

# TIME

He's Back.



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## Donald Trump's Disruption Is Back

Calabresi is TIME's Washington bureau chief.



Lost amid the hullabaloo surrounding Donald J. Trump's second Inauguration as President of the United States—the last-minute, cold-driven venue changes, the galas and balls, the \$170 million raised from donors both big-name and anonymous—is the point of the whole extravaganza. In the summer of 1787, the delegates to the federal convention in Philadelphia included in the document they were drafting a requirement that before taking office, the President should recite the following [oath](#): “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

Not everyone thought it was a good idea. Several delegates [believed](#) that oaths were pointless, almost superstitious. It's the only verbatim pledge in the U.S. Constitution, and in retrospect it speaks to the document's fragility, a sense that the men struggling in secret in Philadelphia were worried their hard-won agreement was so tenuous that it required a promise from future leaders to

respect their work. Yet every president from George Washington on has recited the 35 words as a commitment to the rule of law in the face of unpredictable forces of change.

Trump, of course, is himself an unpredictable force for change. Whatever one thinks of him, he has altered America in ways unimaginable a decade ago. Back then, the so-called Washington consensus among Republicans and Democrats held that free trade was a near-absolute good. Presidents respected prosecutorial independence as a way of protecting citizens from an elected leader's trying to use the power of law enforcement for personal interests. For 75 years, Commanders in Chief upheld the U.S. pledge of mutual defense with its NATO allies. Trump has cast these norms aside, and the consequences are rippling around the world. He is arguably the most influential change agent to occupy the White House since Franklin Delano Roosevelt.



**Read More:** *Here's Who's Attending Trump's Inauguration, From Foreign Leaders to Big Tech Executives*

Yet the 47th President is as much a product of global change as a driver of it. The challenges his agenda attempts to address accumulated over decades, and are now greater than can be mastered by any one leader, or even one country. Transnational forces, from migration to organized crime to pandemics, have resisted both collaborative and unilateral responses since before 9/11. Today's world is in many ways unrecognizable from what it was when America won the [Cold War](#). In China, the U.S. faces a potential economic and military [competitor](#) unlike any before.

Trump has pledged to solve these challenges through a suite of aggressive moves. He promises everything from mass deportations to suppression of the free media through prosecution to the annexation of [Greenland](#), the [Panama Canal](#), and Canada—though he may be joking about that last bit. Supporters say his norm breaking will be worth it if it succeeds where others have failed, and they credit him for promising to tackle big, difficult problems: cutting government waste and reversing massive deficits, ending wars in the [Middle East](#) and [Ukraine](#), fixing the long-broken immigration system. Trump will take office in as strong a political position as ever before, buoyed by a decisive election victory and near record-high public support, a Republican Congress unified behind him, and broader backing in the business community, most notably among tech elites, who have committed this time to working with him. To many, Trump’s ascension carries the possibility of positive change for institutions that have grown stagnant or worse.

His opponents, meanwhile, are in the process of figuring out which parts of his agenda to accept. Over time, Democrats have adopted some of the Trump prescriptions they once denounced. President Biden kept many of Trump’s China tariffs. Vice President Kamala Harris embraced his “no tax on tips” pledge during her campaign. Forty-eight House Democrats voted for the Laken Riley Act, which requires federal detention for anyone in the country illegally who is arrested for shoplifting or theft; an even greater proportion of their Senate colleagues support the bill. At the same time, Democrats are preparing to battle over many of Trump’s policies, as they have for the past 10 years.



The key moments of Trump's second term will come when the forces of political resistance, his own advisers, the legal system, or his fellow world leaders oppose the President's moves. Trump has threatened to deploy the military against American protesters. Will he abide by judicial rulings if an aide tells him the courts can't force him to? It is unclear what use Trump intends to make of the partial immunity from criminal prosecution the Supreme Court granted Presidents last year.

**Read More:** *What Trump Says He Will Do on Day One*

Trump [told](#) TIME last fall, “I’ll only do what the law allows, but I will go up to the maximum level of what the law allows.” His most anxious critics point out that he is not exactly a man of his word. He changes positions and discards allies at the drop of a hat—he’s already named and replaced his White House counsel before even taking office. The 47th President is the first to enter office as a felon, convicted less than a year ago by a jury of his peers of 34 counts of falsifying business records. Reciting a simple oath doesn’t seem like much assurance that he will abide by the Constitution.

But the hard-won agreement for governing the U.S. has shown itself a survivor. It has endured the Civil War, the rise of fascism, pandemics, and extralegal affronts. It emerged from the disruptions and disgraces of Trump’s first presidency, too, including the events culminating in the [Capitol riot](#) on Jan. 6, 2021. As he takes office for the second time, the pledge at the center of his Inauguration spectacle now seems less an expression of insecurity by the framers than one of wisdom. And those anxious about what is coming can be glad that on Aug. 27, 1787, the convention delegates decided to broaden their original version of the President’s oath from a simple promise to “faithfully execute the duties” of the office to a further commitment to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” It is on Trump, and America, to ensure that oath is kept.

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<https://time.com/7207806>

## ‘He’s at the Apex of Power Now’: A Preview of Trump’s Second Term

Cortellessa is a correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C., bureau. He covers Congress, Donald Trump, and national politics.



**One by one**, they had all trickled into the walnut-paneled [Mansfield Room](#). [Donald Trump](#) had just made another improbable return: his first visit to the U.S. Capitol since a mob of his supporters stormed the building on Jan. 6, 2021. Now, just days away from reclaiming power, the [President-elect](#) was there to meet with the 52 Republican Senators of the 119th Congress about advancing his legislative agenda: a massive border security package, extending his 2017 tax cuts, and dispensing with the debt ceiling.

After more than an hour of wrangling over strategy, Senator Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, tried to wrap things up, according to one of the GOP senators present. “Sir,” she told Trump, “I want to respect your time and get you out of here so you can move on to your other commitments.” Trump raised his

eyebrows and interjected. “I have no other commitments,” he said. “This is my legacy.” The Jan. 8 meeting lasted nearly another hour.



Despite Trump’s visions of enhanced executive authority, it was a recognition that his success will rest on the cooperation—or capitulation—of others. Even before his inauguration, he has been racking up wins. When Israel and Hamas announced a ceasefire after 15 months of war, Israeli officials credited Trump’s demand that the terror group release the hostages or else “all hell will break loose.” As President Biden warned in his farewell address of an [ultra-wealthy oligarchy](#) taking shape, the corporate titans he was referencing were cozying up to Trump in unsubtle [displays](#) of anticipatory obedience. Congressional Republicans similarly continue to bend to his will—whether it’s the few House members who threatened to derail Mike Johnson’s reelection for Speaker of the House, or the key Senator who expressed doubts about former Fox News host Pete Hegseth as Defense Secretary. Ultimately, they all backed down. “The way he went to bat for Mike Johnson and cracked down on dissenters sent a message to me and a lot of others to back off,” says a Republican Senator close to Trump. “Don’t ruin this.”

Even with all that political capital, Trump still faces limits to his power. Republican legislators balked at his request to use recess

appointments to install his more controversial Cabinet picks. When it became clear there were enough holdouts to tank his choice of Matt Gaetz for Attorney General, Trump told the former Florida congressman to step aside. Today, he's navigating the competing demands of Republicans in purple and ruby red districts as they try to carve out a legislative framework for his signature domestic priorities. And despite Trump's GOP having full control of Washington, the threat of internecine divisions derailing his plans looms large. "When you have majorities in each chamber," a Trump advisor says, "the worry is that it would become a circular firing squad."

That remains a possibility. For Trump, who won on a promise to reshape government, the greatest obstacle may be just how far his own party is willing to let him go. In private meetings, sources close to Trump say the President keeps expressing a desire to move fast, fully aware that the window for maximal disruption won't stay open for long. "Your biggest opportunities for change are in the first couple of years, and even more so in the first 18 months, because that's ahead of elections," says a senior Trump official. "He's at the apex of power now. Every month that goes by, he has a little bit less."



If you want to know how a candidate will govern, the clues are often in how they campaigned. Trump's 2016 bid was marked by chaos, leaking, and vicious infighting. He trudged through three separate campaign managers. His 2024 campaign was far more disciplined; there was hardly any turnover and they succeeded in ways few saw coming: broadening the tent while pleasing his base, winning the popular vote, and clinching a decisive Electoral College victory. Much of that credit goes to [Susie Wiles](#), his de facto underboss who will serve as White House Chief of Staff.

So there was little surprise when Trump asked Wiles to take on the vital role. Inside the West Wing, she will be tasked with maintaining order and cohesion among the executive branch and

Trump's far-flung coalition. One of Trump's deputy chiefs of staff, James Blair, will be a liaison to Congress. Another longtime advisor, Stephen Miller, will have broad discretion to shape executive policy, while Dan Scavino will manage Trump's social media and be a constant presence by his side. Taylor Budowich, a seasoned MAGA stalwart, will oversee hiring in the executive branch and media strategy. All of them worked on the last campaign and will try to translate an operation that worked for them on the trail into a model for unconventional governance.



As Trump's Cabinet picks were sending shockwaves through Washington late last month, Wiles laid out a theory of her boss's unorthodox appointments in a call with senior transition staff: “[RFK](#) is going to be a disruptor, [Elon Musk](#) is going to be a disruptor. [Kash Patel](#) is going to be a disruptor.” One of Trump’s biggest regrets of his first term, he told TIME in April, was the people he hired who tried to block his most norm-shattering, and in some cases dangerous, ideas. But now he’s been elected on an unambiguous promise to wage war on the institutions of government and deliver sweeping transformations. His Cabinet nominees, Wiles told her underlings, according to two sources familiar with the call, were chosen to deliver on that promise. “He wants people that can disrupt alongside him.”

## **Read More:** *Donald Trump's Disruption Is Back*

To critics, Trump's nominations reflect another impulse: to install obedient, often inexperienced, acolytes who will acquiesce to his demands to turn the government into an instrument for his own self-interest. In some instances, Trump's antagonists see an explicit quid pro quo. In exchange for Kennedy endorsing Trump last summer, says Lisa Gilbert, co-president of the progressive government watchdog Public Citizen, Trump picked the vaccine critic to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. In exchange for Musk donating \$250 million to his campaign, she alleges, Trump rewarded the billionaire whose businesses hold various U.S. government contracts with his own commission tasked with shrinking the size of government. "There is no clearer instance of a direct tit-for-tat interaction," says Gilbert.

Beyond Trump's Cabinet and inner circle, the administration expects to harness an array of outside groups, social media influencers, and right-wing media personalities to shape narratives and apply pressure on Republicans who might obstruct the Trump agenda. They were already deployed in full force to squash any GOP squeamishness on Hegseth, who Trump wants to lead the Pentagon despite questions about his experience, his views, and accusations leveled against him of alcohol abuse and sexual assault that he's denied. When Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, a veteran up for re-election in two years, expressed reservation about Hegseth, who has said women should not serve in combat, she drew an onslaught of social media harassment, revved up by the likes of Steve Bannon and Gaetz, now an anchor for the pro-Trump One America News Network. "How do I make it stop?" Ernst asked one of her fellow Republican senators, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations. "She toe-dipped in her opposition," the GOP senator tells TIME, "and felt the immediate backlash."

Another source familiar with the matter tells TIME that a Trump ally informed Ernst that the President would support a primary

challenge against her in Iowa—where Trump won the caucuses last year by roughly 30 points—if she blocked Hegseth. At the same time, Musk quietly back-channelled a message to Senators, according to two sources familiar with the matter: anyone who votes against Trump’s Cabinet secretaries will face a multi-million dollar Musk-funded Super PAC to oust them from office in their next primary. Ernst ultimately signaled she would back Hegseth.

“That’s the reality that all these members live in the next couple years here,” says a source close to Trump. “They all get in line at the end of the day.”

**There’s still always** the potential for trouble in a MAGA paradise. There are competing factions within Trump’s orbit with their own agendas. Some of that has already spilled into public view, such as Bannon’s tussle with Musk over H1B visas, through which U.S. companies, including Musk’s, import skilled workers from other countries. To Trump, the argument is part of the fun—and his decision-making process. “He doesn’t mind the squabble,” says a Trump aide. “He likes to see the conversation hash out and see where the conversation online lives and where the base is on things.”



In the end, Trump sided with the SpaceX founder over whether the H-1B program was worth continuing. Trump, after all, uses them at his clubs and hotels. Plus Musk has more than \$300 billion.

Bannon does not. But over the coming years, such quarrels may serve as a barometer for which voices in his ear will have the most influence, and the extent to which Trump remains sensitive to public pushback. Trump aides say he is more intent than he was in his first term on remaking the federal bureaucracy, and less concerned with appeasing those who might stand in his way. “His risk tolerance is higher,” says a senior Trump official.

For everything Trump may be able to accomplish without the help of the legislature, every President aims to sign major, far-reaching pieces of legislation. Trump’s checklist in Congress will be passing a border security bill and making his tax cuts permanent. There’s also the debt ceiling, which Congress must agree to either raise or eliminate entirely. In public and in private, Trump says he would prefer to pass his border security measures and raise the debt ceiling in one package, whereas some leading members of Congress insist on doing them separately. On some level, it’s a simple process argument, but it’s also a test of how Trump will handle resistance from his own party after becoming accustomed to their subservience over the course of his march to power.

Perhaps most of all, it may reveal whether Trump, ten years into his life as a politician, has learned that most Washington of lessons: sometimes you need to lose a few fights to win a bigger one.

Toward the end of his Jan. 8 meeting with the Republican Senators, he pushed hard for one bill but, by the end, eventually relented that he could accept either method. All that really matters, he said, was that it gets done. “I’ll sign one bill, I’ll sign two bills. I’ll sign 10 bills,” he said. “Whatever it takes.”

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## Home Losses From the LA Fires Hasten ‘An Uninsurable Future’

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Insurance companies were worried about many of the homes in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles long before this week’s devastating wildfire burned through the area, ravaging homes and forcing evacuations. The Palisades, because of its location next to the brush-heavy Santa Monica Mountains and the high value of its homes, was too vulnerable to fires to insure at permissible rates without the companies losing money. Insurers including State Farm, which dropped [nearly 70% of policyholders](#) in Pacific Palisades in July 2024, refused to offer new insurance plans or renew old ones.

As a result, many homeowners were forced to obtain coverage from the state's insurer of last resort, the California Fair Access to Insurance Requirements (CA FAIR) Plan, which [covered 1,430 homeowners](#) in the Pacific Palisades zip code of 90272 in September 2024, an 85% increase from 2023. The FAIR plan insures homes against fire but has higher premiums than traditional home insurance and only covers up to \$3 million in damages for residential properties.

Like many other insurers of last resort in the 33 other states with this type of system, the California FAIR Plan is buckling under the weight of natural disasters worsened by climate change. "I'm concerned that we're one bad fire season away from complete insolvency," said Jim Wood, then a California Assemblyman, at a [March hearing](#) in which CA Fair Plan President Victoria Roach explained that it had just \$200 million of cash on hand, with \$450 billion of exposure in the state.

**Read More:** *The Conditions That Led To the Unprecedented Los Angeles Fires.*

That bad fire season is now here. As infernos burn across Los Angeles County, torching at least 28,000 acres, analysts at Accuweather estimate losses could reach [\\$52 to \\$57 billion](#). It is a blow to the hundreds of insurers operating in California, but a particular challenge for the state's insurer of last resort. And its predicament highlights the precarity of the home insurance market, in California and nationally. Due to an increased risk of fires, floods, convective storms, hurricanes, and other national disasters, it doesn't make financial sense for insurers to offer plans to some people. In 2023, insurers lost money on homeowner coverage in 18 states, up from 12 states five years ago, according to an [analysis by the New York Times](#).

About the same number of states are seeing both increases in home insurance prices as well as increases in non-renewals of insurance,

according to Dave Jones, the former insurance commissioner of California and now director of the Climate Risk Initiative at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law. “In the long term, we’re not doing enough to deal with the underlying driver, which is fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions, so we’re going to continue to see insurance unavailability throughout the U.S.,” says Jones. “We are marching steadily towards an uninsurable future in this country.”

As insurers drop policyholders, homeowners turn to insurers of last resort—in the Southeast, they’re often called Beach and Windstorm Plans—which can’t really afford to insure them either. Yet more states are creating these plans to bolster private property insurance markets. Nationwide, the number of FAIR Plan insurance policies nearly doubled between 2018 and 2023, rising to 2.7 million, according to data from AM Best, a company that rates the financial strength of insurers. The California FAIR Plan alone saw its exposure grow nine-fold over the past six years.

“The plan of last resort,” says Benjamin Collier, a professor of risk management and insurance at Temple University in Philadelphia, “is becoming the de facto insurance in the state.”

The fate of the California FAIR Plan affects everyone in the nation’s most populous state. If it doesn’t have enough money to cover its claims, every policyholder in the state ends up paying more. Insurers are responsible for covering the first billion dollars of claims in California, but then the responsibility goes to every insurance policyholder in the state—who are responsible for additional assessed charges. Essentially, everyone has to pay to reimburse people whose homes lie in high-risk areas.

Florida is a case in point: when Citizens, the state-run insurer of last resort, can’t pay out claims, policyholders must pay the bill, which added up to a “[Hurricane Tax](#)” of hundreds of dollars per

household after Hurricane Ian hit the Atlantic Coast near Cape Canaveral in 2022, causing \$113 billion in damages.

The way FAIR Plans work “is really a symptom of the broader insurance market failing,” says David Marlett, managing director of the Brantley Risk and Insurance Center at Appalachian State University. “It’s a horrible system.”

**Read More:** [\*How to Help Victims of the Los Angeles Wildfires.\*](#)

In some ways, it’s useful for people to be priced out of insurance and have to turn to FAIR Plans, which are more expensive than regular insurance and don’t cover as much loss, says Collier, the Temple professor. The insurance market is one way of signaling where people should and shouldn’t live; more expensive plans may help guide people from high-risk areas. But as the insurance math becomes unworkable in wider bigger swathes of the country, FAIR Plans won’t be a tenable solution. “We need to be dramatically rethinking how homeowners’ insurance works and what it covers,” says Collier.

One potential fix would be for the federal government to offer to [provide insurance](#) (called reinsurance) for FAIR Plans, essentially backstopping them if they don’t have enough money to pay out claims, says Jones, the former insurance commissioner. That would also help FAIR Plans save money on buying insurance from the private markets. Jones also suggests creating an Obamacare-style marketplace for home insurance, where the government can subsidize low or moderate-income households buying insurance.

What won’t work, experts say, is continuing with the same system and hoping that climate risk just goes away. “Insurers are not magicians,” Jones says. “The risks of loss are rising through climate change, and insurers can’t just wave a magic wand and make them go away.”

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# Why So Many TikTokers Are Moving to the Chinese App Red Note Ahead of Ban

Chow is a technology correspondent at TIME. He covers crypto, AI, tech regulation, and culture.



With the [TikTok ban](#) looming in less than a week, creators are scrambling to find a replacement. Many have simply migrated over to TikTok's direct American competitors, like Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts. But another unlikely challenger has emerged: the Chinese-owned Xiaohongshu, a social media app often referred to as Red Note in English.

While Red Note had previously catered almost exclusively to Chinese audiences, Americans are flooding onto the platform this week, making it the number one on the App Store for two days straight. Lemon8, a separate Chinese social media app owned by TikTok's owner ByteDance, sits at number two. On those apps, Chinese influencers and fashionistas appear in between American newcomers showing off their woodworking or [floating](#) down the Mississippi River.

It is unlikely Americans will settle on Red Note or Lemon8 long term: They face the same regulatory pressures that TikTok does. But these apps' ascendance does reveal an acute desire from Americans to find their next social media destination; their general wariness about TikTok's top American competitors; and their discontent with a ban that many see as paternalistic.

"It was a bit of a spite thing—and I also wanted to be one of the first people over there," says Christina Shuler, an entrepreneur who runs the small business [Glam Farmhouse](#) and joined Red Note this week. "Hopefully I can be part of the crowd that maybe can change how our government views this whole situation."

