JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022
THEATLANTIC.COM

JANUARY 6 WAS PRACTICE

The Atlantic
EST. 1857

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The Atlantic

[Sun, 02 Jan 2022]

Cover Story

Editor's Note

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- **What Happened to American Conservatism?**
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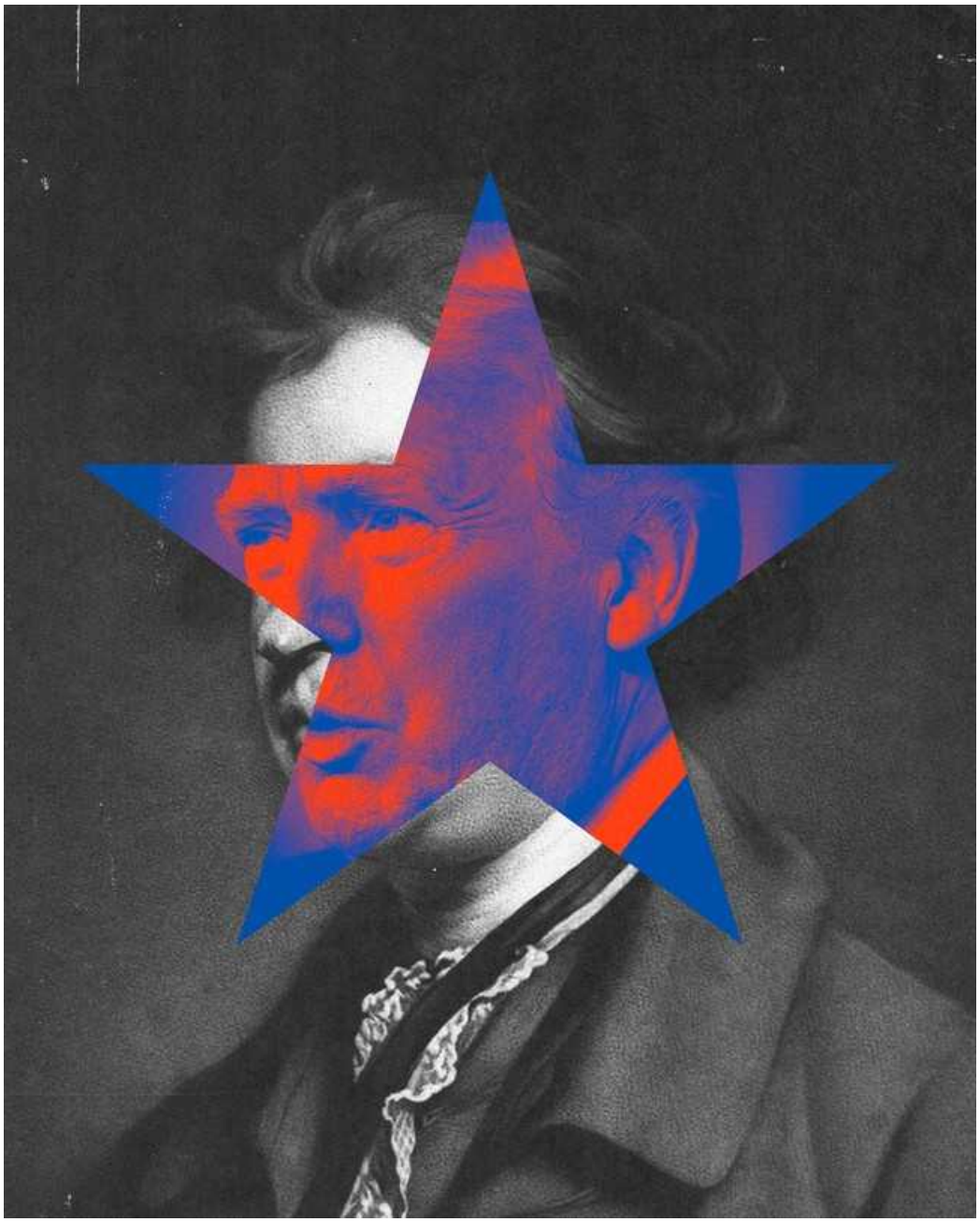

What Happened to American Conservatism?

David Brooks: Conservatism Is Dead

By David Brooks

I fell in love with conservatism in my 20s. As a politics and crime reporter in Chicago, I often found myself around public-housing projects like Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes, which had been built with the best of intentions but had become nightmares. The urban planners who designed those projects thought they could improve lives by replacing ramshackle old neighborhoods with a series of neatly ordered high-rises.

But, as the sociologist Richard Sennett, who lived in part of the Cabrini-Green complex as a child, noted, the planners never really consulted the residents themselves. They disrespected the residents by turning them into unseen, passive spectators of their own lives. By the time I encountered the projects they were national symbols of urban decay.

Back then I thought of myself as a socialist. But seeing the fallout from this situation prompted a shocking realization: *This is exactly what that guy I read in college had predicted*. Human society is unalterably complex, Edmund Burke argued. If you try to reengineer it based on the simplistic schema of your own reason, you will unintentionally cause significant harm. Though Burke was writing as a conservative statesman in Britain some 200 years earlier, the wisdom of his insight was apparent in what I was seeing in the Chicago of the 1980s.

I started reading any writer on conservatism whose book I could get my hands on—Willmoore Kendall, Peter Viereck, Shirley Robin Letwin. I can only describe what happened next as a love affair. I was enchanted by their way of looking at the world. In conservatism I found not a mere alternative policy agenda, but a deeper and more resonant account of human nature, a more comprehensive understanding of wisdom, an inspiring description of the highest ethical life and the nurturing community.

What passes for "conservatism" now, however, is nearly the opposite of the Burkean conservatism I encountered then. Today, what passes for the worldview of "the right" is a set of resentful animosities, a partisan attachment to Donald Trump or Tucker Carlson, a sort of mental brutalism. The rich philosophical perspective that dazzled me then has been reduced to Fox News and voter suppression.

I recently went back and reread the yellowing conservatism books that I have lugged around with me over the decades. I wondered whether I'd be embarrassed or ashamed of them, knowing what conservatism has devolved into. I have to tell you that I wasn't embarrassed; I was enthralled all over again, and I came away thinking that conservatism is truer and more profound than ever—and that to be a conservative today, you have to oppose much of what the Republican Party has come to stand for.

This essay is a reclamation project. It is an attempt to remember how modern conservatism started, what core wisdom it contains, and why that wisdom is still needed today.

Our political categories emerged following the wars of religion of the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries. It was a time of bitterness, polarization, and culture war—like today, but a thousand times worse. The Reformation had divided Europe into hostile Catholic and Protestant camps. The wars were a series of massacres and counter-massacres, vicious retributions, and even more vicious counter-retributions. Blaise de Monluc, a French commander, was a characteristic figure. In 1562, as Sarah Bakewell recounts in her book *How to Live*, he was sent to pacify the city of Bordeaux after a Protestant mob had attacked the town hall during a riot. Monluc's method was mass murder. He hanged Protestants in the street without trial. His suppression was so bloodthirsty that his troops ran out of gallows and had to hang people from trees. So many Protestants were killed and thrown into a well that their bodies entirely filled the deep shaft. In 1571, Monluc was shot in the face, and he spent the rest of his life behind a mask—a disfigured man from a disfigured age.

Eventually many Europeans became exhausted and appalled. The urgent task was this: how to construct a society that wouldn't devolve into bitter polarization and tribal bloodbaths. One camp, which we associate with the French Enlightenment, put its faith in reason. Some thought a decent social order can be built when primitive passions like religious zeal are marginalized and tamed; when individuals are educated to use their highest faculty, reason, to pursue their enlightened self-interest; and when government organizes society using the tools of science.

Another camp, which we associate with the Scottish or British Enlightenment of David Hume and Adam Smith, did not believe that human reason is powerful enough to control human selfishness; most of the time our reason merely rationalizes our selfishness. They did not believe that individual reason is powerful enough even to comprehend the world around us, let alone enable leaders to engineer society from the top down. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small," Burke wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

This is one of the core conservative principles: epistemological modesty, or humility in the face of what we don't know about a complex world, and a conviction that social change should be steady but cautious and incremental. Down the centuries, conservatives have always stood against the arrogance of those who believe they have the ability to plan history: the French revolutionaries who thought they could destroy a society and rebuild it from scratch, but who ended up with the guillotine; the Russian and Chinese Communists who tried to create a centrally controlled society, but who ended up with the gulag and the Cultural Revolution; the Western government planners who thought they could fine-tune an economy from the top, but who ended up with stagflation and sclerosis; the European elites who thought they could unify their continent by administrative fiat and arrogate power to unelected technocrats in Brussels, but who ended up with a monetary crisis and populist backlash.

If conservatives don't think reason is strong enough to order a civilization, what human faculty do they trust enough to do the job? Here we have to resort to a classic 18th-century concept—the "sentiments." An early book of Burke's was on aesthetics. When you look at a painting, you don't have to rationally calculate its beauty or its power, the sadness or the joy it inspires. Sentiments are automatic aesthetic and emotional judgments about things. They assign value. They tell you what is beautiful and what is ugly, what to want and what is worth wanting, where to go and what to aim for.

Rationalists put a lot of faith in "I think therefore I am"—the autonomous individual deconstructing problems step by logical step. Conservatives put a lot of faith in the latent wisdom that is passed down by generations,

cultures, families, and institutions, and that shows up as a set of quick and ready intuitions about what to do in any situation. Brits don't have to think about what to do at a crowded bus stop. They form a queue, guided by the cultural practices they have inherited.

The most important sentiments are moral sentiments. Conservatism certainly has an acute awareness of sin—selfishness, greed, lust. But conservatives also believe that in the right circumstances, people are motivated by the positive moral emotions—especially sympathy and benevolence, but also admiration, patriotism, charity, and loyalty. These moral sentiments move you to be outraged by cruelty, to care for your neighbor, to feel proper affection for your imperfect country. They motivate you to do the right thing.

Your emotions can be trusted, the conservative believes, when they are cultivated rightly. "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," David Hume wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. "The feelings on which people act are often superior to the arguments they employ," the late neoconservative scholar James Q. Wilson wrote in *The Moral Sense*.

The key phrase, of course, is *cultivated rightly*. A person who lived in a state of nature would be an unrecognizable creature, scarcely fit for life in society, locked up within and slave to his own unruly desires. The only way to govern such an unformed creature would be through a prison state. If a person has not been trained by a community to tame his passions from within, then the state would have to continuously control him from without.

Fortunately, people do not generally bring themselves up alone. The state of nature as imagined by John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau has never existed. People are raised within families and communities, traditions and nations—within the civilizing webs of a coherent social order. Over time, humans have evolved arrangements, traditions, and customs that not only help them address practical problems, but also help them form their children into decent human beings. The methods and mores that have stood the test of time have usually endured for good reason. "The world is often wiser than any philosopher," the journalist Walter Bagehot wrote in the mid-19th century.

Some of the wisdom passed down through the ages is transmitted through books and sermons. But most of the learning happens by habituation. We are formed within families, churches, communities, schools, and professional societies. Each institution has its own stories, standards of excellence, ways of doing things. When you join the Marines, you don't just learn to shoot a rifle; you absorb an entire ethos that will both help you complete the tasks you will confront and mold you into a certain sort of person: fierce against foes, loyal to friends, faithful to the Corps.

If someone asked you how to treat a woman whose husband has just died, your instinctive response would probably not be "Induce her to host an open house for the next week." But the Jewish shiva customs are a brilliant set of practices to help people collectively deal with grief, in part by giving everybody something basic and purposeful to do. The shiva rituals nurture a certain way of caring for one another, instantiate a certain sort of family life. They help turn individuals into a people. Institutions instill habits, habits become virtues, virtues become character.

Burkean conservatism inspired me because its social vision was not just about laws, budgets, and technocratic plans; its vision was about soulcraft, about how we build institutions that produce good citizens—people who are moderate in their zeal, sympathetic to the marginalized, reliable in their diligence, and willing to sacrifice the private interest for public good. Conservatism resonated with me because it recognized that culture is more important than the state in driving history. "Manners are of more importance than laws," Burke wrote.

Conservatives thus spend a lot of time defending the "little platoon[s]," as Burke called them, the communities and settled villages that are the factories of moral and emotional formation. If, as Burke believed, reason alone cannot find the one true answer to any social problem, each community must improvise its own set of solutions to intricate human concerns. The conservative seeks to defend this wonderful heterogeneity from the forces of bigness and the centralizing arrogance of rationalism—to protect these little platoons when government tries to perform roles best done in families, when the federal government takes power from local government, when big corporations suck the vitality out of local economies.

True conservatism's great virtue is that it teaches us to be humble about what we think we know; it gets human nature right, and understands that we are primarily a collection of unconscious processes, deep emotions, and clashing desires. Conservatism's profound insight is that it's impossible to build a healthy society strictly on the principle of self-interest. It's an illusion, as T. S. Eliot put it, to think that a society in which people don't have to be good can thrive. Life is essentially a moral enterprise, and the health of your community will depend on how well it does moral formation—how well it nurtures ordered inner lives and helps balance sentiments, desires, and motivations. Finally, conservatism welcomes you into a great procession down the ages. Society "is a partnership in all science," Burke wrote,

By the early 1990s, I was living in Brussels, covering Europe, Africa, and the Middle East for *The Wall Street Journal* and continuing my conservative self-education. I became fascinated by a British statesman named Enoch Powell. If you were to design the perfect conservative, Powell would seem to be it—a classics scholar, veteran, poet, and man of faith, and the product of the finest Tory training grounds the U.K. had to offer. And yet in 1968, Powell had given his notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech, which was blatant in its racism and shocking in its anti-immigrant message. How, I wondered, had conservatism, which was developed in response to sectarian war, produced a statesman who was trying to start one?

