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TIME

HER WAY

MELINDA
FRENCH
GATES
IS JUST
GETTING
STARTED

by BELINDA
LUSCOMBE



TIME Magazine

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Melinda French Gates Is Going It Alone

Belinda Luscombe is an editor at large at TIME, where she has covered a wide swath of topics, but specializes in interviews, profiles, and essays. In 2010, she won the Council on Contemporary Families Media Award for her stories on the ways marriage is changing. She is also author of *Marriageology: the Art and Science of Staying Together*.



The early days of the pandemic were a complicated time for a lot of couples.

But it's fair to say that in the sprawling, Pacific lodge-style home of Melinda and Bill Gates, the complexity was particularly acute. The foundation the couple co-led had been running a flu study in their hometown of Seattle, which had detected [early cases of COVID-19](#) in the region. There were video calls with infectious-disease specialists they funded, world leaders, epidemiologists, journalists, and public-health officials. Two of their three children were home from school full time. Plus, the couple was secretly separated, trading off who lived at the family house and who was elsewhere while they tried to figure out if they could stay married.

“It was a super intense time for us as a foundation,” says [Melinda French Gates](#), sitting in her industrial-chic office in Kirkland, Wash., three days after exiting the [world-changing organization](#) that bore her name for almost 25 years. “The other thing I would say, though, is, unusually, it gave us the privacy to do what needed to be done in private. You know, I separated first before I made the full decision about a divorce. And to be able to do that in private while I’m still trying to take care of the kids, while still making certain decisions about how you’re going to disentangle your life—thank God.”



Most divorces are not undertaken lightly. They can blow a hole in a couple's finances and health, [the happiness of their children](#), and each partner's self-esteem. French Gates didn't have to worry so much about that first issue. But unlike others, she did have to think about the effect [her divorce](#), finalized two weeks before her 57th birthday in August 2021, might have on the world. It's not an exaggeration to say that if the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) were damaged by the collapse of the Bill and Melinda Gates marriage, it could affect the welfare of millions of people around the globe. How do you factor that in when you're figuring out if your marriage is over?

“I would say it’s a personal thing,” French Gates says, after a significant pause, of her decisionmaking process at the time. Her office, while lush, is not showy. All warm wood and eggshell, its most prominent feature is a large poster spelling out the word *JOY*. But there are hints of her influence—among the family photos are notes from Bono and Barack Obama. “I thought a lot about my three children,” she says. “But I certainly thought about the effect on the [foundation](#). Those are the three biggest buckets: me, the kids, and the foundation. And I wanted to make sure that when we came through it to the other side—when *I* came through it on my side—all of those pieces were intact.”

After a stint away from the spotlight, French Gates seems to have reached the other side. In May, almost exactly three years after [news of the divorce](#) broke, she announced her departure from the foundation that began above a pizza parlor with her and two other employees before it was officially launched in 2000. As she leaves, she wants to make a few things clear. She is doing well. She is not out of the philanthropy business; she just announced her second billion-dollar funding plan (her [first was in 2019](#)). And she’s focused on one issue: helping women thrive.

[video id=gkVjKuL6 autostart="viewable"]

French Gates no longer wants to be the soft humanist layer surrounding Bill Gates’ hard-data-driven core or a modern [Eleanor Roosevelt](#), well-meaning but powerful only because of her spouse. She has never wanted to ride anybody’s coattails. On the cusp of turning 60, she’s both looser and more direct than in our [interviews](#) in prior [years](#), maybe because she now has an unobstructed view of her goals as she does of the yachts in the lake outside her office window. And she has her own wealth plus \$12.5 billion from her ex’s personal stash to achieve them. “I feel like, Wow, I’m 60. I better surround myself with people and still travel [so that] I’m still absolutely learning, because the world is moving, the world is

changing,” she says. “I’m totally unencumbered to work in any way I want.”

In a way, French Gates’ emergence as a woman making her own weather is a throwback to her Texan roots. Melinda Ann French, as she was known for her first 29 years, was a standout student at her all-girls Catholic school in Dallas. The nuns there were Ursuline, an order dedicated to educating young women, whose Latin motto translates to “I will serve.” French Gates traveled to jails and hospitals and tutored at low-income schools as part of her education, and still feels that introduction to service shaped her.

She frequently tells the story of how a foresighted teacher, Mrs. Bauer, persuaded the head nun to buy a smattering of Apple II Plus computers in the early ’80s and introduced them to 10 or so of her more math-minded students, including Melinda. She was immediately fascinated, she says, by the logic puzzles that coding presented.

French Gates went to Duke University for a bachelor’s in computer science and an M.B.A. while interning over summers at IBM. When she went for her rubber-stamp interview before accepting a job there, she mentioned she still had an interview at a newbie company, Microsoft. The hiring manager told her to take that job, because there would be more opportunity for advancement.

All along the way, French Gates’ path was lined by people who wanted a little more for women: a better education, access to more advanced knowledge, a less obstructed career path. And she was easy to root for. The second of four children, as a teenager she helped at her parents’ side hustle, a 14-home rental operation, mowing lawns and “Easying-Off the ovens.” She also campaigned to get the grading system changed at her high school. Young Melinda felt students who took AP classes were penalized. She had clocked that, unlike at the more pricey all-girls school nearby, only

the valedictorian at her school was accepted into a prestigious college. “I’m like, Oh my God, if I’m not valedictorian, I don’t have a shot at getting in,” she recalls. She got the scoring system changed. And she was valedictorian.

Perhaps it was that combo of pragmatism, ambition, and appreciation for data that drew Microsoft’s founder to her the evening they took the last two seats at a company dinner in New York City in 1987. At first, says French Gates, she wasn’t sure Bill was her type. He tried to schedule a drinks date two weeks in advance. After she declined what sounded like an appointment, he called and changed it to later that evening. They married in 1994.

It’s a sad symptom of how little respect is given to parenting that French Gates, who ceased paid work and focused on raising the couple’s children after 1996, has been accused of not [deserving her wealth](#). Indeed, both Bill and Melinda have [acknowledged that it’s unfair](#) for them to have so much money. They decided to give it away even before they were married and asked Gates’ dad Bill Sr. to help. After the William H. Gates Foundation merged into the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2000, French Gates began to take an increasingly large role, primarily championing the data that showed that investing in women—assisting them to stay healthy, [get educated](#), and plan pregnancies—helped raise whole communities out of poverty.



Somewhere along the way, the Gateses became one of America's favorite couples. They were [TIME's Persons of the Year](#) in 2005, alongside literal rock-star philanthropist Bono. In 2006, [Warren Buffett](#) entrusted the couple with more than \$30 billion to disburse. In 2016, they were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom; in 2017, the French Legion of Honor.

“She’s a very substantial person, and she brings that to her work,” says [former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern](#), who first met French Gates at a U.N. function in 2019. “This isn’t a side project. It’s not a moment in time. Every time I have seen her over the years, she has had a laser focus on what she can do to improve areas of work that support women.”

If you had to pinpoint a moment when Melinda Gates, wife, mother, and philanthropist, began to turn into Melinda French Gates, powerhouse advocate for women, it was probably July 11, 2012, when she co-hosted, alongside the U.K. government, the one-day London Summit on Family Planning. More than [20 countries pledged \\$4.6 billion](#) to help increase access to birth control for women in developing nations. Three years later, French Gates started Pivotal Ventures, an investment and charitable firm

focused on the issues she cared about. Four years after that, she published a memoir, *The Moment of Lift*. And now she's going it alone. "Once Pivotal Ventures was up and running for three years, I knew I could do this on my own," she says.

The first billion in giving since leaving the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation offers some clues as to the direction she now wants to go. Her focus is still getting women in power—in politics, in business, in tech, and, now, in media, but she's widening her lens to work more globally, and being bolder. She's spreading \$200 million among 16 organizations that work to advance the rights of women and other underrepresented groups, including the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund and the National Domestic Workers Alliance.



She's also offered \$20 million each to 12 individuals she believes are disrupters and charged them to pass it along to others. These include friends such as filmmaker Ava DuVernay, people she has worked with like Ardern, and people she has only met over Zoom, like Sabrina Habib, who runs low-cost childcare centers in East Africa. The recipients get to request up to \$5 million for their own institutions and invest the rest in other people or organizations they

admire. Two of these recipients are men, [Richard Reeves](#) and [Gary Barker](#), who are trying to help prepare boys for a world where women are equal partners.

Ardern, who doesn't yet know how she will allocate the money she has been assigned, except that it's likely to be invested in the geographic region from which she hails, says the offer from French Gates came in mid-April, totally out of the blue. She was putting away clothes one evening when she glanced at her phone. "I got a personal message from Melinda saying, 'Here's my areas of interest. I believe you're someone who will have seen meaningful places where we could have an impact. Will you help me?' And 'I'm trusting you to hand this over,'" says Ardern. "Who does that?"

A further quarter-billion dollars is going to a kind of contest, for which people will pitch ideas, using [Lever for Change](#), a model she used before with another woman giving away her divorce settlement, [MacKenzie Scott](#) (formerly Bezos). While French Gates no longer partners with Scott, she acknowledges there are now some similarities in their methods, which lean into trust in people rather than pure adherence to data. But she prefers to stay more involved than Scott. "MacKenzie will literally do the grantmaking to the organizations and then she's extraordinarily hands off," says French Gates. "I try and coalesce a group of organizations around moving something forward."

That leaves \$310 million to give away. "I don't know yet what I'm going to do with the rest," she says. "That's exciting. One of the things I feel like I'm on is a learning journey." She repeats those words, *exciting* and *learning*, often.

One of the things French Gates has learned is that she's more pro-choice than she thought. Previously, she had spoken in favor of—and funded—contraceptive access for women in countries where availability was low. Now, in part influenced by her daughters,

she's funding abortion-rights organizations, which the foundation never did. This has put her at odds with some in the Catholic Church, a faith she espouses. "Melinda French Gates could do much to help women and their preborn children on the national—and even international—level," Carol Tobias, president of the National Right to Life Committee, told a Catholic news outlet. "Yet she has decided instead to pour money into the abortion industry."

But to French Gates, the Supreme Court's [decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*](#) is a symptom of a bigger issue. "To have a law on the books since I was 9 years old, and to have it rolled back, and all the downstream consequences—like these women's-health deserts now when we already have one of the highest maternal-mortality rates of high-income countries—I can't not speak up about that," she says. "To see that my granddaughter will have fewer rights than I do? That doesn't make any sense."

Read More: [*Why I'm Focusing on Getting More Women In Public Office*](#)

Another topic that has really got her goat over the years is that the U.S. is the only Western nation with no federal policy on [family medical leave](#). One of the recipients of her largesse is [New America](#), which does [advocacy work](#) in that area. "I want to push on that policy in a huge way," she says. Rich as she is, she knows she can't fund family leave for an entire nation; eventually the government will have to step in. She's just going to try to clear away the obstacles, including the elected ones.

Which is why, noting that [60% of Americans](#) agree that women should have access to abortion and [80% of Americans](#) agree that the U.S. should have a policy about family leave, French Gates is turning her attention to politics. She's funding centrist candidates from both sides of the aisle, especially women, and especially in local and state government, and putting money into turn-out-the-vote efforts in swing states. And she's gone further. The Gateses

long had a policy of not endorsing any politicians, on the theory that they must be able to work with any government that gets elected, but she's clear on whom she'll be voting for this year: President Biden. "There's no chance I could vote for Donald Trump. Not a single chance," she says. "Not after what he has done to women's reproductive rights, and not after the heinous things he has said about women."

After 27 years of marriage, the Gateses announced their divorce, midpandemic, in May 2021. It later emerged that Bill had had an affair with a Microsoft employee in 2000, leading to an internal investigation in 2019. He left the board in 2020. ("Bill Gates stepped down from the Microsoft board in 2020 to dedicate more time to philanthropic priorities including global health and development, education, and his increasing engagement in tackling climate change," a foundation spokesperson told TIME.) He also spent time with [Jeffrey Epstein](#), even after the latter's first conviction. (Gates has said he [regrets those meetings](#).) While both of those were factors, French Gates has said there was no one thing that led to the dissolution of the marriage. Since September 2022, Bill has been seen frequently with Paula Hurd, the widow of former [Oracle co-CEO Mark Hurd](#).

There is zero need to feel sorry for French Gates. By all accounts she's living her best life. "Getting a divorce is a horrible thing. It's just painful. It's awful when you realize you need one," she says, then asked to correct herself from "horrible thing" to "hard thing" a minute later. But now that it's over? "It has been wonderful," she says with a tiny chuckle. "I'll just leave it there." She doesn't leave it there. She's skiing. She's traveling to see her granddaughter and daughters (Jennifer, 28, and Phoebe, 21) in New York City and son (Rory, 25) in Washington, D.C. She's going to Paris to watch her son-in-law [Nayel Nassar](#) compete as an equestrian in the Olympics, and on safari in Africa, one of her favorite things.

She's allowing a few close friends to throw her a dance party for her 60th. She has two spiritual groups she loves (local mindfulness guru Tara Brach's podcast is a favorite topic of discussion) and a long-term walking group with a cluster of her besties. And she is smitten with her new house, having never been a fan of the massive one her husband had built. "I live in a neighborhood. Now I can walk to little stores. I can walk to the drugstore, I can walk to a restaurant," she says. "I absolutely love it." Alas, it was considered imprudent for her to go to any open houses—a favorite weekend hobby in her 20s. Instead, she did a lot of searching on Redfin.

French Gates might even be dating. She says "of course" she's willing to meet a new somebody, especially "somebody who's open to learning and who's vibrant, and who's smart, and somebody who challenges me and that I challenge." It seems a remarkably specific list, but when asked if there is somebody in the picture, she demurs. "Not that I'm ready to talk about."

The [foundation](#) French Gates has just left is richer than some countries. It had an endowment of \$75.2 billion in December 2023. It has given away \$76 billion or so since 2000, including close to \$8 billion in the past year. Its work reaches 48 states and 135 countries, and while its focus is global health, it also touches education, agriculture, water, climate, financial systems, gender equality, and family planning, among other things. [Pivotal Ventures](#), on the other hand, is not a nonprofit and has no endowment, just whatever French Gates has. That's reported to be \$11.3 billion, on top of the \$12.5 billion she was given for philanthropic purposes when she left the foundation—a stipulation of her divorce agreement. It's not nothing, but scale is crucial in funding if you want to take big swings. Can she tolerate the downsizing?



“I don’t see it honestly as a downsizing,” she says. “I was just ready to be able to have full decisionmaking control about where all the funds go.” She also felt the foundation was in a good place, and the work she was doing there on gender equity would continue. “I know it will continue because of the board, because of Mark [Suzman, the CEO], and Bill believes now fi...”—she seems to be about to say *finally*, but stops—“in women’s health, so it will continue.”

When she told her foundation colleagues she was leaving, she says, none of them tried to talk her out of it. Even Bill was resigned to it. “I think he said he would be willing to make substantial changes if it would help me stay,” she says, but “they knew once I’ve made a decision, I’ve made a decision.”

“I’m grateful to Melinda for all her contributions to the Gates Foundation, where she was instrumental in shaping our strategies and initiatives,” Gates told TIME in a written statement. “I’m certain she will have a huge impact through her future philanthropic work. I’m impressed with many of the grants she’s already announced for women’s health and economic empowerment, and hope we have the opportunity to collaborate again in the future.”

The struggle to bring equity to women was already under way before French Gates was born. It would be a mistake to call it a revolution, because it has been very slow and things have not fully turned around. But for many women in low-income countries, whose position was and is precarious, the foundation's programs made an enormous difference, especially to their health. No country has ceased being grindingly poor without [improving the lot of women](#); it is now a tenet of international development that gender equality is macrocritical. French Gates is one of the engines that have driven this work.

Read More: [*Decisions Are Still Being Made For Women, Instead of By Them. We're Suffering As a Result*](#)

People who have worked with the funding giant, who did not wish to be named because it might jeopardize their relationship, say she will be missed, both in the programming and the organization's culture. The Gateses' differing approaches made them a good team. Because French Gates was a co-chair, anybody coming to a meeting would know that in addition to bringing technological options, and data to support their approach, they'd be asked about how they were providing dignity, equity, and access to tools and funding for all the people they were working with. And after the meeting, French Gates would be the one emailing them a thank-you note.

On the other hand, said one younger aid worker, it was inspiring to see French Gates embodying the autonomy she had been trying to provide for women by choosing to forge her own path, focus on issues she deemed most vital, and distribute money in a way she regarded as equitable.

French Gates' mother Elaine often told her daughter that if she didn't set her own agenda, somebody else would. Several decades later, French Gates may be coming to terms with what that looks like. She no longer talks, for example, about empowering women.

“I’ve stopped using that empowerment language, because we aren’t giving women their power—they have their power,” she says.

“What I’m trying to do is make sure that women can step into their full power, that women see their power. It’s not something we give them. We have it. We’re born with it.”

When Bill and Melinda married, she wrote [in her memoir](#), his parents gave them a sculpture of two birds “looking out intently toward an unknown place with their gaze eerily together.” She loved it, she wrote, because it represented a married couple looking to the future together. She put it right by the front door of the home. When they were dividing up the assets, he got the sculpture. “I didn’t ask for it,” French Gates says. “I didn’t want it.” She’s looking at a whole new horizon.

—With reporting by *Leslie Dickstein*

Correction, June 18: *The original version of this story misstated how much money Melinda French Gates was giving to certain organizations. She is giving \$200 million in total to 16 organizations, not \$20 million to each.*

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Welcome to the Noah Lyles Olympics

Sean Gregory is a senior sports correspondent at TIME. His work has been cited in the annual Best American Sports Writing anthology nine times. His stories have won awards from the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, and his work was named a finalist for Deadline Club and Mirror awards for excellence in magazine writing and reporting on media, respectively.



Noah Lyles should be a miserable human on this suffocatingly hot May morning near Orlando. Two nights earlier, the U.S. sprint star

was up until 3 a.m. in the Bahamas, waiting on a delayed drug test after a race. You can still spot fatigue under his eyes.

Lyles, however, can summon social energy on command, and today he's yapping away between stretches and sprints: about his love of anime, how he needs a pedicure, how he's the most fashionable guy in all of track and field. He had been absent from the past few practices while running in Nassau, where he and his 4×100 -m relay team took first place. "We did miss you," one of Lyles' training partners, Paralympic sprinter Nick Mayhugh, tells him. "But did we enjoy the peace and quiet of the past two days? Yes."

Lyles runs a 120-m practice sprint in 12.4 sec. "You don't have to run any faster than that," says his coach, Lance Brauman. "You ran fast twice this weekend. You don't have to do it again." Lyles isn't feeling this advice. "My body's turned on!" he says. "I can feel the rust coming out of the legs! These two are going to be faster." Brauman rolls his eyes. Lyles runs the next two in 12.2 and 11.9 sec., respectively.



Talk turns to Lyles' competitors, including Letsile Tebogo of Botswana, who won a silver in the 100 m and bronze in the 200 m at last year's World Athletics Championships in Budapest. Lyles won gold in both races. "He's definitely a once-in-a-generation talent," Lyles says. I ask Lyles if such a threat worries him. "I'm here to race anybody who wants it," he declares. "The deeper the field, the better I run. I know I'm going to win. Because I'm never going to break nerve."

The Paris Olympics, which begin on July 26, are set to go down as the Noah Lyles Games. If Lyles, 26, repeats his Budapest feats and wins the 100-m, 200-m, and 4 × 100-m relay golds, he'll be the first American track-and-field athlete since Carl Lewis, 40 years

ago, to win that triple, and the first male athlete to do so since [Usain Bolt](#) in 2016. Now Bolt is no longer in the starting blocks, and [Michael Phelps](#) is out of the water. [Katie Ledecky](#) is in the pool but a more low-key presence, and everyone already knows [Simone Biles](#) is a legend. The stage appears set for the World's Fastest Man, the title Lyles took with his 100-m win at worlds, to steal the show. He's even made noise about chasing a fourth gold, in the 4×400 -m relay. No male track athlete has ever won that many sprint golds at a Games. (Americans Carl Lewis, Jesse Owens, and Alvin Kraenzlein each won a fourth, but in the long jump.)

[video id=clPhM76O autostart="viewable"]

If Lyles piles up golds in Paris, “we may have to recalibrate who is America’s biggest star,” says NBC analyst and four-time Olympic medalist Ato Boldon. “With the Olympics being next in Los Angeles and him being right in his prime for those four years leading up to LA28, look out. He’s going to be huge.”

Lyles, who has shot ads for Adidas, Visa, NBC, and others, seems tailor-made for this moment. An outspoken extrovert with ICON tattooed on his torso, he’s begun a tradition of walking into track events in splashy outfits to attract attention. He’s stronger, physically, than he was three years ago, when he won a disappointing bronze in Tokyo. More important, he’s in a better headspace, no longer fighting the demons that haunted him during the pandemic Games.

“Being able to run with passion, and a smile on your face, and turning a race into something for everybody to enjoy, that’s what I consider running with soul,” Lyles says during an extended conversation in the living room of his four-bedroom house in Clermont, Fla., after training. He’s sitting under a white blanket on his couch, legs stretched out. “It just means that I’m happy,” he says. “I love to do what I do. And that’s a dangerous guy.”



Lyles' parents Kevin Lyles and Keisha Caine Bishop were both collegiate track stars at Seton Hall University. But they couldn't envision Noah, the oldest of their three children, following in their footsteps—Lyles suffered from such severe asthma as a child that he didn't have plush toys or teddy bears, because they could gather dust and aggravate his condition. As he struggled to fill his airways, his cough sounded like a high-pitched bark. “One day I was on a conference call for work,” says Keisha, “and the supervisor said, ‘Could somebody take their dog out?’”

They eventually found a medication that helped him breathe comfortably. But as Lyles entered middle school, he faced another obstacle: bullying. His teeth had become discolored—Lyles believes the medicine caused them to yellow—and classmates, particularly girls, teased him. “They were ruthless,” he says. “An emotional beating, that’s the stuff that really breaks you down.” Lyles was also diagnosed with ADD and dyslexia, which made school difficult for him.

- Welcome to the **Noah Lyles Olympics**
- The **Best Photographs** From the Paris Olympics
- The **Cost of Attending** the 2024 Paris Olympics

- See [How Many Medals Every Country Won](#) at the Paris Olympics—So Far
- Why Are the [Olympics Held Every Four Years?](#)
- [Snoop Dogg on His Olympic Gig](#) and Being a ‘Very Legal Guy’
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He gravitated toward art, drawing Spider-Man swinging down a cityscape and, later, designing the uniforms for his high school track team. Lyles attended church dressed as Peter Pan and climbed on the shelves at Costco. “He was that kid who was just always trying to test things out,” says Kevin.

Lyles eventually found an outlet for his rambunctiousness: sports. After Keisha and Kevin divorced in 2008, when Noah was around 11, the kids moved with Keisha from Charlotte, N.C., to Alexandria, Va., where Noah and his younger brother Josephus attended T.C. Williams High School (now called Alexandria City High School) and ran track. Noah practiced longer and harder than anyone. “I have everybody else tired and throwing up, but I can’t get him,” says Rashawn Jackson, Noah’s high school sprint coach. “This is not right.” While watching the opening ceremonies for the 2012 London Olympics, Noah and Josephus, just a year apart in age, made a pact to make the team for Rio. Noah finished fourth in the 200-m trials in 2016, just missing the cut; Josephus was injured.



Noah and Josephus both turned professional in 2016: they're believed to be the first male sprinters in the U.S. to bypass college for the pros. (Josephus did not qualify for the Tokyo Olympics but is seeking to make the team for Paris.) Lyles broke the 300-m indoor world record in his first pro season, in 2017. But in the weeks before his first outdoor world championships in Doha in 2019, he grew homesick living out of hotel rooms in Europe. Keisha visited him in Amsterdam, bringing his favorite cereal, Raisin Bran Crunch. "I really learned at that point this is not a glamorous life," says Lyles. "This is a hard-fought, dog-eat-dog life that you've got to get through."

Winning the 200 m at those worlds did little to improve his morale. "I just remember crossing the line being so empty," says Lyles. Then the pandemic, which hit a few months later, left him isolated. "Noah has a twinkle," says Cheryl Tardosky-Anderson, his longtime therapist. "He didn't have that twinkle."

