CURRENT AFFAIRS

A Magazine of Politics and Culture

The Worst Magazine In America

The Atlantic poses as a magazine of ideas, but its writers get away with terrible arguments. Its ascendance is a sign of the dire state of American intellectual life.

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Regular *Current Affairs* readers know that I have a tendency to make grumbling remarks about a magazine called *The Atlantic.* In fact, in our print edition we recently awarded *The Atlantic* a prize for "Worst Magazine In America." This prompted an irate letter from one of our subscribers, who said that they enjoyed *The Atlantic* very much, and they could not understand our virulent distaste. The reader asked, fairly, if we could explain exactly *why* we think *The Atlantic* is such a "bad" magazine. Is it simply because we don't share its political leanings? Are we mad at *The Atlantic* for not being socialist? If so, why does it get singled out for special criticism, given that *most* publications aren't socialist (including *Field & Stream, Good Housekeeping,* etc.)? The reader offered an example of an *Atlantic* article that they thought was quite good: George Packer's "The Four Americas." Did we disagree with it, they wondered? If so, why?

I agree with the reader's point: I shouldn't just sit around snarkily making cracks about *The Atlantic* without justifying the position. I wouldn't like it if people did that about *Current Affairs.* If they went around saying "Ugh, *Current Affairs,* that magazine *sucks*," I'd want to ask them to justify their verdict: What sucks about it? Can you enumerate precisely the ways in which it sucks, with examples and

evidence? If not, surely you should shut up about *Current Affairs* (or in my case, *The Atlantic*).

So I want to explain exactly what it is that I think makes *The Atlantic* terrible and why I think we'd all be better off if it stopped publishing. My basic criticism is that while it presents itself as a magazine of ideas—which makes readers feel as if they are engaging intelligently with important issues—it in fact covers those issues in such a superficial and slipshod way that people are liable to be left with a worse understanding of the issue than when they went in, though they may be wrongly convinced that they have learned something. I do think that the ideological suppositions that predominate (with exceptions) in *The Atlantic*'s pages are dangerous and wrongheaded, but my critique of the magazine's glib carelessness with ideas would be valid even if I was not *also* annoyed by its tendency to publish aggressive criticism of my fellow leftists and a never-ending sequence of cheap swipes at protesters.

See, it's not just that *The Atlantic* is a magazine where you'll find headlines like "Medicare For All Is a Fantasy" and "John Bolton Is Misunderstood." Those get under my skin in part because I think the points being made (that Americans should be denied the benefit of a humane healthcare system, and that infamous warmonger John Bolton is actually complicated) are morally repugnant. But the arguments themselves are also shoddy and unpersuasive, purely as pieces of reasoning.

Consider the "Medicare For All Is a Fantasy" piece, written by Reihan Salam in 2018. Salam claims that M4A is "an indulgent fantasy, based on the illusion that we can simply reset the way the U.S. health-care system operates." How does he justify his claim? Well, he doesn't. Search his piece for a refutation of the case for Medicare For All, and you won't find one. Instead, his article is mostly focused on advising Republicans on what they should offer instead of Medicare For All, namely several small tweaks to the for-profit healthcare system that he does not demonstrate will end the affordability crisis or ensure that everyone gets quality care.

Salam invokes a term associated with Khmer Rouge Cambodia, saying that Medicare For All is a "Year Zero fantasy—it's all about wiping the slate clean and starting over again, with institutions borrowed from some supposedly more enlightened society." But that's

exactly the opposite of the truth. Medicare For All builds on an existing institution (Medicare) precisely to avoid redesigning the healthcare financing system from scratch. It expands a program that's already widely popular, rather than "borrowing [an institution] from some supposedly more enlightened society," a possible reference to an actual universal system such as Britain's NHS. The core claim of the article is false. It was published anyway.

Salam only briefly hints at anything resembling an actual argument against M4A, though he does incorrectly claim it is "foreordained that Democrats will campaign on Medicare for All in the years to come, as the party's activists are transfixed by the (illusory) promise of sweeping away the maddening complexity of the health-policy status quo." (In fact, Joe Biden has promised to veto M4A, Kamala Harris no longer supports it, and Democrats have, to their discredit, failed to push it.) Salam says that support for M4A drops in polls if you tell people it will raise their taxes (true, but if you're being honest, you have to explain that the tax raises will be offset by the savings on premiums, deductibles, and copays). He also implies that Medicare For All would be very expensive because of political pressure from doctors to keep reimbursement rates high, and he says Medicare is already a major reason we pay too much for healthcare:

> *To understand why medical care in the United States is so obscenely expensive, look first to Medicare's role in propping up underperforming hospitals, which invariably warp the way they practice medicine to capture as much Medicare reimbursement money as they can. The conceit of Medicare for All is that by centralizing health expenditures in a single agency, or at least in a vastly expanded public-insurance program, the government will be in a position to dictate terms to these greedy hospitals. The trouble is that hospitals wield a great deal of power in democratic politics, not least because they employ large numbers of awfully sympathetic people.*

Now, as a reader (and an editor), what I want to see next is how Salam squares this argument with the fact that private sector

healthcare prices are much higher than those for Medicare, for the same services, with Medicare being far more cost effective than private insurance. Health policy expert Micah Johnson observes that "Compared to private insurance, Medicare has a much better track record for keeping care affordable, making it a sensible foundation for expanding health coverage across the population." I want to see why Salam thinks this doesn't matter. But instead, he simply doesn't mention these inconvenient facts. He disparages M4A as "hubristic" and a "utopian scheme" without ever engaging the arguments of its proponents, which had been laid out in books like Dr. James Burdick's *Talking About Single Payer*. (Since Salam's article was published, there have been other excellent books like Abdul El-Sayed and Micah Johnson's *Medicare For All: A Citizen's Guide,* Gerald Friedman's *The Case For Medicare For All*, and Timothy Faust's *Health Justice Now*.)

Salam's piece illustrates one of the main tendencies that makes *The Atlantic* a bad magazine: its editors allow writers to make unsubstantiated claims, ignore contrary evidence, and use sloppy reasoning. As a magazine editor myself, I am appalled that nobody at the publication would even think to ask a writer to deal with the opposing arguments or provide actual evidence for the thesis of their piece.

It matters, too, because the magazine's reach is huge. The past few years have been immensely profitable for *The Atlantic,* which reaches 50 million people a month. The magazine has set new subscription records and become a rare media success story. It has found creative sources of revenue including native advertising (which got it in trouble early on when an ad for the Church of Scientology looked like a real article), a consulting business, and speaking events that do not seem to maintain much journalistic independence from corporate sponsors.

I want to go through a few more examples to show the pattern of low editorial standards. Let's take one of the more loathsome pieces the magazine has published, "In Defense of Henry Kissinger" by Robert D. Kaplan. Kaplan, who says at the outset that he is a longtime personal friend of Kissinger's (and who therefore should probably not have been commissioned to write the piece in the first place), argues that Kissinger's critics, who condemned him as a war criminal, should have been more appreciative of Kissinger's virtues as a statesman and his successful diplomatic accomplishments, such as helping to usher in dictatorship in Chile (which Kaplan believes was a good thing to do).