## TikTok's Ban

TikTok's likely shuttering stems from a bill passed by Congress last year, which forced the app's parent company ByteDance to either sell it by Jan. 19, or face a ban in the U.S. TikTok took the law to court, arguing a violation of freedom of speech. But last week, Supreme Court Justices expressed skepticism about the company's legal arguments. Because ByteDance has said it will not sell TikTok, the ban will likely go into effect Sunday. (The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on Tuesday that Chinese officials have discussed the possibility of allowing Elon Musk to invest in or run the company's U.S. operations.)

Read More: [TikTok's Fate Arrives at the Supreme Court](#)

So many users are looking to establish themselves on other platforms. American companies have been preparing for this influx: Snap, for instance, announced a new [Monetization Program](#) last month, which places ads within eligible creators' videos.

But this week, Red Note and Lemon8 seem to be the main beneficiaries. Red Note was founded in 2013 as an online shopping guide before pivoting towards social media and e-commerce. Over

300 million people use the app, which is filled with Mandarin speakers delivering travelogues, beauty tutorials, animal videos and language lessons. Red Note also has a live online marketplace, a format extremely common in Asia, but much less prevalent in the U.S. While some new users noted that the name Red Note seems to allude to Mao Zedong's Little Red Book, the company has [stressed](#) that the names are unconnected.

Before this week, the few American users of Red Note had included musicians looking to tap into the Chinese market, like John Legend and Mariah Carey. This week, a wave of TikTokkers announced on that app that they would be migrating over to Red Note, and encouraged their followers to join them.

Marcus Robinson, a 29-year-old fashion designer, created a [Red Note account](#) to share his thrifting adventures and promote his clothing company, P-13. He previously had accrued 21,000 followers on TikTok, and estimates that 40% of his brand's sales came from that app. "I thought I was going to keep building and make a living ultimately," he says.

Robinson heard about Red Note on TikTok, set up an account, and started posting. After just 36 hours on the app, he already has nearly 10,000 followers and 22,000 likes. He engages with his Mandarin-language followers thanks to translations and captions provided by CapCut, an AI-powered video editing app owned by ByteDance. "I honestly feel like my brand will grow a lot quicker than it did on TikTok," he says. "They're all asking for clothes, asking me to model clothes. Everything's flying right now."

Shuler, the 32-year-old woodworker based in South Carolina, had been earning money from TikTok thanks to brand partnerships, the Creator Rewards program, and product commissions. Her [first post on Red Note](#), in which she announced herself as a TikTok refugee and gave a tutorial on how to install a sliding barn door, received 10,000 likes. "Right now, everyone's so positive and people are

caring,” she says. Other videos containing the hashtag “TikTokrefugee” have been viewed 100 million times.

Shuler says that her posts on Red Note are already performing better than those on the Meta platforms Instagram and Facebook. “Unless you pay Meta to promote your posts, they’re not really going to show it to people—so I’ve seen a significant drop in engagement on both of those platforms,” she says. “And Facebook is just a bunch of angry people on there. So it was refreshing to get on Red Note and know that my content was appreciated.”

Shuler says she’s even been learning a few Mandarin phrases thanks to the app. Neither she nor Robinson are particularly concerned about the data privacy worries associated with Chinese apps. “If you’ve already bought anything from Temu or Shien, I feel like whatever data that they want, they probably already have,” she says.

It is quite possible that Red Note’s honeymoon will be short-lived. Some users have expressed concern that Red Note will be quicker to censor content that is political, sexual or LBGTQ-related. And Red Note also faces a potential ban: While Congress’s Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act singles out TikTok and other ByteDance apps, it also [regulates](#) other “foreign adversary controlled applications.”

“Nobody thinks rednote is a viable long-term replacement,” [wrote](#) one Redditor on Monday. “This is just a form of protest; a big middle finger to the US government and their billionaire masters.”

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<https://time.com/7206781>

## Kate Middleton Says Her Cancer Is in Remission. Here's What That Means

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](#).



After announcing in March 2024 that she had been [diagnosed with cancer](#), Kate Middleton, Princess of Wales, has again spoken out about her illness—this time, with good news. “It is a relief now to be in remission and I remain focused on recovery,” Middleton announced [on X](#) on Jan. 14.

The remission announcement comes a few months after she [revealed](#) in September that she had completed chemotherapy treatment.

There's still a lot we don't know about the Princess's case, including what type of cancer she had. Here's what it means to be in remission from cancer.

## Defining “remission”

Cancer remission means that doctors have successfully reduced the signs and symptoms of cancer—in some cases, to undetectable levels. “Remission quite simply means that at that point, there is no detectable sign that cancer is in the body on all of the tests we have done,” says Dr. Sikander Ailawadhi, an oncologist and professor of medicine at Mayo Clinic. That doesn’t necessarily mean the cancer is completely gone, but it does mean that doctors can’t find it after thoroughly testing for it.

“The word remission is a very, very tricky word,” says Dr. Marleen Meyers, professor of medicine and director of the survivorship program at the Perlmutter Cancer Center of NYU Langone Health. “The common use of the word—even among oncologists, if they say someone is in remission—is that it means we have knowledge that it could come back, but at the moment, there is no evidence of cancer.”

The way the term “remission” is used can vary “from person to person and, really, physician to physician,” says Dr. Christopher Flowers, chair of the department of lymphoma and myeloma and head of the division of cancer medicine at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

**Read More:** [Why Are So Many Young People Getting Cancer? It’s Complicated](#)

The [National Cancer Institute](#), for example, defines two types of remission: partial and complete. In complete remission, all signs and symptoms of cancer have disappeared, the agency says, while in partial remission, the cancer may be reduced but remain in the body. (It's not clear from Middleton's post which kind of remission her cancer is in.) If people remain in complete remission for at least five years, it could mean they have been cured of their cancer.

"You have to have complete remission to be cured," says Dr. Larry Norton, an oncologist and medical director of the Evelyn H. Lauder Breast Center at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, "but complete remission doesn't guarantee that you're cured."

## Can cancer return after remission?

Cancer is notorious for recurring—even after remission—and some types are more likely to do so than others. "Certain kinds of cancers, such as glioblastoma multiforme [a brain cancer]—even if it's gone, it's going to come back very soon," says Ailawadhi.

"Similarly, pancreatic cancer, bladder cancer, and ovarian cancers have a very high risk of coming back—despite treatment, despite complete responses, despite remission." Small numbers of cancerous cells that doctors can't detect may start growing at any time. Most patients will continue to work with their doctors to monitor for any signs of these recurrences.

"I tell my patients that remission is an important milestone on the cancer journey to know you are on the pathway to cure," says Flowers. "It's the most positive first step to be in remission."

For now, the Princess says she is "looking forward to a fulfilling year ahead," and thanked the staff at the Royal Marsden Hospital, where she was treated, for "looking after me so well during the past year." The Princess has limited her royal duties since her diagnosis, but recently [appeared](#) at the family's annual Christmas Day service

in Sandringham and hosted the “[Together at Christmas](#)” carol service at Westminster Abbey in early December.

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<https://time.com/7206825>

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## We're Lucky to Have Been Alive in the Age of David Lynch

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.



Cigarettes, coffee, candy. According to legend, and to people who spent time with him, these were the things David Lynch would fuel up on, substances that kept him going and contributed to the mad, cosmic swirl of ideas that found their way—to our lasting pleasure—from his brain to the screen. None of these substances, in excess, is particularly good for us, and cigarettes especially are a killer: Lynch, who for most of his life just couldn't quit them, was diagnosed with emphysema in 2020, and he urged others off the habit, offering his own story as a cautionary tale. Of course, cigarettes don't make you a genius; neither do coffee or M&Ms. But Lynch's love for them is part of his lore. They're earthly remnants of his glorious, certified oddball spirit, like tools scattered around the workbench of a recently departed artisan. No one

thought or saw things as he did; no one made movies or TV shows as he did. Lynch, who has died just a few days shy of his 79th birthday, was so extraordinary that fairly early in his career, his last name became the foundation of a descriptive adjective. But even if he [inspired dozens, if not thousands, of filmmakers and TV creators](#), he remained inimitable. No one was more Lynchian than David Lynch.

If you were in high school or college anytime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, you knew about Lynch's unnerving, hypnotic black-and-white feature debut *Eraserhead*, even if you hadn't seen it. There was a lady, with strange, puffy, cauliflower-shaped cheeks, living in a radiator? And a deformed, pus-oozing baby? Once you heard about *Eraserhead*, you either rushed to see it, or you waited, unsure whether you could handle it. (That was me—though I eventually corrected my grievous error in judgment.)

Lynch's movies were like that: sometimes they felt a little intimidating, but once you gave yourself over to being beguiled, charmed, weirded-out, you only wanted more. They made strange things seem normal and normal things feel strange. I can't pass through steam rising from a grate without thinking of Lynch. Born in 1946 in Missoula, Mont., Lynch had originally aimed to be a painter; he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia, where, in 1967, he made his first short film. Not long after, he and his wife and daughter moved to Los Angeles: he enrolled at the AFI Conservatory, which was where *Eraserhead* was conceived and made. Mel Brooks was so taken with the film that he hired Lynch to direct a movie he was executive-producing, *The Elephant Man* (1980), set in Victorian London and based on the life of Joseph Merrick, who suffered from a rare genetic condition that caused abnormal growths to appear on his body. *The Elephant Man* is an elegant picture, one of Lynch's most straightforward and touching films—but even then, the joyful melancholy of its visual poetry is distinctly his own.

## **Read more:** [How Twin Peaks Changed TV Forever](#)

Lynch's next project was an ill-fated adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which has since become a cult favorite: Lynch's lesser films and shows are often more imaginative than other directors' best efforts. In 1990, he recalibrated everyone's idea of what television could be with a show steeped in genuine weirdness: In *Twin Peaks*, Kyle MacLachlan starred as Agent Dale Cooper, a detective who finds—what else?—darkness in the heart of a small, woodsy town in the Pacific Northwest as he investigates the murder of high school student Laura Palmer. Lynch revisited this material in 2017 with [\*Twin Peaks: The Return\*](#), set 25 years after the events of the original series. And in between, there were so many movies and side projects—from the black-comedy romance *Wild at Heart* (1990), to the glittering, noirish *Lost Highway* (1997), to a creamy, dreamy commercial for [\*Yves Saint Laurent's Opium\*](#) (1992), to a somber-shivery rat-centric 1991 [\*PSA for the New York City Department of Sanitation\*](#)—that there's no way to do justice to all of them here.

Maybe it's a fool's errand to try to narrow Lynch's greatest films down to two. Where would that leave his gorgeous and mournful 1992 *Twin Peaks: Firewalk with Me*, or 1999's homespun reverie *The Straight Story*, based on the true story of an elderly man who, having lost his driver's license due to his failing eyesight, drove a tractor from Iowa to Wisconsin to see his estranged, dying brother one last time? But for those who weren't around at the time, it's hard to convey how the release of [\*Blue Velvet\*](#) (1986) seemed to blow a hole in the world. MacLachlan stars as small-town naif—there's that *small-town* thing again—Jeffrey Beaumont, who discovers a severed ear in a field, a mystery he feels compelled to solve. This is how he meets nightclub singer Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini, radiant as a night-blooming flower), who's involved in a twisted relationship with sicko gangster Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper). *Blue Velvet* was perverted, depraved, upsetting—it was also so disarmingly seductive that it left you feeling more

than a little drugged, as if your brain had been rewired in a peculiar and irreversible way.

For that reason, we probably should have been ready for Lynch's 2001 *Mulholland Dr.*—but I, for one, wasn't. A tale of two aspiring starlets, played by Naomi Watts and Laura Harring, *Mullholland Dr.* begins in a sun-drenched Hollywood that still seems to be enjoying its heyday (Ann Miller shows up, brassy as ever, in red silk glamour PJs and saucy little spit-curls), only to swerve into a seedy nightmare version of itself. Seemingly every character has a dark, glittering secret; one has amnesia—she doesn't even remember what her secrets *are*. What, exactly, was going on here? *Mulholland Dr.* featured steamy, dreamy girl-on-girl sex; it was structured like a puzzle box you could never hope to understand; its pacing was liquid and languid, and yet it seemed to be over long before you wanted it to be. Was *Mulholland Dr.* anti-Hollywood or pro? It was definitely a condemnation of the town's greed and dishonesty. But Lynch was also luxuriating in its world of legends —its Spanish stucco mansionettes, its insistence that a girl from a tiny town could be discovered at a lunch counter and become a star —and found that he, like us, just couldn't let any of that go. Hollywood means so many things—it's a place that exists in multiple dimensions at once. No movie brought that home like *Mulholland Dr.*

That was what Lynch was all about. He genuinely believed in sunny, middle-American values, but he was also fearless about probing the wormy soil of the American spirit. Whatever it is that makes an American—a belief in kindness and goodness, the ability to dream big, an eagerness to extend a helping hand where it's needed—Lynch believed in all of it. He often claimed to be apolitical, and it's true that his politics have never been clear-cut. When *The Straight Story* came out, we all murmured that he was probably a Republican. In a 2018 *Guardian* interview, he observed that Donald Trump “could go down as one of the greatest presidents in history,” alluding to the way the 45th president had

disrupted the system—you could read that as praise or not, but in hindsight, most of us have to acknowledge Trump's almost mystical hold, even on people who should know better.

Rather than vest Lynch with any specific political bent, it's more helpful to think of him as a quintessentially American filmmaker: He was alive to all the things we do and think, to the horrors we visit upon the world that we have no excuse for, to the dishwater secrets we wish we could hide even from ourselves. But he also found beauty and joy in trees and birdsong, in the bluest of skies, the reddest of roses, the whitest of white picket fences. Near the end of *Blue Velvet*, Kyle MacLachlan's Jeffrey and Laura Dern's Sandy marvel at the sight of a robin with a bug clamped in its mouth: "It's a strange world, isn't it?" Sandy says with a cheerful smile, happy to embrace all of it. Because really, what's the alternative?

We live in awful times: many of us, horrified by both the facts of real news and the falsity of disinformation, say this to ourselves again and again. But there's something else we should be thinking about as we reflect on our collective pop-culture past and one man who shaped it like no other, bringing off-the-charts outlandishness to our television sets and the grandeur of both sweet dreams and nightmares to our movie screens. We're lucky to be alive right now; we're lucky to have been alive in the age of Lynch.

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<https://time.com/7207633>

## Cecile Richards Never Flinched

*Hogue is the co-founder and CEO of Democratic Futures Institute and a senior fellow at New America*



Ten days before the 2016 election, I was standing in a cinderblock room in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with Cecile Richards and other leaders of prominent women's groups, all of us out to make the case for Hillary Clinton's historic run for President. A jubilant crowd packed the town square waiting for the show to start, but Hillary was running late.

It turned out there was a good reason. FBI Director James Comey had just sent his infamous letter to Congress reopening the official investigation into Hillary's emails, throwing the election into turmoil in the home stretch. Hillary and her top advisers were huddling on the plane, trying to figure out how to weather this one last blow.

The mood backstage was anxious—but not Cecile. Elegant and perfectly coiffed as always, she posed for selfies, cracked jokes, and calmed the nerves of the stream of volunteers who strained to

get close enough to bask for a moment in her effervescent shine. Cecile's optimism and sense of purpose were infectious, and she saw every stop and disruption as a chance to enlist more recruits in the fight for more health care, more access to information, more freedom.

Once the rally finally started, Cecile's speech—punctuated with off-the-cuff jokes—drew a standing ovation. Afterward, we all decamped to a local bar where Cecile proceeded to transform it into a war room leading the pushback against the resurfaced claims of improperly handled email servers. That was Cecile in a nutshell: equal parts beloved doyenne and four-star general inspiring the people to take on the causes she loved. Cecile, who died Monday at 67 after a battle with brain cancer, loved a lot of people, and boy, did the people love her.

I first knew of Cecile Richards because of her mom. The first election cycle I was old enough to vote, I voted for Ann Richards for governor of Texas. Pulling the lever for Ann made my young Texan feminist heart flutter. Two decades later, I found myself almost speechless sitting across a table from her daughter at a downtown D.C. eatery. Cecile was the president of Planned Parenthood, and I had recently assumed the position of president of NARAL Pro-Choice America (now Reproductive Freedom for All). Cecile had taken me out to lunch to congratulate me, read the newbie into the movement strategy and—as I later learned—to induct me into a sisterhood of women who left perfectly respectable careers to instead fight for abortion rights.



Cecile cut her teeth on union organizing. She often spoke of “cutting turf”—dividing up which houses to visit—with her husband Kirk, sitting at their kitchen table late at night. Cecile had worked in the legendary Nancy Pelosi’s office on the Hill, learning the ins and outs of legislative policy. She was the founding president of the cutting-edge civic-engagement organization, America Votes. I know from experience that at that time, with that pedigree, many would have warned Cecile off the Planned Parenthood job. Moving into women’s rights, and especially abortion rights, was seen as a voluntary demotion for a powerhouse woman who could write her own ticket.

Cecile never flinched. She occupied the position with a zealousness of a missionary and the certainty of an oracle. Her aggressive warnings about the state of abortion care were dismissed by some as hysterical and shrill before becoming apparently prescient as the attacks on reproductive health care ramped up in President Obama’s second term. Cecile had a knack for turning attacks into opportunities. When the Susan G. Komen foundation announced they would defund Planned Parenthood because it provided abortions to patients, Cecile unleashed a juggernaut of fundraising that would grow the organization’s profile and bolster its resources for the wars to come. The summer I had my twins, schooled in the

lead-up by Cecile who had born her own twins years prior, Cecile was hauled to testify before Congress. I remember watching on TV while feeding my babies as an always-prepared Cecile stoically answered every cynical question, defending Planned Parenthood against politically trumped-up charges of doctored video footage. In 12 hours of relentless interrogation, she became a hero in the raging war of political disinformation, refusing to yield an inch that might jeopardize patients' access to life-changing care.

Cecile was also complicated. We collaborated, but we also fought. Like any good warrior, she liked to get her way and didn't mind sparring to get her point across. She could dispatch an adversary with a cool glance and a shrugged shoulder. But her internal compass was always set to justice, and when the joust was over, she was likely to chuckle and invite you out for a glass of wine, her eyes twinkling as she set sights on the bigger battles that she relished. As the reality of the post-Dobbs environment settled over the country, many mourned and shrank from the Herculean task of finding ways to support people who needed abortion care in an increasingly hostile environment. Not Cecile. She doubled down developing [Charley the chatbot](#), always ready to dispense medically accurate information. Even as her own health began to wane, Cecile was often imploring donors to give more and politicians to care more. She knew the stakes, and she would fight to the end.

Cecile Richards leaves a legacy of fearless service and a shining example for future generations of young women to follow.

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<https://time.com/7208699>

## How to Get Better at Doing Things Alone

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



As a recent college graduate in a new city, Samantha Elliott thought she'd be lonely. Instead, she found companionship in the most unexpected place: with herself. And that, ironically, helped expand her community.

“Being alone has this negative connotation, like it’s a punishment, but you’re learning to be friends with yourself,” says Elliott, who’s 24. Over the past few years, she’s gone on solo hikes and to concerts, museums, movies, and dinners alone—often meeting other people in the process. “It’s like I have this little secret with myself—this experience that was just for me,” she says. “Nobody knows it was a really lovely, profound time.”

Spending time going places and doing things alone can be transformative, says Jessica Gaddy, a therapist in Los Angeles and avid solo traveler. She encourages many of her clients to become more comfortable with solitude as a means of self-care and self-

exploration, and she helps them overcome their fears around venturing out alone. The potential benefits are extensive: Whether you're taking yourself across the world or to a coffee shop on the other side of town, "you're breaking outside of your comfort zone," she says. "That grows your capacity to take on other challenges in your day-to-day life."

Amid an [epidemic of loneliness](#), it may seem counterintuitive to carve out alone time. But as long as you also have a strong social network, [research suggests](#) that quality solo time boosts happiness, curbs stress, and improves life satisfaction. It can even make you [more productive and creative](#). Plus, when you're alone, you're able to get in touch with yourself in a way you can't when surrounded by other opinions and ideas. "You have this isolated time to drown out the noise and influences from other people," Gaddy says.

