



How Elijah Muhammad Won

Thanks to one man, Islam may become the dominant faith among black Americans.

JUN, 2000 · BY DANIEL PIPES

In the early 1930's, when the Nation of Islam had just come into existence, its founder made the bold prediction that, one day, Islam would replace Christianity as the primary faith of black Americans. At the time, this assertion must have sounded incredible, if not slightly mad; not only was the Islamic faith broadly despised in the United States, but African-Americans who were Muslim numbered at that time only in the dozens. By 1959, however, a perverse endorsement of this same prediction would issue from, of all people, a top leader of the Ku Klux Klan. In a letter to the New York City police commissioner, that white supremacist wrote: "If we fail to stop the Muslims now, the sixteen million niggers of America will soon be Muslims, and you will never be able to stop them."

Today, that 1930's prediction no longer seems so outlandish—indeed, it has already been partially borne out. About one million African-Americans now identify themselves as Muslims, and a visit to the black sections of any fair-sized American town quickly confirms the presence not only of an Islamic infrastructure—mosques, schools, *halal* butchers, stores carrying Islamic clothing—but of an active and ambitious drive to propagate Islam. So vital is this movement that the director of a Christian effort to stem its headway has made a memorable prediction of his own: "If the conversion rate continues unchanged, Islam could become the dominant religion in black urban areas by the year 2020."

Is there a single figure most responsible for the remarkable career of Islam among African-Americans? Undoubtedly, the most common reply to this question would name the man who was born as Malcolm Little and died as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, and is best known as Malcolm X (1925-65). Charismatic, eloquent, honest, a martyred seeker of true faith, Malcolm X did play a major role in the development of black Islam, and to this day many American blacks cite his 1964 *Autobiography* as a powerful factor in their own conversion to the faith. Yet Malcolm X's active career as a Muslim lasted not much over a decade; his real contribution lies elsewhere, as an apostle of secular black nationalism. Today, he is a

pop-culture icon, his memory kept alive by Spike Lee's movie about him and by baseball caps sporting his "X," T-shirts emblazoned with his face, and a U.S. postal stamp in his honor.

In the final analysis, it was another man, Malcolm X's mentor, who had the greater impact on establishing Islam among African-Americans. This was the uncharismatic, inarticulate, heterodox, and long-lived Elijah Muhammad. During his lifetime—he was born in 1897 and died in 1975—he was a mysterious figure, the subject of rumor and innuendo. He told contradictory stories about himself, avoided the press, surrounded himself with a wall of bodyguards, and punished those who revealed information about him. But recent scholarship has pieced together his story, mostly thanks to law-enforcement records. For, starting in 1932 and continuing for over four decades, police agencies kept extremely close tabs on him, including (as part of the controversial COINTELPRO program) by means of extensive FBI wiretaps and letter-openings. The resulting reports, now available to researchers in all their immensity—the FBI's papers alone amount to well over a million pages—reveal the most intimate secrets of Elijah Muhammad's household, his power struggles, and his personal and sexual escapades.

Two authors, both black, have done yeoman work culling these archives (as well as other relevant documents), and have produced impressively researched biographies of the man who liked to be called the Messenger of Allah. Claude Andrew Clegg III's *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*¹ appeared in 1997; a well-rounded biography by a professor of history, it is also perhaps the best book ever written on the Nation of Islam. And now there is also *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad*,² by Karl Evanzz, a journalist at the *Washington Post*; depending heavily on the police files, Evanzz provides more new information but also a somewhat skewed picture, since he tends to neglect matters (like theology) with which the FBI did not concern itself.

As it happens, the two biographers disagree on a dismaying number of details, which suggests that much work on this topic remains to be done. In the main, though, their accounts complement each other and make it possible, for the first time, to understand who exactly Elijah Muhammad was.

