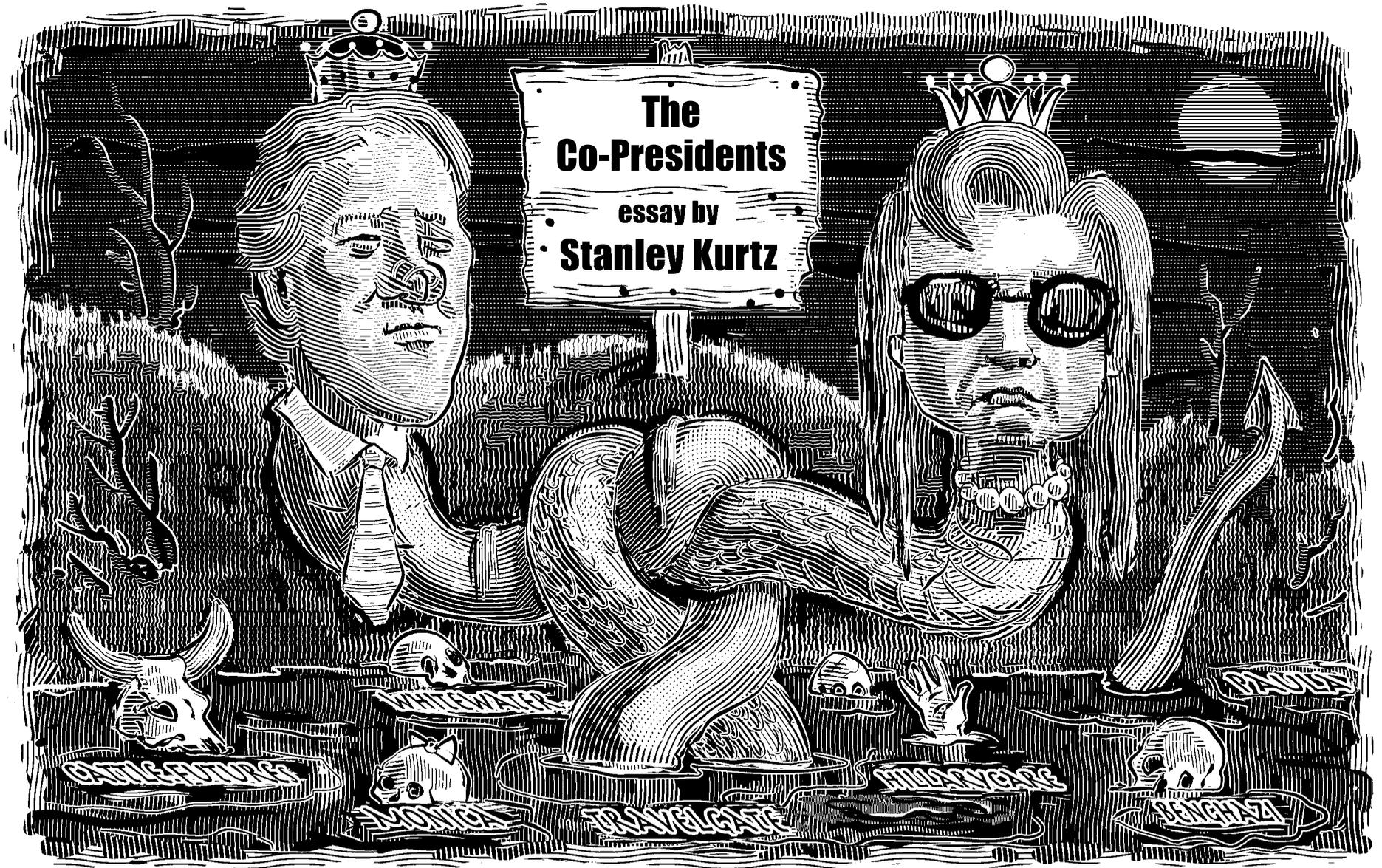


VOLUME XIV, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2014

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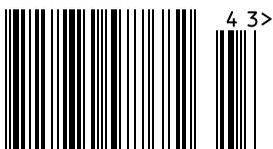
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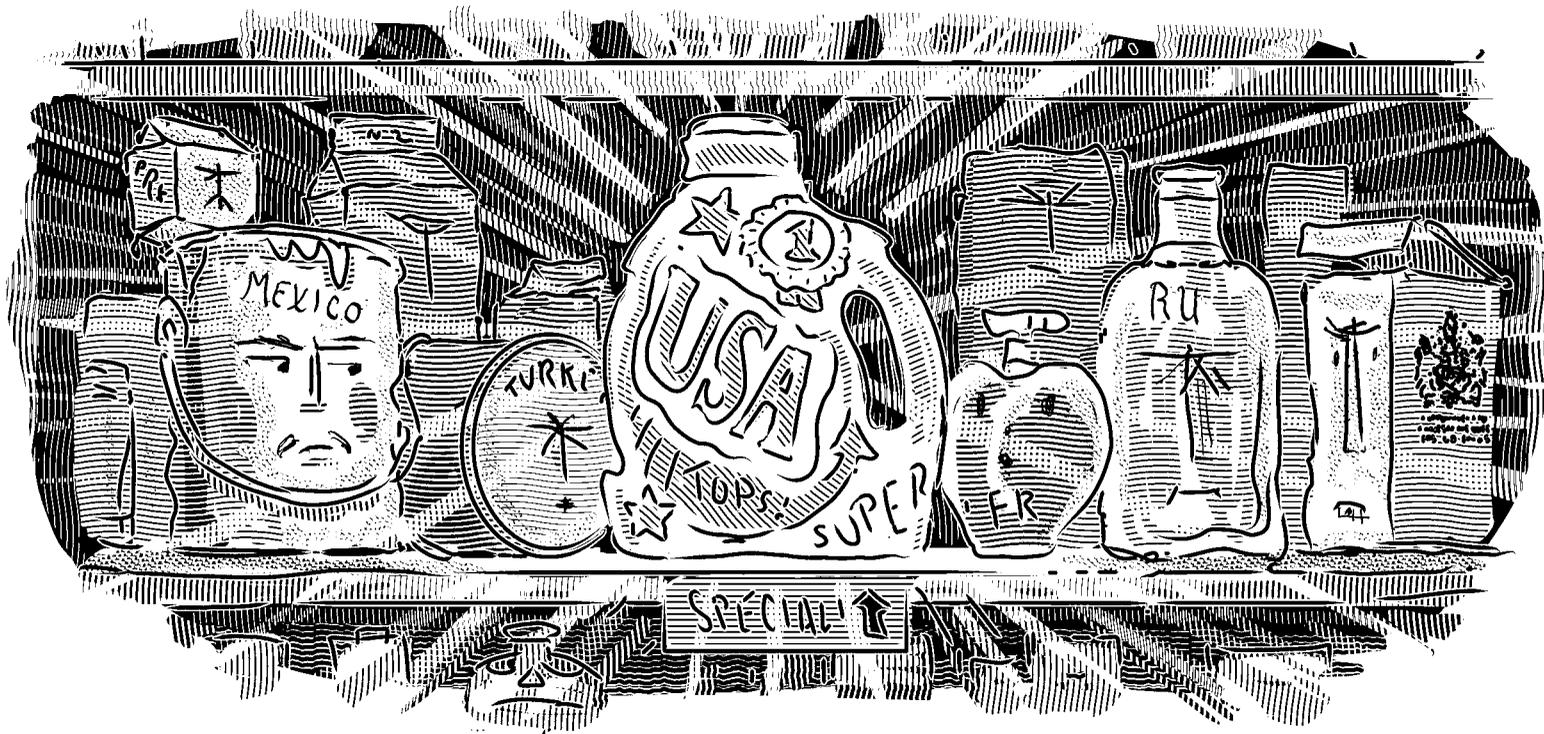
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PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$7.95

SELLING AMERICA SHORT, AND NASTY

Through A Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad, by Martha Bayles.
Yale University Press, 336 pages, \$30



THERE ARE MANY VARIATIONS ON this story: an American diplomat/academic/journalist listens patiently to his counterpart from Europe or the Middle East roundly denouncing the United States for every imaginable sin, foreign and domestic. When the recitation is over, he asks mildly: "Have you got your green card yet?"

"Bastard!" the man replies.

In many cases, as almost certainly in that case, the explanation is simple hypocrisy. Getting a green card is an excellent career move, and so is spouting anti-American invective. Why not do both? For most foreigners, however, an admiration for the liberties guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution is combined quite sincerely with a strong distaste for American culture and for what the foreigner believes to be the patterns and practices of everyday American life. That seeming contradiction—and how it came about and what to do about it—is the subject of Martha Bayles's *Through A Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad*.

As Bayles establishes at once, this contradiction is a problem, indeed a massive one, but not a mystery. Very few foreigners reject the political mores embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Those

who do are generally either authoritarian rulers and their servants, or believers in doctrines (radical Islamism, Marxism) incompatible with political freedom. These latter groups have some influence on their fellow countrymen when they trace the violence, sexual libertinism, drug-taking, and self-indulgent consumerism of American life to the nation's founding ideas of freedom and political equality. Arab governments allied to the U.S. famously encourage anti-Americanism in political debate to distract attention from their own failings. In the main, however, *ideological* anti-Americanism is an elite obsession.