Read More: *Fred Richard Is Team USA's Next Olympic Hope for Men's Gymnastics*

"I could barely talk," says Lyles. "I was so tired. All the time. Even thinking was a drain. It felt like you were almost in a constant asthma attack. You know there's more room in your lungs, but you

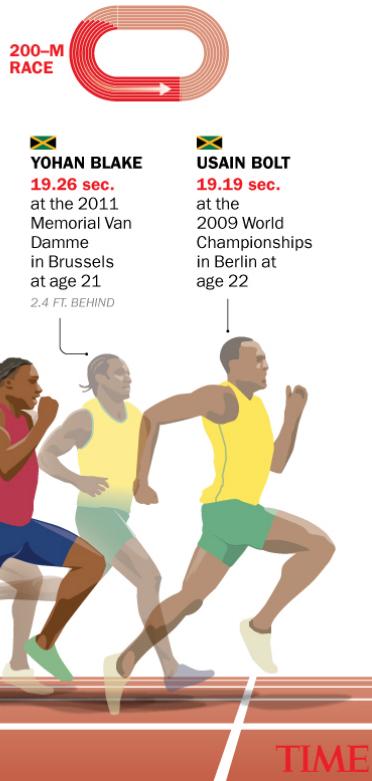
can't physically use the muscles to actually take that breath." George Floyd's murder, in May 2020, added to his angst. "I just remember constantly thinking, That could be me," Lyles says.

Lyles started taking Zoloft, which lifted his cloud that summer, but weaned himself off the antidepressant going into the next track season. He ran a world-leading 200 m at the trials for the postponed Tokyo Olympics and was the clear [favorite for Olympic gold](#). But when he got to the Games, his knee started to swell up. Plus, there were no fans in the stands to provide electricity. "Noah thrives on crowds," says his sports psychologist, Diana McNab. "He's a performance athlete, meaning he loves the limelight, he loves showtime. There was none of that in Tokyo. So he was a fish without water."

"I was half-motivated," Lyles says. "I feel like we just walked into an empty room, and they said, 'Fight.'"

WITHIN REACH

Here's how Noah Lyles would finish in a hypothetical race against history's top 200-m sprinters running their personal bests



In his postrace huddle with reporters after finishing third, Lyles broke down in tears. He opened up about [his mental-health](#)

[struggles](#) and expressed sadness that Josephus wasn't with him in Tokyo. "It burns my chest every time I think about it," Lyles says now about his bronze. But in a way, he says, it's also "my greatest medal." The failure rewired Lyles' approach and set him up for the success of these past three years. He still rewatched that final on YouTube. "It is physically very hard for me to push play," he says. "But every time I look at it, I'm just like, 'Yeah, I am *not* that guy anymore.'"

Post-Tokyo, Lyles had to dig out of a malaise. A session with McNab helped persuade him to run a race in Eugene, Ore., a few weeks after those Olympics. "You get out there and just run for the joy of running and run your ass off," she told him. "If you can't do that, we're screwed for next season."

Read More: [*Before There Was Caitlin Clark, There Was Jimmer Fredette*](#)

He won. He entered the next season vowing to train not harder but smarter. Lyles worked with a biomechanist to revamp the weakest part of his game, his start. "It's a constant science project," says Brauman, his coach. Lyles added at least 10 lb. of muscle to his frame, which has allowed him to position his body at more efficient angles in the blocks, and generate more force and higher speeds at the outset of his races. Lyles already enjoys strong "top-end," or maximum, speed: this weapon, combined with a more technical approach to the start, has produced startling results. He broke Michael Johnson's U.S. record in the 200 m—19.32 sec.—at the 2022 World Championships, running a 19.31. He took the 100 m and 200 m double in Budapest and ran a personal-best 6.43 sec. in the 60 m at the U.S. Indoor Championships in February.

"Lots of guys want to be the man," says Boldon, the NBC analyst. "Noah is the one I see going back to the lab to figure out what is going to make him the man. He's going to be tough to beat,

because he has improved his weaknesses more than anybody he is going to face in Paris.”

Lyles works with McNab to pen scripts detailing exactly how each part of a race—the warm-up, the start, the acceleration phase, the finish—should unfold. The night before an event, he calls her from his bedroom. She rings her Zen chimes three times, and he does a breathing exercise before visualizing each element of the script. Before Lyles ran a 100-m race in Bermuda, for example, they wrote, “You are … driving your knees into the track like a jackhammer. Crushing it … through the finish line.”

Lyles won, again.

Olympic athletes rarely drive the sports-news cycle in a non-Olympic year. Lyles, however, did so in August with comments he made at a world-championships press conference following his 200-m victory: “The thing that hurts me the most is that I have to watch the NBA Finals, and they have *world champion* on their head. World champion of what? The United States?” His point: Is it really fair for U.S.-based leagues, like the NBA, to call their title winners *world champs*?

NBA players took it in stride. Just kidding! “Somebody help this brother,” Kevin Durant wrote on Instagram. A furor ensued on talk shows and the web. “The problem with Noah is in the delivery,” says Josephus. “It’s not always the most finessed. I think that I probably would have explained it a little more than he did.” Noah stands by his words. He’s a world champion. The 2022–2023 Denver Nuggets, who never played a professional team from outside North America, were not.

Taming Lyles’ candor has been an ongoing project. “I do encourage him to use his filter sometimes,” says Tardosky-Anderson. A couple of years ago, Josephus brought a date over to the house he

and Noah shared in Clermont. She made cookies. Noah tried one. “Whoa, that’s a bad cookie,” he said. “Really bad.”

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I ask Lyles if, these days, he’d be less likely to offend his brother’s date. “You’d probably say it in a nicer way,” says Jamaican sprinter Junelle Bromfield, Noah’s girlfriend, who’s sitting nearby. “Ahhhhhhh,” Lyles responds. “Maybe. But probably not.”

Lyles is prone to impulse. After breakfast on the morning of the indoor national championships, Lyles insisted that he, Keisha, and her husband needed to stop by an Albuquerque motorcycle shop: he had to buy a helmet to go with the red racing outfit he was going to wear for his entrance. When Keisha questioned the wisdom of this move, Lyles told her she didn’t understand his vision. “I said, ‘You’re right, babe, I don’t get the vision,’” says Keisha. “I just roll with it. His sister said, ‘Next, he’s going ride in on a horse.’”

He’s promising new hair and nail styles at the Olympics. He wanted to decorate his cuticles for the relay in the Bahamas, but his nail tech, a high school student in Clermont, had her prom.



His house doubles as a dork shrine. Games are stacked near the entryway: Catan, Magic: The Gathering, the Chameleon (Lyles hosts weekly game nights). Upstairs, short, stout figurines—called Funko Pops—of characters from *The Office* line one shelf. Lego Bowser, playing a piano, sits below them. Lyles hasn't opened his Princess Leia Lego set, but a Lego *Star Wars* Star Destroyer takes up prominent coffee-table space in the upstairs TV room. "I've been working on that thing for three months," Lyles says. "Maybe four."

At his training track, Lyles boasts that his "random-knowledge generator is very big." He fills me in on the aye-aye, a lemur native to Madagascar. They have a middle finger, Lyles says, that's "literally long enough to stick it up their nose and touch their brain. They use it for getting insects out." He's also obsessed with ants

and sings the praises of AntsCanada, a YouTuber and ant enthusiast with nearly 6 million subscribers. “It’s very interesting,” Lyles says. “I’ve always enjoyed learning about animals.”

“All right!” he says, his aye-aye and ants lecture a wrap. “Let’s get up to the gym.”

When Lyles was negotiating an Adidas contract extension last year, the company, he says, threw him what it thought was a bone. Adidas invited him to the shoe-release event for Anthony Edwards, the rising Minnesota Timberwolves star who’s got plenty of talent but, unlike Lyles, isn’t a six-time world champ. “You want to do what?” says Lyles. “You want to invite me to [an event for] a man who has not even been to an NBA Finals? In a sport that you don’t even care about? And you’re giving him a shoe? No disrespect: the man is an amazing athlete. He is having a heck of a year. I love that they saw the insight to give him a shoe, because they saw that he was going to be big. All I’m asking is, ‘How could you not see that for me?’” (Adidas declined to comment; in February, Lyles signed a new deal with the company, reportedly the most lucrative track-and-field contract in the post-Bolt era.)

This slight represents the problem with track and field in the U.S.: the sport’s low visibility outside the Olympics. Lyles can go to an Applebee’s or Texas Roadhouse in Clermont unrecognized. And the Texas Roadhouse even has a picture from the 4 × 100-m relay at the London Olympics, the Games that first drew Lyles’ attention, on the wall.

Lyles has designs on fixing this issue. He swears he can be bigger than Bolt. “Yeah, why not,” he says. “That’s my plan.” While Bolt is an icon, by dint of hailing from Jamaica, he couldn’t—or at least wasn’t willing to—grow track and field in the U.S. “I have the personality, I have the speed, I have the showmanship,” says Lyles. “I have the marketing mindset. I’m willing to be uncomfortable.” In March, he did a pair of shoots with Adidas, filmed a spot for

Visa, and did another shoot for Omega, between training sessions and running in a meet. He wants to host *Saturday Night Live*.

The prerequisite for any track takeover, of course, is success in Paris. Lyles isn't too concerned about that part. "I will definitely win my first" Olympic gold medal, Lyles tells me, legs still tucked under a blanket. How about two? "I definitely will." Three? "I will definitely win three," Lyles says. How about four? "That one is debatable!" Lyles says with a laugh. It depends on whether the coaches put him on the 4 × 400-m relay team so he can make history.

Most of all, he's guaranteeing a good time. "I definitely advise you to indulge, because it's going to be a lot of fun," he says. "And I can promise you if you're watching me, you will not be bored."

"If you need somebody to entertain you for this Olympics," says Lyles, smiling and pointing his fingers like a friendly bartender, "I got you." —*With reporting by Leslie Dickstein*

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Inside Fiji's Fiery Battle Against Plastics

Aryn Baker is the senior international climate and environment correspondent at TIME. She covers the human impacts of climate change, as well as food security, oceans, climate migration, and extreme heat.

She lives in Rome, and has reported from more than 50 countries, as TIME's Africa bureau chief based in Cape Town, the Middle East bureau chief based in Beirut, Afghanistan and Pakistan bureau chief based in Kabul and as Asia correspondent based in Hong Kong. She has won multiple awards for her writing, reporting, and documentary film work.



This story was reported with support from the Pulitzer Center Ocean Reporting Network.

Whenever the growing pile of plastic waste in front of her door takes up too much space, Asinate Lewabeka has a simple solution. She sets it on fire. She prefers to do so at dawn when the air is still so that the smoke rises in a black column. She says any later in the day, the coastal breeze risks blowing the acrid fumes straight into her home, a modest shack built on the edge of the Vunato dump site in Lautoka, Fiji's second largest city.

Lewabeka watches in satisfaction as flames consume the haphazard pile of empty water bottles, travel-size tubes of shampoo, juice cartons, wads of food packaging, a broken plastic fan, and coils of

copper wire coated in PVC insulation, reducing it all to carbonized lumps. “Plastic rubbish is the worst kind,” she says. “It is everywhere. It makes our country look so bad. I don’t want it to be a pollutant in our neighborhood, so I collect it and burn it so I can get rid of it.”

[video id=f3TUq321 autostart="viewable"]

It may no longer be an eyesore, but Lewabeka’s problem is far from gone. Burning plastic releases toxic substances that will remain in the environment for hundreds of years, with deleterious impacts on human and ecosystem health. Yet open burning is one of the most common methods for eliminating unwanted waste in a remote island nation besieged by a plastic tide. Less than a third of Fiji’s plastic waste is locally produced. The rest drifts in with ocean currents from as far away as South Africa and Mexico. It must be disposed of, wherever it comes from, and burning is often the simplest option.

After the final embers of Lewabeka’s bonfire flicker out, the smoke sinks into a choking haze that irritates the eyes as it ripples through the community. Small breezes kick up the ashes, coating in an oily soot the chassis of a long-abandoned car that has become a playground for the neighborhood children. The afternoon rains sweep the partially burnt remains into a nearby stream that irrigates several modest vegetable plots before emptying into the bay. When washed into the ocean, what’s left of the plastic detritus will break into microscopic particles that leach heavy metals and toxic chemicals into the marine environment, slowly poisoning the fish that residents reel in for their evening meals.

Lewabeka’s bonfire is replicated dozens of times daily in communities around the world, and across the Fijian archipelago, creating a toxic burden on human and environmental health that is only starting to be quantified.

JULY 15, 2024

Paradise in Peril

PLASTICS ARE HURTING THE OCEANS AND OUR PLANET. INSIDE FIJI'S FIGHT FOR ITS FUTURE

BY ARYN
BAKER

TIME



Asinata Lewabeka burns trash near her home on Viti Levu island on May 9

time.com

The evidence, however, is already apparent: microplastics found in the flesh of almost every marine species tested; certain plastic chemicals identified in drinking water; others in the leaves of plants irrigated by polluted streams. And while Fiji's high rates of cancer and diabetes have not been scientifically linked to the presence of plastic in the environment, there is research elsewhere suggesting that it might yet be the case. "The data is building that plastics have the potential to adversely impact human health," says Linda S. Birnbaum, a toxicologist and the former director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences in the U.S. "Burning plastic waste releases dioxins that stay in the environment forever and are linked to cancers as well as reproductive and

developmental impairments. We know plastics are a problem; we know we've contaminated our world."

Humans have produced more than 11 billion metric tons of virgin plastic since 1950, when plastic first came into widespread use, according to Roland Geyer, lead author of one of the first scientific studies quantifying the global plastic habit. According to his research, only 2 billion metric tons are still in use today, meaning the rest—some 8.7 billion tons—is waste. According to the U.N. Environment Programme, the world produces 430 million metric tons of plastic annually, two-thirds of which are short-lived products destined for disposal.

When researchers revealed the extent of the world's plastic pollution crisis nearly a decade ago, they spread the word with evidence that packed a visual punch: dolphins entangled in plastic bags, a viral video of a straw being removed from a turtle's nose. The chemicals that go into plastic production, which are emitted when it breaks down, are harder to see, but they carry a far more pernicious threat to human life.

Cleaning up that pollution is all but impossible, and so a global movement is under way to stop production at the source. Fiji is leading the charge, championing a robust global treaty as countries around the world convene this year in a series of dedicated U.N.-sponsored meetings that will conclude in South Korea in November. Fiji, along with other so-called high ambition nations, wants to see the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution (INC) produce a treaty that will substantially reduce the production of unessential plastics, minimize plastic's chemical load, and hold manufacturers responsible for the sustainable disposal of their products.

Depending on how it is interpreted, such a treaty could deal a blow to the country's biggest export: Fiji Water. The premium bottled water company produces, fills, and exports more than half a billion

of its iconic square plastic bottles every year. Fiji Water, owned by the California-based Wonderful Co., is one of Fiji's biggest employers, its largest single taxpayer, and a primary foreign-exchange earner. Few would argue that the pricey bottled water, quaffed by celebrities and wealthy Westerners, constitutes an essential use of plastic. But for Fiji, it's an important financial driver.

Fiji's struggle to balance an economic need for plastic production with a public health plea for its reduction illustrates a complex relationship with a product that has become the cornerstone of modern life. Fiji Water's appeal comes, in part, from the perception that its source is a paradisiacal land of pure waters, yet the very vehicle of that bottled dream is a global pollutant, says Rufino Varea, a Fijian environmental toxicologist and a member of Fiji's delegation to the treaty negotiations. "I know that it is a company that provides jobs to many Fijians. And we can see that the business is important to a country like ours." But knowing the impacts of plastic pollution, he says that as a Fijian, he feels uncomfortable contributing to the cycle. "This plastic-water-bottle thing has to stop."



Fiji has more than 330 islands, one sanitary landfill, and two municipal dumps. While some high-end resorts ship their plastic waste back to the main island for disposal, few communities can afford to do the same. As a result, most of Fiji's plastic waste is burned, buried, or tossed into the environment.

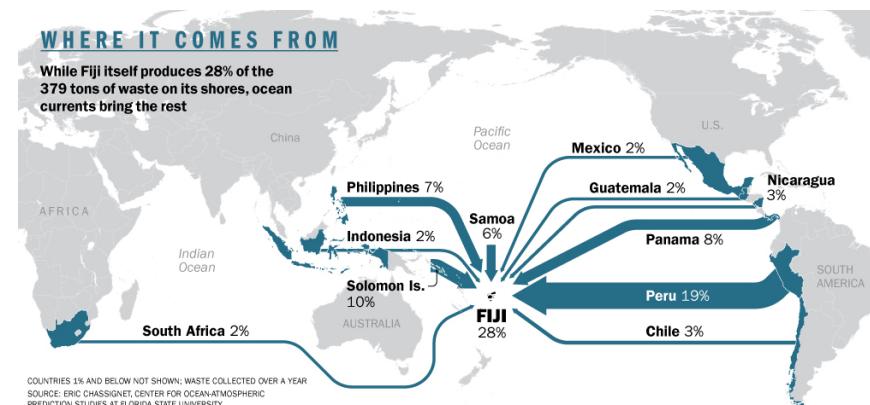
Rising sea levels and heavy rainfall sweep the dumped refuse out to sea, where it joins plastic refuse drifting in from other regions and is swept back to shore by circulating ocean currents. There, it is collected in cleanup campaigns conducted by a hospitality industry eager to keep the beaches pristine for tourists—the mainstay of the Fijian economy. And so, the cycle continues. Burning is seen as the best option for stopping the endless return of a product that, while considered disposable, seems to last forever.

“It’s just people trying to clean up their waste without realizing the damage that can be done,” says Dr. Ane Veu, Fiji’s leading oncologist. She understands the impetus to burn waste but worries that the invisible pollutants are taking a toll. Veu has seen firsthand how cancer cases, even once rare lymphomas and leukemias, have more than doubled over the past decade; rates of asthma and metabolic disease are also rising. While some of those numbers can be attributed to increasingly sedentary lifestyles, diet, and better monitoring, she suspects that increasing exposure to plastics plays a role. If research were formally undertaken in Fiji, as has been done elsewhere in the world, she believes it would likely “show that yes, there is a direct link between [plastic pollution] and the rising number of cancers.”

She is not alone. A growing body of evidence is linking plastics to adverse human health outcomes. Scientific research has long demonstrated that burning plastic emits toxic and carcinogenic gases. More recent studies show that micro- and nanoplastics—tiny particles produced when plastic breaks down—can be found everywhere on the planet and almost everywhere in the human body, from blood to breast milk.

Scientific research on the effects of those microplastics in the human body is limited, at least in peer-reviewed literature. Still, the cumulative evidence is enough to raise an alarm, says Dr. Philip Landrigan, a professor at Boston College and the director of its Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good. He cites a recent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that found particles of polyethylene (used to make plastic bags and bottles) lodged in the arterial plaque of 150 out of 304 patients participating in a cardiovascular study, correlating with a 4.5-fold increase in risk of heart attack, stroke, or death in those patients —“nearly on par with smoking a pack a day,” he says. Another study in mice demonstrated that ingested particles can cross the blood-brain barrier, leading to behavioral changes similar to human dementia.

Most plastics are derived from crude oil, methane gas, or coal. Chemicals are added to create different characteristics, such as flexibility or water repellency. In March, a team of European scientists published a database of more than 16,000 chemicals found in plastics, only a quarter of which have been tested for health impacts. Almost all of those were found to be hazardous to human health, with links to inflammatory bowel disease, cancer, autism, and ADHD. PFAS—per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances that are often added for water resistance—disrupt the endocrine system with impacts on fertility, immunity, development, and increased risks of developing Type 2 diabetes.



Geyer says that he wouldn't be surprised if "a couple of decades from now, researchers look back at us and say, 'They were so naive. There was this huge uptick in neurological problems, in cancer, autism, ADHD, and whatnot. At the same time, everyone was using these crazy pollutants they didn't understand and knew nothing about ... How could they not put one and one together?'"

Varea, a Ph.D. candidate studying plastic pollution at Fiji's University of the South Pacific, is from the northernmost island of Rotuma, a remote, palm-fringed paradise that, like every other paradise in the archipelago, is choked with plastic that has washed up on shore. Varea's research focuses on testing soil, water, shellfish, and fish samples from Fiji's coastal areas for microplastics. A "very high percentage" come up positive, he says. That is a concern for a nation where 60% of the population depends on the ocean for food. The most frustrating part, he says, is that most of the waste comes from somewhere else.

According to Eric Chassignet, an oceanographer with the Center for Ocean Atmospheric Prediction Studies at Florida State University who models plastic waste flows on global ocean currents, only 28% of the plastic waste on Fiji's shores comes from Fiji. A quarter comes from regional neighbors, and most of the rest comes from Latin America. As with the countries that suffer the most from climate change, while contributing the least, Fiji can't do much to stop the plastic tide. All it can do is clean up the mess. "We're doing what we can," says Varea. "But it needs to be a global effort, and most of this effort must come from plastic-producing countries."

Like most Pacific Island nations with limited land and small economies, Fiji cannot even handle its own plastic waste, let alone an influx from other countries. Only about a third of the population, concentrated in the urban areas on the main island, has access to garbage collection. That leaves residents and resort owners

everywhere else to fend for themselves. A 2021 report commissioned by the International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that a quarter of the country's plastic waste is mismanaged—either thrown into rivers or straight into the ocean. Either way, it eventually ends up back on shore.

Shore cleanups can help reduce the plastic plague. However, local community organizations, international conservation groups, and resorts seeking to maintain their postcard-perfect beaches face the same conundrum: What should be done with plastic waste once it is collected? In some countries, it can be transported to recycling facilities on the mainland via boat. That's impractical, and expensive, for a nation comprising hundreds of islands scattered over more than 500,000 sq. mi. For some communities, the nearest landfill is more than a day's boat journey away.

The thousands of small waste fires lit daily across Fiji are a sign that plastic pollution is beyond the country's ability to manage it, says Peter Thomson, a Fijian diplomat and the U.N. Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean. "Nowadays, everything comes in plastic. And as we know, it doesn't degrade. So, what do you do with all that plastic? It's a huge problem for an island economy." He means that quite literally: for some island nations he has visited, landfills are the highest elevation. "The fact is, we just have to change the global plastic system."



Designed to last forever but cheap enough to be thrown away, plastic has become an industry worth \$712 billion a year, with no signs of slowing down. The world is producing four times as much plastic as it did in the 1990s, and consumption—along with waste—is expected to nearly triple by 2060, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. That is by design.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that demand for fossil fuels will peak before the end of this decade as the world moves toward renewable energy. That makes plastic, which is derived from fossil fuels, a lifeline for an industry facing global efforts to transition away from oil and gas to combat climate change. Last year, Sultan Al Jaber, head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, told the *Guardian* that if the company's expanded production capacity of 600,000 barrels a day were not needed in a renewables-fueled world, those hydrocarbons could be turned into plastics instead. “Everything around us is made from this finite resource. We have to accept that.”

Not everyone does. To reduce the impact of what is rapidly becoming the planet’s most ubiquitous manufactured material, 175

nations agreed in March 2022 to draft a legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution on land and in the marine environment. The first four phases of negotiations have produced a draft, but negotiators are still divided over the treaty's scope: fossil-fuel-producing nations, including the U.S., say the solution to plastic pollution lies in tackling the mess through better recycling and cleanup efforts. But recycling is, at best, a stopgap measure—less than 10% of the world's plastic is currently recycled—and at worst a well-orchestrated public-relations campaign designed to put the onus of plastic's toll on consumers and communities, rather than producers.

The 127 nations that make up the High Ambition Coalition—of which Fiji is a member, along with the E.U., most of Africa, Japan, Canada, Mexico, and Australia, among others—are asking for restrictions on the use of chemicals in plastic formulations, limits on plastic production, a plastic tax, and bans on nonessential products like single-use items.

A strong treaty would curb the plastic flood by stopping it at the source, say proponents. A weak one focused on cleanup would be like bailing out an overflowing bathtub before turning off the tap. “Everybody’s heard about how there’s going to be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050 if we carry on with our current course,” says Thomson. “The motivation of the plastic treaty is to make sure that does not happen.” More important, he says, is a treaty prioritizing human health, with wording in the text that outlaws harmful chemicals. “My prediction is that in 10 to 20 years’ time, we will be in the position we were in with the tobacco companies a few decades ago, where countries are starting to legislate against plastics [because of the public health impact].”

The best way to reduce production is to start with figuring out what is, and is not, essential, says Bethanie Carney Almroth, a professor of ecotoxicology at Sweden’s University of Gothenburg and a member of the Scientists’ Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty,

which advocates for a negotiation process informed by science. Medical equipment, like blood bags and flexible tubing, is vital. Disposable plastic forks, less so. The treaty, she says, needs to be flexible enough to adapt to a changing world. “If something is identified as essential right now, but still problematic, then that should trigger mechanisms to solve the problem and make that product obsolete.”

Eliminating disposable plastics would go a long way toward improving health, says waste-management expert Costas Velis at the University of Leeds. He estimates that some 2 billion people worldwide lack dedicated garbage collection services. If space is limited, and there are no nearby rivers for dumping, many will resort to burning, in what he calls an overlooked health crisis. His research estimates that some 270,000 premature deaths result from the open burning of waste every year around the world. “Open, uncontrolled burning of anything is bad enough for the health, but open burning of plastics, with all their unknown chemistry, is possibly orders of magnitudes worse.”