He was born Eliza Pool in Sandersville, Georgia, in 1897, the seventh of thirteen children. Georgia at that time was a racist, violent place, and young Eliza grew up with searing experiences of white scorn and brutality. The lynching of a friend in 1912 prompted him to flee his parent's house a year later. In 1917 he met Clara Belle Evans and in 1919 married her; between 1921 and 1939, they had eight children.

Pool fled Georgia for Detroit in 1923 and then, in the classic pattern of black migration to the north, called for his family to follow. In Detroit, he worked in several industrial plants and joined a variety of organizations—notably, Marcus Garvey's proto-black-nationalist movement, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and the Black Shriners; but neither of these kept his allegiance. After an arrest for drunkenness in 1926, Eliza Pool became Elijah Poole, the change in spelling intended to symbolize the desire for a fresh start in life.

In a further effort to improve himself, Poole also joined the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and converted to its vaguely Islam-like religion, becoming intensely involved in the institution and in spreading its doctrines. This strangely named organization had little in common with the standard version of Islam coming from the Middle East, but it was the first to forge a 20th-century link between that religion and African-Americans. Founded in 1913 by a Black Shiner named Timothy Drew (who renamed himself Noble Drew Ali), the MSTA introduced such Islam-like features as the crescent-and-star motif, the use of Arabic personal names, and the prohibition of pork, but it also foretold the destruction of all whites and promoted Drew as a prophet.

The MSTA went into a steep decline with Drew's death in July 1929, and Elijah Poole was among the many who quit. In the ensuing struggle for power, three major factions emerged, all based in Chicago. One was led by a very recent convert named David Ford, who quickly moved to Detroit and renamed both himself (Wallace D. Fard) and his faction—the Allah Temple of Islam (ATI). This new sect retained many of the MSTA's peculiar customs and ideas, but it also introduced new elements, including the theme that whites are devils and a paramilitary unit called the Fruit of Islam.

In early 1931, Elijah Poole met Fard and quickly became his enthusiastic disciple, receiving in return the “original” name of Elijah Karriem. A year later, Fard further rewarded Elijah by making him Supreme Master of the ATI and changing his name yet again, this time to

Elijah Muhammad. Over the course of their three-year partnership, Fard and Elijah Muhammad also elevated Fard's own theological status—from Allah's Messiah to Allah himself—with Muhammad taking over the role of Messenger.

The ATI horrified the Detroit police, especially after one of its members ritualistically killed a man. Making a deal with Fard, the authorities let him out of a psychiatric ward on condition he shut down the ATI; Fard agreed, but then tricked the police by changing the ATI's name to Nation of Islam (NoI) and keeping it alive. He was finally forced to leave Detroit in mid-1934. Thereupon, Muhammad attempted to take control of the NoI, but he met with considerable opposition and was forced to flee to avoid being killed. His first stop was Chicago, then Milwaukee, then Washington, D.C., where he lived until 1942. There he took advantage of the opportunity to educate himself at the Library of Congress and to travel throughout the East, spreading his faith.

Alight-skinned, diminutive man, Elijah Muhammad won converts not through his eloquence—or his command of grammar—but through a soft, Southern-accented intensity that audiences found somewhat reminiscent of the manner of a black Baptist preacher (which his father had been). Although to nonbelievers it might seem hard to understand how he was able to rouse listeners to standing ovations or inspire their utter devotion, Clegg believes that he had the exact measure of his audience: “Something ineffable about this ‘squeaky little man teaching hate’ attracted African-Americans for an entire generation as few other leaders could.”

In brief, Muhammad's message went as follows. Blacks came into existence 78 trillion years ago, and through the eons they lived an advanced and righteous life. But their paradise ceased 6,000 years ago when a deviant black savant named Mr. Yakub, also known as “the big head scientist,” rebelled against the black gods and set about creating the white race. When blacks learned what Mr. Yakub was doing, they exiled him to an island in the Aegean Sea, but he was able to continue his work and within 600 years had succeeded in bringing the white race into existence, with a mandate to reign over blacks for six millennia. That reign ended in 1914, though a seventy-year period of grace would extend it to 1984; W.D. Fard had come to proclaim its end and to show blacks how to reclaim their rightful place through the Nation of Islam—a goal they would definitely accomplish by the year 2000.

