



HOW TO SUCCEED IN JOURNALISM WITHOUT REALLY GRADUATING WITH JEFFREY GOLDBERG

It was during a long and crowded lecture that I first heard the call. It came from the school newspaper!



Why are you wasting your time here? I can take you on a...

FANTASTIC ADVENTURE!



Instead of this academic nonsense, you can....

MEET! INTERNATIONAL MEN of MYSTERY!



FARM! & GUARD!



DABBLE IN MAFIA REPORTAGE!



FROLIC WITH WEIRD AND SUPPOSEDLY BRILLIANT BEASTS....



MUCKRAKE!



JOURNALISM, JEWS, AND JEFFREY GOLDBERG

As we're talking in his office, the writer Jeffrey Goldberg C'87 leans back in his desk chair, tossing a set of beads up in the air and catching them. I ask him what they are.

Worry beads, he explains. "Somebody in the Taliban gave me these 12 years ago. They're much cheaper than therapy." It happened when he was in Afghanistan in 1999, speaking to the governor of Kandahar in an attempt to get an interview with Mullah Omar, spiritual leader of the Taliban. (He did get the interview—"but I had to do it through a screen, because of being an infidel," Goldberg notes as an aside.)

The governor of Kandahar told him, "You seem nervous."

"Um, I'm in fucking Kandahar," Goldberg remembers thinking. "I'm definitely nervous."

"So here, take my beads," the governor told him, adding that he had gotten them in Saudi Arabia on the hajj.

"It was very nice of him," Goldberg says, catching the beads and tossing them in the air again. The gift was particularly generous, he adds, because the giver apparently had a lot to worry about: "He only had one eye and one leg by the time I met him. He was losing parts at a rapid clip."

The story is a pretty good example of Goldberg's strengths as a writer, in his award-winning magazine articles and book on the Middle East and his popular blog at *The Atlantic*. He is a tireless reporter who goes where the story is, he cultivates great sources, and he has a keen eye for the telling detail and a lively—if dark and somewhat skewed—sense of humor.

Goldberg honed those skills, and possibly the humor as well, at *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, and the lessons didn't come cheap. The *DP*, it turns out, was both his professional awakening and his academic undoing.

In fact, when I first contacted him, Goldberg felt compelled to come clean on one point before being profiled: "I haven't (yet) graduated from Penn," he emailed back. "I went on leave of absence senior year to finish as editor of the *DP*, then I ran away and joined the Israeli army. I meant to go back to school, but I got a job at *The Washington Post*, and that was that." Assured that the lack of a formal degree is no disqualification for inclusion among Penn's alumni, Goldberg agreed to talk.

College alumnus Jeffrey Goldberg's reporting from the Middle East has garnered a slew of awards and an invitation to come and chat with Fidel Castro. Just don't tell his kids he dropped out of Penn.

BY JORDANA HORN

We met at the Washington headquarters of *The Atlantic*, where Goldberg is a national correspondent, writing feature articles and other pieces for the print magazine (including its advice column) and blogging for its online platform. After calling Boston home for its first 150 years of existence, *The Atlantic* relocated to the nation's capital a few years ago. Its offices are in the Watergate building—a great location for a journalist, infused with a heady combination of history and irony. The view's not bad, either.

Goldberg takes me on a walk around the outdoor balcony, where various memorials to great American presidents are spread

out below us and right across the street stands the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. Its green flag with crossed swords flutters in the breeze. Goldberg tells me he was going to put a Hezbollah flag up in his window, but thought it might have been taken the wrong way by the Saudis, given that the two don't get along particularly well.

His office is piled high with stacks of books against the walls, covering virtually every aspect of the Middle East. He may not have finished college, but the room bears a strong resemblance to the digs of a Middle Eastern Studies academic. "Here, read my favorite book," he jokes, tossing me a copy of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's "Green Book." The space where Goldberg's diploma might have been hung is occupied instead by a picture of him in a Pakistani madrassa—but more on that later.

Born in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island, Goldberg picked Penn for college in the first place because of the *DP*, he says. He became executive editor of the paper in his junior year, but by his own account had already gone "off the rails academically" as early as spring of his freshman year. As a new beat reporter, Goldberg found himself—running "late, as usual"—sitting in the back of a 300-person lecture hall in an introductory course on international relations. He could barely see his professor at the front of the room, and he had to leave class early to go over to College Hall to interview then-President Sheldon Hackney Hon'93.