Kissinger is often accused of being amoral because he was willing to cause the deaths of large numbers of innocent people in pursuit of what he perceived to be America's national interest. ("I may have a lack of imagination, but I fail to see the moral issue involved," Kissinger said about the bombing of Cambodia.) Kissinger, Kaplan argues, "believes that in difficult, uncertain times" such as the 1960s and '70s, "the preservation of the status quo should constitute the highest morality." Citing the ideas of a Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, he says that "artists and intellectuals" cannot accept the "horrible but necessary truth" that "Judeo-Christian morality" has an "inapplicability [...] in certain circumstances involving affairs of state." Still, Kaplan continues, Kissinger's actions were "quite moral—

provided, of course, that you accept the Cold War assumptions of the age in which he operated." Thus, the reader is to understand, Kissinger was not amoral as long as we redefine "morality" to mean "the preservation of the status quo"—though Kaplan admits that Kissinger flagrantly violated "Judeo-Christian morality," at least any version of it that would condemn support for homicidal dictators and the bombing of civilians.

Kaplan runs through a number of examples of actions by Henry Kissinger that are widely condemned but which Kaplan believes were right and necessary. Take, for instance, the massive bombing campaigns in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Kaplan writes that "The ritualistic vehemence with which many have condemned the bombings of North Vietnam, the incursion into Cambodia, and other events betrays, in certain cases, an ignorance of the facts and of the context that informed America's difficult decisions during Vietnam." He explains why the bombing of Cambodia was necessary:

> *[The] successful [U.S.] troop withdrawal [from Vietnam] was facilitated by a bombing incursion into Cambodia—primarily into areas replete with North Vietnamese military redoubts and small civilian populations, over which the Cambodian government had little control. The bombing, called "secret" by the media, was public knowledge during 90 percent of the time it was carried out, wrote Samuel Huntington, the late Harvard professor who served on President Jimmy Carter's National Security Council. The early secrecy, he noted, was to avoid embarrassing Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk and complicating peace talks with the North Vietnamese.*

In other words, Kaplan thinks the annihilation of "small civilian populations" is fine if it means U.S. troop movements are successful. He says the bombing of North Vietnam was similarly useful:

> *The troop withdrawals were also facilitated by aerial bombardments of North Vietnam. Victor Davis Hanson, the neoconservative historian, writes that, "far from being ineffective and indiscriminate," as many critics of the Nixon-Kissinger war effort later claimed, the Christmas bombings of December 1972 in particular "brought the communists back to the peace table through its destruction of just a few key installations." Hanson may be a neoconservative, but his view is hardly a radical reinterpretation of history; in fact, he is simply reading the news accounts of the era. Soon after the Christmas bombings, Malcolm W. Browne of The New York Times found the damage to have been "grossly overstated by North Vietnamese propaganda." Peter Ward, a reporter for The Baltimore Sun, wrote, "Evidence on the ground disproves charges of indiscriminate bombing. Several bomb loads obviously went astray into civilian residential areas, but damage there is minor, compared to the total destruction of selected targets."*

Kaplan says the bombings allowed troop withdrawals to be "gradual enough to prevent complete American humiliation" and that "this preservation of America's global standing" facilitated Nixon's "historic reconciliation with China" and "helped provide the requisite leverage for a landmark strategic arms pact with the Soviet Union." Kaplan does not attempt to provide evidence that these massive bombing campaigns helped the people of Southeast Asia themselves. He ignores testimony from the victims. For instance, on the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam, he quotes *only* press accounts that downplay the scale of the harm to civilians, leaving out devastating news stories such as this 1972 article from the *New York Times*, which described "mass ruins and a scene of desolation and mourning." CNN, in a retrospective on the bombings, discusses the "almost indescribable" human toll, quoting a Vietnamese writer, Duong Van Mai Elliott, who spoke to eyewitnesses: "those who survived told me when they went out to look, they found dead bodies lying around. [...] To this day, they can still smell the rotting bodies."

Likewise, on the bombing of Cambodia, Kaplan omits Kissinger's outright lies minimizing the death toll and repeats the idea that only "sparsely populated regions" with "small civilian populations" were targeted. He ignores scholarly analyses like that of Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, which have tried to document the harm done by the 500,000 tons of bombs dropped on Cambodia, including "Unexploded American bombs [that] littered the Cambodian countryside, maiming and killing people for decades to come." The bombings caused as many as 150,000 civilian deaths, unsurprising since the orders transmitted by Kissinger were essentially genocidal ("anything that flies, on anything that moves"). Owen and Kiernan conclude that the long-term effect of the bombing on the country was catastrophic:

> *Civilian casualties in Cambodia drove an enraged populace into the arms of an insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began, setting in motion the expansion of the Vietnam War deeper into Cambodia, a coup d'état in 1970, the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately the Cambodian genocide.*

Kaplan does not discuss the bombing of neighboring Laos, which was equally horrendous and turned Laos into the most-bombed country in the world (which it remains today). Fred Branfman, who exposed the U.S.' covert bombing of Laos and its human consequences, describes here witnessing the effects of Nixon and Kissinger's bombing campaign:

> *[These Laotian farmers] described seeing a beloved grandmother burnt alive by napalm before their eyes, a child buried alive or a wife blown to bits by five-hundred-pound bombs, a husband shredded by antipersonnel bombs. There in front of my eyes was a young boy missing a leg, a beautiful six-year-old girl with napalm wounds on her chest, stomach, and genitals. I took photos of her smiling face. When I happily came*

> *back after a few days to give one of the photos to her mother, the woman appeared tired and miserable. I handed her the photo. She informed me her daughter had died painfully just days earlier. I was also given a photo of a beautiful, sincere-looking, happy young girl named Sao Doumma, posing on her wedding day. She had later been killed by US bombing. The horror was magnified by the slow realization that the vast majority of the people that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had murdered were civilians, particularly children, mothers, and old people. Northern Laos was deeply forested and the only "targets" visible from the air were villages. The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers moved easily through the forests. The main groups forced to remain in and near the villages were mothers with children, old people, and the children themselves. These groups comprised the vast majority of the bombing victims. But the greatest horror was my realization that the bombing was continuing, that at the very moment I was talking with these refugees, bombs were dropping on other innocent villagers just a few hundred kilometers away. To realize that each and every day Laotians who awakened alive would be dead by the evening—burned and buried and suffocated and shredded—was almost more than I could bear.*

None of this goes discussed in Kaplan's article, for an obvious reason: to face the human reality of Kissinger's actions would make him impossible to defend. Kaplan sets aside the ugly facts that contradict his narrative, and *The Atlantic*'s editors let him do so.

Kaplan is similarly dishonest in presenting Kissinger's role in ending Chilean democracy. Here is how he describes the rise of Augusto Pinochet:

> *In the fall of 1973, with Chile dissolving into chaos and open to the Soviet bloc's infiltration as a result of Salvador Allende's anarchic and incompetent rule, Nixon and Kissinger encouraged a military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet, during which thousands of innocent people were killed. Their*

> *cold moral logic was that a right-wing regime of any kind would ultimately be better for Chile and for Latin America than a leftist regime of any kind—and would also be in the best interests of the United States. They were right—though at a perhaps intolerable cost. While much of the rest of Latin America dithered with socialist experiments, in the first seven years of Pinochet's regime, the number of state companies in Chile went from 500 to 25—a shift that helped lead to the creation of more than 1 million jobs and the reduction of the poverty rate from roughly one-third of the population to as low as one-tenth. The infant mortality rate also shrank, from 78 deaths per 1,000 births to 18. The Chilean social and economic miracle has become a paradigm throughout the developing world, and in the ex-Communist world in particular. Still, no amount of economic and social gain justifies almost two decades of systematic torture perpetrated against tens of thousands of victims in more than 1,000 detention centers.*

Kaplan admits that Pinochet was a mass torturer and that people "were killed" "during" the coup. But he says that Nixon and Kissinger were "right" to usher this homicidal dictator into power, ousting the elected president and ending Chilean democracy for a generation. They were "right" because the government of democratic socialist president Salvador Allende was "anarchic and incompetent" and a right-wing dictatorship was "better for Chile" as well as being "in the best interests of the United States." This is proven, Kaplan claims, by the fact that Pinochet privatized state-owned companies, reduced poverty and infant mortality, and created a "social and economic miracle."