This imaginative schema had the virtue of explaining both black weakness and white evil, even as it motivated blacks to prepare themselves through discipline and hard work to seize power. But as a theology, it differed almost diametrically from core Islamic beliefs. In his worst nightmare, a Muslim could hardly imagine a religion more repugnant to his own than one that identified God with a human being, excluded most of humanity on racial grounds, believed in a post-Muhammadan prophet, and held the Qur'an to be an imperfect, temporary document. Compared with these basic principles, such NoI practices as the avoidance of pork, intermittent study of Arabic, and separation of the sexes were but minor details. The NoI offered a folk religion with strong Christian overtones and hints of science fiction. It had little in common with standard Islam. In the intervening seven decades it has moved in that direction, but not by much.

Muhammad hated the United States and loved its enemies, especially non-Caucasian ones. And so he rejoiced in the Japanese victory at Pearl Harbor in 1941, not only refusing to register for military service but instructing his followers to do likewise. Arrested for draft evasion in May 1942, he spent three years in jail on sedition charges, getting out in August 1946. The Nation had been kept alive during those years—barely—by his wife Clara and other faithful acolytes; on leaving prison, he found fewer than 400 active members. It was at this low point that Malcolm X turned up and, as Evanzz puts it, “gave new life to the Messenger.”

Malcolm X joined the NoI in late 1948. After his release from jail in 1952, he devoted himself full-time to building the organization, and with great success. Members began to flow in—one notable newcomer, Louis Farrakhan, was recruited in 1955 by both Muhammad and Malcolm X—new temples and schools were opened, and a number of small commercial enterprises (a bakery, grocery store, restaurant) were established. The Nation also bought real estate, both urban and rural. The money added up, and it soon became the richest-ever black organization in the United States. In 1959, the national media discovered the NoI: Mike Wallace's television documentary, *The Hate that Hate Produced*, appalled whites but evidently thrilled many blacks, thousands of whom joined up as new members.

The NoI's new wealth and stature also provided access to foreign leaders, and its dignitaries were soon in direct contact with such stars of the anti-American firmament as Sukarno of Indonesia, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Fidel Castro of Cuba. In 1959, Muhammad confirmed these burgeoning relationships in a triumphal tour of the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, including a pilgrimage to Mecca that implied Saudi acceptance of his legitimacy as a Muslim. (Although many observers at the time suspected foreign governments of funding the NoI—Thurgood Marshall dismissed it as “a bunch of thugs organized from prisons and jails, and financed, I am sure, by [Egyptian president Gamal Abdel] Nasser or some Arab group”—in point of fact serious foreign funding arrived only in the 1970's from Libya, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi.)

But then, just as everything was looking good, rot set in: “rumors of oppressive disciplinary practices, deviations from the moral code, and financial irregularities,” as Evanzz describes it. From the start, the NoI had been steeped in violence; I have already mentioned the “ritual sacrifice” that took place in 1932, when the organization was still called the Allah Temple of Islam. Through the decades, NoI members who presumed to disagree with Muhammad were injured or killed, a trend that culminated after 1960 with the assassination of Malcolm X (1965) and the murder of seven members of the Khaalis family (1973). Nor were whites immune: the notorious “Zebra” murders left nine dead in Illinois in 1972, and a year later a squad known as the Death Angels killed fourteen in the San Francisco area. And these were only the most spectacular atrocities.