In 2020, to manage its own pollution problem, Fiji implemented a ban on single-use plastics. Water bottles were notably exempted,

mainly because access to clean drinking water is limited outside the main cities. But also because banning bottles would be impractical for a country that exports them. Fiji Water directly employs some 800 Fijians; 300 suppliers employ hundreds more. The company also sponsors the national rugby team, and its philanthropic arm, the Fiji Water Foundation, spent \$1.5 million last year on health, development, and education projects within the country. That doesn't mean the company should get a free pass, says Varea, the Fijian ecotoxicologist. "We need to weigh job creation and investment against waste production and management. Corporations that are involved in plastic packaging, including bottled water, need to have more accountability."

Fiji Water argues that from a sustainability point of view, plastic bottles made from polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, are less carbon intensive when it comes to production and transportation than aluminum or glass. (This assessment is based on a study commissioned by the National Association for PET Container Resources). The company already uses recycled PET plastic in 70% of its bottles, and by 2025, it says, all bottles will be made from RePET. It also supports a bottle-buyback scheme with Coca-Cola in three main island cities, paying 5 Fijian cents (\$0.02) per bottle. "Frankly, nobody else in Fiji is doing as much as Fiji Water" in terms of managing their plastic footprint, says Ashneel Naidu, the director of plant operations. "Why should we, a developing island country, give up something that's so important to us? Why can't people in developed countries turn their lights off for a few minutes? Wouldn't that have a bigger impact [on the planet] than us giving up one of our most economically important drivers?"

Sivendra Michael, Fiji's Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change and one of the lead voices calling for a robust plastics treaty at the INC negotiations, recognizes that plastics have a role to play in the economic development of many of the countries that suffer most from its

pollution, including his own. Bans on nonessential plastics with easy alternatives makes sense, he says. Replacing Fiji Water's plastic bottle exports with glass may not. In cases where plastic alternatives are out of reach, another approach is needed: making manufacturers responsible for their products through the end of life, instead of just to the point of sale.

That is what Fiji Water is already doing, on a limited basis, with its bottle-buyback program. On a recent Wednesday, Lewabeka returned from the bottle-buyback center to her modest shack near the Vunato dumpsite with 300 Fijian dollars (\$133), proceeds earned from a few days' worth of sorting through the trash to find recyclables. When she started as a waste picker 27 years ago, glass bottles and aluminum cans were her primary source of income. Now, it's plastic bottles, but only ones from Fiji Water, Coca-Cola, and local drinks producer Sprint. None of the other companies pay for returns. "I will take what I am paid to take," Lewabeka, 64, says, hovering with her lighter next to a pile of plastic bottles from other brands. "Those people really should be paying for us to bring in their bottles too, because it's their bottles you see the most." She estimates that for every bag of Fiji, Coke, and Sprint bottles she takes in for recycling, she will burn another pile of trash at home.

Lewabeka's bottles won't be recycled at the buyback center. Instead, they will be shredded, packed into pallets, and shipped to Australia, where they will be melted down and turned into RePET pellets, ready to feed the global demand for recycled plastic in new products. It would be better, of course, if Fiji Water could close the loop by using its own bottles (or others) to create new ones, but there is no recycling facility in Fiji. Meanwhile, the cost of shipping a ton of plastic abroad for processing far outweighs the price per ton of recycled PET on the market.

Only 23% of Fiji Water bottles are returned in Fiji. It's an abysmal rate, but still better than the global plastic-recycling average, and a model for how the country could start getting on top of its plastic-

pollution problem—especially if it's implemented across all brands. Fiji Water's voluntary program is a precursor to a countrywide bottle-deposit scheme under parliamentary review. Kinks are still being worked out: 5 Fiji cents might be enough incentive for residents to return bottles if they live near collection centers, but probably not enough for remote island communities to bring their plastics to a centralized location. The alternative would be to build collection points on each island, managed by a regional waste-collection system—a costly investment.

If recycled plastic, like aluminum or glass, had a high enough value, a recycling system would pay for itself. The problem is that virgin plastic is cheap and abundant, so manufacturers have little incentive to opt for higher-cost recycled materials. One of the more contentious items supported by Fiji in the INC draft treaty to be finalized in November seeks to change that metric by proposing a per-ton tax on virgin plastic. Such a fee, paid by producers, manufacturers, or importers, would be used to fund waste-collection systems and recycling infrastructure in areas that need it most. It would, essentially, encourage producers to use less virgin plastic, while taking responsibility for their products.

For Lewabeka, it seems like an obvious solution. “The companies that are making this stuff should be paying to clean it up,” she says as she sweeps a pile of ashes away from her front door. “If everything had a value, then I wouldn’t have anything left to burn.”—*With reporting by Lice Movono/Suva, Fiji, and Leslie Dickstein/New York*

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How Europe's Far-Right Parties Are Winning Over Young Voters

Yasmeen Serhan is a staff writer at TIME, based in the London Bureau. She covers foreign affairs with an emphasis on the future of democracies and rising authoritarianism around the world.



The writing was on the wall—or, at least, in the polls. Despite the fact that young Europeans had [turned out en masse](#) to prevent a predicted far-right surge during the 2019 European Parliament elections, they wouldn't necessarily be compelled to do so again five years later. If anything, many analysts warned in the days and weeks leading up the vote, many of them would end up voting *for* the far right.

And vote they did. While these latest European elections ended earlier this month in a [victory for Europe's center-right parties](#), which are poised to make up the largest grouping in the next European Parliament, the radical right made historic gains—enough to throw the bloc's biggest powers, France and Germany, off balance. In the former, Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally emerged victorious with 30% of the vote—an electoral blow so

devastating that French President Emmanuel Macron announced a snap parliamentary election to be held in a matter of weeks. In the latter, the extreme-right Alternative for Germany (known by its shorthand AfD) secured the second-largest share of votes behind the opposition center-right Christian Democrats, trouncing Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats and their coalition partners, the Greens and the liberal Free Democrats, and throwing the government's stability into doubt.

Young people played their part. Among French voters under the age of 34, the National Rally was the most popular party, securing 32% of the vote, according to French broadcaster [BFMTV](#); Macron's ruling Renaissance Party won just 5% of the youth vote. Though the AfD did not earn the distinction of being the most popular party among young Germans, it did manage to triple its support from 5% in 2019 to 16% today, according to the German broadcaster [Deutsche Welle](#).

Such an outcome would have been unthinkable just five years ago, when young Europeans were thought to be more likely to [throw a milkshake](#) at a far-right politician than vote for one. While this shift to the far right can be explained by a number of factors—not least the [cost-of-living and housing crises](#) that have hit Europe's Gen-Z and younger Millennials particularly hard—many observers credit the far right's social media prowess for their success with younger voters. Indeed, Jordan Bardella, the National Rally's 28-year-old president and presumed successor to Le Pen, has proven to be a social media sensation in France, boasting 1.6 million followers on TikTok. It's a platform he has used to communicate with young voters directly, [to great effect](#). (Should his party replicate its European election performance in France's upcoming legislative vote, Bardella could become the country's youngest-ever prime minister.)

The AfD has similarly used social media to court young voters. "If you look at TikTok, the AfD has more reach than all the other

parties combined,” Laura-Kristine Krause, the executive director of the More in Common think tank in Germany, told TIME and other journalists in Berlin in the days leading up to the European elections. The country’s mainstream parties are only just catching up. Scholz, for example, only established [his TikTok account](#) in April.

Read More: [*This 28-Year-Old Is the New Face of Europe’s Far Right*](#)

This phenomenon isn’t limited to France and Germany. Across Europe, far-right parties have been able to strike a chord with young voters—not only by appealing to them on their favorite social media platforms, but by tying the issues young people care about (such as a lack of affordable housing) with their own signature policies (namely, restricting immigration). This was evident during last year’s Dutch elections, in which the far-right firebrand Geert Wilders’ anti-immigration Freedom Party won the largest [share of votes](#), including 17% of voters aged 18 to 34 ([up from 7%](#)). Far-right parties have made similar inroads with young voters in [Portugal](#), [Spain](#), and [Finland](#).

These trends present a stark shift from just five years ago, when the received wisdom was that younger generations were more politically progressive and environmentally-minded than those that came before them. The reality, however, is that younger people “are way more open in all directions,” says German political scientist Thorsten Faas. Indeed, the second-most popular party among French voters under the age of 34 was Jean Luc Melenchon’s leftist France Unbowed party. In Germany, meanwhile, young voters were split across a range of parties, with most of their support going to the AfD, the Christian Democrats, and the Greens.

“There was this perception that young people are progressive, and they’re not,” Krause said. But she noted that those who are opting to support the far right aren’t necessarily doing it for purely

ideological reasons. Rather, she says young people tend to be overrepresented among what she dubs “[The Invisible Third](#),” a segment of society that isn’t as socially or politically integrated and has thus proven more susceptible to far-right talking points. “They don’t feel like they’re being talked to by politicians; like they don’t have a seat at the table,” she added. “The disillusioned very much care about a just society, care about a just Germany, but don’t see that as being fulfilled.”

None of this is to say that young voters necessarily represent a burgeoning [far-right generation](#). “Youth support for the far-right parties likely stems from the same factors driving many of their peers to the left: frustrations with political establishments and policies seen as ill-equipped to address the structural causes of big issues,” Lucas Robinson, a senior research associate and digital media manager at the Eurasia Group’s Institute for Global Affairs, tells TIME. The Institute’s [recent study](#) found that global challenges such as pandemics and climate change are considered to be the biggest threats among young adults (aged 18-29) in France, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S.; political elites making decisions that hurt the public was deemed the second biggest, whereas immigration came in third.

If there are any lessons more moderate political parties can take from the European elections, it’s that they can no longer presuppose the support of young voters, even in the face of an ascendant far right. “Gen Z and millennials are not monoliths,” Robinson says. “These election results showed that their views cannot be taken for granted.”

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Scientists Develop New Algorithm to Spot AI ‘Hallucinations’

Billy Perrigo is a correspondent at TIME based in the London bureau. He covers the tech industry, focusing the companies reshaping our world in strange and unexpected ways. His investigation ‘Inside Facebook’s African Sweatshop’ was shortlisted for the 2022 Orwell Prize.



An enduring problem with today’s generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, like ChatGPT, is that they often confidently assert false information. Computer scientists call this behavior “hallucination,” and it’s a key barrier to AI’s usefulness.

Hallucinations have led to some embarrassing public slip-ups. In February, AirCanada was forced by a tribunal to honor a discount that its customer-support chatbot had mistakenly offered to a passenger. In May, Google was forced to make changes to its new “AI overviews” search feature, after the bot told some users that it was safe to eat rocks. And last June, two lawyers were fined \$5,000 by a U.S. judge after one of them admitted he had used ChatGPT to help write a court filing. He came clean because the chatbot had

added fake citations to the submission, which pointed to cases that never existed.

But in good news for lazy lawyers, lumbering search giants, and errant airlines, at least some types of AI hallucinations could soon be a thing of the past. New [research](#), published Wednesday in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Nature*, describes a new method for detecting when an AI tool is likely to be hallucinating. The method described in the paper is able to discern between correct and incorrect AI-generated answers approximately 79% of the time, which is approximately 10 percentage points higher than other leading methods. Although the method only addresses one of the several causes of AI hallucinations, and requires approximately 10 times more computing power than a standard chatbot conversation, the results could pave the way for more reliable AI systems in the near future.

“My hope is that this opens up ways for large language models to be deployed where they can’t currently be deployed – where a little bit more reliability than is currently available is needed,” says Sebastian Farquhar, an author of the study, who is a senior research fellow at Oxford University’s department of computer science, where the research was carried out, and is also a research scientist on Google DeepMind’s safety team. Of the lawyer who was fined for relying on a ChatGPT hallucination, Farquhar says: “This would have saved him.”

Hallucination has become a common term in the world of AI, but it is also a [controversial one](#). For one, it implies that models have some kind of subjective experience of the world, which most computer scientists agree they do not. It suggests that hallucinations are a solvable quirk, rather than a fundamental and perhaps ineradicable problem of large language models (different camps of AI researchers disagree on the answer to this question). Most of all, the term is imprecise, describing several different categories of error.

Read More: *The A to Z of Artificial Intelligence*

Farquhar's team decided to focus on one specific category of hallucinations, which they call "confabulations." That's when an AI model spits out *inconsistent* wrong answers to a factual question, as opposed to the same consistent wrong answer, which is more likely to stem from problems with a model's training data, a model lying in pursuit of a reward, or structural failures in a model's logic or reasoning. It's difficult to quantify what percentage of all AI hallucinations are confabulations, Farquhar says, but it's likely to be large. "The fact that our method, which only detects confabulations, makes a big dent on overall correctness suggests that a large number of incorrect answers are coming from these confabulations," he says.

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The methodology

The method used in the study to detect whether a model is likely to be confabulating is relatively simple. First, the researchers ask a chatbot to spit out a handful (usually between five and 10) answers to the same prompt. Then, they use a different language model to cluster those answers based on their meanings. For example, "Paris is the capital of France" and "France's capital city is Paris" would be assigned to the same group because they mean the same thing, even though the wording of each sentence is different. "France's capital city is Rome" would be assigned to a different group.

The researchers then calculate a number that they call "semantic entropy" – in other words, a measure of how similar or different the *meanings* of each answer are. If the model's answers all have different meanings, the semantic entropy score would be high,

indicating that the model is confabulating. If the model's answers all have identical or similar meanings, the semantic entropy score will be low, indicating that the model is giving a consistent answer—and is therefore unlikely to be confabulating. (The answer could still be consistently wrong, but this would be a different form of hallucination, for example one caused by problematic training data.)

The researchers said the method of detecting semantic entropy outperformed several other approaches for detecting AI hallucinations. Those methods included “naive entropy,” which only detects whether the wording of a sentence, rather than its meaning, is different; a method called “P(True)” which asks the model to assess the truthfulness of its own answers; and an approach called “embedding regression,” in which an AI is fine-tuned on correct answers to certain questions. Embedding regression is effective at ensuring AIs accurately answer questions about specific subject matter, but fails when different kinds of questions are asked. One significant difference between the method described in the paper and embedding regression is that the new method doesn’t require sector-specific training data—for example, it doesn’t require training a model to be good at science in order to detect potential hallucinations in answers to science-related questions. This means it works with similar effects across different subject areas, according to the paper.

Farquhar has some ideas for how semantic entropy could begin reducing hallucinations in leading chatbots. He says it could in theory allow OpenAI to add a button to ChatGPT, where a user could click on an answer, and get a certainty score that would allow them to feel more confident about whether a result is accurate. He says the method could also be built-in under the hood to other tools that use AI in high-stakes settings, where trading off speed and cost for accuracy is more desirable.

While Farquhar is optimistic about the potential of their method to improve the reliability of AI systems, some experts caution against overestimating its immediate impact. [Arvind Narayanan](#), a professor of computer science at Princeton University, acknowledges the value of the research but emphasizes the challenges of integrating it into real-world applications. “I think it’s nice research … [but] it’s important not to get too excited about the potential of research like this,” he says. “The extent to which this can be integrated into a deployed chatbot is very unclear.”

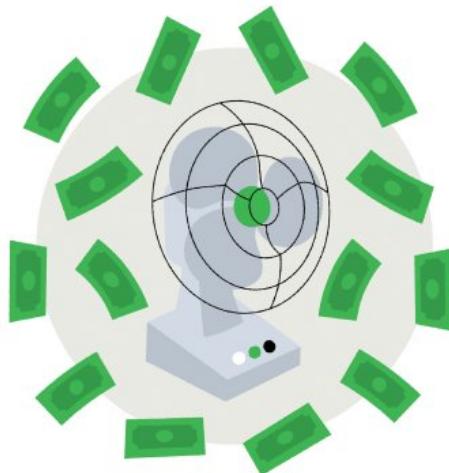
Read More: [Arvind Narayanan is on the TIME100 AI](#)

Narayanan notes that with the release of better models, the rates of hallucinations (not just confabulations) have been declining. But he’s skeptical the problem will disappear any time soon. “In the short to medium term, I think it is unlikely that hallucination will be eliminated. It is, I think, to some extent intrinsic to the way that LLMs function,” he says. He points out that, as AI models become more capable, people will try to use them for increasingly difficult tasks where failure might be more likely. “There’s always going to be a boundary between what people want to use them for, and what they can work reliably at,” he says. “That is as much a sociological problem as it is a technical problem. And I don’t think it has a clean technical solution.”

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Here's How Your Energy Bill May Be Affected by Extreme Heat

Solcyré (Sol) Burga is a general assignment reporter at TIME. She covers U.S. news with a focus on student loans and LGBTQ+ issues.



The effects of extreme heat on the human body have been well-documented, but increased summer temperatures may also pose another type of burden for millions of Americans—financial.

In addition to the increased frequency and record-high temperatures that are hallmarks of a heat wave, climate change is also [lengthening the duration](#) of a heat wave, and Americans can expect to see the cost of energy rise alongside temperatures.

“There’s a cost to climate change,” Mark Wolfe, the executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA), tells TIME. “As temperatures rise, you need to use more electricity to run your cooling systems, and it’s becoming more expensive—and will be more expensive—as we go forward.”

The average cost of keeping the house cool in the U.S. is expected to jump by nearly 9% this summer. Experts forecast cooling costs

to reach an average of \$719 from June 2024 through September, compared to \$661 during the same period last year, according to a report by NEADA and the Center for Energy, Poverty and Climate. It's an upward trend that has continued over the past decade.

"It's very hard to get hit with a high bill," says UCLA professor Alan Barreca, lead author [of a study](#) on the effects of increased summer temperatures and electricity disconnections. "You end up thinking, 'Oh, do I have to cut back on other expenses, or do I just not pay and try to do some bill juggling?'"

Research from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) from 2015 shows that about 1 in 5 U.S. households reported reducing or giving up certain necessities like food and medicine [to cover the cost](#) of their energy bill. About 14% of households surveyed said they received a disconnection notice, and just over 1 in 10 said that they keep their house at unhealthy or unsafe temperatures to prevent using more energy.

Rising costs are particularly overbearing to low-income households, which the U.S. Department of Energy says spends a [larger percentage of their income](#) on home energy costs, or have a greater "energy burden" than others. Families living in the South are disproportionately affected by extreme heat. Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Arkansas top the list of the states with the highest, low-income energy burden.

A study [published in the Nature Energy journal](#) found that low-income households were at a greater risk for electricity disconnection months after temperatures reach 95 degrees Fahrenheit, when compared to other periods of the year. "When people think of extreme heat they think very contemporaneously, like, 'Oh, it's a hot August. We need to help people in August.' But financial distress from electricity expenses come after, in September, and October," says Barreca.

Some solutions have been brought forward on a federal level through the [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program](#) (LIHEAP), which helps low-income families cover heating and cooling costs. But funding to that program was cut by \$2 billion for fiscal year 2024.

“The person I think of is the single elderly person that’s living on a fixed income in Southern California and potentially has a Social Security income of \$1,500 a month, and there’s no wiggle room,” says Barreca, when explaining who is most affected by increased costs of electricity in the summer.

Only 17 states and the District of Columbia have some shut-off protections in the summer, set to prevent people from having their power turned off during the hottest months of the year.

Forgoing air conditioning could prove harmful for many—extreme heat is [deadlier than any other](#) weather-related causes of death in the U.S, causing 207 [fatalities](#) in 2023, per the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Many states and cities have been dealing with the extreme heat by setting up cooling centers. But [attendance at these places](#) can be low, which could pose a threat to their future. Even then, critics call cooling centers a short-term solution. “Families can’t move into the library, and often their problem is [getting to it](#). How do you get to the cooling center?” asks Wolfe.

Advocates are calling for bigger changes, including more local programs providing discount rate electricity programs for low-income families, and upgrades to building codes to require air conditioning in apartment units. “You don’t find 20% of the families in New York have no heating system,” says Wolfe. “That’s not possible, it’s not allowed by law. But many families don’t have cooling. So some of this is catching up.” Wolfe is also advocating

for increased funding for low-income households to install heat pumps or solar rooftops to create more energy efficient homes.

“We need to think about how we retrofit households or homes so they’d be more energy efficient and need less electricity for cooling,” he adds. “If you just focus on bill payment...without addressing energy efficiency, then what you do is you make the situation even worse, because you’re creating more emissions for the production of electricity that contribute to climate change.”

The original version of this story misstated how much energy prices will go up. It will increase by nearly 9%, not nearly 8%.

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Chicago Mayor Signs Executive Order to Launch Black Reparations Task Force



Black Chicagoans could see reparations in their near future, after the city's mayor signed an [executive order](#) Monday aimed at creating a task force that will look into the massive endeavor.

The Black Reparations Co-Governance Task Force “will conduct a comprehensive study and examination of all policies that have harmed Black Chicagoans from the slavery era to present day,” and will then draft recommendations for reparations, Mayor Brandon Johnson’s office said in a [press release](#). Johnson signed the order after \$500,000 in the city’s 2024 budget was set aside to study reparations.

The mayor highlighted the task force during a festive Juneteenth flag-raising ceremony Monday.

“Like many cities across this country, Chicago still bears the scars of systemic racism and injustices that have been inflicted on our communities,” Johnson said during the ceremony. “The disinvestment in our communities have been intentional. And of

course, that's why it's imperative that it is now the time to deliver good on reparations for people of Chicago, particularly Black people."

Read More: *The Origins of Juneteenth and Why ‘Black Independence Day’ Falls on June 19th*

Johnson said that highways that cut through predominantly Black neighborhoods, gun violence, health disparities, and lack of employment opportunities were just some examples of the lasting impact that racist policies have had on the Black community in Chicago. The mayor went on to apologize on behalf of the city for the “historic wrongs committed against Black people in Chicago.”

Chicago joins several cities across the U.S. that have explored a reparations program to address the impact of slavery and segregation. In 2019, Evanston became the [first city in the country](#) to enact a government-funded reparations program.

Nearly 30% of Chicago residents are Black, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). During the [Great Migration](#)—which is regarded as one of the largest movements of people in U.S. history—about six million Black people relocated from the South to northern, midwestern, and western cities, including Chicago.

Johnson said that moving forward with reparations will allow Chicagoans to “begin to move in the direction of complete liberation.” He added that reparations will benefit “the entire neighborhood in which Black people exist in” by creating inclusive opportunities for the community.

Over the next three months, Johnson will work with the [Chicago Aldermanic Black Caucus](#)—which is made up of City Council members who represent predominantly Black communities—to figure out how task force members will be chosen, according to the executive order. After its first meeting, the task force will have a

year to write a report that will include “a series of recommendations that will serve as appropriate remedies and restitution for past injustices and present harm,” as well as identify issues that may need “reparative action,” such as housing and mass incarceration.

“Reparations will be an investment in our neighborhoods and our people. Reparations will unlock the doors for prosperity to fully flow through the neighborhoods that have been disinvested in for decades,” Johnson said during the Juneteenth flag-raising ceremony. “And as we grapple with the challenges and the hard-fought victories to get to this point, we must never forget our goal: To make sure that reparations become a reality for Black residents of this city.”

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How TIME and Statista Determined the World's Most Sustainable Companies of 2024



For the first time, TIME has partnered with Statista to identify the [World's Most Sustainable Companies for 2024](#), aiming to highlight corporate responsibility and promote sustainable practices. In an era marked by significant environmental challenges and social inequalities, it is crucial to recognize and reward companies prioritizing sustainability. By featuring these leading entities, the ranking sets a benchmark for other businesses, fostering transparency and accountability and encouraging the integration of sustainability into core corporate strategies.

Methodology

The ranking process began with a comprehensive selection from over 5,000 of the world's largest and most influential companies, considering factors such as revenue, market capitalization, and public prominence. The process involved a rigorous 4-step methodology to identify the top 500 companies, evaluated on more than 20 key data points.

- 1. Exclusion of Non-Sustainable Businesses:** The first step excluded companies involved in non-sustainable industries like fossil fuels or deforestation. Additionally, companies appearing on negative lists related to sustainability issues, such as those identified as carbon majors or associated with environmental catastrophes, were automatically disqualified. This step also considered significant scandals or controversies related to sustainability.
- 2. Commitment & Ratings:** The second step involved assessing companies based on external sustainability ratings and commitments from reputable organizations. Key criteria included CDP ratings, adherence to the UN Global Compact, alignment with the Science Based Targets initiative, inclusion in the S&P Global Sustainability Yearbook, participation in the UNFCCC Race to Zero, and MSCI ESG & SRI evaluations.
- 3. Reporting & Transparency:** The third step evaluated the availability and quality of sustainability reports. This included verifying whether companies published an ESG report for 2022, ensuring these reports had undergone external assurance, and assessing compliance with international reporting standards such as GRI, SASB, and TCFD.
- 4. Environmental & Social Stewardship:** The final step involved researching various environmental and social Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from companies' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports. Environmental metrics included emission intensity, emission reduction rates, energy intensity, and the proportion of renewable energy used. Social metrics covered aspects like gender diversity on board and in leadership, gender pay gap, work safety, and employee turnover rate.