With that in mind, we asked experts how to master the art of spending time alone.

## **Start with a low-stakes outing**

Write down what you'd like to do by yourself, ranked from the most intimidating activity to the least, Gaddy suggests. Traveling internationally or attending a concert might be a 10, for example, while going to the park may be a three. Then, brainstorm ways to make the easiest one less nerve-racking. "Maybe it's driving by the park to get an idea of what your route would be and where you would walk, and to get comfortable with the environment," she says. The next step might be a short solo walk.

When she coaches clients through this exercise, "they usually come back and say, 'Oh, that wasn't so bad at all,'" Gaddy says—which means it's time to move up your list to the next challenge.

## **Do your homework beforehand**

Once you've decided to head out on your own, search online to figure out exactly where to go. Look up places nearby that are, for example, great for dining alone; lots of restaurants have cozy window seats that are ideal for solo meals (versus being seated somewhere with lots of action, like the middle of the dining room). "Sitting at a bar is always kind of nice because you're shoulder to shoulder with people, but you're still having your own meal or drink," Elliott says.

**Read More:** [\*How to Make Friends as an Adult—at Every Life Stage\*](#)

You could also read reviews of other places that cater to solo activities, like museums, art galleries, farmers markets, and spas. The more excited you are about what awaits you, the more likely you are to have a great time.

## **Bring along a distraction—at first**

When you start going places alone, it can be helpful to have something to focus on, like a book or journal. "You're giving yourself something that grounds you and reminds you of who you are, even when you're not around other people," says Sanna Khoja, a somatic therapist in Houston who focuses on teaching clients mind-body techniques, like [breathwork](#).

Keeping your headphones on and listening to a favorite podcast or audiobook can serve the same purpose. Eventually, as you get more comfortable, you'll likely feel empowered to ditch whatever you were busying yourself with and engage more directly with your surroundings—but in the early days, distractions provide a welcome sense of solace.

## **Lean into moments of connection**

On solo adventures, Elliott tells herself that even though she may have arrived alone, she's not actually there by herself. She's surrounded by potential friends. That mindset shift has helped her meet lots of interesting people.

**Read More:** [\*7 Things to Say When Someone Gaslights You\*](#)

Her go-to icebreaker when she goes somewhere is to admit she's nervous to be there by herself, but that she couldn't resist the beautiful decor; or, she might ask what the person sitting next to her recommends on the menu. "It becomes less of being alone and more just, 'I'm doing this thing to seek connections outside of who I already have in my circle,'" she says.

**If you feel awkward, remind yourself of your “why”**

Gaddy's clients are often skeptical about going places alone because they don't want others to assume they're lonely or friendless. Won't everyone gawk at that weirdo claiming a table for one? Probably not. That kind of thinking is an example of a cognitive bias called [the spotlight effect](#). "We tend to believe people are paying more attention to us than they actually are," Gaddy says. In reality, no one is likely to notice or care who you're with or what you're doing; they're too focused on themselves.

Keep sight of your "why"—the reason you're trying to get more comfortable with being your own company. "If your goal is to travel outside of the state or the country by yourself, then remind yourself, 'This is a step toward that goal,'" she says. You can also practice mindfulness techniques, like taking a few deep breaths or visualizing something peaceful, she adds.

**Learn from reflection**

When Gaddy's clients report back after solo outings, she asks them to walk her through the experience: What kind of initial butterflies did they have? "What were the narratives that helped them get into the restaurant, get seated, and get through the dinner?" she says. "What were those gentle reminders that pushed them through that? Because we can carry those into other scenarios."

In the future, when you board a plane alone or are standing solo in the line to get into the concert venue, you'll be able to replay those encouraging messages to keep your nerves at bay.

## Celebrate your accomplishments

The next time you venture out alone, reframe it as taking yourself on a date. When you get home, spend a few minutes celebrating the experience, Khoja suggests. Maybe that means journaling or posting a selfie on Instagram. Give yourself kudos for stepping outside of your comfort zone, even if it felt hard or if things didn't go exactly as planned. "That way, you associate doing something alone with celebration," she adds, which will buoy your efforts going forward.

## Remember: Spending time alone doesn't mean you're lonely

One of the biggest misconceptions Danny Stewart hears about enjoying solitude is that it means you're lonely. He grew up in a big family—he's one of five siblings—and always looked forward to his birthday, which was the one day a year he got to pick where his family ate and what they did. "Getting to be selfish for a day was a treat," says Stewart, 27, who lives in Mokena, Ill.

**Read More:** *The Daily Habits of Happiness Experts*

As an adult, he relishes his alone time when he gets to choose exactly what to do, and regularly goes to concerts, movies, baseball games, and conventions by himself. Yet that doesn't mean he'd pick spending time alone over being with his friends and family. "Life is still a team game. People give me strength, and spending time with loved ones is my favorite thing in the world," he says. "At the same time, spending time alone is part of my story, too."

He thinks of his solo adventures as his personal lore, something he'll turn over in his mind and smile about years from now. "Spending time by myself makes me appreciate those moments with my friends and family more," he says, "and spending time with all of my loved ones all the time makes me appreciate alone time more."

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<https://time.com/7205297>

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## How Doctors Are Pushing Medical Credit Cards on Patients

Semuels is a senior economics correspondent at TIME. She covers work, consumer spending, retail, gender, and technology. She is a four-time finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism, and she has won awards from the Society of Business Editors and Writers and the Los Angeles Press Club.



David Zhao signed up for a medical credit card while supine in a dentist's chair, fluoride trays in his mouth. In December 2018, the consumer lawyer from Los Angeles went for a routine dentist appointment at Western Dental in San Mateo, in the suburbs of Northern California. Zhao was told by the dentist that his gums were receding. He needed a special mouthguard or he'd have to have surgery, he recalls being told.

Zhao says he asked if the mouthguard was covered by insurance, and that office staff said that most of the cost was not. Instead, Zhao says, he was told he could sign up for a payment plan used by many of Western Dental's patients. As he lay in the chair, Zhao

recalls, an assistant came over with a clipboard and a document for him to initial. Zhao normally would have read each page of the document closely, scrutinizing the terms. But he had fluoride trays in his mouth and was stressed about his gum condition. “In hindsight, it was duress,” he says. After the appointment was over, he recalls, a Western Dental employee gave him a gift bag and escorted him out of the office.

Three weeks later, Zhao got a bill from Synchrony Bank, which owns CareCredit, the largest medical credit card company in the U.S. It was for \$1,200. Among the charges on the statement, which was reviewed by TIME, were \$425 for a mold made of his mouth and \$290 for the contents of the gift bag, which included an expensive mechanical toothbrush Zhou hadn’t requested, he says. But that was just the first surprise.

Though the dentist’s office had told Zhao he was signing up for a payment plan with no interest, he says, in fact he had signed up for what’s known as a deferred-interest credit card, which charges no interest on payments during a promotional period, but imposes hefty fees on top of the original payments if the user doesn’t pay off the entire balance within that time. Zhao says he had to take out a chunk of his savings to pay off the card so he wouldn’t be charged 26.99% in deferred interest. “I never want to have anything to do with the dentist ever again,” Zhao says.

### **Read More:** *Why You Can’t Find a Pediatrician.*

Western Dental said it has no history of any complaints with Zhao’s account and that it could not comment further for this story. Synchrony Bank said it could not comment specifically on Zhao’s case, but said in a statement that its financing solutions are “transparent and clear” and that they have saved cardholders billions of dollars in interest over the years.

Zhao's experience is not just the story of a bad encounter with a medical provider. It highlights the way medical credit cards are increasingly pushed on patients across America as the costs of health, dental, and veterinary procedures rise. CareCredit had 12 million cardholders and 270,000 participating providers in 2024, up from 4.4 million cardholders and 177,000 participating providers a decade prior, according to a May 2023 [report](#) by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). “The growing promotion and use of medical cards and installment loans,” the CFPB wrote, “can increase the financial burden on patients who may pay more than they otherwise would pay and may compromise medical outcomes.” Revenue for the medical patient-financing industry was \$15.3 billion in 2023, according to a report by the research firm IBISWorld, which found that as health care becomes less affordable due to rising premiums and insurance gaps, more patients are turning to medical loans or installment plans.

Medical credit cards may seem like a boon to both patients and providers. Doctors' offices can get paid up front without needing to chase down clients for billing or insurance reimbursement, while customers can get approved on the spot to finance procedures they might not otherwise be able to afford. The “deferred interest” component, which touts zero-interest loans during the promotional window, may also appeal to customers at a moment when interest rates are high. CareCredit is not the only medical credit card—others include ScratchPay, Alphaeon Credit, and HealthiPlan.

Some cards can come with startling terms and hidden costs, consumer-protection advocates say. If consumers don't pay off the balance of their card in the promotional period, they are charged all the interest that would have accrued since the original purchase date, at rates that can top 30%. CareCredit is the subject of a lawsuit seeking class-action status that was filed in New York in August 2024. It argues the card's interest rates—32.99% in May 2024—violate state usury laws, which cap interest rates on loan

payments. (Synchrony told TIME it could not comment about that lawsuit.)

“I don’t think people understand what they are signing up for,” says Elisabeth Benjamin, managing director of the Community Service Society of New York, a nonprofit research and advocacy group for people facing economic insecurity. “There are people who sign up for these CareCredit programs who don’t even have \$500 in savings.”

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**Sonia Romero, a nursing-home worker** from Los Angeles, went to House Dental in South Gate, Calif., in September 2021 to see about replacing some of her missing teeth. She says her dental provider told her to sign some forms to determine her eligibility for a payment plan that would help cover the procedure’s costs, but never mentioned Synchrony or CareCredit. Romero says she signed the forms but ultimately elected not to have the procedure done. So she was surprised when, a few months later, she received a bill from CareCredit for \$3,437. The provider had signed her up for CareCredit and charged her for a procedure she didn’t have—and she says that the provider would not remedy the mistake.

House Dental could not be reached by phone for comment for this story; multiple emailed requests for comment went unreturned.

Romero did not pay the bill, because she never even had the procedure. She thought the ordeal was over until September 2024, when she learned she was being sued by Cavalry SPV I LLC, a debt buyer, for unpaid debt. Cavalry says Romero now owes \$4,231.82. She plans to contest the debt in Los Angeles court in July 2025. “I was vulnerable because I’m embarrassed about my teeth,” Romero says, “and they took advantage of it.”

**Read More:** *Why Your Pharmacy Experience Is Miserable.*

Romero's case raises the question of whether problems with deferred-interest credit cards should be blamed on the card companies themselves, or on providers who allegedly mislead customers about what they're actually signing up for. Benjamin and other consumer advocates say that unscrupulous doctors, dentists, and veterinarians sometimes push consumers into signing up for medical credit cards even when their insurance or Medicaid will cover the procedure, or when they could potentially get financial assistance from nonprofit hospitals.

Some providers sign patients up without properly explaining how deferred interest works—or making it clear that people are signing up for a credit card at all, says Joy Dockter, senior attorney at Western Center on Law & Poverty, which provides advocacy services in California. In such cases, Dockter says, it's the providers, not the product they're pushing, that is the primary culprit. Still, Dockter says, "the medical credit-card providers make it so easy for them to be bad actors."

CareCredit said in a statement to TIME that all of its 270,000 participating providers must pass a training program that teaches providers how to explain that the product is a credit card, and to refer patients to disclosures about how the product works, the company says. CareCredit says that 80% of its cardholders pay off their balance before the promotional period ends, meaning they pay zero interest. People use CareCredit to purchase vitamins, beds, hearing aids, and fitness equipment, among other products, the company says. "For more than 35 years, CareCredit has offered convenient and transparent financing options that make health and wellness products and services more accessible for consumers," the company said in its statement.

**Read More:** [\*Why Health Care For Mothers Is Underpaid.\*](#)

Yet even if most CareCredit customers understand the deferred-interest promotion and pay off balances before the promotional

period ends, the company is making significant money on those that don't. The most recent public earnings report issued by Synchrony Bank states that the company's Health & Wellness products, of which CareCredit is the largest, earned \$956 million from interest and fees on loans in the third quarter of 2024, a 13% jump from the same period the previous year.

Even the savviest consumers can be confused by medical credit cards. Michael Imboden, a 52-year-old IT specialist from Atlanta, signed up for a CareCredit card in early 2024 to pay for \$5,400 hearing aids for his wife. Imboden says the paperwork did not detail many of the terms of the loan, including how much he would need to pay monthly in order to settle up within the promotional window and avoid deferred interest. He had to get a calculator and figure out the sum himself, since his bills just listed the minimum payment due and his balance. What's more, Imboden says, while he was told he had two years to pay off his loan, in reality he had 23 months. "It's a slippery slope," he says. "They're providing access to credit, but they're also betting on people missing a payment or not reading the fine print." He paid off the bill on time, but worries that others will be saddled with unexpected costs.

Medical credit cards with deferred interest often end up hurting people with lower credit scores, according to the CFPB. People with credit scores below 619 accrued interest on about one-third of deferred-interest health care purchases, according to the bureau, meaning that those customers were not able to pay off their cards before the promotional period ended. As a result, many wound up in debt. Eventually, if consumers miss too many payments, their credit score will be affected. If their debt grows big enough, credit-card companies often sue them over the debt.

Debt-collection lawsuits often end up with a judgment in favor of the card issuers, says Chi Chi Wu, senior attorney at the National Consumer Law Center. In some cases, Wu says, that allows the

credit-card company to garnish the customer's wages or take money from their bank account.

States have made attempts to more closely regulate medical credit cards. A California law that went into effect [in 2020](#) requires the patient, not the provider, to fill out the application and prohibits them from doing so while under anesthesia. A [bill passed in Illinois](#) in August 2024 prohibits dentists and their staff from completing customers' applications for third-party lines of credit and bans dentists' offices from signing patients up for third-party credit cards with deferred-interest provisions. "I wanted to make sure that if you're going forward with a deferred-interest credit card, you know what you're signing up for," says Margaret Croke, the Illinois state representative who sponsored the bill. The CFPB [said last year](#) that it was planning to monitor how financial institutions market their products to health care providers, looking especially at whether financial institutions are putting borrowers at risk.

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## No One Won the War in Gaza

Rodenbeck was a foreign correspondent for *The Economist* for more than 20 years.



After 15 months of agony, [the potential Gaza ceasefire](#) comes as a colossal relief not just for Palestinians and Israelis, but for the wider Middle East. True, the deal is narrow in size and scope. It covers a physical space scarcely bigger than Martha's Vineyard. The actual terms of [the first phase](#) of the ceasefire agreement extend no farther than a pause in fighting, an exchange of [some hostages](#) and a partial Israeli withdrawal. Given recent precedent, the fragility of Israel's ruling coalition and the yawning gap between the belligerents, this deal is just as likely to collapse, or simply to lapse, as to foster a longer-term peace. Still, even a temporary lowering of the regional heart rate allows for useful reflection.

The modern Middle East is prone to shifting alliances and balances of power, but each turn of the kaleidoscope tends to tumble only one piece of the multicolored pattern at a go. This time, the rearrangement looks far more radical than the puny size of Gaza

might have suggested. Perhaps not since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 has the regional puzzle been so swiftly and wholly transformed. In those six days Israel conquered East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Syria's Golan Heights and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, upending a two-decade-long status quo, shattering Arab dreams, expanding America's role, and making the Jewish State an occupying power and turning millions of Palestinians into a subject people.

By contrast the Gaza crisis has lasted far longer than any previous Arab-Israeli clash. Its cost in lives has been immensely higher, too. An epidemiological study published this month in *The Lancet*, Britain's top medical journal, suggests that 70,000 Gazans may have been killed so far, a grisly tally that is more than three times greater than the total number of Israelis, military and civilian, killed in all the wars and terror attacks Israel has faced since its founding in 1948. Even so, Hamas's easy breach of Israeli defenses on Oct. 7, and Israel's loss of 1,200 lives in a single day were an unprecedented shock to the Jewish State. But as in 1967 the reverberations of the war have reached beyond the immediate parties to Israel's other neighbors and even more distant countries across the region, often in unexpected ways.

How so? At a dinner party in Cairo, the Egyptian capital, a guest speaks with dark sarcasm of the singular achievements of Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas mastermind behind the horrendous Oct. 7, 2023, attack that sparked the current conflagration (an Israeli drone killed Sinwar a year later). “Isn’t it amazing how one man achieved in one year what millions of people couldn’t do in decades?” she asks rhetorically, ticking off the effects. “Because of him Israel destroyed Hezbollah in Lebanon, and because of that the Assad regime fell in Syria, and because of that Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’ collapsed.” She pauses for effect, then adds that it is to Sinwar’s “genius” that we owe the prolonging of Benjamin Netanyahu’s political life as Israel’s prime minister, as well as the rescue of the

Egyptian leader, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, from mounting debts and other troubles.

The sarcasm is merited. Each of these “successes” represents an own-goal for Hamas. The Palestinian Islamist group was allied to and funded by the now strategically diminished Islamic Republic of Iran. The Assad family in Syria were no special friends to Hamas, but Israel took advantage of their fall to obliterate Syria’s entire arsenal of heavy weapons, putting one more potential regional adversary out of military action for perhaps a generation.

Netanyahu is far more popular in Israel now than before the war and the Egyptian leader, who has viciously persecuted its parent organization, the global Muslim Brotherhood, has been reprieved by Western creditors in reward for maintaining a stony silence over Gaza.

To be fair, Sinwar at immense cost to both Israelis and Palestinians did achieve some of his real aims. He put the plight of Palestinians back in the global spotlight. He undermined efforts to widen Israel’s web of treaties with Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia. He shamed Israel, first by exposing its military incompetence and then by provoking a response so violent that it has severely damaged the country’s moral standing. But the people of Gaza are not the only ones in the region to ask, now, whether Sinwar’s gamble was worth it.

The Hamas leader’s reckless play has left Israel, as it was briefly after the 1967 war, an almost undisputed mini-hegemon in the region. Its Arab neighbours are military dwarves by comparison, and in most cases too absorbed in internal affairs to care much for the fate of the Palestinians. Iran has burned its fingers, and all that even nuclear weapons would bring is a new level of stand-off with Israel—which is in any case a rather far-off country that many ordinary Iranians do not regard as an enemy. The timely arrival in Washington of a new, even more gung-ho Israel-first administration than Joe Biden’s, which bankrolled Netanyahu’s Gaza offensive to

the tune of \$17.9 billion, simply underlines Israel's military dominance.

But as in 1967, Israel's triumph comes loaded with unwanted responsibilities. Back then, wise Israelis counseled that to remain an occupying power over an understandably angry people was not only morally repugnant, but could erode Israel's own society. That advice was ultimately ignored in favor of an undeclared policy of creeping annexation and colonization. The result is that today Israel rules over populations of Palestinians and of Jewish Israelis that are almost equal in number but disturbingly skewed in terms of rights and wealth and outlook. This is hardly a recipe for peaceful coexistence.

Yet because of unquestioning support from America and other Western backers, because of perpetual Arab disarray and because of its own rightward political drift, Israel has persisted in this direction. The temptation to dig the hole deeper is even stronger just now, with Gaza a smoldering ruin and all potential regional challengers cowed. Can Israel now rise to the wisdom of being magnanimous in victory? Alas, the signs are not good.

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<https://time.com/7207787>

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## ‘Not Returning Breaks My Heart.’ A Gazan in Egypt Considers Where to Go Next

Murtaja is a sister, a wife, a mom, a teacher, and a writer from Gaza.



*In her [first](#) letter from Gaza, the former blogger Amal Murtaja described daily life in war. A second [dispatch](#) closed with the news that she had managed to escape to Egypt with her children. Murtaja, who taught English at Gaza’s American International School, wrote this from Giza, outside Cairo.*

As the potential cease-fire agreement neared, the news was a whirlwind of conflicting reports. It was so nerve-wracking, especially with most of my friends and relatives still in Gaza, that I honestly stopped following closely. I didn’t want to get my hopes up. Then, two days ago, my WhatsApp notifications went crazy. I knew something was happening. I turned on the TV and saw the [news](#) of the cease-fire. A wave of ambivalence washed over me, and the tears followed immediately.

