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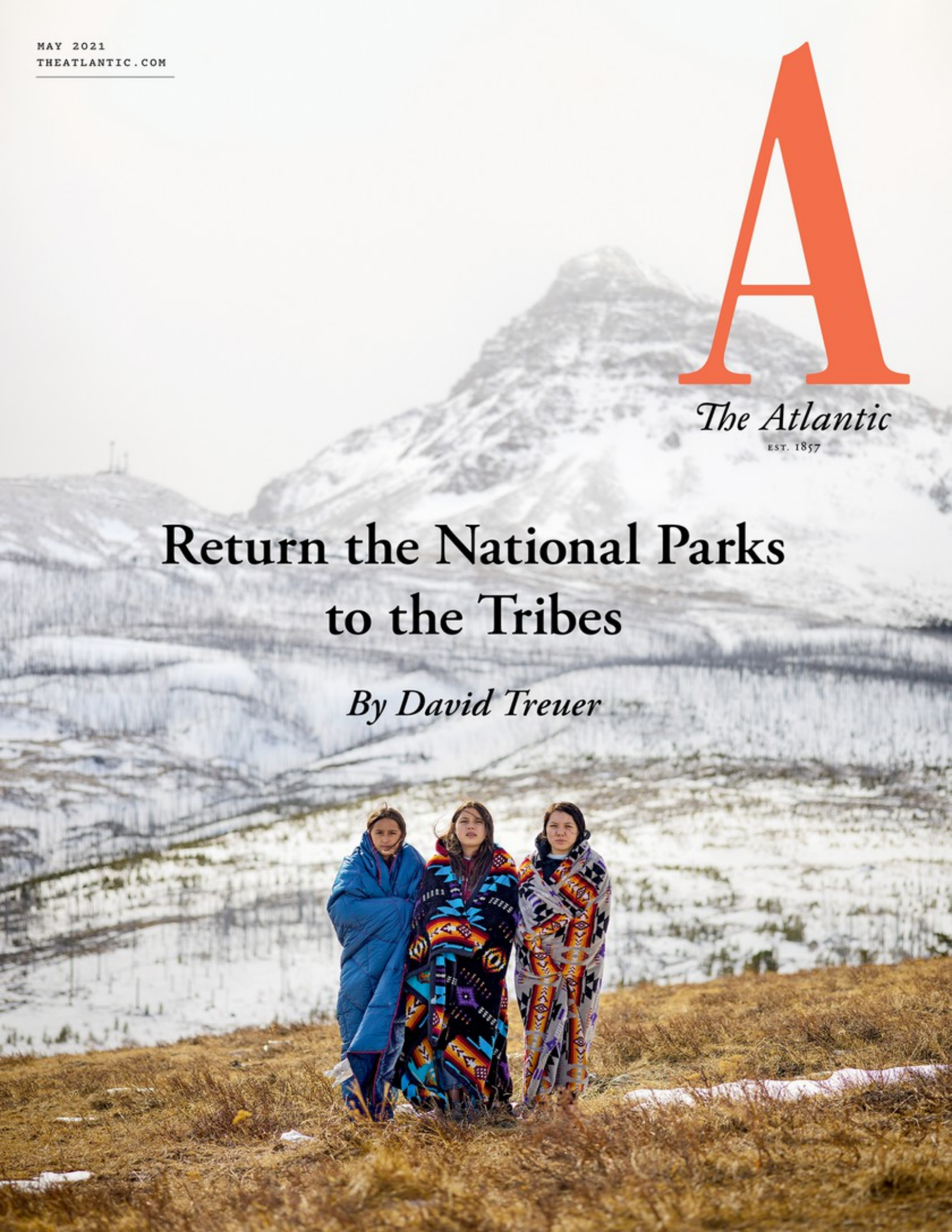
Return the National Parks to the Tribes

By David Treuer



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Cover Story

- **Return the National Parks to the Tribes**
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Return the National Parks to the Tribes

The jewels of America's landscape should belong to America's original peoples.

- Story by David Treuer
- May 2021 Issue
  Who Owns America's Wilderness?

Photographs by Katy Grannan

Editor's note: *This article is part of a new series called "Who Owns America's Wilderness?"*

Image above: Glacier National Park, in Montana, as seen from the Blackfeet Reservation, near Duck Lake.

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I.

THE END RESULT OF DIRTY BUSINESS

In 1851, members of a California state militia called the Mariposa Battalion became the first white men to lay eyes on Yosemite Valley. The group was largely made up of miners. They had been scouring the western slopes of the Sierra when they happened upon the granite valley that Native peoples had long referred to as "the place of a gaping mouth." Lafayette Bunnell, a physician attached to the militia, found himself awestruck. "None but those who have visited this most wonderful valley, can even imagine the feelings with which I looked upon the view," he later wrote. "A peculiar exalted sensation seemed to fill my whole being, and I found my eyes in tears." Many of those who have followed in Bunnell's footsteps over the past 170 years, walking alongside the Merced River or gazing upon the god-rock of El Capitan, have been similarly struck by the sense that they were in the presence of the divine.

The Mariposa Battalion had come to Yosemite to kill Indians. Yosemite's Miwok tribes, like many of California's Native peoples, were obstructing a frenzy of extraction brought on by the Gold Rush. And whatever Bunnell's fine sentiments about nature, he made his contempt for these "overgrown, vicious children" plain:

> Any attempt to govern or civilize them without the power to compel obedience, will be looked upon by barbarians with derision … The savage is naturally vain, cruel and arrogant. He boasts of his murders

> and robberies, and the tortures of his victims very much in the same manner that he recounts his deeds of valor in battle.

When the roughly 200 men of the Mariposa Battalion marched into Yosemite, armed with rifles, they did not find the Miwok eager for battle. While the Miwok hid, the militiamen sought to starve them into submission by burning their food stores, souring the valley's air with the smell of scorched acorns. On one particularly bloody day, some of the men came upon an inhabited village outside the valley, surprising the Miwok there. They used embers from the tribe's own campfires to set the wigwams aflame and shot at the villagers indiscriminately as they fled, murdering 23 of them. By the time the militia's campaign ended, many of the Miwok who survived had been driven from Yosemite, their homeland for millennia, and forced onto reservations.

Thirty-nine years later, Yosemite became the fifth national park. (Yellowstone, which was granted that status in 1872, was the first.) The parks were intended to be natural cathedrals: protected landscapes where people could worship the sublime. They offer Americans the thrill of looking back over their shoulder at a world without humans or technology. Many visit them to find something that exists outside or beyond us, to experience an awesome sense of scale, to contemplate our smallness and our ephemerality. It was for this reason that John Muir, the father of modern conservationism, advocated for the parks' creation.

From the August 1897 issue: John Muir's "The American Forests"

More than a century ago, in the pages of this magazine, Muir described the entire American continent as a wild garden "favored above all the other wild parks and gardens of the globe." But in truth, the North American continent has not been a wilderness for at least 15,000 years: Many of the landscapes that became national parks had been shaped by Native peoples for millennia. Forests on the Eastern Seaboard looked plentiful to white settlers because American Indians had strategically burned them to increase the amount of forage for moose and deer and woodland caribou. Yosemite Valley's sublime landscape was likewise tended by Native peoples; the acorns that fed the Miwok came from black oaks long cultivated by the tribe. The idea of a

virgin American wilderness—an Eden untouched by humans and devoid of sin—is an illusion.

Four generations of the women of the Schildt family at a sacred medicine rock on their property on the Blackfeet Reservation, with Glacier National Park in the background. The photographs that accompany this article are portraits of members of the Blackfeet Nation and the lands around them. They were taken on the Blackfeet Reservation and in Glacier National Park, in Montana, over two weeks in March. The Blackfeet's homelands once encompassed part of the Rocky Mountains and what became the park, before the tribe was dispossessed of its land.

The national parks are sometimes called "America's best idea," and there is much to recommend them. They are indeed awesome places, worthy of reverence and preservation, as Native Americans like me would be the first to tell you. But all of them were founded on land that was once ours, and many were created only after we were removed, forcibly, sometimes by an invading army and other times following a treaty we'd signed under duress. When describing the simultaneous creation of the parks and Native American reservations, the Oglala Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk noted darkly that the United States "made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller."

Many of the negotiations that enabled the creation of these islands took place in English (to the disadvantage of the tribes), when the tribes faced annihilation or had been weakened by disease or starvation (to the disadvantage of the tribes), or with bad faith on the part of the government (to the disadvantage of the tribes). The treaties that resulted, according to the U.S. Constitution, are the "supreme Law of the Land." Yet even despite their cruel terms, few were honored. Native American claims and rights were ignored or chipped away.

The American story of "the Indian" is one of staggering loss. Some estimates put the original Indigenous population of what would become the contiguous United States between 5 million and 15 million at the time of first contact. By 1890, around the time America began creating national parks in earnest, roughly 250,000 Native people were still alive. In 1491, Native people controlled all of the 2.4 billion acres that would become the United States. Now we control about 56 million acres, or roughly 2 percent.

Read: The Blackfeet brain drain

And yet we remain, and some of us have stayed stubbornly near the parks, preserving our attachment to them. Grand Canyon National Park encloses much of the Havasupai Tribe and its reservation. Pipe Spring National Monument sits entirely inside the 120,000-acre Kaibab Paiute Indian Reservation, in northern Arizona. Many other parks neighbor Native communities. But while the parks may be near us, and of us, they are not ours.

We live in a time of historical reconsideration, as more and more people recognize that the sins of the past still haunt the present. For Native Americans, there can be no better remedy for the theft of land than land. And for us, no lands are as spiritually significant as the national parks. They should be returned to us. Indians should tend—and protect and preserve—these favored gardens again.

Related Podcast: ***The Experiment***

David Treuer, an Ojibwe author and historian, says we can make "America's best idea" even better—by giving national parks back to Native Americans.

In July 2020, I conducted something of a barnstorming tour. I wanted to look with fresh eyes at the park system, to imagine a new future for it. I had planned on visiting all sorts of places—the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Great Smoky Mountains National Park—but the coronavirus pandemic intervened.

Some parks closed completely, while others (like Yellowstone) closed campgrounds, cultural centers, and museums. In the end I drove from Minnesota through North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon and down the spine of California. Then I turned around and drove back. I visited Theodore Roosevelt National Park, Little Bighorn Battlefield, Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Mount Hood National Forest, Kings Canyon, Death Valley, and Joshua Tree.

The roads were quieter than usual, though the skies were sometimes hazy as the West Coast burst into flames. I slept in campgrounds, in my tent in the backyards of friends, and, rarely, in a hotel or motor lodge. I cooked on the trunk of my car and on picnic tables, under the blazing sun and in torrential rain. I fought off raccoons and squirrels.

More than any other place I visited, Yellowstone seemed to contain the multitudes of America. There, I saw elk and bison. I saw enough recreational vehicles to house a good portion of this country’s homeless. I saw lake water, river water, black water, swamp water, and frothy waterfall water. I saw Tony Hawk being stopped by two park rangers after longboarding down the switchbacks above Mammoth Hot Springs while an actual hawk circled above him. I saw Instagram models in tiny bikinis posing in front of indifferent bison. I saw biker gangs (who seem to really enjoy parks) and gangs of toddlers (who don’t seem to enjoy anything). I saw tourists, masked and unmasked. I saw placards and displays. I discovered that you can learn a lot about nature at Yellowstone, and perhaps even more about American culture. But the park’s official captions give you at best a limited sense of its human history.

Yellowstone National Park was created about 100 years after the country was born. An 1806 expedition, part of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery, passed just north of where the park is today. Later, John Colter, one of the Corps members, joined the fur trade and purportedly became the first non-Native to see its vistas. Of course, Native people had lived there for thousands of years, and at the time Colter was setting traps in the area, they still claimed Yellowstone as their home.

Colter traveled through the Yellowstone area and the Teton Range in the early 19th century, looking for fur. Wherever he went, he ended up in mortal conflict with Native Americans, culminating in his wounding at the hands of the Blackfeet. He hid from the tribe under a pile of driftwood and then walked for a week to safety. Over the next 60 years, trappers like him described the landscape that would become Yellowstone as an area of mud geysers, acid pools, and petrified trees.

Not until 1869 did the first official expedition explore the region and confirm the mountain men's accounts. Things moved quickly after that. In 1871, Ferdinand V. Hayden led a government-sponsored survey of Yellowstone that produced reports complete with professional sketches and photographs. Based on that report, President Ulysses S. Grant signed into law the Yellowstone Act of 1872, which created America's first landscape to be "reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale … and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."

Left: Jade-Heather Hinman, a local small-business owner, pictured with five of her seven children in the sweetgrass hills at Camp Disappointment. *Right:* A memorial obelisk at Camp Disappointment, on

the Blackfeet Reservation, so named by the Lewis and Clark Expedition when it reached its northernmost point.

Grant's declaration made trespassers of the Shoshone, Bannock, and other peoples who had called the parkland home for centuries. The tribes left with the understanding that they would retain hunting rights in the park, as guaranteed by an 1868 treaty. Before the century was out, however, the government had reneged on that promise. This tactic of theft by broken treaty would become a pattern where parks were concerned.

When Yellowstone was established, the Plains Wars were raging all around the park's borders. It was as though the government paused mid-murder to plant a tree in the victims' backyard. The Dakota War had erupted 10 years earlier, just east of the Great Plains. By the time it was over, dozens of Dakota had been hanged, and more than 1,600 women, children, and elders had been sent to a concentration camp at Fort Snelling. Eventually, all of the treaties between the Eastern Dakota and the U.S. government were "abrogated and annulled."

Read: 'Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone'

In 1864, on the Plains' opposite edge, at Sand Creek in Colorado Territory, Colonel John Chivington massacred and mutilated as many as 500 Native Americans. In 1868, just four years before the creation of Yellowstone, Native Americans, led by Red Cloud, fought the U.S. government to a standstill, then forced concessions from the Americans at the treaty table, though these, too, were eventually unmade.

War came to Yellowstone itself in 1877. Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perce had been shut out of their homeland in the Wallowa Valley and embarked on a 1,500-mile journey that would end just south of the Canadian border, where they would surrender to the U.S. Army. The Nez Perce did their best to avoid white people on their way. But they were attacked on the banks of the Big Hole River, in August 1877, by soldiers in Colonel John Gibbon's command. Gibbon's men approached the camp on foot at dawn, killing a man during their advance. Then they began firing into the tepees of the sleeping Nez Perce, killing men, women, and children. The Nez Perce counterattacked. Their warriors kept Gibbon's soldiers pinned down while

the others escaped. Although they defended themselves well, they lost at least 60 people.

Reeling from these deaths, the Nez Perce passed into Yellowstone, where they ran into tourists from Radersburg, Montana, enjoying the "pleasuring-ground" created at the expense of Indians. The Nez Perce briefly held the tourists hostage, and then released them, but went on to kill two tourists in the park later in the month.

Moving east through the park, the tribe forded the Yellowstone River at a place still known as the Nez Perce Ford. Around the time they crossed the river, an elderly woman peeled away from the main column and stayed at an area known as Mud Volcano. She sat on a bison robe near a geyser and sang. When a U.S. scout approached her, she closed her eyes. "She seemed rather disappointed," John W. Redington, the scout, wrote, "when instead of shooting her I refilled her water bottle. She made signs that she had been forsaken by her people, and wanted to die." Ten minutes later, a Bannock scout for the Army obliged by striking her down and scalping her. One hundred and forty-three years later, my sons and daughter and I would stand on the same spot, wondering why there are so few places in the park where you can learn about its bloody past. Viewed from the perspective of history, Yellowstone is a crime scene.

America's national parks comprise only a small fraction of the land stolen from Native Americans, but they loom large in the broader story of our dispossession. Most of the major national parks are in the western United States. So, too, are most Native American tribes, owing to the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which attempted to eject all tribes east of the Mississippi to what was then Indian Territory. The reservation period likewise began, for the most part, in the West, in the mid-19th century.

From the May 2020 issue: The people who profited off the Trail of Tears

Even after we were relegated to reservations, the betrayals continued. Beginning in 1887, the Dawes Act (also known as the General Allotment Act) split much of the reservations up into small parcels of land to be granted to individual Indians, while the "surplus" communal land was

opened for white settlement. In blunt terms, Thomas Morgan, the commissioner of Indian affairs, said in 1890 that the goal of federal policy at the time was "to break up reservations, destroy tribal relations, settle Indians upon their own homesteads, incorporate them into the national life, and deal with them not as nations or tribes or bands, but as individual citizens." This land grab bled at least another 90 million acres away from the tribes—roughly equivalent to the 85 million acres that comprise America's 423 national-park sites.

After Yellowstone was established and Indians were removed and in some cases excluded from its spaces, the same—and worse—happened elsewhere. The Blackfeet, living in three bands in northwestern Montana and southern Alberta, had long thought of the Rockies as their spiritual and physical homeland. They wouldn't have dreamt of ceding it at the treaty table, but in the 1880s and '90s, they were forced to negotiate with the U.S. government. Weakened by a string of epidemics, seasons of starvation, and insatiable Americans bent on opening up their homelands to timber and mineral extraction, the Blackfeet had to make concession after concession. Some years, they had to give up land just to secure enough resources to last through the next winter.

