

THE WEEKLY PRINT

In another spring without JazzFest, a New Orleans synagogue steps up; The State Dept.'s diversity officer grew up among Orthodox Jews in Cleveland; New DNC chair stands by Israel amid progressive headwinds; Patrick Radden Keefe's account of the family behind the opioid epidemic; and The White House is reviewing Western Sahara recognition. Here's what's at stake.

APRIL 20, 2021

In another spring without JazzFest, a New Orleans synagogue steps up

Congregation Gates of Prayer's 'GatesFest' mini-music festival aims to give musicians a stage amid the pandemic

By Gabby Deutch

Just weeks after Mardi Gras last year, the coronavirus began to sweep through New Orleans, forcing the city to shutter its storied jazz clubs, bars and restaurants. The French Quarter was empty. A lone musician might be seen on a street corner, wailing on a saxophone for imaginary listeners.

But the Big Easy was not without music for long. The city stepped up to keep its culture alive, with homeowners hosting porch concerts, inviting out-of-work musicians to perform for small neighborhood audiences. When the city canceled its famed JazzFest, set to take place in late April and early May of last year, local radio stations broadcast festival sets from years past. Now, JazzFest has been postponed to the fall, but one community institution is stepping in to host its own jazz festival this spring: a synagogue.

Congregation Gates of Prayer, a Reform synagogue in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans, will host a music festival called "GatesFest" in its parking lot on the weekend that JazzFest would have occurred this year. Some of the city's iconic jazz acts, including the Rebirth Brass Band and George Porter

Jr., will be performing.

"I'm a big lover of jazz: I turned 18 at JazzFest. I turned 30 at JazzFest. My 40th birthday was supposed to be last year at JazzFest, with the Beach Boys," said David Gerber, the synagogue's senior rabbi. "I kind of jokingly said last year that if they cancel JazzFest, I'm going to have it in my backyard."

GatesFest is selling tickets for pods of up to six adults (children can attend at no extra cost) and anticipates an audience of 400 adults at the April 25 event, a far cry from the hundreds of thousands who usually attend JazzFest, but a sizable showing for the congregation. But the goal of GatesFest, which is a fundraiser for the synagogue, is not to rival the festival; it's to offer a show of support to the city's struggling musicians and demonstrate the Jewish community's support.

"We've been trying to not just have this festival, but we're really trying to support our community with it," Gerber said. The festival will also have an art gallery, where local artists can sell their work, and food stands from nearby restaurants. "We're not charging artists to have a stand there. We're

just giving them space and hoping they sell as much as they can. For the restaurants, they're having booths, and they're selling, and we're trying to get their servers tips. We're really just trying to support our community."

Eight bands will perform across two stages, with a family-friendly lineup that takes the stage at 10 a.m. and finishes before nightfall. Social distancing will be enforced; guests will have their temperature checked when they arrive. The art village will feature local artists, as well as Judaica from the synagogue's sisterhood gift shop.

The festival is an extension of a concert series that Gates of Prayer hosted in its parking lot in the fall. The synagogue had hosted drive-in movies, and while Gerber wanted to expand the offerings to Shabbat meals, he did not yet think it was responsible to do so because "eating and drinking involves removing the mask." So the synagogue began hosting Shabbat concerts with New Orleans musicians.

"There were just so many musicians in need of a stage. Everything was closed, and in New Orleans, when there's no music, the city isn't quite the same," said Gerber. "We

set up our little stage in our parking lot, the same stage that we use for our Purim shpiel,” he added, and “people were just so thrilled to be able to look at other human beings that the music was almost background. I kind of had in my mind from that point on that if JazzFest was canceled, that we would do something in its place.”

Gerber worked with synagogue member Howie Kaplan, the owner of the Howlin’ Wolf club in New Orleans’s Warehouse District, to bring musicians to the congregation. Gerber got to know Kaplan early in the pandemic; Kaplan’s son’s bar mitzvah was the first that Gerber performed after COVID-19 emerged. “I spent a lot of time with him and heard about how much these bands are struggling,” Gerber said of Kaplan. “That was inspirational, as well. He’s supported us along the way.”

“It’s a very New Orleans thing. We like to say New Orleans knows how to take care of itself,” Kaplan told JI. Kaplan is the manager for the festival’s top-billed performer, the Rebirth Brass Band, and he helped Gerber handle contracts and other logistical preparations for the event. Kaplan has been an outspoken voice in the city and nationally about the importance of supporting artists, lobbying Congress to pass the Save our

Stages Act to give grants to independent venues. Last Tuesday, the Howlin’ Wolf — which has recently begun hosting indoor performances again — offered a “shot for a shot” special, where patrons could come get the Moderna vaccine and a free shot of liquor.

Well before the pandemic, New Orleans synagogues joined in the culture that defines the city, sometimes in unexpected ways. “Congregation Gates of Prayer, years ago, used to host crawfish boils. Not exactly the most kosher thing in the world, but it’s a very New Orleans thing,” said Kaplan. (The event bears at least a passing resemblance to the infamous 1883 “Trefa Banquet,” when the first class of rabbis ordained by Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati were feted with a feast that included clams, shrimp, and crab — and which fragmented the budding Reform movement in the U.S.)

Gates of Prayer also routinely hosts “second lines,” which Gerber defined as “a kind of spontaneous mini-parade.” Second lines are a local tradition, not just at Mardi Gras but also at weddings and even funerals: a brass band performs, and revelers parade behind them.

