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The sickness of silence: A letter to future historians.

BERKELEY, 21 FEBRUARY—I write this letter so that you, you who will look back on our time as professionals trained in the craft of recording history, will see it in the whole—for all that it is, nothing missed. We who are alive now do not have the vision I urge you to bring to our present and what will be for you your past.

Ours is a time of catastrophe, of savagery in the name of righteousness, a time of commonly shared depravity, of defeats for the human cause, of civilizational collapse. But the larger import of the events to which I refer—apartheid Israel’s condemnable aggression against the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank, the profligate wastage of human lives in America’s proxy war with Russia in Ukraine—is simply too large for most of us to manage. It is as if we sit too close to a movie screen properly to see the picture. You must do better than we in this. You must master the vision that eludes us and write the true picture into history.

Many important events are hidden from us. They are often written out of the record at least in part and sometimes altogether, as if they never occurred. In addressing you I mean to do what small thing one can do to make sure the truth of our time is properly recorded. To know that the histories you will write will comprise some or all of what power has sought to obliterate can be a kind of redemption, a source of confidence in humanity’s capacity for goodness.

Justice is not retroactive: The wrongs we witness daily cannot be taken back or reversed, I mean to say, just as a mother and child wantonly murdered with an

Israeli sniper's bullet in Gaza cannot be brought back to life. But we can honor all such victims of injustice if we write their stories truly, as you are in a position to do. Their sufferings and their deaths will not, in this way, be altogether in vain.

It is by way of the historical record, the recording of history, of "what happened," that the lies proliferating all around us as I write this letter can be exposed and, at least in the way our story is told, transcended.

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Note the date of this letter: The Israelis' bottomlessly inhuman assault on the Palestinians of Gaza has just entered its fifth month. The proxy war in Ukraine began 10 years ago this month; it broke into open conflict two years ago this week.

You will read the official accounts of these events and the media coverage of them just as these are given to us. Israel is not conducting a genocide and an ethnic cleansing in Gaza, these versions of reality tell us: It is waging a "war," and this war is in "self-defense." You will read that Ukraine is a democracy just as liberal Westerners like to think, and as such it is the front line in a global confrontation between democrats and autocrats. These two conflicts are in many ways defining of our world as it is in 2024.

I urge you to study these conflicts in the larger context that those purveying official versions of events resolutely omit.

Almost certainly you will have casualty counts and counts of displaced persons at your disposal, and may these be at least approximately accurate by the time they will sit on your desks. You must, I implore you, put these shockingly large casualty figures next to the true motivations of those in Jerusalem (or Tel Aviv, Israel's rightfully recognized capital), Kiev, and Washington who insist these conflicts

must continue. I have in mind Bibi Netanyahu, Volodymyr Zelensky, and Joe Biden.

Tell the story of what you discover as you look beneath the official accounts and what is in the media archives. These two conflicts have little to do with the high-sounding explanations you will readily find. Look further. All three of the people just named, and so their governments, are politically vulnerable as they sustain these conflicts: There are elections in Israel and the U.S. that could turn the Israeli PM and the American president out of office; Netanyahu is likely to go to prison once the Israeli assault in Gaza ends, The Kiev regime's president is on a razor's edge as Ukraine loses its war with Russia. These three purported leaders, in short, need these conflicts for their survival.

This week, as it happens, the U.S. vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for Israel to cease fire in Gaza—this for the third time since its assault on Gaza began last autumn. Linda Thomas–Greenfield, the Biden regime's ambassador to the U.N., spoke as she always does, delivering a rote recital of the argument that a ceasefire would somehow disrupt delicate diplomatic negotiations. You must see in this the distance separating our purported leaders from reality. Ask yourselves if this gulf is unprecedented, as many of us alive now think.

You will not find it hard to make the connections to which I draw your attention. A few people alive now know and understand them. But they are never mentioned in what you will recognize as our official discourse. Do not neglect your responsibility to unearth what is in this way buried. Then the history you write will record the shocking smallness of those who shape the time of which you will write. These are people who seem to think nothing of sacrificing the lives of innocent women, men, and children to their petty desires to remain in office—to their lust

for power. This is what I mean when I describe my age, ours, as one of depravity—low and dishonest, to borrow Auden’s famous phrase. You must record it as such.

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You can read reports and view video footage of Israeli soldiers shooting mothers and their children—not by accident, not as “collateral damage,” but purposely. You can watch as they torture captive Palestinian men, some in their teens. Israeli troops shoot a good deal of this footage themselves, disseminating it as if to boast of their sadism.

But you cannot, with very rare exceptions, see any of this in what we call mainstream or corporate media. You must resort to independent publications to find this kind of material—work that provides true accounts of the horror the Israelis inflict on Gaza’s 2.3 million people.

Absent such publications, one is left with a thoroughly distorted picture of the kind I mentioned to you earlier: Gaza as a justified war of self-defense, civilian casualties as regrettable accidents, and so on. This same is so in the case of Ukraine: The Armed Forces of Ukraine fight bravely and shall triumph, there are no neo-Nazis in the AFU, nobody is stealing the weapons and funds the West sends the Kiev regime.

Maybe in your time it will still said, as it is in ours, that the press provides “the first draft of history.” This is a considerable distance from the reality of mainstream media. These newspapers and broadcasters provide the first draft of what power wishes to record as the truth so as to keep the truth out of the history texts you will write. Be mindful of this, I urge you. Independent media are in an early stage of their development; they are very short of resources—trained professionals, funds—relative to the responsibilities our time imposes upon them.

But you must not neglect them. It is in their pages and their digital productions that true accounts of our time reside.