"As I'm leaving, I'm thinking to myself, 'Well, I could spend an hour as a random putz in a lecture hall, or, as an 18-year-old, I can go ask the president of the University any question I want.' And I thought, 'You know something? Being a reporter is better.'"

"The *DP*, for a lot of people, was a major," Goldberg recalls. "It was certainly mine. I knew what I wanted to do. It was a

fantastic adventure, where you got to go anywhere and do anything. It taught me that journalism could be the shortcut to interesting things—and it certainly made academic work at the time pale in comparison.” In retrospect, Goldberg doubts that he was “prepared for the rigors of Penn,” adding: “My disinterest in academic work was profound.”

That disinterest was reflected in his grades, which, by the time he was editor, “were dismal,” he says. “I took a leave of absence, planning to go to Israel, but planning on coming back to school.” While some of his professors expressed doubt that he would return, Goldberg says, “I was like, ‘I’m totally coming back.’ And I didn’t.”

Still, the training he’d received at the *DP* helped earn him an internship at *The Washington Post*, Goldberg says. “Then I went to *The Jerusalem Post*, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So that was the launching pad. Try explaining that to your parents, but it makes its own sense.”

In his 2006 book, *Prisoners: A Muslim & A Jew Across the Middle East Divide* (re-subtitled *A Story of Friendship and Terror* for the 2008 paperback edition), Goldberg writes of having been deeply engaged as a child in the Zionist socialist youth movement, attending Hashomer Hatzair overnight camp, or “Bolshevism in the Catskills,” as he refers to it. “Built within that system was the Bolshevik inevitability that we’d be making *aliyah*—[and become] farmer-soldiers in the land of Israel,” Goldberg says.

A further spur to immigration was provided by a two-week trip he took right after leaving Penn to what was then, in the winter of 1986, still the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, where he traveled with the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. “That kind of radicalized me, or however you’d want to put it,” Goldberg says. “My interests have always been journalism and Jews, and sometimes the intersection. Sometimes the Jewish issue is vocational, but sometimes it’s avocational.” The trip, he said, “set me on the path of trying to go to Israel—and my academic ‘achievements’ made it possible for me to leave early.”

Once in Israel, Goldberg learned that life on the land was not for him. “After two years as a farmer, I knew I was going to go bonkers with boredom.” He managed to land a job writing a humor column for *The Jerusalem Post*, Israel’s largest English-language newspaper. “I told them, I cannot look at another cow uterus or chicken, please get me off my kibbutz,” he recalls. “Writing a humor column for a right-wing Israeli newspaper wasn’t the easiest thing to do,” he adds, and it was perhaps especially hard then, during the first Gulf War, which was an era of stress and strikes at the paper. “It was so unpleasant that being called up for *miluim* [army reserve duty] was a relief,” he says.

Most of *Prisoners* has to do with Goldberg’s experience serving as a military policeman in the Israeli army in 1990 at Ketziot prison camp in the Negev Desert during the period of the first Palestinian uprising, or *intifada*. Many of the prisoners in the camp were PLO leaders and would go on to hold positions in the Palestinian Authority.

The book is emotionally honest, sometimes viscerally so, as Goldberg writes from the vantage point of someone who desperately wants peace in the Middle East but is repeatedly confronted by obstacles of viewpoint and circumstances. His own

optimism and drive come through clearly in his friendship with Rafiq, a comparatively moderate Palestinian whom he befriends and with whom he nurtures a friendship, both in the Middle East and in Washington after their prison time ends.

“The army experience: well, it was what it was,” Goldberg says simply. “It was dispiriting, and obviously, in the basic sense, the most interesting thing I’d ever done.” That being said, he left Israel a year or so later. “It was like, my God, it’s enough.”

The issues of identity, homeland, place, and belief Goldberg raises in the book are at the root of who he is—but not *all* he is. “Part of me would be perfectly happy only writing about the struggles of my people and the issues that dominate Jewish thought and existence,” Goldberg says. “But then I get this other impulse, which is that I don’t want to be parochial—I have other interests.”

So after returning to the US and settling in New York, Goldberg wrote for the Jewish newspaper, *The Forward* (“a small, scrappy paper run by a kind of visionary guy with old-fashioned scoop-artists who punched above our weight and got attention”), but he also wrote for *New York* magazine, trying on another journalistic hat: “I recreated myself as the mob reporter for a while, covering the Mafia, which was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. Not that a barrel of monkeys is that much fun, but it was awesome.”