The *Atlantic*'s editors did not require Kaplan to explain why the United States is more entitled than Chilean voters to decide what is "better for Chile," or why the "interests of the United States" are sufficiently compelling to allow us to end other countries' democracies and help install dictators who torture dissidents.

More importantly, however, the editors of *The Atlantic* allowed Kaplan to engage in outright historical falsification. Pinochet did not create a miracle. In fact, economics professor Edwar E. Escalante, in

the *Latin American Research Review*, showed that "income per capita greatly underperformed for at least the first fifteen years after Pinochet's coup." According to ProMarket, a publication of the University of Chicago business school:

> *Chile's GDP grew 2.9 percent annually during the dictatorship, putting Pinochet in eighth place out of the nation's past ten governments, between 1958 and 2018. Annual inflation was 79.9 percent, the second-highest of the past ten governments. Unemployment averaged 18.0 percent, the highest figure in any Chilean government of the past 60 years. Public spending on education decreased from 3.8 percent of GDP in 1974 to 2.5 percent in 1990, and health spending fell to 2 percent of GDP. In 1990, the country Pinochet handed over was poor and unequal. Poverty measured by the current standard was 68 percent. The GINI inequality index was 0.57, one of the highest in the world, similar to the Central African Republic or Guatemala.*

What is Kaplan's article, then? It is certainly not a piece of scholarship, because it violates basic rules of honesty. Instead, it is atrocity denial propaganda, which the editors of *The Atlantic* never corrected or retracted. Kissinger's appalling record has been exposed at length in works like Greg Grandin's book *Kissinger's Shadow*, Christopher Hitchens's *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, the anthology *The Good Die Young: The Verdict on Henry Kissinger*, and Noam Chomsky's review of Kissinger's memoir, *The White House Years*. Each offers facts that are central to understanding and evaluating Kissinger but which are purposefully excluded from Kaplan's *Atlantic* defense of him.

Kaplan's article is an example of basic factual dishonesty, because it deliberately leaves out important facts that would undercut its persuasiveness. A similar, more recent example of this, is Simon Sebag Montefiore's "The Decolonization Narrative Is Dangerous and False," which became hugely popular when published last year. Montefiore aggressively derides those who view the Israel-Palestine conflict as "colonial" in nature, with the Palestinians in the role of an indigenous population being violently displaced by settlers from elsewhere. Montefiore is unequivocal that this view of the conflict is nonsense:

> *It [the decolonization narrative] holds that Israel is an "imperialist-colonialist" force, that Israelis are "settler-colonialists," and that Palestinians have a right to eliminate their oppressors. [...] This ideology, powerful in the academy but long overdue for serious challenge, is a toxic, historically nonsensical mix of Marxist theory, Soviet propaganda, and traditional anti-Semitism from the Middle Ages and the 19th century.*

Montefiore says that the "settler-colonialist" lens on the conflict is wrong because most Israelis have strong cultural and historic ties to the area:

> *At the heart of decolonization ideology is the categorization of all Israelis, historic and present, as "colonists." This is simply wrong. Most Israelis are descended from people who migrated to the Holy Land from 1881 to 1949. They were not completely new to the region. The Jewish people ruled Judean kingdoms*

> *and prayed in the Jerusalem Temple for a thousand years, then were ever present there in smaller numbers for the next 2,000 years. In other words, Jews are indigenous in the Holy Land, and if one believes in the return of exiled people to their homeland, then the return of the Jews is exactly that. Even those who deny this history or regard it as irrelevant to modern times must acknowledge that Israel is now the home and only home of 9 million Israelis who have lived there for four, five, six generations. [....] [Consider] Suella Braverman and David Lammy, Kamala Harris and Nikki Haley—whose parents or grandparents migrated from India, West Africa, or South America. No one would describe them as "settlers." Yet Israeli families resident in Israel for a century are designated as "settler-colonists" ripe for murder and mutilation.*

Now, if I were editing this piece, I would mark a few queries in the margins. First, who are those who hold "decolonization ideology"? If they believe that "all" Israelis are "colonists," can you quote one of them saying this, so that we have examples of people who hold this position? Second, how does the analogy with Kamala Harris apply? Harris's parents did not arrive as part of an effort to create a new state for people of their own ethnicity within territory inhabited primarily by people of a different ethnicity, and if they *had*, then people might have been more likely to call them settlers. Next, how does the designation of Zionism as "settler-colonialist" in nature necessarily make people "ripe for murder and mutilation"? Throughout his piece, Montefiore says that those who hold the "settler-colonialism" view believe certain things. For instance, they believe that Jews "cannot suffer racism, because they are regarded as 'white' and 'privileged.'" But he doesn't cite examples to show exactly who he is referring to. In an intellectually serious work, a writer should buttress their claims about what other people believe with examples of them saying it. The most popular work categorizing Israel as "settler-colonialist," for instance, is Rashid Khalidi's *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*. Khalidi certainly does not dispute the historical ties of Jews to the region, nor does he claim that Israelis are "ripe for murder" merely because Zionism is "settler-colonialist." An intellectually honest author should

therefore acknowledge that acceptance of the settler-colonial framework does *not* require the extreme conclusions that Montefiore condemns. But Montefiore is engaged in caricature, not thoughtful analysis.

Consider his deeply biased account of the birth of Israel, which makes clear that he has no time for the narrative of 1948 as a year when a terrible injustice was done to Palestinians:

> *A word about that year, 1948, the year of Israel's War of Independence and the Palestinian Nakba ("Catastrophe"), which in decolonization discourse amounted to ethnic cleansing. There was indeed intense ethnic violence on both sides when Arab states invaded the territory and, together with Palestinian militias, tried to stop the creation of a Jewish state. They failed; what they ultimately stopped was the creation of a Palestinian state, as intended by the United Nations. The Arab side sought the killing or expulsion of the entire Jewish community—in precisely the murderous ways we saw on October 7. And in the areas the Arab side did capture, such as East Jerusalem, every Jew was expelled. In this brutal war, Israelis did indeed drive some Palestinians from their homes; others fled the fighting; yet others stayed and are now Israeli Arabs who have the vote in the Israeli democracy.*

Like Kaplan, Montefiore simply doesn't mention things that would call his story into question. He doesn't mention, for instance, that (in the words of Israeli historian Benny Morris) "the Jews committed far more atrocities than the Arabs and killed far more civilians and PoWs in deliberate acts of brutality in the course of 1948." Montefiore also does not explain *why* Palestinians resisted the establishment of the State of Israel, though David Ben-Gurion was admirably clear and frank: "If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal; we have taken their country. It is true God promised it to us, but how could that interest them? Our God is not theirs. [...] They see but one thing: we have come and we have stolen their country. Why would they accept that?" Montefiore speaks

as if Palestinians could have chosen to remain in their homes and join the "Israeli democracy" but does not explain why Israel refused to readmit Palestinians who were forced to flee, confiscating their homes and giving Arab towns new Hebrew names. In 1960, the director of the Survey of Israel warned that "the replacement of Arabic names with Hebrew ones is not yet complete. The committee must quickly fill in what is missing, especially the names of ruins." It was vital to rename these places because Zionism was a project to turn a land that had been majority-Arab into a Jewish state.