“When the [NFL] Saints are in the playoffs, we do a Saints Shabbat, and

at the end of the service, I had a little marching band of about a half dozen brass instruments come play our closing song. Then we just march around into the oneg,” Gerber recalled. Gates of Prayer has also had second lines at bar mitzvahs, and on holidays: “With Simchat Torah, we just follow the band around with the Torah in our parking lot,” Gerber said.

New Orleans’s Jewish community dates back to the late 18th century, but has long welcomed newcomers. “A nice thing about the New Orleans community is that for people who want to be part of it, the community will welcome you completely,” Gerber said.

His family moved to the area less than three years ago from the Philadelphia area, right around the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. At the time, he posted about the storm on Facebook, feeling slightly self-conscious that he might be placing himself into a history in which he did not belong. “A rabbinic colleague of mine who’s from New Orleans sent me a message saying that by choosing to live in New Orleans, you write yourself into the story of New Orleans,” he said. ♦

APRIL 21, 2021

The State Dept.’s diversity officer grew up among Orthodox Jews in Cleveland

Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley grew up in the heavily Jewish Cleveland Heights suburb and studied Hebrew in high school

By Gabby Deutch

There’s a scene in *Heartburn*, the Nora Ephron novel based loosely on her marriage to and divorce from investigative reporter Carl Bernstein, in which a handful of people are discussing diplomacy in the Middle East. The narrator introduces the fictional “undersecretary of state in charge of Middle Eastern affairs” to her Jewish father, who then turns to him and says, “I suppose they don’t give that job to the Jews.”

“That’s right,” the undersecretary of state responds.

The moment is meant to be humorous — it followed the narrator’s wry observations about leaving her beloved New York City for the unfamiliar world of Washington diplomacy — but it relayed a truth that, at the time the book was published in 1983, went without saying: The State Department was an exclusive place, and not all Americans were given equal opportunity to climb

its ranks.

At the time, Jewish diplomats were routinely kept away from posts involving Israel or the Middle East, due to concerns that they would be loyal to Israel if conflicts arose between Israel and the U.S. That began to change by the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton appointed Martin Indyk as the first Jewish ambassador to Israel and named Dennis Ross and Aaron David Miller to other senior Middle East posts.

Of course, Jews are not the only minority group to face hurdles in diplomacy. Black diplomats have often been relegated to positions in Africa, due to an assumption that they might better relate to Africans. (A recent letter from the Association of Black American Ambassadors called on the State Department and USAID to “cease the practice of assigning African Americans predominantly to the Africa Bureau.”) Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Andy Kim (D-NJ) recently shared on Twitter that when he worked at the State Department earlier in his career, he once “received a letter banning me from working on Korea issues just because of my last name,” even though “I didn’t even apply to work on Korea. The State Dept was proactively telling me they didn’t trust me.”

Now, the Biden administration is attempting to mediate the diplomatic corps’s lack of diversity. Last week, Secretary of State Tony Blinken named former Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, a Black woman who served as ambassador to Malta after three decades as a foreign service officer in postings including Tel Aviv, as the State Department’s first chief diversity and inclusion officer.

“When we fail to build a team that reflects America, it’s like we’re engaging the world with one arm tied behind our back,” Blinken said in his introduction of Abercrombie-Winstanley, 64. “And as President Biden has made clear, prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility is also a national security imperative.”

In a statement to Jewish Insider, Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) praised the appointment of Abercrombie-Winstanley, a Cleveland native. “Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley’s breadth of experience after more than two decades of a career diplomat, with postings in Asia, Northern Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and here in Washington, make her an optimal choice to oversee the State Department’s diversity and inclusion priorities,” Brown said.

Abercrombie-Winstanley did not respond to multiple requests for comment from Jewish Insider, but she has spoken in the past about how her experience studying abroad in Israel helped spark her interest in diplomacy. “My first two plane rides ever were to and from college” — at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. — “and my third was to Tel Aviv,” she said in an interview with a magazine affiliated with her childhood school district. (The experience was not entirely positive; she said in the interview that she didn’t have a roommate in Israel until another non-Jewish student arrived, making her feel like an outsider. “No one else was willing to live with her, as a non-Jew or with me, as a Black girl,” she said.)

Growing up in Cleveland Heights, in the eastern suburbs of the northeast Ohio city, Abercrombie-Winstanley took Hebrew classes at the public Cleveland Heights High School. At her nomination hearing to become ambassador to Malta in 2012, Brown introduced Abercrombie-Winstanley by noting that her education was “reinforced by the culture of Orthodox Judaism that shaped the neighborhood of Cleveland Heights where she was raised.”

Ron Klein, a former Florida congressman and the current board chair of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, called Cleveland Heights a “very demographically mixed population. This wasn’t one of these areas that was all white or all Black.” Klein graduated from Heights High a couple years ahead of Abercrombie-Winstanley, though he did not know her, and he said it was pretty rare that a non-Jewish kid would take Hebrew. “My recollection would have been almost all Jewish kids taking the class,” Klein said, but it wasn’t entirely surprising: “It wasn’t a pristine suburban perfect place, but it was a great place to really get a good education.”

Even today, the city remains roughly half Black and half white, although many white residents left Cleveland Heights for further-flung suburbs in the “white flight” of the 1960s and 1970s.

(The local Jewish federation, which was then located in downtown Cleveland, worked to keep Jews from leaving the eastern suburbs in the 1970s and 1980s, though most community institutions eventually relocated to the suburb of Beachwood, which has a larger Jewish population.)

