Commentary
September 2001

Letters from Readers

First Causes

To the Editor:

Were he a veiled dancer, David Berlinski could not have beckoned more seductively in trying to deliver a resolution to the question he poses ["What Brings a World Into Being?," April]. He dances feverishly with information theory, linguistics, particle physics, biology, literature, and—almost but not quite—theology.

His seemingly inescapable conclusion: that the world is too complex to have sprung full blown from itself. Thus: "The laws of physics . . . must provide an explanation for the behavior of matter in all of its modes, and so they must explain the *emergence* as well as the organization of material objects" (emphasis in the original). Or: "Plainly, the creation of something from nothing cannot be explained in terms of the behavior of material objects."

But physics is the study of the principles underlying the relation between matter and energy. It is *not* the study of causes—and certainly not of *first* causes, which is a concern of theology.

When considering a closed system—that is, a system within which all entities are known and defined—the human mind cannot grasp the possibility of spontaneous creation. An apple cannot appear on a table unless someone puts it there. Spontaneous generation of an idea? A feeling? A bit of magic and a dove from a puff of smoke? A movie that creates whole epochs out of projected images? No. These are all understandable (to most of us).

But what about our universe? Is it so clear and well defined that we know that matter does not just come into existence? We must resist the tendency to label and define. There are limits that confine imagination to the already known.

David Berlinski blurs the distinctions that natural scientists have struggled for centuries to establish. This smacks of the tactics of the religious Right. Rhetoric is argument. Argument is propaganda. Propaganda may also be a form of information—but it is not science.

Robin Rapport
Rush, New York

To the Editor:

David Berlinski informs us, albeit obliquely, that cosmologists are on the wrong track. Astonishingly, they think that the universe came from nothing.

Without ever stating as much, Mr. Berlinski seems to invoke the old theological idea of "intelligent design," according to which the complexity we see in nature could only come from an intelligent source outside of nature. In doing so, he holds up to contempt cosmologists, physicists, and other scientists.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I would simply point out that many of yesterday's scientific mysteries have been solved in today's academies and laboratories. I think that we will just keep chipping away at the these marvelous cosmological problems—and that we will keep uncovering answers fact by painful fact.

Louis S. Lyons
Woodland Hills, California

To the Editor:

David Berlinski asks many questions but accepts very few answers. He apparently refuses to believe in biological evolution, the Big Bang, contemporary neuroscience, or current theories about the behavior of cells and DNA. Does he even believe in the existence of cells and DNA? I would not venture a guess.

It is true that we do not understand everything. And even where we have some understanding, it is not absolute. But summarily to dismiss as rubbish whole scientific disciplines does not strike me as very helpful.

Matthew Johnson
New York City

TO THE EDITOR:

David Berlinski ends his article with a question that paraphrases his title: "Just how did the information latent in the fundamental laws of physics unfold itself to become a world?" His answer: "Apparently it just did."

Mr. Berlinski discussed a similar subject—the astonishing complexity of the biological world—in "The Deniable Darwin" (COMMENTARY, June 1996). The "assumption of religious belief," he wrote, is that this complexity came about when "God said, 'Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let fowl fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven'. . . . And who on the basis of experience would be inclined to disagree? . . . An act of intelligence is required to bring even a thimble into being; why should the artifacts of life be different?"

Has Mr. Berlinski changed his mind since then? Or is his refrain of "Apparently it just did" merely a provocative way to express his faith in the Bible?

GEORGE JOCHNOWITZ
College of Staten Island
Staten Island, New York

TO THE EDITOR:

David Berlinski's conclusion in "What Brings a World into Being?" was strangely evocative of the opening words of the Gospel of John. Mr. Berlinski tells us that "It is only when information is assigned the power to bring something into existence from *nothing whatsoever* that its essentially magical nature is revealed" (emphasis in the original). John 1:1-3 reads, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God. . . . All things were made by him."

ALFRED R. MATTHEWS
Garner, North Carolina

TO THE EDITOR:

David Berlinski grapples with ultimate subjects—the universe, evolution, creation—with wit and grace and, most importantly, total independence from the orthodoxies and received wisdom of the scientific establishment. With the humility and awe of the true scientist, he reminds us that we live in a universe of mysteries.

To those of us who are simple-minded, these mysteries seem to be miracles (dictionary definition: "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs"). But since it is intellectually forbidden these days to believe in divine anything, modern scientists pretend to understand such phenomena by inventing new terminology. The alleged explosive creation of the universe from a point the size of a pinhead is thus called a "singularity." David Berlinski avoids such pretense; he calls a mystery a mystery.

ERIC JULBER
Carmel, California

TO THE EDITOR:

David Berlinski is right. The notion of information has become ubiquitous in contemporary science, and it carries the same sense of imperial destiny as have other universal ideas. The idea of information may be the hardest of all to resist, for it promises nothing less than the power, as Mr. Berlinski suggests, to bring our very world into being.

Can it really be the information contained in a novel that brings an imaginative world into existence, or the information in a molecule that creates an organism? Mr. Berlinski seems to think not. Yet for him, "It is only when information is assigned the power to bring something into existence from *nothing whatsoever* that its essentially magical nature is revealed" (emphasis in the original).

Maybe so, but it is possible to detect quite a bit of magic in the power attributed to information even in what he calls the "low tavern of thought" of biology. We need only to look a little more closely at the sleight of hand involved in the idea of pulling an organism out of a molecule of DNA.

Mr. Berlinski identifies two parts of the difficulty: the first is to be found in the "computational wilderness" of protein-folding, and the second in the regulation of global properties that maintain the cell or organism as a living system. Both of these point to gaps in our understanding of the relation between genotype and phenotype that have become ever more conspicuous since we have learned to read the genome's sequences.

But there are other difficulties as well. For example, what exactly are "the causal pathways initiated by DNA" (to use Mr. Berlinski's phrase)? The common assumption is that DNA "causes" protein synthesis and replication, but the notion of cause is almost as elusive as that of information, and it is worth scrutinizing this claim as well.

No one would argue that the digital structure of DNA allows for an extraordinarily high degree of specificity—that is, of information, in the colloquial sense of the term. But actual responsibility for initiating the chemical reactions leading to replication and protein synthesis lies in the enzymatic machinery that performs these tasks. Furthermore, while nucleotide sequences certainly carry vital information, they do not carry enough to determine when, where, or even how faithfully replication occurs, or when and where protein synthesis occurs. Nor do they determine exactly which proteins are to be synthesized.

There is no problem in saying that DNA carries indispensable information for bringing an organism into being, or that it has a kind of causal power—as long as we are clear about what we mean. The sleight of hand is in the implication that it is the only source of information, the only causal agency at work. And for that implication, the conjurer relies on the imprecision of our terms, and on the ease with which we slide from one meaning to another.