Memories of Eman, my brother’s wife, and my nephews, Omar and

Zaid, who we [lost](#) in October, overwhelmed me. Zaid would have turned 5 this year, and Omar 6. I pictured my burnt house, where I lived so many happy days, and my demolished school, where I built a second family with my colleagues, and the vibrant classrooms now reduced to rubble. I pictured my parents' house, the ultimate source of safety and love. These images of what once was—and now exists only as a memory—flooded my mind. Any joy the ceasefire might bring felt minimized, even overshadowed by these emotions.

The past 15 months—though they've felt like years—have been incredibly challenging. Adjusting to a new environment and navigating a slightly different culture has been tough, not just for me but for Mohammed and Ali as well. Even now, I often find myself staring out the window, asking, “Where am I?” Egypt is undoubtedly a beautiful place, and the people are warm and loving, and while I’ve grown more familiar with it, it still feels strange to me, like a place I’m living in but not quite a part of yet.

I’ve been trying to settle in, establishing a new routine, learning the streets, and getting to know my neighbors. But this new life, which I’m forcing myself to grow accustomed to, feels nothing like my past life in Gaza. Nothing feels right. I keep comparing everything around me to Gaza. Gaza was a small city with limited resources, yet it was “enough.” The people, the family, the friends, the food, the history, the memories—they made it a place of belonging.

The small equestrian club where I took Mohammed and Ali every Friday, the smile on my kids’ faces every time they rode a horse was enough. The three-story mall with its little shops and the familiar faces of the shopkeepers was enough. The food court with only 5 restaurants, where I taught Mohammed, at age 7, how to order a meal by himself, that first hesitant “Excuse me, sir...” followed by his beaming smile—those moments, those simple joys, were enough. The holy month of Ramadan and the feasts we shared with our family and friends, the table laden with fragrant dishes,

the anticipation of breaking our fast together, the laughter and warmth that filled the room—those were enough. The bustling streets during Eid, a symphony of colors and sounds, visiting our relatives and friends, the excitement of my children as they insisted on laying out their new clothes on their beds the night before, eager to wear them at the crack of dawn—these simple pleasures were enough. The parties, my best friends and I threw every now and then, whenever the school stressed us out, to let off some steam and feel less stressed by criticizing the school system together laughing until our sides ached, those were the nights that built the bonds that truly mattered. Now, I can't remember the last time I saw all my friends together, and I rarely see those who have made it to Egypt, we are scattered in the vastness of this country. I miss them all tremendously; they truly are like family to me. Egypt is fascinating, but not "enough." And voices keep whispering in my ears, "You don't fit in."

Life in Egypt hasn't been kind to us, and we've had more than our share of struggles. Not having residency here has created enormous barriers in our attempt to rebuild and move forward. It has hindered us from accessing basic opportunities and what one might call "life." After a month-long search, I finally found a school willing to accept Mohammed and Ali without residency. But because we lack proper documentation, they won't receive end-of-year certificates. While I'm grateful they're learning, it's disheartening knowing there's no official record to show for it.

Despite my 12 years of teaching experience, I haven't been able to find a job here, years of dedication and passion, seem to hold no weight in this country yet. My husband Ramadan hasn't been able to start a business either. He managed to join us in April, which honestly felt like a miracle. If he had been just one day late crossing the border, he'd still be stuck there. Our son Ali, three at that time, clung to Ramadan's neck beaming and said, "Daddy what took you so long?" and Mohammed stood in the corner in disbelief before he burst out, hugging Ramadan, crying. The

memory still brings a lump to my throat. Starting over from scratch has been forced upon us but let me tell you—it's unbelievably hard.

Even with all these challenges and obstacles, there's no way for my family and me to return. We have lost everything—our house is completely burned down, my mother-in-law's house, my parents' house, my husband's place of business, and my school are shut down. We have lost everything, so returning is not an option for me. The echoes of the bombings still ring in my ears, a constant reminder of the life we once knew. Palestinians in Egypt have been vocal about returning, with some wanting to return tomorrow and others, like me, having lost everything and finding it impossible. I mean, we share the same desire—if we wanted to start over, we'd like to do so in a safe and healthy environment for ourselves and our children, especially since there is no absolute guarantee that another war might erupt at any time. I'm 35, and my husband is 37. I can't risk losing more years of my life in a city where everything can, and most probably will, be lost in the blink of an eye.

You know, we have gone through several wars before, but this one is the most vicious and devastating. We never had to leave our homes during any of the previous wars, and we never experienced such significant loss. I genuinely feel like I've betrayed my friends when I ask them in the WhatsApp group how they are. Their suffering haunts me. I feel like sending them a message to inquire about their well-being from the comfort of my home, while they take refuge in a tent or a group shelter, is a betrayal. I keep telling them that I feel for them, and I truly do, but I know that deep down they wish they were far away from this bloodshed and horror. They all have nothing left to lose now, just like me. None of them have their homes still intact, and all of them have suffered the loss of a relative or a loved one. We also lost a few of the friends we know and love. They are all so fed up with everything that's happening, worn out, that they've even lost their passion for life. It's like they've forgotten what happiness feels like. Believe it or not, the ceasefire news didn't cheer them up the way you'd expect. It's

happiness mixed with fear, sorrow and uncertainty. They were all saying things like,

- “Yeah, whatever, we just want this to be over.”
- “I hope it’s true this time.”
- “I hope none of the sides break the agreement.”
- “The only thing we won is surviving; other than that, we were the true victims.”
- “I just have no idea what’s the right thing to do? Fix my home or leave Gaza or just wait?”
- “I’m too tired to think, I just want peace and quiet and I want to return to my home.”
- “Guys, I’m not ‘very’ happy. Is this normal?”
- “Once the border opens, I’m getting out of this hellhole.”
- “We’re all happy we made it out alive.”

The conversation was long and filled with sarcasm, grim laughter at our shared struggle. They are as clueless about the future as I am. They are divided between those who want to travel and leave everything behind, and those who wish to travel but are too broke to do so and those who are already in Egypt and want to return, and those who will return to their homes no matter the conditions.

Most Gazans in Egypt have decided to return. As I mentioned, life in Egypt hasn’t been easy, given that we lack residency permits, restricting us from moving freely, and of course the financial reasons. Whatever money people had been saving is almost finished. Some people immigrated to countries like Australia, Canada, and others around the world, and even they yearn to return. Gaza may be small but Gaza is enough.

War has stripped us all of our lives—both figuratively and literally—of our aspirations for the future, and of our desire to live. Now, we are all in survival mode, whether in Gaza or out. We are equally struggling and trying to rebuild our lives, we are all equally bewildered and have no idea what’s right and what’s wrong about

the next phase in our lives. We all feel trapped, unable to find a way out of this spiral of consuming thoughts about our future and our kid's lives.

The thought of me not returning breaks my heart. I never thought that I'd ever leave my hometown. Memories, vivid and painful keep flashing through my eyes, and I just can't help but cry. Even if I did return, it wouldn't be the same. The echoes of war would linger, a constant reminder of the life we had lost. The real war starts now. With everyone not knowing what to do with their lives. Not knowing which decision is the right decision. Everything we think is both right and wrong. We're lost in a sea of doubt, despair and uncertainty.

So I'll end up with this fragile promise, I may not return now, or for the next few years, but I'm sure I'll go back one day.

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# My Son Hersh Was Killed in Gaza. I Won't Stop Speaking Out Until All Hostages Are Home

Rachel Goldberg-Polin is an American-Israeli whose son Hersh was kidnapped by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023. With her husband Jonathan, she has been prominent in the movement to free the hostages and end the war in Gaza.



My only son, Hersh, was kidnapped from a music festival on Oct. 7, 2023, after having his dominant forearm and hand blown off. He

was held captive, tortured, starved and then, after 328 days, [shot](#) in the hand (his only one), shoulder, neck and twice in the head in a dark and airless tunnel in Gaza on Aug. 29, 2024.

Hersh's name had been on [the list](#), in July, of who would be released in a deal between Hamas and Israel. But that deal did not happen, because decision makers [did not want it to happen](#). And Hersh, along with [five other beautiful young people](#), with whom he was being held hostage, are now all dead.

My husband Jon and I, after [having suffered](#) more than 300 days of every parent's nightmare of utter and indescribable torment, continued [advocating](#) and pushing for the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza. We did not want anyone else to go through what we are and will continue grappling with for the rest of our lives. At this time there are 98 hostages still in Gaza. The live hostages must come home to be physically and psychologically rehabilitated, and the deceased must return to have proper and respectful burials.

Finally, on Wednesday, the news came that [a deal](#) was reached and will begin to be implemented imminently.

Over 200 messages flooded my phone. People seemed confused that Jon and I are relieved and happy that so many of our hostage community, with whom we feel like family, will finally be reunited with their loved ones. This does not mean we are not in agonizing mourning and oozing with grief for our beloved Hersh, who we buried 135 days ago. It means we can hold two truths; we can even hold more.

Humans are fascinating creatures. We can experience a multitude of diverse feelings simultaneously. So we can experience suffering while still having the capacity to laugh, we can be longing for someone and capable of celebration, we can be weeping and resilient, we can be yearning and hopeful.

What is essential to us at this moment is that we make sure this phase of the deal is the *beginning* of the end, and *not the end*. Getting out 33 cherished human beings is critical. BUT, there are still going to be 65 hostages left in captivity. This remains a microcosm of failure of all of humanity.



The remaining hostages represent [23 different nations](#). They are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. The youngest is Kfir Bibas, who will turn two years old on Saturday, Jan. 18. And the oldest is Shlomo Mansur, who is 86 years old. They are both slated for being released in this first phase of the deal. Yet back in November 2023, they were also supposed to be released (as was my son Hersh), but the deal broke down and now Hersh is dead. I pray Kfir and Shlomo come home as planned, alive and able to recover.

In addition, the [innocent Gazans who have suffered terribly](#) since the Hamas attack on Oct. 7, 2023 also severely and critically need relief and recovery immediately. So this deal must happen, to the very end, with everyone in the region finally able to quench our common desperate need for solace.

While I remain ever optimistic and cautiously sanguine, a deal is not a deal [until](#) it is successfully completed.

Godspeed to us all.

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## A Trump-Biden Fight Over Credit For the Gaza Ceasefire Misses the Point

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*This article is part of [The D.C. Brief](#), TIME's politics newsletter. Sign up [here](#) to get stories like this sent to your inbox.*

Even before the peace [deal](#) in the Middle East had been put to page and circulated among the many anxious stakeholders, the question of credit was already at the fore. It was, as most things dealing with that region and Washington's tentacles into it, anything but an easy verdict.

As President Joe Biden on Wednesday finished announcing the deal that would potentially end a 15-month war in Gaza, a reporter asked the twilight leader in the White House entry hall: "Who gets credit for this, you or Trump?" A puzzled Biden turned around and asked if the query was a joke. It clearly was not, nor did it carry a

clear answer. The unlikely and uncomfortable answer is each man carried some responsibility for the agreement.

The fight between the Israelis and Palestinians has been a slog since October of 2023, when Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and took 250 hostage, according to Israeli [tallies](#). The event precipitated a massive response that plunged the region into chaos and left world leaders flummoxed by its ricochet. Palestinians [say](#) more than 46,000 of their people have died—about half being women and children—in an unrelenting ground and air campaign from Israel.

The [deal](#) announced in principle on Wednesday puts a halt to that conflict, starting in phases that kick off with hostage-for-prisoner trades and a six-week ceasefire. But the deal itself was a byproduct of complicated diplomacy back in the United States, with Biden's team working closely with President-elect Donald Trump's incoming team and regional partners in Doha. The two-fold U.S. cooperation between otherwise rival camps came after a hard-fought election in which both sides offered competing visions of peace in the Middle East, and which key leaders in Gaza were closely monitoring. It's not a stretch to say the election-year calendar in the United States likely dragged out the negotiations far longer than might have been seen during a non-election season.

Ultimately, both Biden and Trump had a hand to play, and historians for generations will mull which pol had the bigger role. In the immediate wake of the deal, though, both sought to claim credit.

Trump, preempting Biden's announcement, said the deal "only happened as a result of our Historic Victory in November." Trump has been warning Hamas that there would be "hell to pay" if the hostages were not released before he takes office on Monday, and his negotiator, Steve Witkoff, has been conducting his own form of

shuttle diplomacy in the region while Biden's Middle East guru, Brett McGurk, has been joining by speakerphone.

For his part, Biden sought to cast the breakthrough as something that dated back to his framework announced in May and was only realized in recent weeks because of his team's persistence. "Its terms will be implemented for the most part by the next administration," Biden said. "For the past few days we have been speaking as one team."

The eleventh-hour diplomatic push carried plenty of echoes of 1981 and the Iran hostage crisis that ended just as President Jimmy Carter was leaving office and Ronald Reagan arrived in Washington. It's a comparison that Trump's team has been less-than-subtle in promoting, though its historical parallels certainly have their limits. (For instance, it does not seem like Trump's team had its own John B. Connally Jr. flying around the region to [torpedo](#) an election year peace deal the way Reagan did. Trump's belligerent threats, however, suggest his friend Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was more inclined to give Trump the win than his foil Biden.)

Biden, though, proved to be in the job when the deal here came together, and he called it "one of the toughest negotiations I've ever experienced." Despite Trump's insistence that he was to credit for the deal, his envoy Witkoff made clear to reporters that McGurk was the man with the brief. The cooperation between the outgoing and incoming teams was hardly the stuff of buddy films, but both teams rightly noted that the crisis demanded more than political hacking to get it done.

With Trump's Inauguration scheduled for next week and his campaigns over for all practical purposes, the credit question is mostly one for egos and presidential libraries. Biden is coasting toward his retirement years, Trump is roaring back to Washington this weekend to set in motion a second term. Both will rightly want

to snag the prize of credit for the agreement but neither reached it alone. In perhaps the oddest last-chapter twist, Trump probably helped Biden get one last win as President, and Biden likely set in motion the first victory of Trump's second term. It's tough to imagine either finds much pleasure in that piece of history, but sometimes that make-it-work ethos is what the office requires.

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## Breaking Down All of Trump's Day 1 Presidential Actions

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Within hours of his [Inauguration](#), President [Donald Trump](#) set out to fulfill a number of his [campaign promises](#), issuing a spate of presidential actions on everything from [the border](#) to federal building architecture.

The White House's website lists 46 presidential actions on Jan. 20. The first four were administration staffing announcements—Trump's [Cabinet](#) and [sub-cabinet](#) nominations as well as his designations of [acting Cabinet](#) and [Cabinet-level leaders](#) and [chairs of various commissions](#). Of the rest, 26 were executive orders, 12 were memorandums, and four were proclamations.

## **Read More:** Trump 2.0 Was Pitched as Less Chaotic. The Orders Tell a Different Story

What these different types of presidential actions mean and how much authority they each carry isn't always clear. Many are also likely to face swift challenges in court. Here's what to know.

Constitutionally, the President can't create laws, but he does have broad authority to direct how the federal agencies enforce them. There is no official definition of executive orders or memoranda or proclamations, though they are generally written directives from the President to government officials and agencies, and they've been issued by every President since George Washington. "The distinction between these instruments," according to a [Congressional Research Service report](#), "seems to be more a matter of form than of substance."

"The only technical difference," the CRS report states, "is that executive orders and proclamations must be published in the *Federal Register*, while presidential memoranda are published only when the President determines that they have 'general applicability and legal effect.'"

Historically, executive orders have dealt with more controversial topics, while memoranda often cover more routine directives to federal agencies that require less public scrutiny, such as instructions to issue a report, according to the CRS report.

Proclamations, according to the [Library of Congress](#), deal with the activities of private individuals and today tend to be more ceremonial in nature. They are typically used, according to the *Federal Register*, when the President "communicates information on holidays, commemorations, special observances, trade, and policy."

“If issued under a valid claim of authority and published, executive orders and presidential memoranda have the force and effect of law,” according to [another CRS report](#). However, because they are based on implied authority, “it is important to examine the legal basis for each executive order and presidential memoranda issued and the manner in which the President has used these instruments.”

Executive orders can be reviewed by the judicial branch, and they can also be ratified or nullified by the legislative branch, according to [another CRS report](#), which also points out that “they can also be impermanent because a later President can, generally, revoke or modify any previously issued executive order with which he disagrees”—something Trump has expressly said he is seeking to do to many of former President Joe Biden’s presidential actions.

### **Opinion: *The Steep Price of Trump’s Executive Orders***

Below are summaries of all the executive orders, memoranda, and proclamations Trump issued on Jan. 20.

## **Proclamation on flying flags at half-staff**

After [former President Jimmy Carter died on Dec. 29](#), President Biden, following U.S. Flag Code, issued a [proclamation](#) for flags to be flown at half-staff for 30 days at all public buildings, including the White House, military posts and naval stations, and embassies. Trump, however, [expressed his displeasure](#) at the idea of flags being flown at half-staff on the day of his Inauguration, prompting Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and a number of Republican governors to order flags to be flown at full-staff on Jan. 20 at the Capitol and state buildings.

As his first move back in office, Trump issued a proclamation titled [“Flying The Flag Of The United States At Full-Staff On Inauguration Day”](#) that ordered flags to be flown at full-staff on all Inauguration Days, including the current one. Trump’s

proclamation stated that the flag may be lowered back to half-staff, in memory of President Carter, once Inauguration Day ended.

## **Executive order on rescinding previous executive orders**

Trump issued an executive order titled “[Initial Rescissions Of Harmful Executive Orders And Actions](#),” revoking 78 executive orders and memoranda issued by the Biden Administration, many to do with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and tackling the climate crisis. Trump’s order accused the Biden Administration of having “embedded deeply unpopular, inflationary, illegal, and radical practices within every agency and office of the Federal Government.”

## **Executive order on freedom of speech**

Trump issued an executive order titled “[Restoring Freedom Of Speech And Ending Federal Censorship](#)” that claimed the Biden Administration “trampled free speech rights by censoring Americans’ speech on online platforms” under the guise of combating disinformation and misinformation. The order directs the Attorney General to investigate federal policies of the past four years and to recommend appropriate remedial action.

## **Executive order on the ‘weaponization’ of government**

Trump issued an executive order titled “[Ending The Weaponization Of The Federal Government](#)” that directs the Attorney General to “identify and take appropriate action to correct” supposed “politically motivated” law enforcement activity at the Department of Justice, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Federal Trade Commission. The order also calls on the Director of

National Intelligence to do the same with regard to the intelligence community.

## **Memorandum ending remote work**

Trump issued a memorandum titled “[Return to In-Person Work](#),” which orders federal employees in the executive branch to terminate all remote-work arrangements.

## **Memorandum limiting new regulations**

In a memorandum titled “[Regulatory Freeze Pending Review](#),” Trump ordered all executive departments and agencies not to propose any rule or directive until a department head reviews and approves it.

## **Memorandum stopping federal hiring**

Trump issued a memorandum titled “[Hiring Freeze](#),” ordering a pause on recruiting federal civilian employees in the executive branch, effective as of noon on Jan. 20. The memorandum, however, has some exceptions, including that it does not apply to military personnel and to positions related to immigration enforcement, national security, or public safety. It also asks the Director of the Office of Management and Budget to submit a plan within 90 days “to reduce the size of the Federal Government’s workforce through efficiency improvements and attrition,” at which point the hiring freeze will be lifted except for the IRS, for which the freeze is indefinite.

## **Memorandum on ‘emergency price relief’**

In a memorandum titled “[Delivering Emergency Price Relief for American Families and Defeating the Cost-of-Living Crisis](#),” Trump directed executive departments and agencies to implement

so-called “emergency price relief” measures to lower the cost of housing, health care, food, and fuel costs—as well as create employment opportunities for workers. No specific measures were outlined, though the memorandum calls on the Assistant to the President for Economic Policy to report every 30 days thereafter on the status of implementation.