Moral deviations likewise began in 1960: Elijah Muhammad's first illegitimate child was born in January of that year, the first of thirteen unrecognized children whom he fathered over a seven-year period with no fewer than seven different mistresses. FBI tapes record Muhammad handing each woman the same line about his “divine seed,” then lying about his marital intentions; the FBI also found that he had five affairs going simultaneously, and that he threatened women with violence if they revealed his paternity. To his wife's special shame, among these relationships was an incestuous one.

Nor was this all. Newly affluent, Muhammad lavished luxuries on himself and the “royal” family, as it came to be known. He traveled in a Lockheed executive jet, wore a jewel-studded fez said to be worth \$150,000, and let his family milk the NoI for all it was worth. In Clegg's careful words, this focus on money “ultimately validated, by example, a trend toward materialism, even avarice, that would hamper the Nation as a religious organization.”

It is hard to convey just how shocking Muhammad's actions, especially his sexual ones, were to members of the moralistic NoI. His son Wallace later endeavored to explain it by saying that Elijah Muhammad had "been worshipped as the final prophet of God for so long that he had convinced himself that it was true," and helped himself to the liberties his status seemed to confer. But his behavior caused severe strains, putting the organization's very existence in jeopardy and forming perhaps the single most important reason for the rift with the upright Malcolm X.

Other consequences followed as well. Once he became the captive of his own avarice, Muhammad developed an operational timidity that was quite at odds with his fire-breathing rhetoric. He refused to sanction any response to police intrusions into NoI temples, and even took part in discussions with Ku Klux Klan leaders toward an arrangement whereby the NoI would stay out of "non-Negro" areas in return for the Klan's leaving NoI members alone. The head of the American Nazi party, George Lincoln Rockwell, was invited to speak at the NoI's main annual event, and used the occasion to laud Elijah Muhammad as the black Adolf Hitler (high praise, in his view).

To cap it off, Muhammad was entering into a slow process of physical deterioration, and this led to a protracted battle over his succession. In the end, there were just two contestants, his son Wallace and his national spokesman Louis Farrakhan. (The rupture with Malcolm X had ended with the latter's assassination by Muhammad's goons, apparently supervised by Farrakhan.) Each advanced his cause in imaginative ways—for example, Farrakhan married two of his daughters to Muhammad's nephew and grandson. But when Elijah Muhammad finally died in February 1975, Wallace hurriedly called a news conference and announced that his father had appointed him sole successor, and Farrakhan temporarily acquiesced.

Wallace undertook a thorough refashioning of the movement, purging it of its heterodox elements and turning it almost overnight into an Islamic institution that still exists; its current name is the Muslim American Society, and its membership is said to number around 200,000. He also dismantled the Fruit of Islam, sold the commercial establishments, and spun off most of the infrastructure. Farrakhan, going along for a while, Arabized his first name (to Abdul Halim), studied Arabic and the Qur'an, and grew a beard. But it is clear that he disagreed with the changes initiated by Wallace, and in 1978 he mustered the resolve to split off and start his own competing organization, a revived Nation of Islam.

For over two decades, Wallace—who today goes by the name of W. Deen Mohammed—and Louis Farrakhan have been bitter rivals. They make for an interesting contrast. Both born in 1933, they have known each other for over forty years but in terms of personality could hardly be less alike. W. Deen Mohammed is scholarly, and perhaps too intellectual to be a mass leader. Louis Farrakhan is an entertainer by training who became a brilliant orator and polemicist, given to extremist rhetoric that has regularly included a strong dose of anti-Semitism. He dominates his organization and thrives on controversy.

Fundamentally, the issue over which the two men have fought is which of them is the true son and heir to Elijah Muhammad. If W. Deen has the obvious biological advantage, Farrakhan married into the “royal family” and won many of its members to his side, and he also has remained far more faithful to Elijah Muhammad’s basic message. The back cover of one of W. Deen Mohammed’s books, *Islam’s Climate for Business Success*, proclaims him “the foremost leader of *Muslims* throughout America and in many other parts of the world” (emphasis added). Farrakhan, by contrast, has few specifically Islamic aspirations; instead, he has sought recognition as the most powerful leader of American *blacks*.