At the announcement of Abercrombie-Winstanley’s hiring, Blinken cited a Government Accountability Office report from 2020 that found that “racial or ethnic minorities in the department’s Civil Service were up to 29% less likely to be promoted than their white peers with similar qualifications,” even after factors like education and years of service were controlled. The report also found that the share of Black Americans in the State Department’s permanent, full-time workforce decreased from 17% to 15% from 2002 to 2018.

The diversity initiative comes as the Biden administration is seeking to grow the foreign service. Blinken has spoken of staffing up the State Department’s ranks after a historic number of career diplomats and foreign service officers resigned or were fired during the Trump administration. In late 2017, just months after former President Donald Trump took office, the head of the American Foreign Service Association — the union that represents diplomats — said that the State Department had lost 60% of career ambassadors in that year alone.

Abercrombie-Winstanley was among the wave of diplomats who left the State Department early in the Trump administration. “In August, my dream assignment in the Office of Global Women’s Issues was withdrawn less than a week before my start date, and I was told, ‘We don’t want leadership for that office.’ The role remains unfilled,” Abercrombie-Winstanley wrote in a 2018 *New York Times* op-ed. “It has always been a struggle for minorities and women to reach our full potential in the white-male-dominated world of diplomacy. The State Department has

long struggled to reflect ‘looking like America’ among our senior officer corps, and under this president the refusal to utilize the talent, experience and passion of so many people dedicated to serving our nation was heartbreaking.”

In her brief three-year stint outside of government, Abercrombie-Winstanley became a vocal advocate for increasing diversity in diplomacy. And while she has publicly expressed her frustration with the Trump administration, her comments have focused very specifically on its actions and attitudes toward U.S. diplomacy and foreign policy.

“These are some of the most patriotic people you’ll find, people who believe and live their careers in this way that transcends politics of one administration or another,” said Dan Moulthrop, CEO of the City Club of Cleveland, a local civic organization, and a friend of Abercrombie-Winstanley. “They’re so devoted to the American cause and the cause of democracy in ways that I think it’s really hard for ordinary Americans like you and me to understand because we all take politics so seriously.” He observed that this might be why her comments on Trump, and politics in general, have been so considered: “She has always been extraordinarily diplomatic.”

With a group of prominent female foreign policy practitioners, Abercrombie-Winstanley helped launch the Leadership Council for Women in National Security (LCWINS) in 2019, to provide mentorship to women entering the field and advocate for the inclusion

of more women in senior governmental roles.

“The joke about the Foreign Service is that it’s ‘pale, male and Yale,’ but that’s not without some historical foundation,” said Tamara Cofman Wittes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who served as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the Obama administration and worked with Abercrombie-Winstanley to launch LCWINS.

Issues of diversity “have complex roots, and it will take a lot of work across the institution” to fix the problem, Wittes said. “Creating this position is part of sending a strong message throughout the [State] Department that this is a priority, and that it’s got to be integrated into everything the Department does,” Wittes said of Abercrombie-Winstanley’s new role.

Wittes did not get to know Abercrombie-Winstanley well until their work together on LCWINS, but at an event early last year, Wittes learned that they shared something surprising in common: “She and I went to the same overseas student program at Tel Aviv University, a few years apart. We had both done that program, we had both gone through the ulpan [Hebrew instruction] there, we both lived in the same dormitory building,” Wittes recalled. “That experience both drew us closer to the field.”

Abercrombie-Winstanley’s career centered on the Middle East and North Africa, taking her to postings ranging from Cairo to Baghdad to Jakarta. She spent a stint in Tel Aviv monitoring the

Gaza Strip in the mid-1990s. Indyk, who was ambassador to Israel at the time, told JI that “she was an excellent young foreign service officer in those days.”

In the early 2000s, she became the first woman to serve as U.S. consul general in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She has said that the posting gave her the status of “honorary male,” since women in Saudi Arabia — particularly at the time — are often barred from working in public-facing roles. But that also allowed her to learn from women in the country: “I get to see literally half of Saudi society that my (male) predecessor did not,” she said in a 2004 interview. Later that year, Abercrombie-Winstanley survived an al-Qaeda attack on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah, going on to receive a State Department award for her courage on that day.

While working overseas, Abercrombie-Winstanley experienced racism in addition to the sexism she faced in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Still, she told *The Atlantic* last year, “It is only when I am overseas that I am truly and fully American. When I am in the Middle East or in Asia or even in Europe, I am seen as nothing but a U.S. diplomat.”

Stateside, Abercrombie-Winstanley has said that racism has been her biggest barrier. “I have found low expectations of me as a minority to be a bigger obstacle than low expectations of me as a woman, though they both remain in good supply in the State Department,” she said in 2017. ♦

New DNC chair stands by Israel amid progressive headwinds

Jaime Harrison, who challenged Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), says Democrats will follow Biden's lead on Israel policy

By Matthew Kassel

Jaime Harrison, the newly appointed chairman of the Democratic National Committee, emphasized in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Friday that his party would follow President Joe Biden's lead with respect to U.S.-Israel policy.

"We as a party take our guidance from the White House and the Biden-Harris administration," Harrison told *J.I.* "So in many ways, the party won't deviate from that. We will follow the president's guidance and the administration's policy."

The Democratic Party platform affirms a commitment to U.S. funding for the Jewish state while opposing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, as well as such actions as annexation and settlement expansion that some fear could undermine a two-state solution. The platform was regarded as a reflection of Biden's views when it was approved last August, as internal discussions about adding a reference to "occupation," which caused some debate during the drafting process, were ultimately nixed.