EVELYN FOX KELLER
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

DAVID BERLINSKI writes:

The idea that, to quote Robin Rapport, the world (or anything else) sprang "full blown *from itself*" (my emphasis) collapses into contradiction as soon as it is expressed. An object can no more be its own cause than a man may be his own father.

The seemingly spontaneous emergence of material objects is another story. Virtual particles pop up in the universe described by quantum electrodynamics and then quickly pop back

A world of ideas on public policy.

Rethinking Health Insurance

By Milton Friedman

Since the end of World War II, the provision of medical care in the United States and other advanced countries has displayed three major features: first, rapid advance in the science of medicine; second, large increases in spending, both in terms of inflation-adjusted dollars per person and the fraction of national income spent on medical care; and third, rising dissatisfaction with the delivery of medical care, on the part of both consumers of medical care, and physicians and other suppliers of medical care.

A key difference between medical care and other technological revolutions is the role of government. In other technological revolutions, the initiative, financing, production, and distribution were primarily private, though government sometimes played a supporting or regulatory role. In medical care, government has come to play a leading role in financing, producing, and delivering medical service. Direct government spending on healthcare now exceeds 75 percent of total health spending for 15 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. For the U.S., the figure is 46 percent.

Two simple observations are key to explaining both the high level of spending on medical care and the dissatisfaction with that spending. The first is that most payments to physicians or hospitals or other caregivers for medical care are made not by the patient but by a third party – an insurance company or employer or governmental body. The second is that nobody spends somebody else's money as wisely or as frugally as he spends his own. These statements apply equally to other OECD countries.

Why are most medical payments made by third parties? The answer for the United States begins with the fact that medical care expenditures are exempt from federal income tax if, and only if, medical care is provided by the employer. If an employee pays directly for medical care, the expenditure comes out of the employee's income after income tax. That strong incentive explains why most consumers get their medical care through their own employer, or their spouse's or parents' employer.

> ***A key difference between medical care and other technological revolutions is the role of government***

The tax exemption of employer-provided medical care in the U.S. has two different effects, both of which raise healthcare costs. First, it leads American workers to rely on their employer, rather than themselves, to make arrangements for medical care. Second, it leads employees to take a larger fraction of their total remuneration in the form of medical care than they would if spending on medical care had the same tax status as other expenditures.

Employer financing of medical care in the U.S. has caused the term "insurance" to acquire a rather different meaning in medicine than in most other contexts. We generally rely on insurance to protect us against events that are highly unlikely to occur but involve large losses if they do occur – major catastrophes, not minor regularly recurring expenses. We insure our houses against loss from fire, not against the cost of having to mow the lawn. We insure our cars against liability to others or major damage, not against having to pay for gasoline. Yet in medicine, it has become common to rely on insurance to pay for regular medical examinations and often for prescriptions.

Moreover, the states and the federal government have increasingly specified the coverage of insurance for medical care to a detail not common in other areas. The effect has been to raise the cost of insurance and to limit the options open to individuals. If the tax exemption for employer-provided medical care had never been enacted, the insurance market for medical care would probably have developed as other insurance markets have – as a way of providing for catastrophic, out-of-the-ordinary costs, not for routine expenditures.

Throughout the OECD countries, third-party payment has required the bureaucratization of medical care and, in the process, has changed the character of the relation between physicians or other caregivers and patients. A medical transaction is not simply between a caregiver and a patient; it has to be approved as "covered" by a private, or public-sector bureaucrat and the appropriate payment authorized. An inescapable result is that the interest of the patient is often in direct conflict with the interests of the caregiver's ultimate employer – whether the latter is a government or a corporation.

Milton Friedman, recipient of the 1976 Nobel Memorial Prize for economic science, has been a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution since 1977. This article was excerpted from the Winter 2001 issue of The Public Interest (www.thepublicinterest.com).

down; but even such particles do their popping within a pre-existing structure: the quantum vacuum, which contains a seething electron-positron field. These strange quantum effects indicate that nature on the smallest level blurs the distinction between fields and particles, but no one suggests that virtual particles are their own cause, or that they come into existence from nothing whatsoever.

Current orthodoxy in the sciences—and in intellectual life generally—holds that the universe is nothing more (or less) than a collection of material objects. However "material objects" may ultimately be defined—are quantum states *material*; are Hilbert spaces *objects*?—it is surely reasonable to ask for an account of their origin. And this demand has nothing directly to do with their complexity. A universe filled with objects no more complicated than Britney Spears or Stanley Fish would also require an explanation. Nor is there anything out of the ordinary in the idea that mathematical physics should provide an account of the emergence as well as the organization of matter. "The origin of the matter in the universe," remarks the contemporary cosmologist Alan Guth, "is no longer thought to be beyond the range of science."

Indeed, I cannot imagine why Mr. Rapport is persuaded that physics is *not* the study of causes, or even first causes. Causal connections are the physicist's stock in trade. A baseball strikes a bat. Thereafter it accelerates toward the bleachers. Newton's laws of motion provide the requisite explanation: force has been applied and the result is acceleration. Cause—the applied force; effect—the zooming baseball. The inference is so commonly made *within* a world of material objects that it is very hard to see why it should not be applied *to* a world of material objects.

True, there is one big difference. Cause and effect are connections achieved between material objects; if the point at issue is the *emergence* of material objects, then there are no material objects to act as causes. Two solutions, broadly conceived, commend themselves. The first is to accept the existence of material objects as an axiom—something given and so something unexplained. The second is to enlarge the concept of causality so that things that are not material can give rise to things that are.

The first solution, although logically impeccable, is emotionally unsatisfying; the second is the other way around. This is because it replaces a mystery by a miracle, as when the laws of physics are assigned a causative role in the grand scheme of things. I discussed just such a notion in my essay.

On the largest scale, Mr. Rapport suggests, perhaps things *do* just pop into existence. We must resist the "tendency to label and define." I demur: a little more labeling and defining would do the world much good. Labeling and defining are coextensive with thinking and thinking clearly; the same inferential chain that stops with a melodramatic thud when something is said to arise from nothing *within* well-understood systems comes to the same bad end when applied to the universe as a whole. It is for this reason that physicists invest all that nothingness with some remarkably well-defined physical properties.

As for myself, I do not even share Mr. Rapport's conviction that we understand more familiar miracles: how, for example, an imaginative world arises from a series of flickering images on a movie screen, or from a series of letters on the printed page. Familiar miracles these may be, but from the point of view of mathematical physics—our only serious science—miracles nonetheless.

Finally, I do not know what important distinctions I am supposed to have blurred, or why the blurring of those distinctions is a tactic of the religious Right. I have nothing against the religious Right, and nothing against the agnostic Left; my observations are ecumenical.

In reply to Louis S. Lyons, I do not think, nor did I write, that "cosmologists are on the wrong track." Cosmology is a rich speculative science, and whether particular cosmologists have gone wrong depends entirely on what track they happen to be following. Nor do I charge cosmologists with believing that the "universe came from nothing." What I contend is that cosmologists often affirm that the universe arose from nothing whatsoever while at the same time smuggling a good deal of something into all that nothing.