An overall sustainability score was calculated, with a maximum achievable score of 100. The top 500 companies with the highest scores were awarded the title of World's Most Sustainable Companies 2024. These companies are spread across more than 30

countries, with the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom hosting the highest numbers.

[See the full list here.](#)

About Statista

Statista R is a world leader in the creation of company, brand, and product rankings and top lists, based on comprehensive market research and data analysis: Statista R recognizes the best. With a team of over 100 expert analysts and in cooperation with more than 40 high profile media brands across all continents, Statista R creates transparency for consumers and business decision makers and helps companies build trust and recognition across a plethora of industries and product categories. Statista R is a division of Statista. The leading data and business intelligence portal provides an extensive collection of statistics, reports, and insights on over 80,000 topics from 22,500 sources in 170 industries.

About GRI

GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) is an independent, international organization that helps businesses and other organizations take responsibility for their impacts, by providing them with the global common language to communicate those impacts. The GRI Secretariat is headquartered in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and they have a network of seven regional offices to ensure support for organizations and stakeholders worldwide. GRI provided the data for the evaluation.

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8 Ways to Stay Hydrated if You Hate Drinking Water

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



For all the hype surrounding [status water bottles](#)—looking at you, Stanley and Owala—it turns out [many of us](#) aren't drinking nearly enough H2O. "It's a struggle," says Vanessa King, a registered dietitian nutritionist with Queen's Health System in Oahu, Hawaii. "We see thousands of people a month, and drinking enough water comes up all the time."

Exactly how much you need to drink every day depends on a variety of factors, including your age, activity level, how much you sweat, and your health status, as well as which medications you take (some can cause dehydration) and your location (hot places call for more water). One rule of thumb, King says, is to drink half your weight in water (in ounces) every day. For example, if you weigh 140 pounds, your target would be 70 ounces—or at least eight 8-ounce glasses—per day. To zero in on a more specific number, she advises talking to your doctor or a registered dietitian.

If you're not getting enough water, you'll be able to tell: Your mouth might get dry, King says, and your pee will become darker than normal. You might get a headache or feel dizzy. Plus, you'll feel thirsty. People who are truly dehydrated—which is common among older adults—can **experience** altered mental status, hypotension, kidney failure, and other complications that may require hospitalization.

Being well-hydrated, on the other hand, is linked to improved **mood** and **cognition**, as well as **optimal physical performance**. It can **aid weight loss**, **alleviate constipation**, and even **make your skin look healthier**. If you're drinking the right amount of water, "there's only positives," says Maya Feller, a registered dietitian nutritionist based in Brooklyn and author of *Eating from Our Roots: 80+ Healthy Home-Cooked Favorites from Cultures Around the World*. "There's just so many benefits."

But realistically, how do you glug all that water (especially if it's far from your favorite beverage)? We asked experts to share how they manage to drink enough every day.

Add one glass per week

Lots of people avoid drinking water because they don't want to have to make frequent beelines to the bathroom during the workday. Easing into it, however, can teach your body to tolerate a new level of water intake. "I encourage people to have that first glass as close to waking up as possible, because if they're going to go to the bathroom, it's going to happen at home and not on their commute or when they get to the office," Feller says. After a week, add in an extra glass when you get home from work, which will allow your body to adjust to two additional glasses per day. Then, in week three, add an additional glass at any point during the day. "Keep going until you get to your desired amount," Feller says, giving your body a week to adjust to each new glass of water.

Schedule nudges throughout the day

If you routinely forget to drink enough water, consider enlisting technological assistance. “Phone reminders are a very cool thing,” says Melanie Betz, a registered dietitian in Chicago who specializes in renal and geriatric nutrition. [Lots of apps](#) offer the ability to schedule hydration nudges throughout the day.

Read More: [*What Experts Really Think About Diet Soda*](#)

For people who want a fancy, high-tech solution, Betz sometimes recommends a [HidrateSpark “smart” water bottle](#), which tracks how much you drink—and starts glowing when you haven’t had enough. It can also send reminders to your phone when you haven’t had any water in a certain amount of time. Or, of course, you can keep things simple and set alarms for, say, 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and 6 p.m., she says. That way, your smartwatch will vibrate or your phone will ding when it’s time to drink.

Start a water log

Any time you’re trying to make a lifestyle change, it helps to have a specific goal, Betz points out. Pledging to drink 100 ounces of water a day, for example, is more effective than thinking, “I’ll start drinking more water,” she says. It can be hard to keep track of your intake throughout the day, so consider starting a Notes app memo where you list how much you drank, and at what time. That will help reveal patterns and let you know where you could make changes, she says; you might notice you don’t drink much in the morning, for instance. And remember, It takes time to develop a new habit. “Give yourself some grace,” Betz says—you’re not going to jump from 16 ounces to 64 overnight.

Add herbs to your water or ice cubes

If you find water boring—and let's be real, it can be—experiment with fun ways to jazz it up. King likes adding “flavor enhancers” such as slices of lemon and lime and chunks of pineapple. “It becomes very tropical,” she says. Or prepare a glass of cucumber water: Drop sliced cucumbers into your water, along with some ginger and mint. “It looks pretty and makes it more inviting,” King says. “Plus it’s something your friends can get on board with when they come over and drink water.”

Read More: *Your Brain Doesn’t Want You to Exercise*

Betz enjoys testing out different herbs. One of her favorite concoctions is water infused with watermelon and basil, which she finds much more interesting than plain. Blackberry and rosemary also work well, she says, and feel fancy.

Speaking of elevated options: Feller suggests treating yourself to herb-filled ice cubes. Choose a couple of your favorites, like basil and mint, and then mash them up or mince them before adding them to an ice-cube tray. Pour water on top, freeze, and enjoy. “It’s so good, and it makes the drink pretty,” she says.

Ditch the colorful water bottles

Invest in a clear water bottle, and always carry it with you, King suggests. “A lot of people who carry water bottles carry them home full,” she says. “A clear one lets you see how you’re doing.” If a completely full bottle is in your face all day, after all, you’ll probably get the hint that it’s time to take a sip.

Another way to increase visibility, King says, is to put a glass of water on your bedside table. That way, you can make drinking water first thing in the morning a habit. It’s also helpful to keep pitchers of water on your kitchen counter and in other high-traffic areas.

Play with temperature

Feller works with people around the globe, and many don't drink ice-cold water—they consider it “an American thing.” Regardless of where you live, you might find you prefer a different temperature, too. Leave your water out so it's room temp, add some ice, or even boil it like you would tea, Feller advises. As you experiment with different temperatures, “you'll find that it becomes a bit easier to drink once you know what temperature you prefer,” she says.

Pretend you're a plant

The app [Plant Nanny](#) makes drinking fun, says King, who's recommended it to her patients. Once you download it, you'll become responsible for virtual plants; each time you log that you've had a glass of water, your plants will be watered, too. “When I first tested it out, I turned it on and my plant was wilted,” King recalls. “And it was super cute. I was immediately emotionally attached to it—you forget it's not a real plant.” That made her want to meet her daily hydration goals, she says, noting that the app is a good fit for parents helping their kids understand the importance of staying well-hydrated.

Read More: [*Your Houseplants Have Some Powerful Health Benefits*](#)

Expand your definition of “water”

Chugging glassfuls of water isn't the only way to hydrate. Dairy and dairy alternatives, like almond milk and soy milk, also contain water, King points out; in fact, it's the first ingredient listed on labels.

And don't overlook the role that fruits, vegetables, broths, soups, and stews can play in your daily hydration goals. Some of the most water-heavy choices include melons like cantaloupe and watermelon; berries such as strawberries; and leafy greens like spinach, cucumbers, and zucchini, King says. Other smart choices include bananas, pears, oranges, pineapples, carrots, broccoli, and avocados. "A good dose of fruits and vegetables in your day can also help with meeting your water target," she says. So if you absolutely can't stand the thought of one more glass of water, consider consuming it a tastier way instead.

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How China Soured on Israel

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It wasn't so long ago that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called his country's relationship with China "[a marriage made in heaven](#)." And when Biden [told reporters](#) in March 2023 that he was not inviting Netanyahu to Washington given his plans to undermine Israel's independent judiciary, Netanyahu [announced](#) a trip to visit President Xi Jinping in China instead.

For Israel, the trip was a reminder to Washington that there are other superpowers looking to deepen their ties with Israel. For China, it was an opportunity to raise the costs of the U.S.' pivot away from the Middle East to Asia by signaling that Beijing could fill some of the void. Netanyahu's ploy may have worked. Biden reneged in September and [invited him](#) to the White House.

That dynamic was upended in the wake of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack. During the current moment of strain in the Bibi-Biden relationship, Sino-Israeli ties will not be a viable pressure tool for Netanyahu.

because China has other plans. Beijing has distanced itself from Israel amid marked international criticism of its bombardment of Gaza—a move that is playing well around much of the world and serves as a counterpoint to Washington’s diplomatic and military support of Israel.



This approach has also supported China’s longer running goal of challenging its own reputation as a largely commercial player and the U.S.’ reputation as the Middle East’s diplomatic heavyweight. Since China successfully facilitated the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia last spring, it has sought out further opportunities to position itself as an alternative to the U.S.-led international order. Throughout the Israel-Hamas war, Beijing has attempted to flex its diplomatic muscle, including publishing [a peace plan](#), [hosting reconciliation talks](#) between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, and [holding summits](#) with Arab and Muslim foreign ministers aimed at ending the fighting. None of these efforts have borne fruit but they are playing well in Arab and Global South capitals.

To exploit the growing wedge between the U.S. and key global actors, China has explicitly articulated its support for the Palestinian cause in international fora. After the U.S. vetoed a December U.N. Security Council resolution calling for an

immediate ceasefire, China's foreign ministry spokeswoman [stated](#), “We regret and are disappointed at the U.S. veto … Close to 100 countries, including China, co-sponsored the draft resolution tabled by the UAE representing Arab countries.” Deepening its relationship with the UAE—a major oil producer, emerging innovation hub, and key U.S. ally in the Middle East—could provide China with the same opportunity Israel once did: an exploitable entry point to potentially access sensitive American technologies.

Still, China’s approach to the Israel-Hamas war has sparked fierce Israeli backlash. About a third of Israeli Jews [have reported a negative change](#) in their perception of China since Oct. 7 and some private sector leaders have called for exacting financial consequences, such as [temporarily prohibiting](#) Chinese companies from operating in Israel’s ports. Israel’s government has communicated its “deep disappointment” to PRC officials and taken measures that have undermined relations, including sending a parliamentary delegation to Taiwan, where Chair Boaz Toporovsky took aim at nearby China in his public comments, [saying](#) Israel and Taiwan “have much in common as small but strong democracies in a harsh environment.”



All that said, other PRC geopolitical interests could ultimately drive Beijing back toward Tel Aviv. China's desire to shore up ties with U.S.-friendly Gulf States has been a key driver of its Gaza policy. Yet China's refusal to condemn Hamas and its labeling of Iran's missile attack on Israel as “[self defense](#)” have exacerbated concerns in the UAE and Saudi Arabia that the U.S. is an irreplaceable partner. While China casts the U.S. as a warmonger to advocate for a Chinese-led world order that resolves conflicts without military force, many Gulf countries see Biden's ironclad military backing of Israel as the U.S. support they have long desired. (Even as they have publicly criticized Israel's conduct, reflecting popular opinion in these countries.) Beijing may not aim to fully supplant Washington in the region as the Gulf countries' security guarantors, but it is still hoping to capitalize on this opportunity to strengthen its relationships with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. To do so, it may adopt rhetoric more in line with theirs, and, in the process, Washington and Tel Aviv's preferences.

China and Israel also have financial incentives to maintain a relationship. Israel's war has [shrunk its GDP](#) and [hurt its credit rating](#), creating obstacles for Israeli firms looking to raise funds. China is the world's second largest economy and was Israel's third largest trading partner the year before Oct. 7, making it essential to Israel's economy. Meanwhile, Chinese investors are facing a lagging domestic economy and [pursuing investment opportunities abroad](#). This dynamic could generate a mutual—albeit reluctant—desire to bolster commercial ties.

For Palestinians horrified with the U.S. and its largely unconditional support for Israel, China's emerging interest in the conflict seems like a positive development. But China's current pro-Palestinian stance may simply reflect that today, a public relationship with Israel is more of a liability than asset in the U.S.-China rivalry. If that changes, China's position on Israel will likely follow suit. China's support for Palestinians appears to be mostly

superficial, and even its vague peace plan puts most of the onus on the U.N., not Beijing, giving it the future flexibility to pivot on this issue and leave the Palestinians once more without a great power.

Like Israelis, Palestinians may too soon discover that China is a fair-weather friend, and a relationship with it is not a marriage made in heaven.

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The Meaning of the Putin-Kim Connection

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Vladimir Putin's [recent trip](#) to North Korea was a remarkable event for many reasons. It was his first visit there in 24 years, the pageantry was especially lavish even by Russian and North Korean standards, and Kim Jong Un and Putin seized the moment with a [new mutual defense pact](#) that echoed the Cold War era. But the upshot is a decidedly mixed bag.

On one hand, we shouldn't read too much into the rendezvous. Putin was perhaps keen to show he still has friends days after representatives of more than 90 countries, many of them deep-pocketed, [gathered in Switzerland](#) to forge a Ukraine peace plan. That summit came on the heels of new [Western commitments](#),

including by the U.S., to provide Kyiv with better weapons and more money. Putin's turning to the hermit Democratic People's Republic of Korea, by contrast, was not the most impressive optics.

In addition, the mutual defense pact that Kim and Putin announced—an “alliance,” according to Kim, but not Putin—isn’t worth all that much. Both Russia and North Korea have nuclear weapons. It’s the nukes, not their new diplomatic partnership, that provide their best deterrent against attack.

There’s also the fact that China can’t be happy with this budding friendship. Beijing doesn’t need Putin emboldening Kim to act more aggressively, further destabilizing a region China would prefer to keep quiet. Threats from North Korea drive South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. closer together, creating problems for Beijing in East Asia.

On the other hand, top-level Russia–North Korea cooperation should concern Western governments. North Korea, like Russia, is a dangerous nuclear-armed country with sophisticated cybercapabilities. If Kim is listening to foreign friends, America and Europe would prefer he turn to China’s Xi Jinping, who wants more stability in the global order, than to Putin, who benefits from chaos.

Nor is the tightening Moscow-Pyongyang axis good for Ukraine and its Western backers, because North Korea has weapons that Russia badly needs and incentives to share them. Days before Putin’s trip, South Korea’s Defense Minister said Seoul had detected 10,000 shipping containers sent from North Korea to Russia that could carry nearly 5 million artillery shells.

Openly showcasing their ties underscores Putin’s confidence. The Russian leader knows that when so many countries, including the U.S., are holding critical elections, the threat of energy and food crises will compel the West to limit sanctions. Creating an

economic emergency for resource-rich Russia would trigger supply shocks and price surges that no one can afford—and Western nuclear plants [still need Russian uranium](#) to operate.

Now take a second look at that Swiss-sponsored peace conference. Putin knows Ukraine has (still limited) backing from the U.S. and Europe. But China [didn't attend](#) the event. India, the Saudis, and the United Arab Emirates sent lower-level delegations. The West may be firmly with Volodymyr Zelensky, but much of the Global South wants a cease-fire and a Ukrainian-Russian compromise that ends threats to food and fuel supplies that risk a punishing global recession.

For these reasons, Putin believes he can wait to make a peace deal. Maybe for a long time—especially [if Donald Trump wins](#) the White House come November, and a friendlier far-right government [takes power](#) in France in the coming weeks. Such a scenario could undermine the West's support for Ukraine and force Zelensky, or his successor, to the bargaining table.

Materiel from North Korea can make Putin's waiting easier. For the West, that's the worst news of all.

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Louisiana's Ten Commandments Law Couldn't Have Happened Without Trump

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Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry knew the score when he [signed](#) into law a requirement that every classroom in his state—from kindergarten classrooms to college chemistry labs—must post a copy of the Ten Commandments. In fact, the ambitious Republican seemed to be trolling his critics even before he sanctified the work of the GOP-controlled [legislature](#).

“I’m going home to sign a bill that places the Ten Commandments in public classrooms,” he [said](#) Saturday night as he headlined a Republican Party fundraiser in Nashville. “And I can’t wait to be sued.”

Lawsuits were at the ready as soon as Landry signed the bill on Wednesday. It is abundantly clear this effort **seems** on a glide path toward the Supreme Court, which for decades has **ruled** such expressions of faith **collide** fatally with the First Amendment's prohibition from state-sanctioned faith. But given the new tilt of the bench, conservatives' credo might be reduced to a simple profession: *In Trump They Trust.*

That's right. Donald Trump has been out of official power since early 2021 but his presence continues to be felt at every level of government. His legacy is most firmly established through his three picks to the Supreme Court, part of the record-breaking 231 federal judges Trump successfully **ominated** to federal roles. The Trump cohort of judges—mostly young conservatives with a bent to treat the roles as political callings rather than academic exercises—stand to shape American jurisprudence for a generation. And the Supreme Court is the most obvious and impactful of any of those levels thanks to 56-year-old Neil Gorsuch, 59-year-old Brett Kavanaugh, and 52-year-old Amy Coney Barrett.

That Trumpian trio is why Louisiana's governor sounded so excited about being sued. While the Supreme Court ruled in 1980 that a similar Kentucky law was **unconstitutional**, a majority of the current justices may see things differently. They've already shown an openness to the Christian conservatives' argument that faith and government can co-exist if not thrive in a symbiotic relationship. Notably, in 2022, Justices sided with a high school coach who **argued** his players had the right to pray at the 50-yard line and that Maine could not **block** religious schools from receiving a state subsidy. A year earlier, in a unanimous ruling, the Court said a Catholic group in Philadelphia could **refuse** to work with same-sex couples on fostering children.

By one study's count, parties arguing on the basis of so-called religious liberty found **success** four out of five times. That's no

accident on a bench stacked by Trump with the explicit call to arms to [blend](#) religion—specifically, Christianity—with the rule of law.

This, in no small measure, helps to explain how self-described Values Voters have fallen into line behind the less-than-pious Trump and his bid to return to power in this November's election. A Pew Research Institute [study](#) finds 43% of Trump supporters think government policies should support religious values, and 69% who say the Bible should influence U.S. laws. A second Pew study [finds](#) Trump riding high among white Evangelical protestants by a 2-to-1 margin.

While the Ten Commandments are important pieces of Jewish and Christian teachings and compatible with Islam, the play in Louisiana—and elsewhere, to be clear—have clear linkages to the current Republican Party's courtship of Christian conservatives, especially white Christian nationalists. That first Pew [survey](#) found 22% of Trump supporters say the government should declare Christianity the official national religion and 59% who say the government should promote Christian morality.

So while Trump is out of sanctioned power—at least for the moment—there is still no credible way to argue that he's without tremendous sway over the Republican Party and the laws it is passing. Louisiana may be the first test case of these omnipresent reminders of religious teachings, but it most certainly will not be the last. The current political environment is one that rewards such audacious acts, and it's no accident that Landry chose to taunt his critics while signaling his national ambitions during a dinner more than 500 miles from home. For any GOP politician looking to make inroads with the party's conservative Christian base—be it a first-term Governor or a convicted ex-President—pandering like this works to build lists, credibility, and fundraising tallies. If secular voters—or even those who think the place for expressions of faith are better served in a sanctuary than a Nashville convention hall—

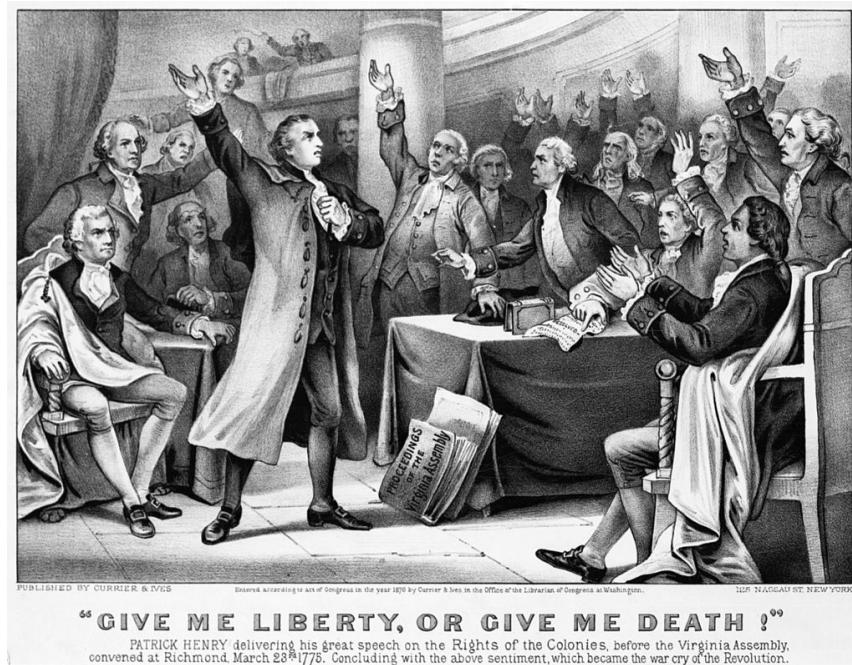
stopped rewarding such trolling, perhaps the sanctimonious performance art would stop. One can only pray.

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The True Meaning of ‘Give Me Liberty’



Almost 250 years ago, four weeks before the battles of Lexington and Concord, Patrick Henry rose in St. John’s Church in Richmond, Va., to urge Americans to arm for a war that he saw as inevitable. He famously concluded his call to arms: “Give me liberty, or give me death.”

Patriots embraced Henry’s dramatic refrain, and rallying militia members sewed it into their hunting shirts. Since then, his words have echoed through the centuries, here and abroad. In 1845, Frederick Douglass referenced Henry when he wrote of the enslaved battling for freedom. Over a century later, when thousands gathered for liberty in [Tiananmen Square](#) and when Hong Kong protesters fought for democratic rights, they also invoked Henry’s words.

Yet, Henry’s phrase has been embraced by some as a radical call for opposition to almost any government action. Timothy McVeigh quoted Henry after his 1995 anti-government Oklahoma City

bombing killed 168 and injured 700. In 2020, signs attacking health regulations demanded, rather confusedly, “Give me liberty or give me COVID-19!” Protesters seeking to undermine a democratic election on Jan. 6, 2021, quoted Henry. His famous phrase has appeared on everything from AR-15 dust covers to a Tea Party manifesto.

Rather than a call for democratic freedom, Henry’s mantra has become a radical screed. But wrapping anti-government campaigns in Henry’s words demonstrates a fundamental historical misunderstanding, one that speaks to an increasingly dangerous American fixation on personal freedom at the expense of fellow citizens and our shared government.

Read More: [*Beyond the Founding Fathers: 12 Unsung Figures Who Helped Build America*](#)

Henry was never simply a tax protester or opposed to government regulation. The problem was, as we learn in school, taxation *without representation*. Henry consistently recognized the right of government, empowered by the community, to make binding laws and regulations—even when he disagreed with the result.

In 1788, Henry led antifederalist efforts to oppose ratification of the U.S. Constitution, because he believed that it would create a government too powerful and distant from the people. When the Constitution was ratified over their objections, some antifederalists sought to enrage the public and undermine its implementation. When they called upon Henry to lead their effort, he emphatically rejected such opposition, insisting that change must be sought “in a constitutional way.”

Henry’s commitment to the community’s right to govern was never clearer than in his final political campaign.

In 1798, in desperation over the Sedition Act that criminalized political dissent, Thomas Jefferson, in his [Kentucky Resolutions](#), proposed nullification of the law: the idea that a single state could make a federal law “null, void, of no force or effect” in that state. Turning to the defunct Articles of Confederation, Jefferson resurrected the notion that the nation was a mere compact of independent states.

George Washington saw that anarchy or secession was the likely consequence of Jefferson’s rash theories. He begged Henry to come out of retirement to oppose the dangerous new doctrine. An ailing Henry agreed.

At Charlotte Courthouse on March 4, 1799, thousands gathered, suspecting correctly that this would be Henry’s last public speech. Henry did not disappoint. He reminded the throng that he had led the antifederalists, opposing ratification of the Constitution because a powerful government could undermine the people’s rights. Now, it seemed, his predictions had come true.

Read More: [The Constitution Is Not a Suicide Pact](#)

But Henry also reminded the crowd that “we the people” had ratified the Constitution and now it was “necessary to submit to the constitutional exercise of that power.” Jefferson, Henry told the crowd, was dangerously urging action that violated the Constitution.

Henry, the great antifederalist, warned that if we cannot live within the Constitution that “we the people” adopted, “you may bid adieu forever to representative government. You can never exchange the present government”—that the community had endorsed—“but for a monarchy.”

Even when the people ignored his warnings, even when the government interfered with the people’s rights, even though he too

disagreed with the Sedition Act, Henry recognized the community had the right to decide and to voice any dissent via their elected representatives, not by refusing to follow the law. That is the very nature of a democracy: joining with our co-citizens even when we disagree and using the vote and peaceful protests, not violence, to articulate disagreement.