Still, a growing chorus of progressive lawmakers have called for conditioning U.S. aid to Israel, which the Biden administration rejects. Last week, Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), a longstanding critic of U.S.-Israel policy, introduced legislation that places restrictions on U.S. aid. The bill was co-sponsored by, among others, Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN).

Despite such efforts, Harrison, 45, suggested in the interview with *J.I.* that support for Israel within the Democratic Party remains strong.

"Joe Biden has, as president and even before, been very clear about unwavering

support for Israel as our ally, as our partner, as our friend," said Harrison. "Individuals may have their own opinions, but it is very clear to me, as a party-wide stance, we see Israel as a friend, as an ally and as our greatest ally in that region of the world — and we aren't moving away from that."

Harrison, who succeeded former Labor Secretary Tom Perez in the chairman role, said he has not yet discussed the party's Israel platform plank with Biden since taking over at the DNC in January.

As Biden negotiates a return to the Iran nuclear deal, his administration has also met some resistance from moderate Democrats, like Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA), who are wary of the 2015 agreement.

"The majority of Democrats, I'm sure, will follow where the president is and how he's proceeding on this," Harrison told *J.I.* "It does not mean that, at the end of the day, you'll get unanimous support. There are members who, for whatever reason, given their districts or their own perspective and experiences, may differ, and that's fine. I mean, we're a big-tent party where sometimes there are differences on particular issues. But in terms of where we go as a party, as a party organization, we will be where the president is."

Harrison, who previously served as chairman of the South Carolina Democratic Party, ran a high-profile campaign against Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) last November, losing by 10 percentage points while raising more than \$100 million. Under Harrison's guidance, the DNC has pulled in record fundraising sums.

"I feel good about where we are as a party at this point, but I think we can get better," he said. "We can tighten up our message, and we're doing just that. I mean, you take a look at how unified we were in terms of the

American Rescue Act, and how focused we were in terms of delivering that message to the American people. We're still doing that, and that's going to be the model by which we move forward — unified in purpose, unified in mission, unified in message and extremely focused."

Harrison rejected the notion that a post-election rift between moderates and progressives on issues like socialism and defunding the police was a threat to party unity, even as Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) renewed such debate last Monday when she called for an end to policing following the shooting of Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center, Minn.

Harrison emphasized that "one individual member of the House" isn't responsible for the Democratic Party's messaging, adding that "our members just don't have that power," though he acknowledged that "people are free to believe what they want to believe and state what they want to state."

"We understand there's a lot of passions going on right now," he told *J.I.* "But I think, at the end of the day, my message to our members and our candidates is, 'You need to reflect your district, you need to talk about the issues that are important to the people that you are representing.'"

The former Senate hopeful, a protégé of House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D-SC), said it was possible for Democrats to uphold a broad party message while catering to the individual needs of their states and districts. "The contrast between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party couldn't be even clearer," he said. "You've got one party in this country who's doing everything that they possibly can in order to take the right to vote away from folks or to make it much difficult for them to exercise their right."

“On the other side, you have a party that’s fighting for the American people, getting money in their pockets, making sure they keep their jobs,” he said. “The contrast in the brands could not be more stark or clear than what we what we currently have. Now, folks, will have some diversity in terms of where they are on other things. But there’s one freedom party here in this country, there’s one equality party in this country, and that’s the Democratic Party.”

Going into the next cycle, Harrison said he would “fight like hell” to ensure that Democrats hold onto their razor-thin margins in both the House and the Senate.

“We’re going to go out and work with our

sister committees to help with recruitment,” he said. “We’re going to get more people registered to vote. We’re going to educate them on the importance of voting. We’re going to mobilize them to get them to the polls. And then, in the end, we’re going to protect them as the Republicans attempt to suppress them at the polls. So those are the things that we can control, and I believe that if we do those steps, and we do those steps well, we’ll be in good shape.”

While some Democrats have announced bids to unseat Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) in Harrison’s home state of South Carolina next year, the DNC chair said the gubernatorial election would be a “particularly interesting”

race to watch.

“We haven’t had declarations yet on the Democratic side, and I expect that Henry McMaster may even have a few primary opponents,” Harrison said, referring to South Carolina’s Republican governor. “I think he’s a weak governor who doesn’t have a strong track record to run off of, and that gives Democrats here a great opportunity.”

“I think we built the foundation,” Harrison said of his own Senate bid. “We woke up 1.1 million people.” ♦

APRIL 16, 2021

Patrick Radden Keefe’s account of the family behind the opioid epidemic

In his new book, ‘Empire of Pain,’ the intrepid reporter examines the story of the Sackler family, who created OxyContin

By Matthew Kassel

By his own admission, the intrepid reporter Patrick Radden Keefe, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, has never taken OxyContin, the highly addictive painkiller introduced 25 years ago by the drug manufacturer Purdue Pharma.

But Keefe is more intimately acquainted with the narcotic — and the shocking story behind it — than most. His deeply reported new book, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*, lays out with damning specificity how the Sacklers, the family behind Purdue Pharma, built a pharmaceutical juggernaut while fueling the opioid epidemic that has claimed more than 450,000 lives since the late ’90s.

“Prior to the introduction of OxyContin, America did not have an opioid crisis,” Keefe writes in his detailed historical account,

released this week by Doubleday. “After the introduction of OxyContin, it did.”

The 44-year-old author and journalist admits he was “shocked” to discover that the Sacklers, until recently better known for their cultural philanthropy, were responsible for the powerful narcotic relentlessly marketed by Purdue Pharma despite clear evidence of OxyContin’s widespread abuse. Some family members are now in legal peril as they seek to fend off a barrage of lawsuits.

