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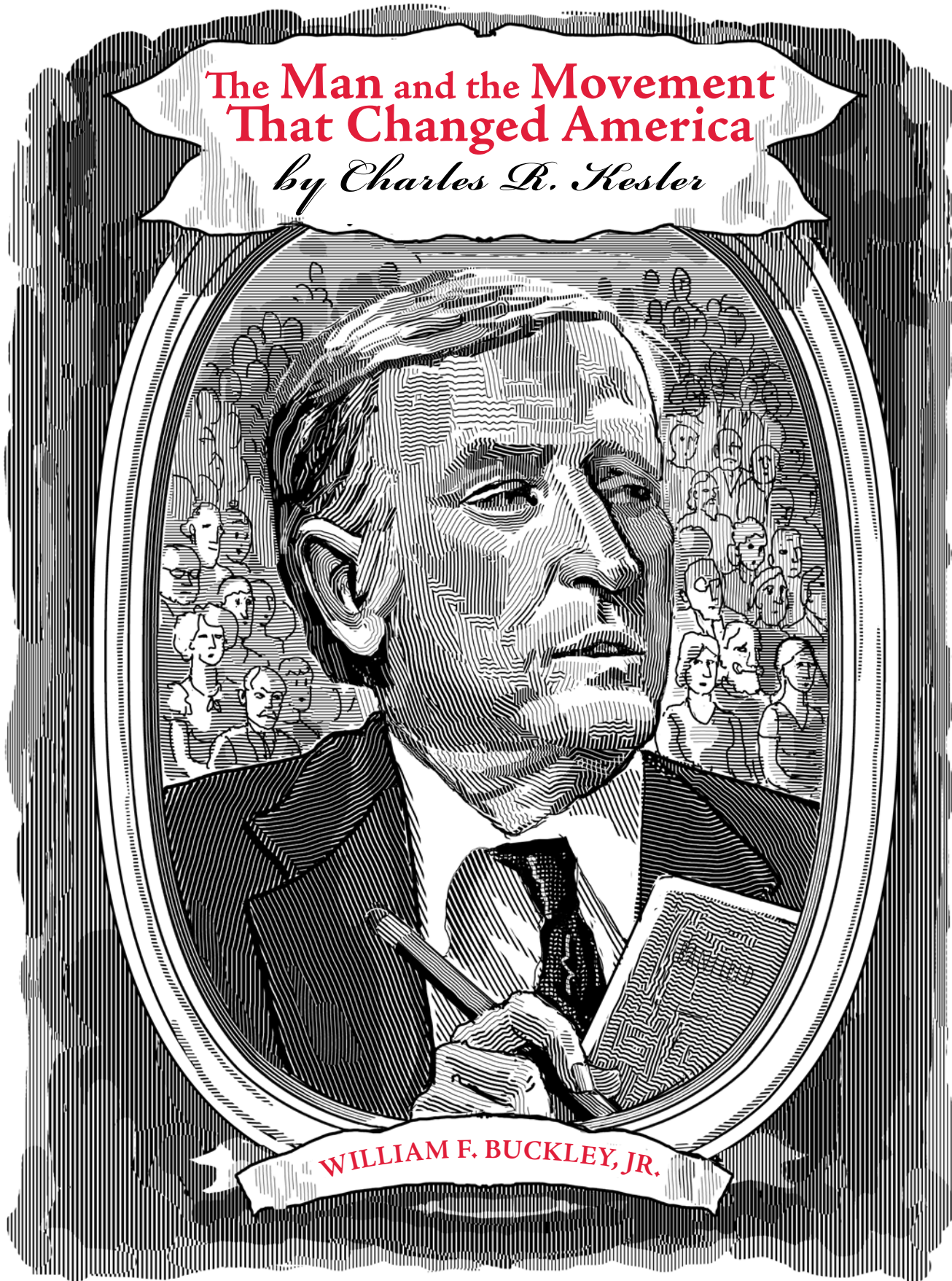
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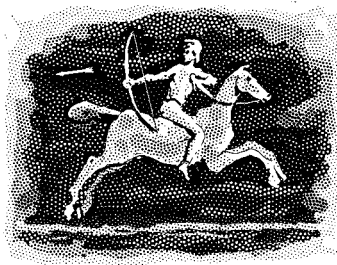
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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



## 'Arnuld Tuinbi and Israel

**H**ARVARD'S CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES HAS BEEN in the news of late for a few no doubt meaningless administrative defenestrations. Almost 60 years ago, as a graduate student there, I had the bizarre experience of reading excerpts from Arnold Toynbee—أرنولد توينبي (*Arnuld Tuinbi*)—in Arabic. Though my command of Arabic was atrocious, I got the gist.