I realized that every worldview has the vices of its virtues. Conservatives are supposed to be epistemologically modest—but in real life, this modesty can turn into a brutish anti-intellectualism, a contempt for learning and expertise. Conservatives are supposed to prize local community—but this orientation can turn into narrow parochialism, can produce xenophobic and racist animosity toward immigrants, a tribal hostility toward outsiders, and a paranoid response when confronted with even a hint of diversity and pluralism. Conservatives are supposed to cherish moral formation—but this emphasis can turn into a rigid and self-righteous moralism, a tendency to see all social change as evidence of moral decline and social menace. Finally, conservatives are supposed to revere the past—but this reverence for what was can turn into an abject deference to whoever holds power.

When I looked at conservatives in continental Europe, I generally didn't like what I saw. And when I looked at people like Powell, I was appalled.

Fortunately, I didn't have to live within the confines of blood-and-soil European conservatism; I had the American kind. Because conservatism is so rooted in the local manners and mores of each community, there is no such thing as international conservatism. Each society has its own customs and moral practices, and so each society has its own brand of conservatism.

American conservatism descends from Burkean conservatism, but is hopped up on steroids and adrenaline. Three features set our conservatism apart from the British and continental kinds. First, the American Revolution. Because that war was fought partly on behalf of abstract liberal ideals and universal principles, the tradition that American conservatism seeks to preserve is liberal. Second, while Burkean conservatism puts a lot of emphasis on stable communities, America, as a nation of immigrants and pioneers, has always emphasized freedom, social mobility, the Horatio Alger myth—the idea that it is possible to transform your condition through hard work. Finally, American conservatives have been more unabashedly devoted to capitalism—and to entrepreneurialism and to business generally—than conservatives almost anywhere else. Perpetual dynamism and creative destruction are big parts of the American tradition that conservatism defends.

If you look at the American conservative tradition—which I would say begins with the capitalist part of Hamilton and the localist part of Jefferson; extends through the Whig Party and Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt; continues with Eisenhower, Goldwater, and Reagan; and ends with Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign—you don't see people trying to revert to some past glory. Rather, they are attracted to innovation and novelty, smitten with the excitement of new technologies—from Hamilton's pro-growth industrial policy to Lincoln's railroad legislation to Reagan's "Star Wars" defense system.

American conservatism has always been in tension with itself. In its prime—the half century from 1964 to 2012—it was divided among libertarians, religious conservatives, small-town agrarians, urban neoconservatives,

foreign-policy hawks, and so on. And for a time, this fractiousness seemed to work.

American conservatives were united, during this era, by their opposition to communism and socialism, to state planning and amoral technocracy. In those days I assumed that this vibrant, forward-looking conservatism was the future, and that the Enoch Powells of the world were the receding roar of a sick reaction. I was wrong. And I confess that I've come to wonder if the tension between "America" and "conservatism" is just too great. Maybe it's impossible to hold together a movement that is both backward-looking and forward-looking, both in love with stability and addicted to change, both go-go materialist and morally rooted. Maybe the postwar American conservatism we all knew—a collection of intellectuals, activists, politicians, journalists, and others aligned with the Republican Party—was just a parenthesis in history, a parenthesis that is now closing.

Donald Trump is the near-opposite of the Burkean conservatism I've described here. How did a movement built on sympathy and wisdom lead to a man who possesses neither? How did a movement that put such importance on the moral formation of the individual end up elevating an unashamed moral degenerate? How did a movement built on an image of society as a complex organism give rise to the simplistic dichotomies of manipulative populism? How did a movement based on respect for the wisdom of the past end up with Trump's authoritarian campaign boast "I alone can fix it," perhaps the least conservative sentence it is possible to utter?

The reasons conservatism devolved into Trumpism are many. First, race. Conservatism makes sense only when it is trying to preserve social conditions that are basically healthy. America's racial arrangements are fundamentally unjust. To be conservative on racial matters is a moral crime. American conservatives never wrapped their mind around this. My beloved mentor, William F. Buckley Jr., made an ass of himself in his 1965 Cambridge debate against James Baldwin. By the time I worked at *National Review*, 20 years later, explicit racism was not evident in the office, but racial issues were generally overlooked and the GOP's flirtation with racist

dog whistles was casually tolerated. When you ignore a cancer, it tends to metastasize.

Second, economics. Conservatism is essentially an explanation of how communities produce wisdom and virtue. During the late 20th century, both the left and the right valorized the liberated individual over the enmeshed community. On the right, that meant less Edmund Burke, more Milton Friedman. The right's focus shifted from wisdom and ethics to self-interest and economic growth. As George F. Will noted in 1984, an imbalance emerged between the "political order's meticulous concern for material well-being and its fastidious withdrawal from concern for the inner lives and moral character of citizens." The purpose of the right became maximum individual freedom, and especially economic freedom, without much of a view of what that freedom was for, nor much concern for what held societies together.

But perhaps the biggest reason for conservatism's decay into Trumpism was spiritual. The British and American strains of conservatism were built on a foundation of national confidence. If Britain was a tiny island nation that once bestrode the world, "nothing in all history had ever succeeded like America, and every American knew it," as the historian Henry Steele Commager put it in 1950. For centuries, American and British conservatives were grateful to have inherited such glorious legacies, knew that there were sacred things to be preserved in each national tradition, and understood that social change had to unfold within the existing guardrails of what already was.

By 2016, that confidence was in tatters. Communities were falling apart, families were breaking up, America was fragmenting. Whole regions had been left behind, and many elite institutions had shifted sharply left and driven conservatives from their ranks. Social media had instigated a brutal war of all against all, social trust was cratering, and the leadership class was growing more isolated, imperious, and condescending. "Morning in America" had given way to "American carnage" and a sense of perpetual threat.

I wish I could say that what Trump represents has nothing to do with conservatism, rightly understood. But as we saw with Enoch Powell, a

pessimistic shadow conservatism has always lurked in the darkness, haunting the more optimistic, confident one. The message this shadow conservatism conveys is the one that Trump successfully embraced in 2016: Evil outsiders are coming to get us. But in at least one way, Trumpism is truly anti-conservative. Both Burkean conservatism and Lockean liberalism were trying to find ways to gentle the human condition, to help society settle differences without resort to authoritarianism and violence. Trumpism is pre-Enlightenment. Trumpian authoritarianism doesn't renounce holy war; it embraces holy war, assumes it is permanent, in fact seeks to make it so. In the Trumpian world, disputes are settled by raw power and intimidation. The Trumpian epistemology is to be anti-epistemology, to call into question the whole idea of truth, to utter whatever lie will help you get attention and power. Trumpism looks at the tender sentiments of sympathy as weakness. Might makes right.

On the right, especially among the young, the populist and nationalist forces are rising. All of life is seen as an incessant class struggle between oligarchic elites and the common *volk*. History is a culture-war death match. Today's mass-market, pre-Enlightenment authoritarianism is not grateful for the inherited order but sees menace pervading it: You've been cheated. The system is rigged against you. Good people are dupes. Conspiracists are trying to screw you. Expertise is bogus. Doom is just around the corner. I alone can save us.

What's a Burkean conservative to do? A lot of my friends are trying to reclaim the GOP and make it a conservative party once again. I cheer them on. America needs two responsible parties. But I am skeptical that the GOP is going to be home to the kind of conservatism I admire anytime soon.

Trumpian Republicanism plunders, degrades, and erodes institutions for the sake of personal aggrandizement. The Trumpian cause is held together by hatred of the Other. Because Trumpians live in a state of perpetual war, they need to continually invent existential foes—critical race theory, nongendered bathrooms, out-of-control immigration. They need to treat half the country, metropolitan America, as a moral cancer, and view the cultural and demographic changes of the past 50 years as an alien invasion. Yet pluralism is one of America's oldest traditions; to conserve America, you

have to love pluralism. As long as the warrior ethos dominates the GOP, brutality will be admired over benevolence, propaganda over discourse, confrontation over conservatism, dehumanization over dignity. A movement that has more affection for Viktor Orbán's Hungary than for New York's Central Park is neither conservative nor American. This is barren ground for anyone trying to plant Burkean seedlings.

I'm content, as my hero Isaiah Berlin put it, to plant myself instead on the rightward edge of the leftward tendency—in the more promising soil of the moderate wing of the Democratic Party. If its progressive wing sometimes seems to have learned nothing from the failures of government and to promote cultural stances that divide Americans, at least the party as a whole knows what year it is. In 1980, the core problem of the age was statism, in the form of communism abroad and sclerotic, dynamism-sapping bureaucracies at home. In 2021, the core threat is social decay. The danger we should be most concerned with lies in family and community breakdown, which leaves teenagers adrift and depressed, adults addicted and isolated. It lies in poisonous levels of social distrust, in deepening economic and persisting racial disparities that undermine the very goodness of America—in political tribalism that makes government impossible.

There is nothing intrinsically anti-government in Burkean conservatism. "It is perhaps marvelous that people who preach disdain for government can consider themselves the intellectual descendants of Burke, the author of a celebration of the state," George F. Will once wrote. To reduce the economic chasm that separates class from class, to ease the financial anxiety that renders life unstable for many people, to support parenting so that children can grow up with more stability—these are the goals of a party committed to ameliorating, not exploiting, a growing sense of hopelessness and alienation, of vanishing opportunity. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's brilliant dictum—which builds on a Burkean wisdom forged in a world of animosity and corrosive flux—has never been more worth heeding than it is now: The central conservative truth is that culture matters most; the central liberal truth is that politics can change culture.

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Dispatches

- **Are We Doomed?**
  To head off the next insurrection, we'll need to practice envisioning the worst. -- George Packer

Are We Doomed?

How to Fend Off Trump's Next Coup

By George Packer

A year after the insurrection, I'm trying to imagine the death of American democracy. It's somehow easier to picture the Earth blasted and bleached by global warming, or the human brain overtaken by the tyranny of artificial intelligence, than to foresee the end of our 250-year experiment in self-government.

The usual scenarios are unconvincing. The country is not going to split into two hostile sections and fight a war of secession. No dictator will send his

secret police to round up dissidents in the dead of night. Analogies like these bring the comfort of at least being familiar. Nothing has aided Donald Trump more than Americans' failure of imagination. It's essential to picture an unprecedented future so that what may seem impossible doesn't become inevitable.

Before January 6, no one—including intelligence professionals—could have conceived of a president provoking his followers to smash up the Capitol. Even the rioters livestreaming in National Statuary Hall seemed stunned by what they were doing. The siege felt like a wild shot that could have been fatal. For a nanosecond, shocked politicians of both parties sang together from the hymnal of democracy. But the unity didn't last. The past months have made it clear that the near miss was a warning shot.

If the end comes, it will come through democracy itself. Here's one way I imagine it could happen: In 2024, disputed election results in several states lead to tangled proceedings in courtrooms and legislatures. The Republican Party's long campaign of undermining faith in elections leaves voters on both sides deeply skeptical of any outcome they don't like. When the next president is finally chosen by the Supreme Court or Congress, half the country explodes in rage. Protests soon turn violent, and the crowds are met with lethal force by the state, while instigators firebomb government buildings. Neighborhoods organize self-defense groups, and law-enforcement officers take sides or go home. Predominantly red or blue counties turn on political minorities. A family with a Biden-Harris sign has to abandon home on a rural road and flee to the nearest town. A blue militia sacks Trump National Golf Club Bedminster; a red militia storms Oberlin College. The new president takes power in a state of siege.

Few people would choose this path. It's the kind of calamity into which fragile societies stumble when their leaders are reckless, selfish, and shortsighted. But some Americans actually long for an armed showdown. In an article for the *Claremont Review of Books* imagining how the cultural conflict between blue California and red Texas might play out, Michael Anton, a former Trump White House adviser, recently wrote:

Imagining the worst is a civic duty; cheering it on is political arson.

Another, likelier scenario is widespread cynicism. Following the election crisis, protests burn out. Americans lapse into acquiescence, believing that all leaders lie, all voting is rigged, all media are bought, corruption is normal, and any appeal to higher values such as freedom and equality is either fraudulent or naive. The loss of democracy turns out not to matter all that much. The hollowed core of civic life brings a kind of relief. Citizens indulge themselves in self-care and the metaverse, where politics turns into a private game and algorithms drive Americans into ever more extreme views that have little relation to reality or relevance to those in power. There's enough wealth to keep the population content. America's transformation into Russia is complete.

Listen to an interview with William J. Walker, sergeant-at-arms of the U.S. House of Representatives, on *The Experiment.*

Listen and subscribe: Apple Podcasts | Spotify | Stitcher | Google PodcastsWe know what's driving us toward this cataclysm: not simply Trump, but the Republican Party. By the usual standards, Trump's postpresidency has been as pathetic as the forced exile of any minor dictator—Idi Amin poolside in Jeddah. Much of Trump's nongolfing time is devoted to fending off criminal charges against his business. Banned from Twitter and Facebook, he started a blog that was so anemic, he had to shut it down. His sore-loser rallies are desultory. And yet, in the year since the insurrection, the party has aligned itself so completely with his sense of grievance and lust for revenge that there's no room for dissent.