“There was a kind of initial revelation,” Keefe told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, “which was, there’s this name that I see when I go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and actually, this fortune is associated with this drug that has created a lot of carnage.”

In the interview, Keefe, whose previous books include *Say Nothing: A True Story of*

Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland, discussed the Sacklers’ fall from grace and his own experience digging into the family’s past.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

JJ: *You’ve previously reported on the Mexican drug trade. How did you hit upon this story?*

Keefe: For a long time, I’ve been really interested in the role that drugs play in American society, whether they’re legal or illegal. I had written a couple of big pieces about the Sinaloa drug cartel, and about the consequences of drug prohibition, really — that you have this huge, multi-billion-dollar, cross-border trade between Mexico

and the U.S. in illicit drugs. I did a big piece for *The New Yorker*, probably in 2014, and then I also did one, possibly the same year, about the legalization of cannabis in Washington State. That was so fascinating to me because you're looking at what had been this big, clandestine pot economy that then gets legalized kind of at the stroke of a pen. What's it going to resemble? More like alcohol? More like cigarettes? How do you police it? How do you control marketing?

Those themes were always really interesting to me. I had always felt that with the Mexican drug cartels, a lot of the press coverage — this is going to sound more glib than I mean it — but for understandable reasons, the press coverage focuses on the grisly murders and the illegality of what's happening. I was kind of interested in them as businesses — the ways in which these drug trafficking organizations actually kind of resemble big commodity businesses. And so, getting to Purdue, what happened was I noticed the uptick in heroin coming into the U.S., wondered about that, started to educate myself on the opioid crisis, and then it doesn't take long when you start reading about the opioid crisis to come upon OxyContin and Purdue Pharma. And the big revelation for me was the Sacklers.

JJ: *It must have been somewhat striking to realize that the name we associate with philanthropy and the arts was behind this sort of epidemic of addiction. What was that like for you to peel back the layers?*

Keefe: I was really shocked. When I started reading up on it, I read *Pain Killer* by Barry Meier, which had been published all the way back in 2003, and Sam Quinones's great book *Dreamland*, which also talks about the Sacklers. So there was a kind of initial revelation, which was, there's this name that I see when I go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and actually, this fortune is associated with this drug that has created a lot of carnage. The second revelation was that, actually, this was kind of an open secret — it had been written about before — and I couldn't really understand how it was, given the fact that it was already in the public record that the Sacklers owned Purdue, and that the company had pled guilty to felony charges in 2007. I was just surprised that the

questions hadn't caught up with them, and that their money still seemed to be pretty widely accepted. In 2017, it was a name that connoted prestige in elite circles.

JJ: *Is the implication that the Sackler family is kind of like a modern American drug cartel?*

Keefe: No, I mean, I think [that's] kind of pushing it too far, and I wouldn't go that far. I guess this is what I would say: I've always been interested in the ways in which illegal drug organizations resemble legal businesses, and I became very interested in some specific ways in which legal Big Pharma practices sometimes resemble those of drug cartels — for instance, offering free samples to an addictive product. In the case of Purdue, they offered these coupons for a free prescription, and that's something I know because I've looked into it at great length. When the Sinaloa cartel decided that methamphetamine was going to be their big new product, they started sending free samples to Chicago so that people would try it. But I think sometimes people get a little carried away with the rhetoric and they try and draw too precise an analogy there. Let's remember, nobody's suggesting that the Sacklers, or Purdue, had roving gangs of armed assassins, right? I mean, I think this is a business that did break the law and engage in crime. They pled guilty again in 2020, just a few months ago. So there's illegality there, but it's of a different category than the Sinaloa cartel, and I wouldn't want to suggest otherwise.

JJ: *You do suggest that Purdue Pharma tried to strong-arm you as you wrote about them. You mention in the book that it seemed as if you were being surveilled, though the company denied it. A lawyer for the Sacklers also told the Times that you've "refused to correct errors" in your "past reporting and "blatantly violated journalistic ethics by refusing to meet with representatives for the Sackler family." But no one in the Sackler family cooperated with you for the book. How did you navigate all that, and was it different from previous reporting experiences?*

Keefe: I've written about very wealthy people before who have tried to manhandle

my reporting and the way the piece would be written. I've written about some fairly scary figures from the criminal underworld. This was a different kind of experience. Part of the story I try and tell in the book is that it's not an accident that even after Barry Meier's reporting and even after the guilty plea in 2007 and even after Sam Quinones's book, the Sacklers still enjoyed a pretty good reputation. People hadn't really made that connection between them and OxyContin. I think the reason is that they have had, for 20 years, this apparatus of lawyers and PR hatchet men who, any time journalists start writing about this stuff, they just come down on them like a ton of bricks.

For years, it worked. I tell the story in the book about how *The New York Times* took Barry Meier off the story after Purdue Pharma intervened. They did what the Sacklers always do: They're always saying, "Can I see your manager?" They love to go to people's bosses. They did with me. They've written notes to *The New Yorker* about how irresponsible I am. It was frustrating to have to work on the book and be dealing with that kind of static all along the way — and particularly frustrating given that I gave them a fair shake. I sent them a really long list of very detailed queries from the book asking them to confirm or deny, and initially, they said, "Oh, we're going to give you very detailed answers," and then they waited. They asked for more time — they got five weeks — and then they came back with just like a page and a half saying, "Your book is full of lies, we're not going to cooperate." So it's frustrating to me that they wouldn't engage in a kind of good faith way. Instead, what they were often trying to do was question my journalistic integrity. But both in the context of this book and in my prior work, I feel like at this point my record speaks for itself.