Do I, "without ever stating as much," seem to be invoking the idea of intelligent design, as Mr. Lyons suspects? If I thought that intelligent design, or any artful contrivance like it, explained anything in any depth, I would leap to the cannon's mouth and say so. I do not and I did not.

The argument from design proceeds along a natural path. Complicated human artifacts—a watch, a thimble, a nuclear reactor—make their appearance on the scene as the result of some form of agency. In explaining the existence of a watch, we appeal to forethought, intention, and the translation of these mental acts into a world of matter.

There is nothing wrong with this—as an inference. We make such inferences all the time, and we rely on them as well. The watch *does* have a watchmaker; the nuclear reactor, a design team; those long-awaited signals from outer space, an author or authors. The trouble is that these inferences explain very little. The design inference makes sense only on the assumption that we quite understand what it is for human beings (or animals) to frame intentions, conceive of certain ends, and then act to bring them about. We do not. No analysis of these activities ever goes beyond the activities themselves. We explain our intentions by invoking our intentions; we understand our passions by reference to our passions.

The world in which we find ourselves is closed, and we cannot withdraw from it. From the point of view of the sciences, the process by which an intelligent agent shapes a sheet of tin in order to make a spoon is simply a mystery, one that we overlook simply because the mystery is so common. We do not even understand intelligent design when we ourselves have the intelligence and do the designing. I am not for a moment disputing what seems to me

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About Your Professor:

DANIEL ROBINSON is a distinguished Research Professor of Psychology at Georgetown University since 1971. Since 1990, Professor Robinson has lectured in Philosophy at Oxford University, where he is a Faculty Fellow at Linacre College. He is past president of two divisions of the *American Psychological Association: The Division of History of Psychology* and the *Division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology.* He is editor of the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology.*

He is author or editor of more than 40 books, including *Wild Beasts & Idle Humours: The Insanity Defense from Antiquity to the Present* (Harvard 1996), *An Intellectual History of Psychology* (3rd edition, Wisconsin, 1995), *The Mind: An Oxford Reader* (Oxford, 1998) *and Aristotle's Psychology* (Columbia, 1989).

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obvious: that living systems are shot through with traces of intelligence. I scruple only at the conclusion that this observation functions as a satisfying explanation.

Mr. Lyons reminds us that scientific mysteries do get solved, and of course I agree. It would be foolish to insist otherwise. But I would draw a distinction between problems that are simply difficult or vexing and problems that are, currently, unfathomable.

An example may help. Turbulence is a difficult problem in Newtonian physics. None of the currently available solutions seems entirely free of difficulties. Nonetheless, the problem of turbulence, while insoluble in the plain sense that it lacks a solution, is hardly unfathomable. We are quite able to imagine what a solution would be like. We simply do not have one.

Unfathomable problems are different. They leave us baffled in almost every respect. We do not understand how a world comes into being, whether in ordinary life (as when we read), or in biology (as when a new organism comes into existence), or in cosmology (as when what is on view is the drama of creation itself). The facts are clear enough. It is the solutions that are baffling. We cannot imagine their ultimate shape. We haven't a clue.

In writing my essay, my aim was hardly to argue that scientific progress has now come to a halt but rather to show how, given the unfathomable nature of certain problems, the concept of information has come to enjoy essentially a magical role. This concept does no work; it offers little by way of intellectual relief.

Matthew Johnson asks whether I believe in the existence of cells. Sure. DNA, too. But as for "current theories about the behavior of cells and DNA," just which theories does Mr. Johnson have in mind, and where might they be found? Quantum electrodynamics—now, that's a theory. First- and second-order linear differential equations—a theory can be found there, too. But what theory is at work in molecular biology? The closest is quantum mechanics, which offers a very partial and incomplete explanation for the nature of the chemical bond. But what we really find in molecular biology is a brilliant and successful application of ordinary chemistry to living systems—an application, note, in which matters of fact predominate and theories are conspicuous by their absence.

What about Darwin's theory of evolution, which Mr. Johnson accuses me of dismissing as so much "rubbish"? Although I regard that contraption as the last of the great 19th-century mystery religions, the word "rubbish" would never pass my lips, if only because it is not generous enough to encompass the gorgeousness of the current Darwinian display, in which both rape and altruism are successfully explained as tactics of survival.

But something deeper is plainly at work in the disagreements between Mr. Johnson and me. The scientific community regards itself as a uniquely self-aware collective, one whose members are prepared, even eager, to subject their most cherished assumptions to a veritable firestorm of critical analysis. Yet the same community warms to the view that general criticisms made of various scientific disciplines, especially when they are severe, are not, in Mr. Johnson's words, "very helpful." Not helpful, as in not needed; not needed, as in not wanted. There is plainly a fissure here between two self-conceptions, the one open and confident, the other narrow and defensive. To put it another way: in science, as in politics, large and general principles are often upheld precisely to the extent that they are not believed in.

I would say to George Jochnowitz that no, I haven't changed my mind, but evidently I failed to make myself entirely clear. The sentences that Mr. Jochnowitz quotes from "The Deniable Darwin" make two points. The first is that religious doctrine has always assigned creation to some form of agency, and the second is that this and other such doctrines arise from very natural, unforced sentiments, or from "experience."

In the case of the biological world, these same sentiments have historically taken the form of arguments from design—arguments that move *from* the complexity of living systems *to* the intervention of some designer, an intelligence that is either supernatural, as in the Bible, or simply alien, as in Francis Crick's theory of directed panspermia. Darwinism breaks the grip of this ancient inferential impulse—which is why Richard Dawkins, in *The Blind Watchmaker*, says that Darwin's theory is profoundly liberating.

To which I would respond: it is profoundly liberating *if true*. I am as willing as the next man to be liberated; I am simply not persuaded that Darwin's theory is true. Or even plausible. I remain where, I suspect, most of us find ourselves. I regard Darwin's theories *and* various theories of design as inadequate; I have no replacement for either.

I would add only (to revert to the subject of my recent COMMENTARY essay) that the use of information in contemporary biology is simply another mirror to the biblical account, a matter of displacing the fog from a Designer onto a magical concept. This may well be the best that we can do, but that is a question for the future.

In answer to Alfred R. Matthews, I chose my rhetoric to evoke precisely the allusion Mr. Matthews cites, but I can no more place my confidence in John 1: 1-3 than in information. The words are suggestive; they are moving; and they have haunted the Western intellectual tradition. For all I know they may express the plain, literal truth. But for all I know, they may not.