Goldberg next became a writer for *The New York Times Magazine*. His wife, Pamela, was working for the United Nations in West Africa, so Goldberg developed another interest separate from his Jewish identity, writing about that part of the world for the magazine. He didn’t return to Israel for another six or seven years, until *Times Magazine* editor Adam Moss suggested an article about the Palestinian Authority.

“It was tough to get on the plane,” Goldberg says of his trip back to the Middle East. “I went and did it, and then sort of reintroduced myself to the Middle East, but as a *New York Times* correspondent, not as a schmuck chicken farmer. It was different.”

It was the late 1990s, a time when, Goldberg says, “the Middle East was still fun and not just apocalyptic.” He thinks it over. “Fine, ‘fun’ might not be the exact word to describe the peace process, or the rise of the Taliban.” Still, “it was before 9/11, so it wasn’t *just* tragic,” he says. He wrote a cover story in 2000 on the then-new king of Jordan, and spent time in Pakistan and Afghanistan, even studying at a madrassa. He points himself out in the picture on his wall, although he doesn’t really have to—being of Eastern European Jewish stock, he sort of stands out. “I had a defensive beard,” he notes, laughing.

“I wish I could tell you that at that point, I knew what was going to happen,” he continues. “I started realizing something, but unfortunately it was inchoately—something’s going on here, something’s happening—but that’s all.” At a party for the Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf, he was introduced to AQ Khan—and had no idea who he was. “Nice to meet you,” he recalls saying to the man who would make Pakistan a nuclear power and sell nuclear technology to Iran, meanwhile thinking, “Wow, that guy really hates America. What’s *up* with that guy?”

After the *Times Magazine*, Goldberg moved over to *The New Yorker* and to more professional accolades. His 2002 article, “The Great Terror,” on Saddam Hussein’s campaign to destroy Iraq’s Kurds, including use of chemical weapons, won the Joe &

Laurie Dine Award for international human-rights reporting from the Overseas Press Club, which quoted former CIA director James Woolsey as calling the story “a blockbuster.” A year later, his two-part examination of Hezbollah, “In the Party of God,” won the coveted National Magazine Award for reporting.

Goldberg’s current home base, *The Atlantic*, has become something of a hybrid operation, with its—and Goldberg’s—feet simultaneously planted firmly in the grand tradition of long-form journalism and the 24/7 continuous feedback loop of the Internet. Recent print issues of the magazine have featured multi-angled considerations of energy policy, the impact of growing wealth disparities, the declining educational status and earning power of men, and other broad topics, but *The Atlantic* has also established a significant footprint in the blogosphere, with an impressive lineup of writers—Goldberg, James Fallows, and Andrew Sullivan (who recently decamped to *The Daily Beast*) among them—posting sharp and often comparatively instant ripostes on issues of the day. But, I ask Goldberg, can a reporter really believe in blogging *and* more conventional long-form journalism?

“It’s not entirely clear to me that an individual can do both things very well,” he replies. “I look back on that *New York Times Magazine* time and remember thinking then it was really hard—you have to do four cover stories a year! But on the other hand, there was nothing else you were doing.” Working on a true long-form piece, he says, is like a deep dive. “To do long-form journalism and book writing, you’ve got to submerge completely. You’re looking for rabbit holes to go down, and you can’t keep surfacing all the time to blog about the events of the day. You don’t have to slow your brain down, but you have to slow down, period: absorb information and let it percolate.”

Blogging is the complete inverse of that process. “You have to spit the information right back out: churn it for 10 minutes, and then write,” he says.

“As a writer, you want to be doing everything now: long pieces on magazine covers, you want to be Tweeting a joke off the Charlie Sheen story, blogging about whatever’s in the paper this morning,” Goldberg adds. “In the meantime, stuff is coming to you from your readers, and you’re obligated to them to pursue their interests for them, and then, you’re also trying to think about your book proposals and mega-long projects.”

Goldberg pauses to edit himself.

“I wouldn’t want this conversation to be mistaken for bitching,” he says. “Fallows always says that when you wake up and someone is paying you that day to perform an act of journalism, it’s a good day. We all have to just grapple with this.”

But Goldberg does find *The Atlantic*’s duality striking. “We spend months writing a cover story that’s carefully edited and fact checked, and it arrives in the mail, in this curated beautiful magazine,” he says. “But if you take the same set of facts and observations and press *return* on your laptop, that same information will go out to the world weeks earlier. And we’re doing both at the same time. We have one timetable that’s three months from now, and another that’s 10 minutes from now.”