Egregiously, Montefiore heaps scorn on the idea that Israel is in any way colonial without noting that *this is how it was described by many Zionists themselves.* As Khalidi notes:

> *The land purchase agency for the Zionist project was called the Jewish Colonization Agency. That's not some antisemitic fantasy by a bigoted historian trying to slander a purist national movement with biblical roots. This movement saw itself as a colonial project from the beginning: that's what [Theodor] Herzl said, that's what [Ze'ev] Jabotinsky said, and that's what [David] Ben-Gurion said. I don't really understand how historians can dispute this.*

Khalidi is right. In his 1923 article "The Iron Wall," Jabotinsky explained presciently that Arab resistance to Zionism was predictable and inevitable because native populations never passively accept colonization projects that are meant to take their country away from them:

> *My readers have a general idea of the history of colonisation in other countries. I suggest that they consider all the precedents with which they are acquainted, and see whether there is one solitary instance of any colonisation being carried on with the consent of the native population. There is no such precedent. The native populations, civilised or uncivilised, have always stubbornly resisted the colonists. [...] Every native population,*

> *civilised or not, regards its lands as its national home. [...] This is equally true of the Arabs. Our Peace-mongers are trying to persuade us that the Arabs are either fools, whom we can deceive by masking our real aims, or that they are corrupt and can be bribed to abandon to us their claim to priority in Palestine, in return for cultural and economic advantages. [...] We may tell them whatever we like about the innocence of our aims, watering them down and sweetening them with honeyed words to make them palatable, but they know what we want. [...] They feel at least the same instinctive jealous love of Palestine, as the old Aztecs felt for ancient Mexico, and their Sioux for their rolling Prairies. To imagine, as our Arabophiles do, that they will voluntarily consent to the realisation of Zionism in return for the moral and material conveniences which the Jewish colonist brings with him, is a childish notion, which has at bottom a kind of contempt for the Arab people. [...] Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonised. That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope that they will be able to prevent the transformation of "Palestine" into the "Land of Israel."*

Now, any intellectually honest person must ask themselves: Why would Montefiore leave this unmentioned? Why would he not explain that early Jewish settlers called their project the "colonization" of Palestine? That the "Jewish Colonisation Association" was founded in 1891, and that Zionist project was consistently described as colonization in the international press? (1883, 1899, 1902, 1913, 1925, 1930, 1941, 1945, 1948.) The answer is obvious: because if he admitted this fact, it would make it much harder for him to insist that the "settler colonialism narrative" was transparently absurd and historically illiterate. He would be forced to concede that there is at least *something* to it, that it does not come out of blind antisemitism.

It is possible to admit the full historical facts and not see Israel *solely* as a "settler-colonial" venture. This is what Khalidi does. He says that Israel "is not a typical settler colony" and is of course also "a refuge

from persecution." It is also possible to admit the colonial aspect and still reject the "settler colonialism" narrative completely. This is what Simha Flapan does in *Zionism and the Palestinians*, which concedes that Zionism had colonial aspects while ultimately concluding it should not be classified as "settler-colonial." But these are honest historians: they have to face the truth. Benny Morris is himself honest, in a way. Unlike Montefiore, he admits that Zionism involved ethnic cleansing but says the ethnic cleansing was morally defensible because the ends (a Jewish state) justified the means (a violent racist project of expelling people from their land). Montefiore is not an honest historian, because instead of laying the full facts before the reader and then making his argument, he acts like a stage magician holding cards behind his back so that you won't see them. A good editor will not let a writer get away with this.

I have so far been going through cases in which inconvenient facts are left out of the narrative in order to mislead the reader. Another type of *Atlantic* piece has perfectly sound facts but a dismally poor argument, or at least does not address the basic questions that would need to be answered for an argument to be persuasive. Consider "That's Not Censorship" by Xochitl Gonzalez. Gonzalez is arguing against those who say that it is "censorship" when, for example, a pro-Palestinian novelist has their book talk canceled. Gonzalez's argument is that in a free-market capitalist system, we must all face the "consequences" of our "choices," and if someone chooses to express their political views and suffers professional consequences, those consequences are simply a part of our economic system, which we must accept:

> *Perhaps that's because my worldview was shaped by the 15 years I spent as an entrepreneur running an artistic enterprise—I was a high-end event producer and designer. Or perhaps it's because I went into the profession with no economic safety net, as a single woman living in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Either way, I have always been keenly aware that the creative professional in a capitalist society has a great deal of freedom, but she is not free from the consequences of her choices. Vocally supporting a political candidate or cause can ostracize you from potential clients on the other side of the issue. That doesn't mean you shouldn't stand up for what you believe. The question is simply one of personal values: Is taking this position more important to me than the potential consequences, even if they affect my bottom line? [...] When I look at it this way, I see that Nguyen, the art maker, has not been censored at all. Nguyen, the art mover, has simply lost one economic opportunity—the chance to sell a large number of books in 92NY's 900-seat auditorium [...] The event organizers decided it was the wrong moment to offer Nguyen their stage. That is their right. Just as signing the letter was Nguyen's. [...] No one is stopping the artist from making art about anything that they want, or from publicly or privately taking whatever political stance they want. [...] But artists who make a living from their work are also entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs can face consequences. This is not censorship; it is, like it or not, capitalism. [...] Censorship is a fun word. It's a dramatic word. And as an artist, I love to be dramatic. But by throwing it around, we risk taking for granted our privileges as Americans. [...] So, artists, let's enjoy the relatively low-stakes consequences while they last. It's called "taking a stand," after all, because sometimes you get knocked down.*

Gonzalez says that "real censorship" is that which is done by the government: for example, the outlawing of drag performances or school boards taking books from library shelves. Or an incident in which "El Museo del Barrio in New York, which receives government funds, recently changed its mind about displaying an artwork it

commissioned because the artists included a Palestinian flag." Thus, according to Gonzalez, whether a venue canceling a pro-Palestinian artist is "censorship" hinges crucially on the question of whether government funds are involved. Otherwise, the situation is "capitalism," not censorship.

I don't think it takes much critical thinking to see that Gonzalez's piece raises a lot of questions that she doesn't answer. She tells us that cancelation is a part of capitalism. This is descriptively true. But does she think this is the way it *ought* to be? It's true that it's the 92nd Street Y's "right" to cancel Nguyen, legally. But it's also our right to condemn their decision if we think it's wrong. It's our right to boycott organizations that pretend to provide open forums but then do not. Does Gonzalez think we ought to exercise that right? Does she think those who control access to major public forums should be denying opportunities to speakers over the kind of offense that got Nguyen canceled? Does she think that in a private marketplace where wealth is concentrated, content moderation decisions are *ever* censorship? For instance, if the world's richest man owns a major part of the public square and decides to purge opinions he dislikes, is this not censorship merely because he is a private citizen? If the government owned a piece of the company (i.e., it was partially nationalized), would this turn the same action from un-objectionable non-censorship into objectionable censorship? If so, why? Well, presumably because *censorship only applies to what the government does.* But why? If we live in a fully privatized "company town," is censorship impossible merely because the functions of government have been handed over to a private company? That doesn't seem to make much sense, because a private company that owns the town can be just as coercive as a state.