Need I say that I am in complete agreement with Eric Julber? It is quite true that an appeal to the divine is no longer in fashion. The decline of religious faith is a complex and disturbing topic, but the facts are what they are: sophisticated men and women rejoice in their atheism, prepared to believe in nothing and simultaneously prepared to believe in anything. Those who concur with Richard Dawkins that Darwin has made atheism intellectually respectable have often demonstrated a degree of credulity that

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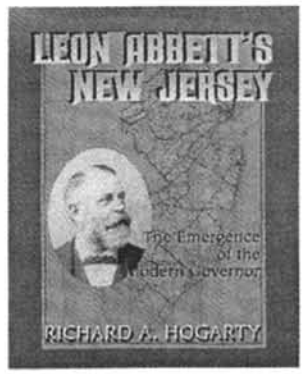

Following in the succession of his 25 predecessors, Leon Abbett twice served as governor of New Jersey in the late nineteenth century. A lifelong Democrat, he was a dynamic and visionary party leader who guided the citizens of New Jersey into a new urban industrial age. While he was a machine politician and party boss, he was also a notable reformer.

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The Command of Light: Rowland's School of Physics and the Spectrum

GEORGE KEAN SWEETNAM

Henry Augustus Rowland (1848-1901) was one of the most important figures in the founding of modern physics in the United States. A principal founder and first president of the American Physical Society, he is best known for his invention of the concave spectral grating for which he won a gold medal and grand prize at the 1890 Paris Exposition. A graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in civil engineering, Rowland was professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University, where he had the principal part in forming the first school of American physicists to be professionally trained in the United States.

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Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 238. 240 pp. Illus. $25. ISBN:0-87169-238-4

would embarrass a seminarian. How else might one explain currently fashionable doctrines of evolutionary psychology, a field so richly preposterous that, in reading its literature, only a man born with a petrified diaphragm, to quote H.L Mencken, could fail to laugh out loud?

I agree with much that Evelyn Fox Keller writes; indeed, I would go further. The information resident in DNA is clearly not sufficient to bring an organism into existence, if the DNA is considered as a molecule in isolation. But then again, the information in a cookbook is not sufficient to bring a soufflé into being, either. The words must be read and understood; but any attempt to *specify* that understanding quickly empties out in a virtually infinite regress.

We accept the regress in daily life because it reflects a familiar human world. But what of the cell? The information resident in DNA is not sufficient to account for the construction of an organism. It is not sufficient because information is *never* sufficient for such purposes; no language explains itself. As far as we now know, the informational macromolecules are the only entities within the cell capable of conveying information; but it would not help us to discover other sources of information, since that information would have to be interpreted as well. As so very often happens in the sciences, an entirely secondary concept—information—has been made to play a role that it cannot play.

Something is at work in biological systems that we have not yet properly defined, or even grasped. After all, if the current doctrines were even roughly correct, we should be able to write a recipe, place it on a table, and then observe with satisfaction how the recipe, quite by itself, makes a cake. We cannot do this, and we have no idea how it might be done.

It is true that the information in DNA is used in the context of a physical structure—the cell itself—and that DNA does not pass naked from one generation to another. But this only deepens the mystery: if the cell is needed to interpret its own DNA, whence the information needed for the interpretation? If no information is needed, why is the information in the DNA even relevant?

I suspect that when we come to understand biological systems, the entire conceptual superstructure to which we now appeal—information, organization, self-regulation, and the like—will disappear. We will see the cell entirely in terms of—but that is just what I do not know.

Refugees

TO THE EDITOR:

In his article "The Palestinians and the 'Right of Return'" [May], Efraim Karsh writes that "neither Arab propagandists nor Israeli 'new historians' have ever produced any evidence of a Zionist master plan to expel the Palestinians during the 1948 war. For such a plan never existed."

Perhaps Mr. Karsh can explain these comments, taken right from the horse's mouth—that is, from David Ben-Gurion:

- "We must expel Arabs and take their places." (Quoted in *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs* by Shabtai Teveth, Oxford University Press, 1985)
- "We walked outside, Ben-Gurion accompanying us. [Yigal] Allon repeated his question, 'What is to be done with the Palestinian population?' Ben-Gurion waved his hand in a gesture which said 'Drive them out!'" (Yitzhak Rabin, leaked uncensored version of his memoirs, *New York Times*, October 23, 1979)
- "We must do everything to ensure [the Palestinian refugees] never do return." (Ben-Gurion, in his diary, July 18, 1948, quoted in Michael Bar Zohar's *Ben-Gurion: the Armed Prophet*, Prentice Hall, 1967)

Considering that Mr. Karsh is well-known for accusing Israel's new historians of "fabricating history"—while side-stepping their lengthy quotations from damning official Israeli documents—it is no surprise he came up with this chestnut.

NIGEL PARRY
St. Paul, Minnesota

TO THE EDITOR:

Contrary to Efraim Karsh, there are a number of UN resolutions that specifically use the words "right of return." For example, Resolution 33/28, dated December 7, 1978, says in part:

> A just and lasting peace in the Middle East cannot be established without the achievement, inter alia, of a just solution of the problem of Palestine on the basis of the attainment of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the right of return and the right to national independence and sovereignty in Palestine.

Mr. Karsh makes many good points, but it is not fair to leave out simple, easily obtainable material like this.

The real arguments against the Palestinian definition of the right of return are that this right would require the satisfaction of one group of refugees by the creation of a new group of refugees and the destruction of the state of Israel. But this idea clearly contradicts the spirit and meaning of Resolution 194 and all subsequent United Nations affirmations, which are not about erasing the establishment of Israel but about creating peace through the satisfactory settlement of refugees.

In essence, the Palestinians do have a recognized "right of return"—that is, a right to settlement in a Palestinian state, compensation for land lost in 1948, and some settlement within Israel. These meet the essential goals of the UN, which are to turn refugees into permanent citizens and help create regional peace. But the Palestinians have perverted this humane concept into little more than a cry for vengeance to undo the results of the 1948 war. No UN resolution intends this.

JONATHAN KURTZMAN
Brookline, Massachusetts

TO THE EDITOR:

Efraim Karsh's superb article is a welcome response to the Arab campaign for a

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Palestinian "right of return." The notion that millions of Palestinians should be permitted to pour into Israel is so preposterous that many well-meaning people seem to find it hard to take it seriously. Meanwhile, however, it has been gaining sympathy around the world, as exemplified by recent statements from organizations like the World Alliance of YMCA's, the National Council of Churches of Christ, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the American Green party.

In March, a survey sponsored by several national Jewish organizations found that while Americans view Israel much more favorably than they do the Palestinian Authority, attitudes about the right of return were less encouraging. Asked if Palestinian refugees should have "the right to return to their villages in Israel, [which could] mean the end of the Jewish state," 33 percent of the public agreed and 22 percent said they did not know. Only 45 percent took the position that refugees should move to a "Palestinian state that will be created in the West Bank and Gaza." Supporters of Israel need to take seriously the fact that a majority of respondents failed to reject out of hand a plan that could spell the destruction of the Jewish state.