And while the mentality behind that 10-minute time frame gains ground continually, a good, old-fashioned, thoroughly reported blockbuster cover-story can still be an event. Such was the case, in fact, with Goldberg’s September 2010 *Atlantic*

article, “The Point of No Return,” which discussed Israel’s strategic options as to Iran’s nuclearization, and how an Israeli air strike on Iran could happen.

“That cover story was worth one thousand blog posts,” Goldberg says. “And it wasn’t an accretion—it was months of reporting, and it landed like an explosion.” The piece triggered conversations and debates at high policy-levels as well as around household coffee tables: in short, Goldberg proved that long-form journalism, when done well, still works and still sells.

In light of his Iran analysis, I ask him over lunch, was he surprised by Stuxnet, the computer virus reportedly sent to Iran by Americans and Israelis to sabotage Iran’s nuclearization efforts? While calling it “the world’s greatest computer virus,” Goldberg says he wasn’t. What was surprising was the broad acceptance that the virus had “had an enormous and dramatic impact,” he says. “I thought it was being oversold, and then I realized it was being oversold deliberately—because the Iranians are enriching at a constant pace.”

While it was predictable that the Iran story would provoke controversy, one outcome of the piece was entirely unexpected—its publication led directly to the interview of a lifetime: a personal, multi-day, one-on-one audience with Cuba’s Fidel Castro.

“That’s the kind of stuff you live for as a journalist,” he says, sighing with pleasure. “You know, I think if you become a journalist, you’re someone who’s easily susceptible to boredom. In other jobs, you wake up and know what’s going to happen that day, and in journalism you don’t.”

Goldberg had left his family on vacation on Martha’s Vineyard to appear on *The Colbert Report* to talk about his Iran story. His phone rang, and the caller was the head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, which represents Cuban interests in the absence of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US. “I have a message for you from Fidel,” the official told him. “He wants you to come to Havana on Sunday and discuss your article.”

“This is maybe a Tuesday or a Wednesday,” Goldberg recounts. “I’m saying, ‘Sure, let me take your number and get back to you,’ but in the meantime thinking, ‘Who’s punking me? This is a pretty random punk.’” A few days later, he was landing in Havana and meeting with the 84-year-old Castro, from whom little had been heard in several years, since he’d withdrawn from most of his leadership posts in the wake of health problems.

The spur-of-the-moment, somewhat surreal nature of the trip—at one point, Goldberg and Castro took in a dolphin show—made it perfect for blogging. “That’s the thing about the blogosphere as opposed to journalism—if you’re bringing truly new information, I guess it really doesn’t matter if it’s on paper or on a website,” Goldberg says. “The new information will win out and cut through some of the noise.”

Castro had called the meeting for a purpose, using it to send a message to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “to lay off the anti-Semitism,” says Goldberg. The Cuban leader “seemed very sincere and emotional in his self-conception, and feels personally offended by anti-Semitism, which was useful.”

Goldberg’s blog posts about the meeting soon spiraled into something bigger. “I wrote this stuff up; Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres get wind of it; they write letters to Castro thanking him; and then the Cuban-American lobby goes nuts—it became an international incident,” Goldberg says, smiling.

"If you have a troublemaking personality, that's kind of fun. *Fun* isn't the right word, but you do want to make noise and make waves."

In *Prisoners*, Goldberg writes, "There seemed to be no greater mission than that of a muckraking reporter, and it was, I told myself, a calling in harmony with organically Jewish values, of a certain kind; not the values found in the tribe-and-law books such as Leviticus, but the universal values found in the justice-seeking books of the Prophets. The Jews in journalism tend to be among the more deracinated members of the tribe, because the mission of journalism is most attractive to people free of the burden of sectarian loyalty. (It is one of the unnoticed ironies of anti-Semitism that many of the Jews accused of controlling the media are notable mainly for their disloyalty to the dictates of tribe.)"

Goldberg's reporting identity is very much tied up in his Jewish identity. He writes frequently on issues concerning Jews, and occasionally on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionist bias (which, he has argued, to a certain degree are one and the same). Before we met in March, there had been a flurry of arguably anti-Semitic rants circulating—including Charlie Sheen's calling Chuck Lorre, the creator of his hit TV show, *Two and a Half Men*, "Chaim Levine," and clothing designer John Galliano's drunken praise of Hitler in a Paris bar.