Incredibly, Gonzalez doesn't address any of these challenging and obvious questions. How could it not have occurred to her or her editors that they need to be dealt with if the article is going to be persuasive in its theory of what censorship is and isn't? We are left with an article that is supremely confident in its conclusion and supremely unpersuasive, a combination of arrogance and ignorance that helps to explain what gives *Atlantic* pieces their uniquely irritating quality.

By way of major examples, let me turn finally to the specific article that our *Current Affairs* reader asked me to weigh in on: George Packer's "The Four Americas." Our reader appeared to think the article was an insightful analysis of American society in the 21st century. I disagree. I believe it says virtually nothing, albeit in a great many words.

Packer says that since the 1970s, "four rival narratives have emerged, four accounts of America's moral identity." Before then, there were *two* narratives: "the Republicans spoke for those who wanted to get ahead, and the Democrats spoke for those who wanted a fair shake." But at least then "the two parties were arguing over the same recognizable country." It was an America where people had more in common: "Americans then were more uniform than we are in what they ate (tuna noodle casserole) and what they watched (*Bullitt*). Even their bodies looked more alike." Today's four "narratives" "reflect schisms on both sides of the divide that has made us two countries, extending and deepening the lines of fracture." Packer calls his "narratives" "Free America," "Smart America," "Real America," and "Just America." Free America "draws on libertarian ideas, which it installs in the high-powered engine of consumer capitalism." "Smart America" is the

meritocratic narrative of "salaried professionals in information technology, computer engineering, scientific research, design, management consulting, the upper civil service, financial analysis, law, journalism, the arts, higher education." They watch HBO and use MacBooks. They "welcome novelty and relish diversity." They think globalization is good. "Real America" believes that "the authentic heart of democracy beats hardest in common people who work with their hands." It is a "a country of white people," the Sarah Palin fantasy of America. "Just America" is made up of the social justice activists who think America is deeply flawed, racist, misogynistic, etc. It is the 1619 Project, BLM, etc. It "emerged as a national narrative in 2014" after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson and "sees American society not as mixed and fluid, but as a fixed hierarchy, like a caste system." Packer rejects all of the "narratives," saying they are "driven by a competition for status that generates fierce anxiety and resentment." He says that we need "a way forward that tries to make us Equal Americans, all with the same rights and opportunities—the only basis for shared citizenship and self-government."

I find it hard to analyze Packer's argument, because it's such a vague, muddled mess. This sort of writing drives me mad, because there are hundreds of editorial queries that should have been made and evidently weren't. Getting out my editor's pen, I have nothing but questions. How many people believe each of these narratives? How does Packer deduce that we have splintered into multiple countries with competing narratives and that we are no longer "arguing over the same recognizable country" whereas once we were? Is it from survey data? Has he interviewed people? Is it just kind of a *feeling* he gets about how the country is today? How does he know whether his impressions correspond to reality? The essay contains hardly any reporting or data, yet he's making grandiose claims about the country. But is it true that things were different back in the '60s, when the country seemed to be tearing itself apart at the seams? Is there really that much of a difference between the "Real America" and "Free America" narrative, since they both seem to be different registers of Republican Party boilerplate? Are these mostly just stereotypes or caricatures? They sure seem to be. Look at how he describes the rise of "Just America":

Book publishers released a torrent of titles on race and identity, which year after year won the most prestigious prizes. Newspapers and magazines known for aspiring to reportorial objectivity shifted toward an activist model of journalism, adopting new values and assumptions along with a brand-new language: systemic racism, white supremacy, white privilege, anti-Blackness, marginalized communities, decolonization, toxic masculinity. Similar changes came to arts organizations, philanthropies, scientific institutions, technology monopolies, and finally corporate America and the Democratic Party. The incontestable principle of inclusion drove the changes, which smuggled in more threatening features that have come to characterize identity politics and social justice: monolithic group thought, hostility to open debate, and a taste for moral coercion. Just America has dramatically changed the way Americans think, talk, and act, but not the conditions in which they live. It reflects the fracturing distrust that defines our culture: Something is deeply wrong; our society is unjust; our institutions are corrupt. ... [A]nother way to understand Just America is in terms of class. Why does so much of its work take place in human-resources departments, reading lists, and awards ceremonies? In the summer of 2020, the protesters in the American streets were disproportionately Millennials with advanced degrees making more than $100,000 a year. Just America is a narrative of the young and well educated, which is why it continually misreads or ignores the Black and Latino working classes. [...] The historian Peter Turchin coined the phrase elite overproduction to describe this phenomenon. He found that a constant source of instability and violence in previous eras of history, such as the late Roman empire and the French Wars of Religion, was the frustration of social elites for whom there were not enough jobs. Turchin expects this country to undergo a similar breakdown in the coming decade. Just America attracts surplus elites and channels most of their anger at the narrative to which they're closest—Smart America. The social-justice movement is a repudiation of meritocracy, a rebellion against the system handed down from parents to children. Students at elite universities no longer believe they

> *deserve their coveted slots. Activists in New York want to abolish the tests that determine entry into the city's most competitive high schools (where Asian American children now predominate). In some niche areas, such as literary magazines and graduate schools of education, the idea of merit as separate from identity no longer exists. But most Just Americans still belong to the meritocracy and have no desire to give up its advantages. They can't escape its status anxieties—they've only transferred them to the new narrative. They want to be the first to adopt its expert terminology. In the summer of 2020, people suddenly began saying "BIPOC" as if they'd been doing it all their lives.*
>
> *[...]*
>
> *The rules in Just America are different, and they have been quickly learned by older liberals following a long series of defenestrations at The New York Times, Poetry magazine, Georgetown University, the Guggenheim Museum, and other leading institutions. The parameters of acceptable expression are a lot narrower than they used to be. A written thought can be a form of violence. The loudest public voices in a controversy will prevail. Offending them can cost your career. Justice is power. These new rules are not based on liberal values; they are post-liberal. Just America's origins in theory, its intolerant dogma, and its coercive tactics remind me of 1930s left-wing ideology. Liberalism as white supremacy recalls the Communist Party's attack on social democracy as "social fascism." Just American aesthetics are the new socialist realism. The dead end of Just America is a tragedy. This country has had great movements for justice in the past and badly needs one now. But in order to work, it has to throw its arms out wide. It has to tell a story in which most of us can see ourselves, and start on a path that most of us want to follow.*

There's a lot here, and hardly any citations to the factual claims. (How *many* of the *15 to 26 million* 2020 protesters were "Millennials with advanced degrees making more than $100,000 a year"? I consulted the book from which this essay was adapted, and it has a

bibliography but no citations.) As with Montefiore, Packer seems to be oversimplifying and declines to offer citations of people making the claims he insists they believe. Nor does he take any of their arguments seriously.

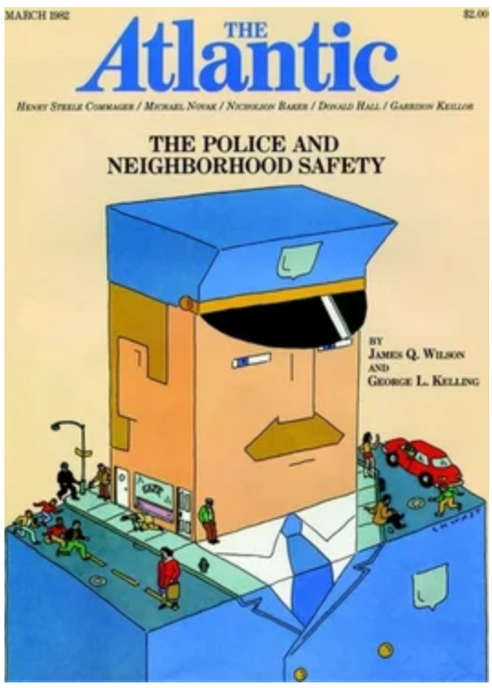
He says "the parameters of acceptable expression are a lot narrower than they used to be." If that's so, then what does Packer want to say in *The Atlantic* that he feels he's not allowed to say? It's true that *The Atlantic* once fired a new right-wing columnist after he suggested that abortion should be punishable by hanging. Is that the sort of expression that Just America is stifling through its narrow-minded and censorious instincts?