## **Executive order on withdrawing from international climate agreements**

Trump issued an executive order titled “[Putting America First In International Environmental Agreements](#),” which effectively withdraws the U.S. from the landmark Paris Agreement that focuses on reducing countries’ carbon emissions. It also orders the withdrawal of the U.S. from any other international climate pacts as well as any financial commitments the U.S. made to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, and it immediately revokes the U.S. International Climate Finance Plan.

**Read More:** [\*What Happened The Last Time Trump Withdrew From the Paris Agreement\*](#)

## **Proclamation pardoning Jan. 6 Capitol rioters**

In a proclamation titled “[Granting Pardons And Commutation Of Sentences For Certain Offenses Relating To The Events At Or Near The United States Capitol On January 6, 2021](#),” Trump pardoned all who were criminally charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol by his supporters that injured more than 100 police officers, except for 14 individuals, for whom he commuted the sentences to time served. He also ordered the dismissal of all pending indictments related to Jan. 6. The sweeping clemency directive is believed to cover over 1,500 defendants.

**Read More:** *Some Fear Trump's Jan. 6 Pardons Will Spur More Violence*

## Executive order delaying TikTok ban

Trump, in an executive order titled, “[Application Of Protecting Americans From Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act To TikTok](#),” effectively delayed the U.S. ban, which was passed with broad bipartisan support by Congress and unanimously upheld by the Supreme Court, of Chinese-owned shortform video app TikTok for 75 days. The order came after the app’s brief shutdown over the preceding weekend.

**Read More:** *Here's What Happened When India Banned TikTok in 2020*

## Executive order withdrawing from the World Health Organization

Trump issued an executive order titled “[Withdrawning The United States From The World Health Organization](#),” fulfilling a campaign promise. Trump had pushed for the U.S. to leave the international health organization near the end of his first term in 2020, citing failed handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Biden reversed the withdrawal when he took office in 2021. According to [Devex](#), the U.S. withdrawal could cost the WHO some \$130 million in annual financial backing.

**Read More:** *What Leaving the WHO Means for the U.S and the World*

## Executive order on hiring and firing federal employees

Trump's executive order titled "["Restoring Accountability To Policy-Influencing Positions Within the Federal Workforce"](#)" restores and amends an [executive order from his first term](#) and rescinds a Biden executive order that effectively makes it easier to hire and fire certain federal civil servants, with an eye toward loyalty.

An addendum to the reinstatement states: "Employees in or applicants for Schedule Policy/Career positions are not required to personally or politically support the current President or the policies of the current administration. They are required to faithfully implement administration policies to the best of their ability, consistent with their constitutional oath and the vesting of executive authority solely in the President. Failure to do so is grounds for dismissal."

## **Executive order revoking security clearances**

Trump issued an executive order titled "["Holding Former Government Officials Accountable For Election Interference And Improper Disclosure Of Sensitive Governmental Information."](#)" The order revokes the security clearances of more than four dozen former intelligence officials, including Trump's first-term national security advisor John Bolton, who signed a 2020 letter saying that published information purportedly from one of Hunter Biden's laptops smacked of "a Russian information operation." Trump's executive order declares that it is U.S. policy "that the Intelligence Community not be engaged in partisan politics or otherwise used by a U.S. political campaign for electioneering purposes" and "that classified information not be publicly disclosed in memoirs, especially those published for personal monetary gain."

## **Proclamation declaring a 'national emergency' at the southern border**

In a proclamation titled “[Declaring A National Emergency At The Southern Border Of The United States](#),” Trump declared a “national emergency” that calls for military personnel and resources to help secure the southern border, including through additional physical barriers as well as drones.

**Opinion:** [\*Trump’s Emergency Declaration at the Border Is an Abuse of Power\*](#)

## **Memorandum on resolving delayed security clearances**

In a memorandum titled “[Memorandum to Resolve the Backlog of Security Clearances for Executive Office of the President Personnel](#),” Trump ordered the White House counsel to “provide the White House Security Office and Acting Chief Security Officer with a list of personnel that are hereby immediately granted interim Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) security clearances for a period not to exceed six months,” to address supposed backlogs that have prevented workers’ access to the White House complex, infrastructure, and technologies.

Some have criticized the move for lacking transparency. “The only cases where this would apply, obviously, are to people who did not qualify for a top secret security clearance,” journalist Roger Sollenberger [posted on X](#). “Also, will the public be able to know who gets the special Trump clearance? Or will that list be private?”

## **Memorandum on trade**

Trump issued a memorandum titled “[America First Trade Policy](#)” addressed to multiple Cabinet secretaries, the U.S. Trade Representative, the Assistant to the President for Economic Policy, the Senior Counselor for Trade and Manufacturing, and the director of the Office of Management and Budget. The memorandum

stipulates that “unfair and unbalanced trade” should be addressed, directing Cabinet officials to look into trade and tariff policies, including those with China.

## **Executive order on plans for troop deployment to the border**

Trump signed an executive order titled “[Clarifying The Military’s Role In Protecting The Territorial Integrity Of The United States](#),” which effectively authorizes the U.S. military to create a plan that would deploy troops to the southern border.

## **Executive order on energy**

Trump’s broad executive order titled “[Unleashing American Energy](#)” directs an immediate review of agency activities that “potentially burden” the development of domestic energy resources —particularly “natural gas, coal, hydropower, biofuels, critical mineral, and nuclear energy resources.” After a month, agencies are required to have action plans to counter previous rules that hinder energy development.

The order also revokes 12 Biden-era regulatory actions related to clean energy initiatives and orders federal agencies to “immediately pause” the disbursement of funds from the Inflation Reduction Act —a Biden-era law that gave billions in subsidies to clean energy initiatives.

## **Executive order suspends refugee resettlement**

Trump has suspended the [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program](#) in an executive order titled “[Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program](#).” The order takes effect Jan. 27 and is indefinite, asking the Secretary of Homeland Security, consulting

with the Secretary of State, to submit a report every 90 days regarding whether refugee resettlement should be resumed.

## Executive order to redefine birthright citizenship

Trump issued an executive order titled “[Protecting The Meaning And Value of American Citizenship](#)” aimed at effectively ending birthright citizenship by redefining it such that it would not apply to a person born in the U.S. to a mother and a father who both are neither a lawful permanent resident nor a citizen when the person is born. This executive order already facing [legal challenges](#), as it explicitly undermines the current understanding of the Constitution’s [14th Amendment](#).

**Read More:** [How Does Birthright Citizenship in the U.S. Compare to the Rest of the World?](#)

## Executive order to secure the U.S.-Mexico border

Trump revoked several Biden-era immigration policies, reinstating many of his own first-term border policies in a sweeping executive order titled “[Securing Our Borders](#). ” These include establishing a border wall and bringing back his Remain in Mexico policy (formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols), which requires asylum seekers at the southern border to wait out their cases outside of the U.S. The order terminates use of the Biden-era CBP One app, which made legal entry easier, and ends the so-called “catch-and-release” practice—whereby undocumented migrants were released into the U.S. on parole to await their immigration hearings—calling instead for greater detention.

Under the Biden administration, Trump’s sweeping first-term deportation policy was narrowed to prioritize people convicted of serious crimes, considered national security threats, or stopped at the border. Now, the order calls for criminal charges against and

deportation of anyone in violation of immigration laws as well as criminal charges against “those who facilitate their unlawful presence in the United States.”

The executive order also terminates the Biden-era program known as [humanitarian parole](#) that allowed migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to apply for authorization to enter the U.S. for up to two years if they secured a U.S.-based sponsor and passed certain vetting requirements.

## **Memorandum removing environmental protections for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta**

In a memorandum titled “[Putting People Over Fish: Stopping Radical Environmentalism to Provide Water to Southern California](#),” Trump ordered for water from California’s Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to be redirected for use in the rest of the state, overruling environmental protections of the wildlife in the Delta. In a post earlier this month on Truth Social directed at California Gov. Gavin Newsom amid the [wildfires in Southern California](#), Trump [wrote](#), “RELEASE THE WATER FROM UP NORTH. MILLIONS OF GALLONS A DAY. WHAT’S TAKING YOU SO LONG.”

## **Executive order expanding the use of the death penalty**

Trump called for a more aggressive and expansive use of the death penalty in an executive order titled “[Restoring The Death Penalty And Protecting Public Safety](#).” The order instructs the Attorney General to pursue the death penalty for all capital crimes and to “pursue Federal jurisdiction and seek the death penalty regardless of other factors for every federal capital crime involving: the murder of a law-enforcement officer; or a capital crime committed by an alien illegally present in this country.” The order also asks

the Attorney General to encourage state prosecutors to pursue the death penalty whenever applicable and to ensure that states have a “sufficient supply” of lethal injection drugs.

Biden [issued commutations](#) for 37 of 40 federal death row inmates in December—a presidential action that Trump cannot reverse.

## **Memorandum on classical architecture for public buildings**

A memorandum titled “[Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture](#)” calls for federal public buildings to be designed in a style that respects “regional, traditional, and classical architectural heritage.” Classical architecture has become a “dog whistle” for a subset of nationalists, former deputy director of the Architecture Association Phineas Harper [wrote](#) in 2020 when Trump issued a similar order.

## **Memorandum facilitating the firing of civil servants**

In a memorandum titled “[Restoring Accountability for Career Senior Executives](#),” Trump asserted that career Senior Executive Service officials, a classification of civil service officers who serve just below presidential appointees and hold various employment protections, are subordinate and accountable to the President. The directive calls on federal agency heads to reassign or replace SES members to “optimally” implement Trump’s agenda and “prioritize accountability.”

## **Executive order declaring a ‘national energy emergency’**

Trump signed an executive order titled “[Declaring a National Energy Emergency](#),” citing the need to lower energy costs as a

reason to boost oil and natural gas production across the country. The order calls for a review of “obstacles to domestic energy infrastructure” resulting from legal environmental protections like the Endangered Species Act.

## **Memorandum pausing certain wind energy projects**

Trump suspended and called for a review of the leasing and permitting practices of wind energy projects in a memorandum titled “[Temporary Withdrawal of All Areas on the Outer Continental Shelf from Offshore Wind Leasing and Review of the Federal Government’s Leasing and Permitting Practices for Wind Projects](#).” This includes pausing development of the Lava Ridge Wind Project in Idaho by Magic Valley Energy. The order is in line with Trump’s attacks on renewable energy and campaign promises to boost the oil and natural gas industry.

## **Executive order to pause U.S. foreign aid**

Trump signed an executive order titled “[Reevaluating And Realigning United States Foreign Aid](#)” that calls for a 90-day pause in U.S. foreign development assistance and a review of the nation’s foreign aid programs. The order says the “foreign aid industry and bureaucracy are not aligned with American interests and in many cases antithetical to American values,” though gives the Secretary of State the authority to waive the pause for specific programs. According to the [Associated Press](#), Republicans have long targeted foreign assistance for cuts, though it typically only “amounts to roughly 1% of the federal budget, except under unusual circumstances such as the billions in weaponry provided to Ukraine.”

## **Memorandum organizing the National Security Council**

In a seemingly strictly-administrative memorandum on the “Organization of the National Security Council and Subcommittees,” Trump outlined the structure, membership, and purpose of the National Security Council for his administration.

## **Memorandum pulling out of the OECD’s Global Tax Deal**

In a memorandum titled “[The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) Global Tax Deal \(Global Tax Deal\)](#),” Trump effectively withdrew the U.S. from a landmark agreement on a universal corporate minimum tax ratified by nearly 140 countries. The global tax deal, which the U.S. signed in October 2021, would have ended competitive reductions in corporate tax rates.

## **Executive order to tighten immigration laws and restrict federal funds for sanctuary cities**

An executive order titled “[Protecting The American People Against Invasion](#)” introduces a slew of policies aimed at curbing immigration. These include restricting federal funds for so-called sanctuary jurisdictions, allocating resources to creating more detention centers, and establishing Homeland Security TaskForces in every state to “ensure the use of all available law enforcement tools to faithfully execute the immigration laws of the United States.”

## **Executive order repealing Biden-era environmental protections and promoting resource extraction in Alaska**

The executive order “[Unleashing Alaska’s Extraordinary Resource Potential](#)” reverses a number of restrictions on drilling and

extraction in Alaska set by the Biden Administration—which included protecting areas within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil and gas leasing—to promote oil, gas, and other resource extraction from the state of Alaska.

## **Executive order to restrict visa-seekers from certain countries**

Trump's order titled "[Protecting The United States From Foreign Terrorists And Other National Security And Public Safety Threats](#)" intensifies the vetting and screening of visa-seekers, particularly "those aliens coming from regions or nations with identified security risks" as well as refugees or stateless persons. The order is reminiscent of the Muslim travel ban from Trump's first presidential term that he promised to bring back.

## **Executive order calling for an 'America First' foreign policy approach**

Trump directed the Secretary of State to bring the State Department in line with Trump's isolationist foreign policy approach that puts "America and American citizens first" in an executive order titled "[America First Policy Directive To The Secretary Of State.](#)"

Trump's Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio, who was confirmed unanimously by the Senate on Jan. 20, said as much at his confirmation hearing last week, vowing: "Under President Trump, the top priority of the United States Department of State, will be the United States."

## **Executive order establishing DOGE**

Trump signed an executive order titled "[Establishing And Implementing The President's 'Department Of Government Efficiency'](#)" that renames the U.S. Digital Service as the "Department of Government Efficiency," a new agency Trump

controversially promised to create and install [Elon Musk](#) as head of. The order gives DOGE advisory powers to “maximize governmental efficiency and productivity.”

But the non-governmental advisory body is already facing multiple lawsuits, including one [alleging](#) that DOGE violates the Federal Advisory Committee Act, which oversees the public accountability of federal advisory committees.

## **Executive order defining gender and rolling back transgender protections**

In an executive order titled “[Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism And Restoring Biological Truth To The Federal Government](#),” Trump outlined federal definitions of “women” and “girls” as females and “men” and “boys” as males, defining male and female as biological, binary, and immutable. The order seeks to remove the promotion of “gender identity” and “gender ideology” from federal policies, communications, IDs and more. The order calls for imprisoned trans men to be detained in women’s prisons and trans women in men’s prisons, and it calls for agencies to restrict “intimate spaces” by sex and not identity. The order also sets in motion the rollback of Biden-era guidance about transgender people and gender identity, including certain Title IX protections, and Trump instructs the Attorney General to “ensure the freedom to express the binary nature of sex and the right to single-sex spaces in workplaces and federally funded entities covered by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”

**Opinion:** [\*Trump’s ‘Biological Truth’ Executive Order is Not Based in Biology or Truth\*](#)

## **Executive order to end DEI programs**

Trump dismantled federal DEI programs in an executive order titled “[Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing](#).” The order calls for the termination of all DEI, accessibility, and environmental justice offices and positions across the federal government.

## **Executive order calling for ‘merit’-based federal hiring**

Trump further took aim at DEI initiatives in an executive order titled “[Reforming The Federal Hiring Process And Restoring Merit To Government Service](#).” The order blocks federal hiring based on race, sex, or religion—describing diversity hiring practices as “illegal racial discrimination under the guise of ‘equity,’ or one’s commitment to the invented concept of ‘gender identity’ over sex”—as well as the hiring of “individuals who are unwilling to defend the Constitution or to faithfully serve the Executive Branch.” Instead, it calls for the prioritization of “merit” and “skill” in hiring.

## **Executive order to designate certain Latin-American gangs and cartels as terrorist organizations**

The President designated drug cartels, Salvadoran gang MS-13, and Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua as foreign terrorist organizations in an order titled “[Designating Cartels And Other Organizations As Foreign Terrorist Organizations And Specially Designated Global Terrorists](#).” The classification enables the federal government to prosecute anyone seen as supporting the cartels on the charge of providing material support to terrorists. The Trump Administration plans to invoke the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to deport anyone designated as a terrorist under this order.

# **Executive order to rename Denali and the Gulf of Mexico**

In an executive order titled “[Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness](#),” Trump directs the Secretary of the Interior to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America and return the name of Denali—the highest mountain in North America—to its former name, Mount McKinley. Former President Barack Obama [announced](#) the renaming of Mount McKinley to Denali in 2015, referencing a 1975 request by the state of Alaska, where the mountain is located, to honor the mountain’s sacredness to Alaska Natives.

## **Proclamation declaring an ‘invasion’ and restricting entry into the U.S.**

Trump claimed the U.S. is facing an “invasion” due to the migrant crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border in an executive order titled “[Guaranteeing The States Protection Against Invasion](#).” Citing the inability to conduct comprehensive medical and criminal background checks at the southern border as well as “emergency tools” of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the proclamation suspends entry by “any alien engaged in the invasion across the southern border of the United States.” It also calls on the Secretary of Homeland Security, Secretary of State, and Attorney General to “take all appropriate action to repel, repatriate, or remove any alien engaged in the invasion across the southern border of the United States.”

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<https://time.com/7208691>

## What to Know About Trump's Order on Birthright Citizenship and the Legal Battle Around It

Bennett is the senior White House correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C., bureau. He has covered wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, interviewed world leaders, traveled across the globe with President Trump and President Biden, and written extensively about intelligence, immigration, and the fallout of major disasters.



Donald Trump is trying to redefine who is allowed to be a U.S. citizen. On the first day of his presidency, Trump signed an [order](#) challenging a long-standing constitutional right that people born inside the U.S. are guaranteed citizenship. The right has been considered settled law since it was ratified as part of the Constitution more than 150 years ago.

Trump told federal departments to deny the right known as birthright citizenship from children born to mothers and fathers in the country unlawfully. Under his order, it would also deny citizenship to children born to parents in the U.S. on work or study visas, tourism visas, or when neither parent is a U.S. citizen or

permanent resident. The order could impact who is granted passports, social security numbers, and certificates of citizenship. If it stands, the changes would go into effect on Feb. 19.

Within hours, Trump's action was challenged in court as unconstitutional. A coalition of immigrant rights groups—expecting Trump to quickly sign such an order—filed a lawsuit on Monday night asking a federal court in New Hampshire to declare the order unlawful and stop the federal government from implementing it. “The framers of the Fourteenth Amendment specifically enshrined this principle in our Constitution’s text to ensure that no one—not even the President—could deny children born in America their rightful place as citizens,” read the lawsuit. On Tuesday, the attorneys general for 22 Democratic-led states, Washington, D.C. and the city of San Francisco joined in, filing similar lawsuits in federal courts in Seattle and Boston.

Here's what to know about Trump's order:

## **Who would the executive order impact?**

If allowed to stand, the order would block citizenship for all children born after Feb. 19, 2025, who don't have at least one U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident parent.

Trump's instructions would stop the granting of automatic citizenship for children born in the U.S. to mothers who are not legally in the country, unless their father was a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident. It would also deny citizenship from children of mothers who are temporarily in the country on a work visa, student visa or tourist visa, and whose fathers aren't citizens or permanent residents.

About 150,000 children are born each year in the U.S. to two parents who don't have legal status, according to the lawsuit filed by 18 states. “They will all be deportable, and many will be

stateless,” says the lawsuit. “And despite the Constitution’s guarantee of their citizenship, they will lose their rights to participate in the economic and civic life of their own country—to work, vote, serve on juries, and run for certain offices.”

## **What documents would be denied?**

The federal government routinely creates certain documents for newborns recognized as U.S. citizens. Those documents include passports issued by the Department of State, social security cards issued by the Social Security Administration and certificates of citizenship issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security. Trump’s order instructed federal agencies to draft new instructions to guide federal officials on who should be excluded from receiving those documents that confirm citizenship.

The order could also impact applications for benefits like food assistance for children administered by the Department of Agriculture, and health care services supported by the Health and Human Services.

Trump’s order does not directly affect the granting of birth certificates, which are usually administered by states.

## **When does the order go into effect?**

Trump gave federal agencies 30 days—until Feb. 19—to draft instructions for how to deny citizenship to the categories of people he laid out. The order would only apply to people born on or after that date. If courts intervene, the order’s implementation could be delayed or blocked entirely.

## **Does Trump have the power to do this?**

Trump's order hinges on convincing courts to upend a century and a half of judicial rulings by accepting his interpretation of a single clause in the 14th Amendment. "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." The key phrase there is "subject to the jurisdiction thereof." Trump's order instructs agencies to consider people who are in the country on temporary visas or without authorization as being not subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

Trump's reading of the Constitution flies in the face of settled law, says Evan Bernick, associate professor of law at Northern Illinois University, and co-author of *The Original Meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment: Its Letter and Spirit*.