A modern fixation on Henry’s “give me liberty” speech as a license for unbounded personal freedom is a historic lie and is symptomatic of a broader problem. Our fixation on personal liberty has morphed into disregard for the broader community’s interests that lay at the heart of America’s founding.

The Founders would be appalled.

The freedom that American patriots fought for was not a ticket to do whatever one wanted, but the right to participate in a community that governed itself, a government—to use Jefferson’s phrase from the Declaration of Independence—“deriving its just powers from the consent of the governed.” With such a government, Henry understood that a “loyal opposition” must seek reform “in a constitutional way”: at the ballot box.

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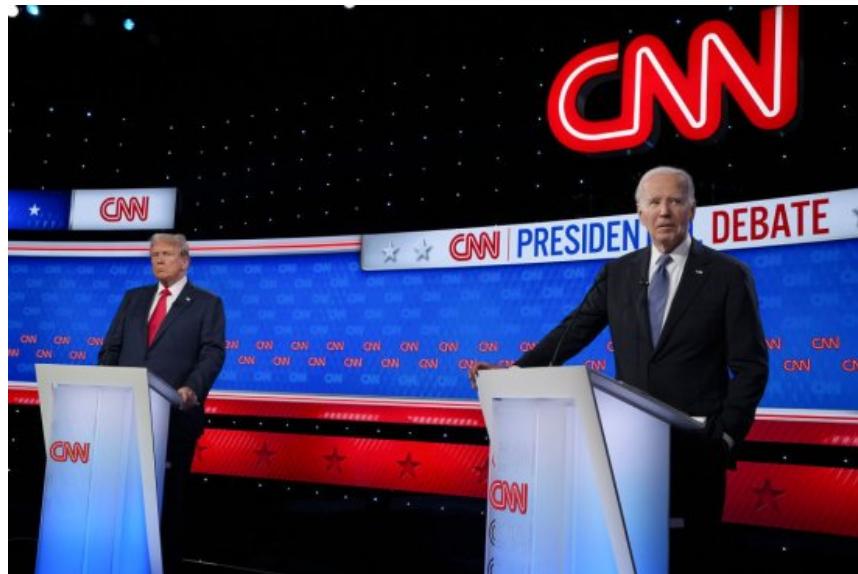
shaping an accurate, inclusive, and just public memory of the American Founding for the upcoming 250th anniversary.

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The Founders Didn't Want a Gerontocracy



America's political gerontocracy is hard to avoid noticing. Our presidency continues to be dominated by septuagenarians and octogenarians, and Mitch McConnell [will finally retire](#) from running the Senate at age 82. The Dianne Feinstein revelations of advanced dementia mere months before her [death at 90 years of age](#) vividly demonstrated the potential ramifications that come with a consolidated elderly leadership. WWFD: What would the Founders Do?

The Founders did care about the implications of an increasingly gerontocratic government and sought to avoid it. In their own lifetimes, they moved from a monarchical political system that prized the wisdom of age—and therefore often allowed political figures who were far past their prime—to a democratic system where voters intentionally placed political offices of trust in vigorous middle-aged men. To them, political leadership demanded cognitive and emotional quickness and flexibility.

[Read More: The Weaponization of Biden's Age](#)

In the colonial period, governors had often drawn from the older set. In part, that was because it was considered a more ceremonial role. The European system of governance was based on the extreme hierachal assumptions of monarchy. In practice, Europeans had long experience with deficient, and even doddering, senile monarchs. They had also come to rely on the *de facto* separation of ceremonial power awarded by birth and position from the real power wielded in part by courtiers and advisors. The American colonial system re-created many of the more aristocratic features of government, such as governorships that were advised by an appointed council. Elderly leaders were acceptable in these roles so long as their power was circumscribed. For example, Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut served as governor until he was 74 years old.

After the Revolution, voters saw governors as democratic leaders of thriving representative governments. Leaders were no longer ceremonial, but executives charged with military leadership, political planning, and financial acumen. Governors started getting younger. [Stevens T. Mason](#), the first governor of Michigan, was the youngest of all at 24 years old. Lots of governors were elected in their early 40s, such as Isaac Tichenor and Richard Skinner of Vermont and James Monroe of Virginia. There were positively youthful governors such as 33-year-old Edmund Randolph of Virginia; 37-year-old John Rutledge, wartime governor of South Carolina; and 34-year-old John Drayton of South Carolina. Even Connecticut, long the preserve of septuagenarian governors, finally started electing men in their 40s by the 1810s.

There were similar expectations for the presidency. All but one of the first eight presidents of the United States were elected in their 50s, with only [John Adams](#) stretching the boundaries of middle age at 60. Voters knew that life expectancy for people who made it to adulthood would take them into their 70s, well past their term in office.

Read More: Congress Needs to Rethink Its Obsession With Longevity. The Reaction to Dianne Feinstein Won't Help

Younger men looked forward to holding office as well as rising in business at ever younger ages. Gouverneur Morris, a signer of the Constitution, put his finger on the changes in the air when he wrote that “although some of the present generation may feel colonial Oppositions of opinion, that generation will die away, and give place to a race of Americans.” A new generation saw themselves as the people ready to embrace the freeing possibilities of democracy and freedom. They moved out of their parents’ homes younger, started their own families younger, set out in new occupations, and forged a vibrant new, pervasive media environment predicated on the liberatory possibilities of partisan politics in bringing ordinary people into the conversation.

The Founding generation also worried that older men were more inflexible, obstinate, uninterested in change, and stuck in their ways—all leadership qualities at odds with the experimentation needed for representative government. They wanted leaders who embraced flexibility and change in shaping what a thriving democracy could look like. When Benjamin Franklin Bache, the tempestuous grandson of Benjamin Franklin, wanted to attack President John Adams, he inveighed against his old age as a shorthand for an old generational aping of monarchal arrangements. Abigail Adams complained that Bache “in his paper calls the President old, querulous, Bald, blind, cripaled, Toothless Adams.”

Most of all, the Founders shared a new-found fear that all older people might suffer from cognitive decline and outright dementia. In a democracy, elected leaders hold real power. It was essential to make sure they were mentally competent to wield that power on behalf of the people.

Thomas Jefferson repeatedly invoked his wariness of his own mental decline late in life: “Eighty two years old, my memory gone, my mind close following it.” In fact, he was still sharp as a tack, but he and his aging friends looked out for signs of cognitive decline in each other. It was a frequent topic of gossip when older men wrote to each other. Samuel Adams ruefully admitted he “cannot help feeling that the powers of his mind as well as his body are weakened, but he relies upon his memory, and fondly wishing his young Friends to think he can instruct them by his Experience, when in all probability, he has forgot every trace of it, that was worth his memory.” They understood that people suffering mental decline were poor judges of their own changing abilities.

Indeed, assertions of mental decline became political ammunition. When Jefferson went on the attack against President Washington, he funneled allegations that Washington was increasingly senile to his favorite newspaper, which published these attacks repeatedly. Washington found the rise in such partisan attacks infuriating—especially since the charges stuck. He had admitted to his own concerns about his slowing mental quickness to both Jefferson and James Madison when he explained why he wanted to retire after one term.

So if the Founders worried about the likelihood of political leaders of advanced age losing their marbles while in office, why did they not enact guardrails in the Constitution? At the constitutional convention, the Founders wrote in minimum age requirements for federal office, but rejected constitutional maximum age requirements because they believed in the discernment of the electorate. They were overly optimistic about our system’s ability to screen, counsel out, and if need be, defeat dementia-affected political leaders at the ballot box.

Read More: Believing Myths About Aging Makes Growing Old Worse

Initially, their belief in moral suasion worked. Washington and others monitored themselves and fellow leaders. The [Electoral College](#) system depended on the back-room conversations of men who were from the same communities and had manifold opportunities to engage in conversation and probe the mental fitness of men seeking high office. Local whisper networks could be amplified by the national press and a national networking circuit.

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That's why we are left without a clear constitutional solution. But that lack is not because the Founders did not see the problem, and it is not because they did not seek to rectify it.

As we mark another Fourth of July, perhaps it is time to return to the problem of aging leadership with more than the strategy the Founders left us with. Potential answers include ending the seniority system in the Senate, instituting required mental fitness and memory tests for political leadership, and amending the constitution to put maximum age requirements for federal office into place.

Rebecca Brannon is the author of [From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of the South Carolina Loyalists](#) (University of South Carolina Press, 2016). The Road to 250 series is a collaboration between Made by History and Historians for 2026, a group of early Americanists devoted to shaping an accurate,

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There's Still More to Learn From the Debate Over American Monuments



Four years ago, the Black Lives Matter movement [reinvigorated public debate about historical monuments](#) in the U.S. Monuments began coming down across the country. From Christopher Columbus in Connecticut to the massive Confederate statues on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Va., public art honoring many historical figures identified with colonialism, slavery, and oppression was either vandalized, relocated, or removed.

At the same time, new monuments have been erected, including works honoring abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and activist Barbara Johns, part of the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial. By 2025, another monument to Johns will replace the empty pedestal that once featured Confederate General Robert E. Lee in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall. New American heroes — many of them women — have joined the U.S. commemorative landscape.

However, these changes have [not gone uncontested](#), and public opinion is divided. Proponents and opponents operate on different

assumptions and frequently talk past one another. This will only intensify with the [upcoming 250th commemoration](#) of the American Revolution. But even in a polarized climate, we can choose to approach the debate thoughtfully as an opportunity to learn about the past and its ramifications — both positive and negative — for the present.

Consider the case of Philip Schuyler, a Revolutionary War hero and a politician who was also a slaveholder. In 2023, Albany, N.Y., Mayor Kathy Sheehan ordered the removal of a bronze monument honoring him. Some welcomed the mayor's decision to remove a statue that reminded them of oppression. But others accused Sheehan of "erasing history" and inappropriately judging past figures by today's standards.

[Read More: Beyond the Founding Fathers: 12 Unsung Figures Who Helped Build America](#)

Who was Schuyler, why was he chosen to symbolize Albany, and why — after almost 100 years — did his monument come under scrutiny?

Schuyler made important contributions to the cause of independence. He was appointed a major general in the Continental Army in 1775. In the face of a British invasion from Canada in the summer of 1777, Schuyler ordered a strategic retreat while creating obstacles to impede the enemy's passage across difficult terrain. These decisions set the stage for the Patriot victory at the Battles of Saratoga in the fall, which ultimately proved a turning point in the war.

Representing New York at the national level, Schuyler served in the Continental Congress and the U.S. Senate. A Federalist, he promoted both the Constitution and his son-in-law, [Alexander Hamilton](#). His politics might today be characterized as pro-business and anti-populist.

As a land developer and New York's first surveyor-general, Schuyler foresaw the potential for canals to expand the state's territory and economy. Like many New Yorkers, he had been frustrated by Britain's restrictions on taking Native American land. His dealings with Native Americans during and after the war were sometimes fair but sometimes foul.

Additionally, thanks in part to the active role earlier generations of Schuylers had played in the transatlantic slave trade, more than one in seven Albanians in 1790 were enslaved and subject to all the attendant exploitation and insecurity of their status. Philip himself enslaved between nine and 13 persons at any given time. He continued acquiring people until at least 1797 but manumitted some before he died in 1804.

Is it unfairly applying modern values to the 18th century to consider Schuyler's slaveholding against his military and political achievements? Hardly. There were many Americans during his lifetime who asserted the evil of slavery. A speaker at the 1788 Massachusetts Ratifying Convention declared that George Washington's "character has sunk 50 per cent" because "he holds those in slavery who have a good right to be free as he has."

Schuyler is a reminder of how the things we rightly celebrate about that period are intertwined with the things from which we recoil. We continue to grapple with the paradox.

The Schuyler statue in Albany wasn't erected until [more than a century after his death](#). Approaching the 150th anniversary of the Revolution, Albanians in 1925 pondered how to commemorate the event. The monument reflected that moment.

The deliberations occurred in an era in which the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, had created a taste for monument-making on a grand scale. This bold style — supported by American architects and sculptors who had trained in

Europe — meshed with the first reach of American Imperialism in the Pacific and the success of the Spanish-American War.

By the turn of the 20th century, the City Beautiful movement encouraged American communities coast to coast to embrace the Expo's robust Beaux-Arts aesthetic. The movement emphasized enhancing urban landscapes with European-style parks and monuments, which signaled that Americans were on the move — both at home and abroad.

It was in this context that Albanians rallied around their native son Schuyler. George C. Hawley, a former beer manufacturer, stepped forward to supply an over-life-sized monument to the former general, which he dedicated to his deceased wife, Theodora.

[Read More: The U.S. Capitol Is Filled With Racist Depictions of Native Americans. It's Time for Them to Go](#)

The monument, placed in a prominent position in front of City Hall across from the State Capitol, was validated by a "Citizens' Committee" composed of the mayor, a judge, a doctor, and a textile factory owner, which accepted the monument on behalf of the city. According to a newspaper account, thousands came out for the dedication. For Hawley, the monument was a personal memorial made public. It also reminded everyone who came within view of City Hall that Albany and its historical figures were worthy of commemoration and, further, that Americans had a lengthy and rich history from which to draw.

However, ideas about the display of American power did not remain static. After the Great Depression and World War II, the interpretation of public spaces began to shift into a less elite mode. Museums and historical sites, including the nearby Schuyler Mansion, could adapt by changing up historically furnished rooms and creating new tours that brought ordinary people into focus. Monuments in bronze lacked such versatility.

In 2022, as part of the broader debates about monuments, five Albany teenagers of color considered what to do about Schuyler, as part of the Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute. They recommended placing the bronze Schuyler in a busy pedestrian space nearby that could be called “The People’s Park.” There, the general would be joined by “modest statues, monuments, and artistic sculptures...which would celebrate and commemorate the contributions of Albany’s diverse and rich heritage.” Although several ideas for Schuyler have been circulated, the monument remains in storage. The stalemate persists.



The Revolutionary War created a new nation that asserted liberty and equality as its founding principles. That itself is worthy of celebration. However, to the extent that actors like Schuyler comported themselves inconsistently with those values — and many of them did — their monuments can be reinterpreted as symbols of persistent resistance to living up to those ideals. Moreover, embodying the Revolution in the bronze statue of one elite revolutionary leaves many important stories, and many groups of people, out of the publicly celebrated American past.

Monuments have something to teach us, even when they are gone. Philip Schuyler in bronze might not appear again in front of Albany’s City Hall, and monuments will continue to go up and come down as Americans continue to ask questions about history, identity, and shared memory. But the upcoming 250th anniversary of the founding of the U.S. is a moment not only to remember

revolutionary courage and ideals, but also to confront failures to live up to them. If we take the time, we can use history to understand that the debate around monuments is more complicated — and potentially more useful — than we think. Although Google Maps tells us the “Philip Schuyler Statue” is “permanently closed,” it is still open for conversation.

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The Road to 250 series is a collaboration between Made by History and Historians for 2026, a group of early Americanists devoted to shaping an accurate, inclusive, and just public memory of the American Founding for the upcoming 250th anniversary.

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Inside Andriy Yermak's Quest for Peace in Ukraine

Simon Shuster is a senior correspondent at TIME. He covers international affairs, with a focus on Russia and Ukraine. For his first book, *The Showman*, he reported inside the Ukrainian President's compound in Kyiv as the Russian invasion unfolded.



The fleet of helicopters began to arrive at the Swiss resort around noon on June 15, shuttling world leaders toward the top of a mountain range speckled with grazing cows and wildflowers. The

event had been sold to them as a global peace summit, the start of a process that would end the Russian war against Ukraine. But Russia and its allies, notably [China](#), would not be represented. Instead, the Ukrainians would run the show, with [President Volodymyr Zelensky](#) in the starring role and his chief of staff, [Andriy Yermak](#), the impresario.

Zelensky and Yermak, old friends from their early careers in the entertainment business, have been inseparable since Russia launched its invasion in early 2022. For much of that year, they lived together in a bunker beneath the presidential compound in [Kyiv](#), slept down the hall from each other, shared meals in the bunker's cafeteria, and lifted weights in its makeshift gym. They appeared side by side during trips to the front and meetings with foreign allies. That fall, when Zelensky launched a peace process to end the war, he put his chief of staff in charge of it.

Ever since, Yermak has tried to build the groundwork for a peace on Ukraine's terms, racing to outwit Russia on the diplomatic front even as his country's armed forces lost ground in the war. With his willful and often overbearing nature, he has succeeded in critical ways while failing in others. Ukraine, through his efforts, has managed to set the stage for talks, gathered a large group of allies around it, and avoided getting dragged into a peace process that [Russia controls](#).

[Read More: How Zelensky Ended His Feud With Ukraine's Top General](#)

The summit that took place in mid-June at the Bürgenstock, an Alpine resort where the likes of [Sophia Loren](#) and Audrey Hepburn once spent their holidays, was the first real test of this strategy. More than 80 countries agreed to attend, representing every region of the world, but with a distinct preponderance of Western democracies. As they arrived in their helicopters, some noticed that the landing zone stood next to a rundown barn, its fence barely

obscuring a large pile of manure. “It’s pretty symbolic,” remarked one of the American guests. “There’s a lot of sh-t to shovel here.”

Yermak has wielded the biggest shovel. He wrangled, shamed, and pressured foreign nations to make the trip to the Alps, all while rejecting the idea that Russia, as the war’s aggressor, should take part. What transpired from his efforts seemed bizarre on its face: a peace process with no mediators, no cease-fires, no actual talks between the warring sides. The U.N. kept a wary distance. Rwanda somehow found itself at the negotiating table. So did the tiny island nation of Cabo Verde. In Yermak’s telling, this was all part of the plan. “We want all the countries of the world to walk this path with us,” he told me while preparing for the summit last fall. “The whole world! Then it would really be hard for the Russians to claim the process isn’t fair. Then we can say, Excuse me, all the countries of the world already agreed that it’s fair.”



Well, not all of them. Some of the world’s most powerful nations, such as Brazil, India, [Saudi Arabia](#), and South Africa, sent envoys to the summit but refused to sign its final declaration. Other participants complained that the event felt less like a negotiation than an echo chamber for Ukraine’s existing allies. Russia dismissed the whole thing as a farce. The day before it started, Vladimir Putin issued his own demands for peace, a string of ultimatums that would have amounted to Ukraine’s capitulation in the war and the loss of one-fifth of its territory.

Ukraine rejected the offer out of hand, but Russia's move underscored just how far this war remains from any lasting conclusion. All along the front, the [killing continues](#) on a barbaric, industrial scale, as each side seeks to exhaust the other's willingness to sacrifice its stocks of men and money. So far, the closest thing we have to a peace process in Ukraine appears to be the one that opened at the Bürgenstock, and its success will depend on President Zelensky and his indefatigable fixer, Andriy Yermak.

Though the Ukrainians may wish to forget it these days, their first attempt to sue for peace began as soon as the invasion started. At the time, Zelensky had two core priorities: appealing to the world to help Ukraine defend itself, and urging Putin to call a truce. "We need to talk about the end of this invasion," he said the day after it began. "We need to talk about a cease-fire." The following week, the first round of peace talks commenced in a secluded estate in southern Belarus.

Read More: [*How Ukraine is Pioneering New Ways to Prosecute War Crimes*](#)

The contrast between the two sides of the table could hardly have been starker. The Russians showed up in business suits and ties. The head of the Ukrainian delegation, Davyd Arakhamia, wore a black baseball cap, cocked slightly to the side. "Our thing was antidiplomacy, starting with the dress code," Arakhamia, a senior lawmaker in Zelensky's political party, told me at the time. "They would start with the legalese, and I'd be like, 'I don't need this bullsh-t, break it down in normal terms.'"

Within six weeks, the negotiators reached the outlines of a deal. In exchange for reliable "security guarantees" from Russia and other countries, Ukraine would agree to abandon plans to join the [NATO alliance](#) and accept the status of "permanent neutrality." The offer gave Putin a chance to claim at least a partial victory. His main excuse for launching the invasion had been to stop Ukraine from

joining NATO, and Zelensky offered to grant him that wish. He was also ready to give up territory in exchange for peace.

The Kremlin seemed willing to consider those terms. But, by the end of April 2022, the peace process broke down for several reasons. Ukraine's negotiators were horrified by the mass atrocities Russian forces had committed, especially in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha, and they called on Zelensky to pull out of the talks. The position of the U.S. and Europe did little to keep them going. Ukraine's Western allies refused to make any firm promise to stop Russia from invading again in the future. "They actually advised us not to go into ephemeral security guarantees," Arakhamia later said. Without such guarantees from the West, the Ukrainians would be left to rely on the good faith of the Russians.

The other reason for the failure of those talks had to do with the state of the fighting. Ukraine's armed forces achieved some astonishing victories in the first year of the invasion. They defeated Russia in the Battle of Kyiv that spring, forcing the invaders to withdraw from roughly half the land [they had occupied](#). In the fall, the Russians faced a fresh set of defeats in the northeastern region of Kharkiv and the southern city of Kherson.



As Ukraine gained ground, its allies urged Zelensky to resume the peace talks from a position of strength. “When there’s an opportunity to negotiate, when peace can be achieved, seize it,” U.S. General Mark Milley, then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said after the Russians withdrew from Kherson in November 2022. “Seize the moment!”

Read More: *The Back-to-School Horror for Ukraine’s Children*

But the Ukrainians rejected his advice. Milley’s counterpart in Kyiv declared that peace talks could begin only after all Ukraine’s territory had been liberated. Zelensky felt the same way: Why stop when he had the momentum? The string of victories in the first year of the invasion had convinced him the war would continue “along the same trajectory,” the President told me that fall. Still, he could not ignore the pressure coming from his allies, who urged him to consider ways to reach a settlement with Putin. As a compromise, Zelensky proposed an ambitious plan he called the Peace Formula.

It consisted of 10 goals, ranging from the reasonable to the all but unattainable. Point four called for the release of all Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, including children, who had been abducted by Russian forces. Point seven called for all Russian war criminals, including [Putin](#) and his top generals, to be brought to justice. Perhaps most important, the formula demanded that Russia withdraw from every inch of Ukrainian land, including that which it had occupied since 2014. “I am convinced,” Zelensky said in announcing the plan in late November 2022, “now is the time when the Russian destructive war must and can be stopped.”

A few days after that announcement, I went to see Yermak in his office on the second floor of the presidential compound, just down the hall from the Situation Room. Zelensky had placed him in charge of implementing the [Peace Formula](#), a Herculean task that might have made Yermak concerned about his chances of success.

But he seemed relaxed and confident. The day before, Yermak had celebrated his 51st birthday, and a bundle of balloons hovered in his office, the biggest one in the shape of a missile.

On a table near his desk, he showed me a ceramic skull he had received as a gift. It was painted with images of the Kremlin in flames. “That’s the goal,” he said with a smile. In other ways, too, he tried to project the image of a war fighter, not a negotiator, even as he became the architect of the negotiating process. The task was not foreign to him. Before the invasion, he held numerous rounds of talks with the Russians in the hope of forestalling the war.



Once the invasion started, Yermak negotiated with the Russians to secure prisoner exchanges, which brought thousands of soldiers and civilians home from Russian captivity. “These swaps were

always on the edge,” he told me. “Always hanging by a thread.” The final sign-off on the Russian side would sometimes go all the way up to Putin, who could decide to cancel an exchange that had been months in the making. The biggest one, [arranged in the fall of 2022](#), secured the release of 215 Ukrainian prisoners, including senior military officers, in exchange for 55 captives held in Ukraine. By all accounts, the swap was a coup for Yermak, who went to meet the Ukrainian prisoners upon their release. It demonstrated that he could outmaneuver the Russians at the negotiating table.

A childless bachelor, Yermak was born and grew up in Kyiv. His father Boris worked as a Soviet diplomat in Kabul during the 1980s, at a time when the Soviet Union was bungling through a hopeless war in [Afghanistan](#). After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Yermak worked as a lawyer in newly independent Ukraine. He avoided criminal law, he says, because of the rampant corruption in Kyiv’s legal system. Instead he focused on [intellectual](#)-property rights and entertainment law. In 2010, he befriended Zelensky while they were both working for the TV channel that broadcast [Zelensky’s comedy shows](#).

On the side, Yermak also dabbled in the movie business, earning credits as a producer on a couple of moody gangster flicks. Perhaps because of that experience, he often veers into movie references when describing his outlook on the war, sometimes casting himself and the President as the good guys in some Hollywood production. When I asked about his life with Zelensky in the bunker, he brought up one of his favorite films, a classic shoot-’em-up called *Heat*, starring Robert De Niro. “He does this monologue,” Yermak said of the lead character, who is a bank robber. “It’s about the samurai principle, when your life is devoted to some kind of goal. And our life right now is devoted to victory.”