In any case, the rivalry between the two men, which had gone on almost unchanged for decades, has now rather suddenly ended, or at least altered. In February of this year, exactly a quarter-century after the death of Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and W. Deen Mohammed embraced, and proclaimed their intention of working together. The change, whether tactical or real, has been mutual. Politically, W. Deen Mohammed, who began solidly in the mainstream of the American spectrum, has in recent years adopted more radical stances (perhaps in an effort to ingratiate himself with immigrant Muslims) and in this respect has moved in Farrakhan’s direction. Religiously, Farrakhan for his part has increasingly endorsed, if somewhat ambiguously, the reforms initiated by Wallace a quarter-century earlier. At their February meeting, specifically, he accepted the seventh-century Muhammad as the Seal of the Prophets. (It remains to be seen, however, exactly what Farrakhan had in mind when he announced that “Allah sent Muhammad with the final revelation to the world.” Which Allah, the omnipresent one or the human one? Which Muhammad, the Meccan or the Georgian?)

There still remains a profusion of other groups that continue to purvey the old unadulterated NoI message, but Farrakhan's decision to join forces with Muhammad, however clouded in its meaning, does signify a certain weakness and also points to a trend. As long ago as 1962, the author of a book-length study of the NoI noted that few who joined the Nation remained in it for very long. If that was true almost 40 years ago, it is even more true today. As blacks discover when they join and inevitably come into closer contact with the real thing, the NoI, whatever its claims to legitimacy, purveys a jumble of primitive and unsustainable myths with no connection to standard Islam. A folk religion founded in Detroit in the 1930's can hardly stand up to a religion with nearly fourteen centuries of history, nearly a billion adherents, 50 national governments to its name, and one of the world's great civilizations.

A number of other factors tend toward the NoI's eventual demise as well. Each of its many splinter groups, including Farrakhan's, is centered around a dominant figure and amounts to "little more," as Evanzz says, "than a cult of personality." When these aging leaders are gone, he continues, "all that will remain is a storefront temple here and there." Also relevant is the NoI's emphasis on hard work, thrift, and the family: this emphasis inculcates exactly the sort of habits that permit NoI members to escape poverty, but as they rise economically, they often seek a less sectarian faith. Some return to Christianity; more move on to standard Islam.

But this, too, must be counted as part of the legacy of the redoubtable Elijah Muhammad. For all his foibles and failures, he clearly altered the course of black culture and politics. As Clegg notes:

The Muslims were "black" before it became fashionable to be labeled as such, and the Black Power Movement and all subsequent African-American protest styles, from the rhymes of the nationalistic rap group Public Enemy to the raison d'être of the Million Man March, are undeniably offshoots of the legacy of Elijah Muhammad.

True, the wilder notions of Muhammad's religion are disappearing; but all African-American Muslims today can claim him as their patron, for nearly every one of them has a direct connection, personal or familial, to the NoI. Without Muhammad, the million or so

African-Americans who are now Muslims would almost certainly still be Christians.

Their numbers, moreover, are only likely to grow. Though Islam still exercises only modest appeal to white Americans, it has become a powerful and permanent presence among blacks, who by my rough calculation are 200 times more likely to convert to it than are whites. Nor is it hard to imagine such conversions beginning to cascade, in an Islamic pattern that, as the historian Richard Bulliet has established, goes back over a millennium. If that happens, Islam may well pull ahead of Christianity among blacks within a matter of decades.