JJ: *You mentioned in a separate interview that you wrote most of this book sitting in bed. What was that like? How did you keep track of all the documents you consulted for this research-heavy book?*

Keefe: It was a strange process. There was about a year when I was working on the book before COVID hit, and that was a lot of reporting and going to archives

and going out and meeting people. When the pandemic started, I was just sort of grounded, but by that point, I had a lot of the documents already, and so I kept reporting. I was calling a lot of people. My wife and I share a home office, and she has a job that normally takes her into the city every day, but she wasn't doing that. So I got the bed. It worked out strangely fine, in the sense that because there were so many documents, I found that the bed was a useful place to lay everything out. Everything was right there within easy reach, and I still have a little bit of a mild back pain to show for it. But that's the worst of it.

JJ: *You devote a substantial portion of the book to Arthur Sackler, the family "patriarch," as you describe him. His heirs aren't affiliated with Purdue Pharma and have tried to distance themselves from the controversy surrounding the company. How much do you blame Arthur for the opioid epidemic?*

Keefe: It's a very complicated and nuanced question, and this is part of the reason that I devoted a third of the book to Arthur. Arthur died in 1987. His children and his widow point out, rightly, that he wasn't around when OxyContin was invented, he didn't market the drug, and in fact, they sold their stake in Purdue before the drug was rolled out. So today, the descendants of Arthur Sackler are not beneficiaries of OxyContin in any sense, and I make all that clear in the book. Having said that, as I think I also make clear in the book, Arthur Sackler pioneered a certain template for the marketing of pharmaceuticals, particularly pharmaceuticals that are potentially addictive. When you look at the various drugs I describe in the book — Librium, Valium — these drugs were marketed by Arthur, where you see the seeds for what happens decades later with Oxycontin.

To me, the book is about kind of gradations of complicity, and I think of it as concentric circles. Richard Sackler is just the red hot bull's-eye of complicity, and then you have these other characters who are kind of arrayed outward in those circles. The suggestion that Arthur Sackler's heirs make is that he's nowhere on the target at all, that there's no relationship to this story whatsoever. They say, like, "It

should just be the Raymond and Mortimer Sackler family." It always makes me chuckle because I think about that, you know, there are two other Koch brothers who might not want to be referred to as the Koch brothers. With Arthur, the way we evaluate morally what he did vis-à-vis this drug that was introduced after he died, it's no comparison to the people who were working at Purdue when they rolled out OxyContin or, in fact, to the people who today are very rich, even if they didn't work at the company, because of OxyContin sales. But I also think that it's important to look at him, and I think that he ended up having a really significant impact on the way in which drugs are sold in this country and kind of creating the universe in which Oxycontin could happen.

JJ: *Despite that things went so wrong, Arthur does seem like an archetypal sort of Jewish-American striver.*

Keefe: To me, this is a book, in a way, about the American dream, and there's a kind of almost mythical, archetypal, Horatio Alger quality to the early story, where you have this immigrant family that comes with nothing, and they work incredibly hard, and they invest in education, and they have higher ideals, and they have great ambitions. In some ways, it's a cautionary tale about where ambition can take you. But I do think that there's no way that it didn't really forge the identities of those three brothers that they lived in a world in which — glass ceiling isn't exactly the word that I want — but there were these little reminders everywhere that no matter how far you come, you could still be excluded on the basis of the fact that you're a Jew. Even if you're not all that observant, even if you could pass as a gentile, as Arthur sometimes did, there were these moments of exclusion, and how could it not have profoundly influenced Mortimer and Raymond that, when they want to apply to medical school, they can't? They can't go in this country. They have to leave the country because of Jewish quotas.

And Arthur, I think, felt conscious that — even as he ascended the New York aristocracy — there would be these moments where he was kind of brought low. The most dramatic one for me — and this was something that's nobody ever written about — was that early

congressional testimony where Arthur's trying to get funding for his program at the asylum, and this senator starts talking about *The Merchant of Venice*. And I don't know, I feel a huge amount of empathy with Arthur in that moment, because on the one hand, he's kind of arriving and he's just on the cusp of this great life and he's testifying in the U.S. Senate, and this guy, like, accuses him of being a Shylock, and it's a senator.

Who wouldn't come out of that with a kind of hypersensitivity to whether or not you're in the club? I think you see it later where Arthur felt that the Met wouldn't give him a board seat because he was Jewish. There were Jewish board members and there were a number of senior officials who were Jewish who said, "That's just paranoia." There were other concerns that people had about Arthur. But I just think that experience of social exclusion, notwithstanding all of the incredible work and how brilliant they were, could only have affected them.

JJ: *The Sacklers last month offered to pay around \$4.3 billion to end the many lawsuits being brought against them. How do you expect this legal saga to end?*

Keefe: I think the end game is going to play out in the next few months in this bankruptcy court in White Plains. The Sacklers have proposed to pay about four and a quarter billion dollars — and I think their hope is that they would do that, all of the cases against the company would be resolved, and they would basically get a release from roughly two dozen states that are suing not just Purdue but the Sacklers. And whether or not that happens remains to be seen. It'll depend on whether or not the states sign off on the plan, and there's a piece of legislation that's been introduced on Capitol Hill called the Sackler Act. If it were passed between now and August, that would actually prevent the bankruptcy judge from giving a release from all those lawsuits to the family, so that's also kind of hanging in the balance. It's a strange aspect of this book, where I hope that the book feels somewhat conclusive, because I think the broad outlines of how this story is going to end are pretty clear already. But it's also the case that there will be a big postscript in the next couple of months.