I could go through every sentence of this and find serious issues. Packer cites Peter Turchin's theory that "elite overproduction" produces social conflict. How does he respond to the serious criticisms of Turchin's idea? How can it be proven that, as a reasonable reader could posit Packer to be claiming, the use of the term BIPOC is causally linked with the contracting of the legal profession? *Is* the legal profession even contracting significantly enough to provide support for this theory? How does he conclude that in literary magazines today, there is no idea of merit separate from identity? First, what does he mean by "literary magazines"? That could mean anything from the *New Yorker* to the *Iowa Review* to *Zoetrope: All-Story*. Is he talking about literary magazines as a whole or just certain publications? And how does he think literary magazine editors select pieces? They *literally* just look to see if the writer checks certain identity boxes? They don't have any other criteria? If this is hyperbole, then it's false, and if it's meant to be taken seriously, it needs proof. Or take a statement like "Just American aesthetics are the new socialist realism." If you're going to make it, you need examples. What aesthetics? Are you referring to particular artists? Packer seems to assume that his intended audience probably already agrees with his view that social justice activists are risible and Stalinist. If he's right, then they'll just accept claims that are made without any support. The question that occurs over and over in my mind as I read *Atlantic* articles is: *where are the editors?* How are they allowing writers to get away with this stuff?

The Harm Done

There are consequences to these kinds of editorial failures. In 1982, *The Atlantic* published what might be the most influential and widely-cited article in its history, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety" by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. The article is known for arguing, essentially, that crime is a slippery slope: if you allow vandals to break a window in an abandoned building without being punished, soon they'll be breaking all the windows. Then other, more serious criminals will get the signal that nobody cares about crime, and the whole community will go to hell in a handbasket. The "broken windows theory" led cities to adopt more aggressive policing that targeted seemingly trivial offenses like loitering and public urination. In fact, "few ideas have become as influential as 'broken windows.'" New York City's controversial racist "stop-and-frisk" policy is considered an outgrowth of broken windows theory. Broken windows even led New York to crack down on unlicensed dancing, reviving a Prohibition-era anti-cabaret law. In other words, the criminological theory published in *The Atlantic* made it seem reasonable for police to be just as concerned with illegal dancing as with murder.

In fact, as Spencer Piston notes in an article revisiting the theory, the original *Atlantic* article did not just argue that minor lawbreaking could lead to major lawbreaking. It actually argued that police should crack down on behavior that *was not even against the law*, but which challenged social "order." This was because "disorder" (not just crime) threatened to set the slippery slope process in motion. "Disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of



developmental sequence," they wrote. "The idea [is] that once disorder begins, it doesn't matter what the neighborhood is, things can begin to get out of control," Kelling said. Thus the task of police was to deal with all of those who could undermine social "order," as Wilson and Kelling said explicitly: "not violent people, nor, necessarily, criminals, but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, the mentally disturbed." To deal with this population, Wilson and Kelling argued, police should be prepared to use methods that are themselves illegal. They praise a foot patrol officer for "taking informal or extralegal steps to help protect what the neighborhood had decided was the appropriate level of public order," conceding that "some of the things he did probably would not withstand a legal challenge." (In other words, police should commit crimes to prevent things that are not crimes, in the name of stopping crime.) Rather than enforcing laws, this officer focused on "informal rules." If a stranger was lingering, the officer would "ask him if he had any means of support and what his business was; if he gave unsatisfactory answers, he was sent on his way. Persons who broke the informal rules, especially those who bothered people waiting at bus stops, were arrested for vagrancy."

Did Wilson and Kelling cite any persuasive evidence that this would do any good, beyond keeping the unsightly poor from annoying respectable citizens? Well, no, but who needs evidence when you have a story? The story that they told was that "community controls," not just the targeting of violent crime and abuse, were what was needed, and these controls were fragile:

> *We suggest that "untended" behavior also leads to the breakdown of community controls. A stable neighborhood of families who care for their homes, mind each other's children, and confidently frown on unwanted intruders can change, in a few years or even a few months, to an inhospitable and frightening jungle. A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed. Adults stop scolding rowdy children; the children, emboldened, become more rowdy. Families move out, unattached adults move in. Teenagers gather in front of the corner store. The merchant asks them to*

> *move; they refuse. Fights occur. Litter accumulates. People start drinking in front of the grocery; in time, an inebriate slumps to the sidewalk and is allowed to sleep it off. Pedestrians are approached by panhandlers. At this point it is not inevitable that serious crime will flourish or violent attacks on strangers will occur. But many residents will think that crime, especially violent crime, is on the rise, and they will modify their behavior accordingly. They will use the streets less often, and when on the streets will stay apart from their fellows, moving with averted eyes, silent lips, and hurried steps. [...] Such an area is vulnerable to criminal invasion. Though it is not inevitable, it is more likely that here, rather than in places where people are confident they can regulate public behavior by informal controls, drugs will change hands, prostitutes will solicit, and cars will be stripped. That the drunks will be robbed by boys who do it as a lark, and the prostitutes' customers will be robbed by men who do it purposefully and perhaps violently. That muggings will occur.*

I have pointed out before that as a substitute for the difficult work of social science, conservatives often simply tell stories in which the world "will" go to hell in a handbasket if certain conditions are fulfilled (such as the implementation of progressive social policy), appealing to people's fear that this *might* happen without actually offering proof that it does. Wilson and Kelling here are just offering a rearticulation of the old "veneer theory," which suggests that civilization is "thin veneer" and humanity will easily lapse back into barbarity and violence if order is not strictly maintained. That theory is false, but because it resonates with many people's preconceived ideas about human nature, it is put forward without evidence.

Was there *anything* to support the broken windows theory? Wilson and Kelling did cite a 1969 study by social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, who later became infamous in his field for conducting the fraudulent (and deeply unethical) "Stanford Prison Experiment." In the 1969 experiment, Zimbardo abandoned a car with its hood open in the Bronx, then watched as people picked parts of the car off and stole them. Then, Zimbardo conducted the same experiment on a street in

wealthy Palo Alto, California. Nobody touched the car. (With one exception: "when it began to rain, one passerby lowered the hood so that the motor would not get wet!") Then Zimbardo conducted the same experiment on the Stanford University campus. Since passersby were *not* vandalizing the car, Zimbardo and his students began beating up the car themselves:

> *It was obvious that the releaser cues which were sufficient in New York were not adequate here. I expected that vandalism needed to be primed where it did not occur with a higher "natural" frequency. To do so, two of my graduate students (Mike Bond and Ebbe Ebbesen) and I decided to provide a better model for destruction by taking a sledge hammer to the car ourselves and then seeing if others would follow suit. [...] Although everyone knew the sequence was being filmed, the students got carried away temporarily. Once one person had begun to wield the sledge hammer, it was difficult to get him to stop and pass it to the next pair of eager hands. Finally they all attacked simultaneously. One student jumped on the roof and began stomping it in, two were pulling the door from its hinges, another hammered away at the hood and motor, while the last one broke all the glass he could find....*