Of course, Israel is not interested in committing national suicide. Still, allowing the Jewish state to be portrayed as rejecting the rights of a suffering people has hurt its position in the international community. The fact is that the responsibility for the plight of the Arab refugees has always lain with Arab leaders, as Mr. Karsh's article plainly demonstrates. That message should be broadcast widely and often.

LEONARD A. COLE
Chairman
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
New York City

EFRAIM KARSH writes:

One of the more confounding aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict is its total impermeability to the fundamental rule of cause-and-effect. Ever reluctant to take responsibility for their own actions, Arab regimes and societies have consistently cast themselves in the role of hapless victims, putting the blame for their own numerous failures on third parties, whether the West or non-Arab actors like Turks and Jews.

With the passage of time and the fading of first-hand collective memory, the line between fact and fiction has become increasingly blurred, even in the minds of those who once knew better. The sustained effort by Palestinian (and Arab) leaders, from Hajj Amin al-Husseini to Yasir Arafat, to abort the Jewish national revival and to expel the largest possible number of Jews from their ancestral homeland has been largely eclipsed. Instead, *Israel* has been charged with harboring a longstanding grand design to dispossess the Palestinian Arabs from *their* land. It matters little that neither Arab propagandists nor their Israeli and Western sympathizers have ever produced any evidence of such a design. Through a tendentious use of documentary evidence, including carefully culled misquotations from Zionist leaders, a picture has been painted that grotesquely falsifies Jewish aspirations and policies.

Nigel Parry seems to have been sufficiently convinced by this propaganda to repeat some of its standard claims. But the handful of second-hand citations he provides only serve to negate those claims. Consider his first "comment" by David Ben-Gurion: "we must expel Arabs and take their place." In fact, Ben-Gurion's original letter, which can be found in the Israeli archives, says precisely the opposite: "We do not wish and do not need to expel Arabs and take their place." Moreover, the full paragraph in Shabtai Teveth's book, from which Mr. Parry chooses to quote a single truncated sentence, clearly states that Ben-Gurion "did not wish to do so [i.e., expel the Palestinians], for 'all our aspiration is built on the assumption—proven throughout all our activity—that there is enough room for ourselves and the Arabs in Palestine.'"

In this particular distortion of Ben-Gurion's (and Teveth's) words, Mr. Parry takes his cue from the Israeli "new historian" Benny Morris. In his Hebrew-language writings, Morris has cited Ben-Gurion correctly. But in the English-language version of his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1987), Morris himself presents Ben-Gurion as saying the opposite. Could it be because he knew his audience would not be able to check for itself the wording of the original Hebrew letter?

Nor does Yitzhak Rabin's recollection of the battle for Lydda (Lod) in July 1948 indicate any master plan for mass expulsion. As I noted in my article, the expulsion of the town's residents occurred not in the framework of a premeditated plan but rather in the heat of battle—as a result of a string of unexpected developments on the ground. The action, as I wrote, was "in no way foreseen in military plans for the capture of the town." Nor was it discussed during the pre-operation briefings. Nor did the initial occupation of the town suggest any intent to expel Arab inhabitants. It was only when their forces encountered stiffer resistance than expected that the local Israeli commanders decided to "encourage" the population's departure to Arab-controlled areas a few miles to the east. The purpose was twofold: to avoid leaving a hostile armed base at the rear of the advancing Israeli Defense Forces and, by clogging the main roads, to forestall a possible counterattack by Transjordan's highly effective Arab Legion.

Even on the assumption that Ben-Gurion did meaningfully wave his hand as he was taking his leave from a meeting with local commanders, as Rabin recalled some 30 years later, his alleged gesture could have signified many things other than an intention to "drive them out." This can be inferred not only from the admission of Rabin's commander, Yigal Allon, that he himself had already given orders "to help the Lydda inhabitants leave" prior to Ben-Gurion's arrival, but also from the entry in Ben-Gurion's war diary to which Mr. Parry refers. Contrary to Mr. Parry's claim, there is no trace in this entry, made less than a week after the battle for Lydda, of any assertion

to the effect that "we must do everything to ensure [the Palestinian refugees] never do return." What the entry does contain are the following lines on the occupation of Nazareth, which suggest something entirely different:

> Yesterday Moshe Carmel gave an order to uproot the Nazareth population. The commander of the brigade hesitated. Upon receiving a query on the matter I immediately cabled that the population should not be removed.

So much for Ben-Gurion's grand dispossessionary designs.

Jonathan Kurtzman raises the issue of the legal basis of the Palestinian "right of return." I did not contend that this "right" has never been mentioned in UN resolutions. Rather, I argued that it has no basis whatsoever in General Assembly Resolution 194, or indeed in international law, and that the increasing invocation of this "right" since the late 1960's reflects a spurious reading of the letter and spirit of Resolution 194 by the Arabs and their Soviet and third-world allies.

Mr. Kurtzman's suggestion that the refugees should be free to return to a newly established Palestinian state is sensible enough; not so, his proposal of compensation and partial repatriation to Israel. Arab propaganda has succeeded in transforming failed aggressors into hapless victims. The truth is that in 1948 the Palestinians and the Arabs attempted to "cleanse" a neighboring ethnic community. Their failure to achieve this goal does not make them any more deserving of compensation than were the millions of Germans who became refugees as a result of the Nazi war of aggression.

In any case, Mr. Kurtzman's formula is totally unacceptable to Palestinian and Arab leaders. They have not perpetuated the refugee problem for so long only to accept something they could have received decades ago. They have done so with a view to weakening, and eventually destroying, the Jewish state. As Israelis have learned to their horror following the collapse of the Barak government's peace efforts, the Arabs are not, in the foreseeable future, going to relinquish their most efficient anti-Israel weapon.

And why should they? As is aptly noted by Leonard A. Cole, support for the "right of return" in the West far exceeds support for the Palestinian cause as a whole. Substantial audiences that are not instinctively hostile to Israel, or that may even sympathize with its cause, have been convinced by decades of sustained Arab propaganda that the refugee problem is essentially a humanitarian issue rather than an instrument of warfare whose purpose is the destruction of the Jewish state. It is this purpose that must be exposed, understood, and resisted.

Bitter Medicine

TO THE EDITOR:

As a primary-care physician of 30 years who has recently retired, I read with some interest Ronald W. Dworkin's insightful article, "Why Doctors Are Down" [May]. I am puzzled, though, as to why he exonerates the government of playing a role in creating the situation he describes.

Until 1965, the doctor-patient relationship was a consensual contract, with services agreed upon by both parties and paid for by the patient. With the advent of Medicare, all this changed. The patient no longer based decisions for care on dollars taken from his pocket, and the physician discovered that the income he received for the patient's visit came with a growing list of restrictions on his freedom as a practitioner.

Medicare now requires an entire government agency for its administration. Its complicated regulations and mandates often compel doctors to take on additional staff, sharply increasing the overhead expenses of small medical practices. I am thus at a loss to understand Dr. Dworkin's claim that the government has somehow "guaranteed doctors their autonomy."