Not long after a harsh winter that killed as many as 600 Blackfeet, the tribe signed away land that would become Glacier National Park. The deal was brokered by George Bird Grinnell, the naturalist founder of the Audubon Society of New York. Grinnell had joined George Armstrong Custer on his expedition into the Black Hills in 1874 in search of gold. The trip was in direct violation of the treaty guaranteeing that the Black Hills would remain in Native control. Grinnell was often called a "friend of the Indian," but he once wrote that Natives have "the mind of a child in the body of an adult." In 1911, a year after Congress approved the creation of Glacier, Montana ceded jurisdiction of the park to the U.S. government.

Read: How much are America's national parks worth?

So many of the parks owe their existence to heists like these. Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, in Wisconsin, was created out of Ojibwe homelands; the Havasupai lost much of their land when Grand Canyon National Park was established; the creation of Olympic National Park, in Washington,

prevented Quinault tribal members from exercising their treaty rights within its boundaries; and Everglades National Park was created on Seminole land that the tribe depended on for food. The list goes on.

Saint Mary Lake and surrounding mountains inside Glacier National Park

I set out on my trip through America's national parks from my home, at Leech Lake Reservation, in Minnesota, on the southern fringe of the North American boreal forest. This forest is one of the largest stretches of woodland in the world: It spreads from the Aleutian Islands all the way to Newfoundland and from near the southern edge of Hudson Bay to northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. As I headed west for Theodore Roosevelt National Park, in North Dakota, the taiga gave way to grasslands and oak savanna near Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. By the time I crossed the Red River, I'd left the forest behind altogether. I felt the land dip, and looking west, I thought I could make out the horizon where the Great Plains begin.

As a boy, I would accompany my father on business trips through some of these same landscapes. In the car, he would narrate the history of our region, mostly without much emotional inflection: "Chief Little Crow fled this way to escape the military after the Dakota War in 1862." We would pass many

small towns—Hawley, Valley City, Medina, Steele—that seemed pleasant enough, until my father ruined them for me. The calm and order of them, their small houses and neatly kept yards, the Protestant ethic reflected in their organization—all of it infuriates me, because every single one of those towns exists at our expense.

Medora, North Dakota, is the southern gateway to Theodore Roosevelt National Park. (The Marquis de Morès named the town after his wife, Medora von Hoffman, though the romance of the gesture suffers when you consider that he established the town as a place to slaughter cattle to be sold at eastern markets.) Medora today is a fantasy of a time that never was. There is a statue of Roosevelt and a Rough Riders Hotel and, during the summer months, the Medora Musical. The show's website really says it best when it promises "the rootin'-tootinest, boot-scootinest show in all the Midwest. There's no other show quite like it. It's an ode to patriotism, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Great American West!" When I was there it was an ode to COVID-19: According to a clerk at the convenience store, one of the cast members was spreading the virus from the stage.

I wanted to begin my journey at Theodore Roosevelt because no one embodies the tensions of the park system as it is currently constituted like the 26th president. Contained in the person of Roosevelt was a wild love for natural vistas and a propensity for violent imperialism; an overwhelming desire for freedom and a readiness to take it away from other people. Much of the park named after him exists on top of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (MHA) land. The MHA lost that land in 1851, with the signing of the first Treaty of Fort Laramie. Executive orders in 1870 and 1880 seized still more of the tribes' homeland.

Roosevelt went to hunt bison in Dakota Territory in 1883. In 1884, when he was back home in New York, his wife gave birth to their daughter, Alice, but unbeknownst to her doctors, his wife had a kidney ailment, and died on Valentine's Day that year. Teddy's mother died the same day in the same house. After drawing a large X in his diary, Roosevelt wrote, "The light has gone out of my life." He returned to the West and built a ranch outside Medora, intent on letting nature soothe him. He didn't last long out there, and the West never became his permanent home, but it left a mark on him—and he, in turn, left his mark on it.

From the May 1906 issue: Camping with President Theodore Roosevelt

Roosevelt was familiar with Native Americans, having interacted with them when he was in Dakota Territory. “The most vicious cowboy has more moral principle than the average Indian,” he would say in an 1886 speech, during which he also famously declared: “I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indians are the dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every 10 are, and I shouldn’t like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth.”

Roosevelt’s attitude toward Indians is manifest in his treatment of the Apache leader Geronimo. Born in 1829, Geronimo lived the first three decades of his life in the peace and security of his Apache homelands, in what is now New Mexico and Arizona. In the second half of the 19th century, he rose to international fame for fighting the American and Mexican governments in an attempt to preserve his tribe’s piece of the Southwest.

In 1858—the year of Roosevelt’s birth—Geronimo joined a large trading party that left the Mogollon Mountains and entered Mexico. While he was in town conducting business, his band was attacked and slaughtered at camp. Among the dead were Geronimo’s wife, mother, and three small children. He later recalled, “I did not pray, nor did I resolve to do anything in particular, for I had no purpose left.” Life, for him, as recounted by Gilbert King in *Smithsonian* magazine, shaded from peace into a state of perpetual warfare, ending only with his capture by U.S. forces in 1886, around the time Roosevelt was mourning in Dakota Territory.

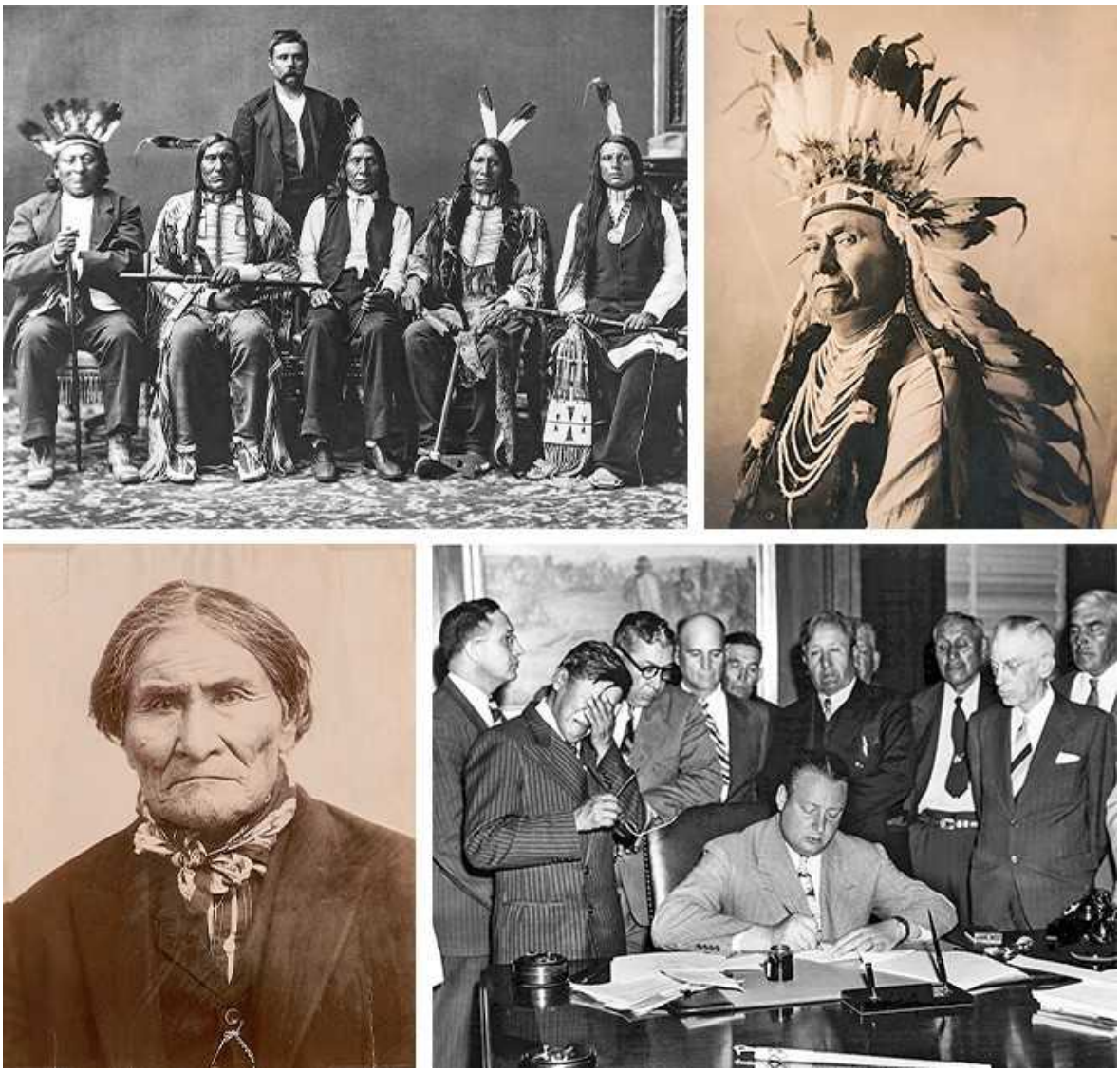
Geronimo was shipped east and spent the rest of his life in captivity, and his tribe’s land was whittled away. Around the same time, Native children were also being shipped away from their homelands, to government-sponsored boarding schools—removed from their families and their culture so as to mainstream them. Attendance was sometimes mandated by law and sometimes coerced, but it was rarely strictly voluntary. For speaking in their own language, the children were sometimes beaten or had soap put in their mouths. Of the 112 Apache children from Geronimo’s band sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Pennsylvania, 36 died—most of them likely from tuberculosis—and were buried there.

[From the October 2020 issue: “My Industrial Work,” a poem written in 1914 by an anonymous student at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School]

For his part, Geronimo did get out (under guard) once in a while, including a stint in 1904 as part of the “Apache Village” at the St. Louis World’s Fair, where he was made to play the role of the savage. In 1905, he and other Native leaders were asked to be part of Roosevelt’s inaugural parade. It was a who’s who of tribal leadership, including Quanah Parker (Comanche), Buckskin Charlie (Ute), Hollow Horn Bear (Brulé Lakota), American Horse (Oglala Lakota), and Little Plume (Piegan Blackfeet). They rode horses down Pennsylvania Avenue in regalia not entirely in step with their individual tribal traditions. America liked and still likes its Indians to function much like its nature: frozen in time; outside history; the antithesis, or at best the outer limit, of humanity and civilization.

Geronimo met with Roosevelt afterward. “Take the ropes from our hands,” he begged, in a desperate appeal to be allowed to return, along with other Apache prisoners, to his homeland. Roosevelt declined, telling him, “You killed many of my people; you burned villages.” Geronimo began to gesture and yell but was cut off. Four years later, he died in captivity at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

In 1903, Roosevelt had let himself be drawn back west. In April of that year he embarked on a 14,000-mile train journey that took him through 24 states and territories in nine weeks. He traveled to Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and California, where he enjoyed a three-night camping trip with John Muir.



Top left: Red Cloud (*seated, center*) and other Native American leaders visited President Ulysses S. Grant in 1875, but failed to persuade him to honor existing treaties. *Top right:* Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, circa 1900.
Bottom left: Geronimo at the St. Louis World's Fair, in 1904. *Bottom right:* George Gillette (*left*), the chairman of the Fort Berthold Indian Tribal Business Council, weeps as more than 150,000 acres of the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota are signed away for the Garrison Dam and Reservoir project. (Bettmann / Getty; De Lancey Gill / Library of Congress; The Gerhard Sisters / Library of Congress; William Chaplis / AP)

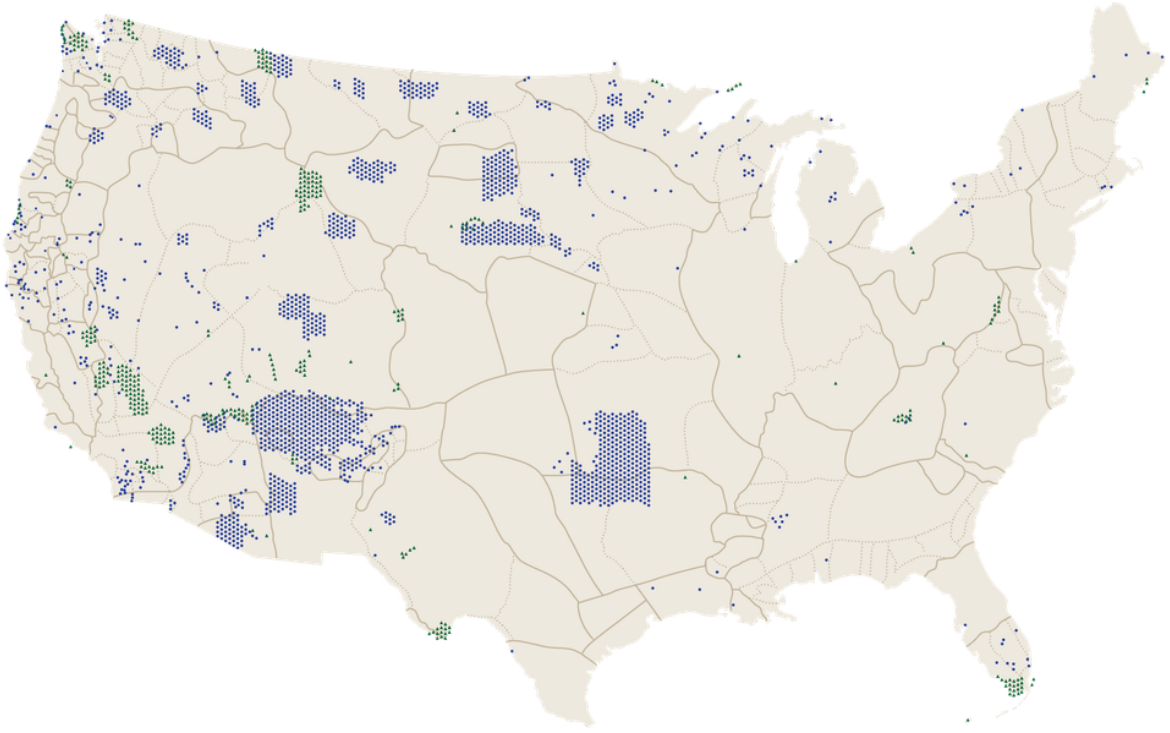
Along the way, Roosevelt gave speeches—at the Grand Canyon; at Yellowstone, where he laid the cornerstone for the Roosevelt Arch; near some redwoods in Santa Cruz. He said much about the majesty of nature. Regarding the Grand Canyon: "I want to ask you to do one thing in connection with it in your own interest and in the interest of the country—to keep this great wonder of nature as it now is … I hope you will not have a

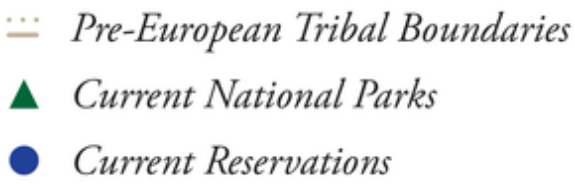
building of any kind, not a summer cottage, a hotel or anything else, to mar the wonderful grandeur, the sublimity, the great loneliness and beauty of the canyon." And Yellowstone: "The Yellowstone Park is something absolutely unique in the world, so far as I know … The scheme of its preservation is noteworthy in its essential democracy … This Park was created, and is now administered, for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."

Roosevelt translated his passions into policy. During his time in office, he created 150 national forests, 18 national monuments, five national parks, four national game preserves, and 51 bird "reservations."

Like Geronimo, Roosevelt came of age during a pivotal 50-year stretch when the contiguous United States assumed its final dimensions. The last major armed conflict between a Native tribe and the U.S. government ended at Wounded Knee Creek with the massacre of as many as 300 men, women, and children of Spotted Elk's band of Miniconjou. The frontier was pushed all the way to the Pacific and then was no more, and America's truly wild space—land outside the embrace of "civilization"—was subsumed.

The American West began with war but concluded with parks.





A. L. Kroeber, *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*; *Encyclopedia Britannica;* Bureau of Indian Affairs

Instead of describing one moment in time (for example, "Here's what tribal boundaries looked like before Columbus reached America"), this map approximates the tribal boundaries that European settlers recorded as they traveled through the frontier—the western half of the map describes a later period than the eastern half does.

II.

THE FUTURE OF THE TRIBES AND THE PARKS

The MHA Nation lives just north and a little east of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, but under drastically different circumstances than the people in and around Medora. Time and again, the MHA reservation was reduced by federal fiat and exploitative deals—from more than 12 million acres to less than 1 million. The dispossessions continued well into the 20th century: During construction of the Garrison Dam and Reservoir on the Missouri River in the 1940s and '50s, up to 80 percent of the reservation population was forced to relocate away from the fertile river bottoms that had given them life and defined them as a people for centuries.