There are signs of such momentum already. The Arabic name Malik, for example, has become one of the most popular given names for newborn black American boys, and in some years *the* most popular. In black culture, according to one scholar, “all African-American youths have at least some familiarity with Islam, either through a personal encounter, a relative, a friend, a fashionable item of apparel, or, as is more frequently the case today, in the form of rap music poems.” Under this last heading, consider that such rap performers as Ice Cube, King Sun, KMD, Movement X, Queen Latifa, Poor Righteous Teachers, Prince Akeem, Sister Souljah, and Tribe Called Quest have all supported Farrakhan. A still more aggressive NoI offshoot named the Five Percenters claims the allegiance of Grand Puba, Big Daddy Kane, Lakim Shabazz, and Eric B. and Rakim. In the view of Farrakhan’s biographer Mattias Gardell, the “hip-hop movement’s role in popularizing the message of black militant Islam cannot be overestimated.”

Among non-Muslim blacks, the enviable reputation enjoyed by Islam is traceable in good part to the discipline it is thought to impose on young men, thereby addressing what may be the black community’s number-one problem. A Baptist woman whose son converted has succinctly expressed this favorable disposition:

This Islam sounds like true religion to me. They don’t believe in smoking dope, drinking liquor and no adultery. I say we could use more teaching like that. . . . When my son reached over to be a Muslim, I was not going to fault him. I enjoy listening to him talk about it, and how it came out of Africa, and that sounds pretty good.

From a social point of view, indeed, the newfound sobriety and seriousness of African-American converts to Islam, whether to the NoI or the standard version, are all to the good. Though violence and recidivism remain very real problems among these new Muslims—the recent arrest of Jamil Al-Amin (the former H. Rap Brown) on charges of having murdered a policeman in Atlanta is a case in point—the manly atmosphere of convert Islam has helped many ex-convicts and others at the bottom of society to find the straight path and stick to it.

From a political point of view, however, things are much less positive. Black converts generally tend to adopt extremist views. Those in the Nation of Islam become black nationalists, pumped up with incendiary antiwhite rhetoric, while those who join standard Islam often become Islamists—admirers of such figures as the Ayatollah Khomeini and Usama bin Ladin. Whether followers of the NoI or standard Islam, moreover, black converts tend to hold vehemently anti-American, anti-Christian, and anti-Semitic attitudes.

It does not take much imagination to see that, should Islam in fact replace Christianity as the primary religion of African-Americans, this will have vast significance for all Americans, affecting everything from race relations to foreign policy, from popular culture to issues of religion and state. Eric Lincoln, a leading authority on African-American Islam, once wrote that the Nation of Islam might “well change the course of history in the West.” Should that come to pass, the credit, or blame, will belong above all to the “squeaky little man teaching hate,” Elijah Muhammad.

¹ St. Martin's, 377 pp., \$25.95.

² Pantheon, 667 pp., \$28.50.



Daniel Pipes

Daniel Pipes (DanielPipes.org, @DanielPipes), president of the Middle East Forum, has researched immigration and Islam in ten European countries during the past year.

“Witness”

APR, 1989 · BY OUR READERS

To the Editor:

Eric J. Sundquist has provided a magnificent literary illumination of Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness* [“Witness’ Recalled,” December 1988]. He cites as well several possible reasons for the recent neglect of that book. I would like to add one more. When *Witness* first appeared in 1952, the spiritual status of the Communist idea was entirely different from what it is today. We had read, for example, *The God That Failed*, a collection of important essays by intellectuals who had renounced Communism; Communism had “failed,” but it was still a “god.” We had read George Orwell’s *1984*, in which the “party” and Commissar O’Brien are all-powerful. In Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, the idea of Communism is so powerful that Rubashov willingly sacrifices himself to it. . . . Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness* belongs in this same genre; its thesis is that Communism is evil but spiritually powerful, and that it is going to win historically.