But here is how Wilson and Kelling describe the experiment in *The Atlantic*:

> *The car in Palo Alto sat untouched for more than a week. Then Zimbardo smashed part of it with a sledgehammer. Soon, passersby were joining in. Within a few hours, the car had been turned upside down and utterly destroyed. Again, the "vandals" appeared to be primarily respectable whites.*

This is a flat-out inaccurate description of the experiment. Remember how it actually went: nothing happened to the car on the street in Palo Alto for more than a week. Zimbardo then took the car *to the Stanford campus*, and he *and his students* began going crazy beating the hell out of it. Then some other students beat the car up as well. The omissions are crucial, because Wilson and Kelling suggest that, essentially, Zimbardo just had to give a small cue (a "broken window") and the people of Palo Alto became barbarians like the people in the Bronx, descending on the car like wild beasts. In fact, it was Zimbardo and his students who began an orgy of violence against the car, and others at Stanford who (seeing a professor destroying a car with a sledgehammer) joined in. The actual facts (students join in with a crazed professor wrecking a car) in no way substantiate the authors' conclusion (that any town, however "respectable," is one broken window away from a descent into savagery). As Bench Ansfield writes, "Wilson and Kelling manipulated Zimbardo's experiment to draw a straight line between one broken window and 'a thousand broken windows,'" and "conveniently neglected to mention [...] that the researchers themselves had laid waste to the car." In other words, one of the most influential policing theories of all time is built on essentially falsified evidence.

When serious empirical criminologists have tried to find causal links between "broken windows" style "social disorder" and violent crime, they have come up short, and "social science has not been kind to the 'broken windows' theory." Unsurprisingly, people's concepts of "disorder" turn out to be racist, and the degree to which an area is inhabited by poor Black people contributes more to its perceived "disorderliness" than whether it is actually disordered in a meaningful sense. It's not surprising, then, that the implementation of broken windows theory involved the mass detention and harassment of young Black men. Even though New York City's stop-and-frisk policing was ruled unconstitutional in 2013 and the program formally ended in 2014, Mayor Eric Adams has essentially revived the practice, with the police department continuing to engage in unlawful stops, particularly of Black and Hispanic people.

Fortunately, there has now been a backlash to harsh policing regimes and a renewed focus on the racist aspects of American criminal punishment. But it's fair to say that a basic fact-checking oversight in *The Atlantic* contributed to the bloating of America's mass incarceration system. Criminal punishment took a turn toward the punitive in part because of a stupid *Atlantic* article arguing that police should focus on "disorder" rather than on the thing people actually want police to do (finding and apprehending people who commit murder and other serious crimes). The standards of empirical rigor for writing in a popular magazine are lower than for writing in a sociology journal, but in practice that means you can use the pages of *The Atlantic* to float dumb ideas that do not have evidentiary support, and hundreds of thousands of people will read and discuss them who will not read the subsequent refutations in scholarly publications. (The infamous story of the *New Republic*'s publication of excerpts from *The Bell Curve* is similar.)

This stuff does lasting harm. Just recently, *New York Times* op-ed columnist Pamela Paul, writing about the "embarrassment" of the state of the NYC subway, cited "broken windows" theory as legitimate, stating it as a simple matter of fact. She did this to justify her proposed solution to the problem of fare evasion, a solution she admits will be unpopular: a massive police crackdown. She also thinks that this is the "common sense" solution. But it gets worse: she says that "broken windows" has been "attacked" and that "progressives are still loath to admit that broken windows policing works." Here we have in 2024 an

opinion columnist in one of the country's top papers of record arguing for the continuation an ugly racist practice that was never based on any solid research. Thanks, *Atlantic*!

The harms go far beyond "broken windows." When *The Atlantic* creates a misleading impression about how many people "detransition" or stop identifying as transgender, it provides fodder for demagogues who want to pass hideous anti-trans legislation on the basis of a theory that trans children are not *really* trans but are being turned trans (by Democrats, librarians, "groomers," etc.). The *Atlantic* also runs seemingly endless articles deriding protesters and activists. ("The Defeat-Harris, Get-Trump Politics of Protest, "How Social Justice Became a New Religion," "The Illiberal Demands of the Amherst Uprising," "The Climate Art Vandals Are Embarrassing," "Maybe Don't Spray-Paint Stonehenge," "Let the Activists Have Their Loathsome Rallies.") The general *Atlantic* attitude toward activists is captured well by Gonzalez, who writes, "Protests give me claustrophobia. Rallies cause heart palpitations. Honestly, even stadium concerts make me uncomfortable." God only knows what conniptions she would have suffered if she found herself at the March on Washington.

When *The Atlantic* casts doubt on Palestinian death statistics, for instance, it gives people license to think that the destruction of Gaza is not as bad as it actually is. Dr. Feroze Sidhwa, a doctor who worked in Gaza and who has a master's degree in public health, said he was "shocked to see the sloppiness with which *The Atlantic* reported this story" and disturbed when a friend told him that *The Atlantic* is their go-to source for "serious news" on Israel-Palestine. (Likewise, I have been sent Montefiore's article by several people who have told me it seemed fair and intelligent, when in fact it is egregiously dishonest and misleading.) Sidhwa notes that he received no response from the *Atlantic*'s editors when he submitted a letter correcting the article. (His first-person accounts of the reality in Gaza, written with Dr. Mark Perlmutter, are essential reading for anyone who is actually interested in "serious news" about the conflict.) Under editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg, a former IDF prison guard, the magazine has a distinct bias against Palestinians, whose voices rarely show up in its pages.

The drumbeat for war is constantly pounded in the pages of the *Atlantic* by hawkish contributors like Eliot Cohen, Anne Applebaum (hired despite a history of openly advocating war crimes, which was

perhaps considered a qualification rather than a red flag), and David Frum (whose execrable *Atlantic* writing on immigration I have debunked before). The contributors tell us not to be squeamish about supporting large-scale killing, because "Insisting that the Israelis find a humane way of destroying an enemy, without collateral damage, is absurd" and "it is possible to kill children legally." Cohen tells us that "Iran Cannot Be Conciliated," and we must use "Chicago rules" against our enemies, meaning ruthless mobster amorality, and we must certainly not try to end wars with diplomatic negotiation. With recent new evidence of the horrors of the U.S. Marines' 2005 Haditha massacre, it's worth remembering that the *Atlantic* saw fit to publish the headline "Why We Should Be Glad the Haditha Massacre Marine Got No Jail Time." (That article made the extraordinary claim that "preserving the fairness and impartiality of the American legal system" necessitated giving light sentences to Marines who were "almost certainly guilty of war crimes.")

Incredibly, *The Atlantic* lets someone like Frum, a contributor to the worst crime of the 21st century who has falsely claimed photos of injured Palestinians are fake, write a revisionist retrospective on that crime in which he outright misleads his readers, writing that "what the U.S. did in Iraq was not an act of unprovoked aggression," and claiming that U.S. troops found "an arsenal of chemical-warfare shells and warheads" in Iraq. (Frum leaves out the crucial information that they were long-abandoned and dated from the period when the U.S. was supporting Iraq's use of chemical warfare, which is why the U.S. did not publicize the finding.) As the excellent *Citations Needed* podcast episode on the magazine put it, *The Atlantic* makes right-wing ideas respectable to liberals, and when it publishes articles encouraging Americans to be terrified of Iran or to support boosting the military budget, it does so in a "prestige-y format, next to a bunch of poems, and well-written movie reviews [which give it] some gravitas. You can't just dismiss it as right-wing fear-mongering."