Read More: ‘*Nobody Believes in Our Victory Like I Do.*’ Inside Volodymyr Zelensky’s Struggle to Keep Ukraine in the Fight

Yermak's work on the Peace Formula took an unorthodox approach to wartime diplomacy. Rather than making any offers to the Russians, Ukraine set out to build a coalition of countries to support its plan for peace. The goal was to give Ukraine more heft and control in the peace process and to deepen Russia's sense of isolation. Every nation in the world would be welcome as a partner in the process, but not as a neutral observer or a mediator. "We don't need mediators," Yermak told me. "Mediators can no longer be allowed to take both sides."

In order to broaden this alliance, Ukraine packed the Peace Formula with points that other countries could easily support. The first one calls for nuclear safety, the second for stable food supplies to Africa and Asia. The fifth references the founding charter of the U.N., which states that borders cannot be changed by force. "It's very hard to argue with that," Yermak explains. If foreign leaders did not want to support the entire plan, he encouraged them to pick and choose which points to endorse à la carte. "Every country can see their own leadership in at least one of the points."

Starting last summer, Yermak convened a series of meetings with foreign officials willing to support the formula. The first was held in Denmark in June 2023, and it attracted more than a dozen countries, mostly members of the [NATO alliance](#) but also Brazil, India, South Africa, and others. After the talks ended, some of the participants went out to a French restaurant in Copenhagen. "There was a lot of optimism," said one of officials at the dinner. "This was obviously Yermak's baby, and he thought he could get the whole world behind it."

At the next gathering, held less than two months later in Saudi Arabia, the number of participating countries more than doubled. Even China sent a representative, signaling that Beijing did not want to be left out. Yermak was ecstatic. "Nobody believed we could pull it off," he told me afterward. Soon he turned his focus to

the plan for hosting a global summit of heads of state in support of Zelensky's formula.

But, as with every war, the terms of a possible peace were defined by events on the battlefield. Through the summer and early fall of 2023, Ukraine pushed ahead with its most [ambitious counteroffensive](#), aiming to liberate vast stretches of [occupied territory](#) using the weapons it had received from the U.S. and Europe. Success would have given Zelensky a chance to negotiate with Putin from a position of strength, potentially dictating the terms of a deal to the Russians.

By the middle of autumn, however, the counteroffensive stalled. Ukrainian forces took horrifying losses as they tried to break through Russia's stubborn defensive lines. When we met that October, Yermak seemed far less optimistic about the Peace Formula. "We'll do everything to ensure that this platform survives," he told me. But he knew the failure of the counteroffensive was not the only obstacle to peace.

Two days earlier, the world's attention had shifted to the Middle East as [Hamas militants](#) invaded Israel, killing some 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and taking around [250 hostages](#). Yermak sensed what the attack could mean for peace in Ukraine. "I really hope the situation in Israel won't get in the way," he told me. "But of course it has an impact." Arab nations were appalled by the brutality of Israel's response, which killed thousands of civilians in Gaza. Many countries in the Muslim world refused to back the peace plan in Ukraine as long as Israel pursued its war against Hamas. As a result, Yermak found it much harder to win broad support, and Russia found it easier to undermine his efforts.

By then it was too late for Ukraine to call off the summit in Switzerland. Its Western allies had pledged to attend, and Yermak intensified his efforts to attract guests from other regions. He asked celebrities for help, securing endorsements from Bono and

[Madonna](#). Members of Yermak’s team were assigned lists of countries to persuade, mostly in Africa and Latin America. “These were the difficult cases,” one of them told me. “We had to work the phones, come up with arguments.” A few of the targets were swayed by the chance to schmooze with powerful officials at a Swiss resort. Others were too afraid of getting drawn into a fight with Russia and its allies.

By the time the helicopters landed at the Bürgenstock, it seemed clear that Yermak’s dream of a truly global coalition had been dashed. China didn’t show. Saudi Arabia agreed to send an envoy only after Zelensky made a last-minute trip to the kingdom and appealed to its ruler. Yermak was undaunted. At the start of the summit, he declared, “It’s already a success.”

Read More: Column: [*Why Ukraine’s Civilian Volunteers Are the Unsung Heroes of the War*](#)

By his count, more than a hundred countries and international organizations were represented. Their final declaration, all 500 words of it, did not directly call on Russia to stop its invasion. Instead, the participants promised to avoid “the threat or use of force” against any states. Despite the cautious wording, key envoys from the Middle East and other parts of Africa and Asia refused to sign it. South Africa expressed outrage at Israel’s participation in the talks. India and Saudi Arabia both said that without Russia, the process was not credible.

Only on the sidelines did the delegates debate the question on everyone’s minds: What kind of peace will Ukraine end up with? Among the more sober projections came from Czech President Petr Pavel, a retired army general who has been among Ukraine’s most dogged allies. In an interview at the Bürgenstock, he told me Russia would likely remain in control of the lands it had occupied, while the democratic world would continue to condemn the occupation for years to come. “Of course I don’t see a chance that

Ukraine would be able to turn the war into their fast success,” Pavel said. The Russians, he added, “have no pressure whatsoever to sit at the table right now.”

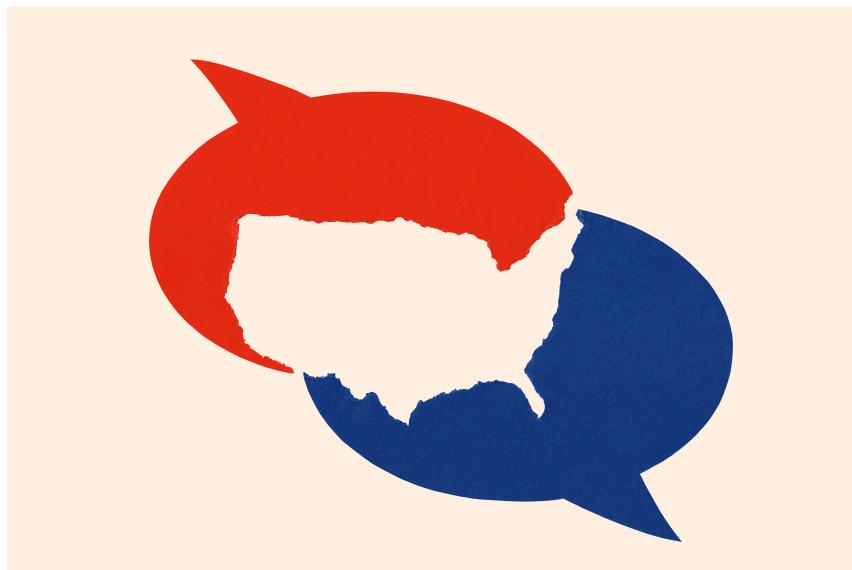
When the summit was over, perhaps its weightiest outcome was Ukraine’s pledge to invite the Russians to the next one. They hope to organize it in Saudi Arabia before the end of this year. “No pauses now,” Zelensky said after returning to Kyiv. “We have made the first tangible step toward peace.” By then, Yermak was already preparing for his next big test—meeting the Russians face to face.

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The Growing Evidence That Americans Are Less Divided Than You May Think

Karl Vick is an editor at large at TIME. He has also served as TIME's Jerusalem bureau chief. He has reported from 60 countries and in 2001 was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for coverage of the spread of AIDS in Africa.



In January 2021, in the turbulent wake of the last presidential contest, a former professor named Todd Rose asked some 2,000 people a question. The survey was, at least on the surface, designed to deduce what kind of country Americans would like future generations to inherit.

Each person was presented with 55 separate goal statements for the nation—“People have individual rights” was one; “People have high-quality health care” was another—and asked to rank them in order of importance. Each person was also asked how each goal would be ranked by “other people.”

When the results were tallied, the surprise was not that “People have individual rights” came in first, or that “People have high-

“quality health care” finished second. The surprise was the third highest priority: “Successfully address climate change.” We know that’s a surprise because, on the list of what “other people” considered important, climate came in 33rd. In other words, no one thought their fellow Americans saw climate as the high-priority item nearly everyone actually considered it to be.

That gap—between what we ourselves think and what we reckon others must be thinking—may hold the power to upend a great deal of what we believe we know about American civic life.

“People are lousy at figuring out what the group thinks,” Rose says. This collective blind spot is a quirk he would underline to students when he was teaching the neuroscience of learning at Harvard. At Populace, the think tank he co-founded to put such knowledge to practical use, the foible plays a prominent role in efforts to undo what Rose calls the “shared illusion” that Americans are hopelessly divided.

And divided we certainly think we are. The only thing Americans seem to agree on is that Americans cannot agree on anything. It’s hardly worth summarizing the headlines about doom and radicalization. In the prelude to a November ballot featuring the candidate synonymous with polarization, all the dapple and nuance of life is once again being reduced to a binary. Choose a side: red or blue.

Yet in the wintry interval between Jan. 6 and Inauguration Day 2021, [that Populace survey](#), dubbed the American Aspirations Index, found “stunning agreement” on national goals across every segment of the U.S. population, including, to a significant extent, among those who voted for Donald Trump and those who voted for Joe Biden. On the few points where the survey registered disagreement (notably, on immigration and borders), the dissent was intense. But intense disagreement was the exception, not the rule.

Much of what news reports, politicians, and pollsters call polarization, Rose understands as “learned divisiveness”—division propagated by the assumption that it exists even where it does not.

It’s a bold, and boldly optimistic, notion, but a notion supported by more than just one survey. At universities across the U.S., researchers have been looking hard at the mechanics of polarization. Picture them under the hood, bent over the engine that’s supposed to be driving us, possibly over a cliff. Every now and then, one reaches back with something they’ve managed to pry loose, sets it on the fender. These studies, hiding under titles like “Reducing Explicit Blatant Dehumanization by Correcting Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions,” together make up a growing body of evidence that challenges the received wisdom about this political moment.

Maybe, they suggest, America has the wrong idea about polarization. It may not be nearly the engine we thought. It’s possible that what it produces, as much as anything, is noise.

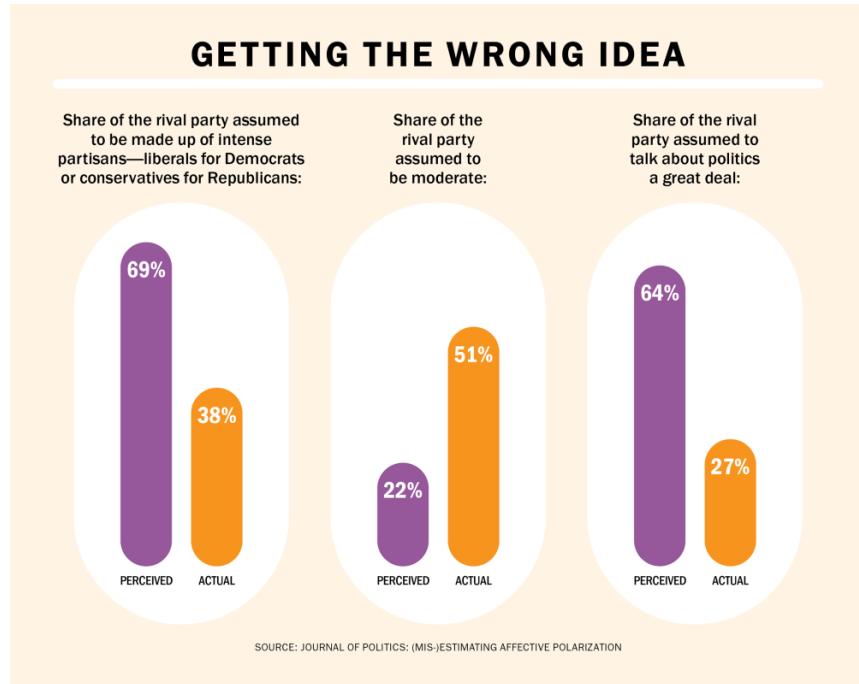
Consider: Ordinary people in both parties turn out to like ordinary people in the other party well enough. In a 2021 [study](#) in the *Journal of Politics*, researchers found that when a person in one political party was asked what they think of someone in the other party, their answer was pretty negative. That certainly sounds like polarization. But it turns out the “someones” respondents had in mind were partisans holding forth on cable news.

If told the truth—that a typical member of the opposite party actually holds moderate views and talks about politics only occasionally—the animus dissolved into indifference. And if told that the same moderate person only rarely discusses politics, the sentiment edged into the positive zone. These folks might actually get along.

“There are people who are certainly polarized,” says Yanna Krupnikov, a study co-author now at the University of Michigan. “They are 100% polarized. They deeply hate the other side. They are extraordinarily loud. They are extraordinarily important in American politics.” But those people, she adds, are not typical Americans. They are people who live and breathe politics—the partisans and activists whom academics refer to in this context as elites.

“Elite politics is quite polarized,” Krupnikov says. “So the question is, does that mean everyone else is?”

Why not ask “everyone else” whether America is really that divided? Pollsters do, all the time. But there’s a problem. Ordinary folks think Americans are much more partisan than they are. In the same study, people grossly overestimated (by 78%) the size of the most polarized group within each party—that is, Democrats who call themselves liberal and Republicans who call themselves conservative. At the same time, ordinary Americans grossly *underestimated* (by 77%) the share of the other party who are moderate. That share is, in fact, at least half of either party. “People probably are exactly right about how polarized their leaders are,” says Robb Willer, a sociologist at Stanford. “They get it very wrong for the general public.”



It gets worse: the more involved in politics a person is, the more distorted their view of the other side, a 2019 YouGov survey [found](#). In other words, engagement in civic life actually serves to narrow one's perspective on the world.

That hardly recommends today's politics, and goes a long way toward explaining why many people avoid partisans. "They dislike people who are really ideologically extreme, who are very politically invested, who want to come and talk to them about politics," says Matthew Levendusky, a University of Pennsylvania professor of political science. And it's not as if they're trying to avoid confrontation, he adds: "It's also the case that people aren't really that fond of people from their own side who want to talk to them about politics."

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So people who do like to talk about politics talk to each other instead, and a striking social dynamic plays out: political enthusiasts will pretend to be even more polarized than they are. For a 2023 [study](#) published in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, people who described themselves as heavily invested in politics admitted

that they would dial up their anger to impress fellow partisans. According to Elizabeth C. Connors, the University of South Carolina professor who conducted the study, the falseness partisans described about their own behavior reached levels “rarely seen in social sciences.”

Her takeaway: “If you’re a partisan and you’re going to say you’re a Republican or you’re going to say you’re a Democrat, you need to be a polarized one. Or else you’re not a good one.”

Such performative behavior of course complicates efforts to gauge how divided Americans have become. “If you ask a true racist their views, they’re going to lower the temperature, and report that they’re less racist than they actually are,” says Sean J. Westwood, who [studies polarization](#) at Dartmouth. “If you ask someone about partisanship and partisan hatred, they tend to do the reverse.”



So, yes, American politics has grown more divided—but largely among people who live and breathe politics. And these people exaggerate their own polarity to win the approval of other people who also live and breathe politics. It’s also true that the number of these people [has grown](#) over the past 40 years, as more Republicans identified as conservative and more Democrats as liberal.

That growth is a big reason that, for example, the U.S. House of Representatives is [no longer](#) actually representative. Most House seats—often by design—are for districts dominated by one party, so the decisive election is the primary, a low-turnout affair in which the enthusiasm of activists has outsize impact. And, once in Washington, [studies](#) show, the Congressperson routinely cast votes more ideological than their typical constituents. But, still, in neither party do the ideologues make up the majority, even if it sure can feel that way. In truth, most Americans agree on most things.

“That’s kind of surprising to a lot of people,” says James Druckman, a political scientist at the University of Rochester. “But it’s pretty well documented that the typical voter of each party is not that far from the typical voter of the other party on most issues. If you look at other countries, the distance is a lot greater.”

[Read more: Americans Say They Feel Pretty Good—at Least Compared to the Country as a Whole](#)

Yet that relatively modest distance seems like a chasm, in no small part because of what’s called “conformity bias.” Researchers have long known that when asked a question by a pollster, people tend to color their reply by what they think they’re expected to say. This idea can make it easier to understand why, when the national narrative is about extremes, as it is now, moderate people self-report as being less moderate than they really are.

“This tug toward the fringes,” as Populace’s Rose calls it, threatens to empty out the middle ground where many Americans might prefer to stay, but fear they’ll be alone there. Their isolation may be an illusion—like the idea that no one but you cares about climate change—but it can feel real enough.

Remember how bad humans are at figuring out what other people are thinking, at least as a group? It’s reinforced by another bug in

our mental software. Our brains mistake repetition for majority opinion.

As the delightful subtitle on a 2007 [study](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* put it: “A repetitive voice can sound like a chorus.” The study gathered people in a group to discuss something, then asked individuals to state the majority opinion of the group. What people offered up was the opinion they had heard several times—even when it had been voiced by just one person, saying the same thing over and over. Other studies have documented the same phenomenon.

“Your brain has this stupid shortcut for how it estimates the majority,” says Rose. The shortcut sheds light on why people frequently mistake the views of political activists, such as those on Fox News Channel and MSNBC, for the views of most Americans. Regular viewers do appear to be genuinely polarized. But in a 2022 [study](#), Fox News viewers who were paid to watch CNN registered a significant moderation in their views after just a few weeks. “You change their media environment and their attitudes change pretty meaningfully,” says University of California, Berkeley, political scientist David Broockman.

But for those who don’t embrace an ideology, the “tug toward the fringes” can be a source of stress. Populace figured out a way to measure this unease in another of its surveys—one that helps explain how we know moderates are inhibited about revealing their views to pollsters.

This survey, in 2022, aimed to avoid the distortions of conformity bias by masking both the respondent’s identity and, more subtly, the question being asked, by hiding the “target” among a series of multiple-choice questions. Because this method requires several rounds of polling to see which results are significant, it’s expensive and time-consuming—but it’s thought to reliably reveal

information people might not consciously choose to share. (“The IRS uses this,” Rose says.)

Among the revelations of “[Private Opinion in America](#)” is that men are less supportive of abortion being a matter between a woman and her doctor than public surveys suggest, but also that people are less concerned than other polls suggest about the amount of time public schools spend talking about race.

On many topics, the gap was fairly small—a few percentage points—between the opinion someone held privately and the one publicly expressed. And the results varied by demographic and political party. Yet every group polled registered double-digit gaps on at least one issue.

Read more: [*The Split in How Americans Think About Our Collective Past Is Real—But There’s a Way Out of the ‘History Wars’*](#)

One group in particular was revealed to have struggled mightily to be candid with ordinary pollsters. For political independents, people without a party, the gap between private thought and public expression ran to double digits on more than half the issues—a striking amount of dissonance. This discrepancy ought to seem odd. After all, political moderates still constitute the majority in the U.S. electorate. But in a public sphere dominated by extremes, independents are made to feel that they have no place.

A more striking measure of that distress popped up in Gallup’s [annual poll](#) asking Americans, “What one country anywhere in the world do you consider to be the United States’ worst enemy today?” One of the options is “the United States itself.” This year, that was the choice of 2% of Democrats and 1% of Republicans. But 11% of independents judged the U.S. as its own worst enemy—more than selected either North Korea or Iran.



People do, of course, disagree. If they didn't, there wouldn't be much need for democracy. There are real differences in opinion on topics that are, to many Americans, a matter of life and death. It matters that you vote. And there's a reason the past decade or so has been a time in which friendships, families, and civic life have been riven by politics. Which is to say, no discussion of polarization can ignore Donald Trump. Division is kind of his brand. Whether or not Trump deliberately exploited the national tug toward the extremes to get elected in 2016, the trend accelerated during his time in office.

When it comes to measuring perceived polarization, political scientists regard the quadrennial [surveys](#) by American National Election Studies as the gold standard. Every four years, it asks members of one party how warmly or coolly they feel toward the other party. During Trump's term, the temperature dropped a record amount. Studies of presidential rhetoric [note](#) that he stood out among modern Presidents for seldom using language intended to unite the country.

And yet, at the end of those four years, moderates remained the majority, even as politics grew nastier. "National unity" actually turns out to be of scant interest to most people, finishing 50th in the

American Aspirations survey. “Treating one another with respect,” however, ranked 14th. In a country where most people agree on most things, the acid tone of public debate amounts to a paradox that Lilliana Mason, a political psychologist at Johns Hopkins, [captured](#) in the title of a 2014 paper, “I Disrespectfully Agree.”

Mason says insult politics masks the underlying congruity on most issues by stirring emotions attached to differences in sensibility or social identity—the “culture war” topics that animate activists on both sides. “Americans are, on average, moderate on most policy preferences,” she says. “But one of the things that our current politics does is it makes us think the most about the policies that we get the most mad about.”

Fortunately, when people learn the truth about the other side, they feel better.

“Polarization appears to be largely driven by misperceptions,” Rachel Kleinfeld concluded in a [sweeping survey of the topic](#) for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Even the worst [reports](#) going around—that, for instance, significant numbers of Americans supposedly favor armed revolt—turn out to be misleading. Those polls reflect a perception that the “other side” is already planning violence. Informed of the actual situation, the reaction [recedes](#). Stanford’s Willer says the propensity for political violence is overreported by 300% to 400%.

Mason agrees. In so many studies, people register surprise that their assumptions about their rivals are wrong. “They’re like, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that,’ and then they feel better about the other side,” she says. “And then they go out into the real world and everything around them is like no, no, no, they’re demons. And so the effect doesn’t last, right? It has to be everywhere.”

What looks like a gulf may be more like a flooded sidewalk—shared space that’s still there, just really hard to see. In American

Aspirations, more respondents said politicians should focus on finding common ground than said politicians should be fighting for them. But—sure enough—they also thought “other people” felt the opposite.

And of course November looms, with its promise of cleaving the nation down the middle with a this-or-that choice. Yet face to face, most people still get along, especially if they’re polite enough not to talk only about politics all the time.

But even if they do, look: In 2022, a Berkeley [study](#) followed what scholars have determined are the most insular partisans of all—liberal Democrats—as they knocked on doors in conservative neighborhoods, canvassing for votes. The activists didn’t change many minds. But afterward, many reported a new respect for people who saw things differently. —*With reporting by Julia Zorthian*

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The IOC Wants the Olympics to Be Apolitical. That's Impossible

Yasmeen Serhan is a staff writer at TIME, based in the London Bureau. She covers foreign affairs with an emphasis on the future of democracies and rising authoritarianism around the world.



When French historian Pierre de Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the governing body of the modern Olympic Games, in the late 19th century, he billed the competition as a peace movement that could bring the world together through sport. “Wars break out because nations misunderstand each other,” he [said](#). Competition, the reasoning went, would foster greater understanding and reconciliation between adversarial countries.

More than a century later, Coubertin’s vision hasn’t exactly borne out. Far from bringing an end to wars, the Olympics have been embroiled in and even [canceled](#) by them. For while the Games are ostensibly apolitical, the world in which they operate is not. Indeed, authoritarians [past](#) and [present](#) have used the spectacle of the

Olympics for their own political propaganda. And despite Olympic officials' insistence that the Games be strictly neutral, the IOC has on many occasions made decisions derided by some as partisan—most recently, its move to suspend the Russian Olympic Committee in the aftermath of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The upcoming Summer Games are poised to be “the most politically charged Olympics in decades,” says Jules Boykoff, an international expert in sports politics. Set against the backdrop of two major ground wars—in Ukraine, where Russia continues to [occupy 18%](#) of the country’s territory, and in Gaza, where Israel’s ongoing war on Hamas has leveled much of the Strip and killed more than 37,000 people, according to figures from the enclave’s Hamas-controlled health ministry, which are deemed credible by the U.S. and the U.N.—the 2024 Games, he and others warn, cannot be held in a geopolitical vacuum.

If recent international competitions are any indication, they aren’t wrong. From the Eurovision Song Contest to the UEFA Champions League, global events have been subsumed by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. But the responses haven’t been identical: while Russia was [summarily barred](#) from several international tournaments and matches following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine—including the Paris Olympics, where Russian and Belarusian athletes will be permitted to compete only as neutral participants—activists’ calls for Israel to be [similarly excluded](#) have largely fallen flat.

The IOC, which has previously dismissed such calls on the basis that the situation in Gaza is “[completely different](#),” cites Russia’s violation of the Olympic Charter—specifically, the Russian Olympic Committee’s takeover of regional Olympic organizations in occupied Ukrainian territory—as the reason for its ban. “This situation cannot be compared with any of the other armed conflicts in our world,” an IOC spokesperson tells TIME in an email.

Still, some critics argue that the IOC's relative silence on Gaza represents a double standard. For while Israel hasn't annexed Gaza or taken over its sporting organizations, its military has destroyed much of its infrastructure, including its sports facilities. What little remains, like Gaza's iconic Yarmouk Stadium, has reportedly been converted by the Israeli military into a space to hold Palestinian detainees, a move the Palestinian Football Association denounced as a "clear violation of the Olympic Charter." As of late May, the Palestinian Olympic Committee estimated that 300 Palestinian athletes had been killed since Oct. 7, including Palestinian Olympic soccer coach Hani Al-Masdar and karate champion Nagham Abu Samra. For those who have survived, the prospect of sports returning to Gaza is years, if not decades, away.

