely to do any better, not in Manhattan. Not with Sleepy's. I had to take what they were willing to give me. There were no more men behind the curtain, no more layers of conspiracy to peel back. I had simply been had.