Establishment Republicans believe they've found a way to return to power: mollify the base and keep Trump at a distance, while appealing to suburban moderates with conventional issues such as education and inflation. Sooner or later, the party will be cleansed of Trump's stain. But this is wishful thinking, and not just because he's almost certain to run again in 2024. A party can't be half-democratic and half-authoritarian. The insurrection and the lie that instigated it are not tools that Republicans can put away when it suits them. The corruption is too deep.

Most Republican voters believe that the last election was stolen and that the next one likely will be too. Some have come to embrace the insurrection as a sacred cause. Ashli Babbitt, the invader killed by a Capitol Police officer,

has become a martyr. Steve Bannon's podcast, which rallies the conspiracy-minded to take over the party from the ground up, has tens of millions of downloads. "Election security" (a euphemism for the myth of rampant fraud) has become the top issue for candidates in heavily Republican states like Oklahoma, where an extremist pastor named Jackson Lahmeyer is running against Senator James Lankford over his vote to certify President Joe Biden's win. Even the "moderate" Glenn Youngkin, Virginia's new governor, refused to acknowledge Biden as the legitimate president until after the state's Republican nominating convention. Republicans who dared to criticize Trump have become the objects of more visceral hatred than any Democrat; most have prudently gone silent. Those few who have the temerity to tell the truth are being pushed out of the party.

Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers around the country have spent the year stacking state election offices with partisans who can be counted on to do Trump's bidding next time. State legislatures have tried, in many cases successfully, to pass laws that will make it easier to manipulate or overturn election results and intimidate nonpartisan officials by criminalizing minor infractions. In state after state, Republicans have tried to make it harder for Americans, especially Democratic constituencies, to vote. This tireless campaign of legislation and disinformation has set in motion an irreversible process of electoral sabotage.

In a sense, the Republican Party now functions like an insurgency. It has a legal, legitimate wing that conducts politics as usual and an underground wing that threatens violence. The first wing is made up of leaders such as Senator Mitch McConnell and Representative Kevin McCarthy, who oppose Democratic bills, stoke conservative anger over progressive policies, and try to stay clear of Trump's fantasies and vendettas. But every day they collaborate with party figures in the underground wing, whose lies mobilize the base, and whose goal is not so much to refight the last election as to give a pretext for fixing future ones. McConnell and Senator Lindsey Graham quietly bemoan Trump's obsession with fraud, as if "Stop the Steal" is just a personal fixation that hurts the party, not a path to power.

Not even Senator Mitt Romney will take a single step that could save democracy. The Freedom to Vote Act is a compromise bill between

progressive and moderate Democrats that would establish national rules for voting rights—heading off state laws that limit ballot access and enable partisan attempts to throw out legitimate votes. But Romney won't join Democrats to pass it, or even let it be brought up for debate. (No Republican will—which is why the filibuster has become such a powerful weapon in the hands of antidemocrats.) Romney doesn't lack moral courage. He voted twice, once as the lone Republican, to throw Trump out of office. But after that crisis passed, he returned to the narrow thinking of a party man. It seems Romney can't bring himself to imagine that democracy is threatened not just by Trump, but by his own party.

Democrats suffer from a different failure of imagination. They regularly sound the alarm about the threat to democracy, but it is one of many alarms, along with those over the pandemic, child care, health care, criminal justice, guns, climate change. All of these deserve urgent attention, but they can't be equally urgent. Biden has spent far less of his political capital on saving democracy than on passing an infrastructure bill. According to a Grinnell College poll in October, only 35 percent of Democrats believe that American democracy faces a "major threat." The figure is twice as large for Republicans—whose belief in a major threat *is* the threat. Delusion about the danger prevails in both parties.

When Democrats talk about the threat, they focus on disenfranchisement, describing the new Republican election laws as "Jim Crow 2.0." The language, by provocatively invoking that terrible history, highlights the racial bias in the laws. But the threat we face is a new one; it requires new thinking. Through most of American history, both parties, while excluding large numbers of Americans from the franchise, basically accepted the choice of the electorate—and that is no longer true. The supreme danger now is not that voters in urban counties will have a harder time finding a drop box, or that some states will shorten the mail-ballot application window. The danger is that the express will of the American people could be overthrown.

Failures of imagination result from the expectation that what has always happened will continue to happen, even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. They console us with the belief that the worst won't befall

people like us. Europe had never known a Hitler, and so the Western powers thought they were dealing with a comic-opera maniac, even as he made no secret of his plans for a genocidal slave empire. The United States had never seen mass slaughter by foreign terrorists on its soil, and so the planes of September 11 seemed to come out of the blue, though al-Qaeda had been trying to kill Americans for a decade. Citizens of liberal democracies are particularly unequipped to see these eruptions in history coming, because our system of government is founded, as Jefferson wrote, on a belief in "the sufficiency of human reason for the care of human affairs." It's hard to accept that the foundation of democracy is quite this fragile.

For all the violence and oppression of American history, we've enjoyed the steadiest democratic run in the modern world. Political stability and national wealth allowed many Americans to go long periods relatively untouched by politics. The end of Trump's cruel and frenzied presidency seemed to promise a return to the old comforts of the private sphere. Realizing that his defeat gives no respite exhausts me even more than his years in office.

There is no easy way to stop a major party that's intent on destroying democracy. The demonic energy with which Trump repeats his lies, and Bannon harangues his audience, and Republican politicians around the country try to seize every lever of election machinery—this relentless drive for power by American authoritarians is the major threat that America confronts. The Constitution doesn't have an answer. No help will come from Republican leaders; if Romney and Susan Collins are all that stand between the republic and its foes, we're doomed.

There is a third scenario, though, beyond mass violence or mass cynicism: a civic movement to save democracy. In an age of extreme polarization, it would take the form of a broad alliance of the left and the center-right. This democratic coalition would have to imagine America's political suicide without distractions or illusions. And it would have to take precedence over everything else in politics.

Citizens will have to do boring things—run for obscure local election offices and volunteer as poll watchers—with the same unflagging energy as the enemies of democracy. Decent Republicans will have to work and vote

for Democrats, and Democrats will have to work and vote for anti-Trump Republicans or independents in races where no Democrat has a chance to win. Congressional Democrats and the Biden administration will have to make the Freedom to Vote Act their top priority, altering or ending the filibuster to give this democratic fire wall a chance to become law.

It will be no easy matter to defy the prevailing forces in American politics—those that continually push us toward the extremes, to the benefit of elites in technology, media, and politics. A cycle of mutual antagonism normalizes illiberal thinking on all sides. The illiberalism of progressives—still no match for that of the antidemocratic right—consists of an ideology of identity that tolerates little dissent. As a political strategy, it has proved self-destructive. Ignoring ordinary citizens' reasonable anxieties about crime, immigration, and education—or worse, dismissing them as racist—only encourages the real racists on the right, fails to turn out the left, and infuriates the middle. The ultimate winner will be Trump.

The overriding concern of democratic citizens must be the survival and strength of the alliance. They will have to resist going to the mat over issues that threaten to tear it apart. The point is not to abandon politics, but to pursue it wisely. Avoid language and postures that needlessly antagonize people with whom you disagree; distinguish between their legitimate and illegitimate views; take stock of their experiences. This, too, requires imagination.

Finding shared ground wherever possible in pursuit of the common good is not most people's favorite brand of politics. But it's the politics we need for the emergency that's staring us in the face, if only we will see it.

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "Imagine the Worst."

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Rewriting the Book of Genesis

Review: ‘Making Darkness Light,’ by Joe Moshenska

By James Parker

Take us back, little time machine, with your bleepings and your flashings; take us back to crusty old London in the late 1650s, so we can clap the electrodes onto the sleeping head of blind John Milton. Let’s monitor the activity in the poet’s brain. Let’s observe its nocturnal waves. And let’s pay particular attention as his sightless eyes begin to flick and roll in deepest, darkest, dream-friendliest REM sleep, because it is at this point (we presume) that the spirit whom he calls Urania, a nightly visitor with a perfect—not to say Miltonic—command of blank verse, will manifest before his unconscious mind and give him the next 40 lines of *Paradise Lost*.

Is that really how it happened? Is it possible that the most monumental and cosmically scaled poem in the English language, nearly 11,000 lines of war in heaven, snakes in the garden, and the slamming of the gates behind Adam and Eve, was dictated by a voice in a dream? Did Milton—to put it another way—write *Paradise Lost* in his sleep? We’ve got only his word for it, of course, although it appears to be a fact that he arose each morning with lines of verse fully formed and ready for transcription. (For this task Milton seems to have availed himself of whoever happened to be around—to have “employed any casual visitor in disburthening his memory,” as Dr. Johnson wrote in his short biography.) Another fact: If he tried composing later in the day, he’d have no luck.

The conditions of the composition of *Paradise Lost*, we learn from Joe Moshenska’s new *Making Darkness Light: A Life of John Milton*, are a crucial part of the poem itself. Supernaturally inspired, spoken in darkness to one who lived in darkness, to an elected poet who also happened to be a disappointed revolutionary, this epic about the Fall of Man intimately

concerns the fall of a man—one John Milton—and what he chose to do about it.

So who was he? Moshenska, in 11 chapters, gives us 11 ways of looking at Milton, from the brilliant son of a musician father to the traveling polyglot (he visits Galileo in Tuscany) to the theological crank to the ferocious propagandist pamphleteer to the blind man sitting in his house, reeling off the staves of his great poem. His times were, to put it mildly, rather polarized: He was 36 when Oliver Cromwell smashed the forces of King Charles at the Battle of Naseby. Milton, as a radical Protestant and a republican, was on Cromwell's side. It's an item worth remembering about the English that they once chopped their own king's head off; John Milton was very much in favor of said head-chopping. His 1649 tract *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* proclaimed the lawfulness of trying and putting to death "a Tyrant, or wicked King." It was published shortly after Charles's execution in London, by which time Milton was well on his way to a post in the new republican government: secretary for foreign tongues to the Council of State.

Brief triumph. To quote the not-completely-un-Miltonic English band The Fall, "Over the hill goes killer civil servant." Over the hill goes the regicidal secretary. By 1652 his eyesight, already weak, is completely destroyed: Milton is blind. His enemies will exult in his infirmity. In 1658 Cromwell dies; in 1660 Charles II is restored to the throne, and Milton goes into hiding. Reappearing, he is arrested and briefly imprisoned. He returns to his house and sits there.

When exactly he began work on *Paradise Lost*, or it began work on him, is unclear. ("It seems likely," writes Moshenska, "that the bulk of it was composed between the late 1650s and the early 1660s.") The poem's first sentence ("Of Man's first disobedience," it begins) is an exhibition of pure technique and audacity. Like a long electric-guitar note fringed by slowly intensifying feedback, it builds through five lines, shimmering over the line breaks, before it arrives at its verb—*sing*—and goes another 11 lines before it slides ringing against its period, fittingly concluding with the promise of "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." T. S. Eliot, who held that Milton had generally been a bad influence on English poetry, testified

nonetheless to the "peculiar feeling, almost a physical sensation of a breathless leap," produced in him by these extended Miltonic runs.

The action begins in hell, as hell gets to know itself for the first time. The rebel angel Satan and his legions, defeated by God, have been tossed off the shining battlements of heaven, "hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky," and are now lying stunned and smoldering in a region of nameless, measureless, combustible obscurity: "no light, but rather darkness visible." Already the poem is moving in an obsessive but magisterially controlled pattern between extremes of light and dark, of seeing and unseeing, as Milton begins—via a supreme creative act—to reconcile his physical blindness with the apocalyptic magnificence of his inner vision.

Milton believed, utterly, in a humorless and imperial God; he also knew that he was a genius. "You ask what I am thinking of?" he once wrote to a friend. "Of immortality! And what am I doing? *Growing my wings* and meditating flight." As a young man he could hear the wind woofing under his pinions. And here he was, in his 50s, rewriting the Book of Genesis. How to cope, morally, with the godlikeness of his own imagination, and the scale of his ambition? Give it to a fallen angel. Give it to one who, like him, had been flung from the ramparts into exile, into a chasm as dark as no sight at all, with defeated armies spread around and only his magnificent ego to sustain him.

"A mind that dilates outward as far as it can take itself in every direction so that it can retract, back to where it started, but with a new sense of its own being"—this, Moshenska writes very beautifully, is "the mind that Milton both desires and wants his audience to desire." The shadow image of this mind, in *Paradise Lost*, is Satan in flight: an autarch in the abyss, superbly aloft, beating his way in splendor through total celestial-political isolation. His revolution has failed, but his wings are spread. "The mind is its own place," Satan tells his sidekick, Beelzebub, and when he takes off on his anti-mission to the just-created Earth he seems to be mental power itself: He "puts on swift wings, and toward the gates of hell / Explores his solitary flight: sometimes / He scours the right hand coast, sometimes the left, / Now shaves with level wing the deep, then soars / Up to the fiery concave towering high." They are fantastically exciting, these Satanic zoomings.