A ray of hope for the future is the burgeoning interest in medical savings accounts, which would, among other things, place the responsibility for the expenditure of healthcare dollars back in the hands of those receiving the services.

GARY D. GILLESPIE, M.D.
Williamston, Michigan

TO THE EDITOR:

Adding to the picture described by Ronald W. Dworkin, I would suggest that another reason doctors are "down" is that they must walk on eggshells: any adverse medical outcome can lead to litigation, and anything less than perfection is punishable. Knowing that their decisions may be investigated, they protect themselves through over-treatment and a maelstrom of referrals.

Dealing with the medical bureaucracy has also become a nightmare. Errors in billing and violations of the new "privacy" laws have left many practitioners open to prosecution, with the possibility of severe fines and even imprisonment.

Surveys indicate that approximately one half of active physicians would like to leave clinical practice in the next five years. There is no mystery in this.

CLIVE SINOFF, M.D.
Beachwood, Ohio

TO THE EDITOR:

Ronald W. Dworkin omits one important factor in the depersonalization of doctor-patient relations over the last few decades: the growth in malpractice lawsuits filed by disappointed patients. The commensurate rise in the cost of insurance has driven many doctors into group practices and managed-care facilities, which pay the higher premiums but also set rules governing treatment. In these settings, doctors are pressured by insurance lawyers to say as little as possible to patients during treatment, thus adding to the feeling that the field has become, in Dr. Dworkin's apt phrase, an exercise in "body engineering."

FREDERIC WILE
New York City

TO THE EDITOR:

I have been practicing medicine for 50 years now, and the complaints described so incisively by Ronald W. Dworkin are similar to those I have heard.

One subtle factor that has further undermined the position of physicians is the amount of medical infor-

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mation that is now available to the general public. Patients come to my office daily with materials ranging from a brief news article to an exhaustive Internet printout, and then offer me advice on diagnosis and treatment. They confuse information with knowledge.

JONAS BRACHFELD, M.D.
Moorestown, New Jersey

RONALD W. DWORKIN writes:

Unlike Gary D. Gillespie, I do not believe that government, in the form of Medicare, represents as great a threat to physician autonomy as managed care. Medicare may be a heavily discounted fee-for-service program, but it keeps some distance from medicine itself, allowing doctors to practice as independent professionals though at much lower rates of reimbursement. Managed care, on the other hand, insinuates itself into the heart of the medical profession, and threatens physician autonomy by getting doctors to think of themselves as "organization men" who work for higher-ups. It is managed care, not government, that employs medical directors to micromanage doctors' decisions, that lumps doctors, nurses, and technicians under the general category of "provider," that promotes flex time and shift work, and that accustoms doctors to the idea of advertising. Government only threatens doctors' incomes; managed care forces them to change their very mindset.

Clive Sinoff and Frederic Wile are correct to note how troublesome the practice of defensive medicine is for doctors. But I do not believe that the cost of malpractice insurance was an important factor in the rise of managed care. As it happens, malpractice premiums stabilized during the early 1990's (in my own specialty of anesthesiology, they even began to drop). Doctors were compelled to join managed care not in order to get their insurance premiums paid but because managed care had the patients. As business turned to managed care to control rising costs, doctors had to join to stay in practice.

Like Jonas Brachfeld, I, too, have dealt with patients armed with just enough medical information to be dangerous to themselves. If being the sole interpreters of a complex art once enabled doctors to perpetuate the mystique surrounding the medical profession, the democratization of information has assuredly contributed to a decline in this mystique, and hence in the professional ideal itself. That ideal now finds itself under the twin threat of capitalism (in the form of managed care) and democracy—another reminder of the historical origins of the medical profession in premodern ideas of service.

Affirmative Action

TO THE EDITOR:

Jason L. Riley's good article, "The 'Diversity' Defense" [April], is incorrect in stating that in the *Bakke* case (1978) four Justices of the Supreme Court ruled that the race-preference program at the medical school of the University of California at Davis was unconstitutional. What they ruled was that the program clearly violated Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits racial discrimination by institutions, like the medical school, that receive federal funds. There was therefore no need or occasion to reach the question of whether the program was also unconstitutional.

This is important because although the constitutional question might be considered debatable, the 1964 Civil Rights Act's prohibition of racial discrimination could not be more plain. The refusal of Lewis Powell and the other four Justices to abide by the statute was an act of judicial bad faith inconsistent with the requirement of "good

behavior" that is a condition of tenure on the Court—a clear example of the belief that a good enough end justifies any means.

Further, Powell's opinion was much worse than "indecisive," to use Mr. Riley's term. It was self-contradictory, a foolish attempt by a "moderate" to wish the problem away by answering it both ways. Powell insisted, on the one hand, that the plaintiff, Alan Bakke, had the right to be considered for admission to the school "without regard to his race," and, on the other hand, that it was permissible for the school to give preference to non-whites. This sort of reasoning has been typical not only of Powell but of the other good lawyers on the Supreme Court who decide the most basic issues of social policy for the nation as a whole.

LINO A. GRAGLIA
University of Texas School of Law
Austin, Texas

TO THE EDITOR:

In his excellent article, Jason L. Riley may be too generous toward his targets. The "diversity" cult insists that racial diversity implies diversity of ideas and opinions, and so benefits all students on campus. But if this is the purported justification, why not demand that at least 20 percent of the members of every academic department at every university be neither leftists nor liberals, or that conservatives be represented on the faculty in numbers similar to their proportion in the population at large? In fact, many of those demanding quotas to establish diversity sit in ideologically monolithic university departments.

Where is the evidence that race is associated with original ideas about chemistry or accounting or medicine? And besides, why is every diversity program designed to grant preferences to blacks and Hispanics? Why not demand greater numbers of students or faculty members who are Armenians, Hungarians, Finns, or Basques?

STEVEN PLAUT
Haifa, Israel

TO THE EDITOR:

Jason L. Riley notes that blacks and whites often do not take the same classes at our universities, a fact that should engender doubts about how much actual diversity there is in the classrooms of mixed-race schools. I have observed that the two races generally eat, socialize, and sleep apart as well. This is at the insistence of the black students, whose presence somehow is supposed to bring new perspective to the whites they shun.

RICHARD H. SHULMAN
New York City

TO THE EDITOR:

Heartiest congratulations on "The 'Diversity' Defense." One can only hope that the judges on the appeals court read this piece before issuing an opinion.

JAY BERGMAN
Central Connecticut State University
New Britain, Connecticut

JASON L. RILEY writes:

Lino A. Graglia is correct, of course, about the grounds on which four Supreme Court justices in *Bakke* rejected the admissions policy of the University of California's medical school. As Mr. Graglia notes, the program so plainly violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act that there was no need to address its constitutionality. Still, one wishes they had done so. As Steven Plaut's amusing reductio ad absurdum illustrates, it is past time for the Court to clarify the matter.