In the 1860s, long before the dam was built, the MHA had lived mostly at a place called Like-a-Fishhook Village, Royce Young Wolf, the collections manager at a new cultural center the MHA are building, told me. "It's all under the lake now, flooded out," she said. We were standing at Oxbow Overlook inside the park, looking down at the Little Missouri River as it wound lazily through acres of cottonwood and grassy clearings. "They were self-sufficient," she said. "Each village had its own garden. Many families had sacred bundle-keepers." The dam was planned without any meaningful consultation of the MHA Nation; after the Army Corps of Engineers

threatened to confiscate the land it needed, citing eminent domain, the tribes had little choice but to come to the negotiating table and eventually cede territory. By 1949, they had received settlements totaling only $12.6 million for the more than 150,000 acres that were taken.

“They moved us from where water was plentiful to where there wasn’t any,” Young Wolf said. “Our river bottoms were the most fertile in the whole state … But when we were flooded, we were moved to areas where there’s poor soil and no water and we couldn’t sustain large gardens.” The tribes’ rights to use the land on the reservoir’s shoreline—for hunting or fishing or plant-gathering—were denied.

In recent years, the MHA have been in the grip of rapid, violent, and remunerative fracking enterprises. As I drove north from the park, I saw land bearing scars—pipes, gas vents, and fracking pads dotting the hills. In 2014, the former tribal chair Tex Hall promised the tribes “sovereignty by the barrel,” and he wasn’t wrong: The tribes are wealthier than they have been since before the first Treaty of Fort Laramie. But by encouraging and facilitating oil extraction, they put themselves at odds with their own cultural legacy and connection to the land.

Native American nations such as the MHA are in a difficult position. They have endured state-sponsored assaults on their families, communities, land, and ways of life. Their traditional political structures and institutions have suffered under the paternalism of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which controls Native land by holding it in trust.

Top left: Violet M. Schildt, who is 85 years old, pictured on her family's property on the Blackfeet Reservation. *Top right:* Talissa, Aariah, and McKennzi Wagner (*left to right*) standing in front of Divide Mountain, which separates Glacier National Park from the Blackfeet Reservation. Members of the Blackfeet Nation, Aariah (12) and McKennzi (14) are sisters; Talissa (11) is their cousin.

Bottom left: Doug Fitzgerald on his grandfather's ranch on the Blackfeet Reservation. *Bottom right:* Michael Fast Buffalo Horse, a traditional artist and singer, at Camp Disappointment.

On one hand, we are sovereign nations with our own laws and law enforcement, courts, and municipal infrastructures, all derived from those rights that we have managed to retain. Contrary to popular myth, neither casinos nor the right to gamble were "given" to tribes as a kind of pity payment or as the recognition of a debt owed us. The casino industry is the modern expression of a civil right to gamble that we had before white people came along, a right we have retained and that was affirmed by the Supreme Court.

Read: One way to help Native Americans: Property rights

On the other hand, without a strong tax base or much commerce—extractive industries, casino gambling, and tax-free cigarette sales are notable exceptions—we are dependent on federal support for education, health care, infrastructure, and our continued survival. We are, in the words of Chief Justice John Marshall, "domestic dependent nations," and thus live in constant tension.

The MHA have had their struggles—with unemployment, substance abuse, a destructive marriage to the oil-and-gas industry, and intergenerational trauma inflicted by the U.S. government. But tribes are much more than the sum of their troubles. The MHA are also keenly protective of their heritage and culture. The cultural center they are constructing is a state-of-the-art facility in service to these ideals.

The MHA Interpretive Center is on Army Corps of Engineers land because that land is near the river, which is so essential to MHA history, Delphine Baker, the director of the Interpretive Center, told me. She was instantly recognizable to me as a kind of fierce, no-nonsense Native auntie. Government officials didn't want the tribes to own that land, she said matter-of-factly—the tribes now hold a lease instead—out of a concern that the tribes would take control of recreation rights and not allow nontribal members to have access. "The tribe never is interested in blocking access. But, you know, that's a fear."

The facility is gorgeous—swooping embankments and curving walks mirror the rolling hills and grasslands of the MHA tribal area. Inside is a partial replica of an earth lodge, the traditional dwelling of the three tribes, and gallery space that tells the story of the MHA. The Interpretive Center will be the home for hundreds, if not thousands, of artifacts taken from the tribes over the years. And it will not be merely a show-and-tell kind of endeavor. The center will cultivate traditional plants on a rooftop garden. A café will serve traditional foods. There is a recording studio for preserving tribal languages, and a research space where tribal members will be able to trace their lineage. For so many Native people who have been separated from their tribes because of federal meddling, reconnecting is an important service the center can provide. To call this an Interpretive Center isn't quite right. It is more like a cultural mothership.

"If you lose your culture, you lose your sovereignty and your tribe," Baker told me. "And that's what we're fighting against."

It is not the first such fight. During the early reservation period, a difficult and fractious time when the people at Like-a-Fishhook Village were trying to figure out a new way of living, a splinter group wanted to hunt and garden in the old communal ways. So they left, relocating outside the reservation, about 120 miles upriver. "That group became known as the Xoshga, and they were led by Crow Flies High and Bobtail Bull," Young Wolf told me. "When they separated, they were taking a stand against assimilation and Christianity. They stayed away for over 20 years." They revived ceremonies and songs and dances. They preserved knowledge of local plants. While they were gone, Young Wolf said, the community at Like-a-Fishhook Village suffered from being split apart into small plots of land. But the Xoshga "kept our traditions safe while they were away. And it's because of them we have many of our traditions today."

In 1894, the government forced the Xoshga back to the reservation. They were treated badly at first by many of the MHA members who had stayed behind, Young Wolf told me. They were looked at as backward and savage. But now, to be Xoshga is to be connected to the land, to tradition, and to a spirit of resistance. The Xoshga were saved by the land, and their return to it saved their tribe.

Pat Schildt on his bison ranch on the Blackfeet Reservation

The first "park person" I met on my trip was Grant Geis, then the chief ranger at Theodore Roosevelt National Park (he has since retired). Geis is tall and broad-shouldered, with a rugged face and large, strong hands. He'd been at the park since 1998, when he started as a seasonal employee. "As soon as I hit Painted Canyon … I fell in love with it," he told me, "and [I've] kind of been here ever since."

Pretty much every person I talked with in the Park Service used the word *love* to describe the parks, the vistas, and their own roles as protectors of the land and its visitors. In my experience, that's not a word most government employees use when talking about their job. I asked Geis about Teddy Roosevelt and his legacy. "He was a firm believer in the land of many uses, but at the same time trying to save something for future generations," Geis replied. "It says something about his character when he was forward-thinking to that degree." He also acknowledged Roosevelt's imperfections and expressed support for cooperative relationships between parks and adjacent tribes.

The personal failings of people like Roosevelt are still codified in American policy. A lack of access to land—and the lack of power that such access would confer—undergirds the social ills that affect many Native peoples. But, at least in some places, American attitudes are changing. And in the parks, policies are changing too, albeit slowly, and in piecemeal fashion.

When I was a kid and my parents took my two siblings and me on our first trip out West, in the early ’80s, we stopped at Theodore Roosevelt, Custer Battlefield (now Little Bighorn), Yellowstone, and Grand Teton. Indians were barely mentioned on the signage, and I don’t remember meeting any Native rangers or even sensing that we existed as anything other than America’s past tense. But since the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, in 1990, tribes and parks (not to mention museums, galleries, and private collections) have drawn closer together in their efforts to preserve Native spaces and objects. Many tribes now have historic-preservation officers, who work with the parks.

Land use itself is also changing within the parks, to some degree. For instance, the Park Service has made it easier for Native people to harvest plants for traditional purposes, though typically they first have to submit a written request. And some parks allow us to hunt or trap within their borders.

Top left: Evan Thompson grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation. An attorney, he works on issues of tribal sovereignty, civil litigation, and general tribal advocacy throughout the Northwest. *Top right:* Simarron Schildt, with her 3-year-old daughter, Rosie Robertson, on her family's property on the Blackfeet Reservation.

Bottom left: Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, a university lecturer working to preserve the native Blackfeet language; *Bottom right:* Robert Hall, also active in language-preservation efforts, pictured at Two Medicine Lake, one of the tribe's most sacred locations in Glacier National Park.

In some respects, ours is an era of Native resurgence. For all we have suffered, there remain 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States. When the first national parks were created at the end of the 19th century, only about 250,000 Native people were left in the U.S. Now there are more than 5 million Native Americans throughout the country, roughly equal to the number of Jewish Americans and millions more than the number of Muslim Americans.

Our survival hasn't mattered only to us: As the efforts to assimilate us largely failed and we remained, mostly, in our homelands, Americans have gradually assimilated to *our* cultures, *our* worldview, and *our* modes of connecting to nature. The parks enshrine places, but they also emphasize and prioritize a particular way of interacting with the land. In the nation's mythic past, the wilderness may have been a dangerous environment, something to be tamed, plowed under, cut down. But that way of relating to the land is no longer in vogue. For many Americans, our wild spaces are a solace, a refuge—cathedrals indeed. America has succeeded in becoming more Indian over the past 245 years rather than the other way around.

It took me a few days to hike the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt. Unlike more congested parks such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, Roosevelt is quiet, so much so that it feels like a secret. I started in high, red, dusty hills, and descended through a series of washes and dry river bottoms. I keenly felt how far back in time I was traveling with each step. The trail rose past the petrified tree stumps of a swamp millions of years old and out onto a grassy plain, where the wind screamed through the grass, echinacea, aster, and goldenrod. I passed near cliffs where the tribes might once have funneled stampeding bison, causing them to fall to the hard earth below.

The day after I finished my hike, I had breakfast with Wendy Ross, the park superintendent, in Theodore's Dining Room at the Rough Riders Hotel. I asked her whether Native people should be able to use the park differently than non-Natives, considering our longer tenure on the land, which had originally been part of the MHA's tribal homeland. Why, I asked, couldn't

the MHA hunt the bison in the park? Ross said it was something of a slippery slope. If the park allowed Native people to hunt bison, the rest of the residents of North Dakota would throw a fit and, more troubling, the efforts of hunting groups to open up parks across the country to sport hunting would be greatly encouraged.

"The problem," Ross said, is that "there are no protocols" nationally, and hence there's much confusion. "Here at Roosevelt, I've told all of my staff: We let anybody in who says they're coming in for ceremonial or spiritual purposes." I have no doubt this is true. Ross seems to be a good leader and an ally to the tribes who live near Roosevelt. She spoke of reparations, of "providing what you can to people who used to use that area all the time, and then expanding that to other Native peoples." She has been attending tribal meetings. Superintendents like Ross are changing the parks to better meet the needs of Native nations, but they can do only so much. So far, reparations are partial, ad hoc, and tenuous—always subject to reversal.

Native people need permanent, unencumbered access to our homelands—in order to strengthen us and our communities, and to undo some of the damage of the preceding centuries. Being Native is not so much a disposition or having a certain amount of blood running through one's veins as it is a practice around which families and tribes are built. For a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, buying a bison burger at Whole Foods might satisfy their caloric needs, but being able to hunt and harvest bison, in keeping with their spiritual and cultural practices, feeds their culture and community. Native life was diminished when our land disappeared beneath our feet, and it is further diminished when the manner in which we access "public" lands is scripted by the government.

The preservation of these sublime places for future generations is of course crucially important, something Native Americans understand as deeply as anyone. But putting aside for a moment the interests of Native Americans—and notwithstanding the hard work and goodwill of many park employees—the parks show worrying signs of mismanagement. Myopic decisions have seemed to proliferate, and some protected natural spaces have become political footballs. Bears Ears National Monument, in southeastern Utah, was signed into being by President Barack Obama before he left office. One year later, President Donald Trump reduced Bears Ears by 85 percent, from

1.4 million acres to just over 200,000. This move left archaeological and sacred sites at the mercy of mining operations and motor vehicles. And while it is likely to be reversed by the Biden administration, possibly quite soon, it augurs poorly for the future.

Although the Department of the Interior will soon benefit from the leadership of Deb Haaland, who recently became the first Native American Cabinet secretary, it has typically lacked for innovation in recent years. As Jeff Ruch, a director of the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, has written, "most parks merely 'Xerox forward' old plans, adjusting as they go." Most of this is done without fresh thinking on conservation, development, and access.

National parks are withering as a result of overcrowding, habitat loss, and what Ruch calls a "science deficit." Even as attendance has increased, park staff has been shrinking, as has the influence of scientists within the Park Service. Ruch's assessment doesn't make the Park Service sound like the protective arm of a powerful government safeguarding its "best idea."

Parks, as they've existed for 149 years, have done a decent job of preserving the past. But it's not clear that today's model of care and custodianship best meets the needs of the land, Native people, or the general public. Nor is it clear that the current system will adequately ensure the parks' future. That's something Indians are good at: pushing ahead while bringing the past along with us. We may be able to chart a better way forward.

The Rattler family's ranch on the Blackfeet Reservation, looking out onto the mountains of Glacier National Park

All 85 million acres of national-park sites should be turned over to a consortium of federally recognized tribes in the United States. (A few areas run by the National Park Service, such as the National Mall, would be excepted.) The total acreage would not quite make up for the General Allotment Act, which robbed us of 90 million acres, but it would ensure that we have unfettered access to our tribal homelands. And it would restore dignity that was rightfully ours. To be entrusted with the stewardship of America's most precious landscapes would be a deeply meaningful form of restitution. Alongside the feelings of awe that Americans experience while contemplating the god-rock of Yosemite and other places like it, we could take inspiration in having done right by one another.

Placing these lands under collective Native control would be good not just for Natives, but for the parks as well. In addition to our deep and abiding reverence for wild spaces, tribes have a long history of administering to

widely dispersed holdings and dealing with layers of bureaucracy. Many reservations are checkerboarded: Large parcels of reservation land are scattered and separated from one another. And much of the land within reservation boundaries is owned by a number of different interests—private, nontribal citizens; corporations; states; the federal government—that tribal leadership balances and accommodates. Through hard practice—and in the face of centuries of legal, political, and physical struggle—Indian communities have become adept at the art of governance. And tribes have a hard-earned understanding of the ways in which land empowers the people it sustains.

Transferring the parks to the tribes would protect them from partisan back-and-forth in Washington. And the transfer should be subject to binding covenants guaranteeing a standard of conservation that is at least as stringent as what the park system enforces today, so that the parks' ecological health would be preserved—and improved—long into the future. The federal government should continue to offer some financial support for park maintenance, in order to keep fees low for visitors, and the tribes would continue to allow universal access to the parks in perpetuity. Bikers and toddlers, Instagram models and Tony Hawk—all would be welcome. We would govern these beautiful places for ourselves, but also for all Americans.

There is precedent for this kind of transfer. The indigenous peoples of Australia and New Zealand now control some of those countries' most significant natural landmarks. For instance: Uluru, previously called Ayers Rock, was transferred to the Anangu decades ago. Thanks to legislation passed in 1976, nearly half of the Northern Territory of Australia has been returned to Aboriginal peoples. In 2017, New Zealand's Māori were granted a greater role in the conservation of the Whanganui River, on New Zealand's North Island. The public is still free to visit as before, but the Māori now have more oversight of the use of the river.

There is a precedent for this kind of transfer in America, too. In 1880, France began work on the Panama Canal, which the United States took over in 1904. Theodore Roosevelt (he keeps coming up) wanted to see it through, and so he worked out a deal with Panamanian nationalists, whereby the U.S. would receive the canal in exchange for help overthrowing the Colombian

government. But in 1977, President Jimmy Carter and General Omar Torrijos of Panama signed an agreement that outlined the transfer of control of the canal to Panama. The canal was jointly managed by the two countries until 1999, when control reverted fully and finally to Panama. It doesn't happen often, but the United States has given things back.

In 1914, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that American democracy was forged on the frontier. It was there that the uniquely American mixture of egalitarianism, self-reliance, and individualism commingled to form the nation and its character. "American democracy," he said, "was born of no theorist's dream … It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier."

Turner was almost right. It wasn't the frontier that made us as much as the land itself, land that has always been Native land but that has also come to be American. The national parks are the closest thing America has to sacred lands, and like the frontier of old, they can help forge our democracy anew. More than just America's "best idea," the parks are the best of America, the jewels of its landscape. It's time they were returned to America's original peoples.

David Treuer is the author of The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America From 1890 to the Present.

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A Kidnapping Gone Very Wrong

In 1974, John Patterson was abducted by the People's Liberation Army of Mexico—a group no one had heard of before. The kidnappers wanted $500,000, and insisted that Patterson's wife deliver the ransom.

- Story by Brendan I. Koerner
- May 2021 Issue
  Politics

Illustrations by Leonardo Santamaria

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The Motel El Encanto in Hermosillo, Mexico, served a lavish breakfast that John and Andra Patterson liked to eat on the tiled deck near their suite. The couple would discuss the day ahead over fresh pineapple and *pan dulces* while their 4-year-old daughter, Julia, watched the gray cat that skulked about the motel's Spanish arches.

On the morning of March 22, 1974, the Pattersons' breakfast chatter centered on their search for a permanent home. They were nearing their two-month anniversary of living in Hermosillo, where John was a junior diplomat at the American consulate, and the motel was feeling cramped.