There's a related question, too, which is, the Sackler name is still on the Sackler wing at the Met and a variety of other institutions, and it'll be really interesting to watch those institutions. The Met has said, I think the word they use is, "we're reassessing" or "assessing whether or not we're going to keep the name."

JJ: *Do you intend to continue covering the story as it progresses, or are you done with Sacklers for the time being?*

Keefe: You know, one of the weirdest things about doing this kind of work is that

people keep coming out of the woodwork. Even just in the last few days of the publicity with the book, I've been getting notes from people who worked at Purdue, people who know the Sacklers — which is tempting, to keep gathering string. But I think for now, unless something changes my mind, I've kind of said my piece on this and I'll defer to other journalists.

JJ: *Is there anything else you're working on now?*

Keefe: I don't have anything. It's very strange. In a fairly short order, I published

a book two years ago and then I did a podcast that came out last spring and then this book. So I'm just going to kind of take a deep breath and figure out what's next. I don't have anything on the agenda, and it's making me feel a little anxious.

JJ: *Have you ever taken OxyContin?*

Keefe: That's amazing. Nobody has asked me that yet. I thought I would get the question at some point. I have not. I've taken milder opioids after procedures and what have you over the years. But no, not OxyContin, ever. ♦

APRIL 23, 2021

The White House is reviewing Western Sahara recognition. Here's what's at stake

In brokering a deal between Israel and Morocco, the U.S. became the first Western nation to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed North African territory

By Gabby Deutch

Just weeks before leaving office, President Donald Trump announced a resumption of diplomatic ties between Israel and Morocco, one of five Arab countries to recognize Israel in a series of historic deals. Unlike the other countries, Morocco has not yet resumed full diplomatic ties with Israel. Full normalization between Israel and Morocco hangs in the balance as the White House reviews a key component of the deal.

Morocco agreed to the deal on the condition that the U.S. recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony claimed by both Morocco and the Sahrawi people, who are indigenous to the region. The leadership of the Polisario Front, the movement seeking independence for Western Sahara, is based in Algeria, along with thousands

of Sahrawi refugees.

Trump's decision made the U.S. the first Western nation to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, raising questions about how the U.S. might handle other contested territories such as Crimea and even Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

It also has major implications for Israel abroad: If the Biden administration reneges on the Trump policy, there's a chance Morocco could once again cease or not advance diplomatic ties with Israel. And the issue is far from settled in Washington, with 27 senators hailing from both parties signing a recent letter urging the Biden administration to take back its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in the region.

Morocco's decision to resume official ties with Israel, following decades of discreet relations between the countries, was widely celebrated by Jewish and

pro-Israel organizations. Most of the groups that commented on the agreement did not weigh in specifically on the issue of Western Sahara, with some exceptions; the American Jewish Committee, for instance, has taken a strong stance in support of Moroccan recognition.

AJC's chief policy and political affairs officer, Jason Isaacson, said that recognizing Morocco's claims is simply what the U.S. should do for a steadfast ally. "Morocco is an ally, a force for moderation, stability and interreligious harmony, and a partner in counterterrorism — and the Western Sahara is part of Moroccan history, the kingdom's patrimony," Isaacson told *Jewish Insider*. He argued that reversing the policy now "would be a mistake, and a show of bad faith to a longtime friend."

Morocco has linked the Polisario Front to Iran. In 2018, Rabat cut off

diplomatic relations with Tehran after claiming the Iran-backed Hezbollah provided weapons and training to the organization. Some have argued an Iran connection is reason enough for Biden to maintain the deal.

“This becomes relevant because I would say all administrations are against the expansion of Iranian power and influence across the Middle East, and whether you’re in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or the Western Sahara, it’s the same problem,” said Dore Gold, former director-general of Israel’s Foreign Ministry.

However, neither American nor Israeli officials have mentioned the potential Iranian connection in their comments on the December agreement between Israel and Morocco, and not everyone agrees that the Iranian connection is particularly significant.

“The whole Iran-Hezbollah connection with the Polisario? I don’t make much of it,” said Dan Arbell, a scholar-in-residence at American University and a former Israeli diplomat. “I think it’s a good Moroccan talking point, good propaganda point, but if there are contacts, they are very minimal [and] very insignificant.”

In Washington, the issue is far from settled. While Morocco has a sizable number of supporters in Congress — a congressional caucus on Morocco was formed in 2011 to signal support for the “vital strategic friend” in the early days of the Arab Spring — a bipartisan group of senators, led by Jim Inhofe (R-OK) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT), has been vocally opposed to unilateral recognition of Moroccan sovereignty.

“I think the way that the decision was made is what folks find very objectionable... [it] comes up against the current administration’s pretty strong belief and support for international institutions,” said Sarah Feuer, the Rosenbloom Family Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Geduld Program on Arab Politics. “They don’t want to convey that if people go around just annexing territory, then eventually it can gain U.S. recognition.” Such a precedent could have implications for conflicts involving American adversaries, like Russia’s annexation of Crimea, or even for American allies, such as Israel’s quest to annex parts of the West Bank.

After Trump announced the agreement between Morocco and Israel in December, Inhofe, a Trump supporter, said that the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty is “shocking and deeply disappointing. I am saddened that the rights of the Western Saharan people have been traded away.”

In February, 27 senators signed a letter to Biden, writing that the decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the region “was short-sighted, undermined decades of consistent U.S. policy, and alienated a significant number of African nations.” The senators wrote that they “urge [Biden] to reverse this misguided decision and recommit the United States to the pursuit of a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara.”