Richard H. Shulman's observation that "the two races generally eat, socialize, and sleep apart . . . at the insistence of black stu-

dents" is too glib. To begin with, such self-segregating group behavior is hardly unusual, or limited to blacks, as a visit to the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, where 40,000 Russian immigrants congregate, will readily confirm.

But Mr. Shulman's history also fails him. From slavery's demise to Reconstruction to Jim Crow, it was whites who insisted on separation, and black compliance was the only option. Nor was there anything "general" about it: under the umbrella of the Supreme Court's *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* decision, the highly specific precepts of segregation called for separate schools, separate bathrooms, separate restaurants and water fountains and swimming pools, and so on.

True, these restrictions were officially repealed in the 1950's and 60's, and the Supreme Court finally struck down miscegenation laws in 1967. But at least in some quarters of our society, old attitudes linger. Just this past July, a *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University national poll reported that 46 percent of white Americans believe people should marry within their race, while only 21 percent of blacks share this view. When whites were asked, "How would you feel if someone in your family married a black?," 55 percent said they would approve. When blacks were asked the same question with regard to whites, 86 percent said they would approve. Such figures do not suggest that it is blacks who are resisting integration.

Certainly, black separatism exists, and is as deserving or undeserving of fair comment as its counterpart among other races and ethnic groups, past and present. And yes, given a choice, many black students do choose to "eat, socialize, and sleep" with other blacks. But frankly, unless their college has a policy to the contrary, that is their business.

Catholics and Jews

TO THE EDITOR:

I leave historical refutations to the professional historians, but I question COMMENTARY's providing a forum for the sweeping attack on Catholicism mounted by Robert S. Wistrich in his review of James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* [Books in Review, April]. I refer to Mr. Wistrich's provocative, over-the-top rhetoric, like his observation about "the primary role played by the Catholic clergy in fin-de-siècle French anti-Semitism and the Dreyfus affair—a kind of dress-rehearsal for fascism and Nazism." And then there is his assertion that "Nazi anti-Semitism could never have aroused the response it did had it not been planted in groundwater poisoned by Christian theology."

Poisoned groundwater? Will Mr. Wistrich next be telling us that Christianity is—to borrow a phrase from Louis Farrakhan—a "gutter religion"? It is dismaying to find such simplistic Catholic-bashing in COMMENTARY, which is ever-vigilant in rejecting outrageous attempts to demonize Jews.

In the course of his review, Mr. Wistrich does manage to reveal the true purpose of Carroll's diatribe by noting that "satisfying some of [Carroll's] theological demands would involve not a reformation of the Church but its virtual dissolution." Indeed, as other reviewers have suggested, Carroll's aim is to justify the efforts of "progressive" Catholics like himself to control the future of the Church. In this fight, the biggest stick available against traditional Catholics is the Church's position toward the Jews, especially during the Holocaust.

Mr. Wistrich has the professionalism to note that Carroll has no credentials as a historian, is "dismissive of clashing or more cautious interpretations," and is guilty of "some serious omissions and flaws." But he understates the matter. Carroll's approach is that of a trial lawyer, setting forth all the evidence that is favorable to his case and, when compelled to acknowledge unfavorable evidence, presenting it in the most critical light.

Why, then, would Mr. Wistrich declare, as if with booksellers' blurbs in mind, that *Constantine's Sword* "adds an important dimension to the debate," "achieves often moving effects," and "is marked by a basic integrity and honesty"? Perhaps because he, too, is acting like a trial lawyer.

THOMAS M. COMERFORD
Dallas, Texas

TO THE EDITOR:

I was dismayed by Robert S. Wistrich's review of *Constantine's Sword*. In the penultimate paragraph, he admits that "satisfying some of [James Carroll's] theological demands would involve not a reformation of the Church but its virtual dissolution." Indeed, even a superficial reading of recent attacks by some Catholics on the Church, particularly the popes of the 20th century, makes clear that their underlying agenda is precisely this dissolution.

In my opinion, nothing could do more damage to Jewish-Catholic relations than for our Jewish partners to take part in the culture war now raging within Roman Catholicism. My own involvement in such ecumenical discussions, both intra-Christian and with Jews, has made evident to me that they can take place under two different rubrics.

There is, in the first place, what I call the ecumenism of accommodation, whose (often implicit) presupposition is that each side speaks for a tradition that it wants to move *away from*, toward a more enlightened, *bien-pensant* view. The second is what I call the ecumenism of conviction, which frankly admits that ideas about religious truth are precisely what is *not* up for grabs.

Robert Wistrich's praise of *Constantine's Sword* has given us a new category in this taxonomy. If I read him correctly, he seems to be recommending an ecumenism of capitulation.

EDWARD T. OAKES, S.J.
Denver, Colorado

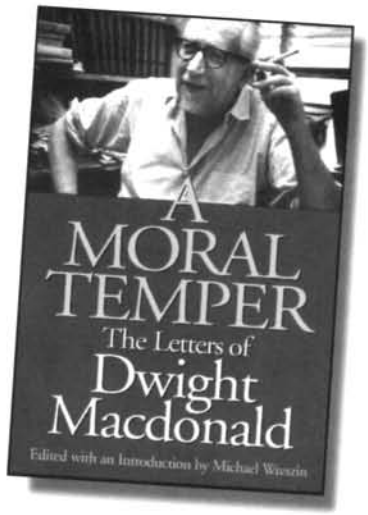
ROBERT WISTRICH writes:

Many historians, long before James Carroll, have pointed to the virulence of the Catholic anti-Semitic campaign in fin-de-siècle France (and elsewhere), with its plethora of conspiracy theories that were later picked up by the Nazis in Germany. Far from this being "provocative, over-the-top rhetoric" on my part, it has been firmly established in historical schol-

MICHAEL WRESZIN, EDITOR

A Moral Temper

The Letters of Dwight Macdonald



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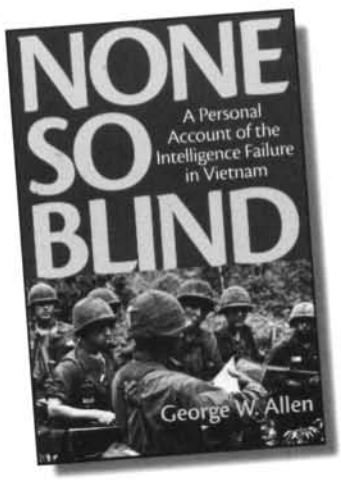

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DAVID REYNOLDS

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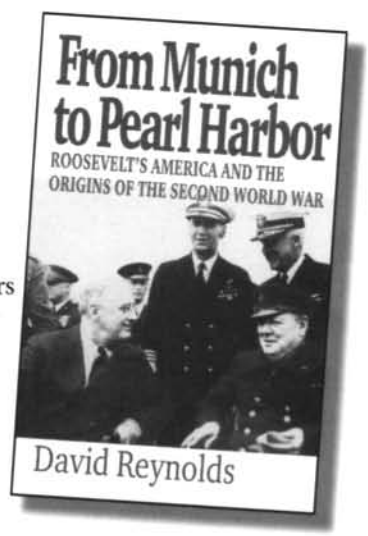

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arship of which Thomas M. Comerford is evidently all too ignorant.