More than a child dies when he or she is shot while fleeing a hospital in Gaza under the instructions of the Israel Defence Forces and this death is not honestly reported. More than a soldier dies when, young and poorly trained or pushing 60 and too slow, he is sent to the front in eastern Ukraine, with death not a certainty but nearly, and these circumstances are omitted from what we can read of or view. The truth, that “first casualty” in all wars, dies another death. Another small part of justice dies, too.

You will be able to write the history of our time in all the detail you may judge it right to include so as to achieve the maximum accuracy. But you will find that the truth lies beneath a dense cover of distorted orthodoxies. In this the mainstream press and broadcasters will be of little use to you. They are working, indeed, against you. They long ago turned from informing the public to protecting from public view those they are charged to report upon.

You must be aware of this: One of the most peculiar characteristics of our time is the consolidation of a meta-reality, if I can call it this, a parallel unreality next to reality. This is in large measure the work of mainstream media as these have come to serve the interests of the imperium ever more faithfully. To the extent you rely upon media in your research, you will need independent media to get your texts done well. They will be your friends as you assume this task.

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Be careful, I advise you, as to how you read into the circumstances I describe as you come upon them in your researches. I have singled out our media because of their exceptional power to construct, as I have just noted, the meta-reality that so

effectively obscures reality. If this is a pernicious inversion of the responsibilities media bear in public space, they are not alone in this abandonment.

What we see in our press and among our broadcasters is matched in the corrosion of numerous other institutions and the principles they are meant to uphold. These include our universities, our legislatures, our courts, our local and state governments, those myriad organizations that bind together our communities. Academic freedom, freedom of assembly, speech, and even thought, the value of open debate, the right to privacy: Suddenly these are considered debatable.

We live amid a kind of social and intellectual chaos. Do not miss this as you study our time. It is true that this state of affairs was discernible well before the events of 7 October and before Russia's military intervened in Ukraine two years ago. It is one consequence, among many, of the despoliation of public discourse with incessant mis- and disinformation, especially since 2016, when American liberals and the media serving them set in motion what we call "Russiagate"—a term you will come across, surely.

But recognize, I earnestly urge you, that Gaza and Ukraine have accelerated that civilizational collapse I mentioned as I began writing to you. I do not think this term too strong. You must, at the very least, consider its validity with great care. This is the feature of our time it is most difficult for us, we the living, to see clearly. We are too close to the phenomenon I describe—too "inside" the present to see the present in the whole.

I come to what I most want you to detect and record. To explain this I will mention an opinion poll published this week by the Quincy Institute, a foreign policy research organization in Washington. [A survey done with the Harris Poll](#) just a couple of weeks ago found that 70 percent of Americans want the Biden

administration urgently to force Ukraine to negotiate a settlement with Russia. The numbers vary, but the same is so in the case of Israel and the Gaza crisis: A considerable proportion of Americans want the Biden regime to force Israel to implement a ceasefire.

This is the kind of thing you will find it useful to turn this way and that to discover what it can tell you.

True again, the White House has proven increasingly indifferent, over the course of many years, to public opinion as it executes America's foreign policies. Congress authorizes policy in the same manner. Israel, and less dramatically Ukraine, have served to consolidate this lapse. These crises have rendered Americans more or less completely impotent to address those who purport to lead us. No institutional recourse remains realistically available to us. This is the stark reality we now face. We are no longer governed so much as ruled. My term for this—perhaps you will find it useful—is “imperial distance.”

The Gaza crisis forced these circumstances into the open. And because the Biden regime's full backing of the Zionist state directly challenges Americans' consciences, it has required the maximum of the just-noted imperial distance between the ruling and the ruled.

You are likely to find it more difficult, as historians typically do, to address the psychological character of our time than to study its outward events. Persist nonetheless, I appeal to you, for this is a significant feature of our reality. Israel long ago disgraced itself, the Jewish heritage, and Judaism altogether. The Gaza crisis, with its daily atrocities and our enforced acquiescence to its crimes, has led humanity, or at least that portion of it counted as “the West,” into a state of

degradation. Israel has dragged us down such that its indignities are ours. It has taken us from our moral grounding just as it long ago lost its own.

You must not neglect these matters even as most of us alive now cannot see what Israel's conduct in Gaza has done to us.

We are afflicted with the sickness of silence, as I will call it. We are face to face with the results of many decades of propaganda, and with the insidious power of language when it is cynically abused. We look but we cannot see. We hear but we do not listen. Such is the effectiveness of propaganda that most of us are not even aware of our complicity in the genociding of a people. For the sake of a tenured professorship or a peaceable dinner party we silence ourselves, so succumbing to this sickness. In this, placing our trifling self-interests before integrity and responsibility, most of us are little different from the Bidens and Netanyahus in their obsessive pursuit of personal power.

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There is no going back from where we find ourselves, as your histories are sure to record. This is so for apartheid Israel and for America and for the West altogether. History's wheel has turned—abruptly, and it seems to some of us irreversibly. It has done this before, to state what will be obvious to you. When a radical Serb assassinated Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian archduke, in Sarajevo in 1914, a world ended and another began. Is our moment comparable?

So it appears, but you will know this better than we. We are left to look forward uncertainly at precisely what you will look back upon and see as an outcome inscribed in facts. We can hope that what now ends opens up a chance to go forward differently. You will know if any difference was achieved.

In various professions—among these journalism and the crafting of history—there are few in any age who “keep the faith,” as we say. Many of you, I accordingly expect, will write orthodox histories of this time that take their places in university libraries, win prizes, and are taught in graduate courses. Be this as it will be, I commend this letter to others among you, the few just mentioned, to propose what you must set down, and where you must look for it, as you compose histories of the early 21st century that are true and worth of humanity’s record of itself.

This is how torches are passed, and how what is good in us is defended against what is not.

February 21, 2024

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