War of ideas

By GLENN C. ALTSHULER
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In his sympathetic history of ‘Commentary,’ Benjamin Balint traces how the magazine created a sense of belonging among American intellectuals.

Founded in 1945 by the American Jewish Committee “to meet the need for a journal of significant thought and opinion on Jewish affairs and contemporary opinion,” Commentary magazine has had an influence that extended well beyond its relatively modest circulation. Born of the conviction that Jews could — and should — participate in American life as Jews, Commentary provided a platform for a new generation of intellectuals. And made itself, for a time, the home of brilliant writing on politics, literature, history, sociology, and theology.

In Running Commentary, Benjamin Balint, a fellow at the Hudson Institute and former assistant editor at Commentary, provides a sympathetic, but remarkably thorough, dispassionate and balanced history of the magazine, tracing its twists and turns from liberal anti-communism in the 1950s to a dalliance, of sorts, with radicals in the 1960s, to neoconservatism in the 1970s and beyond. The story of Commentary, he demonstrates, “lies coiled within a larger story” of the tumultuous, notquite- required embrace of America by “an uncommonly articulate and uncommonly opinionated” group of New York Jews. “Unparalleled in the history of the Diaspora,” it’s a story “of belonging — with its profits and perils.”

The story pivots on Norman Podhoretz’s break with the New Left and the counterculture. Balint indicates that the editor’s “revulsion against anti-Americanism — within the Woodstock Nation and elsewhere — came first.”

But, he writes, Podhoretz also reacted as a Jew to a threat to Jewish interests. African-American clashes with Jews, identity politics, affirmative action, and denunciations of Israel following the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars convinced him that anti-Semitism was alive and well in the United States, and that it was more prevalent on the Left than on the Right.

By the 1970s, Commentary rarely missed an opportunity to expose — and excoriate — “the parochialism of Jewish universalism.” Commentary’s swing to neoconservatism did not come without a cost. Every time it addressed social protest in America, feminist Vivian Gornick wrote, Commentary “ends up sounding like a Jewish mother, arms folded across fat breasts, mouth compressed into fat face, saying: ‘After everything I’ve done for you, this is what I get back!’” Some readers complained that the magazine had become “too insularly Jewish.” And after George Bush invaded Iraq, some critics charged that in abandoning its distrust of concentrated power Commentary “had plowed under its own best political insight: that overinflated ambitions to remake societies, at home and abroad, were doomed to tragic failure.”

Podhoretz and his successors never looked back. Commentary, Balint acknowledges, “had never been much given to exercises in self-criticism.” It did not pause “to take the full measure of its gyrations or reckon with its reversals” because its editors persisted in regarding them as continuities.

For more than three decades, Balint observes, Commentary has railed against Soviet expansionism and Islamic terrorism abroad, embraced patriotism, free market capitalism, and traditional morality at home, and made its mantra “what is bad for Jews (and Israel) is bad for America.”
Unlike most American Jews, Balint observes, the Commentary clan embraced Christian evangelicals. After Reverend Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, endorsed the idea that a secret society of Jewish bankers was conspiring to rule the world, Podhoretz argued in Commentary that his support for Israel trumped his anti-Semitism.

Although, Balint notes, Podhoretz didn’t especially like “being in Israel,” he insisted that a strong Jewish state was vital to the national interest of the United States in a stable Middle East. Worried about post-Vietnam isolationism, cuts to the American defense budget, overtures to Saudi Arabia and the deterioration of Israel’s international standing, Podhoretz emphasized, repeatedly, that the destruction of the Jewish state “could spell the end not only of the Atlantic alliance, but of liberal civilization as we know it.”

Attacks on Israel, he added, were a cover for “a loss of American nerve,” “acquiescence in terrorism,” and “the appeasement of totalitarianism.”

The story of Commentary, Balint concludes, is replete with ironies. The magazine’s accomplishments, at high tide, he writes, were substantial. Commentary writers showed Jews “how to weave strands of their Jewishness into the texture of American life,” fostered a healthy selfrespect and, “in ways previously unimaginable,” defended the rights of Jews to defend themselves. And yet, since the ’70s, their love affair with America has often been regarded, by many traditional conservatives and liberals, “as somehow illicit.”

They’re charged with trading alienation for affirmation, worshiping power and success, and currying favor as “Court Jews.” Even more ironically, Balint shows that Commentary has been out of step “with the near-universal liberal sympathies of American-Jewish life.” If you “scratch an American Jew,” sociologist Earl Raab has written, “you will find a Democratic voter.”

Sixty-seven percent of Jews voted for Walter Mondale in 1984; 78% pulled the lever for Barack Obama in 2008.

They were motivated, it seems, not by self-interest, but by a sense of themselves as outsiders, and an identification with underdogs. These Jews infuriate Norman Podhoretz, who “feels himself among the most profoundly American of American Jews,” and continues to hope against hope that they’ll break free of their “political delusions.”

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