The best way to deal with outbursts like these is through "ridicule and fun," Goldberg says. "In our world today, you have an Iranian government that seeks the physical erasure of a member state of the UN. You have another situation where the leading Muslim Brotherhood theorist in the world, the most popular, argues that Hitler was sent by God to punish the Jews for their iniquities.

"So there's anti-Semitism ... and then there's *anti-Semitism*."

In Goldberg's March 1 blog post on Sheen, Galliano, and related subjects—headlined "Jews, Jews, Jews, Jews, Jews!"—he noted, "One of the great advantages of being Jewish—and there are many (we invented both ethical monotheism *and* whitefish salad, after all)—is that though there are only about 14 million of us on the whole planet (18 million before World War II, Mr. Galliano), people can't stop talking about us! It is very exciting to be a part of so many different fantasies."

Some fellow journalists feel that, particularly when it comes to Israel, Goldberg wears his heart too much on his sleeve. Andrew Sullivan, until recently Goldberg's colleague at *The Atlantic*, calls him an excellent journalist, whose "expertise in this area is much deeper than mine" and whose "emotional commitment is far deeper," but says that sometimes he's "a little too close to those in power, especially in Israel."

Sullivan is quick to emphasize that, despite any political disagreements, he and Goldberg get along well. "He's very funny, and in person, we hit it off," Sullivan says. "But on Israeli and Jewish questions, he reflects a worldview and sensibilities I have discarded. I don't think coddling Israel has helped it, and I think the settlements need to end now. Jeffrey doesn't disagree, and yet he always seems to take Israel's side in the end. That frustrates me, but we remain friends."

On the other hand, Andrea Mitchell CW'67, NBC News chief foreign affairs correspondent, believes Goldberg's personal

convictions enhance his journalism. "It comes through in his book and his daily reporting that he cares about the people who are affected by the policies he reports on," she says. "It's the humanity of what he does that I think is so unusual.

"He is not your average reporter, who goes to briefings and spews out the info that's handed to him," Mitchell adds. "He digs and travels and has great sources overseas, and he's original. He has a rising reputation as one of the most thoughtful people about Middle East policy."

Mitchell, who when we spoke was just back from a trip through the Middle East with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, which Goldberg had also been on, described him as one of the kindest and funniest people on the trip—and one of the hardest-working. "All the rest of us flew back from Tunisia, but he stayed to do more reporting. He's not part of the conventional wisdom. He always tries to find something special and unique, and I think that's why people so appreciate his writing and his journalism."

Given the lead time before this magazine comes out, Goldberg is reluctant to prognosticate on the revolutionary winds sweeping the Arab world. "This period in Middle Eastern history demands analytical humility—that's a quote that will stand up over the next few months," he says. "The Internet is this vast mall demanding insertion of information and opinion, but we're in the prologue of the long book here."

It's too hard to gauge democracy's foothold in such a short period of time, Goldberg believes. While "freedom is better than non-freedom, that includes the significant caveat that it turns out that the Shah wasn't as bad—though obviously he was a miserable creature—as what came after."

Current events in the Arab world have combined to throw all the disparate schools of thought on foreign policy into doubt. "Neocon, liberal interventionism, realism, these are all sort of proven inadequate—realism especially," he says. "I've always been arguing that foreign-policy realism is just cynicism and it's not sustainable in the long term. The provisional lesson, though, may be that dictators cannot repress their way to stability forever. It's foolish to think that dictators and absolute monarchs should be seen as long-term investments."

But arching his eyebrows, he adds, "Who knows?"

As we're leaving lunch, I tell him I'd venture that, even with an undergraduate degree from Penn, he probably still wouldn't know what will happen next in the Middle East.

"Any minute, I'm going to go back to Penn," Goldberg replies. "With any luck, my transcript has yellowed with age to the point where it's unreadable."

He admits that he's now somewhat concerned about the academic choices he made—as a father of three children, whom he hopes will go to and finish college, he knows he's "not a good role model," at least in the educational realm.

"I got lucky and got to earn a living doing what I want to do," he says. "But I'll have so little moral power to argue when they come to me and say, 'Dad, I want to take a leave of absence and go be a snorkeling expert.' I don't have much of a leg to stand on." ♦

When she's not writing for the *Gazette*, Jordana Horn C'95 L'99 is the New York correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post*.