The senators hope to meet with the administration soon in an attempt to clarify Biden’s stance on the issue, a congressional staffer told JI.

“This is one of those things where you can either look at it as, ‘Wow, 27 senators actually got together and wrote this thing to object to the Sahara issue,’ or I think you can also look at this as, OK, basically, three-quarters of the Senate is on board,” Feuer explained. “There isn’t exactly a political base in the United States for the indigenous Sahrawi people.”

Feuer told JI that “there is some concern” in Israeli policy circles about the Biden administration’s stance on Western Sahara. “They hope that the Biden administration will just uphold this decision, because they’re aware that if they go back on it, then it’s very possible, if not likely, that Morocco will also backtrack on the steps that it has taken with Israel.”

Arbell pointed out that Morocco has only partially resumed ties with Israel, due to the possibility that Biden might decide to alter the decision his predecessor made when Trump already had one foot out the door. “They realized that if they don’t get it now, they’ll miss the train,” Arbell told JI, noting that Morocco’s government recognized it had a unique opportunity for movement on Western Sahara in the waning days of the Trump administration.

“They opted for it fully understanding that it may not last. They’re taking a risk here that Biden may not want to play along or may walk it back,” Arbell said. “They’re

not going all the way with Israel yet. They’re playing a waiting game right now.”

State Department maps used in materials released by the new administration show an expanded Morocco that includes the territory of Western Sahara, which has led to speculation that President Biden has, in fact, decided to quietly continue the policy implemented by his predecessor. But the White House has so far not made any statements about Morocco or Western Sahara.

When asked at a January press conference whether the U.S. would continue to recognize Moroccan sovereignty, Secretary of State Tony Blinken did not directly address Western Sahara but noted that the new administration planned to review deals made by Trump. “We’re also trying to make sure that we have a full understanding of any commitments that may have been made in securing those agreements, and that’s something we’re looking at right now,” Blinken said.

At the same press conference, Blinken also affirmed Biden’s support for the normalization agreements: “We very much support the Abraham Accords. We think that Israel normalizing relations with its neighbors and other countries in the region is a very positive development.” (The State Department did not respond to requests for comment on the Biden administration’s position on Western Sahara.)

The Biden administration’s recent decision to proceed with arms sales to the United Arab Emirates — a key tenet of the UAE’s normalization deal with Israel — over objections from some congressional Democrats suggests that the administration might be willing to stick with its predecessor’s policy on Morocco. (Trump also agreed to sell \$1 billion in weapons to Morocco, a policy on which the Biden administration has also remained quiet.)

The decision to go through with arms sales to the UAE made people in Israel “breathe a little bit more easily,” Feuer said. “I think what we’re likely to see is quiet, maybe tacit, recognition and continuity in the policy,” she added, noting that the Biden administration does not want to be

perceived as circumventing international institutions in its decision.

Since a 1991 United Nations-brokered ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front, the U.N. has been attempting to bring the parties together to negotiate a settlement. Christopher Ross, an American diplomat, served as U.N. envoy to Western Sahara for eight years until resigning four years ago. The post remains unfilled; Blinken has called for a replacement to be named by the U.N.

The territorial dispute dates back to the 1970s, when Spain — which held Western Sahara as a colony — wanted to pull out of the region. Morocco attempted to assert sovereignty over the territory, but a 1975 ruling from the International Court of Justice “found no tie of territorial sovereignty between Morocco and the Western Sahara,” according to a Congressional Research Service report. Morocco’s king responded by leading 350,000 civilians to settle in the region. When Spain soon pulled out of the region, leaving it in the hands of Morocco and Mauritania (which later relinquished its claim to Western Sahara), the Polisario

Front began to put up resistance, kicking off 15 years of fighting.

The population of Western Sahara is estimated to be between 500,000 and 600,000, with many Sahrawis living in refugee camps in neighboring Algeria. Skirmishes have taken place between the Polisario Front and Morocco since the ceasefire, and the issue remains a point of tension between the North African nations.

The most pressing concern about U.S. recognition of Western Sahara is that it might upset already tense relations between Morocco and Algeria. “The big question was, what are the Algerians going to do? Because you don’t want to have a war between Morocco and Algeria,” said Feuer. “This is still one of the relatively calm or stable corners of the Arab world.” The Algerian Foreign Ministry condemned the U.S. decision in December, but has taken no significant action against Morocco.

The ceasefire agreement called for a referendum to determine the final status of the region, which has not yet taken place. While the Polisario Front continues to call for the vote, it is widely acknowledged that it is unlikely the vote will occur.

The African Union includes the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the

self-proclaimed Sahrawi nation in Western Sahara, as a member state. Some nations, particularly South Africa, have taken strong positions on the issue; in January, South African Minister for International Relations Naledi Pandor urged Biden to “urgently reverse his country’s recognition of Morocco as having sovereignty over Western Sahara.” Meanwhile, at least 18 nations have consulates in Moroccan-administered parts of the territory.

Germany, the only other Western nation to wade into the discussion, criticized the Trump administration’s move, calling on the U.S. to “act within the framework of international law,” prompting a diplomatic standoff between Morocco and Germany. Last month, a letter from Morocco’s foreign minister was leaked in which he suggested the country cut off relationships with German political and cultural organizations in the country, after already ceasing contact with the German embassy in Rabat.

As the White House attempts to reassert America’s global leadership, its actions on Western Sahara could offer an important signal to the rest of the world — on whether the U.S. will keep its promise, or whether it will opt to support international institutions. ♦