After breakfast, Andra dropped John off at work. Because this was his first posting as a member of the United States Foreign Service, the 31-year-old Patterson had been given an unglamorous job: He was a vice consul responsible for promoting trade between the U.S. and Mexico, which on this particular Friday meant driving out to meet with a group of ranchers who hoped to improve their yield of beef.

At 11 a.m., Patterson grabbed the keys to a consular vehicle, a beige International Harvester truck, and headed downstairs. One of his co-workers, an administrative assistant named Luis Sánchez, saw him standing outside the building, chatting amicably with a mustached man in dark sunglasses and a blue suit. When Patterson got behind the wheel of the truck, his acquaintance climbed into the passenger seat.

An hour later, the clerk at the Motel El Encanto spotted the International Harvester traveling north on the broad boulevard that cuts through Hermosillo. He recognized Patterson as the driver: With his thick mop of sandy-brown hair and modish eyeglasses, the vice consul resembled an unkempt Warren Beatty. But the other man was unfamiliar to the clerk.

Around 2:30 p.m., Andra swung by the consulate to browse its library; she wanted to borrow some books before picking Julia up from school. She was immersed in that pleasant task when a secretary informed her that Elmer Yelton, the consul general, needed to see her right away.

Yelton told Andra that John had never shown up for his meeting with the ranchers. When the consulate reopened after its daily lunch break, the staff had discovered an envelope addressed to "Mr. Yelton" tucked beneath the front door. Inside was a two-page note scrawled on green stationery. The consul general showed this note to Andra, who could see that it was written in her husband's hand. The words, however, were clearly not John's own.

“I have evidently been taken hostage by the People’s Liberation Army of Mexico,” the note began, before segueing into a list of demands. The group wanted a $500,000 ransom, to be hand-delivered by Andra in two installments. The first payment of $250,000 was to be made at the Hotel Fray Marcos in Nogales, Mexico, two days later. Andra was then to fly to Mexico City, check into the airport Holiday Inn, and await instructions on how to make the second payment.

“Under no circumstances whatsoever is there to be any news release concerning my captivity before or after my release,” the letter warned. If word got out, or if the authorities attempted to intervene in any way, the People’s Liberation Army of Mexico would “execute 1 U.S. official each week or member of a U.S. official family.”

Once she’d gotten past her initial shock, Andra thought back to a strange moment in New Orleans. The Pattersons had stopped in the city in January on their way from their former home in Virginia to Hermosillo. They’d hired a babysitter to watch Julia so they could catch a movie. The film the couple had chosen was *State of Siege*, a thinly veiled account of the 1970 kidnapping and murder of Dan Mitrione, a USAID official who’d been teaching the Uruguayan police how to torture. During a scene in which the body of the Mitrione stand-in is found in an abandoned Cadillac, Andra had felt a jolt of anxiety. “Oh my God, that better not be you!” she’d blurted out to John, loud enough to startle other moviegoers.

John had done his best to wave off her concern. But both he and Andra knew that diplomacy had become a perilous line of work.

Word of the Patterson kidnapping reached President Nixon that evening, while he was en route to Camp David after a long week spent tangling with Watergate investigators. The president and his advisers were by now accustomed to handling situations of this nature: Patterson was the sixth American diplomat to be abducted in a little over a year.

The first had been Clinton Knox, the ambassador to Haiti, who was ambushed near his Port-au-Prince home on January 23, 1973. His kidnappers forced him to call the American consul general in the city, Ward

Christensen, who was then lured into captivity as well. A deputy undersecretary of state rushed to Port-au-Prince to help negotiate for the two men's lives. After 20 hours of talks, Knox and Christensen were set free in exchange for $70,000 from the Haitian treasury and the release of a dozen imprisoned revolutionaries.

Six weeks later, commandos from Black September—the Palestinian group that had murdered 11 Israeli athletes and coaches at the Munich Olympics the year before—stormed the Saudi Arabian embassy in Khartoum. Among the hostages they seized were U.S. Ambassador Cleo Noel and the deputy chief of mission, George Curtis Moore, who'd been attending a dinner party. The kidnappers demanded the release of numerous prisoners, including Sirhan Sirhan, the convicted assassin of Robert F. Kennedy.

A State Department official was dispatched to Sudan to establish a dialogue with the diplomats' captors. But this was a higher-profile crisis than the one in Port-au-Prince, and Nixon, who'd come to believe that terrorism posed an existential threat to American security, decided it was time to take the hardest possible line. On March 2, 1973, while the State Department's envoy was still in transit to Sudan, Nixon was asked about the Black September kidnappings at a White House press conference. The president improvised an answer that left his negotiator no wiggle room: "As far as the United States as a government giving in to blackmail demands, we cannot do so and we will not do so." Hours later, the terrorists in Khartoum allowed Noel and Moore to write last letters to their wives before executing them.

Now that blood had been spilled, the Nixon administration felt compelled to double down on the president's off-the-cuff remark and make it policy. The U.S. government would henceforth not negotiate with terrorists, even when the lives of American diplomats were at stake.

That stance was put to the test two months later, on May 4, 1973, when guerrillas kidnapped Terrence Leonhardy, the American consul general in the Mexican city of Guadalajara. Though the State Department publicly reiterated that it would not legitimize terrorists by giving in to extortion, it used diplomatic back channels to pressure Mexico to work toward Leonhardy's safe return. After three days in blindfolded captivity, the consul general was let go in exchange for the release of 30 prisoners allied with the

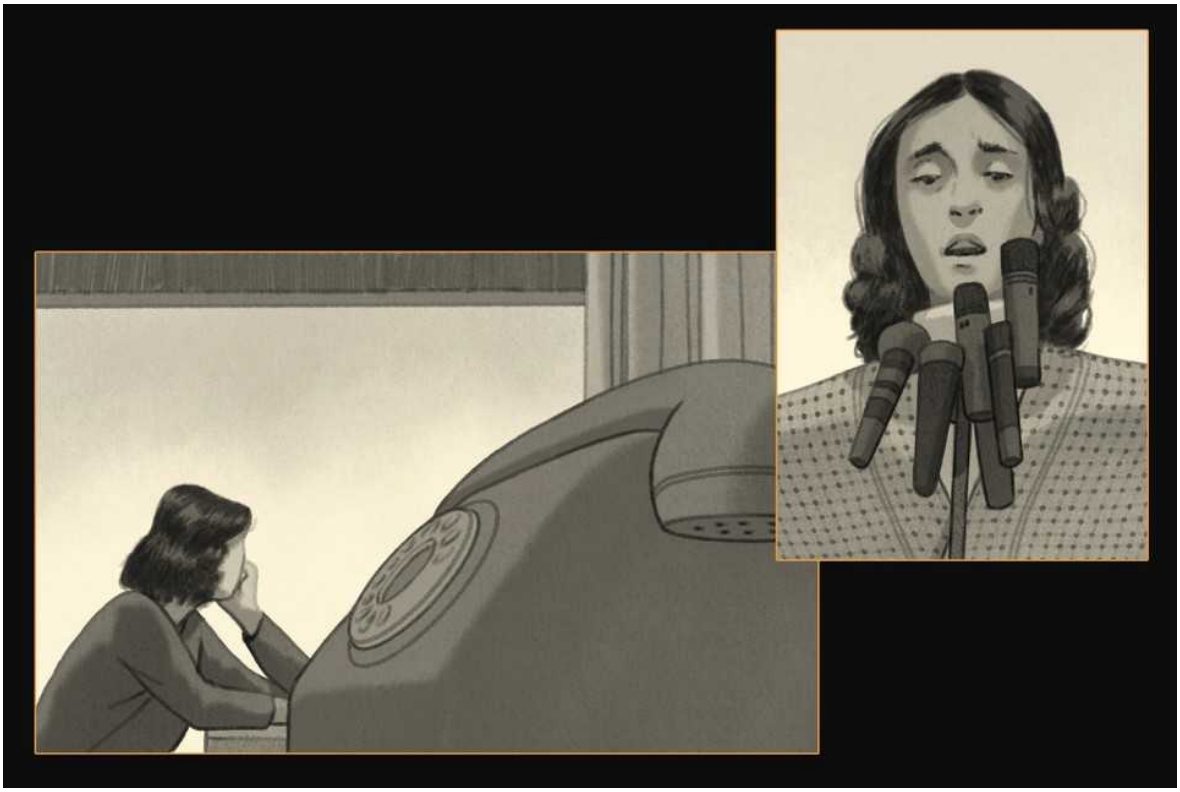
Armed Revolutionary Forces of the People, one of the many leftist groups devoted to overthrowing President Luis Echeverría's authoritarian regime.

The White House chose to adopt a similar approach when confronting the Patterson affair. To maintain the optics of toughness—crucial to the president's political survival in the thick of Watergate—the Nixon administration would refuse to provide even a penny to the kidnappers. But the State Department would be permitted to lean on the Mexican government to locate and liberate the vice consul, and it could offer to quietly assist the Patterson family should they wish to pay the ransom themselves.

This decision was relayed to Patterson's widowed mother, Ann, who lived on Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square. She and her late husband, who'd been a successful supermarket executive, had powerful friends throughout the city, and Ann tore through her Rolodex in search of help. Within a few hours, she'd persuaded a department-store heiress to personally guarantee a $250,000 bank loan. That sum would be enough for Andra to deliver the first payment to the kidnappers, and thus buy John a little time.

A plan was made for Andra to fly to Arizona the next day to collect the ransom; she would then have ample time to make it to Nogales for her initial rendezvous with the People's Liberation Army of Mexico. Andra's stepfather, meanwhile, would travel to Hermosillo to pick up Julia.

Andra passed the sleepless night worrying about her husband, whom she'd known since college. The two had met in the fall of 1962 while spending their junior year abroad in France. On their first date, at an Aix-en-Provence café, John ordered them both espressos in perfect French and then drank his through a sugar cube wedged between his teeth—a trick he said he'd learned from his brother-in-law in Rome. Nineteen-year-old Andra Sigerson was smitten.



That summer, John and Andra rode a Lambretta scooter across Europe. They basked on the verandas of seaside hotels, washed their clothes in the Mediterranean, and rescued a stray mutt from a swarm of bees on Mallorca. One day, as they whizzed down a mountain road toward Spain's Costa del Sol, Andra pressed her cheek between John's shoulder blades and thought, *I can die right now, because I've felt the highest high a person can ever feel*.

But the love affair faded once John and Andra returned to their respective midwestern universities, 400 miles apart. Andra was vexed by John's habit of canceling his weekend visits without notice, and by the awkward pauses on their phone calls. Days before graduation in 1964, John tried to salvage the relationship by proposing on a Wisconsin bluff. When Andra declined, she assumed she'd never see him again.

Six years later, Andra left an unhappy marriage to the man with whom she'd had Julia. She and her 1-year-old daughter relocated from eastern Washington State to Manhattan's Upper West Side, where she'd grown up. While adjusting to life as a single mother, she decided to find out what had become of John. She learned that he was now a student at Columbia Business School and arranged to meet him on the steps of St. Patrick's

Cathedral. She watched him stroll down Fifth Avenue toward the church, his hair as wild and glorious as she remembered. Andra knew they would never part again.

Andra and Julia soon followed John to Washington, D.C., where he'd found work with the ad hoc commission that was implementing Nixon's emergency freeze on consumer prices. But the Beltway grind didn't suit the couple, who craved the sense of adventure they'd experienced aboard their Lambretta scooter a decade earlier. The escape plan that John proposed was one he'd secretly been aching to pursue since adolescence: He would join the Foreign Service.

When he graduated from the Foreign Service's training program, in the summer of 1973, the State Department asked him to begin his career in Santiago, Chile. But after the country's Marxist president, Salvador Allende, was deposed in a bloody coup that September, John was reassigned to Hermosillo, a place assumed to be relatively safe for a rookie diplomat and his family.

Andra left Hermosillo at midday on March 23. Joining her on the Tucson-bound plane were two State Department veterans who'd flown up from Mexico City at dawn: Victor Dikeos, the supervisor for all of the American consulates in the country, and Keith Gwyn, a diplomatic-security agent. Neither man had ever met John, but they'd volunteered to serve as Andra's bodyguards because they considered the Foreign Service a sacred family.

Andra and her guardians went by car from Tucson to Nogales, Arizona, where they stopped at a motel near the crossing into Nogales, Mexico. Andra had been told to wait there to receive the ransom money, which was being couriered from a bank in Phoenix. As she bided her time, a phalanx of FBI agents descended on the motel. They said they'd obtained the Mexican government's permission to cross the border with Andra and stake out the Hotel Fray Marcos, where the payoff was to take place. The agents hoped to identify and track whoever collected the cash.

This plan made Dikeos nervous. He worried the kidnappers would execute John immediately if they detected any hint of surveillance. He was not

informed of the FBI's hunch that the person who showed up to take the money would not be a genuine terrorist, but rather someone with clandestine ties to John and Andra Patterson.

The ransom money, consisting of $50 and $20 bills stacked inside Girl Scout cookie boxes, arrived at the Arizona border motel well past dark on March 23. Andra took a taxi into Mexico and checked in at the Hotel Fray Marcos, a mere block away from American soil.

The next morning, Andra waited for the phone to ring; outside, more than two dozen FBI agents tried to remain incognito. Hours passed, yet no one came looking for the money. By lunchtime, the FBI and the State Department concluded that the payoff wasn't going to happen, and that Andra should return to Hermosillo by car at once.

When she arrived late that afternoon, Andra learned of an important discovery that had been made in her absence: The police had found the International Harvester truck that John had been driving on the morning of his disappearance. Someone had left it at a gas station on the edge of town; there were no signs of a struggle.

The next day, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger placed a call to Andra. He was in the midst of reeling off some sympathetic platitudes when Andra cut him off to ask the only question on her mind: "Do you have any money for me?" As Kissinger tried to explain why U.S. policy precluded the State Department from contributing any funds toward the ransom, Andra stopped listening and handed the phone to someone else.

Andra settled in to await further word from the People's Liberation Army of Mexico. The U.S. government, meanwhile, took pains to heed the ransom note's instructions and conceal John Patterson's abduction from the public. But at a March 27 press conference in Washington, a reporter asked Attorney General William Saxbe why he had abruptly canceled an upcoming trip to Mexico. Having apparently forgotten that he'd been sworn to secrecy, Saxbe replied that an American diplomat had been kidnapped in the country and that his own security was potentially at risk.

Within hours, reporters had uncovered key facts about the kidnapping: the identity of the victim, the amount of money at stake, the name of the terrorist group involved. “U.S. Vice Consul Missing in Mexico,” blared the front-page headline in *The New York Times*.

Fearful of how the kidnappers might react, the diplomats in Hermosillo wrote an apologetic statement for Andra to deliver to the press. On March 29, she emerged from Elmer Yelton’s residence and faced a crowd of 30 journalists who’d assembled on the sidewalk out front. She fought back tears as she read from a note card into a bank of microphones:

> I am here to appeal to the people who have my husband. I am deeply sorry that the news was made public. I will do everything in my power to ensure his welfare. Please let me know that he is well. Please contact me. And for my husband, if he could hear me …

Aware that John and Andra were fond of speaking French to each other, and of the nicknames they liked to use, the statement’s authors had concluded it with the words *Giovanni, je t’aime* (“John, I love you”). But that phrase struck Andra as not quite right, so she improvised a final line more reflective of her yearning and her fortitude. *Giovanni, je t’attends*: “John, I am waiting for you.”

Two hundred Mexican police officers combed the desert beyond Hermosillo, hoping to find John Patterson. They discovered no sign of the vice consul, though they did arrest some members of the 23rd of September Communist League, a Marxist guerrilla group responsible for attacks throughout the state of Sonora. The authorities had recently killed one of the group’s leaders, and a rumor circulated that the Patterson abduction might be an attempt at revenge. Mexican police interrogated the captured insurgents, but their brutal style of questioning yielded no useful clues.

Patterson’s own government, meanwhile, doubted that Mexican revolutionaries had played any role in his disappearance. From day one, the FBI had suspected that it might be dealing with a “self-kidnapping”—an elaborate hoax engineered by the Pattersons to steal money from John’s family.

The bureau's agents had found the kidnappers' modus operandi odd, starting with the fact that no one had ever heard of the People's Liberation Army of Mexico. Weirder still was the group's stated aversion to publicity: Media coverage is the lifeblood of terrorism, the means by which small movements make their political aims known.

FBI investigators had also reviewed a sketch of the man who'd been spotted in John Patterson's truck on the morning of March 22 and had decided he was likely a white American, based on his facial features and formal manner of dress. Agents combed through airplane passenger lists and the logs of rental-car agencies, searching for American citizens who might have been in Hermosillo when Patterson vanished. The list of potential suspects included a copper-mining executive, the landlord of a mobile-home park, and the owner of a Lake Tahoe ski resort, all of whom eventually cleared themselves with alibis.