They are what make the first four books of *Paradise Lost* such a gorgeous and perspective-demolishing experience: The mind's eye must constantly refocus. But guess what, Satan—wherever you go, there you are. "Which way I fly is hell," laments the arch-demon after a bit more veering and swooping, "myself am hell."

Because Milton's theology and perhaps his soul demanded it, Satan had to be reduced. Imagination gone aerial in the gulf of blindness—it had to be brought back under the eye of God. What Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his notes on *Paradise Lost*, calls "the alcohol of egotism" had to be resisted. Satan journeys vastly through the void, wings beating; having reached the Garden of Eden, he assumes for his first encounter with Eve the form of a toad. Ithuriel and Zephon, angelic bouncers on the orders of Gabriel, are not deceived: Ithuriel gives the toad a poke with his spear. Stung by the spear tip, Satan, "as when a spark / Lights on a heap of nitrous powder," flares up into his own satanic nature, his own shape. He is revealed. The angels step back, "half amazed / So sudden to behold the grisly king." Only half-amazed: The devil, wings folded, has been cut down to size.

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "John Milton's Hell."

The Impossible Politics of Johnny Cash

‘Citizen Cash’ Shows the Impossible Politics of Johnny Cash

By Stephen Metcalf

Johnny Cash, so the standard line goes, was a man of many parts. “There was no one single Cash,” the scholar Leigh H. Edwards has argued. “He was always multiple, changing, inconsistent.” He was both “Saturday night and Sunday morning” is how the rock journalist Anthony DeCurtis put it; he was a “walkin’ contradiction,” Kris Kristofferson, Cash’s sometime collaborator and running buddy, sang in a song.

To work my way past the cliché and remember what a high-wire act his once was, I recently rewatched footage of Cash at the Newport Folk Festival. It’s 1964, and he looks almost like Montgomery Clift, a beautiful and half-broken man. He is so lean and angular from abusing amphetamines, he no longer fills out his signature black suit; his eyes are set alarmingly deep. But the unbroken half? It’s downright magnificent, how he chews his gum and carelessly plays his guitar, dead-strumming it like it’s a washboard.

He’d been scheduled to appear Friday night with Joan Baez and Phil Ochs, but missed his flight—a bad omen, considering the shape he was in. His film career was a joke, his marriage in shambles. Some nights he’d “drive recklessly for hours,” he later wrote, “until I either wrecked the car or finally stopped from exhaustion.” And drugs were now overruling his mind. He’d started with a few “diet pills” to pep himself up, but they’d turned him on “like electricity flowing into a lightbulb,” Cash admitted. By the early ’60s, he was in such sorry shape that he once mumbled and paced, zombielike, around the executive suites of Columbia Records.

The executives had seen enough and threatened to drop him. Worse than the embarrassing behavior—banging on doors in the middle of the night, smashing chandeliers—he was no longer *selling*. The first of his so-called concept albums hadn't broken out commercially and had gone all but unnoticed by the music press. And so Cash had come to Newport to win over a new, and potentially lucrative, audience—the kids now flocking to Bob Dylan.

The drugs, however, were drying out his vocal cords. Those days, when Johnny Cash opened his mouth to sing, no one was sure what would come out, least of all Johnny Cash. At Carnegie Hall—a previous proving-ground gig—he could only muster a desiccated whisper. When Cash finally appeared, everyone at Newport gathered to see him. Would he lift them up as one? Or would they need to catch him when he collapsed?

And then, out came the voice—*that* voice, the old umami and gravel, with all its fragile grandeur intact. Was he perfect that night? No, but this was Johnny fucking Cash, product of Sun Records, where the perfect was the enemy of the sublime. He played "I Walk the Line" and a cover of Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and then "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," from his forthcoming album, *Bitter Tears*. After the show, he and a giddy Dylan traded songs and a guitar. Everyone—the college kids, *The New York Times*—agreed: He'd blown them all away.

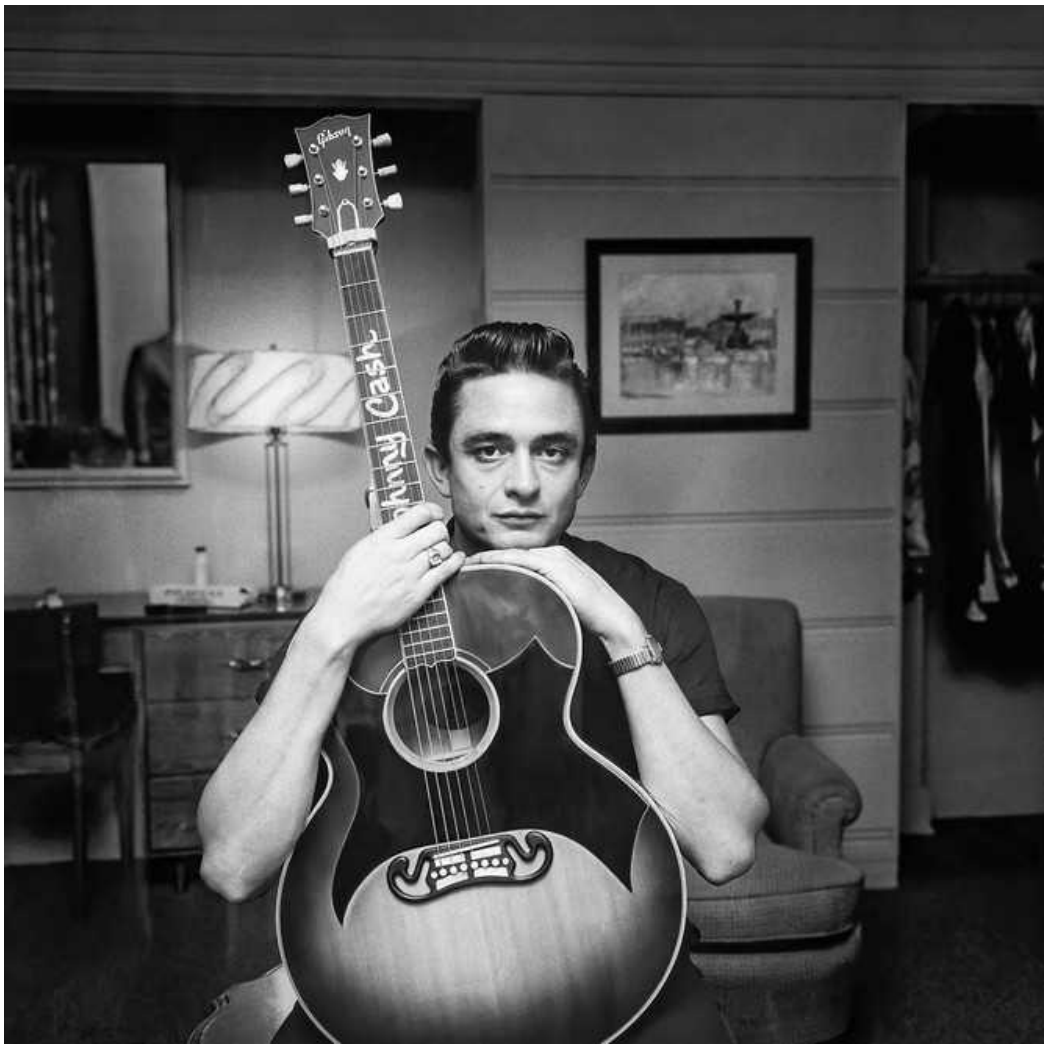
The paradox had lived to see another day.

In a sense, the paradox lives to see yet another day in *Citizen Cash: The Political Life and Times of Johnny Cash*, which sets Cash's contrariness in a new light. Cash, the cultural historian Michael Stewart Foley argues, was not just a country-music icon, but a rare kind of political figure. He was seldom a partisan in any traditional sense, and unlike Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, he rarely aligned his music with a progressive agenda. Nonetheless, "Cash, without really intending it, fashioned a new model of public citizenship, based on a politics of empathy."

For Foley, Cash's status as an artist whose music deeply engaged otherwise incompatible audiences gives him a special relevance to us now. He is a radically unsorted man speaking to our radically sorted times. Just as there

are two Americas, there are two Johnny Cashes. One is likely better remembered by older fans in red states as the country artist who aligned himself with Richard Nixon and Billy Graham, who sneered at the "hippahs" and wrote the lines "I do like to brag, 'cause I'm mighty proud of that ragged old flag." The other is the acceptably blue-state Cash, the antiestablishment rebel flipping the bird at a camera in San Quentin; the Cash of Native American rights.

Foley's method is to remind each set of fans of the other Cash, the Cash they've conveniently forgotten, and then show how he made up a single human being, one who did his own justice to the complex task of being an American. The argument has a certain wishfulness to it. To begin with, there's the faith Foley places in "empathy," or Cash's tendency to be "guided by his own emotional and visceral responses to the issues." What thinking person in 2022—amid the outrage and umbrage Olympics that is American life—still wants an emotional response? We prefer, I think, respect, health care, and a living wage. The case made by Cash is less on behalf of "empathy" than of a world in which partisan affiliation isn't a depressingly strong predictor of—well, everything else, including musical taste.



Johnny Cash in 1958 (John R. Hamilton / Trunk Archive)

In its selection of guests, Cash's TV show (on the air from June 1969 through March 1971) willfully mixed Neil Young, still giving off the hippie aroma, with such Grand Ole Opry standbys as Tammy Wynette. But how well does such a delightful miscellany translate into an everyday politics? Foley doesn't say, though he has a maddening tendency to construe the most modest gesture of allyship as a profile in courage. When Odetta, the folk singer and civil-rights activist, appeared on the show, Cash sang a duet with her. A lovely moment, yes, and not without its significance. Foley's reading? "By telling the world he had been buying her records for years, he said, in effect, that he had been on the side of Black lives from the start."

Some readers may walk away convinced that Cash was a Whitmanesque giant, containing multitudes. I often found myself wondering if he wasn't a two-faced equivocator. The book is a welcome corrective to the tendency to treat the man as so internally contrary as to be a complete enigma. But the cost of rescuing Cash from the metaphysical fog has been to turn him into a plaster saint. Neither does justice to the actual extent of his weirdness.

Johnny Cash grew up in Dyess, Arkansas, otherwise known as "Colonization Project No. 1," a New Deal development built virtually overnight in 1934. The Cash house was No. 266, on Road 3—five rooms, no electricity, no running water—and it had been plunked down on bad land, all thicket on the surface, waterlogged muck underneath.

Cash lived the Old South archetype of working hard and close to the soil, under conditions of endemic rural poverty, combined with another, quite different archetype of the New Deal as personal savior. The Dyess project had its own full-time home economist to help with canning, sewing, and quilting, as the biographer Robert Hilburn writes in *Johnny Cash: The Life*; a farm manager approved the choice of seeds. The radio that first brought Johnny Cash the sounds of country music was purchased with Federal Emergency Relief Administration loan money. Even as the South began urbanizing and suburbanizing, the Cash family remained living anachronisms, smallholders whose pluck went hand in hand with a deep-seated dependence. By the time he graduated high school in 1950, Cash was desperate to leave.

His childhood was *Little House on the Prairie* crossed with Levittown. (There were 500 government-fabricated houses in the Dyess project.) This may help explain a peculiar quality of Cash's, of being, as Kristofferson put it, "partly truth and partly fiction"; of seeming firmly anchored in himself, and utterly at sea. At a loss for what to do after stints working in a car-parts factory in Pontiac, Michigan, and cleaning vats in an oleomargarine plant close to Dyess, he joined the Air Force. Able to hear subtle differences in sounds, he was trained as a radio intercept operator; and for three years, at least eight hours a day, he sat in a room outside Munich, listening to Soviet transmissions, distinguishing signal from noise.

His base was in the same town where Hitler had written *Mein Kampf*. It lay less than 100 miles from the Russians, who could overrun it at will. Surrounded by rural beauty and a lot of bad juju, Cash took up the guitar, playing with barracks buddies and putting his feelings of exile and confinement into his first attempts at songwriting. He had a quick and stiletto wit, a comprehensive mind. This "was no hillbilly stereotype," Hilburn quotes a fellow airman saying.

And yet. On a couple of occasions, Cash got drunk and harangued a Black man. "Honey," he wrote to his future wife Vivian, "some N— got smart and I asked him to go outside and he was too yellow." The letter is sickening, and having read it, some people will understandably never recover a taste for Cash's music. I did, though, and what follows may help explain why.

From the beginning, rock and roll was notable for the sheer variety of talents and types it could encompass. If Elvis Presley was the lovable dodo, Roy Orbison was a nightingale; if Jerry Lee Lewis was the virtuoso magpie, Johnny Cash was—well, a kind of crow, a spectral oddity with dubious pipes.

He had the rockabilly look (quiffed-up hair, black duds) and carried himself with some of the insolence and swagger of Elvis while keeping a watchful reserve. After leaving the Air Force, he headed to Memphis, where he hoped to break into radio. But the cosmos had other ideas. The day after he stepped off the plane, in July 1954, Sam Phillips recorded Elvis Presley's first single, "That's All Right." Elvis was one of those astonishing young men who is naked even when he's clothed. Seeing him perform on the flatbed of a truck—the sexual charisma, the utter lack of guile—persuaded Cash to approach Phillips, the founder of Sun Records, and beg him for an audition.