The amendment was first designed in the wake of the Civil War by Black activists and abolitionists. The Republican Party decided it should be enshrined in the Constitution in order to protect the citizenship rights of formerly enslaved people and their descendants.

Bernick says the act was purposely written to be sweeping and broad in scope. The exception to automatic citizenship intended through the phrase "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" primarily applies to children of foreign diplomats, who have diplomatic immunity and are not subject to U.S. laws. The phrasing was debated when it was written and the intended exceptions were made intentionally narrow, Bernick says.

"Birthright citizenship is a constitutional guarantee that has been settled as a matter of Supreme Court doctrine for over 150 years." The Trump administration's interpretation, he adds, ignores both "the meaning of the text of the 14th Amendment and the history behind why that text is the way it is." Nonetheless, the legal fight over Trump's executive order is widely expected to end up at the Supreme Court.

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## Why Biden's Ukraine Win Was Zelensky's Loss

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 Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's compound in Kyiv as the Russian invasion unfolded.



When Russia invaded Ukraine nearly three years ago, President Joe Biden set three objectives for the U.S. response. Ukraine's victory was never among them. The phrase the White House used to describe its mission at the time—supporting Ukraine “for as long as it takes”—was intentionally vague. It also raised the question: As long as it takes to do what?

“We were deliberately not talking about the territorial parameters,” says Eric Green, who served on Biden’s National Security Council at the time, overseeing Russia policy. The U.S., in other words, made no promise to help Ukraine recover all of the land Russia had occupied, and certainly not the vast territories in eastern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula taken in its initial invasion in 2014. The reason was simple, Green says: in the White House’s view, doing so was beyond Ukraine’s ability, even with robust help from the

West. “That was not going to be a success story ultimately. The more important objective was for Ukraine to survive as a sovereign, democratic country free to pursue integration with the West.”

That was one of the three objectives Biden set. He also wanted the U.S. and its allies to remain united, and he insisted on avoiding direct conflict between Russia and NATO. Looking back on his leadership during the war in Ukraine — certain to shape his legacy as a statesman — Biden has achieved those three objectives. But success on those limited terms provides little satisfaction even to some of his closest allies and advisers. “It’s unfortunately the kind of success where you don’t feel great about it,” Green says in an interview with TIME. “Because there is so much suffering for Ukraine and so much uncertainty about where it’s ultimately going to land.”

For the Ukrainians, disappointment with Biden has been building throughout the invasion, and they have expressed it ever more openly since the U.S. presidential elections ended in Donald Trump’s victory. In a podcast that aired in early January, President Volodymyr Zelensky said the U.S. had not done enough under Biden to impose sanctions against Russia and to provide Ukraine with weapons and security guarantees. “With all due respect to the United States and the administration,” Zelensky told Lex Fridman, “I don’t want the same situation like we had with Biden. I ask for sanctions now, please, and weapons now.”

The criticism was unusually pointed, and seems all the more remarkable given how much support the U.S. has given Ukraine during Biden’s tenure—\$66 billion in military assistance alone since the February 2022 Russian invasion, according to [the U.S. State Department](#). Combine that with all of the aid Congress has approved for Ukraine’s economic, humanitarian, and other needs, and the total comes to around \$183 billion as of last September,

according to [Ukraine Oversight](#), a U.S. government watchdog created in 2023 to monitor and account for all of this assistance.

Yet Zelensky and some of his allies insist that the U.S. has been too cautious in standing up to Russia, especially when it comes to granting Ukraine a clear path to NATO membership. “It is very important that we share the same vision for Ukraine’s security future – in the E.U. and NATO,” the Ukrainian president said [during his most recent visit](#) to the White House in September.

During that visit, Zelensky gave Biden a detailed list of requests that he described as Ukraine’s “victory plan.” Apart from calling for an invitation to join NATO, the plan urged the U.S. to strengthen Ukraine’s position in the war with a massive new influx of weapons and the permission to use them deep inside Russian territory. Biden had by then announced that he would not run for re-election, and the Ukrainians hoped that his lame-duck status would free him to make bolder decisions, in part to secure his legacy in foreign affairs. “For us his legacy is an argument,” a senior member of Zelensky’s delegation to Washington told TIME. “How will history remember you?”

The appeals got a mixed reception. On the question of Ukraine’s NATO membership, Biden would not budge. But he did sign off on a number of moves that the White House had long rejected as too dangerous. In November, the U.S. allowed Ukraine to use American missiles to strike deep inside Russian territory. And in January, the Biden administration imposed tough sanctions against the Russian energy sector, including the “shadow fleet” of tankers Russia has used to export its oil.

While these decisions fell short of what Zelensky wanted, they helped Biden make the case during the last foreign-policy speech of his tenure that the U.S. had met its goals in defending Ukraine. He remained careful, however, not to promise that Ukraine would regain any more of its territory, or even survive to the end of this

war. Russian President Vladimir Putin “has failed thus far to subjugate Ukraine,” Biden said in [his address at the State Department](#) on Jan. 13. “Today, Ukraine is still a free, independent country, with the potential — the potential for a bright future.”

The future that Zelensky and many of his countrymen have in mind is one in which Russia is defeated. But in rallying the world to the fight, the implication Biden embedded in his own goals was that defending Ukraine against Russia is not the same as defeating Russia. So it is not surprising if that goal remains far from Zelensky’s reach.

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## The Myth of Opportunity Has Broken America

Chandler is a journalist and author based in New York. Chandler is the author of *Drive-Thru Dreams: A Journey Through the Heart of America's Fast-Food Kingdom* and, most recently, *99% Perspiration A New Working History of the American Way of Life*



When President Donald Trump delivered his second inaugural address on Monday, January 20, he preserved a tradition of national mythmaking that has only served Americans poorly. Beyond the expected theatrics, Trump declared the U.S. to be “history’s greatest civilization,” despite its fixture as the most unequal nation with the [lowest life expectancy](#), even just among Western democracies of today. And, despite his record-thin margin of victory in November’s election, the President [claimed](#) that “the entire nation is rapidly unifying behind our agenda.”

What’s actually noteworthy about this moment, however, is that there is a rare current of agreement among Americans today. The consensus comes in the form of a deep pessimism about our most cherished national story. One [recent poll](#) of American voters

conducted by WSJ/ NORC found that only 36% still believe in an American Dream broadly defined by the idea that hard work begets success and upward mobility. This finding represents a big tumble downward from 2012 when, even in the shadow of the Great Recession that cleaned millions of families out, 52% of Americans still held fast to the story of the dream.

The far-reaching senses of despair and disenchantment in the U.S. aren't solely the results of bad trade deals or corporate concentration or the [American retreat from social and civic engagement](#). They can't be described strictly through the failure of the government to protect citizens and consumers from the exploding cost of necessities like housing, healthcare, education, and childcare. The national gloom stems from something deeper, specifically the torment of a supposedly cohering national story about opportunity that is encoded in culture, policy, and civic life.

**Read More:** [\*Why a ‘Third Life’ Is the Answer to America’s Loneliness Epidemic\*](#)

Historically, to be American (for some at least) meant the chance to live free of the titles, class static, and feudal baggage of the Old World. Even before the term was coined, an American Dream of being socially mobile by means of hard work dusted industriousness with a special merit-driven magic that has seduced and frustrated millions. From the Pilgrims and founding fathers through the frontier and all the way to today's hustle culture, gig economy, and ragged-by-design safety net, the essential American folk tale has plaited hard work with destiny, self-reliance with self-actualization, and success with moral worth.

The trouble with that story is that it makes struggle feel shameful. Take the nation's kludgy public assistance programs, which are purposefully gummed up with red tape. A 2020 audit by the Government Accountability Office, for example, [found](#) that roughly 8,000 Americans file for bankruptcy and another ten

thousand people die every year while waiting for a disability benefit decision (or an appeal) to be decided by the Social Security Administration. “The administrative burdens themselves are, in some sense, a deliberate test of deservingness,” Dr. Heather Hahn, an associate vice president at the nonpartisan think tank Urban Institute, explained of America’s social insurance programs. “It’s this assumption that only someone truly, desperately needy, who really has no other options, is going to put up with all that is required. That adds to this deservingness.”

Meanwhile, in public retellings, the Americans who don’t make ends meet while providing care work for loved ones or battling at terrible jobs are just people without sufficient ambition. “I don’t think hard-working Americans should be paying for all the social services for people who could make a broader contribution and instead are couch potatoes,” former Florida representative Matt Gaetz once argued in 2023 while lobbying against anti-poverty programs.

Similarly, an individual drowning in student debt is never someone who took out loans to go to nursing school or dropped out of an engineering program to care for a sick parent. It’s always some loafer or wastrel who, in the [words](#) of Senator Ted Cruz, “studied queer pet literature” or a “slacker barista who wasted seven years in college” and can’t “get off the bong for a minute.” On the other hand, those who make it are upheld as virtuous and enlightened. Calling up the 2016 electoral map, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [argued](#) that, “All that red in the middle, where Trump won, what the map doesn’t show you is that I won the places that represent two-thirds of America’s gross domestic product. So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward.”

While the narrative around opportunity has largely remained fixed, the American experience has degraded from one of bootstrapping to one of white-knuckling. Over the past 45 years, the U.S.

economy has doubled in size and American workers have grown 81% more productive while their wages have only grown 29%, according to the Economic Policy Institute . (Workers of color and workers without college degrees have seen their real wages decline.) Today, medical debt is the biggest cause of bankruptcy in America and baby formula is one of the most shoplifted items. According to a Brookings Institution study, 44 % of Americans work jobs that qualify as low-wage.

“I did everything I was supposed to do,” Nakitta Long, a single mother of two with a Master’s degree in North Carolina, told me about the impossibility of finding a job that might sustain her family. “Why is this not simple?”

These are some of the mad-making, faith-shredding headwinds that made arguments about preserving democracy fall flat for people already failed by a democracy where hard work doesn’t pay off.

They are the same winds that have rustled President-elect Donald Trump back into power. And we’re learning again, from Capitol rotunda to the displaced communities of Southern California, winds can very easily carry fires.

*Adapted excerpt from 99% PERSPIRATION by Adam Chandler.  
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<https://time.com/7208831>

## Facing 4 More Years of Trump, Democrats Can't Agree on a Plan

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**When Senator John Fetterman** got word that President-elect Donald Trump wanted to meet, the Pennsylvania Democrat didn't have to think it over too long. Even though Trump had savaged Fetterman during the 2022 campaign—going [so far](#) as to allege he had an affinity for cocaine, heroin, crystal meth, and fentanyl—Fetterman reasoned that he represents all Pennsylvanians, including the 3.5 million who had just voted for Trump.

“If the President invites you to have a conversation and to engage, I’m not sure why anybody would decide not to,” Fetterman tells TIME. “I’m in the business of creating wins for Pennsylvania.” And so, the weekend before Trump returned to the White House, Fetterman jumped on a plane to Florida to spend about an hour with Trump at Mar-a-Lago. The two talked about immigration, the

sale of Pittsburgh-based U.S. Steel, and the detention of Pennsylvania native Marc Fogel in Russia on drug charges. For Fetterman, it was about starting the next four years on productive footing.

“There’s plenty of things that we can work together on, and there are parts where we aren’t agreeing,” Fetterman says. “And I am going to avoid just jumping online and just dropping a lot of cheap heat.”



Eight years earlier, such a meeting would have drawn outrage in Democratic circles. This time the response to Fetterman’s pilgrimage, which caught most senior Democrats by surprise, was more ambivalent. Some party officials believe working more closely with Trump this time will be necessary as the 47th President takes office with political capital to spend and a Republican Congress lined up behind him.

At the start of Trump’s second term, the Democrats are stuck somewhere between discombobulation and despair. Conversations with two dozen Democratic sources reveal a party still struggling to figure out how they found themselves losing the White House and Senate and stuck in the minority in the House. Prescriptions for a comeback abound: A more inclusive message, not just what plays

well among activists and on college campuses. More spending on state parties and less on D.C.-based consultants. Serious investments in a progressive media ecosystem to rival the conservative one. A foreign policy that is as easy to explain as Republicans' tried-and-true "Peace Through Strength." Better polling. Less fear-mongering about the end of democracy. More podcasts.

But those are all hunches at this point ahead of any comprehensive, sanctioned autopsy.

In fact, some Democrats fear the party is in danger of overreacting to Kamala Harris' loss. They point to how bad a year 2024 was for incumbents around the world, from the United Kingdom to South Korea to Botswana. They stress that recent inflation made incumbents vulnerable regardless of political leaning, allowing opposition figures in nations such as Panama, India, South Africa, India, and Japan to make significant inroads. Others point to the promise of Democratic groups like suburban-powerhouse Red Wine and Blue and recruitment machines like Swing Left, which are notching successes for candidates further down the ballot.



As the debate churns, some say any remedies remain premature. "You can write a eulogy before someone dies. You cannot write an

autopsy until the body is on the table,” says Jesse Ferguson, a strategist who formerly ran House Democrats’ outside spending program. In other words, the version of the Democratic Party that got killed in 2024 is still twitching. And the fact that no one in the party can agree on how to deal with Trump 2.0—or decide if Fetterman’s meeting was a shrewd move, a betrayal, or both—means Democrats are still at a loss for how to prevent more casualties.

**A party strategist** who’s been among those searching for a way out of the wilderness has a PowerPoint he’s been delivering since Election Day. The slides are meant to cheer his fellow Democrats up.

It starts with a grim *New York Times* story with the headline “Baffled in Loss, Democrats Seek Road Forward.” The piece begins: “The Democratic Party emerged from this week’s election struggling over what it stood for, anxious about its political future, and bewildered about how to compete with a Republican Party that some Democrats say may be headed for a period of electoral dominance.”



The next slide reveals the date of that verdict: [Nov. 7, 2004](#). Two years later, Nancy Pelosi became the first woman elevated to

Speaker of the House. Two years after that, Barack Obama was elected the nation's first Black President. From the ashes of John Kerry's defeat by George W. Bush, Democrats were able to forge a swift and successful comeback. The strategist who has been delivering this message in seemingly endless Zoom sessions for colleagues and clients says the point is that Democrats can recover quickly if they figure out the right lessons to take from the defeat.

Yet those gains 20 years ago were driven by two primary factors: the presence of Bush, who grew increasingly unpopular amid the Iraq war, and the rise of a transcendent political talent. As another strategist, Chris Moyer, a former aide to Democratic Senate Leader Harry Reid, puts it: "You cannot wait around for Obama to come around. We cannot act like it's just going to happen. We have to make it happen ourselves."

In the meantime, Democrats are at odds over how to respond to a second Trump presidency. The so-called Resistance that propelled Democrats during his first term seems weary, if not depleted. In Congress, party leaders are settling into a strategy that focuses more on Trump's expected failures to fulfill the promises he made to voters, and less on his norm-breaking provocations. As his latest TruthSocial posts and threats to invade Greenland make headlines, Democrats intend to stay on message: what's he doing to curb inflation or bring down the cost of healthcare? A troll, some argue, can control the bridge only if someone feeds him.

**Read More:** [Anti-Trump March Can't Compete With the One 8 Years Ago](#)

Others fear such strategies are an inadequate response to Trump's agenda, including the possibility of deportation camps, military deployment in U.S. cities, and investigations into his political enemies. "The consequences are no joke. People are going to die," says Yasmin Radji, the executive director of Swing Left. "We are not The Resistance 2.0. That is not going to be enough."

That's not to say the remedies are going to be fast, even if they are obvious. "We didn't lose because of the last three months of last year," says Rodell Mollineau, a veteran Democratic strategist who spent years advising top senators. "This didn't happen overnight, and the fix isn't going to be overnight, either. It's foolhardy to think one reason is why we lost and one change will fix it."



Yet as Democrats brace for the return of Trump's chaos, there is little agreement on where the party's focus should be. Few see either House Leader Hakeem Jeffries or Senate Leader Chuck Schumer—both New Yorkers—as the unifying national figure the party needs. The pair is known to donors but hardly household names who can be stand-ins as an unrivaled spokesman. Until Democrats anoint their next presidential nominee, the party will lack a single leader, and that is probably more than three years away.

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<https://time.com/7208489>

## The Man Who Took On Big Tobacco Has a New Target: Sports Betting

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 and 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.



On a balmy December morning in Boston, Richard Daynard is sitting at his dining-room table watching a livestream on his laptop. “Pure. Horsesh-it,” he declares as a witness testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The hearing has been called to discuss what seems to be becoming America’s new favorite pastime: throwing down bets on sports, 24/7. And what has set the bearded, bookish law professor off is a former gambling regulator from New Jersey’s use of a talking point favored by both the industry and the professional sports leagues: that the reason it’s so easy to wager on sports these days is this is

what the American people want. To Daynard, president of the Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI) at Northeastern University's law school, such language deflects from gambling's heavy social toll. "This is consumer *choice!*" says Daynard, the sarcasm driving home his point. "This is *freedom!*"

Daynard has been fighting big public-health battles for decades. He played a foundational role building landmark legal cases in the 1980s and '90s against U.S. tobacco companies, which ultimately resulted in cigarette manufacturers' agreeing to pay more than \$200 billion in settlement funds to the states. Now, at 81, he is no less indignant about the way companies seem to put profits over customer well-being. His latest objective is curtailing the excesses of sports gambling. "We're talking," says Daynard, "about *addiction.*"

Americans bet an estimated \$150 billion on sports in 2024, up 24% from the prior year, according to the American Gaming Association, and sports books kept some \$14 billion of that, up 27%. State governments collected about \$2.5 billion in sports-betting tax revenue in 2024, a 19% jump. Networks broadcast incessant advertising, featuring premium pitchmen like Kevin Hart, [LeBron James](#), [Peyton Manning](#), and [Jamie Foxx](#), from gambling companies like DraftKings, FanDuel, and BetMGM.

### **Read More:** [2024 Athlete of the Year: Caitlin Clark](#)

But America's burgeoning love affair with sports gambling has come with costs. Calls to problem-gambling hotlines have spiked. Emerging research suggests that sports betting depletes investment accounts of already financially vulnerable households, increases bankruptcy risk, and even contributes to upticks in intimate-partner violence. "I am presently, or have recently been, treating divorces, breakups, estrangement from children, criminal charges, incarceration, loss of all savings, foreclosure of homes, end of careers, suicidal ideation, hospitalization for a suicide attempt,"

says PHAI director of gambling policy Harry Levant, a former gambling addict who's now a clinical gambling-disorder therapist and also testified at that December congressional hearing. "The deepest forms of despair."

Daynard argues that sports-betting operators, much like tobacco companies, have engineered their product to foster addiction, through the constant stream of bonuses, promotions, and opportunities to microbet—on the speed of the next pitch, on the rebound totals of a particular player, on who will score the next touchdown—on your phone during a sporting event. "You're just pushing buttons," says Daynard. "You're just going after action."

His approach to reining in the industry is twofold: litigation and legislation. In late 2023 PHAI filed [a class-action lawsuit](#) on behalf of customers in Massachusetts accusing DraftKings, one of the biggest gambling operators in the U.S., of utilizing deceptive marketing practices. Last summer, a judge denied DraftKings' motion to dismiss the case, allowing it to potentially advance to the discovery phase. Daynard's team also helped Representative Paul Tonko, a New York Democrat, draft the [SAFE Bet Act](#), a federal law that would ban sports-gambling advertising during live events, prohibit gambling operators from accepting more than five deposits from an individual in a 24-hour period, and eliminate the use of AI to track a bettor's gambling habits for customized promotions.

"Nobody's had more experience with fighting addiction as a scholar and activist and thought leader," says Senator Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat who as state attorney general in the 1990s worked with Daynard to file lawsuits against tobacco companies and introduced the SAFE Bet Act with Tonko. "He was a very powerfully articulate advocate at a time when there were not a lot of them, making our lawsuits credible."