FBI field offices from Seattle to Milwaukee to New York were ordered to dig into the Pattersons' backgrounds. The agents assigned to this task documented the nature of the couple's relationship, which had reignited while Andra was still technically married to her first husband, and which included a child who was not John's own. They also noted Andra's apparent affinity for leftist causes. She "admitted to participating in various 'Rad-Lib' demonstrations and was against the war in Vietnam and admitted participating in demonstrations against the war," an agent wrote in his summary of an interview with Andra. At an agency where J. Edgar Hoover's reactionary politics still held sway, the Pattersons may have harbored too many progressive ideals to be trusted. The FBI's leading theory was that the Pattersons had masterminded the whole affair.

That theory, shared by Mexican authorities, was soon leaked to newspapers on both sides of the border. "Police Assure that Disappearance of U.S. Vice Consul is a Self-kidnapping," one blunt headline stated. The Justice Department began to discuss how to prosecute the Pattersons once the scam had reached its end. "If it is determined to be a hoax, prosecutive action would most likely be in the Phoenix division," the FBI director's office noted in an April 5 memo.

John's alleged kidnappers were silent until April 10, when a man who spoke perfect English with a slight Texas twang called the consul general's residence in Hermosillo and asked for Andra. Elmer Yelton's wife, Jo, who had the poise of a woman with decades in the field, took the phone instead and said that Andra wasn't there.

"I—they will give her a second chance," the man said, referring to Andra. "She is to go to Rosarito in Baja … We are both in Baja … She is to stay at the Rosarito Beach Hotel … She will be contacted there Friday … John will —and I will be—released Sunday, if she does not cause trouble."

Jo Yelton pressed the caller to furnish some proof that John was still alive. But the man kept insisting that he was a hostage too, and could offer nothing beyond the message he'd been ordered to convey. "But please, ah, these people came very close to harming John and I because of this," he said. "And they are very serious."

The FBI had plenty of reasons to consider the call fishy, not least the fact that it traced back to a telephone exchange in San Diego. But Andra Patterson was adamant that she be given the chance to make the payment—this time without companions who might scare away her husband's captors. After taking a light plane to Tijuana with Victor Dikeos and Keith Gwyn, Andra drove alone to the Rosarito Beach Hotel.

Over the next few days, Andra sat by the hotel's pool, a McDonald's bag filled with cash always by her side. But as had happened in Nogales, no one ever came to take the money, and Andra left, dejected.

On May 6, an envelope addressed to Elmer Yelton arrived at the Hermosillo consulate; the postmark revealed that it had been mailed from California on April 30. The letter inside was written on the same green paper as the original ransom note, but the handwriting was not John's. "Two times we gave you chances to free him and two time [*sic*] you hoped to trap our fighters but we know what you do when you do it," the letter read. "Fail to do as we instruct and death is now his only release." The author directed Andra to return to the Rosarito Beach Hotel and check in under the name "West." If she had the $250,000 payment, she would be taken to meet her husband.

There was a problem, however: The letter stated that Andra had to be back in Rosarito no later than May 3, a date now three days in the past. The slow delivery of the mail had apparently invalidated the kidnappers' offer before it could even be made.

For the second time, Andra felt she had to reach John's captors through the media. On May 17, she spoke to the press and stressed that she was willing to do whatever the kidnappers desired. "I ask only one thing first," she said. "For some proof or evidence that they indeed have my husband and that he is all right."

That proof would never come. As Andra was making her plea to the press, the FBI was having a radical change of heart about the case. The bureau's agents in Southern California were beginning to zero in on a person of interest, a 40-year-old American who clearly hadn't conspired with the Pattersons—and who, just a year earlier, had been feted as a national hero at the White House.

On March 14, 1973, three C-141 cargo planes touched down in sequence at Clark Air Base, in the Philippines. The vessels carried 108 American prisoners of war, freed by North Vietnam as part of the Paris Peace Accords. Many of these men had spent years in captivity at Hỏa Lò Prison, better known as the Hanoi Hilton. Their homecoming was meant to be a moment of catharsis for a war-weary American public.

One by one, emaciated men in sky-blue work shirts emerged from the planes and saluted the ecstatic crowd from atop the boarding stairs. The loudest cheers were for Lieutenant Commander John McCain, the most famous of the freed prisoners, whose limp betrayed the horrors of the abuse he'd endured.

With the audience's attention focused on the heroes at the front of the plane, few noticed a lone figure exit through the rear door of the last C-141 to land. An unimposing man on the cusp of middle age, he hustled to a waiting bus without responding to any shouted questions from the press. Up until that moment, most everyone familiar with the story of Bobby Joe Keesee had assumed he was long dead.

Keesee hailed from a microscopic town in the Texas Panhandle. He dropped out of the eighth grade and, at the age of 17, enlisted in the Army just in time to be shipped off to the Korean War. Though he yearned to be a paratrooper, Keesee spent his nine months in combat as a standard infantryman. Upon his return to the U.S. in 1953, he decided to make the Army his career and spent the rest of the decade doing stints at bases in Japan, Germany, and Iceland as he attained the rank of sergeant. He earned his parachutist badge, qualified as a sharpshooter with an M-1 rifle, and learned how to operate the flight simulators used to train military pilots.

The most notable aspect of Keesee's Army career was the manner in which he chose to quit. In January 1962, Keesee went AWOL from Fort Huachuca, in Arizona; stole a car; and embarked on a 13,000-mile road trip that took him as far north as Alaska. After two months on the lam, he wound up in Albuquerque, where he rented a Piper Comanche airplane. He told the owner that he needed to fly his wife to Carlsbad to visit an ailing relative, and that he'd be back by sunset. Every piece of that story was a lie.

Keesee flew east toward Florida, paying for fuel along the way with kited checks. His last stop in the U.S. was at Marathon, in the Keys, after which he made the short hop to Havana. Upon landing, he professed his desire to live in a socialist paradise and requested asylum.

Fidel Castro's secret police were unmoved by Keesee's pleas. They seized his plane, jailed him for 49 days, then put him on a flight to Miami. Keesee was arrested at the airport and extradited to Austin, Texas, where he faced a 153-count federal indictment that carried a possible life sentence.

At trial, Keesee mounted an unusual defense: He contended that he'd acted at the behest of the CIA, which had recruited him to carry out a mission to destabilize Castro's regime. "I was dumbfounded when they arrested me," Keesee said on the witness stand. (The CIA insisted that it had no records of Keesee.)

Keesee spouted other fictions too, with the apparent aim of appealing to the jury's sense of patriotism. He claimed, for example, to have earned a Purple Heart in Korea after suffering a grievous head wound in combat. (His lone war injury, to one of his arms, occurred during a pickup soccer game.)

Keesee's lies seemed to have the intended effect. He was ultimately convicted of just a single count of theft and sentenced to a mere five years in prison; he was out in less than three.

After another stint behind bars, for stealing a shipment of parachutes from Fort Bliss, in Texas, in 1965, Keesee moved to Phoenix and found work as a cabinetmaker. But his dalliance with blue-collar normalcy did not last long.

In September 1970, Keesee turned up in northeastern Thailand. Masquerading as a movie producer, he chartered a small plane with two pilots on the pretense of scouting film locations in the jungle. Twenty minutes into a flight near the Laotian border, Keesee brandished a pistol and ordered the pilots to take him to a beach near the North Vietnamese city of Đồng Hới. It seemed an absurd request given that the U.S. was mired in a long-running conflict with North Vietnam that had cost more than 50,000 American lives.

Once the plane came to rest on the white sand, Keesee jumped out holding a leather briefcase and walked toward a nearby row of huts. After dodging gunfire during takeoff, the pilots glanced back to see dozens of startled villagers encircling the doughy, bespectacled Keesee, the only American within a hundred miles.

The North Vietnamese villagers took Keesee prisoner and turned him over to the army, which understandably assumed that he was a spy. Interrogators used all manner of torture to get Keesee to cough up information about his mission: They knocked out his teeth and tore out his toenails. But since he was just a cabinetmaker afflicted with a pathological need to insert himself into global events—a need that blotted out all logic and reason—Keesee could provide nothing of value to satisfy his tormentors.

He wound up in solitary confinement as one of the Hanoi Hilton's few civilian inmates. Since the North Vietnamese never acknowledged that they had him in custody, both his family and the U.S. government thought he'd been killed soon after landing near Đồng Hới. His appearance alongside John McCain and the other released POWs in the Philippines was a shock to all who remembered his bizarre odyssey.

The Thai government made noise about extraditing Keesee so that he could stand trial for hijacking the plane he'd chartered in 1970. But it never made a formal request, to the relief of American officials, who opposed the move. Despite his muddled backstory, Keesee possessed the veneer of heroism by virtue of his proximity to more noble POWs. And in 1973, a defeated America was in desperate need of heroes.

Keesee was flown to Travis Air Force Base, in California, where he made a show of kissing the honor guard's American flag before receiving a $1,792 payment from the government for his time in captivity. Two months later, he attended a welcome-home party at the White House. Inside a tent on the South Lawn, he quaffed champagne and gorged on sirloin with the likes of Sammy Davis Jr., Phyllis Diller, and John Wayne. The highlight of the evening came when a well-oiled President Nixon made a toast and cracked a joke about having ended the Vietnam War so Bob Hope—also in attendance—could be home for the holidays. The president then joined Irving Berlin in a raucous rendition of "God Bless America."

Keesee moved to Huntington Beach, California, where he rented an apartment, bought a yellow Ford Mustang, and obtained numerous lines of

credit. He participated in parades and other civic functions where former POWs were in high demand. Eventually, though, he was forced to look for paid work. On his application to an Orange County cabinet shop, he listed his previous employer as “U.S. Govt” and his job description as “Classified.” He landed the job despite the obvious red flags.

But he once again soured on life as a working stiff. In early January 1974, he paid a visit to a co-worker named Greg Fielden, a 19-year-old with a decent command of Spanish. Keesee told the teenager that he needed his help pulling off a caper that would make them both rich. It involved a trip to Mexico.

Keesee and Fielden crossed the border in Keesee’s Mustang on January 16, 1974. Their destination was Hermosillo, where Keesee’s father had retired. Under the guise of being a cattle trader, Keesee had traveled there a few times in recent months to scout out the American consulate, even going so far as to introduce himself to a senior diplomat named Louis Villalovos. During their conversation, Villalovos mentioned that the consulate would soon be welcoming a new economics officer, a Columbia Business School graduate named John Patterson. Keesee told Fielden that they would lure the inexperienced Patterson out to the desert and hold him for ransom.

But their timing was off. When Keesee and Fielden asked for Patterson at the consulate, they were told he was still en route to Hermosillo and wouldn’t be starting work for another week. The duo left the city without their would-be hostage.

Fielden told Keesee he didn’t want to participate in any future kidnapping attempts, and Keesee decided to abandon the idea. But then a tragedy made him reconsider: On March 6, Keesee’s father drowned while fishing near Hermosillo, and Keesee went to Mexico to arrange for the body’s repatriation to Arizona. While sifting through his father’s estate, he found a Remington 12-gauge shotgun.

On March 19, three days after burying his father in Phoenix, Keesee returned to Hermosillo and checked into the Hotel Gandara. He paid another visit to the American consulate, where he struck up a dialogue with John

Patterson about the Sonoran cattle industry. On the morning of March 22, he called Patterson and talked his way into tagging along for the vice consul's meeting with the ranchers.

Patterson had been trained to be wary of people who looked like they might have ties to Mexican terrorists, not well-dressed Americans. As he climbed into the International Harvester with his genial new acquaintance, Patterson had no reason to think that anything was amiss.

Like so many criminals whose ambition exceeds their diligence, Keesee was undone by a careless error: When he'd checked into the Hotel Gandara, he'd done so under his own name. When the FBI belatedly got its hands on the hotel's registration cards, its agents naturally wondered why a convicted felon had been hanging around town.

The FBI approached Luis Sánchez, the administrative assistant who'd spotted Patterson's conversation partner on March 22, and showed him an array of photos of mustached white men. Sánchez picked out two and said that either could be the man he'd seen outside the consulate. Both photos were of Bobby Joe Keesee, taken years apart. The recording of the April 10 phone call to the consul general's residence proved useful too. The FBI played the tape for Keesee's older brother, who identified the voice as Bobby Joe's.

On the morning of May 28, the FBI arrested Keesee in Huntington Beach as he left his apartment to go to work. A search of his car turned up a pair of handcuffs and two shotgun shells.

Rather than claim total ignorance of the case, Keesee confessed that he was the person who'd written the April 30 letter that had instructed Andra to return to the Rosarito Beach Hotel. He insisted, however, that he'd only sent the letter because he'd felt sorry for Andra and wanted to give her a shred of hope. He otherwise denied knowing anything about the kidnapping.

Andra was in New York retrieving Julia when she learned that her husband's alleged kidnapper was being held on $100,000 bail. The news did not erode her faith in the inevitability of her husband's safe return. She and Julia

traveled to Mexico City and became temporary guests of Victor Dikeos and his family, who occupied a plush villa with a trampoline in the backyard. While Julia began ballet classes, Andra devoted herself to apartment hunting. She vowed to friends that she was willing to grow old in Mexico if need be; she wouldn't leave the country without John.

On July 8, 1974, a peasant wandering in the scrublands north of Hermosillo noticed what looked like the carcass of a large animal. But when he pulled close to the mass of blood, bone, and skin, he realized that he'd stumbled upon a human body half-buried in the dirt—a male with a thick mop of sandy-brown hair.

The coroner in Hermosillo left no room for doubt that John Patterson had finally been found. He matched the body's teeth to dental records sent from Philadelphia. A gold wedding ring was found on the ground near the body, inscribed with the initials JSP and AMS, as well as the French words *Mon Destin*. The cause of death was blunt-force trauma to the head.

Henry Kissinger sent an Air Force jet to Hermosillo to transport Patterson's body to Washington, D.C., for burial. Andra accompanied her husband's flag-draped casket on the journey to Andrews Air Force Base. The honor guard on the tarmac, the funeral at Rock Creek Church, the awkward embraces from dignitaries she'd never met—all of it was a blur for Andra as she tried to reckon with the emptiness that lay ahead.

Federal prosecutors added murder to the list of charges against Bobby Joe Keesee. They built a seemingly airtight case, the centerpiece of which was an affidavit from Greg Fielden in which he described the failed kidnapping plot from January. Investigators also tracked down the shotgun once owned by Keesee's father at a pawn shop. An analysis of the gun's stock revealed specks of human blood.

Prosecutors contended that once Keesee had had Patterson under his physical control, he'd realized that the vice consul would surely identify him if released. Keesee, the prosecutors wrote, had seen only one way out of his predicament:

> It appears that Keesee handcuffed Patterson and marched him off into the desert. Patterson must have realized at this time that Keesee intended to kill him because all of the evidence points to a struggle. His broken glasses were discovered next to a bush about 100 feet from his grave …
>
> It must have been when Patterson began to struggle, that Keesee, with ten years' Army experience as a paratrooper and an expert in the use of arms, delivered the crippling butt stroke to Patterson's face which broke his glasses and knocked out his front teeth. After Patterson fell to the ground, Keesee must have then smashed in the back of his head and dragged his body into a small gully nearby.

In the midst of pretrial preparations, however, prosecutors seem to have suffered pangs of self-doubt. They lacked an eyewitness to the murder or physical evidence that tied Keesee to the crime scene. (The dried blood on the shotgun could not be definitively matched to Patterson.) The muddled nature of the kidnapping investigation also threatened to prove problematic: The defense might try to discredit the FBI by harping on the weeks it had spent focused on John and Andra as the plot's organizers.

Rather than risk the humiliation of losing at trial, the U.S. attorney's office in San Diego cut a deal. Keesee agreed to plead guilty to a single count of conspiracy to kidnap, specifically linked to the extortion letter he'd mailed from San Diego on April 30, 1974. In exchange, the government dropped all the other charges, including murder.

In advance of sentencing, a court-appointed psychiatrist evaluated Keesee. The doctor described him as a sociopath who was "clever enough to surround himself with verbal smokescreens." Yet even the psychiatrist wound up bamboozled by his subject. "Mr. Keesee has a good deal on the positive side of the ledger—physique and physical health, intellect and engaging personality, and a versatile education largely obtained 'the hard way,'" he wrote in his report. "Society may be able to profit from his services in five to ten years."