My faculty adviser, a former Israeli who had served in the Haganah (Israel's pre-state army), would eventually become the director of the Center. That would not happen today. Other than the fact that his car was bombed in the Center's garage, we were a rather civil bunch. Like other Middle Eastern studies programs, at that time we had only begun to exchange ties to the CIA for the privilege of floating upon the tsunami of oil money that has shaped such programs ever since.

Toynbee was much admired by the majority of my associates. Given his truly *Gemütlichkeit* visit with Hitler in 1936, and his view that in the Cold War the USSR was a victim of the West, how surprising is it that he had a rather jaundiced view of Jews and Israel? According to him, Judaism, a "fossil remnant," was responsible for the "Judaic" persecution of Christians, and by comparing the Israelis to Nazis (this was not a big hit in Israel) he set the tone very early on for the masked and rhyming automata who on today's campuses chant for the destruction of Israel "by any means possible."

Whatever the other sources of Toynbee's motivations, certainly one was his horror and frustration in regard to the indelible particularity that sustained Jewish nationality in exile among, and outlasting every single one of, the great empires that he so exhaustively examined, including, in the midst of its descent (as he had to have known), the British. Toynbee's twelve-volume *A Study of History* was just one of his many works.

This was an offense not only to what one might reasonably expect, and thus to reason itself, but to his lifetime conclusion that, to quote Andrew Erhardt's and John Bew's essay on Toynbee in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy* (2023), "the idea of the sovereign nation state was 'bankrupt' and that populations needed to move towards... international authority."

Although readers of the *CRB* may find the following confession unnecessary, here I must digress to hint at how long it can take me, perhaps in imitation of a delayed-action munition, to cotton on to something. When I was 17, I stayed for a week in a Marseilles bordello on the Rue St. Christophe. The details of this could be interesting, but the pertinent point is that only 30 years later did I realize that I had not been the guest of a statistically improbable hotel for wildly promiscuous women.

So with Toynbee, not that he was promiscuous, although he may have been, but that more than half a century later it occurred to me, if not to him, that his affection for world governance was due to an atavistic modeling of the very British Empire that had afforded him

his opportunities, fame, and influence. So, as the empire withered, why not reproduce the pattern on a much grander scale?

**A**T FIRST I THOUGHT THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN OCCULT, OR A functioning of his subconscious or simply my misconception. But, no. The most cursory investigation reveals that, due to the superiorities of conception and result that the English-speaking peoples had brought to the world, he believed that the international order which would save mankind should be based upon the British Empire and Commonwealth, with the might of the United States in assist.

Although one need not disagree with the qualities he praises, most of the world's peoples would, and would bridle at the thought of subjection to globe-spanning authority not of their own making. That would have included the "Palestinians," a name applied then only to Jews, who were busy fighting the British Empire in an insurrection that threw an enormous stick into the spokes of both Toynbee's theory of history and his activist design for the future.

His ideal is not only impossible but wrong. In hypothetical world governance, as in the real governments of nations, contending factional interests, if not constitutionally adjudicated, must be politically ordered by a controlling authority. Let us say, for example, that the seat of world government is in Madrid and the buck stops with a Bulgarian president (one could say emperor). He would have to be either preternaturally sensitive or all-knowing to settle justly an Indonesian civil war, or ethnic rivalries in Namibia, or civil disturbances and resource claims in Ecuador. We regularly see, as the British might say, the spectacular cock-up of pretentious international courts indulging their prejudices hither and thither. Imagine if they had the real power for which their supporters lust.

The desire for order will of necessity devolve into diktat in all empires regardless of what they are called, how they view themselves, the nature of their intentions, and who it is that mounts the dreadful charger of authority. Empire has its pluses and minuses, its ups and downs, its benefits and detriments. One thing it has unambiguously is its ultimate unworkability. And that is attributable in almost all cases, regardless of imperial characteristics, to the ineradicable particularity of mankind.

With all his wisdom and remarkable scholarship, that Arnold Toynbee did not know this, should caution anyone blinded by the luxury and power of his own time and place. For as Toynbee, the chronicler of fallen empires, had to have known, the elemental principle of empires and world government makes them both unjust and inescapably transitory. Israel was for him the unwanted proof that the longevity of nations is superior to that of empires, even those he dreamed to endow with unprecedented benevolence. For Toynbee, then, Israel was a painful thorn.

But if you want pain, try reading him in Arabic.

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