Most adults (especially most parents) in countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe dislike and disapprove of America because of the vices and disorders of its citizens as depicted in exports of American popular culture—violent Hollywood action movies, Jerry Springer-type celebrations of moral disorder via satellite, sexually-exploitative rap music videos, etc., etc. Most adult Americans dislike and disapprove of these things, too. But Americans live in America and they know that, despite real social problems such as family breakdown and its consequences, the great majority of their countrymen live in a society characterized by stable families, widespread religious obser-

vance, a strong work ethic, social tolerance, an explosion of voluntarism, safe cities, neighborly small towns, and rapidly declining crime.

NOT EVERYTHING IN THIS REALITY IS perfect or comforting. But the real America is plainly better than the one refracted through U.S. pop-cult exports which is too often a blend of underclass crime and upper-class decadence with the rough-hewn middle-class decency in between largely omitted. Foreigners can't know that, because they encounter only the export version of America—or what Bayles calls the distorting "fun-house mirror" America. When they meet ordinary Americans either in the U.S. or in their own countries, they are struck by how different these pleasant and helpful people are from the amoral egotists in movies—and how much more like themselves and their own families (*mutatis mutandis*, of course). When former White House speechwriter Peggy Noonan asked an Iraqi military officer what he had learned about Americans from working with them, he replied: "You are a better people than your movies say."

Of course, the full picture is more complex than a simple stark contrast between a vicious fictional America and a virtuous real one.

American popular culture is technically and artistically superb overall. It is also full of brilliantly imaginative depictions of kindness, decency, altruism, self-sacrifice, and repentance—consider the 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day* in which a misanthropic Bill Murray relives the titular day over and over until he’s learned his lesson. Its darker treatments of social evil are usually exaggerations for dramatic purposes rather than outright libels. Some movies and sitcoms, designed to challenge social prejudices for the sake of greater tolerance, inevitably outrage people in countries where such prejudices are entrenched. And deep-dyed villains such as J.R. Ewing in the ’80s primetime soap *Dallas* and many imitators since him are, well, cartoon villains not to be taken seriously, certainly not to be seen as accurate portraits of corporate misbehavior. Americans can put most of these threats in a context that defangs them. J.R. comes from a long, entertaining tradition of uncomplicated wickedness going back to the Victorian stage, and such villains always come to a sticky end so that crime will not pay. But more remote audiences may mistake them for real life. And then there remains Jerry Springer, MTV, “reality” television, et al.

THese are deep shallows, and treacherous ones. Fortunately, Martha Bayles is a sure-footed, sensible, and knowledgeable guide to them. A lecturer in the Arts and Sciences Honors Program at Boston College, and author of the “Shadow Play” feature in these pages, she is a cultural critic of depth and subtlety. Her earlier book, *Hole in Our Soul* (1994), explored the way in which American popular music, once a wonderful vehicle for the heart’s longings, had cast aside tenderness and wit to become a crude expression of aggression and lust. She knows therefore that the worst is often a corruption of the best. And as she documents here, America’s broader popular culture with all its technical virtuosity has been gradually corrupted by the counter-culturalism of the 1960s, which rejected all the rules—from sexual modesty to simple grammar—that used to shape culture high and low.

For the moment, that popular culture is the most powerful influence on the world’s view of America. That is not wholly accidental. After the Cold War the U.S. government largely sub-contracted cultural diplomacy to Hollywood and the music industry, which were enjoying some unusual political prestige because rock ‘n’ roll had apparently helped to bring down Communism. Hollywood accepted this diplomatic role, but it is of two minds about it. It is flattered by the implied tribute to its cultural influence but reluctant to show

America in a favorable light. Not for nothing did a distinguished Turkish film critic slyly describe *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (a Turkish thriller showing U.S. troops harvesting the organs of Turkish soldiers for transport to Tel Aviv) as “the most anti-American movie ever made outside the United States.”

Good and bad, however, this popular culture is not the *only* way in which America shapes its image abroad. Other influences—all available still, some growing more influential—include old-fashioned cultural diplomacy conducted by government; U.S. international broadcasting through Voice of America (VOA) and such surrogate broadcasters as the Russian-language Radio Liberty; cultural exchanges involving concert orchestras, museums, art exhibitions, and visits by literary celebrities; the rise of the overseas campus and the increase in American students spending a year studying abroad; the spread of aid agencies and NGOs which employ secular American experts in poorer countries; and the revival of American religious missions offering social and medical help with the Gospel thrown in as an optional extra. In the course of tracing America’s cultural footprint, Bayles has spoken to everyone from jihadist leaders in Indonesia to Christian missionaries in Africa and examined every aspect of American cultural influence from Britney Spears to “Gospel tourism.” The result is a fascinating cultural travelogue—richly detailed, fairly argued, and highly readable.