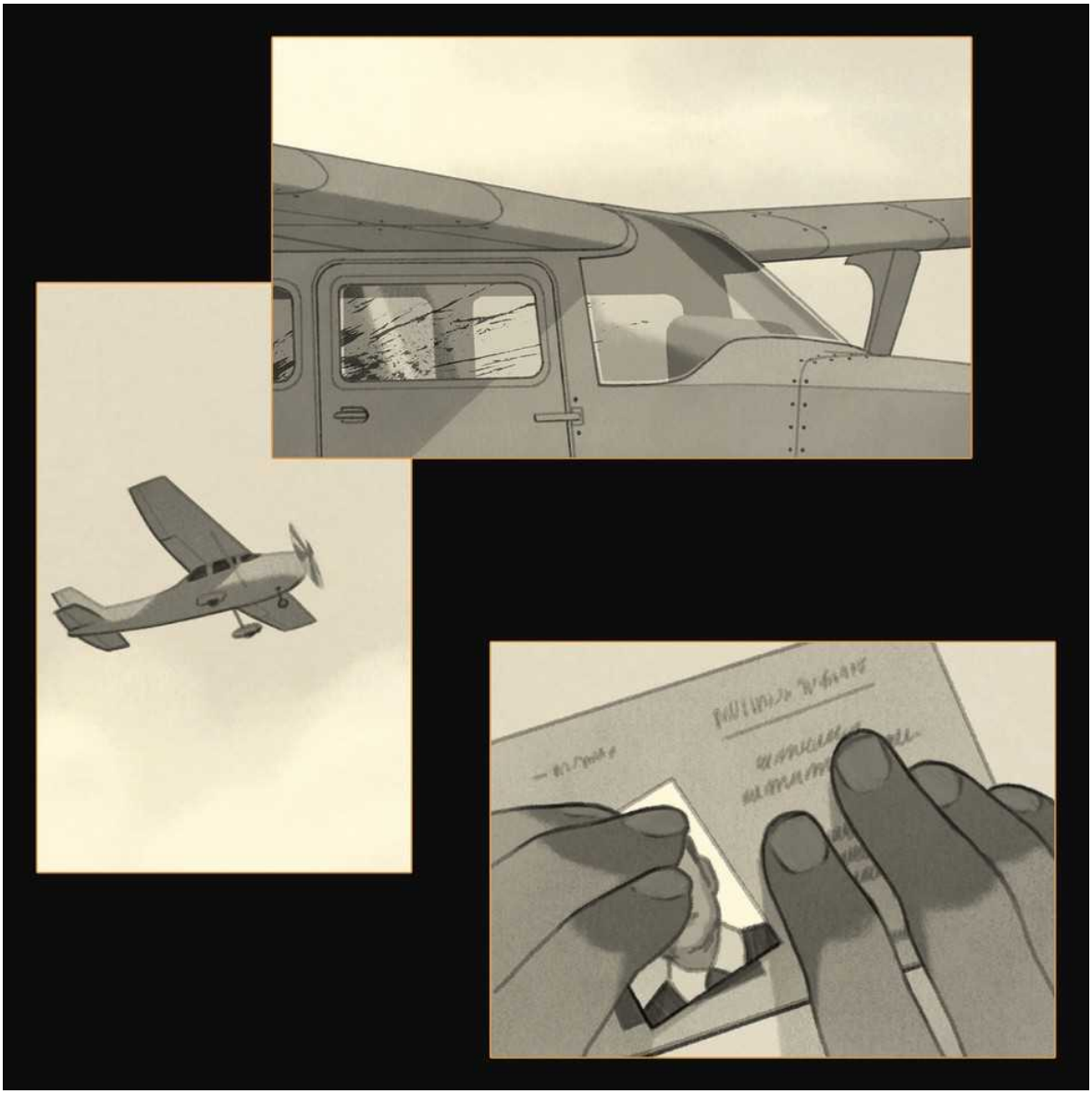
At his sentencing hearing on April 28, 1975, Keesee was offered the customary opportunity to make a statement. The words he offered were

superficially contrite yet oddly passive. “There’s nothing more I can say,” he declared. “I got involved in something that I realize was wrong.” Moments later, the judge sentenced him to 20 years in prison. The Justice Department assured the Pattersons that Keesee would serve the maximum term possible. But it would not make good on that promise.

In late 1998, a champion powerboat racer named Harry Christensen placed a classified ad in *Flying* magazine. Christensen, who also owned a boat-manufacturing company near Arizona’s Lake Havasu, had recently purchased a new Piper Cheyenne turboprop, and he was looking to sell his old Cessna 340. The most promising response came from a man who called from Las Vegas. He introduced himself as a property developer named Bobby Joe Keesee.

Christensen flew to Las Vegas on January 5, 1999, to pick up the 64-year-old Keesee and take him to Lake Havasu City. The two men agreed to close the deal the next morning. Christensen’s wife, Debbie, and his son, Jeff, expected to see him at work later that morning with Keesee’s $300,000 check in hand.

When the afternoon rolled around without any trace of him, they alerted the police and went looking for him at the airport. They were told the Cessna had taken off around 8 a.m. and had landed in Winslow, Arizona, to refuel. It was unclear where the plane had gone from there.



That evening, Debbie and Jeff received a call from the proprietor of Coronado Airport in northeast Albuquerque. The Cessna had landed there that afternoon and was now parked on the tarmac. The police searched the empty plane and found a pool of blood in the passenger area, as well as a travel bag containing Keesee's pilot's license and a .38-caliber pistol clip that was missing bullets.

The next day, Keesee was arrested by FBI agents while driving on Interstate 25 near Las Cruces. His pockets contained Christensen's driver's license, which he'd altered by gluing on his own photograph, and a gold Rolex engraved with the initials HMC.

Keesee had been paroled in January 1986, having supposedly proved his trustworthiness by working in a prison business office. Over the next dozen years, Keesee had orchestrated a series of daring scams: He had set up a fake company to purchase $634,000 worth of copper; he had posed as a Federal Emergency Management Agency official to steal 2,000 feet of gold wire; he had tricked a New Jersey aviation company into selling him a cargo plane that he'd hoped to offload to Mexican drug traffickers. Each con ended with his arrest. But Keesee had never served more than a few years in prison for any of those crimes.

After his arrest near Las Cruces, Keesee swore that Christensen had been alive when they'd parted ways. But on May 2, a rancher found Christensen's remains while grazing his cattle in a desolate patch off New Mexico's Route 44. An autopsy revealed that Christensen had been shot twice in the chest and once in the head.

Even Keesee couldn't talk his way out of trouble this time. To avoid the death penalty, he agreed to plead guilty to a range of charges including murder and air piracy. A sentence of life without parole meant that Keesee's career—a case study in the incoherence of evil—had finally come to an end.

Andra Patterson barely survived her first year as a widow. She moved back to Virginia and lived under an assumed name, fearing that Keesee might have associates who wished her and Julia harm. As she mourned her husband, she often took solace in a fantasy in which she spotted John and Keesee driving through Hermosillo in the International Harvester. Andra envisioned herself racing out into the boulevard to pull John from the vehicle and spiriting him back to the safety of the Motel El Encanto. Whenever the reassuring power of that reverie wore off, a wave of crushing sadness followed.

Andra's grief, so staggering in the years right after Mexico, gradually receded into the background of her busy life. She worked at the State Department, where she edited an in-house newsletter, and she eventually remarried. She also became an accomplished painter; her work was once displayed at the U.S. embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

I first contacted Andra through the website she maintains to showcase her art. A few months later, she agreed to meet me for coffee in New York. Less than a minute after we sat down, she cut off my feeble attempt at chitchat to say that she was reluctant to dredge up her most searing memories and share them with the world. She was worried not just about the psychic toll of opening up about the events in Hermosillo, but also about her personal safety. The last time she'd received any word about Keesee, back in the mid-1990s, he was out of prison; what if he tracked her and Julia down after seeing one of his old crimes brought to light?

I told Andra about the murder of Harry Christensen, whose name she'd never heard before. And I was also able to assure her that Keesee was no longer a threat to anyone: He had died of lung cancer in a prison hospital in December 2010. No one had claimed his body.

Andra eventually consented to a series of interviews at her home near Washington, D.C. During the first of these, she showed me a file box marked The Case, which had been sealed up in her attic. It contained a trove of artifacts that she had preserved: affidavits, telegrams, newspaper clippings, a letter of condolence from President Nixon, an annotated map from the European scooter trip with John. Andra told me she'd recently started sifting through the archive for the first time in 40 years. It was painful, of course, to be reminded of how her world had been smashed apart by a sociopath. But there was also joy to be had in reacquainting herself with the person she'd once been—a person who had not wilted in the face of the incomprehensible.

"That young 31-year-old woman, she acted with no help, no one to hold her; her best friend was missing," she said. "But she acted—I acted—completely honorably throughout that whole period. And I love her."

This article appears in the May 2021 print edition with the headline "The Diplomat Who Disappeared."

Brendan I. Koerner is a contributing editor at Wired and the author of the book The Skies Belong to Us: Love and Terror in the Golden Age of Hijacking.

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You Won’t Remember the Pandemic the Way You Think You Will

The stories you hold on to will be colored by your own experience—but also by the experiences of those around you.

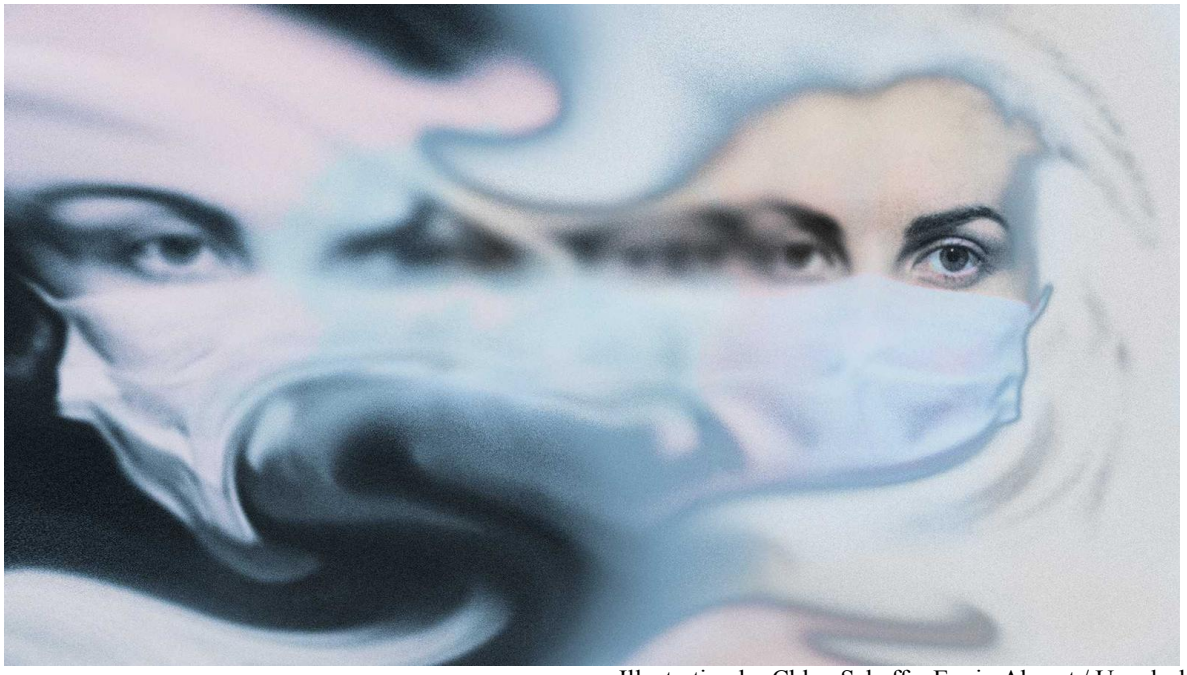

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; Engin Akyurt / Unsplash

- Story by Melissa Fay Greene
- May 2021 Issue
  Science

Illustrations by Chloe Scheffe

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My plague year began on the evening of Wednesday, March 11, 2020, when I was compelled to cancel the Atlanta-to-Denver plane tickets my husband and I had purchased for the next day, for a long visit with our oldest son, daughter-in-law, and small grandson. I was all packed.

For the first half of the week, I'd tried to configure the increasingly ominous COVID-19 news in ways that wouldn't keep me separated from that curly-haired 3-year-old boy. Several of our adult kids had attempted to pierce my denial, calling and texting to say, "Mom, it doesn't feel safe." Wednesday night, when I saw the Denver family ringing me via FaceTime, my heart dropped. Upstairs, weeping, I unpacked the picture books and little wooden toys.

My husband, meanwhile, said that everyone was overreacting, even our son who works at the CDC. But that same night the NBA suspended its season. *Oh*, my husband thought, *this must be serious!* At that moment, his plague year began.

In the weeks that followed, as friends and neighbors recounted similar stories of when normal life stopped for them, I began to wonder about the tales we would someday tell of the pandemic. For the rest of my life, would my story begin with the cancellation of two Delta tickets for Flight 1355, ATL-DEN, scheduled for March 12, 2020? Would my husband eternally narrate the fact that, on March 11, 2020, the National Basketball Association suspended the 2019–20 season after Rudy Gobert, Utah Jazz center, tested positive for the coronavirus? And—bigger picture—what would we as a nation remember?

The pandemic has not been a single, traumatic "flashbulb" event like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the fiery disintegration of the space shuttle Challenger, or 9/11. Instead, it's a life period in which everybody's memories will be embedded, more like the Great Depression or World War II, or My High-School Years or When I Was Married to Barbara. Starting in March 2020, hundreds of millions of Americans began forming their own impressions of it. As psychologists and anthropologists who study memory will tell you, we tend to lay out our anecdotes almost like short stories or screenplays to give our lives meaning; our plots (do they have silver linings? hopeful endings?) can reveal something about how we handle setbacks.

Read: Imagining the future is just another form of memory

We're already shaping our future pandemic narratives—the stories we will tell as individuals, as communities, as societies, and as nations about this epoch. The process of crafting these stories will help determine our resilience and well-being. How we tell our stories can transform how we move forward from hard times.

1.
What We Remember—And What We Forget

"There were so many unknowns at the beginning of the pandemic," Alex Enurah, an internal-medicine-trained hospitalist at the Medical Center of Aurora, in Colorado, told me when we spoke via Zoom recently. He had a dark beard of rich gloss and density,

and maintained an expression of attentive listening and kind concern. “First, will it really cross the seas to the U.S.? How hard will it hit us? Who’s going to get it?” As the virus ravaged Spain and Italy, the questions built, along with the foreboding sense “that something big was coming, with little time to prepare.”

Born in 1986 in Moscow, the son of a Nigerian father and a Russian mother who met at university while completing doctorates in mathematics, Alex grew up in Baltimore. His wife, Lynn VanderWielen, a tall white woman from Wisconsin farm country, is an expert in public-health-program evaluation. Their three-bedroom brick ranch sits in the sort of landscaped Denver neighborhood whose trees look scrubby under the enormous skies of the Great Plains. Medicine isn’t an easy path for a Black man. “When Alex enters a room, his patients sometimes think he’s come to pick up their food tray,” Lynn told me. “He says that’s an important job, too, just not something a physician does. Black families are always happy to see him, though.”

When his hospital asked for volunteers to see COVID-19 patients, Alex stepped up. “We constantly read updates and revised our practices to try to keep people safe,” he said. “It was scary but also exciting, a rare chance to practice medicine at an historic moment. I wondered if this was like the early days of trying to get a handle on HIV/AIDS. As patients began arriving, it felt like we were taking off in a plane we hadn’t finished building yet.”

While reporting this story, I asked people via social media to tell me what had made the deepest impression on them so far about the pandemic and what they thought they’d remember. Memory experts then helped me assess the submissions—and what they indicate about how our minds work.

Read: Discovering the roots of memory

Many replies to my prompts and to my follow-up questions began with the moment a person learned the college dorm was closing, the performances were suspended, the restaurant was shutting down. The psychology professor Henry L. Roediger III and the anthropology professor James Wertsch, scholars of collective memory at Washington University in St. Louis, introduced me to the “primacy effect,” one of the ways a memory gets “pinned” (as we say of tweets), to be easily retrievable.

In an experiment conducted in 1974, 1991, and 2009, whose results were published under the title “Forgetting the Presidents,” Roediger and his co-author, K. A. DeSoto, asked people to recall in five minutes all the presidents they could. The popularity of George Washington as a response exemplified the primacy effect, the tendency to remember firsts. The “recency effect”—another pin—was exemplified by participants easily naming contemporary White House occupants.

And the imprinting of dramatic story lines—which I'll call the "narrative effect," a very powerful pin—explains why Abraham Lincoln, JFK, and Richard Nixon live on in popular memory. A few decades hence, Roediger has noted, recent-ish presidents such as Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Gerald Ford may very well have gone the way of 19th-century figures such as Millard Fillmore and Franklin Pierce—forgotten by most Americans. They weren't the first and they're no longer the most recent, nor were their terms in office remarkable for being action-packed.

These natural memory aids work whether we're naming the Founding Fathers or recalling a turning point in our own life.

"I'll never forget those first spooky, surreal days of shelter-in-place in the Bay Area," wrote Kevin Simpson, an artist, in response to my prompts. "It's one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced places in the world, and yet we were scrounging stores for bread; paper towels; cleaning products; something, anything, to make a makeshift mask. Roads eerily silent, people crossing the street when you'd near each other on a sidewalk while walking a dog."

"I'll never forget the moment in March when a colleague at the local borough hall told me that we'd been asked to evacuate the building immediately because of the pandemic," wrote Howard Fredrics, who runs a public-access television station in Park Ridge, New Jersey. "I grabbed my office computer and ran. I haven't been back."

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; Annie Spratt / Unsplash

“I don’t think people will ever forget March of 2020 and how the world changed in the matter of a week or so,” Dan P. McAdams, a psychology professor at Northwestern University and an expert in narrative memory, told me. “I remember that week. I can tell you the days of the week.”