Cash had, at best, rudimentary musical talent, but he had exquisite taste. He gravitated to Memphis's Beale Street, to a store called the Home of the Blues, where he bought his first record by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and where he said he discovered the blues and folk recordings made by the folklorist Alan Lomax in the South. Lomax's astonishing *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, an album of "Authentic Field Recordings of Negro Folk Music," became a major influence on Cash's songwriting. The revelation for Cash,

Foley suggests, was how uniquely brutal the experience of Black artists had been, especially those living on prison farms and in levee camps, and also how close it was to that of sharecropping whites. Having worked, hard and by hand, a land they did not own, both shared a keen sense of our country's ability to break a promise.

Cash's career was a variation on the master rock-and-roll narrative, of white musicians plagiarizing from Black musicians: He envied but, by and large, he did not steal. He wanted to make gospel records, but Phillips said no. He forced Cash to speed up "I Walk the Line" and "Folsom Prison Blues," turning him into a (sort of) rock and roller; he turned him into a (sort of) teen idol by changing his name from John to Johnny. By the summer of 1958, Cash had sold more than 6 million records. As was true for Elvis, it was inevitable that he'd graduate from the upstart Sun Records to a major label, and for Cash, that meant recentering his career in Nashville.

Johnny Cash and booming Nashville were a terrible match, and not only because seasoned engineers and easygoing sidemen began to cut, polish, and brighten what was, in its essence, a rough, dark thing. By the late '50s, Memphis and Nashville were, as music capitals, antitheses. Memphis was the blues, Sun Records, Elvis; Nashville was country music, steel guitars, choral "ooh"s and "aah"s. You see where this is going. As Memphis took so-called hillbilly and race music, and combined them into rock and roll, country music became more self-consciously white. Sam Phillips said as much; Nashville said as much.

Nobody appealing to the rock-and-roll audience was more country than Cash, and nobody making country music was more rock and roll. This made his commercial prospects vast, and his musical identity fragile. Here was a man who'd stayed a homesteader while the nation suburbanized, who could play the blues without thieving style or attitude from Black artists, who always sounded country but never defensively white. In Nashville, the equilibria got lost. The president of Columbia Records thought of Cash as a folk singer and, eyeing the success of Burl Ives and Harry Belafonte, Cash's manager agreed. Cash embarked on a series of Americana "concept" albums, on which he too often sounded like a museum tour guide. They flatlined commercially. It was in this period that Cash's drug use amped up.

Even a zogged-out Johnny Cash could still generate a single as good as "Ring of Fire." But the truth is, Cash's best work—the Sun sides, his turn at Newport—all involved some kind of courtship of the rock audience. And then there is *At Folsom Prison*, from 1968. Unlike any other, the album brought together the spirit of country music with all the eros and paranoia of the '60s. *Folsom* and its equally remarkable sequel, *At San Quentin*, are of a piece with Hank Williams and Jimmie Rodgers and the Louvin Brothers, but also *Beggars Banquet* and Haight-Ashbury and My Lai. Song after song, you hear the gyres widening.

A wildness flows from Cash to the inmates and back again, until, on the latter record, the place verges on a riot—one that, the producer Bob Johnston believed, would have left Cash dead. The prisoners didn't riot and Johnny Cash lived. *Folsom* was reckoned a masterpiece by everyone from the underground press to *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The wager made at Newport had paid off handsomely, and *Rolling Stone*'s co-founder Jann Wenner laid the jackpot on the table: "Cash, more than any other contemporary [country] performer, is meaningful in a rock and roll context." He declared him the artistic peer of Dylan.

Cash and Phillips—piety in their hearts, dollar signs in their eyes—once talked about making music whose appeal was "universal." Cash had done it: He'd united the rock, pop, folk, and country audiences. In 1969, he outstripped the Beatles, selling 6.5 million records worldwide. But just as he took ownership of the mainstream, the mainstream began falling apart. In 1968, Richard Nixon won the presidency, eking out a plurality in the South, thanks to his careful courtship of white voters resentful of civil rights. And, flattering the white southerner not only as the most reliably conservative voter but as the most "authentic" American, Nixon went on to embrace country music.

This was Cash's core audience, the country audience, made up largely of white southerners. Their devotion to Cash allowed him to hit the country charts, even when he put out his laziest, most mediocre work. But everyone else helped him outsell the Beatles. Here he faced yet another dilemma, as painful as pitting Memphis against Nashville. As one of the biggest country superstars of the Nixon era, he might have addressed the silent majority and

said something important, something concrete and true to his own experience as a white southerner. He could have said: “My bootstraps? They were government-issue. And you know what? Yours were too.”

I know; easy for me to say. But political courage doesn’t begin with introducing a Tammy Wynette fan to Neil Young’s “The Needle and the Damage Done.” It begins with your own ox getting gored. And as exceptional as it was—drawing a living from the gumbo soil—Cash’s childhood was also typical; along with the Cashes, the postwar South got pulled out of poverty by the federal government. Beginning with the New Dealers, who’d labeled the poorer parts of the region “a belt of sickness, misery, and unnecessary death,” through to Pearl Harbor and the Cold War, the federal government poured money into the South, making benefits available—as with Colonization Project No. 1—almost exclusively to white people.

Drawing on his own experience, Cash might have broken up the central falsity of the archipelago of glass and steel known as the New South: its equation of whiteness with self-sufficiency and Blackness with dependency. What did he do instead? He smiled grimly and talked out of both sides of his mouth. When Nixon asked Cash to play the White House, he accepted the invite, but politely refused the White House’s request to cover “Welfare Cadillac,” a racist novelty song.

He persisted in trying to be all things to all people, until, a living effigy in black frock coat and jabot, he rivaled Elvis for losing any evidence of his younger self. In 1976, he served as grand marshal of the bicentennial parade in the nation’s capital, the perfect representative for a country nearing the absolute nadir of its self-respect.

“The people are his audience,” a *Billboard* editor wrote. But “the people” were at one another’s throats. During a live show in 1990, looking strangely like Nixon—jowly, surreptitious, fundamentally unhappy—he introduced his song “Ragged Old Flag.” “I thank God for all the freedoms we’ve got in this country,” he said, as the arena went quiet. “Even the rights to burn the flag.” Instantly, the crowd turned on him, booing loudly. He silenced them with a single “Shhh,” adding: “We’ve also got a right to bear arms, and if you burn my flag, I’ll shoot you.” And the crowd let out a bloodlust roar.

When Rick Rubin, the hip-hop and metal impresario, began reviving Cash's career in 1993, the country legend was languishing on the scrap heap of showbiz. His upcoming gig was a residency at the Wayne Newton Theater (capacity 3,000) in Branson, Missouri. He couldn't even fill that. Here was a man whose own legend was waiting for him to die. But Rubin understood two things: that Johnny Cash was a living encyclopedia of American song, not a museum piece; and that his voice deserved to be presented unadorned.

Their resulting album, *American Recordings*, features Cash alone, accompanied by just his acoustic guitar. The simplicity worked—artistically, but also in rinsing Cash clean of Nashville, Nixon, and Billy Graham. Rubin had taken him away from the NASCAR dads and handed him over to fans of *MTV Unplugged*. He re-sorted him.

Thanks in no small part to Rubin, Cash has been a blue-state hero ever since. *Citizen Cash* pulls, in a salutary way, a reverse Rubin and reminds us that the hipster-acceptable Cash, who hung with Bono and premiered his *American Recordings* songs at the Viper Room on the Sunset Strip, represents less than half the man. But Foley amasses exactly the right facts, only to draw exactly the wrong conclusion.

Cash wasn't any kind of a politician. He was an American artist of the very first magnitude. Listening to him, unrelentingly, for months now, I think he did have something to tell us. It may be idiosyncratic, but here is what I heard: Ironically, for a country built on the promise of owning your own land, among the truest Americans are those who worked the earth without owning a single crumb of it. Dispossessed, they were forced to take possession of themselves another way: They sang. Denied, substantively, the right to happiness, they declared instead an absolute right to personality. This was most true of Black people, but it could also be true of poor white people. However you apportion credit, together they created a common inheritance we all live off to this day. Upon that commonality, Cash seemed to believe, we might form a less grossly imperfect union. The hope is very beautiful, and I think, in its way, true. But it is not enough.

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "He Walked the Line."

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Beware Prophecies of Civil War

America Is Not on the Brink of Civil War

By Fintan O'Toole

In January 1972, when I was a 13-year-old boy in Dublin, my father came home from work and told us to prepare for civil war. He was not a bloodthirsty zealot, nor was he given to hysterical outbursts. He was calm and rueful, but also grimly certain: Civil war was coming to Ireland, whether we wanted it or not. He and my brother, who was 16, and I, when I got older, would all be up in Northern Ireland with guns, fighting for the Catholics against the Protestants.

What made him so sure of our fate was that the British army's parachute regiment had opened fire on the streets of Derry, after an illegal but essentially peaceful civil-rights march. Troops killed 13 unarmed people, mortally wounded another, and shot more than a dozen others. Intercommunal violence had been gradually escalating, but this seemed to be a tipping point. There were just two sides now, and we all would have to pick one. It was them or us.

The conditions for civil war did indeed seem to exist at that moment. Northern Irish society had become viciously polarized between one tribe that felt itself to have suffered oppression and another one fearful that the loss of its power and privilege would lead to annihilation by its ancient enemies. Both sides had long-established traditions of paramilitary violence. The state—in this case both the local Protestant-dominated administration in Belfast and the British government in London—was not only unable to stop the meltdown into anarchy; it was, as the massacre in Derry proved, joining in.

Yet my father's fears were not fulfilled. There was a horrible, 30-year conflict that brought death to thousands and varying degrees of misery to millions. There was terrible cruelty and abysmal atrocity. There were decades of despair in which it seemed impossible that a polity that had imploded could ever be rebuilt. But the conflict never did rise to the level of civil war.

However, the belief that there was going to be a civil war in Ireland made everything worse. Once that idea takes hold, it has a force of its own. The demagogues warn that the other side is mobilizing. They are coming for us. Not only do we have to defend ourselves, but we have to deny them the advantage of making the first move. The logic of the preemptive strike sets in: Do it to them before they do it to you. The other side, of course, is thinking the same thing. That year, 1972, was one of the most murderous in Northern Ireland precisely because this doomsday mentality was shared by ordinary, rational people like my father. Premonitions of civil war served not as portents to be heeded, but as a warrant for carnage.

Could the same thing happen in the United States? Much of American culture is already primed for the final battle. There is a very deep strain of apocalyptic fantasy in fundamentalist Christianity. Armageddon may be horrible, but it is not to be feared, because it will be the harbinger of eternal bliss for the elect and eternal damnation for their foes. On what used to be referred to as the far right, but perhaps should now simply be called the armed wing of the Republican Party, the imminence of civil war is a given.

Indeed, the conflict can be imagined not as America's future, but as its present. In an interview with *The Atlantic* published in November 2020, two

months before the invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, the founder of the Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, declared: “Let’s not fuck around.” He added, “We’ve descended into civil war.” The following month, the FBI, warning of possible attacks on state capitols, said that members of the so-called boogaloo movement “believe an impending insurgency against the government is forthcoming and some believe they should accelerate the timeline with armed, antigovernment actions leading to a civil war.”

After January 6, mainstream Republicans picked up the theme. Much of the American right is spoiling for a fight, in the most literal sense. Which is one good reason to be very cautious about echoing, as the Canadian journalist and novelist Stephen Marche does in *The Next Civil War: Dispatches From the American Future*, the claim that America “is already in a state of civil strife, on the threshold of civil war.” These prophecies have a way of being self-fulfilling.

Admittedly, if there were to be another American civil war, and if future historians were to look back on its origins, they would find them quite easily in recent events. It is news to no one that the United States is deeply polarized, that its divisions are not just political but social and cultural, that even its response to a global pandemic became a tribal combat zone, that its system of federal governance gives a minority the power to frustrate and repress the majority, that much of its media discourse is toxic, that one half of a two-party system has entered a postdemocratic phase, and that, uniquely among developed states, it tolerates the existence of several hundred private armies equipped with battle-grade weaponry.

It is also true that the American system of government is extraordinarily difficult to change by peaceful means. Most successful democracies have mechanisms that allow them to respond to new conditions and challenges by amending their constitutions and reforming their institutions. But the U.S. Constitution has inertia built into it. What realistic prospect is there of changing the composition of the Senate, even as it becomes more and more unrepresentative of the population? It is not hard to imagine those future historians defining American democracy as a political life form that could not adapt to its environment and therefore did not survive.

It is one thing, however, to acknowledge the real possibility that the U.S. could break apart and could do so violently. It is quite another to frame that possibility as an inevitability. The descent into civil war is always hellish. America has still not recovered from the fratricidal slaughter of the 1860s. Even so, the American Civil War was relatively contained compared with what happened to Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, to Bosnia after the breakup of Yugoslavia, or to Congo from 1998 to 2003. The idea that such a catastrophe is imminent and unavoidable must be handled with extreme care. It is both flammable and corrosive.

Marche clearly does not intend to be either of these things, and in speculating about various possible catalysts for chaos in the U.S., he writes more in sorrow than in anger, more as a lament than a provocation. Marche's thought experiment begins, however, with two conceptual problems that he never manages to resolve.