BAYLES ACKNOWLEDGES THE SPECIFIC good things done by many of the people and institutions she has studied. But she is not starry-eyed about them, and she can be quite sharp in pointing out the unintended consequences and mild hypocrisies of their work. The overseas campus, for instance, is often a device for authoritarian regimes to ensure that their young people get a first-class American technical education without being exposed to the subversive liberal ideas of an actual American campus. The colleges and academics get very high rewards in return for avoiding certain lines of research. As for the beneficial cultural effects of study abroad on young Americans, these will be slight if they spend all their time with each other, partying, binge drinking and, not coincidentally, reinforcing the negative message about America that the locals have already picked up from television and the internet. None of this need be so, but it often is the case.

An important chapter of *Through a Screen Darkly* is devoted to the neglected topic of U.S. international broadcasting—VOA, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), etc. Bayles argues persuasively for greater

resources for U.S. international broadcasting when Russia, China, Iran, and others are ramping up their own propaganda output, in much more sophisticated disguise, moreover, than during the Cold War. The Ukraine crisis has since strongly reinforced her argument. She also takes the side of those who want U.S.-funded radio stations such as Radio Liberty to concentrate on news and current affairs programming aimed at elites rather than mixing pop music with hourly news bulletins to attract larger and younger audiences. There is no particular reason for the U.S. taxpayer to fund a stream of pop music; it’s not in short supply. And an Israeli commercial radio station has been providing the same mix of pop and hourly bulletins for decades without noticeably changing the political attitudes of young Arab people. She is finally right in demanding that USIB’s (U.S. International Broadcasting’s) news and current affairs programming observe the high standards of accuracy and impartiality that have been developed within American journalism. This aim inevitably requires a struggle when reporters and editors are recruited from more than 20 countries with very different journalistic traditions; in my time at RFE/RL it was a constant preoccupation at all levels of the radios—never fully achieved but tantalizingly ever closer.

BAYLES IS PERHAPS TOO PURIST IN REJECTING satire as a legitimate device in current affairs programming. Admittedly, satire must be sharply distinguished from news itself. Like anti-Communist jokes in the Cold War, however, satire is a subversive way of telling the truth and negating propaganda. It undermines authoritarian regimes by making them funny. Some of the RFE/RL language services, coached and encouraged by visiting satirist John Bloom (a.k.a., Joe-Bob Briggs), have used it to great effect. Truth is the best propaganda, but mockery comes a close second.

Maybe the most needlessly distressing trend observed by Bayles is the decay of formal cultural diplomacy and, in particular, the apparent lack of interest among young U.S. diplomats in promoting elite (i.e., classical) culture—concerts, exhibitions, lectures, etc. This is sad because it means that people in the countries to which they are posted will have less access to music, painting, and novels that are beautiful in themselves, that convey the spirit and grandeur of the United States, and that refute the common European notion that “American culture” is an oxymoron. But the reason for this reluctance, intuited by Bayles, is sadder still: it is that this kind of cultural exchange “is now deemed ineffective and politically incorrect.”



If her intuition is right, then U.S. cultural diplomats are almost comically wrong. One of the most important cultural trends of the last few decades is the enormous and growing popularity of Western classical music in the non-Western world, including China. This is reflected in the names and nationalities of many young soloists. But a personal experience may make the point more sharply. When I visited Hanoi eight years ago, I attended a symphony concert at which a local composer played his own piano concerto. The concert's second half was devoted to a series of Viennese waltzes by Strauss and Lehar. Except for a handful of tourists, the audience in the packed hall was composed entirely of young Vietnamese. They greeted all of the items, but especially the waltzes, with passionate enthusiasm, cheering the orchestra and dragging back the conductor to play encores time after time. They also cheered the local CEO of the multinational company that had sponsored the concert. Some patriotic Austrian enterprise perhaps? No, Yamaha.

LIKE THE NEGATIVE TRENDS EXCORIATED by Bayles, this timidity of public diplomacy illustrates how America's cultural overtures are repeatedly crippled by

the nation's internal culture wars. She cites gifted, independent-minded Americans in all the areas above who take successful initiatives to promote America and Western culture, but they seem to be the exceptions. Most cultural initiatives, including U.S. popular culture when it is not offending people by its vulgarity, are constrained by a kind of multicultural masochism that prevents simple expressions of patriotic pride—or what Bayles calls the “American ethos.” A cultural civil war—which is what the culture war is—means that two patriotisms are contending for the nation's soul. Until one or the other side wins, America's cultural outreach will be at war with itself and so likely to be uneasy, half-hearted, ambivalent, and unpersuasive.