Someday, when this is all behind us, children may ask what it was like to live through a global pandemic. Given the primacy effect, we’ll probably start with the moment we realized something weird was afoot—my canceled Delta tickets, my sports-fan husband’s lost NBA season, and Alex Enurah’s sense of taking off in an unfinished plane.

Though we may vividly recall “how it began,” many of our pandemic memories will be hazier. I seem to remember a bright, clear morning in late March, when sheets of cool spring air billowed toward me on a walk, and I thought, *Okay, I can do this*. I made a few long-term plans (“long-term” in the sense of “in case lockdown lasts six weeks”): Shift my college classes to remote teaching, via Zoom. Read all of Charles Dickens, because if not now, when? Cultivate pollinator-friendly native plants in the backyard. But in truth, I can’t be sure if my early-pandemic plans were the thoughts of one bright, breezy morning or the thoughts of many such mornings. That’s typical, the memory experts told me.

“Most of our memories are in the form of generalities,” says Robyn Fivush, a psychology professor at Emory University. Because most of life is routine and recurring, she told me, you remember what life was like. “I might tell you about my memories of childhood: ‘One of the most important things to me was having Shabbat dinner every Friday night with my family.’ You might ask: ‘Tell me about one of those family dinners.’ I’d say: ‘Oh gosh, I don’t think I can.’”

In Denver, in the Enurah-VanderWielen home, as Alex’s plague year began with the steep uptick in COVID-19 cases at his hospital, his wife was in the third trimester of a much-wanted pregnancy. The couple had previously lost two pregnancies, and Lynn had suffered a dangerous postpartum hemorrhage when their son, Hans, was born. Lynn began working remotely, but mostly hung out with Hans, a giggly 2-year-old. She’d already been anxious about childbirth; the fear that Alex could get sick now compounded it. “My memories of childbirth are *I lived because Alex took care of me*,” she said. “He wasn’t my medical provider, obviously, but he was the one who said, ‘Lynn’s in trouble.’ Being pregnant during COVID scared me for a lot of reasons, but mostly it was the thought *If I have to deliver the baby without Alex, will I survive it?*

“Hans and I stopped going to the grocery store, stopped playing with other kids at the park. Our neighbors grocery-shopped for us. Hans and I had one fun outing left: the car wash. I’d bring a juice box and snacks and we’d ride through, watching the bubbles. He always asks to go. My car has never been this clean on the outside.”

As Fivush had suggested, most of the submissions to my prompts took this form: “What life was like.” I assume my memories will do the same. I walked the dogs a lot. I read Dickens. I discovered that Zoom classes, Zoom Thanksgiving, and Zoom game nights were a far cry from actual gatherings, but far better than nothing. I hugged those of my family members who were part of my “pod” and desperately missed the ones who lived a plane ride away. My grandson turned 4.

Fivush is intrigued by which moments get tucked away in the slick curlicues of a person’s brain, and why those moments—rather than the tens of millions of others from a lifetime—are saved. We use our memory in part to create a continuous sense of self, she told me, “a ‘narrative identity’ through all of life’s ups and downs: *I am a person whose life has meaning and purpose. I’m more than the subject of brute forces. There’s a Story of Me.*”

What we tend to remember most specifically are high moments and low moments, which become “episodes” in our memory, invested with meaning. In April, Alex Enurah fell ill.

“When I first felt a little tired,” Alex said, “I assumed it was from working long hours and trying to catch up on sleep in a house where a 2-year-old knows where to find you.

I said, ‘My pelvis hurts,’ and my 36-weeks-pregnant wife gives me a *look*. My COVID test came back positive, so I isolated downstairs.”

“The baby’s due date was May 11, 2020, and Alex got sick in mid-April,” Lynn said. “I made him breakfast, lunch, and dinner; placed his dishes on the washer and dryer; and went back upstairs before he opened his door. I worried that if I got sick, it could affect the baby, or they’d take her away from me after birth.”

“Six or seven days in,” Alex said, “just really run-down and weak, sense of smell and taste gone, no appetite, talking by phone with colleagues every day. I kept track of my oxygen with a pulse oximeter, and initially I was like 96, 97, 98 percent. Then I noticed —like, day six—more like 90, 91 percent, which is a change for me, but still kind of normal. And finally, I started dipping down to, like, 88 percent just from standing up. When I was down to about 85 percent, my colleagues said: ‘Let’s bring you in.’”

But where to go? He didn’t want to be a burden on his colleagues. “In a different world or, like, if Alex were white, he could have gone to any hospital in town,” Lynn said, “but anywhere other than the MCA, he’d be just an anonymous Black male admitted off the street.”

“If there was anyone on Earth who could, you know, guarantee that I would get to meet the little girl Lynn was carrying,” Alex said, choking up, “I felt it was my boss, Joseph Forrester,” a pulmonologist. “I just really wanted to meet that little girl.”

The chief medical officer, Philip Stahel, on a group phone call with Alex, said: “I’m sending an ambulance for you now.”

Alex protested: “I can’t do that to Lynn—she’s very pregnant. That will scare her.”

“All right,” replied Chakradhar Kotaru, another pulmonologist on the call. “I’m coming myself.”

“It was the middle of the night,” Lynn said, “and his colleague walks in wearing a full hazmat suit. It scared the crap out of me. He went into the basement and helped Alex climb the stairs. I was shocked to see how much weight he’d lost in just a few days. Dr. Kotaru helped him get into the SUV, and they drove away.”

Tony Ramos, a graphic designer in Cleveland, was one of the people who responded to my request for stories of the pandemic. “2020 will be marked by my Easter evening sitting on the steps to the basement of my house, cellphone in hand, listening to my sister describe how the hospital in which her husband just died from COVID-19 would not let her into the building to be at his bedside,” he wrote. “Instead, she had to sit in her car in their parking lot, alone. I will think about hospital parking lots differently for the rest of my life.”

Trauma gouges deeply into our minds, engraving painful and long-lasting memories. "Whether they are rape victims, combat veterans, or earthquake survivors, people exposed to terrifying trauma typically retain vivid memories of the most central aspects of such experiences, often for the rest of their lives," Richard McNally, a psychology professor at Harvard, told me. "Although most people exposed to trauma do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder, they nevertheless seldom, if ever, forget their trauma." The evolutionary purpose is clear: Vivid memories of dangerous incidents may help us avoid them in the future. But that doesn't make these memories any less searing.

"Alex started out on a regular floor, but with fevers of 103, 104, he was moved to the ICU," Lynn told me. "They surrounded him with ice packs. We tried to FaceTime, but he was so out of it. His face looked shaved and gaunt. He looked like he was freezing, but said he was miserably hot. He wasn't eating. Our relationship is based on a lot of joking and messing around, and we tried to do that a tiny bit on the phone, but Alex would have coughing fits and couldn't get his breath."

"Code blues were going off all around me in the ICU," Alex said. "TVs were tuned to CNN, and I thought I heard them saying, 'Black and Hispanic COVID-19 patients are doing *particularly* poorly.' And I was like, *This is* not *going well*. I'd suspected that the poorer outcomes of Black and Hispanic patients were not all due to social determinants of health, that there might be other components that hadn't been quantified yet. Being Black, I was really scared at this point. I was breathing too quickly. I'd cough once or twice, and my oxygen level would fall into the 70s. I'd seen patients who'd had one, two, four liters of oxygen suddenly pass away, despite our best efforts. I started reviewing the choices I'd made in life to become a doctor. I also started to think, *Well, would this be a time to, you know*—not write a letter; I didn't have the stamina for that. But should I record a video message to our unborn child, kind of telling her about her dad? I didn't want to tell Lynn that I was thinking about something like that, but I think she and I both knew this could end really badly."

Lynn said: "Mostly over the phone, when he could hardly talk at all, we just kept saying 'I love you. I love you so much.' Once, he said: 'I'm not sure I'm going to meet our baby.'"

2.
The Shape We Give to our Stories

"Even as we experience an event," Robyn Fivush has written, "we are already beginning to think about how to tell this event to another person at a later time." In a 2008 paper for the academic journal *Memory*, she and a co-author elaborated on the ideas of the 20th-century French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who developed the concept of collective memory: "Even when experiencing events for the first time, the

traveller has in mind the reactions of others, which colour both his perception of the event and his recollection of it."

According to Halbwachs, we begin composing our memories in anticipation of sharing them. I've caught myself doing this (and the more confusing or stressful the event, the more likely I am to start framing it before it's over, picturing the friends and family I will entertain with my tale of woe and mishap). But I had no idea that everyone does it, nor did I know that retailing our memories into shareable stories is intrinsic to the art of remembering. "When something is going terribly wrong," Fivush confirmed, "you're already thinking, *When this is all over, if it ends well, it's going to be a great story*."

Lynn spent a lot of time on the phone with her sister, sharing updates about Alex's condition and seeking support. "Hans occupied my mind most of the day," Lynn told me, "but when he went to bed at night and I was alone, I spiraled. Because then I could look at the news, read the articles, see what was happening with COVID. I called my sister in Wisconsin to ask, 'Should I just come home? What if Alex gets so sick that he's on a ventilator and that's when I go into labor? What if Alex doesn't make it? Am I going to raise two kids all alone?' Hans idolizes his dad … I mean, anything Alex does, to Hans it's the most marvelous thing in the whole wide world.

"My sister tried to reassure me: 'He's going to be okay.'"

The work of Elizabeth Loftus, a cognitive psychologist at UC Irvine, and others has shown that, if we discuss a memory with listeners who remember it differently, we may unconsciously borrow a bit of their local color or scrap of dialogue for our own version. "Every time you bring a memory to mind, it's activated, then reconsolidated," Fivush told me. And we're open to accepting other people's interpretation of our own memories. "We need to make sense of things," she continued. "During COVID, you call your friend to say, 'I'm so lonely,' and she says, 'I know, but Zooming with your family helps, doesn't it? I feel like I'm talking to my grown kids more than ever,' and you immediately start to think about your situation differently. You'll remember it differently."

We don't shelve a pristine first edition of an experience in a dust-free inner sanctum; we sloppily pass the memory around, inviting comment. The consolidated edition, with other people's fingerprints all over it, is what we put on the shelf of long-term memory, unaware that we've done so.

The founder of the field of cognitive psychology, Ulric Neisser, who died in 2012, was Fivush's mentor and colleague at Emory. On January 29, 1986, he distributed a brief questionnaire to his Psych 101 undergrads, asking for details about how they'd learned—the previous day—about the cataclysmic failure of the Challenger. He collected answers from 106 students. In the fall of 1988, he tracked down 44 of the students and asked them to answer the same questions again.

The results were striking: 25 percent of the subjects were wrong about everything, scoring zero. Half of the subjects scored two or less on a seven-point scale. Meanwhile, most of the students felt confident about their replies. “Our data leave no doubt that vivid and confident flashbulb recollections can be mistaken,” Neisser concluded. “When this happens, the original memories seem to have disappeared entirely; none of our retrieval cues enabled the subjects to recover them.”

In the process of remembering their Challenger stories, the Emory undergrads may have unwittingly borrowed parts of their friends’ narratives. One student wrote, in 1986, “I was in my religion class and some people walked in and started talking about [it].” Two and a half years later, the same student wrote: “When I first heard about the explosion I was sitting in my freshman dorm room with my roommate and we were watching TV.”

Whenever I’ve told people about this research, likening it to my generation’s purported total recall of the afternoon of Friday, November 22, 1963, their response is invariably: “Sure, but I remember it perfectly,” after which they tell me their particulars, thereby missing the point of Neisser’s findings. (For the record, I’m also certain that I remember those minutes with molecular precision, including wondering whether the shooting—we hadn’t yet learned that President Kennedy had died—meant that my Friday-afternoon piano lesson would be canceled.)

“No one ever says: ‘Oh sure, I heard about 9/11, but it didn’t really strike me,’” Fivush told me. “No, the story is: ‘I *heard* the news, and I *ran* to the TV, and I *watched* the second tower come down, and I was *devastated*.’ We probably didn’t all do that, but a lot of us did. As we tell the story, it’s not really false. To tell it is to become part of the community, to share the moment, to work together to understand an event that’s difficult to grasp. If we recall and talk about something often enough, it will become a ‘cultural narrative.’ Through multiple tellings, repetitions, and negotiations, it becomes the Story About X.”

This plague year has left us feeling isolated. Each of us seems to dwell alone within a damp grotto of private thoughts. But we’re already engaged in the crowdsourcing project of organizing collective memories. Americans self-sort into countless communities, which have very different experiences of the pandemic. There are health-care workers and scientists logging inhuman hours; frontline “essential workers” getting sick and going broke; parents trying to do their jobs while acting as their children’s teachers; kids squirming in front of their Zoom screens; Black Lives Matter activists marching and seeing their numbers swell; folks working from home who are dazed by the sameness of their days; college students stalled in their childhood bedrooms. There are the evicted, the jobless, the sick, the bereaved.

In daily chitchat and in give-and-take on social media, we share with others how it started for us and how it’s going. We instinctively compare and match what we’ve got

to what they've got, like the Emory undergrads settling on a blended version of How I Learned About the Challenger Disaster. Within each community, for years to come, stories will be passed around, tweaked, and polished until a small number of gems come to represent *This is what it was like to live through the coronavirus pandemic*.

Narrative-memory experts call this "the social construction of autobiographical memory." It's possible that Lynn's late-night collaboration with her sister—who urged optimism—enabled Lynn to re-shelve the day's difficult hours in her memory with the lightest tincture of hope.

The greatest memory-keepers invented by humankind are stories. "Facts are better remembered when interwoven in a narrative," Henry Roediger told me. Think about what you know of your early childhood. Stories told about you as a little kid are more accessible than a random Wednesday afternoon when you came in quietly from kindergarten and ate your lunch without complaint.

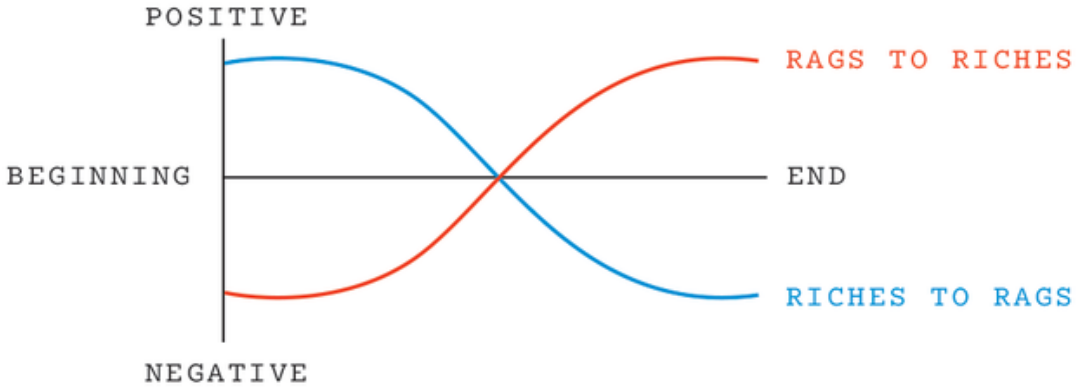
Inherent in the architecture of a story is its meaning. Narrative-memory experts believe that by manipulating the plot of an anecdote, we may be able to exert a bit of control over a memory, even a painful one.

A story opens with a protagonist anchored in time and place, who has a goal and a motivation, but confronts obstacles and barriers on the journey to the goal. At the end of the story, something must have changed in the inner or outer life of the hero. That's the archetypal story arc in Western culture.

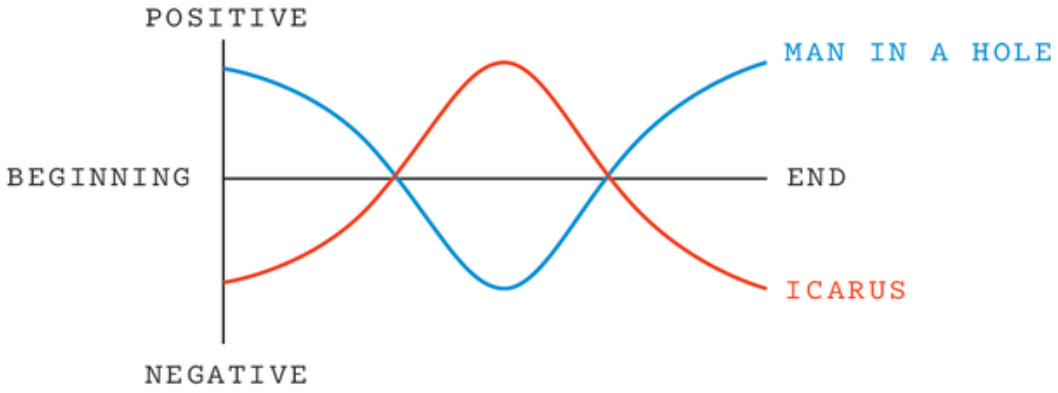
Throughout his life, beginning well before he won worldwide acclaim for his novels, Kurt Vonnegut ruminated about the form our stories take. "The shape of a given society's stories is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads," he wrote in his autobiography, summarizing his master's thesis on "story shapes" for an anthropology degree at the University of Chicago. The department rejected his thesis, but he never forgot what he called his "prettiest contribution."