The first of these difficulties is that, as the German poet and essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger put it in his 1994 book *Civil Wars*, "there is no useful Theory of Civil War." It isn't a staple in military school—Carl von Clausewitz's bible, *On War*, has nothing to say about it. There are plenty of descriptions of this or that episode of internal conflict. Thucydides gave us the first one, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2,500 years ago. But as Enzensberger writes, "It's not just that the mad reality eludes formal legal definition. Even the strategies of the military high commands fail in the face of the new world order which trades under the name of civil war. The unprecedented comes into sudden and explosive contact with the atavistic."

This mad reality is impossible to map onto a country as vast, diverse, and demographically fluid as the United States already is, still less onto how it might be at some unspecified time in the future. Marche has a broad notion that his putative civil war will take the form of one or more armed insurrections against the federal government, which will be put down with extreme violence by the official military. This repression will in turn fuel a cycle of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Under the strain, the U.S. will fracture into several independent nations. All of this is quite imaginable as far as it goes. But such a scenario does not actually go very far in defining this sort of turmoil as a civil war. Indeed, Marche himself envisages that,

while “one way or another, the United States is coming to an end,” this dissolution could in theory be a “civilized separation.”

But this possibility does not sit well with the doomsaying that is his book’s primary purpose. Nor is it internally coherent. Marche seems to think that a secession by Texas might be consensual because Texas is a “single-party state.” This would be news to the 46.5 percent of its voters who supported Joe Biden in the 2020 election. How would they feel about losing their American citizenship and being told that they now owe their allegiance to the Republic of Texas? If we really do want to imagine a future of violent conflict, would it not be just as much within seceding states as among supposedly discrete geographic and ideological blocs?

The secession of California as well as Texas is just one of five “dispatches” that Marche writes from his imagined future. He begins with an eminently plausible and well-told tale of a local sheriff who takes a stand against the government’s closure for repair of a bridge used by most of his constituents. The right-wing media make him a hero figure, and he exploits the publicity brilliantly. The bridge becomes a magnet for militias, white supremacists, and anti-government cultists. The standoff is brought to an end by a military assault, resulting in mass casualties and creating, on the right, both a casus belli and martyrs for the cause. Marche’s other dispatches describe the assassination of a U.S. president by a radicalized young loner; a combination of environmental disasters, with drought causing food shortages and a massive hurricane destroying much of New York; and the outbreak of insurrectionary violence and the equally violent responses to it.

All of these scenarios are well researched and eloquently presented. But how they relate to one another, or whether the conflicts they involve can really be regarded as a civil war, is never clear. Civil wars need mass participation, and how that could be mobilized across a subcontinent is not at all obvious. Marche seems to endorse the claim of the military historian Peter Mansoor that the pandemonium “would very much be a free-for-all, neighbor on neighbor, based on beliefs and skin colors and religion.” His scenarios, either separately or cumulatively, do not show how or why the U.S. arrives at this Hobbesian state.

Marche's other conceptual problem is that, in order to dramatize all of this as a sudden and terrible collapse, he creates a ridiculously high baseline of American democratic normalcy. "A decade ago," he writes, "American stability and global supremacy were a given … The United States was synonymous with the glory of democracy." In this steady state, "a president was once the unquestioned representative of the American people's will." The U.S. Congress was "the greatest deliberative body in the world."

These claims are risible. After the lies that underpinned the invasion of Iraq and the abject failures of Congress to impose any real accountability for the conduct of the War on Terror, the beacon of American democracy was pretty dim. Has the sacred legitimacy of any U.S. president been unquestioned, ever? Did we imagine the visceral hatred of Bill Clinton among Republicans or Donald Trump's insistence that Barack Obama was not even a proper American, let alone the embodiment of the people's will?

This failure of historical perspective means that Marche can ignore the evidence that political violence, much of it driven by racism, is not a new threat. Even if we leave aside the actual Civil War, it has long been endemic in the U.S. Were the wars of extermination against American Indians not civil wars too? What about the brutal obliteration of the Black community in Greenwood, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921—should that not be seen as an episode in a long, undeclared war on Black Americans by white supremacists? The devastating riots in cities across America that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and in Los Angeles after the beating of Rodney King in 1992, sure looked like the kind of intercommunal violence that Marche conjures as a specter from the future. Arguably, the real problem for the U.S. is not that it can be torn apart by political violence, but that it has learned to live with it.

This is happening again—even the attempted coup of January 6 is already, for much of the political culture, normalized. Marche is so intent on the coming catastrophe that he seems unable to focus on what is in front of his nose. He writes, for example, that the assault on the Capitol cannot be regarded as an insurrection, because "the rioters were only loosely organized and possessed little political support and no military support." The third of these claims is broadly true (though military veterans featured

heavily among the attackers). The first is at best dubious. The second is bizarre: The attack was incited by the man who was still the sitting president of the United States and had, both at the time and subsequently, widespread support within the Republican Party.

In this context, feverish talk of civil war has the paradoxical effect of making the current reality seem, by way of contrast, not so bad. The comforting fiction that the U.S. used to be a glorious and settled democracy prevents any reckoning with the fact that its current crisis is not a terrible departure from the past but rather a product of the unresolved contradictions of its history. The dark fantasy of Armageddon distracts from the more prosaic and obvious necessity to uphold the law and establish political and legal accountability for those who encourage others to defy it. Scary stories about the future are redundant when the task of dealing with the present is so urgent.

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "Dangerous Prophecies." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Fiction Meets Chaos Theory

Review: ‘To Paradise’: Hanya Yanagihara’s New Book Depicts a Haunted America

By Jordan Kisner

While reading *To Paradise*, Hanya Yanagihara’s gigantic new novel, I felt the impulse a few times to put down the book and make a chart—the kind of thing you see TV detectives assemble on their living-room walls when they have a web of evidence but no clear theory of the case. *To Paradise*, which is in fact three linked novels bound in a single volume, is constructed something like a soma cube, with plots that interlock but whose unifying logic and mechanisms are designed to baffle. The first book, “Washington Square,” takes place in the early 1890s in a New York City that the reader quickly realizes is off-kilter. There the prominent Bingham family runs the primary bank of the Free States, one of a patchwork of nations (including the southern Colonies, the Union, the West, and the North) sustaining an uneasy coexistence after the War of Rebellion. In the Free States, homosexuality and gay marriage are perfectly ordinary, but Black people are not welcomed as citizens—the Free States are white, and committed

only to giving Black people safe passage to the North and the West. David, the sickly grandson of the Bingham clan, falls in love with a poor musician named Edward, though his grandfather is attempting to arrange his marriage to a steady older man named Charles.

Book 2,“Lipo-Wao-Nahele,” also follows a David Bingham, this time a young Hawaiian man living with his older lover, Charles, in the same house on Washington Square owned by the Binghams in the previous book. David is a descendant of the last monarch of Hawaii, whose legacy is defended by a Hawaiian-independence movement. It is the 1990s, and AIDS is ravaging David and Charles’s world in New York, an erasure of a generation that is counterposed to David’s ambivalent denial of his homeland, his lineage, and his father—who narrates half the book.

Book 3, which, at nearly 350 pages, constitutes almost half of the entire novel, tells the story of a United States that slides into a totalitarian dictatorship in response to recurrent pandemics and climate disasters. “Zone Eight,” as it’s titled, unfolds from 2043 to 2094, again in Greenwich Village (now Zone Eight), and is narrated, alternately, by Charles, a Hawaiian-born virologist and influential adviser to the government, and Charlie, the daughter of Charles’s son, David. Charlie survived one pandemic as a child but lives with lasting neurological effects. These are, I promise, the barest possible bones of the trilogy.

To Paradise, though its plots are too various and intricate to even begin to capture in summary, moves smoothly and quickly. Yanagihara’s previous novel, *A Little Life*, also a bulky page-turner, amassed critical praise and a near-frantic fandom on the strength of her gift for mapping deeply felt lives on an epic scale, and for dramatizing the way that people are driven, and failed, by their love for one another. *To Paradise* shares these qualities. Yet Yanagihara avoids the gratuitous violence and abjection that set the tone of *A Little Life*, a dark saga of four college friends who make their tormented way into middle age. *To Paradise* is a softer book, with a classic, almost old-fashioned set of plot arcs (a wealthy, fragile man is taken in by an opportunistic lover; a father longs for the son he alienated; utopian dreams produce a dystopia). It is executed with enough deftness and lush detail that

you just about fall through it, like a knife through layer cake.But what is Yanagihara doing with all these Davids and Charleses?

A few notes from my TV-detective chart: Characters called David, Charles, Peter, and Edward appear in all three books of the novel. Surnames repeat as well—though sometimes those who share surnames across centuries seem to be related, and sometimes not. Two of the books prominently feature Hawaii; all have butlers named Adams. All three are anchored by the same townhouse on Washington Square. Though the first and third books take place in a version of America that is notably speculative, it is not clear whether these alternative Americas are meant to be continuous, shared across the novel. Each book could just as plausibly be playing out its own version of history.

Two have powerful grandfathers who fail in their efforts to protect their legacy and their vulnerable grandchildren (often from themselves). All center gay men. All dramatize the horrors of illness, horrors that reverberate through generations. Two follow men whose frailty leads them to throw their life into the hands of untrustworthy men; a different two books are set amid plagues. Every book ends with the same phrase and the same image: a character reaching out to someone else through time and space, willing or imagining their way "to paradise." None seems to imagine paradise in quite the same way.

The further I read, the more I suspected that the challenge Yanagihara sets for the reader isn't so much to decode a puzzle as to survive a plunge into chaos theory. The warped harmonies of the three plotlines seem engineered to reveal how ensnared humans are in inscrutable coincidences and consequences, how oblivious we are to the long arcs of causation. *To Paradise* evokes the dizzying way that minor events and personal choices might create countless alternative histories and futures, both for individuals and for society. Reading the novel delivers the thrilling, uncanny feeling of standing before an infinity mirror, numberless selves and rooms turning uncertainly before you, just out of reach.

The butterfly effect—an underlying principle of chaos theory—holds that tiny, apparently inconsequential changes can produce enormous, globally felt repercussions. The butterfly effect was formalized by the meteorologist

Edward Lorenz, who noticed, while running data through his weather models, that even the seemingly insignificant rounding up or down of initial inputs would create a big difference in outcomes: A flap of a wing, as he once put it, would be "enough to alter the course of the weather forever."

Yanagihara plays with shifts on different scales in the altered Americas that populate the novel. What if, after the Civil War, race and class had still been fulcrums of injustice and oppression in society, but sexuality had not? What if Hawaii declared independence, a jolt of a less systemic degree? What if, in the face of devastating pandemics, the American government prioritized virus containment and maximizing lives saved, forcibly isolating the ill and ignoring concerns about civil liberties and human rights? How much would have to change for the world to be different? What seemingly momentous changes would leave the world fundamentally the same?

In Book 2, David is struck, looking at his lover, Charles, by how partially they know each other, and how circumstantial their relationship is. He finds himself reflecting that "each of them wanted the other to exist only as he was currently experiencing him—as if they were both too unimaginative to contemplate each other in a different context." His thoughts begin to spiral outward.

These kinds of "what if"s haunt all three plot arcs. Story after story within each book focuses on missed gestures of care and thwarted intimacy: If the grandfather in Book 1 had shared his doubts about Edward earlier, would that have rescued or stifled David? What if the David in Book 2 had been honest about his family background when he moved in with Charles? What if the Charles in Book 3 had been gentler when David got in trouble at school? Would their relationship have retained the possibility of repair? What if Charlie had told *her* Edward, the husband she acquired in an arranged marriage, that she loved him? Again and again, the question arises: What if this or that interchange had gone *just a little differently*? What swerve might have followed? What could have been saved?

The book that grapples most directly with this torturous uncertainty is "Zone Eight." It is written, in part, as letters from the scientist Charles Griffith to a friend and colleague named Peter over nearly five decades, updating Peter on his life—an account interwoven with his granddaughter,

Charlie's, narration of a year of her adult life, after Charles's death. We meet Charles first as a young husband and father who has accepted a position at a prestigious lab in New York. His husband resents the move, but Charles feels he can do good at this new lab, which is engaged in the crucial work of anticipating and preventing pandemics. As his son grows up, as Charles and his husband grow apart, as global pandemics grow more dire, the reader begins to see in Charles's letters the incremental nature of disaster.

His decisions—to collaborate with the government, to avoid confronting his son in an argument, to behave poorly at a dinner—are barely noticeable in the course of the weeks and months that his letters relate. But slowly, they accumulate into something all wrong. Many years into the correspondence, when the United States has become a totalitarian regime that Charles—trying to save lives—helped build, and when the islands around Manhattan serve as brutal internment camps for the ill, he confesses to his friend: "I have always wondered how people knew it was time to leave a place, whether that place was Phnom Penh or Saigon or Vienna." He knows he has missed his window to escape the state he played a part in creating.

At every step, Charles writes, he was trying to do the right thing. But "I made the wrong decisions, and then I made more and more of them." That some of those missteps led to the devastation of his family, the transformation of Roosevelt Island into a crematorium, the supplanting of neighborhoods by militarized zones—and ultimately to a generation of children who can remember neither the internet nor civil liberties—is harder to contemplate, because this man is a normal enough man, a concerned scientist. As he made his decisions, none of them seemed to hold the potential for fatal error.