Bayles is more than aware of this; it is a major *leitmotif* of her work. And though she sometimes strikes an above-the-battle pose in her occasional allusions to “the culture warriors” of both sides, there cannot be much doubt throughout the book either that the cultural Left is responsible for most of the damage done to America's cultural image or that Bayles is firmly on the side of its more moderate conservative critics. Unfortunately, there is no sign that the cultural Left is losing the war; quite the contrary. So despite her very sensible proposals, in a last chapter,

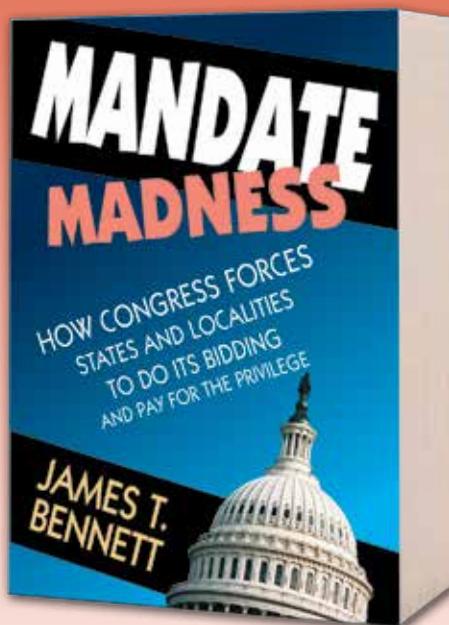
to improve America's cultural diplomacy, its basic weaknesses will likely persist.

But America's rivals in the *international* culture wars—Russia, China, Iran, etc.—have greater weaknesses. And they must worry about their images not only internationally but also among their own citizens. If America is threatened by a false picture of its social reality, moreover, their governments are threatened by the truth about every aspect of reality. They cannot compete in a world of free information. Hence all three countries try to keep information from their peoples by jamming radio stations and erecting internet firewalls. Michael Horowitz, my colleague at 21st Century Initiatives, points out the enormous significance of this: in the global war over information America has very serviceable weapons in the form of technologies that leap over firewalls, cut through jamming, cost far more to block than to install, but that once installed make every religion, political party, international agency, NGO, theater company, pop group, and common-or-garden dissident America's allies even despite themselves. With such allies, even a divided America can't really lose.

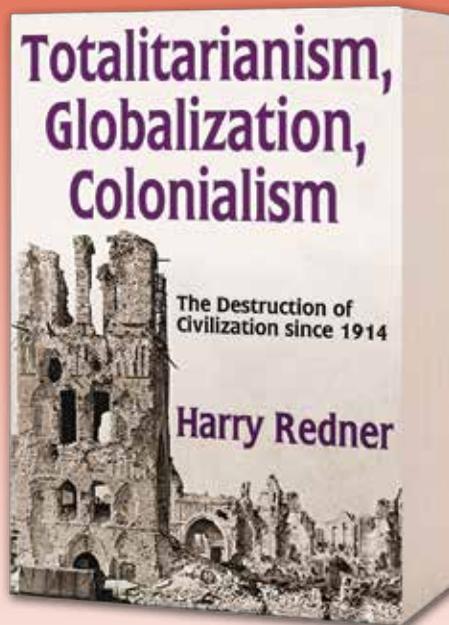
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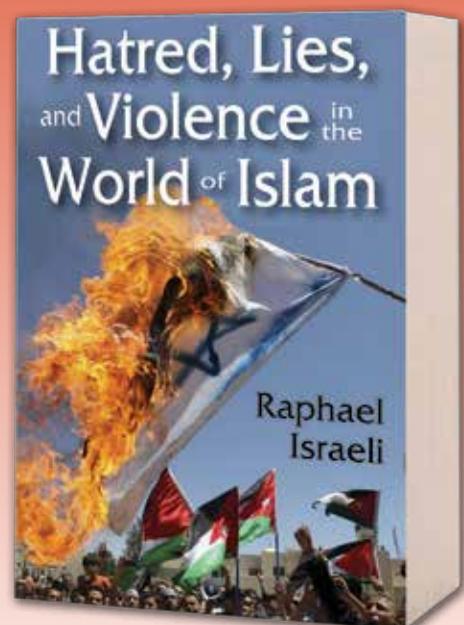
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