As he sips soup in the three-bedroom Back Bay apartment he's lived in since 1974, Daynard seems energized by the challenge

ahead. After all, he not only knows what it's like to take on a deep-pocketed adversary, he also understands the impact he can have if he prevails: Over the past 30 years, the price of a pack of smokes has gone up more than 450%, thanks in large part to the [1998 settlement](#) that requires tobacco manufacturers to compensate states as long as cigarettes are sold in the U.S. Big Tobacco has stopped advertising to kids. And cigarette sales have fallen 59% since the settlement.

"People laughed at Dick Daynard in the '70s and the '80s because they thought his ideas about going after the tobacco industry were harebrained," says Thomas Sobol, a Boston plaintiff attorney who worked on the litigation against Big Tobacco. "They were wrong. People should think twice before even questioning his foresight."

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**A New York City native** whose father ran a clothing business and mother worked as a public-school administrator, Daynard developed a smoking aversion when he was 12. He was the youngest member of the ham-radio enthusiast group that would meet in the back room of a Manhattan tavern, and the space would grow so thick with smoke, he'd have to retreat to the bar to get away.



After attending the Bronx High School of Science, which counts more alumni as Nobel Prize winners than any other secondary school in the world, Daynard went to Columbia, where he majored in philosophy. “I was a nice, bright Jewish kid from New York,” he says. “There are two things I could do in life. I didn’t like blood.”

So he was off to law school, at Harvard. He spent one summer working for a fancy Manhattan firm, drafting a brief on behalf of a marquee client, Ford Motor Co. But oiling the wheels of commerce wasn’t for him. “I’m sitting in my chair thinking about when I’m 50,” says Daynard. “What will my life be like? I’ve only got one of these things. What will I have to say for myself?”

Daynard joined the Northeastern law faculty in 1969. (He also got a Ph.D. in urban studies and planning at MIT in 1980.) He started going to meetings for a quirky smoking-opposition group in the 1970s that, according to Daynard’s wife of close to 50 years, Carol, included a Boston landlord with a “huge” hat, a hermit who’d monitor TV transmission towers in Needham, Mass., and an MIT engineering professor who’d ride a recumbent bicycle throughout Boston. “It was sort of a weird combination,” she says. The couple’s son spread the anti-cigarette gospel: once, when he was

about 6, he spotted a Boston motorcyclist lighting up and told the biker he shouldn't do that. "My wife is watching him, feeling lucky that he didn't get slugged," says Daynard.

In 1983, Daynard became president of the Massachusetts chapter of the Group Against Smoking Pollution (GASP). While teaching a course on consumer protection, he solicited recommendations on what to do in his new gig. "This was a class of law students," says Daynard. "So the answer was 'Sue the bastards.'"

**Read More:** *How a Pair of WNBA Rivals Came Together to Create the Groundbreaking New 3x3 League 'Unrivaled'*

Naturally. But since the 1950s, that had been a failing strategy. Big Tobacco hadn't lost a court case brought by an individual smoker or paid a penny in settlements or damages. Still, Daynard started the Tobacco Products Liability Project out of Northeastern; in 1985, the group published the inaugural *Tobacco Products Litigation Reporter*, devoting a portion of that first issue to documenting a case out of New Jersey in which Rose Cipollone, a smoker for 40 years, sued tobacco companies for causing her cancer. The case continued after her death in 1984, and Daynard began publicizing documents from the trial. He held a 1987 press conference to disclose a memo, written by a government doctor, saying that a tobacco-company lawyer admitted in a meeting with the U.S. surgeon general that cancer is linked to cigarettes. In 1988, Cipollone's husband won the first-ever jury award (\$400,000) involving the death of a smoker, though an appeals court later overturned it.

Taking on tobacco sometimes stressed out his family. "I told him he couldn't go south of D.C.," says Carol. "I was worried about backlash from some crazy tobacco farmer." She once accompanied him to a meeting in Chapel Hill, N.C., and they received a police escort. In 1990, Daynard flew to Orlando to meet with a mysterious character posing as a woman in written correspondence: Merrell

Williams Jr. was a theater Ph.D. who, while working as a paralegal at the firm repping tobacco giant Brown & Williamson, stuffed damning internal documents into a girdle, ripping open a bag of chips as he passed a security guard to cover the sound of rustling papers. The whistle-blower told Daynard about the documents, which included an admission from a Brown & Williamson lawyer that the company was in the business of selling “an addictive drug.” They were eventually funneled to congressional lawmakers, who had just held hearings in which seven tobacco CEOs had said under oath that nicotine wasn’t addictive; a medical professor who disseminated them online; and the Mississippi attorney general, who with the assistance of Daynard and private litigators filed the first state lawsuit against Big Tobacco.

Daynard introduced the theory of “unjust enrichment” into the proceedings. It posited that while tobacco companies were making money off smokers, the state had to pay medical costs for sick customers and was thus the injured party. Other states followed Mississippi’s lead, and within just a few years, an agreement was in place that would transform cigarette consumption in this country. “As a physician and public-health professor, we often don’t view lawyers as partners and leaders in promoting public health,” says Dr. Howard Koh of Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health. “But Dick has saved so many lives.”





**Daynard isn't a sports fan.** He almost never gambles. He's placed a few wagers at the horse track over the years, bought a lottery ticket once when the jackpot was a gazillion dollars, and while on a Caribbean cruise with Carol bet some 50 bucks in the casino (he came out \$5 ahead). But Daynard can pinpoint exactly when sports gambling hit his radar: March 10, 2023, the day mobile betting commenced in Massachusetts. Just as smoke enveloped the back room of Forrester's Bar and Grill during Daynard's ham-radio confabs, sports-gambling advertisements blanketed even the trash cans of Boston.

As anyone who's watched an iota of sports programming over the past few years can attest, the betting business doesn't traffic in subtlety. Sports-gambling ads are everywhere. (Heck, I saw a DraftKings infomercial on AMC one recent morning. **AMC!?**) It's somewhat hard to fathom that just about a dozen years ago, the major U.S. professional sports leagues sued to stop New Jersey's effort to legalize sports betting, citing a 1992 federal law, the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA), that essentially prohibited sport betting outside of Nevada. The Supreme Court, however, [in 2018 overturned PASPA](#), on states-rights' grounds. Since then, 38 states and Washington, D.C., have legalized sports betting; mobile betting is permitted in all but eight

of those jurisdictions. (Missouri voters approved sports betting in November, and gambling should go live there sometime this year.)

Pro sports leagues that had nominally been trying to stop gambling went all-in. This embrace makes business sense. Gambling increases product engagement: if you bet on baseball, you're much more likely to consume baseball. Plus, gambling creates new direct revenue streams for the leagues, which can sell their real-time data to the companies, which in turn can create live in-game betting opportunities. Still, says sports-gambling researcher John Holden, a professor at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, "the buy-in from the leagues exceeded many people's wildest imaginations."

Such robust championing of betting contributes to the downsides researchers have documented. More than a decade ago, gambling disorder was classified as the first nonsubstance behavioral addiction in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. A [paper](#) presented at a finance conference in October, titled "Gambling Away Stability: Sports Betting's Impact on Vulnerable Households," found that sports-betting legalization led to depletion of investment accounts while also increasing credit-card debt and the frequency in overdrafts for financially constrained households. Mark Johnson, a finance professor at BYU and one of the study's co-authors, anticipated that sports gambling would replace other forms of entertainment. "That's not happening," says Johnson. "Instead, people are taking money that they had allocated for investments to fund betting. It's concerning."

Another October 2024 [working paper](#), this one from researchers at UCLA and USC, estimates that online sports-betting legalization has led to roughly 30,000 additional annual bankruptcies and \$8 billion in annual debt collections. A [third paper](#) from last year, from economics doctoral students at the University of Oregon, found that an NFL home-team upset loss in states with legalized sports gambling is more than twice as likely to lead to an incident of

intimate partner violence, compared with states without legalized gambling.

Despite such alarming findings, Daynard isn't out to ban sports gambling. He also never aimed to stop smoking altogether. What he wants to change is the approach to policing the market. The industry touts the "responsible gaming" model, in which companies include problem-gambling hotline numbers in ads, much as labels are affixed to cigarette packages: you were warned, we're offering help, so don't blame us for your woes. A public-health strategy, on the other hand, recognizes that the product can be addictive and enacts reasonable measures to protect consumers. "People fall off the cliff," says Daynard. "The 'responsible gaming' approach is, we are here with the ambulance. The public-health approach is, you put a fence up on the top."

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**Daynard happens to live** a few blocks from DraftKings headquarters. Since way before the legalization of Massachusetts sports betting, he's parked in the garage beneath the building that now houses the company's offices. He jokes he should carry a picture of DraftKings CEO Jason Robins with him, to recognize the executive in a pinch. "I have this fantasy that if I'm not watching," says Daynard, tongue firmly in cheek, "Jason Robins will be there with a bat."

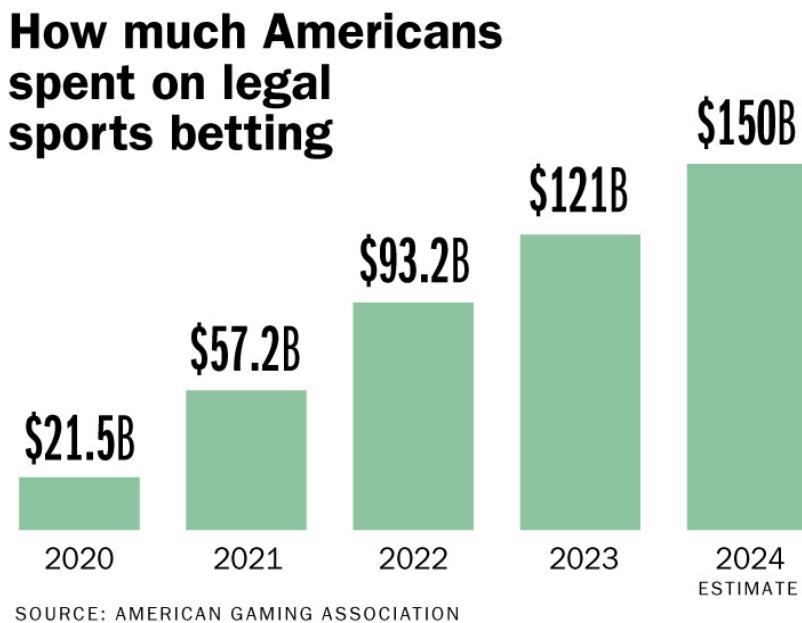
PHAI's lawsuit against DraftKings alleges that the company's offer "to get a \$1,000 deposit bonus" on the sign-up page of its mobile app, and a similar offer on its website, tricked Massachusetts customers who were new to sports betting into funding new accounts and engaging with a known addictive product. Unbeknownst to them, the suit alleges, the customers would receive a \$1,000 bonus only if they deposited \$5,000 up front, bet \$25,000 within 90 days, and bet that money on games in which you had at least a 25% chance of losing your skin. And even if someone fulfilled those requirements—which were, according to the suit,

spelled out in “unreadable” small print—the \$1,000 wasn’t a cash bonus. It was a credit to be used for more gambling. “The old dope peddler actually hands over the stuff,” says Daynard. “These guys can’t hand over, to use a technical term, the f-cking \$1,000. They’ve just hooked somebody. But they can’t give you a goddamn \$1,000?”



In its argument for dismissal, DraftKings contended the promotion wasn’t misleading, and wrote that “no reasonable consumer would believe that a deposit of *any* amount would result in the immediate transfer to them of 1,000 U.S. dollars.” The company also claimed the plaintiffs failed to specify any financial harm caused by the promotion, as not receiving an expected bonus is not the same as losing money. Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Debra A. Squires-Lee, however, wrote that the extent of any DraftKings deception “must be developed in discovery,” and that the plaintiffs “plausibly suggest that they were harmed because they bought into a service worth less than they believed.”

As in most class actions, legal experts say, the odds seem stacked against the plaintiffs. “But the fact that this case has survived that motion to dismiss is fairly significant,” says Holden. “That doesn’t spell victory automatically. But it is a signal that hey, this isn’t a nothing.” If the case does proceed to trial, experts say, a jury could be turned off by the way DraftKings marketed its promotion offer to novice customers. “The lawsuit does a good job of saying, ‘Of course, you put it in your terms and conditions, but you don’t emphasize that,’” says Keith Miller, a professor at Drake Law School. “You don’t emphasize how much people have to deposit. What the play-through is. Those sorts of things are the hardest for them to defend.”



Law is like the NFL: a copycat operation. Innovations spread fast. As the Massachusetts suit progresses, lawyers in other states will file similar claims, just as they did in the tobacco wars. It’s already happening. In September, a suit similar to PHIA’s action was filed in New York; so far in 2025, DraftKings has been hit with lawsuits in New Jersey, Illinois, and Kentucky concerning its “no-sweat” and “risk-free” bet promotions.

“DraftKings provides a legal and regulated platform that prioritizes integrity and responsible gaming,” a company spokesperson writes to TIME in a statement. “Our products are designed for fun and entertainment, giving players opportunities to follow their favorite teams and athletes while connecting with friends. We believe our promotional terms are clearly and fairly disclosed in plain language, and we fully adhere to the regulations set forth in each jurisdiction where we operate. We remain committed to resolving the matter in question through the legal process.”

Meanwhile, the SAFE Bet Act—which would also ban such “bonus” and “no sweat” advertising, require that operators conduct customer affordability checks for wagers in excess of \$1,000 in a 24-hour period or \$10,000 in a 30-day period, and prohibit operators from accepting deposits via credit card—is also an underdog. After all, two Democrats are pushing for regulations in a [Republican-controlled Congress](#). “I’m very clear-eyed that it will be an uphill fight,” says Blumenthal. “It will depend a lot on whether my Republican colleagues want to stand up to the industry and produce some decent reforms.” His Democratic colleagues, moreover, don’t count as no-sweat bets. “The power of the industry affects legislators on a bipartisan basis,” says Blumenthal. “To be very blunt, it’s not like Democrats are immune to campaign contributions and other forms of influence.”

Through it all, Daynard, who’s well past retirement age, plans to keep fighting. He works out with a trainer and says he’s in the best physical shape in his life. He’s still teaching at Northeastern while pursuing a public-health agenda. “I love being productive and useful,” he says. “I don’t play tennis. I don’t play golf. I don’t sail. There’s a limit to how much solitaire I can play. I haven’t learned how to play pickleball.” He’s promised to go part time if he makes it to 100.

“One of the great upsides of being older is you’ve seen a lot of things,” says Daynard. “And you can recognize them. So you see

something, you say, ‘Aha.’” Daynard snaps his finger. “What’s similar with the tobacco industry is that they’ve designed the trap. The customers are in there, and they extract whatever money they can from them. And what happens with a trapped customer? Nothing good.”

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## Behind the Scenes of The White Lotus' Bigger, Wilder, Darker Third Season

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.

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It's hot. Or, as Mike White, the creator of *The White Lotus* puts it bluntly, "really f-cking hot." Not that the 110°F scorch prevents Patrick Schwarzenegger, son of Arnold, from doing push-ups as the crew prepares for another take. As the scene's cast clammers onto sun loungers by the [Four Seasons Koh Samui](#) infinity pool, three burly Thai guys in wide-brimmed straw hats and sodden neck towels wade into the water clutching towering reflectors. The cameras start rolling as Aimee Lou Wood, the [English rising star of \*Sex Education\*](#), banters with Schwarzenegger while munching

nonchalantly on an apple. A yell of “cut” emerges from a blacked-out poolside cabana, where White is glued to a monitor wearing headphones and a huge grin.

“Can you do that threesome line again?” he shouts. “Really throw it out there.”

Another meticulously carved apple is passed to Wood for continuity. Three takes later and White is satisfied, pumping arms skyward in a mini jig. “I like it,” he mutters. White, one of TV’s most sought-after producers, ambles over to Wood and Schwarzenegger to offer avuncular praise, though his untamed hair, threadbare shorts, and sweat-stained Kauai T-shirt smack more of a perennial drifter who’s wandered up from the beach to sell pot. The crew breaks for lunch, save for Wood, who’s got a stomachache 15 apples in.



Fans of *The White Lotus* are sure to feel in their guts the more pleasurable pain of interpersonal friction and rising suspense when Season 3 premieres on Feb. 16. [HBO’s hit black comedy](#) following the snooty guests and careworn staff in a luxury hotel chain will once again morph into a twisted crucible of nerve-shredding subterfuge. Set in Thailand, after previous seasons in Hawaii and [Italy](#), the latest installment promises to be grander, more epic—and

much, much darker. “I do feel like the other seasons were a rehearsal for this one,” says White, perched on a stool between takes at Phuket’s Bangla Muay Thai Stadium during one of two exclusive set visits granted to TIME. “There’s stuff that I’ve never directed before.”

As is the show’s custom, the details of *Lotus*’ third season have been kept tightly under wraps. The secrecy is part of the fun; characters reveal themselves to us slowly, as dozens of small mysteries and major twists crescendo to the culminating crime. This goes double for Season 3, which stars scene stealers like [Carrie Coon](#), [Walton Goggins](#), and [Parker Posey](#) and represents both a vibe shift and an expansion of scope. Surprises abound, as do scammers of various pedigree. Past seasons have opened by [flashing forward to the aftermath of a murder](#) that won’t happen until the finale. This season’s white-knuckle prologue suggests a more terrifying escalation looms, and is one of several elaborate action sequences that are enough of a departure that White feels compelled to aver, “I’m not Ridley Scott.”

In 2020, HBO asked White—who writes and directs every episode solo, a rarity in the TV world—to come up with a single-location miniseries that could be produced in compliance with expensive COVID-19 protocols. White sequestered an ensemble at the Four Seasons in Maui for a satire of wealth that also happened to be a murder mystery. It premiered in July 2021 to virtually universal acclaim. Audiences savored White’s scathing dialogue, actor [Jennifer Coolidge’s tragicomic performance](#) as the emotionally indigent heiress Tanya McQuoid, and the show’s sly insights into how money comes to shape our every relationship. Its viewership grew by a factor of [3.5 over the course of the season, with 7 million having streamed the premiere by the time the finale aired](#)—a remarkable number for a series without dragons—and it dominated the 2022 Emmys.

Of course, by then it was no longer actually a limited series. HBO had renewed it for a second season just before the first ended. Set in the romantic environs of Sicily and free from the confines of the pandemic, Season 2 allowed White to take his characters off the resort, on excursions that broadened the series' cinematic setting. *Lotus'* sleight of hand is to tantalize viewers with glimpses of luxury attainable only for the wealthiest people, even as it assures us that their guilty consciences and limited worldviews prevent them from enjoying such splendor. Season 2 was nominated for a host of Emmys, and won Coolidge a second trophy.



No one is more surprised than White that this painfully perceptive style, one he'd been honing for two decades, rocketed *Lotus* into the zeitgeist. "I'm happy that people like this and that I can keep doing it," he says during a video call in January. But "I don't feel like I'm ever going to be the kind of writer who is like, 'I know what people want.'" For him, the show, packed with the kind of uncomfortable conversations that fans can endlessly dissect on social media, reflects his self-described "minor edgelord" sensibility and offers an outlet to make oblique cultural commentary.

Yet it's also a personal product of a lifetime's worth of travel. As much as he appreciates his many adventures, White has observed

how a vacation can annihilate the familiar context of a quotidian existence surrounded by friends, family, and the distractions of work. What is meant to be a hard-earned break can devolve into an existential crisis. “If you’re in some place where it’s a different culture, different language, different vibe, and you’re also dealing with heavy personal things,” he says, there are moments when “you feel like, Should I just walk into the water?”

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Each morning during the filming process, beginning at 7 a.m., a slew of yachts anchored off the beach for their passengers to gawp at the stars. Some interlopers even made the treacherous journey around the rocky headland that flanks the resort’s half-moon bay to steal onto set. “One lady from Israel walked around three times saying she wanted to be part of the show,” says Four Seasons Koh Samui resort manager Jasjit “JJ” Assi. “One time she hurt herself and was bleeding.”