Small choices leading to unforeseen consequences are a conventional feature of fiction, but Yanagihara's execution of this trope feels compelling and chilling because Charles's world is so plausibly near to our own possible future. We, too, live in a world rocked by pandemics and storms, well aware that more are coming. We, too, live in a country that is vulnerable to authoritarianism. Charles arrives in New York in the early 2040s, and the setting looks reasonably like the New York of today. What

apparently insignificant choices are we making, or not making, that will determine the disasters—or disasters averted—of our future? What vital relationships are in the balance at school pickup? Yanagihara taps into the anxieties of a moment crowded with warnings about apocalypses that might be narrowly avoided if we (who?) take action (what action?) now. One has the feeling, as an American in 2021, of being both the butterfly and the storm.

Yanagihara's feat in *To Paradise* is capturing the way that the inevitable chaos of the present unrolls into the future: It happens on both global and intimate levels, always. The potential and kinetic energies that drive massive political shifts are also at work within the private push and pull of a marriage, between generations. The nature of energy is not to appear and disappear; it simply transfers. That invocation of continuity and possibility can sound hopeful, but here it is also daunting, entrapping. No matter what century, no matter which shifting variables—no matter how compellingly we spin stories out of uncertainties—chaos (the chaos of love, of crisis, of injustice, of alienation) is inescapable, uncontrollable. In the novel, as in life, humans are both the architects and the refugees of that chaos, determined to pursue meaning and connection no matter how impossible we have made that pursuit.

"For just as it was the lizard's nature to eat, it was the moon's nature to rise, and no matter how tightly the lizard clamped its mouth, the moon rose still," goes a fable that Charles relays in Book 3, one he learned from his grandmother, who learned it from her grandmother. The voracious lizard in the tale consumes everything on Earth until there is nothing left, and then he eats the moon. But the moon rises inexorably and the lizard, unable to contain it any longer, explodes. "The moon burst forth from the earth and continued its path."

"We are the lizard, but we are also the moon," Charles writes. "Some of us will die, but others of us will keep doing what we always have, continuing on our own oblivious way, doing what our nature compels us to, silent and unknowable and unstoppable in our rhythms."

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "Hanya Yanagihara's Haunted America."

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The Kleptocrats Next Door

Review: ‘American Kleptocracy’ and ‘Kleptopia’

By Anne Applebaum

In 2010, things started going wrong at the steel plant in Warren, Ohio, a Rust Belt town that went on to cast its votes twice for Donald Trump. A cooling panel started leaking, and the furnace operator didn’t see the leak in time; the water hit molten steel, leading to an explosion that sent workers to the hospital with burns and severe injuries. A year later, another explosion caused another round of destruction. A federal regulatory investigation turned up dozens of safety violations. “They just kept cutting corners,” one employee said. “They were running a skeleton crew. They would not hire more help.” A few years later, the plant halted operations. In January 2016, it shut down for good. Some 200 people lost their jobs.

Here, as Casey Michel writes in *American Kleptocracy*, is what the Warren Steel plant looks like now:

Michel, an American journalist, has chosen his words with care. As his book makes brilliantly clear, the mill actually is "something out of certain parts of the Soviet Union." At the time of its demise, Warren Steel was owned by Ihor Kolomoisky, a Ukrainian oligarch. Kolomoisky is alleged to have bought it, along with hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of other midwestern properties, as part of a money-laundering operation. According to Michel, who said that Kolomoisky declined to comment on any of the allegations in the book, the oligarch needed to move cash that had been obtained illegally into something "real," in order to hide its origins (and perhaps use it as collateral for legitimate loans). He may also have hoped that desperation for investment in the American Rust Belt meant that the origins of his money would be overlooked. Unlike bankers, real-estate professionals in the U.S. have not always been required to examine closely the source of funds used to buy property, which is why the sector has become such a magnet for money launderers.

These were not small investments. From 2006 to 2016, companies linked to Kolomoisky acquired half a dozen steel mills, four office buildings and a hotel conference center in Cleveland, an office park in Dallas, a mothballed Motorola factory near Chicago. Money for the purchases allegedly came from the coffers of PrivatBank, a Ukrainian bank owned by Kolomoisky—and, according to Ukrainian investigators, defrauded by Kolomoisky. The money flowed into the Midwest via shell companies in Cyprus, the British Virgin Islands, and Delaware, with the assistance of the American arm of Deutsche Bank. In 2016, the flow ground to a halt. The Ukrainian government nationalized PrivatBank after determining that Kolomoisky and his inner circle had used fraudulent loans to rob the bank's shareholders of $5.5 billion. (Kolomoisky has denied wrongdoing and is fighting the nationalization in Ukrainian court.)

This was a typical post-Soviet scheme. But it was made possible by a whole series of American front men. One of them, Chaim Schochet of Miami, was 23 when he started buying Cleveland real estate, to the utter delight of the city's leaders. Mordechai Korf, also of Miami, became the CEO of Optima Specialty Steel, the company that held the industrial property purchased with Kolomoisky's money. Both Korf and Schochet used the services of an American lawyer, Marc Kasowitz, who represented Donald Trump during

the Russia probe, among other legal battles. On their behalf, Kasowitz has claimed that they had no knowledge of wrongdoing by Kolomoisky. One Optima Specialty board member has even said publicly that he had no idea that the source of the money for the investment was in Ukraine.

If this alleged scheme took a long time to uncover, that's partly because such an arrangement makes no sense to ordinary businesspeople, or to anyone who buys properties in order to manage them well and make a profit. Kolomoisky, Schochet, and Korf all live far away from Warren, Cleveland, and the other places where they invested; they felt no special responsibility for the people who live and work there. Because the point of their investments was, allegedly, to legitimize money removed from a Ukrainian bank and not to rescue dying factories, the owners were uninterested in the health and safety of their employees.

But the scheme does make sense within the arcane world of international kleptocracy, an alternative universe whose rules are so clearly different from those of the everyday economy that many have sought to find a name for it. In a book published in 2019, the British journalist Oliver Bullough calls this universe Moneyland. Tom Burgis, an investigative reporter for the *Financial Times*, calls it Kleptopia in his 2020 book by the same title. Inside this domain, shell companies, anonymously owned companies, and funds based in offshore tax havens like Jersey or the Cayman Islands hide what some believe could be as much as 10 percent of global GDP—money earned from narcotics operations, stolen from legitimate institutions, or simply hidden with the aim of avoiding taxation. In this world, theft is rewarded. Taxes are not paid. Law enforcement is impotent and underfunded. Regulation is something to be dodged, not respected.

Most voters and citizens in the world's democracies are vaguely aware of this realm, but they imagine it exists in faraway autocracies or on exotic tropical islands. They are wrong. In October 2021, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists published excerpts from the Pandora Papers, a large cache of documents detailing the operations of tax havens and the people who keep money in them. Among other things, the records make clear how much clandestine financial traffic goes not through the Caribbean, but through the U.S. and the U.K. Wealthy Nigerians

secretly own £350 million worth of British property; the king of Jordan used shell companies perfectly legally to purchase homes in London and Ascot, England. The ICIJ investigation also showed, for the first time in such an accessible manner, how Delaware, Nevada, South Dakota, and Wyoming—nice, normal American states, full of nice, normal Americans—have created financial instruments that nameless investors can use to hide their money from the world. Casey Michel's subtitle, *How the U.S. Created the World's Greatest Money Laundering Scheme in History*, gets the map right. So does Tom Burgis's, *How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World*.

The contrast between the tiny number of winners in the kleptocratic economy and the immense number of losers—not just the workers of Warren but the shareholders of PrivatBank and the taxpayers of Ukraine—is so stark that the persistence of this system now constitutes one of the most important modern political mysteries: Why doesn't the U.S., instead of abetting the elaborate arrangements, exert its leverage to help change the rules and eradicate the system? Part of the answer is obvious. Powerful people benefit from it, and they are intent on keeping it in place. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island has long campaigned against the prevailing disorder, emphasizing that the same shell companies used to hide money from taxation can also be used to hide political donations. He told me last year that "the interests who make money off of these schemes fight back quite hard, often through traditional lobbying groups." Michel writes that Kolomoisky himself reportedly sought to preserve his empire by winning influence in the Trump administration, among other things by offering "dirt" on Joe and Hunter Biden, some of which was passed to Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

Very rich people have also been known to use violence to protect what they have. Burgis describes in great detail what happened when an investigation into one African money-laundering operation homed in on its targets. In a relatively short period, hospitalizations, car explosions, and unexpected heart attacks eliminated several people who knew how the operation worked.

The world of kleptocracy is protected by its own complexity as well. Money-laundering mechanisms are hard to understand and even harder to

police. Anonymous transactions can move through different bank accounts in different countries in a matter of seconds, while anyone seeking to follow the money may need years to pursue the trail. Governments, meanwhile, are often ambivalent about prosecuting powerful people. Civil servants charged with tracking complex, secretive billion-dollar deals earn low salaries themselves, and may not want to tangle with people of much greater wealth and influence. Burgis tells at length the story of a British man named Nigel Wilkins, who worked as a compliance officer at the London branch of BSI, a Swiss bank, and then for British regulators. Wilkins came to suspect that BSI was helping its high-net-worth clients launder money, and he gathered the evidence to prove it. But when he produced the clues, he was accused of violating client confidentiality. He lost his job with British regulators. A few years later, he was proved right. BSI was linked to a massive corruption scandal and forced to close.

Journalists are hamstrung too. They may need to spend months or years learning how a particular money-laundering scheme functions, across countries and often continents, without the tools available to government investigators—and without any guarantee that the articles they produce will generate the clicks and likes that newspapers and magazines now need to survive. That's why all but the largest publications have now mostly abandoned this kind of work. Full investigations require big investments, large consortia like the ICIJ, or else groups like the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, funded by philanthropists. The Pandora Papers investigation, like several other investigations before it, was made possible by leaks. Even then, the task of understanding the significance of the documents and their relationship to real people demanded the resources of the ICIJ, which comprises 140 media organizations and hundreds of journalists working all over the world.

And when reporters do the work, the nature of these stories can make them daunting to read. The Pandora Papers report, like the Panama Papers report, caught readers' attention because the journalists involved could focus on a few sensational stories: the apartment owned by Putin's supposed mistress in Monaco, for example, or the villa in the south of France secretly purchased by the prime minister of the Czech Republic. (Both the Kremlin and the prime minister have dismissed the claims.) But conveying the full

picture of corruption, from a scheme's inception to its long-term ramifications, is a big challenge. *American Kleptocracy* and *Kleptopia* required years of careful reporting; they both, in turn, require concentration to read.

What is missing, particularly in the U.S. and the U.K., is a political movement that would not just identify these scourges but seek to remove them. The only major political figure who has successfully and consistently publicized the extent and impact of kleptocracy in his country is the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who has made a series of crowdfunded documentary films, posted on YouTube, tying the leaders of Russia to long-standing, far-reaching financial scams and broad networks of enablers. The videos succeed because they are carefully made, because they include juicy details—purporting to show aerial photographs of Putin's palace, a huge Black Sea residence with its own ice-hockey rink, for example—and because they link the stories to the poverty of Russian teachers, doctors, and civil servants. Navalny himself is a charismatic camera presence, which also helps.

In the U.S., Senator Whitehouse and others have successfully advocated for stricter rules governing anonymous companies. More recently, the Biden administration has said that it will begin using additional resources to audit high earners, especially those who are suspected of employing schemes to hide money from the IRS. But why stop there? Why not ban the use of tax havens and anonymous trusts altogether, including those now operating in so many American states? We can create better systems to detect abuse, better institutions to carry out oversight, better laws and better enforcement of the ones that exist.

Good government is not the only thing at stake. The links between autocracy and corruption are strong. Autocrats and would-be autocrats—whether Hugo Chávez, Vladimir Putin, or Donald Trump—attack and undermine the independent press, the civil service, and the judiciary in order to erode democratic political norms. But they also do it to ensure that nobody will discover that they or their friends have broken the law. Michel notes that Trump pushed hard against the enforcement of anti-corruption laws, even reportedly telling then–Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in the

spring of 2017, to "get rid of" the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which bars American companies from bribing foreign officials. Although Trump failed to eliminate the law entirely, he did slow down investigations and prosecutions. He also used the office of the presidency for personal gain, turning political power into cash, just as kleptocrats around the world have long done. Anonymous purchases of Trump properties skyrocketed once he became the Republican nominee for president. As Michel writes, "We have no idea who the vast majority of these purchasers were, or where they came from, or where they got their money, or what they wanted—or how they impacted American policy."

By the time Trump left office, the story had come full circle. Trump was elected in part by people who had been ripped off by the international kleptocracy in places like Warren. He used his four years in office to weaken any institutions—ombudsmen and inspectors general, as well as the press—that would have held him, his family, and his company more accountable. His presidency should serve as a warning: If democratic societies do not wake up to the spread of corruption among self-interested rulers and their enablers, they may find themselves not just broke and impoverished, but voiceless and unfree.

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "The United States Has a Dirty-Money Problem." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Departments

- **The Commons: The Men Who Are Killing America's Newspapers**
  Readers respond to our November 2021 cover story and more. --
- **An Ode to America**
  You're better than this, sweet land of liberty. -- James Parker

The Story of Alden Global Capital Illustrates Deep American Problems

The Atlantic January/February Issue: The Commons

I'm from Chicago originally and still a close reader of the *Tribune*. It's astonishing how bad things have gotten for a once-vibrant institution. The pages are thinner. Associated Press wire stories have replaced original reporting. There are spelling errors throughout.