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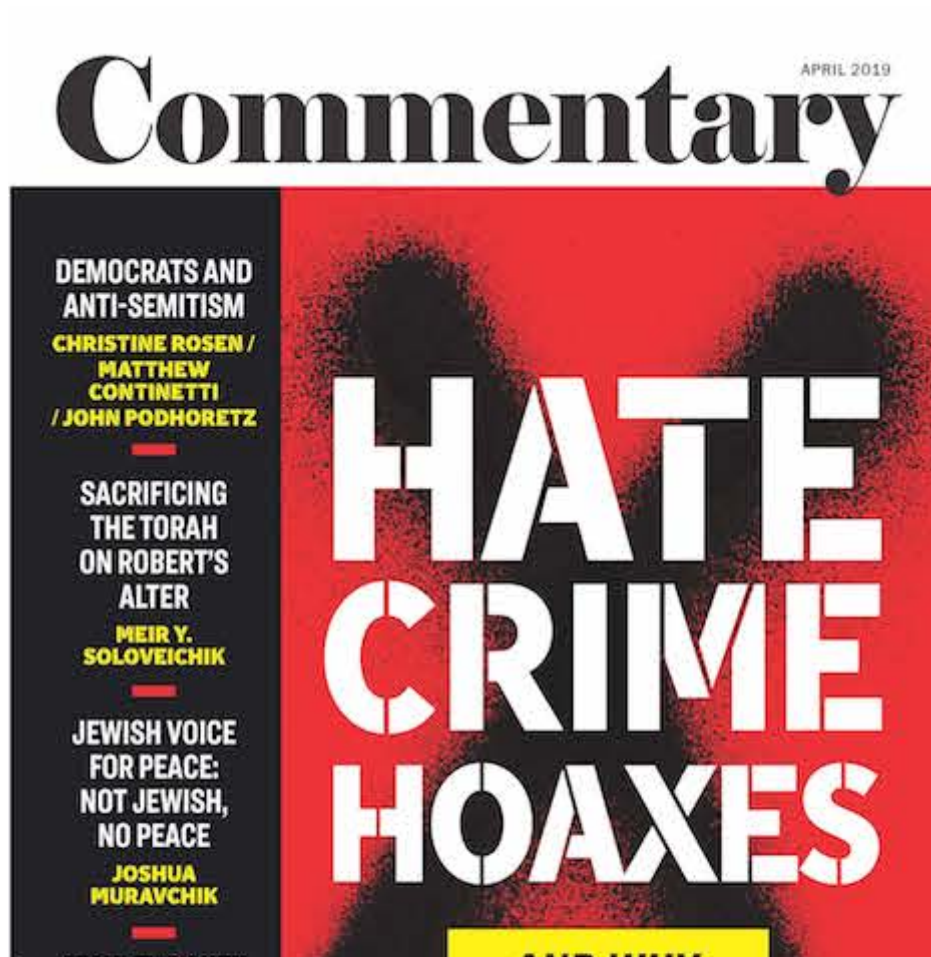


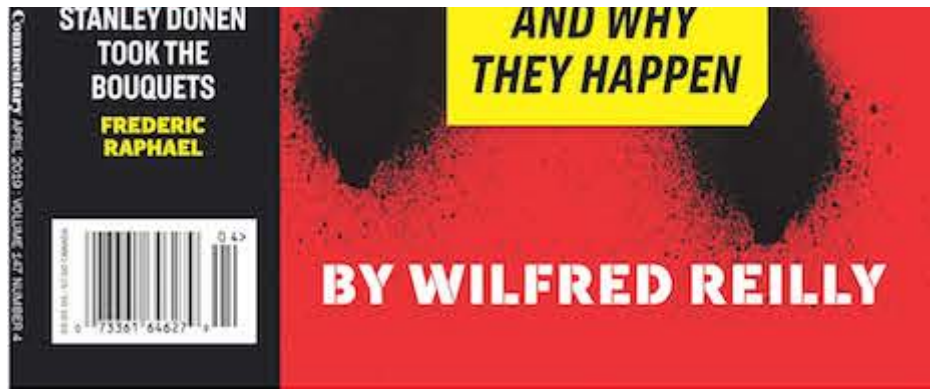


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