I don't mean to imply that everything in *The Atlantic* is terrible. Much of the content is simply dull, petty, or trivial. ("I Will Not Thumbs-Up Your Email," "J. D. Vance Has a Point About Mountain Dew," "Why I Hate Instagram Now," "You Can See Inside Your Ear. That Doesn't Mean You Should.") Its main "bias," in fact, may be toward the unfathomably boring. Some of it is designed to annoy people into

arguing about it ("Uncancel Woodrow Wilson"), and to restrain my instinct to write multi-thousand-word rebuttals, I have to recall the mantra that "it's bad on purpose to make you click." Some of it is clearly only of interest to people who are multiple income brackets above mine. ("A Fancy Card Is Becoming the Only Way to Get a Restaurant Reservation") Some of it is the kind of vacuous parasocial political coverage I have previously complained about ("Doug Emhoff, First Jazz Fan"). Some of it seems like it belongs in *The Onion* (e.g., 2022's "More Proof That This Really Is the End of History" by Francis Fukuyama.) Sometimes it is misleading clickbait. ("Trees Are Overrated" is the headline of an article that is just about the climate benefits of grass.)

Sometimes it is also quite good, such as the reporting work of Ed Yong. Occasionally they even let a socialist say something. They actually once ran a fine article criticizing Israel's destruction of Gaza. Ta-Nehisi Coates produced original and provocative work for *The Atlantic*, before he decided, probably correctly, that writing comic books was a better use of his time than writing *Atlantic* articles. (Coates stepped down from his correspondent position for personal reasons in 2018 and has since written twice for the publication. A recent piece of his about Palestinian American exclusion at the DNC, in which he supported the international consensus that Israel's occupation of Palestine is illegal, came out in *Vanity Fair* rather than *The Atlantic,* leading one to wonder whether Coates's increasingly vocal pro-Palestine stance has made him *persona non grata* at his old publication.) The *Atlantic* publishes an absolutely colossal volume of material, so it is difficult to make generalizations about its work without major qualifications. There is an ideological leaning to the publication, but it is not so rigid that there are no exceptions, and I can usually find something on the front page I think is valuable (today it's "The Great Marijuana Hoax" by Allen Ginsberg, though unfortunately this is reposted from the November 1966 issue).

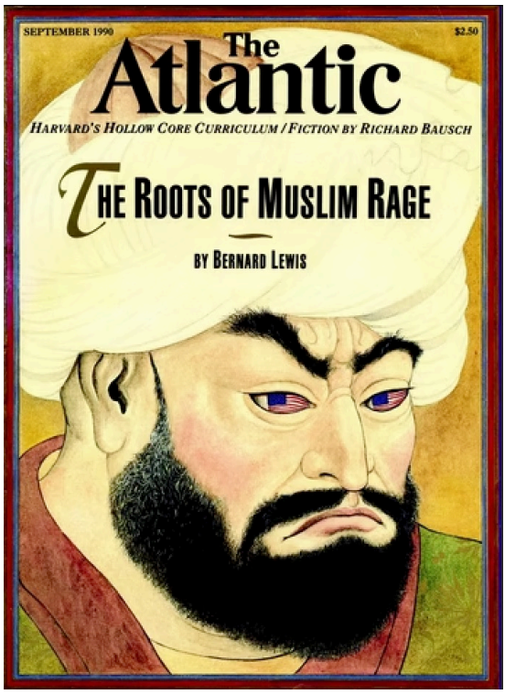
I'm also engaging in a *bit* of hyperbole when I call *The Atlantic* the "worst" magazine in America. There are publications with worse ideas and politics, to be sure. For instance, as I write, the *National Review* is honoring Labor Day with an attack on unions, claiming they are a bunch of corrupt "goons" and claiming that Ronald Reagan was being "magnanimous" by firing striking air traffic controllers instead of

sending them to prison. But the *National Review* is open about its reactionary politics. *The Atlantic* is more insidious. The reader who emailed me about the magazine probably doesn't expect thoughtful, balanced commentary in the *National Review*. They do think that's what they're getting when they read *The Atlantic*. You can always find worse magazines in the world—*Juggs* was still published well into this century, and I'm sure there are others. But even in *Juggs* I doubt you ever found this kind of paragraph:

> *The Houthi spokesman was right on time for our meeting. I was a little surprised by his appearance; I had half expected to see a swaggering tribesman of the kind I used to meet in Yemen—mouth bulging with khat leaves, a shawl over his shoulders and a curved dagger in his belt. Instead, Abdelmalek al-Ejri was a neat-looking fellow in a blue-tartan blazer and a button-down shirt. He kept a physical distance as he greeted me, his manner polite but guarded, as if to register that we stood on opposite sides of a chasm.*

I must repeat: *where are the editors?* Did they not query the writer: "Is there any reason other than stereotypes about Arabs that it would be surprising for a Houthi to be 'neat-looking' rather than a 'swaggering tribesman'?" Apparently this question never entered anyone's mind throughout the editorial process, which tells you a great deal about that process. (Jon Schwarz points out in *Citations Needed* that racist stereotypes about Arabs are nothing new in the publication, which in a 1949 report from Israel described the Palestinian Arabs of Jaffa as "foul, diseased, smelling, rotting, and pullulating with vermin and corruption, slinking about the streets, flatfooted, with loose, dribbling lower lip." Then, in 1990, there was the cover story by Bernard Lewis, an Armenian genocide denier, called "The Roots of Muslim Rage," which proposed the idea of a "clash of civilizations" before Samuel Huntington did. Lewis argued that "the Muslim"—for there is only one—was enraged by "his loss of domination in the world," including "emancipated women and rebellious children," and, inspired by "ancient beliefs and loyalties," decided to lash out at "alien,

infidel, and incomprehensible forces that had subverted his dominance." It did not, of course, interview or quote a single Muslim person. This edition of the magazine became one of its all-time bestsellers.)



It is worth imagining how we would react to a magazine that published the kinds of caricatures and generalizations about "the Jew" that The Atlantic published about "the Muslim."

The Atlantic has been described as a magazine "not precisely of the center but rather of a set of liberal civic ideals" a publication whose "purpose seems to be the continual renewal of educated Americans' commitment to high-mindedness." The highbrow clickbait of *The Atlantic* makes its readers feel they are engaged with serious ideas, put forth by "omniscient gentlemen." (And they do tend to be *gentlemen*. The *Atlantic*'s previous editors-in-chief have included three men named James, two Williams, and not a single woman or person of color. Goldberg has said plainly that he believes the journalists capable of writing cover stories for the magazine are "almost exclusively white males.") Readers might assume the ideas are undergoing some quality checks before being released. They are not.

In the publication's 2024 media kit, Goldberg claimed that "*The Atlantic* leads the way. We illuminate the most complicated issues. We ask the hardest questions...." But as I've demonstrated, the *Atlantic*

tends to do the exact opposite. Often it doesn't illuminate issues but obscures them, and its editors apparently fail to ask their writers even the most basic of questions about what they're writing, never mind the "hard" ones. You are just as likely to come away from an *Atlantic* article with your head full of propaganda and distortion as you are to come away enlightened, which is why I maintain that it is failing the basic job of a magazine, and we'd all be better off without it.

Subscribe to a magazine with far fewer resources than The Atlantic which nevertheless does its best to uphold higher standards of editorial quality.