I keep asking myself one question as more and more local and regional news outlets face cuts or fall completely: How do people know what's going on in their own backyard?

I think the answer is that they really don't, or they get their news from distorted sources. Some of my friends and family now get their Chicago coverage only from cable news or the latest viral Facebook post. Usually,

it's painting the city as a crime-ridden hellhole or bashing the mayor for something partisan—no local nuance, no analysis, just a selective distortion of what's happening on the ground. Many of those same people used to get their news from the *Trib*'s center-right perspective. Now they get it from national outlets that couldn't care less about their city.

Alden Global Capital's track record has already shown that it is perfectly willing to destroy one of America's most storied papers for a quick buck. It's a shame no civic-minded, wealthy Chicagoan stepped up to save the paper from its slow but certain death, and the city is worse off because of that.

Patrick Wohl
Washington, D.C.

The growing prevalence of personalities like Randall Duncan Smith and companies like Alden Global Capital showcases the deep problems the United States is facing. Do we really value this kind of unbridled capitalism? How is it that we—by way of elected officials—tolerate behavior that is so destructive to our way of life?

Morgan Pawlak
Oak Park, Ill.

Alden deserves the scorn it gets for its brutish (but profitable) approach. But American journalism faces a crisis bigger than nefarious hedge funds.

The real problem comes from the fall of America as a republic of letters. American civic education hasn't emphasized the vital role of journalism as the fourth estate, as important to the good society as the separation of powers or checks and balances in the federal government.

Now, Americans don't pay for news anymore and don't fund the local papers that kept communities intact and local governments in line.

Yes, Alden is killing off papers left and right. But why does the hedge fund buy these papers? Because previous owners didn't see a viable future

thanks to an apathetic public. The media industry isn't blameless. But the problem goes deeper than the journalistic failures of recent years …

To save [the newspaper industry], we'll need an effort of renewal to restore local institutions and to restore respectability to journalism.

Anthony Hennen
Excerpt from a National Review *article**The Atlantic*'s report highlights an important threat to journalism and civic awareness. But you overstate the impact on the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Trib*'s all-pro journalists, such as the veteran investigator Ray Long, continue to break major stories of political corruption. And the Springfield capitol bureau is staffed once again. The truth is bad enough. You shouldn't make it even worse.**Loren Wassell**
St Louis, Mo.

Every day I read the *Hartford Courant*, one of the papers that Alden Global Capital owns. Many people in Connecticut are concerned about the ongoing dismantling of the *Courant*, the oldest continuously published newspaper in the United States. However, we already have an alternative: a digital, nonprofit newspaper immune to the depredations of vultures. *The Connecticut Mirror* is now more than 10 years old, providing indispensable news to the public, not to mention state and local government. I read it every day alongside the *Courant*.

Toni Gold
Hartford, Conn.

McKay Coppins's article is troubling for the non-billionaires among us, which is why it's so important to acknowledge the organizations that are fighting to provide our communities with local accountability. Here in Illinois, ProPublica and the outlets that make up the Chicago Independent Media Alliance are rising stars in the shadow of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Many of my favorite news resources today are nonprofits that rely on the support of their readers for revenue. I may not have the funds to buy out Alden Global Capital's newspaper empire, but I hope that other readers will make it their mission to help a local news site thrive in whatever small way they are able.

Ben Suazo
Chicago, Ill.To respond to Loren Wassell's letter: There's no doubt that the Tribune*'s journalists continue to work heroically under adverse conditions to keep their readers informed. But when a paper loses a quarter of its newsroom virtually overnight, its quality will inevitably suffer, as I believe my reporting demonstrated. Those who remain in the* Trib*'s shrinking newsroom deserve credit. They—and their city—also deserve better management than Alden has provided.The drug is creating a wave of mental illness and contributing to homelessness. In November, Sam Quinones reported on how it spread and what it's doing to people.*

Thank you for the excellent article on meth use. I've worked with crime victims for many years and seen the devastation that meth and other drugs cause victims, offenders, and the community at large. My local elected officials have swallowed hook, line, and sinker the idea that drug distribution is "victimless." Hopefully many people will read Sam Quinones's work, and a wider recognition of the need to both offer treatment and protect society will take root.

Kirsten Logan
Denver, Colo.

Sam Quinones's article confirmed what I know all too well as a family- and addiction-medicine physician working in Portland, Oregon. We have lost the War on Drugs, and we will be tallying the casualties for generations to come. Being on the I-5 corridor has kept the Pacific Northwest on the leading edge of the innovative, highly addictive, synthetic drugs manufactured by drug cartels. The devastation for our families and communities is laid out before us on the streets. And there seems to be no end in sight.

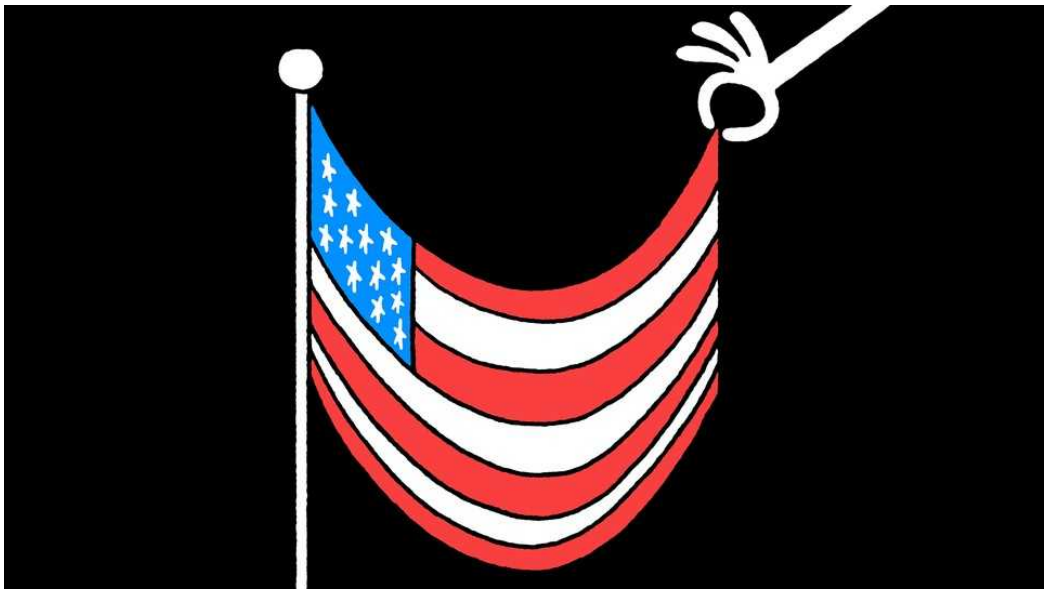
Now is the time for a fresh approach to the problems of illicit drugs and their effect on the health and wellness of our communities. Substance-use disorders, like many other chronic medical problems, are largely a result of system failures, including delayed intervention. Though many initially turn to illicit drug use as a means of coping with trauma, at a certain point, the unhealthy behavior is not a choice. It is time to decriminalize the behavior of using drugs.

Mr. Quinones makes another important point. If we desire healthy, vibrant communities rooted in peace, social justice, and sustainability, then we cannot turn away from these faces of "living addiction." We will need extraordinary outreach for those who are already marginalized because of mental-health issues, including substance-use disorders. After all, a community is only as strong as its most vulnerable member.

Christine Gray, M.D.
Portland, Ore.

In this month's issue, Barton Gellman reports on the forces that led to the January 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol and looks ahead to 2024, arguing that the events that transpired a year ago were just a warm-up. The hand-scrawled cover line offers an urgent warning. On some occasions, typography speaks louder than any image could.

Paul Spella, *Senior Art Director*



An Ode to America

An Ode to America

By James Parker

“Pretty good nose you got there! You do much fighting with that nose?”

New Orleans, 1989. I’m standing on a balcony south of the Garden District, and a man—a stranger—is hailing me from the street. He looks like Paul Newman, if Paul Newman were an alcoholic housepainter. I don’t, as it happens, do much fighting with this nose, but that’s not the point. The point is that something about me, the particular young-man way I’m jutting into the world—physically, attitudinally, beak first—is being recognized. The actual contour of me, or so I feel, is being saluted. For the first time.

America, this is personal. I came to you as a cramped and nervous Brit, an overwound piece of English clockwork, and you laid your cities before me. The alcoholic housepainter gave me a job, and it worked out pretty much as you might expect, given that I had never painted houses before and he was an alcoholic. Nonetheless, I was at large. I was in American space. I could

feel it spreading away unsteadily on either side of me: raw innocence, potential harm, beckoning peaks, buzzing ions of possibility, and threading through it, in and out of range, fantastic, dry-bones laughter. No safety net anywhere, but rather—if I could only adjust myself to it, if I could be worthy of it—a crackling, sustaining buoyancy.

I blinked, and the baggage of history fell off me. Neurosis rolled down the hill. (It rolled back up later, but that's another story.) America, it's true what they say about you—all the good stuff. I'd be allowed to do something here. I'd be encouraged to do something here. It would be demanded of me, in the end, that I do something here.

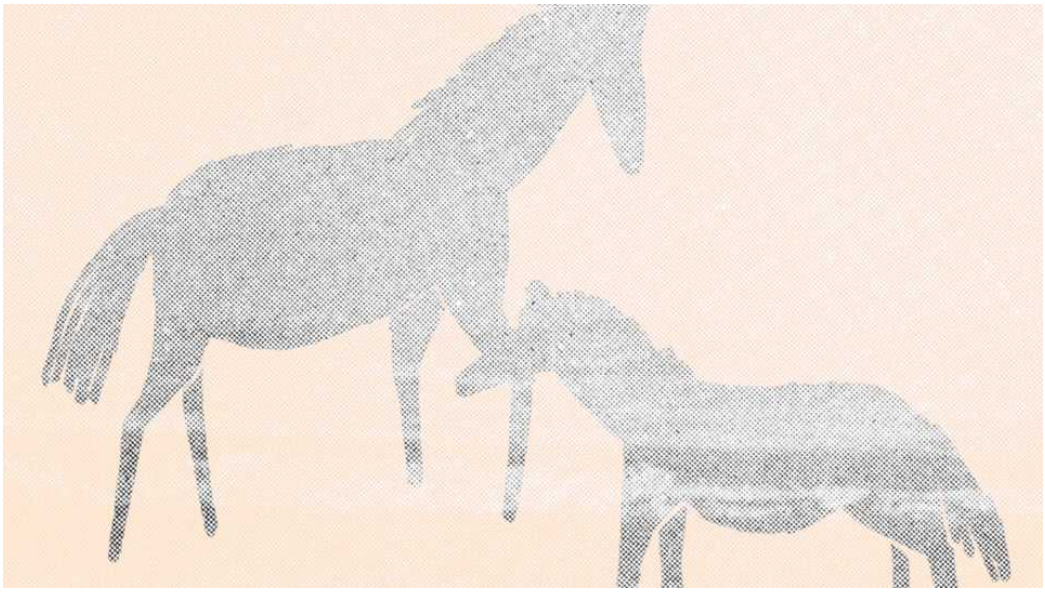
Later that year I'm in San Francisco, ripping up the carpets in someone's house. Sweaty work. Fun work, if you don't have to do it all the time: I love the unzipping sound of a row of carpet tacks popping out of a hardwood floor. On our lunch break, my co-ripper and I gaze at the city skyline, at the rippling spires, the dewy pavilions of San Francisco, and I say something about how good I'm feeling. He turns to me: "Man, you should get paid just for *that*. They should pay you just for walking around this city with your head up." Only in America, believe me, do people say things like this.

So listen: Right now your space, your beautiful space, your ungovernable American ether, is going bloody haywire. No denying it. The imagination that big-bangs you into being every morning is … unwell. It's time to reroute those noble energies of yours, redirect them, with a noise like the drums of Elvin Jones as he explodes behind John Coltrane. Perturbed country, heal yourself! I know you can. Because in the wildness of your generosity, you once healed me.

This article appears in the January/February 2022 print edition with the headline "Ode to America."

Poetry

- **The Unspoken**
  -- Ada Limón



The Unspoken

Ada Limón Poem: ‘The Unspoken’

By Ada Limón

If I’m honest, a foal pulled chest-level
close in the spring heat, his every-which-way
coat reverberating in the wind, feels
akin to what I imagine atonement might
feel like, or total absolution. But what
if, by some fluke in the heart, an inevitable
wreckage, congenital and unanswerable,
still comes, no matter how attached
or how gentle every hand that reached
out for him in that vibrant green field
where they found him looking like he
was sleeping, the mare nudging him
until she no longer nudged him? Am I
wrong to say I did not want to love

horses after that? I even said as much driving
back from the farm. Even now, when
invited to visit a new foal, or to rub the long
neck of a mare who wants only peppermints
or to be left alone, I feel myself resisting.
At any moment, something terrible could
happen. It's not gone, that coldness in me.
Our mare is pregnant right now,
and you didn't even tell me until someone
mentioned it offhandedly. One day, I will
be stronger. I feel it coming. I'll step into
that green field stoic, hardened, hoof first.

This poem appears in the January/February 2022 print edition. When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.