Years later, Vonnegut mused about how great it would be if artificial intelligence could graph the plots of stories. "There is no reason why the simple shapes of stories can't be fed into computers," he said in a famous lecture. "They are beautiful shapes." In 2016, following up on the late novelist's suggestion, data scientists at the University of Vermont and the University of Adelaide, in Australia, put 1,327 English-language works of fiction through statistical computations of "sentiment analysis." They tracked the emotional valence of each story by counting previously identified "happy" words such as *laughter*, *excellent*, and *joy* and "unhappy" words such as *murder*, *cancer*, and *death*. The data analytics revealed that more than 1,000 fictional works could be captured in just six story arcs, which are easily grasped in three pairs.

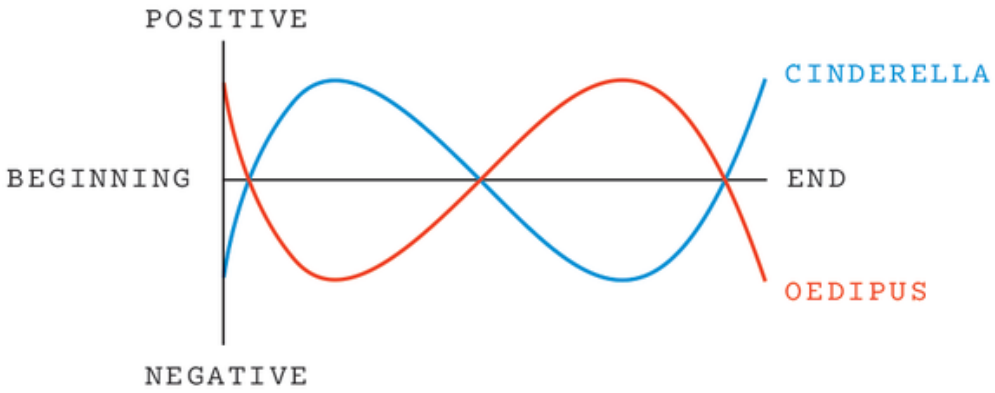
In the first pair, a curving line rises from the lower left to the upper right (the Rags-to-Riches story) or falls from the upper left to the lower right (Tragedy, or Riches to Rags):



The next two involve a change in trajectory: What seemed like a good idea at the time doesn't pan out (rise then fall, as in the myth of Icarus), or triumph is snatched from defeat (fall then rise, nicknamed Man in a Hole).



The third set involves more complex stories that include two inflection points in the hero's prospects: fall-rise-fall, as exemplified by Oedipus, and rise-fall-rise, nicknamed Cinderella.

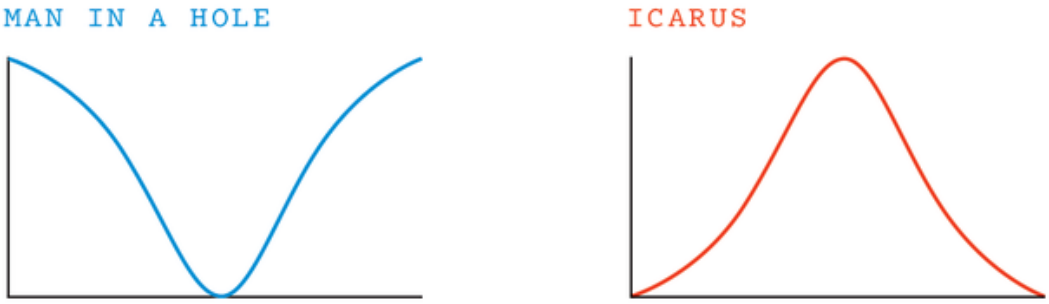


Robyn Fivush and two Emory colleagues, Robert Thorstad and Matthew Graci, wondered whether our personal narratives might echo these same fictional story arcs. When weaving our little after-dinner stories, most of us probably try to offer a bit of drama, intuiting that a flat recitation of this-happened-then-this-happened will not captivate our listeners. Without revealing what they were looking for, the Emory researchers invited volunteers to write down their "most positive experience" and "most traumatic experience." They also solicited anonymous personal narratives online, enabling them to analyze 3,000 personal narratives from more than 500 subjects (each participant wrote multiple narratives).

"People shared really intimate things about themselves," Thorstad, who is now a data scientist for *The Wall Street Journal*, told me. "Some contained physical or sexual violence; some conveyed strong tragedies. We didn't tell the subjects we were interested in story shape. They didn't have to tell a story. They could have just narrated —*This happened first and this happened next*—with no emotional shape, just a flat line."

The researchers subjected the personal narratives to data-analytic techniques similar to those applied to fictional narratives. The same classic story arcs materialized. The large majority of personal narratives "were well characterized by the same 6 emotional arcs that emerged in a recent large-scale analysis of English-language cultural fiction," they reported. Nonprofessional writers, sharing thousands of deeply personal accounts of key life episodes, instinctively chose those same six story shapes.

Within that discovery lay another: Everyday storytellers liked two of the arcs best. "I came into this study thinking that Rags to Riches and Tragedy were going to be common," Thorstad said. "But people prefer story arcs with one emotional inflection point: Man in a Hole or Icarus."



While the researchers haven't yet analyzed this preference, my hunch would be that these one-inflection-point story shapes offer greater drama than the simple uphill or downhill slopes of Rags to Riches and Tragedy, while the greater complexity of the

two-inflection-point plots, Oedipus and Cinderella, exceed the casual skill set of most raconteurs. We can't all be Sophocles. Or Walt Disney. Or Kurt Vonnegut.

3.
Memory and Resilience

"Shape," Thorstad told me, "changes the overall sentiment of the story."

That's the essence of a body of research in the field of narrative psychology. "We study the arc within a given memory," Dan McAdams, the Northwestern psychology professor, told me. "Let's say a person describes a turning point, like: 'I got fired from my first job, went into a depression, and couldn't talk to anybody for three weeks. But I crawled out of it, and a year later, I landed a fabulous position and haven't looked back.' We call that a 'redemptive' sequence."

That's Man in a Hole. "Somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again" is how Vonnegut described it in his lecture. "People love that story. They never get sick of it."

Its opposite, the "contamination" sequence, describes a negative episode that ruins everything. "In a contamination sequence, everything is going beautifully at the start," McAdams said. "'She was the love of my life. We were going to be together forever. We were happy. Then I woke up Monday morning and she was gone, and I'm never going to find love again.'

"Every life story is filled with different sorts of scenes. We've found that people whose narratives include a lot of redemptive arcs tend to have higher psychological well-being. People whose life stories contain a higher density of contamination narratives tend to show higher levels of depression and lower levels of well-being."

Of course, some people face more painful setbacks and disasters in life than others. "Someone who's had a horribly difficult life could have a harder time framing redemptive sequences," McAdams said. "But we look at the interpretation: What kind of meaning does a person derive from difficult events? Some people tend to go through life interpreting things in a positive way, making redemption sequences where they can, even in difficult circumstances."

"I'm not convinced we *store* our memories as narratives," Fivush told me. "The neurobiology and neurochemistry of memory suggest that our memories are stored in dynamic, fluid pieces. When we are in the process of reassembling a memory, we have these story shapes also stored and available to us.

"The particular form we give a memory depends on the context," she said. "For example: When you're telling a sad story, most Americans will demand a redemptive

end. They'll say, 'But you learned something about yourself, didn't you?'"

Vickie Scheer, 73, a retired educator in Atlanta, shared an episode of loneliness redeemed by kindness. Hating the social isolation of lockdown, she said, she sat on her front porch and called "Hi, neighbor!" to random passersby, including a couple walking their dog. "The woman had red hair on one side and a shaved head on the other, and they both were covered in tattoos. They always said hello back. I found out they were dog-walkers. One day I was taking out the trash just as they were passing by. They asked how I was that day. I burst into tears and said, 'Today not so good.' The woman said, 'You are grieving, I understand.' I told them their kindness made all the difference in the world to me. They promised to stop by every Monday to check on me."

Many folks, mid-pandemic, described still-unfolding situations. Fivush cautions that the final shape of a story we tell now might not be known yet. She categorizes narratives of events in progress simply as "unfinished."

As for my canceled trip to visit my grandson, I haven't seen him yet; still, I'll categorize my own story arc not as Icarus (that would make me too sad) but as "unfinished."

In Denver, Alex Enurah and Lynn VanderWielen's story began to take a turn for the better. As Alex told me, "One day, I noticed: *Well, it doesn't seem like things are actually getting worse right this minute. So that's good.* They moved me out of ICU back to a regular floor. A few colleagues stopped by to visit, everyone fully geared up. They'd try not to make me laugh, because laughing made my oxygen shoot down … After a few more days, they said I could quarantine at home."

"He was cleared on the first day of May, and I went into labor on May 4," Lynn said. "If you look at your whole lifetime, four days is so insignificant, but it was significant for us. We delivered Ida at 12:05 in the morning on the fifth of May, healthy, happy, screaming. She was wonderful from the first moment. And I did fine too."

"With the childbirth complications last time," Alex said, "and with my having recently come out of the hospital myself, I was just very … on edge. It was a lot of emotion. You know, for the longest time I felt like I would not get to meet her, and then it's like, suddenly she's in the room and she's healthy. I had a lot of competing thoughts, including *Is this even real, or is this a dream?* Watching Lynn hold our baby, I honestly wondered if it was possible that I had died and was somehow seeing this, you know, after … It just took me a little bit of time to be able to process and appreciate everything."

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; Sophie Nengel / Unsplash

“We didn’t know if Alex would meet the baby,” Lynn said. “And then here she was, healthy, and Hans was home asleep in his bed, so we were going to get to be a family again. Honestly, it was surreal, like this outcome hadn’t been on the list of possible choices.”

I asked Robert Thorstad what his research might allow him to predict about how we’ll talk about our COVID-era memories in the future. “The obvious implication is that, whatever story we tell, it’s not going to be a linear story from good to bad or from bad to good. It’s not going to be: ‘My life was great, and then COVID-19 ruined it.’ It’s going to have inflection points. And narrative psychologists tell us that the shape of story a person chooses can help lead to greater resilience and better outcomes.”

“If you land well after a difficult incident,” Fivush agreed, “you’re more likely to give it a redemptive arc. And if you give a difficult episode a redemptive arc, you’re more likely to land well. It’s not tautological; it’s transactional. They influence each other, like: *The better I cope, the more I can create positive meaning out of my experience* and *The more I can create positive meaning out of my experience, the better I cope.* This is why psychotherapy asks patients, ‘What’s a different way to think about this?’”

We’re surviving an incredibly difficult period, many of us tucking brutal, sad, or frightening memories into long-term storage. But whether alone or with input from others, we may be able to flip over some of our Icarus “contamination” sequences into

Man in a Hole "redemptive" sequences, giving ourselves a boost. "You can't just change your story by deciding to do it in a second," Fivush said. "For really difficult challenges, it takes time to rework your understanding. People might ask if you're over your grief after two months. No, it takes years. But it can be done."

Ida Enurah is a jolly baby, with a broad, smiley face like her dad's.

"It took a long time for Alex to sound like himself, even when he came home from the hospital," Lynn told me via Zoom. "Once he was home he told me they'd been really worried about him."

"I'd never been that sick, realizing how close I was to possibly dying," Alex told me. "Things are good now. But that experience put me in a very dark place for a long while. When I returned to work, I was afraid. There was a fear of being exposed to COVID again, wondering if I'd have a more severe reaction the second time and need to be intubated immediately. I had a hard time passing the ICU room I'd been in. It gave me a sick feeling. A visceral response. To this day I try to detour around that section. I'd never even been hospitalized before. It puts my work in a quite different light. It makes the conversations about death and dying with patients and families more difficult and more personal."

"But, I mean, we're home, we're healthy," Lynn said. "We have two healthy kids. I feel like I'm—I don't know if *proud* is the right word, but I feel like I did a good job."

There are overlapping narrative arcs in this family's story: two protagonists with the same goal, that everyone should survive, but different battles to fight. Alex was fighting for his life. Lynn feared that labor and delivery would throw her into another fight for her life and that COVID-19 could threaten the life of her unborn child, while she did her best to keep 2-year-old Hans's life stable.

"I see a redemptive arc in Lynn's story," Fivush told me. "Ida was born, she's happy and healthy; we're nesting, everything's great. Some redemption stories are just a return to homeostasis: *I got through it and normal life has been restored.* Alex says he is still processing; his story may be different in another year or two, depending upon how the nation emerges from the pandemic. His narrative is unfinished."

"We all know in our bones that this plague year is an epic year," Dan McAdams told me. "Not a day goes by without the proliferation of redemptive stories about the coronavirus. Some are dramatic stories of recovery, starring nurses and first responders who minister to the victims, and starring those victims who manage to come back from the precipice. Others find unexpected benefits in the shutdowns: Families are eating dinners together now, the skies are less polluted, communities pull together. In the United States, progressives may imagine that the crisis will ultimately usher in universal health

care or a Green New Deal. They invoke the story of America's overcoming the adversity of the Great Depression and World War II to emerge as a stronger and more egalitarian society.

"But not everyone will be able to tell a redemptive narrative," he continued. "The suffering is too great. It might be a year where more people are inspired to take the path of Albert Camus' protagonist in *The Plague*, Dr. Bernard Rieux. He wasn't able to save many people, and he couldn't begin to say what it all meant, and the loss of thousands of people didn't appear to be pointing a way to a better life for the survivors. By the end of *The Plague*, you come to believe, with Rieux, that at least it meant something for him to bear witness; he bore witness to suffering. Not every story is redemptive—there are other kinds of great stories in the world, and bearing witness is an important one. It's possible that's the best most of us can do this year. Sometimes you just have to come to terms with the world as it is, and to human beings as they are, rather than how we wish the world and people were."

Perhaps Dr. Enurah's role is like Dr. Rieux's: to bear witness. He has seen the worst of COVID-19 from beside hospital beds, and then in them. He did his best to help preserve life, even to the point of nearly losing his own.

I asked him whether there was anything else he thought he might remember about the pandemic, and he instantly offered this episode: "My colleague Dr. Timothy Bedient was the one who admitted me to the ICU. He was doing the history and physical, asking me questions about my past and all that. I felt like I had the plague; people suited up before entering my room; at home I hadn't been able to hold Hans or get close to my wife. But at the end of our conversation—it was a very brief gesture—Tim put his hand on my shoulder. He said, 'Alex, we are going to figure this out. I think this is going to be okay.' And to me, that was the most meaningful moment of that whole time—the fact that he put his hand on my shoulder meant the world to me. I was feeling nothing but fear, and it felt like he crossed a barrier to be with me."

It's a representative moment of the pandemic era, of a type that might emerge as a theme in many of our tales: that, in the worst of times, even as many people surprised us with their indifference, ignorance, racism, and aggression, other people—some of them friends and colleagues, some total strangers—managed to cross barriers and offer us kindness, compassion, alliance, and strength.

Alyssa Kapnik Samuel contributed research to this article. It appears in the May 2021 print edition with the headline "How Will We Remember the Pandemic?"

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‘Very American Photographs’

Street photography as collaboration

Dawoud Bey

- Story by Syreeta McFadden
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Photographs by Dawoud Bey

Image above left: *Two Men at Cambridge Place and Fulton Street, Brooklyn, 1988*; Above right: *Woman Wearing Denim, Rochester, 1989*

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an I make a picture with you?”

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The photographer Dawoud Bey posed this question to passersby in Black communities across America countless times from 1988 to 1991. His simple inquiry yielded beautiful portraits of everyday Americans that relayed intense interiority and intimacy. The monograph *Street Portraits*, published in April by Mack, marks the first time the 73 pictures in the series can be seen together.

Left to right: *A Girl Coming From the Store, Rochester, 1989*; *A Young Man With His Hotdog Cart, Rochester, 1989*; *Two Girls on Willoughby Street, Brooklyn, 1989*

Left to right: *Kofi and Ebony, Brooklyn, 1990*; *A Boy Wearing a* Star Wars *Shirt, Rochester, 1989*; *A Man Carrying His Bible, Brooklyn, 1988*

Street portraiture by nature is a kind of surreptitious craft, not always reliant on the consent of the photographed and occasionally even voyeuristic or invasive. Bey subverted convention by lugging a tripod and a large camera

around New York City, Rochester, and Amityville in New York, as well as Washington, D.C. Inside the camera was Polaroid positive/negative film. The medium allowed Bey to give his subjects a keepsake from these momentary exchanges, a Polaroid print of themselves (the positive); Bey kept the negative for his own prints. In this way, the photographer and his subjects became collaborators. Bey, who was awarded a MacArthur genius grant in 2017, told me that he cultivated an ethos of reciprocity while working on this series. It has remained a constant in his portraits ever since.

“They’re very American photographs,” Bey said. “It’s about placing Black people within that larger American landscape, within the physical landscape, within the geographical landscape.”

“The whole point,” Bey told me, “is to amplify their presence in the world.”

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