Several Palestinian athletes have qualified for the Paris Games, along with athletes from Israel, Ukraine, and Russia. (Unlike the others, Russian athletes will not be permitted to compete as a team, nor will they be represented by any flags, anthems, or other national identifications.) What remains to be seen, however, is how the athletes are received, both by other participating teams and by each other. Previous competitions have seen athletes refuse to shake hands, as was the case when Ukrainian Olympic fencer Olga Kharlan snubbed her Russian opponent Anna Smirnova at the World Championships in Milan last summer and, more recently, when the Irish women's basketball team declined the customary handshake with their Israeli counterparts at a EuroBasket qualifier in February.

"I think athlete activism will come out in ways we've not seen before," says Shireen Ahmed, a journalist who writes on the intersection of sports and politics. "You will not only get athletes refusing to compete against Israeli athletes, you will get protests in the streets, you will get people talking about divestment. This is going to be incredibly polarizing, and in an event that's meant to unify, there will be pushback at every level."

When asked about the prospect of athletes staging political protests or demonstrations during the Games, an IOC spokesperson tells TIME that “athletes cannot be held responsible for the actions of their governments” and that if anything deemed discriminatory does occur, the IOC will work with the national Olympic committee and the international federation concerned to ensure that “swift action” is taken.

The spokesperson didn’t delve into specifics, though past instances offer some clues. During the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, Algerian judoka Fethi Nourine was handed a [10-year competition ban](#) over his refusal to face an Israeli opponent. At the same Olympics, American shotputter [Raven Saunders](#) made the first podium demonstration when, after being awarded her silver medal, she crossed her raised arms into an X shape, which she said symbolized “the intersection of where all people who are oppressed meet.” Although the IOC investigated the incident, which flouted its ban on athletes staging protests during competition or while on the medal podium, it did not issue any sanctions. “When it comes to dealing with political protests,” Boykoff says, the IOC “has been inconsistent at best.”

Perhaps that’s because, contrary to Coubertin’s vision, the Olympics have always been regarded both by its host countries and athletes as inherently political events. Such was the case in 1936, when Adolf Hitler used the spectacle of the Olympics into a propaganda tool for his Nazi regime. It was also the case decades later when, during the height of the civil rights movement, American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos used a 1968 Olympics medal ceremony to [stage a demonstration](#) against racial discrimination in what was perhaps the most famous moment of political speech in the history of the games.

In a [press conference](#) addressing the potential impact the geopolitical landscape stands to have on the Paris Games, IOC president Thomas Bach referred to Coubertin’s founding credo,

noting that in times of conflict it is “more important to have this link and to give this symbol of hope.”

Boykoff, for his part, isn’t convinced. “If they think this is going away,” he says, “they are living in even a more insulated fairyland than I could even imagine.”

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Simone Biles Is Still Dominating Gymnastics. She's Also Changing It

Alice Park is a senior health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, new drug developments in cancer and Alzheimer's disease, mental health, HIV, CRISPR, and advances in gene therapy, among other issues in health and science. She also covers the Olympics, and co-chaired TIME's inaugural TIME 100 Health Summit in 2019. Her work has won awards from the New York Press Club, and recognition from the Deadline Club. In addition, she is the author of *The Stem Cell Hope: How Stem Cell Medicine Can Change Our Lives*. Follow her on Instagram at [@aliceparktime](#).



There are two main features of any athlete earning the Greatest of All Time title—longevity and ability. Think Michael Jordan's six NBA championships over 15 seasons, Tom Brady's seven Super Bowl rings stretched across 23 seasons, and Michael Phelps' 23 gold medals over five Olympics. Then there is Simone Biles, who not only easily earned a spot on her third Olympic team as the most decorated gymnast in history—with 30 world-championship

medals, nine national all-around champion titles, and seven Olympic medals—but is also changing the sport itself.

Though Biles could at this point just continue competing with the skills she's perfected over her storied career, she keeps raising the stakes. She's had five gymnastics moves named after her because she was the first to perform them in international competitions. Her latest, also known as the Yurchenko double pike vault, had never been attempted in competition before by any female gymnast, and only by a few male gymnasts, when she first executed it in 2021. U.S. national-team member Paul Juda, one of the handful who competes with that skill, says “her ability to pop off the table—which is 5 to 10 cm lower than the one men use—and the fact that she is a couple inches shorter than me, and she is still able to go higher than I do, takes an immense, almost ungodly amount of power.” Although she technically didn’t need to, Biles performed the challenging vault on both competition days at the recent Olympic trials in order to gain more experience with the skill under competition conditions, her coach, Laurent Landi, told TIME. “It can only get better at meets,” he said.

Read More: [*Meet the U.S. Gymnasts Team for the Paris Olympics*](#)

Biles' influence on the sport goes far beyond the technical evolution she is leading. Since her early days competing at the national and international level, her gregarious personality and nurturing instincts helped catalyze a much-needed culture change in the elite program in the U.S. When Biles entered those ranks, Martha Karolyi, then the national-team coordinator, discouraged lighthearted interactions, let alone smiles, at competitions, and instead urged the athletes to remain focused and serious. Biles was different, however, and couldn't help laughing and joking between events—it was who she was, and she and her personal coach at the time didn't think she needed to change. “I think she's allowed everyone around her to have a little more fun, smile more, and enjoy gymnastics,” says Jordyn Wieber, 2012 Olympic gold

medalist and now the women's gymnastics coach at University of Arkansas.

- Which **Olympic Sport** Is Hardest on the Body?
- What Are **Olympic and Paralympic Medals Made Of?**
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Biles' accomplishments are all the more impressive given that they've occurred under the pall of one of the biggest sexual-abuse scandals in sports. The Paris Olympics will be the first after USA Gymnastics weathered lawsuits and an effort to decertify the organization as the sport's national governing body following the [sentencing of national-team doctor Larry Nassar](#) for child pornography and sexual-abuse crimes. Biles was among several hundred gymnasts abused by Nassar, and her testimony, and comments about the culture that discouraged gymnasts from speaking out, in part triggered a shift to a more democratized system for team selections, one that is less reliant on the subjective opinions of a few. She also became a role model for mental-health awareness after she suddenly developed the "[twisties](#)," in which she lost her sense of orientation in the air, and withdrew from most of her events at the [Tokyo Olympics](#). "I felt no, the mental is not there," she said at the time. "I need to let the girls do it and focus on myself."

Read More: [Fred Richard Is Team USA's Next Olympic Hope for Men's Gymnastics](#)

It's that ability to see the bigger picture that will also be Biles' legacy. "She was open and vulnerable in talking about putting her mental health and safety first," says Nastia Liukin, 2008 all-around Olympic gold medalist. "I'm inspired by the strength and humility she was able to show when faced with the immense amount of pressure she felt that I don't think anybody fully understood."

Biles has said that she instantly fell in love with gymnastics and continues to compete because it's still fun, and because of everything the sport has given her. But it's clear that this GOAT is already gifting the sport with so much more, and she's not done yet.

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Which Olympic Sport Is Hardest on the Body?

Alice Park is a senior health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, new drug developments in cancer and Alzheimer's disease, mental health, HIV, CRISPR, and advances in gene therapy, among other issues in health and science. She also covers the Olympics, and co-chaired TIME's inaugural TIME 100 Health Summit in 2019. Her work has won awards from the New York Press Club, and recognition from the Deadline Club. In addition, she is the author of *The Stem Cell Hope: How Stem Cell Medicine Can Change Our Lives*. Follow her on Instagram at [@aliceparktime](#).



Athletes are competitive by nature, so when they get together for a massive sporting event like the Olympics, there's likely a bit of good-natured one-upmanship when it comes to whose event is the hardest.

Yes, it's a bit of a parlor game, and everyone has an opinion. But while difficulty is somewhat subjective, there *are* ways to stratify sports that could start to isolate which sports take the biggest toll on the body—by the highest number of injuries racked up by

athletes, by what types of injuries they develop, and by which injuries tend to have bigger impacts on their long-term health.

That data, unfortunately, is not as complete as it could be. The U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) runs several national training centers, but not all sports take advantage of them. And the USOPC doesn't track overall injuries experienced by Team USA athletes since those are collected by individual national sport organizations—USA Gymnastics, for example, or USA Rugby. Still, during the two weeks each of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the USOPC does have the entire universe of U.S. athletes competing in 32 sports under its purview, and similarly, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) also tracks injuries during the Olympic Games and reports them in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

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Sports physiologists divide sports into two broad categories: those that involve direct physical contact (—the combat or collision sports), which include those involving dangerous pieces of equipment such as bikes or horses—and can cause traumatic injuries, and those that test the body's endurance skills, which are more likely to cause chronic, overuse problems. Injury information collected by the IOC during the Olympic Games is biased toward traumatic, or acute, injuries because “overuse injuries tend to happen in the buildup to the Games or after the Games,” says Dr. Jonathan Finnoff, chief medical officer of the USOPC. According to the IOC, at the last Summer Olympics in Tokyo, the sport with the highest injury rate was boxing, with nearly 14% of boxers requiring medical care during the Games, followed by 12.5% of sport climbers and 11% of skateboarders.

“Speaking generally, during the Olympic Games, the high-speed, high-force and big-air or combat sports cause more injuries,” says Finnoff. During the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, BMX bikers topped the list at 38%, followed by boxing at 30%, mountain-bike cycling at 25%, and water polo and rugby both at 19%. Among Team USA athletes, more than half of rugby players experienced injuries at recent Summer Games, while about half of wrestlers and divers did.

But that doesn’t mean that swimmers or marathon runners are in the clear – chronic injuries due to repetitive motions in their sports are more likely to cause problems that may not appear until years later, because they are harder to identify and more challenging to treat. “Traumatic injuries like muscle tears and broken bones are fixable,” says Dr. Alexis Colvin, professor of sports medicine at Mount Sinai, “whereas chronic overuse issues sometimes linger and aren’t necessarily something that can be fixed.”



Olympic injuries

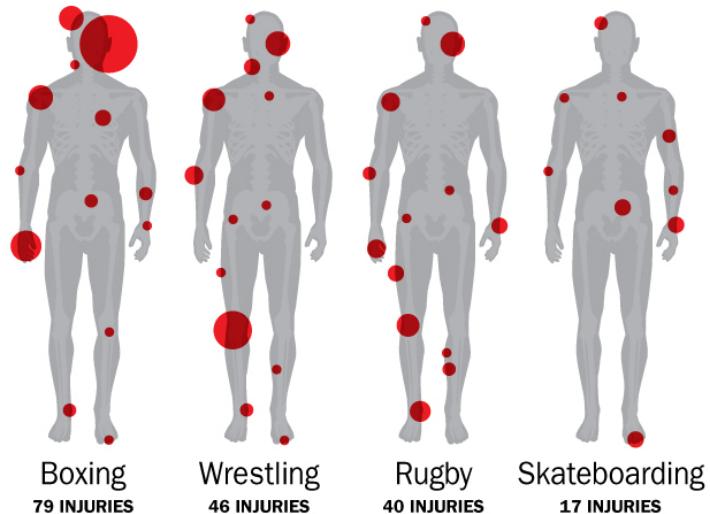
Over a thousand injuries occurred in athletes competing in the 2020 Summer Toyko games—a rate of 9%. Here's a breakdown by sport

Rates within sports

27%	Boxing	10%	Hockey
	BMX Racing		Fencing
22%	BMX Freestyle	9%	Trampoline Gymnastics
21%	Skateboarding	8%	Baseball/Softball
19%	Karate		Football
18%	Handball		Basketball (5x5)
16%	Wrestling	7%	Cycling (Mountain Bike)
15%	Golf	6%	Artistic Swimming
	Sport Climbing		Sailing
	Tae Kwon Do		Badminton
	Judo		Rhythmic Gymnastics
14%	Modern Pentathlon		Cycling (Track)
	Rugby	4%	Tennis
13%	Surfing		Canoe (Slalom)
12%	Triathlon		Equestrian
	Table Tennis	3%	Swimming
11%	Volleyball (Indoor)		Archery
	Water Polo		Canoe (Sprint)
	Basketball (3x3)		Shooting
	Artistic Gymnastics		Marathon Swimming
	Weightlifting		Rowing
	Athletics		Cycling (Road)
10%	Volleyball (Beach)	1%	Diving

Where the injuries occurred

1 • 20 • 40



TIME

SOURCES: IOC; BRITISH JOURNAL OF SPORTS MEDICINE

Both types of injuries can have long-term health effects, though it's hard to know specifically what impact training and competing at the Olympic level have on the body, since no sports group collects detailed information on these athletes after their competitive careers are over. Research continues to show, however, that any acute injury such as a broken bone, muscle tear, or damage to the joints can cause problems down the line. "Repetitive damage can lead to higher and higher incidence of long-term bad outcomes, including severe arthritis and even needing early joint replacement," says Finnoff.

Putting aside injuries that happen during competition, if you consider sports by how many different body parts are at risk of being injured at any one time, Dr. Robert Gallo, a professor of orthopedic sports medicine at Penn State University, says one sport stands out for its potential for both acute and chronic problems. "I personally think that gymnastics combines both," he says. "You can land on your head, or land on your foot, and they also have a lot of chronic injuries that people don't see a lot. Every single joint in gymnastics is subject to problems."

Add to that the fact that most gymnasts begin training at an early age, and the toll on the body is pretty substantial. "Gymnasts have to have a body awareness before they go through puberty, so that's one reason they start early," says Mary Barron, associate professor of exercise and nutrition at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University. "If you're starting a sport when you are 2 years old and participating until you are in your 20s, that's a lot of wear and tear on the body."

But that higher risk doesn't mean injuries are inevitable. "We talk about the body of elite athletes in training in terms of green, yellow, and red lights," says Dr. Matthew Silvis, director of sports medicine at Penn State University, referring to the amount of pain athletes feel and their ability to finish and recover from daily workouts. "Green means you feel amazing and can continue

training with no issues. Red means you can't finish your workout for the day because you're in too much pain, and it doesn't get better by the next day. Most athletes live in yellow—they feel OK even though they hurt and ache while they are working out, but they can complete their workouts and they don't feel worse the next day." Knowing when that yellow shifts into red is key to preventing injuries, and keeping the athlete training at optimal levels for as long as possible.

For distance runners, for example, increasingly painful workouts veering toward the red zone might mean switching from outdoor running routes to an underwater treadmill to reduce pressure on the joints, or concentrating on aerobic exercises to maintain that aspect of their performance while reducing time spent pounding on the muscles and bones.

Barron notes that constant improvements in technology also help athletes and their coaches to better protect against injuries. Video of how basketball players land after jumps, for example, can help identify those who tend to overflex their knees beyond their toes once they hit the ground, which can increase their risk of ACL injuries. Strengthening other muscles to avoid that overflexing can go a long way toward avoiding those injuries.

And it's not just technique that can play a role in avoiding injury—paying attention to things like nutrition and sleep can also be important, especially "to restore the body and give it the best chance of not being injured," says Silvis. "The model for sports is to be active for life," says Barron. "The information we gain every year changes what we do the next year, so the way we take care of and try to avoid injuries is very different now than it was four years ago. And that will help them to stay healthier beyond their careers as Olympic athletes." Which still doesn't mean any of this is easy.

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How Did Hungary Get So Good at Water Polo?

Sean Gregory is a senior sports correspondent at TIME. His work has been cited in the annual Best American Sports Writing anthology nine times. His stories have won awards from the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, and his work was named a finalist for Deadline Club and Mirror awards for excellence in magazine writing and reporting on media, respectively.



Arriving home a world champion in the summer of 2023, Hungarian water polo player Vince Vigvári enjoyed a taste of the rock-star life. After a long-haul flight from Fukuoka, Japan, Vigvári and his teammates hopped on a bus to a victory rally, attended by thousands, at a Budapest pool. The players signed autographs and snapped pictures with jubilant fans. A few weeks later, Vigvári went to a music festival in Lake Balaton, in the western part of the country. “At least 50 people came up to me to take a picture,” says Vigvári, 21. “Random people. Young girls and guys, middle-aged women, men. It was definitely something very special. I can’t lie. It was a good feeling.”

Water polo, a sport that receives scant attention in the United States—and in most other countries around the world—is a national pastime for Hungarians. To wit: the final score of the 2008 Beijing men's final—Hungary 14, United States 10—was announced during Sunday mass in Transylvania, the region of Romania where many Hungarians live. Hungary has won nine men's Olympic gold medals, more than twice as many as the next most successful country, Great Britain (4, more recently in 1920). Hungary also owns four world-championship titles, tied with Italy for tops on the planet.



Certain countries have developed surprising proficiencies in certain niche Olympics sports. South Korea, for example, dominates women's archery, the majority of Turkey's golds have come in wrestling, and Russians have won every gold medal in artistic (née synchronized) swimming since 2000. Hungary has made its splash in water polo, calling to mind a question: how did a landlocked eastern European country, with a population of some 9.6 million people—or a little more than that of the Chicago metropolitan area—become so good at an aquatic sport that plays like soccer on water, except that players can use their hands to pass and shoot at the goal, saving their feet for kicking in chlorine?

Read More: *Sunny Choi Is Heading to Paris for Her Sport's Olympic Debut. Just Don't Call It 'Breakdancing'*

A key factor in establishing water polo, which started in Great Britain in the late 19th century, in Hungary was its abundance of thermal springs. (There are more than 1,300 of them in the country today.) The warm water helped foster an aquatic culture and enabled players to train for longer periods during the year. “If you can stay in the pool to practice when the water temperature is 80, 85 degrees, your fundamentals, movements, and coordination will improve a lot,” says Dénes Kemény, who coached the Hungarian team to three consecutive Olympic gold medals from 2000 to 2008. “We had this advantage over countries who could play in sea, lake, or riverside only four, five months a year.”



Hungary also innovated. According to Gergely Csurka, press officer for the Hungarian Water Polo Federation and author of a 500-page book on the history of the sport in the country, in 1913—a year after Hungary competed in its first Olympic water polo tournament, in Stockholm, and lost in the first round—some players went to watch a circus in Budapest. They saw the performers catching and throwing plates with their wrists and decided to apply that technique to their sport; at the time, players stiff-armed shots and passes. The next year, the Hungarian team

toured Great Britain playing exhibition matches. “The Brits were Olympic champions,” says Csurka. “And Hungary beat them like hell.”

Read More: *Why Are the Olympics Held Every Four Years?*

Hungary won its first Olympic gold medal at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics; between 1928 and 1939, the nation won 110 straight international matches. After Nazi occupation of Hungary in the mid-1940s, Soviet forces drove out the Germans. Hungary became an Iron Curtain nation, and in the weeks before the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, the Red Army brutally suppressed an uprising in the country. Some 2,500 Hungarians were killed. It was amid such geopolitical tension that Hungary, the defending gold medalists, and the Soviet Union played the most famous game in water polo history: a violent clash called the “Blood in the Water” match, in which a Soviet player punched star Hungarian player Ervin Zádor in his head, and his blood poured into the pool. Many Hungarian émigrés hung Hungarian flags with the communist emblem cut out and shouted, “Hajrá Magyarok!” (Go Hungarians!) in the stands. “We felt that we were playing not only for ourselves, but for every Hungarian,” Zádor said afterward. “This game was the only way we could resist them.”

The ref called the match, which Hungary was leading 4-0, before the final whistle. Then Hungary beat Yugoslavia—without an injured Zádor—in the gold-medal game.



This legendary contest—also the subject of a 2006 documentary, *Freedom's Fury*, which was executive produced by Quentin Tarantino and Lucy Liu among others—inspired future national-team players. And each victorious generation has motivated the next. The gold-medal three-peat between 2000 and 2008, which included many of the same core players, has had a profound influence. “Everyone loved that team,” says Vigvári. “They know all the players. Even if water polo is not a big sport worldwide, in Hungary, we had a team we could root for that was successful internationally. It’s a big thing, and a lot of kids start to play water polo because of that success.”

Read More: [*What Are the Olympic and Paralympic Medals Made Of?*](#)

The Hungarian government has also chipped in. Since 2011, companies have been permitted to write off donations for sports infrastructure, equipment, and youth-athlete training as tax deductions: water polo received some \$270 million in investment during the first 10 years of the program. “In my experience, and I have traveled a lot because of water polo, we have the best pools in all of Europe,” says Vigvári.

A 10th Olympic gold for Hungary is no sure thing. Vigvári calls Spain the favorites: many Spanish players suit up for the same club team in Barcelona, giving them a chance to develop year-round chemistry. Italy's got speed. But Hungary can hang with anyone. "We have amazing shooters who are very capable of scoring many, many goals and very great goals," says Vigvári. "For Hungarian players, making big things happen comes naturally."

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What Mia Goth Learned from MaXXXine—And Why She's Ready to Move On

Juzwiak is a senior writer at Jezebel.



It's one of the most indelible images in recent cinema: "Please, I'm a star!," wails the title character of [Ti West's 2022 cult horror film *Pearl*](#), after she's been rejected for a role at an audition. But the actor behind *Pearl* cuts the precise negative of that widely memed film moment inside the greenroom of a Manhattan production studio one evening in June.

"I don't feel famous at all," says [Mia Goth](#). This, despite having worked with auteurs like [Luca Guadagnino](#) (in 2018's [*Suspiria*](#)) and Lars Von Trier (2013's [*Nymphomaniac*](#) was her feature film debut); despite a bevy of accolades for her alternately fragile and furious work in *Pearl*; and despite the paparazzi shots of her walking in L.A. with the father of her child, [Shia LaBeouf](#), published in *The Daily Mail* days earlier. (She says she didn't notice the cameras.) All of which is to say nothing of the hot anticipation for *MaXXXine*, out July 5, ostensibly the last film in the series that began with 2022's barnyard porn-shoot slasher *X*,

continued with prequel *Pearl*, and made Goth one of the preeminent contemporary scream queens.

West's [horror franchise](#), which almost immediately cemented its cult status and counts [Martin Scorsese among its fans](#), has implicitly argued that Goth is like something out of another era. *X* is set in the '70s (and features Goth in the dual roles of porn performer Maxine Minx and the geriatric Pearl under pounds of prosthetics), *Pearl* in 1918, and *MaXXXine* in 1985, with Goth in a voluminous blonde wig. In person, Goth seems more Gen X in spirit than the younger millennial she is at 30. Unlike many of her generation who are outspoken about boundaries on-set, the British actor likes to "romanticize" fraught stories of directors pushing their actors, as [Stanley Kubrick did to Shelley Duvall](#)—to whom Goth is frequently compared—on the set of *The Shining*. "Art needs to be a little dangerous and to get genuine moments, you have to blur the lines a little," she says.

Her effectiveness on-screen is reinforced by her conduct off of it. She doesn't use social media, cultivating a "veil of mystery" that will make her more believable in roles. (And also: "I'm not trying to sell headphones.") There's much she is tightlipped about—from her relationship with LaBeouf to a lawsuit filed against her, West, and A24 by a *MaXXXine* extra. She claims to have no awareness of her steadfast [gay following](#). And despite her rising star—she's now in production on [Guillermo Del Toro's *Frankenstein* remake](#)—she's not worried about keeping her ego in check. "My sense of self is actually quite low," she says. "I'm actually trying to build myself up a little more."

As she speaks, she seems sanguine about living in apparent contradiction. At one point, Goth says: "The truth is, I hate acting. Acting is actually the hardest thing to do. It's this elusive thing and you think you have it—it's like trying to grip smoke." Within minutes, she would say of her job, "I love it so much." None of the

opportunities she's received are lost on Goth, she says. Two things can be true at once.



MaXXXine is a city slasher bookending *X*'s rural spin on the genre. It finds Goth's porn-star character crossing over to the relative mainstream via a horror sequel, *The Puritan 2*. She's mysteriously trailed by a P.I. (Kevin Bacon) and haunted by accumulating deaths around her, while the city is terrorized by real-life serial killer Richard Ramirez, known as the Night Stalker. Hardened but still reeling from surviving the porn-set massacre of *X*, she assumes an offensive stance. Damsel-in-distress tropes are inverted; in one scene, she is chased down an alley then exercises brutal vengeance on her assailant.

Compared to *X* and *Pearl*, *MaXXXine* was a comfortable shoot, according to Goth. The first two films in the trilogy were shot back-to-back in New Zealand in 2021 and both released the following year. There were six-day work weeks, and sometimes 20-hour days. *MaXXXine* was spread out over a comparatively cushy seven-week shoot.

Goth is nothing if not thoughtful throughout our interview. Though it's evening in New York, she's tired. She's been up since about 2 a.m. L.A. time thanks to a canceled flight. She sips on a coffee to

counter her exhaustion. She sometimes thinks for nearly a minute before responding to a question, as with one about the appeal of these particular characters. “Playing Maxine and Pearl has been the most creatively fulfilling experience of my life,” she says finally. “And one of many reasons why it’s been such a gift is because I’ve been blessed to play these characters that are so fearless and have such agency.”