Similarly well-founded is Carroll's proposition that Nazi anti-Semitism was "planted in groundwater poisoned by Christian theology"—a metaphor I borrowed from him. Many prominent Catholic scholars, including Friedrich Heer and Father Edward Flannery, have provided chapter and verse for this and related assertions. To dismiss all this as mere "Catholic-bashing" is not only crude but foolish.

Edward T. Oakes charges me with advocating "an ecumenism of capitulation" and reproves me for intruding on internal Catholic culture wars. None of this is applicable. In my review I could hardly avoid referring to a central thrust of *Constantine's Sword*—namely, the call for a radical reformation of the Roman Catholic Church and its Christological understandings, especially with regard to the Jews. While I think the latter objective is necessary and desirable, what Catholics in general choose to believe is a matter on which I expressed no position, it being entirely their affair. Without accepting every one of Carroll's specific contentions, I praised his honesty in facing painful truths about the Church's relations with the Jews. Surely anyone genuinely concerned with Jewish-Christian dialogue should welcome serious moral reckoning of this kind on either side, rather than seeing it as a cause for dismay or as a sinister plot by "progressives" to seize control of the Catholic Church.

Corrections

In Joseph Epstein's article, "The Critics' Club" (July-August), George Santayana's *The Last Puritan* was mistakenly referred to as *The Last Pilgrim*. In a book review on page 63 of the same issue, the date of the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg was misstated as 1952; the year was 1953. We regret these errors.—ED.

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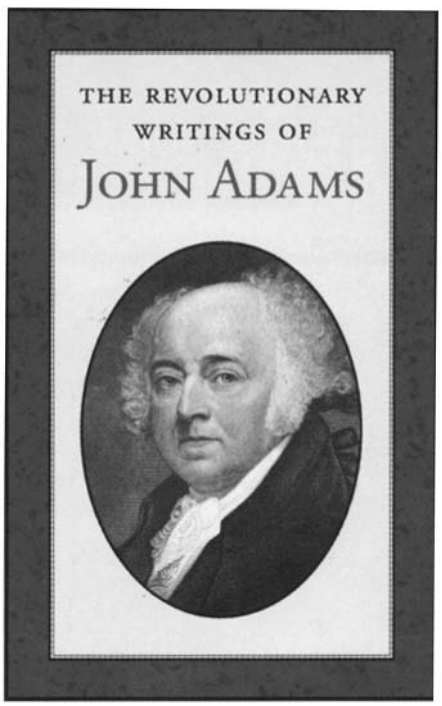

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C. Bradley Thompson is an Associate Professor of History and Political Science at Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio, and the author of *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty.*

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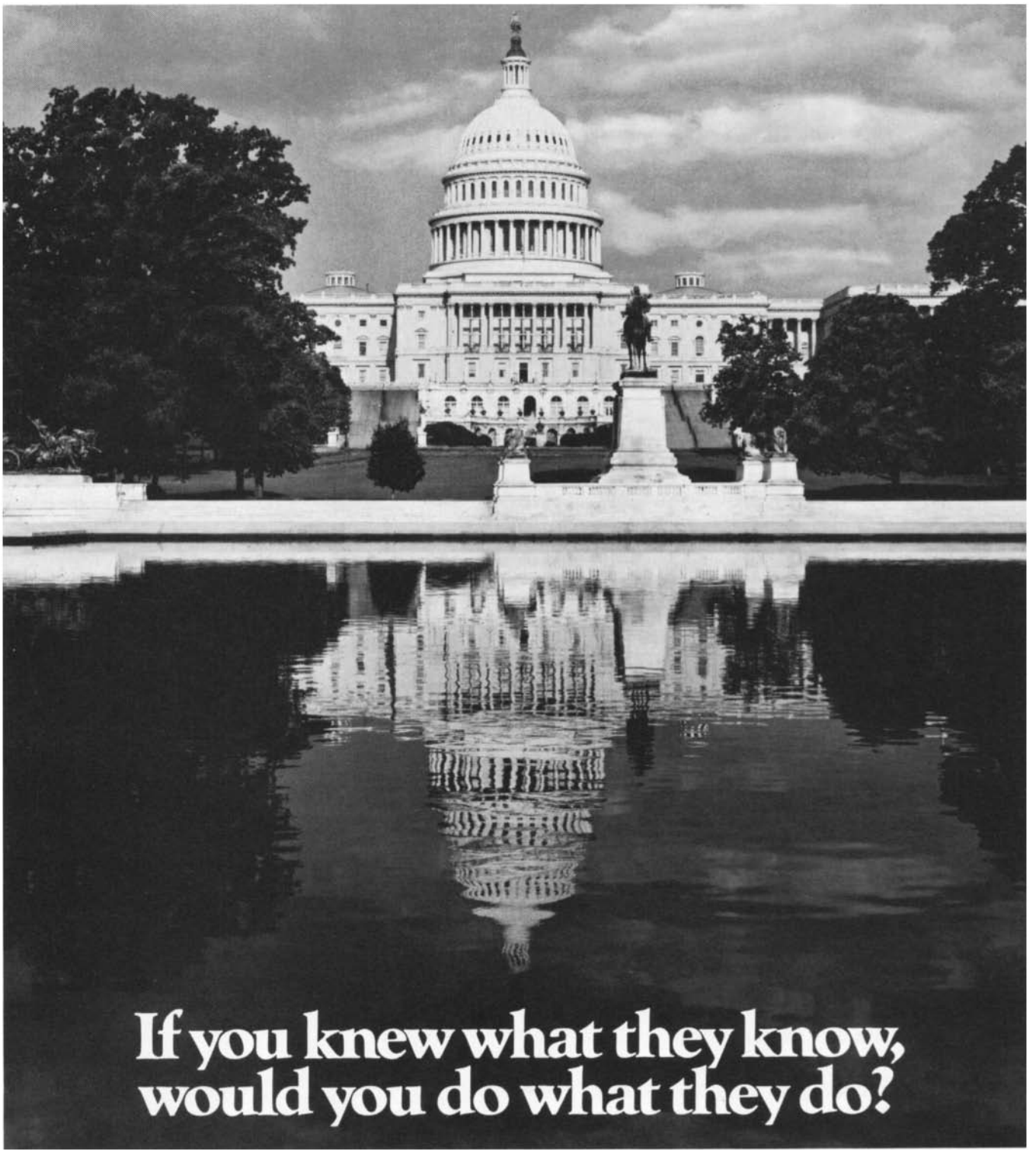

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