In a phone interview, West says Goth’s appeal comes down to authenticity. “Part of the allure is that it’s not pretend for her,” he says. “She finds a way to connect to the material. Sometimes it’s larger than life and crazy, but she finds a way to ground it within herself.” He recalls that when he told her he wanted her to play both Maxine and Pearl in *X*, “She just stopped and I could see the wheels turning. Then she was just like, ‘I could kill that.’ And I totally believed in her confidence.”

In a contrast to her pronounced humility regarding the phenomenon of her career, Goth points out that on set is where she feels most confident. “Whereas in my day to day life, I need a lot of validation, I don’t need that on set. It’s a way for me to feel liberated,” she says.



Goth can be straightforward to an extreme. When asked what her listed role as producer of *MaXXXine* meant functionally, she matter-of-factly retorts, “Um honestly, on this movie, it didn’t mean much.” She believes she was given the credit simply because it’s the third movie (she was an executive producer on *Pearl*). She did make the executive decision not to show her breasts in an early *MaXXXine* scene despite the script calling for it and having already done so in *X*. “I didn’t want to do that,” she says, adding that having a daughter in 2022 has made her see things differently. “It’s not that I wouldn’t do it again, it was just in that moment, I didn’t feel that the story needed it.”

When asked about the aforementioned *Daily Mail* pap piece that featured her and LaBeouf abreast, her consistently bell-clear voice drops. “I don’t like talking about that stuff,” she murmurs so quickly the words come out nearly jumbled. She won’t discuss her relationship with LaBeouf, who for years has conducted his own rather fraught relationship with fame, and has been [accused of abuse](#) and sued by his former girlfriend, the musician [FKA twigs](#). (The twice-delayed [trial](#) is tentatively set to take place [in October](#).) Speaking more generally about her personal life, Goth declares, “I would never want to share that part of my life. Why? For what?”

Goth similarly has little to say about a [\\$500,000 lawsuit that was filed against her, West, and MaXXXine’s studio A24](#) in January by a *MaXXXine* extra named James Hunter, who accused her of intentionally kicking him in the head while filming and then taunting him. “I can’t talk about that at the moment because it’s an ongoing lawsuit,” she says without hesitating. “But I’m really grateful for A24’s support.” Goth, West, and A24 are all represented by the same attorneys. The next hearing is scheduled for July 10.

But she has plenty to say about what might be next for her as an actor. Her career-defining trilogy may be winding down—*MaXXXine* is being marketed as the “final chapter,” though West

has an idea for an additional film that may or may not involve Goth. Either way, she may take some convincing, as she says she's ready to move on from horror. While the genre has offered "roles written for women that you really sometimes struggle to find elsewhere," she says she's "tapped out in that area." She adds that, "I'd love to make a romantic movie. I've been so focused on this end of the spectrum of violence and gore, but I love love too."

Still she's grateful for the experience. "There's a reason certain characters come into your life," she philosophizes. Plus, Maxine taught her a lot. When asked what, she takes a beat for nearly 30 seconds. And then, finally: "Just like: 'You got this.'"

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Maika Monroe on Her Obsession With Longlegs' Sinister World

Megan McCluskey is a staff writer at TIME. She covers culture, focusing on horror, fantasy, and science fiction.



Like a shape-shifting specter lurking just out of frame, the title of “scream queen” has been trailing in Maika Monroe’s wake since her star-making turn in the 2015 breakout horror hit *It Follows*. As Jay, the unassuming teenage protagonist of filmmaker David Robert Mitchell’s indie cult sensation, Monroe cemented her place in the horror pantheon playing a young woman pursued by a lethal supernatural entity after contracting a sexually-transmitted curse. It’s a bizarre premise that initially gave Monroe pause. “This can’t be good,” she remembers thinking after reading the script.

And she was right—in a sense. It wasn’t just good. It was a commercial and critical smash, grossing [\\$23.2 million](#) worldwide against a \$1.3 million budget and earning acclaim as a highly original genre gem. “I don’t think any of us expected *It Follows* to blow up the way it did,” Monroe says. “Never in a million years.”

Nearly a decade later, Monroe, 31, is again in the limelight as the lead in one of the year’s most anticipated horror films, *Longlegs*, in theaters July 12. With early reviews praising it as “[a disturbing descent into hell](#)” and “[the scariest film of the decade](#),” the new

feature from writer-director Osgood Perkins (*I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*) debuted with a perfect 100 percent fresh rating on [Rotten Tomatoes](#) ahead of its U.S. release—a rare feat for any film, but especially a horror movie.

Starring opposite [Nicolas Cage](#), who is *Longlegs'* titular menace—a disfigured, rasping serial killer with mysterious means to his ends—Monroe plays Lee Harker, a talented and reserved FBI recruit whose cryptic psychic abilities give her strange insight into her target's methods. “It was one of those scripts where I was like, ‘I need to be a part of this,’” she says. “I was obsessed with the world that it’s set in.”

That sinister setting, built around a series of occult murders, reminded Monroe of two iconic ‘90s titles she came to love when she was old enough to start watching horror herself, [The Silence of the Lambs](#) (1991) and [Se7en](#) (1995). She recalls the visceral reaction she had watching that type of truly terrifying film for the first time. “I would close my eyes a lot, but I just love that feeling,” she says. “You don’t really get it from anything else.”

Despite her early admiration for the power of cinema, Monroe didn’t grow up wanting to be an actor. Born and raised in Santa Barbara, Calif., she spent her preteen years pursuing dance and learning how to kiteboard with her dad. It wasn’t until a local film production reached out to her dance company looking for extras that a then-13-year-old Monroe took an interest. “Funnily enough, it was a really terrible horror movie,” she says. “I just fell in love with being on set.”

From there, Monroe got a manager and an agent and began to audition. But her attention was divided. Even as she pursued acting, she was proving to be an unusually talented kiteboarder. When she was 17, she moved with her mom to the Dominican Republic to train in the sport professionally (ultimately ranking as high as 32nd in the world). But she kept up with auditions here and there. “I

probably sent in four tapes during that nine-month period, and I ended up booking one of them,” she says in reference to her debut feature, the 2013 family drama *At Any Price*, which brought her back to Los Angeles.

Within the year, she had appeared in both Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring* and Jason Reitman’s *Labor Day*. But it was the one-two punch of Adam Wingard’s 2014 horror-thriller *The Guest* and *It Follows* the subsequent year that linked her to the genre and carved a path forward. While Monroe has since taken on studio blockbusters like *Independence Day: Resurgence*, it’s her enduring success in the indie horror world—think 2019’s *Villains* and 2022’s *Watcher*—that’s built the foundation of a career.

Thanks to its somewhat reductive history, the scream queen label isn’t always a welcome one—‘80s gore-fest icon Barbara Crampton [notably derided the term](#) as implying “that you’re good at two things: howling at the top of your lungs and being a woman.” Still, Monroe says she feels “incredibly grateful” to be playing a part in the moniker’s evolution.

“I think back to some of the horror movies I would watch [as a kid] and it would be hot, blonde girls with half their clothes falling off covered in blood and running and screaming,” she says. “Then all these movies like *It Follows*, *The Babadook*, *The Witch* started coming out and completely changed the genre. Now those are some of the best roles out there.”

Monroe is slated to star next in Maxime Giroux’s crime thriller *In Cold Light* before reuniting with Mitchell for *They Follow*, a long-awaited sequel to *It Follows* that Monroe promises is going to deliver “what people want and more.”

Then, she says, she’d love to do something more lighthearted, like a rom-com. “There’s a lack of great rom-coms right now,” she says. “It’s time for another *When Harry Met Sally*.”

But as the buzz surrounding *Longlegs* builds to a crescendo, Monroe's main (spoiler-free) takeaway from the film speaks to why she'll always be able to return to her roots in horror: For better or worse, the pool of inspiration is bottomless. "Evil isn't going anywhere," she says. "That's just the reality. There really is no end."

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The Imagination Flies Free in Sing Sing's Maximum-Security Prison

Stephanie Zacharek is the film critic at TIME. She is the recipient of a Newswomen's Club of New York award, and was a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist.



Out of sight, out of mind is how most Americans probably think about [incarcerated individuals](#)—until an acquaintance or a loved one lands in a correctional facility, after plotting a crime or perhaps just acting impulsively in a heated moment. It's easy, and comfortable, to pass judgment. But Greg Kwedar's true-to-life [prison drama](#) *Sing Sing* asks more of us: If we believe in our own capacity for growth and change, how can we not extend that good faith to other individuals who have made mistakes?

[Colman Domingo](#) stars as John “Divine G” Whitfield, serving time at the infamous New York prison Sing Sing for a [crime he didn't commit](#), though he's hopeful that an upcoming clemency hearing might clear his name. In the meantime, he's become deeply invested in a prison theater program, not only performing but also serving on its steering committee, helping to determine who joins

the program and what productions get mounted. He's also written a play himself, one that he hopes might someday make it to the stage.

He and his closest friend Mike Mike (Sean San José) are always looking for new men who might benefit the group—and benefit from it. They approach Clarence "Divine Eye" Maclin (a real-life alumnus of a [similar arts program](#), playing himself), who has a reputation as a tough guy around the yard. Divine G knows his instincts about Divine Eye are right when the latter rattles off a passage from *King Lear*, proving he's taken the play to heart. But it takes a while for Divine Eye to recognize that part of the troupe's aim—which it achieves through a mix of acting exercises and just plain yakking, led by the group's coach, Brent ([Paul Raci](#))—is to get the men to explore feelings they usually keep locked down tight. He resents Divine G's efforts to help him open up, and the two clash, though Divine G's ego is part of the problem too.



Prisons are self-contained societies, and *Sing Sing* underscores just how complicated interpersonal relationships can be when you're being watched every waking and sleeping moment. Even the movie's production design suggests how these men strive to preserve their individuality: their cells' narrow windowsills might be stacked with books or small boxes of favorite foods; the drawings they've hung on their walls may have been done by

their kids, or by themselves. Even the smallest assertion of self has meaning and value.

Kwedar co-wrote the *Sing Sing* script with Clint Bentley (the duo also made the affecting 2021 drama *Jockey*), and the story they tell is drawn from the real-life Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) program. The film features several actors who got their start through that initiative, including Maclin. His performance has a nervy kind of electricity: Divine Eye has been bruised by life, and by the system, but we can see his desire to climb back into the world as a new person, a more open and self-aware one. Domingo gives Maclin all the air and space he needs to create that character. That's what a truly terrific actor does: he steps back and listens, instead of merely relishing his own lines.

And even if *Sing Sing* shoulders some heavy-duty ideas about forgiveness and redemption, Kwedar also recognizes the value and delight of pure play. The troupe prepares a nutty, clever comedy Brent has written for them (adapted from a work that real-life RTA teacher Brent Buell developed for his students) that's peopled with pirates, Egyptian kings, gladiators, and more—basically, a part for everybody. To watch this movie's actors, many of them playing versions of the men they used to be not so long ago—to see them incorporating classic pop-locking moves into their swordplay, or tinkering with the phrasing of Hamlet's soliloquy until it rings true to their experience—is to witness a cautious but joyful reawakening. If a group of forgotten men can pull this sort of thing off, then what excuse do the rest of us have? Outside prison walls or within them, those who stop growing have only themselves to blame.

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House of the Dragon's Searing Second Season Has More to Offer Than Just Fire and Blood

Judy Berman is the TV critic at TIME. Along with reviewing current television, she writes about the ways in which entertainment and pop culture intersect with our larger social and political realities. Her TIME essay on [*Ted Lasso and modern masculinity*](#) won a New York Press Club award in 2022.



“There is no war so hateful to the gods as a war between kin,” a wise character observes in the second season of HBO’s [*House of the Dragon*](#). “And no war so bloody as a war between dragons.” Sadly, by the time those words are uttered, both kinds of war have come to seem inevitable. [**King Viserys I Targaryen**](#) (Paddy Considine) is dead, and his bratty son Aegon (Tom Glynn-Carney) has usurped an Iron Throne that rightfully belonged to his older half-sister, Rhaenyra (Emma D’Arcy). Season 1 [**ended with the spilling of first blood**](#), when Aegon’s brother Aemond (Ewan Mitchell) watched his dragon, Vhagar, devour Rhaenyra’s son Lucerys (Elliot Grihault).

It doesn't matter that Aemond didn't intend to kill the boy. Lucerys' death, which came so soon after that of his peace-loving grandfather, sets off a wave of violence that mounts as the second season of the *Game of Thrones* prequel, premiering June 16, progresses. As Rhaenyra's Black faction and Aegon's Green slide slowly toward all-out civil war, *House of the Dragon* cements its place in George R. R. Martin's dark universe by rejecting platitudes about honor and bravery that suffuse so many fantasy epics. Instead, this harrowing season exposes the unique forms of grief and guilt that result when one nation—and the *family* that leads it—declares war on itself.



In a welcome break with the relentlessly expository first season, which raced through decades' worth of *traumatic births* and deaths at a pace that made it tough to feel immersed or even invested in the palace intrigue, the first half of Season 2 unfolds patiently, in the immediate aftermath of Lucerys' fatal flight. His older brother, Rhaenyra's heir Jacaerys (Harry Collett), is at Winterfell, confirming the loyalty of the Starks. (Would they even be Starks if they *weren't* loyal?) At the Blacks' home base of Dragonstone, Rhaenyra's bellicose husband and, er, uncle, Daemon (Matt Smith), burns to storm King's Landing and exact revenge on Aemond and Vhagar. Meanwhile, the valiant Rhaenyra—who suffered a devastating stillbirth just before losing Lucerys—has traveled to

the site of her son's death to wail over his remains. Daemon isn't particularly sympathetic. "The mother grieves as the queen shirks her duties," he sniffs.

While the Blacks mourn, the Greens splinter into factions as the implications of what Aemond has unwittingly done sink in. Impressionable, insecure, and bitterly competitive with his warrior brother, Aegon rebels against a mother, Alicent Hightower (Olivia Cooke), and a grandfather, Otto Hightower (Rhys Ifans), who had taken his obedience in the wake of Viserys' death for granted. Rather than heed their self-serving but politically prudent advice, he allows the most hawkish members of his council—and his own out-of-control emotions—to push him toward war. In between trysts with a new lover, Alicent agonizes over the choice she made, years earlier, to support her father's ambitions over those of her childhood best friend, Rhaenyra.



In a surprisingly subtle variation on the first season's obsession with the ravages of reproduction—one that takes the show out of the tiresome Feminism 101 territory it previously occupied—generational divides emerge. Elders like Otto and Rhaenyra's cousin and ally, Rhaenys (Eve Best), preach caution. Eager though they are to prove themselves on the battlefield, young men raised in peaceful times remain ignorant of the true costs of war. Innocent

children become cannon fodder in a conflict they didn't choose and are often too young to even understand. In a sane world, parents would sacrifice themselves to save their kids, but here that dynamic is inverted. Caught in the middle are [Rhaenyra](#) and [Alicent](#), whose disinclination to murder each other's families seems insufficient to prevent an explosion of violence.

Indeed, the outbreak of civil war is depicted as something both horrific and unstoppable—as simultaneously natural and unnatural as Cain killing Abel. Twin brothers in the Knightsguard, Arryk and Erryk Cargyll (Luke and Elliott Tittensor), end up in opposing palaces. The accidental slaying of Lucerys triggers more deadly mistakes and misunderstandings. Far from King's Landing and Dragonstone, we meet a pair of clans whose feud long predates the war of the Greens and Blacks. The two factions use their split loyalties as an excuse to tear each other to shreds. We don't see the battle that escalates out of their confrontation. What's more salient is its outcome: hundreds of lifeless bodies piled up on their adjoining properties.



The Cargylls aren't the only ominous doppelgangers we encounter this season. Rhaenys, a would-be queen passed over for an inferior man, has always been a mirror for Rhaenyra. Aemond resembles a younger version of his similarly pugnacious kinsman Daemon;

their names are anagrams. In fact, Aegon and Aemon's relationship echoes that of Viserys and Daemon: the weak king and the brother who makes up in terror what he lacks in official power. The Targaryens are also, of course, an incestuous family, which helps to explain why the names of just about every platinum-haired character sound alike. These multiples reinforce the impression of civil war as an obscenely intimate tragedy, waged among inbred aristocrats who couldn't be more alike, for a cause that is largely irrelevant to the armies of commoners who will die fighting. As one character points out: "When princes lose their temper, it is often others that suffer."

House of the Dragon excels, in its much-improved second season, at keeping those anonymous hordes the royals call "little people" in mind even as it sharpens its focus on the fluctuating relationships between a few key characters. Rhaenyra, wounded by grief but resolute in her decision to defend her claim to the throne, is becoming more than just a strong female protagonist. Alicent's guilt may not redeem her, but it does humanize a woman who betrayed her dearest friend in order to align herself with powerful men. Daemon is brash but haunted. For all his aggression, Aemon, who spends idle hours curled up in the fetal position in the lap of a favorite prostitute, remains the same isolated, brittle child who lost an eye to gain a dragon.

Showrunner Ryan Condal's talky, character-driven approach has its downsides. There are still too many names and subplots. To let so much political and personal friction develop requires slowing the action to a pace that might frustrate anyone who's mostly here to watch dragons brûlée people. (For those who might be wondering, the dragon riding still looks as goofy as ever.) But by de-emphasizing—and deglamorizing—combat, in favor of enriching central characters, closely tracking each side's machinations, and questioning the very premise of a just war, the series harkens back to the early seasons of *Game of Thrones*, before the plot was

reduced to filler between episode-length battles. Whether it takes place in our contemporary world or a fantastical medieval Europe, a solid political thriller is worth a thousand big, dumb, fiery special-effects spectacles.

Correction, June 17

The original version of this story misstated the name of the actor who plays Aegon as an adult. He is Tom Glynn-Carney, not Ty Tennant.

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Rashida Jones on Sunny and Whether the Robots Truly Have It Out for Us

Eliza Berman is a senior editor at TIME. She has covered movies, TV, music, books, and theater.



Rashida Jones is the embodiment of what might once have been called a Renaissance (wo)man, but these days more often gets dubbed a multihyphenate. She's best known as an actor—as a straight-woman in projects like the beloved *Parks and Recreation* and *Angie Tribeca*, a recurring guest on comedy series from *Key and Peele* to *Kroll Show* to *Portlandia*, a voice actor on *Inside Out* and *The Simpsons*, and roles in more dramatic projects like *Silo* and *The Social Network*. But she has also made a career behind the camera, as a producer (*The Other Black Girl*, *Claws*), director (*Quincy*, the Grammy-winning doc about her father, music producer Quincy Jones), and writer (*Celeste & Jesse Forever*, *Black Mirror*).

In *Sunny*, the new Apple TV+ dark sci-fi dramedy she produced and stars in, she gets to do a few things that even she hasn't done before. For one, she acts opposite a robot, the titular Sunny, who

possesses, as her name suggests, the kind of “Hey girl!” pep that Jones’ misanthropic Suzie can hardly tolerate. For another, she’s working in two languages, as the tech-thriller mystery of Sunny’s genesis—the homebot appears as a consolation gift following the disappearance of Suzie’s family in a mysterious aviation incident—unfolds across the brightly lit neon nights of Kyoto.

Even as the series is focused on our relationships to technology, it also explores the very human experience of grief, a theme which particularly appealed to Jones in the wake of losing her own mother, the model and actor [Peggy Lipton, in 2019](#). Playing against type, as TIME’s TV critic Judy Berman writes, Jones gives “a performance that’s worth watching on its own merits, as she locates the vulnerability within Suzie’s flatness and channels her *Parks and Rec* charm into making a grouchy heroine lovable.”

[video id=v5tSxtPh autostart="viewable"]

In the lead-up to *Sunny*‘s release on July 10, Jones spoke to TIME about channeling her own experiences with grief, how Sunny compared to Kermit the Frog as a scene partner, and whether she’d ever return for more *Parks and Rec*.



TIME: In *Sunny*, you play an American woman in Kyoto, reluctantly bonding with a “homebot” gifted to her by her husband’s company after he and their son disappear following a plane crash.

What about grief were you hoping to explore in this story?

Jones: [When you grieve](#), there is this sense that there's so much left unsaid. There's regret and confusion, this lens looking backwards at your entire relationship. Even if it's not your husband who you're concerned might be involved in some dark sh-t. There is something that felt really visceral and true to me, because I lost my mom a couple years ago, and it was the most complex emotional experience I've ever had. I had a baby, and then seven months later, my mom passed away. I had this combination that's like in the show, of this intense love of family, and then the shock of the reality that your life has changed so much. There's the Kübler-Ross stages of grief, but it's not cyclical. It's not linear. It's just chaotic.

Was the parallel cathartic, or do you draw a line between your experience and the character you're playing?

I'm not the kind of actor who's like, "I want to go and leave it all on the field." But I think there is something I wanted to process, or else I wouldn't have picked it. It's not the easiest thing to show up every day and scream and cry and have to access that place in real time. Like, maybe today is not the day you want to feel that feeling. But there was probably something in me that wanted to sit in it a little bit more.

What drew you to this project?

I wasn't aware of the book. And this show kind of strays from the book. So my first exposure was a script and an absolutely beautiful deck and a playlist. The world was so well imagined already, this retro futuristic thing where a lot of the music was '50s and '60s

American-style music, sung in Japanese. The look of the show, the primary colors, the glowing lights of night in Kyoto. I was attracted to the new challenge of playing someone who is so immediately in grief and shock. I really liked that Suzie was unlike me in some ways. She feels a bit isolated in her own life. Just to have the opportunity to bring all of that pathos into a mystery was really appealing.

It's a very human story, but the themes around our relationships to technology are very timely. Your character can't trust the intentions of Sunny, her robot. What is your relationship to technology? Are the robots out to kill us?

With so many innovations in the past, there was a sense of ownership, a person using a tool. I don't think anybody thought the printing press was going to become sentient. I've always had a little bit of a nihilistic idea of the world since I was a kid. For all of humanity, as soon as our needs were met, we tried to figure out why we're here, why we're special. We can't figure it out, so we've gone so far as creating something that's **so much like us that it might kill us**, to see if we can figure out what makes us human. It's such a weird Greek tragedy.



You've acted opposite Muppets. What was it like acting opposite a robot?

It was definitely challenging. Joanna Sotomura, who plays Sunny, is a wonderful actress, and she was in a tent off-set with a helmet on with a super bright light shining in her eyes, and the camera would pick up her expressions and then translate them into the very lo-fi Sunny face. It took so many people to make the robot move and have articulate digits. But when we actually got to act with Joanna on Sunny's screen, that felt pretty real, pretty fast. I felt that way on *The Muppets* movie—on the second day, I wasn't even talking to Steve [Whitmire], who plays [Kermit](#). I was just having full, off-camera conversations with Kermit. It doesn't take much.

Not only are you acting opposite a robot, but the show is in two languages. Suzie has this earpiece that can instantly facilitate communication, but it's also a crutch, because she doesn't have to learn the language, which further alienates her.

It was very different from anything I've experienced. The actual earpiece is not functional. So I had that and another earpiece in my other ear with the translation. So both my ears were occupied, and then sometimes the earpiece wouldn't work. I don't speak Japanese, so I would just have to listen to the rhythm of the scene and really watch the actor and respond in a language that I didn't understand. Suzie is isolated, a bit of a misanthrope, and she moves to another country, in a way, to not have to talk to people. So, yes, it's an absolute crutch, and she's been able to check out culturally, which is kind of lazy, and then she gets thrown into this thing where she has to interface with all these people. And so it's a little bit like her worst nightmare.

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You've directed, produced, written, acted in every genre, worked in podcasting and animation. Is there a place where you feel creatively most at home?

When I get to write with [writing partner] Will McCormack, immediately it feels like home, because we've been friends for 25 years. It's like the coziest couch that ever was. We just speak the same language and love each other and it's really fun and funny. The last couple things I've done have not felt like home, and I purposely pushed myself. I also feel very at home sitting at the monitor, whether in a writing or producing or directing capacity, and seeing the thing come to life. You know when something doesn't quite work. And when an actor really has a great moment, you're there to see it.

In this age of reboots, is there a project you would want to revisit?

Actually, three. *Parks and Recreation* was the best job that ever was. We're still **super close**, and everybody would be so excited—it just has to be right, and has to come from **Mike [Schur]** and **Amy [Poehler]**. Any time, any day, you name it, I'd be there. *I Love You, Man* was so much fun. We talked for a while about trying to imagine [coming back to it], but we might just be too old now. People might not care.

I still say totes McGotes sometimes...

It was on tote bags! There were so many classic lines, we spent so much time improv-ing that movie. And then, *Celeste & Jesse Forever*. Will and I have talked about some sort of spiritual sequel because it defined an era of relationship, and now we're in a

different era we have a lot to say about—kids, marriage, staring down the barrel of your back half.

Sequels get a bad rap, but they really do **justify their existence sometimes.**

It's a great joy. All you're trying to do as a writer is get to know the characters, and you never have enough time.

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