The underlying comedy of *The White Lotus* stems from White’s holding a fun-house mirror to rich, entitled Westerners vacationing amid an alien culture from which they’re really detached. White knew he wanted to look to the East to tell the next chapter, though his initial instinct was to set it in Japan, where he’s spent a bunch of time. HBO was hesitant, cognizant of the red tape that swathes the

Land of the Rising Sun, and persuaded White to check out Thailand first.

The deal was sealed through delirium. The production team was scouting locations in Thailand's northern city of Chiang Mai when White was hospitalized with severe bronchitis. "They put me on a nebulizer," he says, as a troop of extras drift past to find their places for the next take. "I didn't sleep for like two nights, and by the next morning I was like, 'I think I have the plot.' The season is pretty much what happened that night." The fact that *The White Lotus* is an anthology means that each season has its own conclusion, "which is always the hardest part," says White. But after that fever dream, "I felt like I had the ending," he says. "And so I was like, 'I guess we're shooting in Thailand.'"

For White, returning to Thailand also had an element of redemption. In 2009, White and his father Mel were eliminated from the [14th season of reality competition \*The Amazing Race\* in Phuket](#), only to be sequestered in the show's elimination station on Koh Samui. The irony that both would become the principal filming locations for the latest installment of White's greatest success isn't lost on him. "I would've hated to have gone through the rest of my life having some bad association with Thailand," says White.



Goggins says traveling back to Southeast Asia stirred similarly deep feelings. He came to Thailand 18 years ago after tragedy struck his own life. “I sat on these beaches, walked these streets, looking for answers after an existential crisis,” he says, reclining in a poolside cabana enjoying a postwrap Aperol spritz. “I wasn’t prepared for how emotional coming back would be, because I’m playing someone that is looking for the same thing—he is lost, he is angry, and he’s bitter about the hand that life has dealt him.”

Still, White had to find the actual hotel, spending months touring Thailand’s rolling northern highlands, bustling Bangkok, and southern beach resorts of Phuket and Krabi. “It’s fun, but it’s like speed dating,” says executive producer David Bernad, who has worked with White for over 20 years. Koh Samui was one of the final stops on the scouting tour. The resort occupies 43 acres of lush hillside peppered with 60 teak villas, all with pools and sweeping ocean vistas. Another key feature are monkeys; over 140 statues of primates adorn rooftops and gateposts, and much like the *Testa di Moro* pottery that came to define Season 2, monkeys are the new talisman for the mischief unfolding beneath their treetop perch.



The Four Seasons also boasts 15 private residences owned by “some of the richest people not only in Thailand but globally as

well,” says Assi. It’s the ideal setting for a series sending up the callous entitlement of the ultrawealthy. In a country where the mean annual wage stands at \$5,450, a four-bedroom residence starts at \$8,000 a night. Even amid Thailand’s well-developed tourist industry, the Four Seasons operates on a different plane; rooms at the perfectly comfortable four-star beach resorts nearby start around \$60. A parody of obscene decadence couldn’t have a more apt setting.

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As soon as cast and crew assembled at the Four Seasons, White called everyone together for a blessing ceremony by local monks at the resort’s spirit house, a traditional shrine outside every Thai building, to honor the ghosts that inhabit the land.

The famously genial atmosphere of White’s sets is one reason why so many top stars wanted to snag a role—though perhaps not the main one. “Normally, when I do auditions, I have to work for hours to try and make the script sound like something I would say. But this sounds natural,” says Sam Nivola, the son of actors Emily Mortimer and Alessandro Nivola, who plays the youngest son of Posey and Jason Isaacs. Goggins expresses similar sentiments: “Here, we work, we live, we eat in the same place. And when you’re not working, that means that somebody else is working. And you get jealous, to be quite honest, because they’re getting an opportunity to say Mike’s words, and you’re not.”



White has had a singular career trajectory. The actor, writer, producer, and later director scripted episodes of the teen dramas *Dawson's Creek* and *Freaks and Geeks* in the late 1990s, before making his art-house bones at age 29 as the writer and star of *Chuck & Buck*, a black showbiz comedy that premiered at Sundance in 2000 and was honored as the best low-budget feature at the Independent Spirit Awards. (“I knew about Mike before it was cool,” jokes Coon. “I have a *Chuck & Buck* DVD!”) The early acclaim led to blockbuster screenwriting credits, a filmography that is still growing today and includes *School of Rock*, *The Emoji Movie*, and *Despicable Me 4*. But he also found time to write and direct small films that reflect his warped brand of humanism, beginning with 2007’s *Year of the Dog*. Between projects, he competed in two seasons of *The Amazing Race* as well as on *Survivor*.

White got a taste of cult TV fame in 2011, when [HBO unveiled \*Enlightened\*](#), the half-hour dramedy he created with and starred in alongside Laura Dern. The tale of a narcissistic corporate executive (Dern) whose nervous breakdown yields a convenient spiritual awakening, the show positions its protagonist in the morally fraught role of a whistle-blower doing the right thing for selfish reasons. Disciples of *Enlightened*, which was canceled after just two seasons, should be thrilled to see White’s abiding fascination

with Eastern spirituality and wellness practices—and his skepticism of the way they're instrumentalized by Westerners on self-care kicks—reincarnated in *Lotus'* upcoming season. But while *Enlightened*'s "tone was a little more slice of life and observational," explains White, "this is more epic, more twisted."

White, whose father Mel was an evangelical minister when he was growing up, has also dabbled in spiritual pursuits. "I had a Buddhist self-help phase when I had a nervous breakdown in my 30s," he says. "I use Buddhist concepts as a way to sort of organize my ideas." Both his relationship to spirituality and confronting his aging parents' mortality fed into the inspiration for the new season. "It's been a hard year for me personally," says White, 54. "My parents are getting older, and there's a lot of stuff going on at home that's not fun."



The show's most unifying theme, also integral to its Thailand season, is the transactional nature of so many relationships that cross lines of gender, race, culture, and most crucially class, whether between guests and hotel staff or among lovers. In that respect, it fits into a current international vogue for stories, rooted in our polarized global economy, that indict the rich and powerful, from *Parasite* and *Triangle of Sadness* to *Squid Game* and *Succession*. Because corpses tend to surface in the flash-forwards

that open each *Lotus* season, it also capitalizes on streaming's recent obsession with whodunits—and has, in turn, created a market for such flimsy leisure-class murder mysteries as Netflix's *The Perfect Couple* and Hulu's *Death and Other Details*. What set White's work apart from the pack are his keen insights into human psychology and his ability to help actors translate that understanding into performances that convey the unique mix of desire, delusion, and hypocrisy swirling in each character's head.

"It has this paradisiacal but surreal feeling," says White. "Embedded into the show is a little bit of Hotel California—you can check in, but you can never leave."

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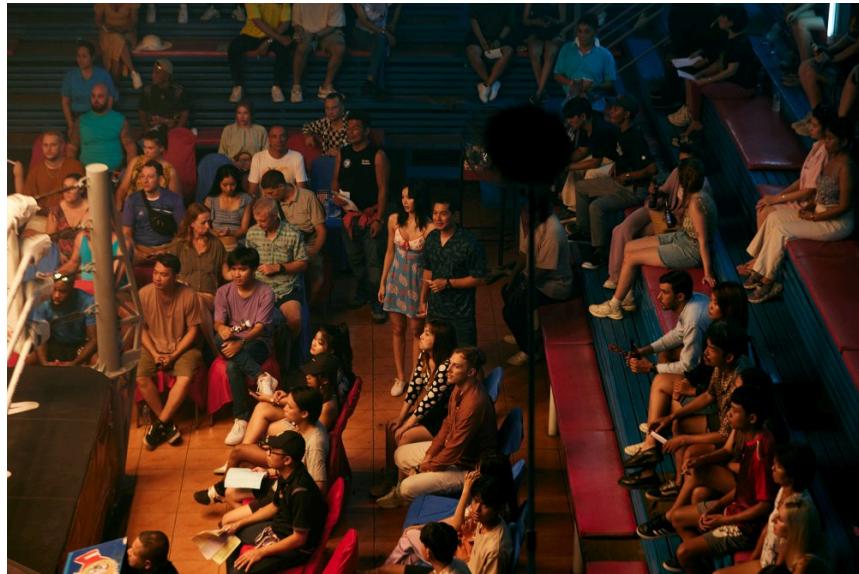
Outside Bangla Muay Thai Stadium, two dozen life-size plaster sculptures of tigers with piercing red eyes hang over the cavernous entranceway. These fearsome creatures guard an arena where two muscle-bound pugilists, slick with sweat, trade blows as a ringside crowd of dreadlocked backpackers and chic Eastern Europeans cheer and jeer. Yet not a sound emerges from the baying mob, which has been instructed to pantomime their appreciation noiselessly. On the second floor a video village has been constructed in the stadium's first-aid clinic, where Bernad and other producers watch monitors amid piles of Hard Rock Café takeout wrappers, mosquito spray, and aspirin bottles.

The subject of their attention is unfolding beyond the ring amid the timber bleachers, where separate elements of Season 3's cast are converging. There's Coon, Michelle Monaghan, and Leslie Bibb, as the privileged Americans; Tayme Thapthimthong and [Lalisa Manobal](#), better known as Lisa from K-pop phenomenon [Blackpink](#), as the local Thai hotel staffers; and Arnas Fedaravicius and Julian Kostov, who play members of Thailand's burgeoning Russian diaspora.



That this season would have a Russian element was something White decided he couldn't ignore after spending a year in Thailand. In 2023, Russians ranked top for tourist arrivals in Thailand from outside of Asia with 1.4 million visitors, many of them fleeing potential draft into Vladimir Putin's war of choice in Ukraine. Asked whether the Russian storyline portends a [narrative more rooted in world events](#), White demurs. "There's as many Russians as there are Thais, it feels!" he jests. "I just felt like there should be some kind of reflection of that."

Incorporating authentic Thai voices and characters was both a logistical and artistic leap for White. The show employed local producers who painstakingly listened to the Thai dialogue to ensure no one misspoke. The focus on religion and Eastern mysticism is a potential minefield if tackled clumsily. Though White doesn't flinch from such challenges, seeing them as part of the writer's art. "I don't think the show will ever be a nuanced version of a Thai person's Buddhist experience," says White. "I don't feel like I could write that. It is really about Americans coming with preconceptions. You talk to people ... and try to build out something that feels multidimensional and you hope it passes the bullsh-t test. Because that's the nature of storytelling: finding the story, finding the connections between all people—as opposed to seeing the differences and being fearful of that."



The stakes are also high because of just who that Thai cast includes. Lisa is one of the world's biggest music stars and among the most followed female K-pop soloists online. Although initially starstruck—a reaction that adds verisimilitude to the pair's onscreen relationship—Tayme says it didn't take long for Lisa to break the ice. "The first time I met her at the cast dinner I was really nervous," he says. "I didn't even shake her hand. But she was like, 'Hey, do you want to get a drink?' And we just hit it off. We both like hip-hop and tequila!"

Tayme, who was born and raised in west London to Thai parents and in everyday life speaks with a plummy Chelsea accent, even found himself a language coach. "My character is an island kid from Samui, so Lisa helped me a lot with phrasing," says Tayme, who plays a hotel security guard.

White confesses to early misgivings about casting pop royalty, though he was quickly reassured by Lisa's professionalism. "Honestly, I was resistant because I don't think we need more attention on the show," he says. "But she did a great audition and I think she's a great actress. I'm really happy we cast her because she's a real source of pride for the Thai people. It's almost like she's a pop star and also Princess Diana!"

Tourism in Thailand, where more than [90% of the population identifies as Buddhist](#), tends to have a spiritual component, whether that means visiting a temple or embarking upon a meditation retreat. Many of the characters we meet this season are, whether they know it or not, in urgent need of relief from what one of the resort's holistic health practitioners identifies as "psychic pain." "They're all in some kind of hurt," White says. "Like, they're all dead, but they don't know it."

Those feelings manifest in different, often bleakly hilarious, ways. White says Coon, Monaghan, and Bibb's trio of 40-something women, who grew up together but have gone on to live very different lives, are mirrors. As they whisper behind one another's backs and privately fret over their own comparative shortcomings, their relationship illustrates "how you become defensive about the choices of your life, and how those people that are so close to you can be a source of pain to you, even if they're not even trying to be, just because they chose a different path."

Jason Isaacs' finance-titan patriarch and Goggins' irritable grifter have more in common than is initially apparent, but their self-images are diametric opposites. While the former feels intense pressure to provide for his family, the latter languishes as a result of a lifelong lack of love and encouragement. Goggins' grim character represents a type of expat White spotted over and over again in Thailand. Guys like this, he says, are "so isolated in their own bubble of scamming, they can't reach out through normal means of communication." Traveling alongside these haunted men, whose sordid backstories he'd later Google, he would overhear conversations where "all they can talk about is how they can hide their money from the government."



These individual spiritual crises are heightened by the Thai resort's proximity to a natural world—where lizards descend out of nowhere, water churns in the night, and monkeys chatter ceaselessly, evoking the racing thoughts of agitated minds—conspicuously apathetic to the whims of spoiled guests. It's a backdrop both gorgeous and sinister. So, yes, “because it's dealing with these existential tropes of facing into the nothingness of self” and “Buddhist themes that have life and death and ethical aspects,” White says, the season “just got more heavy.”

There was also the matter of replacing seemingly irreplaceable cast members, in particular Coolidge, [whose departure served as the climax of Season 2](#). “How do you go about replacing Jennifer?” asks White. “It’s not just the creative part, but she’s a very good friend, and also a big part of the show just as a person. I’m not friends with the cast the way that I’m friends with Jennifer. But there’s definitely some performances I feel rival her as far as hopefully iconic performances.” Posey, with a maximalist portrayal of a pharmaceutical-addled mother oblivious to her family’s dysfunction, has a similar air of privileged suffering. An early episode features the kind of electrifyingly awkward conversation that is *Lotus*’ trademark, in which Posey inexplicably snubs an old acquaintance.

The scene encapsulates White and his actors' ability to imbue a single interaction with both levity and dread. As [Natasha Rothwell](#), who played spa manager Belinda in Season 1 and reappears in Thailand for some professional development, sees it, the season at large strikes a balance: "Where you're talking about spirituality, there's dark and there's light. So I think you'll find that there's balance throughout the season, but [White] would be doing a disservice to explore spirituality and not speak to the darker undertones."

**Read More:** [Natasha Rothwell on What to Expect From Her Beloved Character in The White Lotus Season 3](#)

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Despite the show's unsettling themes, the ambience on set was nothing if not convivial. But the experiences of the actors still varied significantly from those in previous seasons. Rothwell saw firsthand how White upgraded his COVID-optimized chamber piece into a lavish international anthology. This time, she enthuses, "it's expansive. The cast is huge, the scale of the production is huge—and it needs to be to hold the story, because the story is so robust and full and layered and juicy."

But it wasn't just the level of investment or breadth of story that felt different. "From what I've heard, the second season was a lot more partying," says Nivola. "It's honestly so hot here that it's hard to drink or do anything like that that makes you feel dehydrated." White wouldn't know. "I'm thankfully working all the time so that I can't get into the mischief. I'm sure it's happening!"

Indeed, the record-breaking heat was unrelenting. "It's the hottest I've ever felt," says Monaghan. "So we've definitely endured a lot." Outside scenes meant hanging around in the tropical sun for hours, and toward the end of the project a lot of the crew fell ill. Sets were littered with ice coolers and sachets of isotonic powder.

“Thank God I got in shape for this,” says White, who went vegan in the run-up to filming.

The indoors brought little respite, since the hum of air-conditioning meant it couldn’t be used while cameras rolled—despite dozens of crew crammed into rooms along with blistering lights. Between takes, the cast would be blasted by hair dryers to remove sweat patches from their clothes, raising their body temperatures even higher. “We’re doing intimate scenes, and you stink,” says Isaacs. “By the end of each day, we’re just caked in sweat and makeup. You can peel your clothes off with a trowel. It melts your fillings. It would be churlish to complain, there are terrible things going on in the world, but we’ve all had enough.”

Still, in contrast to the hardships of filming, the cast were relieved to find the creative process refreshingly collaborative, given White isn’t precious about his words. “He wants actors to be able to show themselves,” says Isaacs. “It’s an odd paradox that he both wrote it all so precisely and is also prepared to throw it all away and give it over to the actors and just stir the pot.”

Often it appears that stirring is what White enjoys most of all. “Mike shrieks with laughter so much that he ruins the take, but you’re thrilled that you get to do it again,” says Isaacs. “Then he sits behind the monitor like some kind of satanic imp, throwing out ever more outrageous lines, things that you’re almost blushing to say, but he just pushes things further and further. And you just trust that in the edit he’ll find the right tone.”

After the bonding experience of the arrival blessing ceremony, the business of filming was more siloed, with most scenes taking place within the separate traveling parties at the hotel. To avoid resetting different locations, the crew shot two weeks of breakfast scenes, followed by two weeks of lunches, two weeks of bedroom drama, two weeks out at sea. It meant that much of the cast were off at any time though still staying on set.



This dynamic led each group to become close, says Isaacs, who plays husband to Posey and father to Schwarzenegger, Nivola, and Sarah Catherine Hook. “I do feel incredibly parental and very, very close to the kids,” he says. “I think it was odd for my real kids to arrive and see how close we were.”

The fact that the actors were all staying in a hotel while playing people staying in that same hotel added to the strange intimacy. Between takes, Nivola lounges on a daybed playing *Total War* on his handheld console. Isaacs suddenly appears brandishing a tennis racket. “Do you play?” he asks. “I’m really hoping for a game. Mike plays, but he’s just too busy.” After filming one day, as cast and crew troop off to make dinner plans and take much-needed showers, Schwarzenegger wanders down to the beach accompanied by his brother Christopher and mother Maria Shriver, who have just jetted in for a visit.



The camplike atmosphere with work and downtime spent with the same people in the same place meant the distinction between actor and character began to blur. “There’s been times that we’ve been out for dinners and people have said verbatim their lines from the show,” says Wood. “The distance is really disappearing between fiction and reality, because we’re living in the show. It’s so weird. It’s all very meta.”

It’s fair to wonder, at a time when plenty of prestige dramas top out at three or four seasons, how many more times White can conjure up such magic. The series was recently renewed for a fourth season. And its long-term future seems limited neither by audience interest (viewership increased between Seasons 1 and 2) nor, because it resets itself with a new cast, location, and theme each season, by a dearth of fertile material. White already has “some ideas” for what subsequent installments might entail and can imagine making “maybe six seasons.” Why stop there? “Just because I feel like, then I’ll be 60? 59?” And then, he says, with a rueful smile: “And then I’ll probably just die.”

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<https://time.com/7208849>

## **‘I Found the Sound That Represents Me’: Bad Bunny On Heartbreak and Returning Home to Puerto Rico With Debí Tirar Más Fotos**

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

Chow is a technology correspondent at TIME. He covers crypto, AI, tech regulation, and culture.



Last summer, the global superstar Bad Bunny was driving through the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico, crying and feeling sad “about a lot of things.” As he looked out his window, he saw the city’s beaches filled with blissed-out tourists—which somehow made him feel even worse. He began thinking about the relationship between Puerto Rico’s external perception and its sometimes-harsh realities and how that relates to his personal life.

“Tourists come here to enjoy the beautiful places, and then they leave and they don’t have to deal with the problems that Puerto

Ricans have to deal with day-to-day,” he explained to TIME in a Manhattan hotel room in late December, days before yet another [blackout](#) blanketed Puerto Rico in darkness. “Translating that analogy to a romance, there are also people who arrive to share [memories with you] and only see the best part of you, the most beautiful part of you,” he says. “And they leave. They couldn’t see that part of each one of us: the defects, the trauma, the worries, the pains, the wounds of the past. It’s like they were a tourist in your life.”

Bad Bunny, born Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, spent about half of 2024 abroad, showing off the best parts of himself: he wrapped up an [arena tour](#) that grossed more than [\\$200 million](#), co-chaired the Met Gala alongside Jennifer Lopez and Zendaya, performed at [Vogue World 2024](#) in Paris—where he took a private tour of the Louvre with his on-and-off love interest Kendall Jenner—and filmed *Happy Gilmore 2* with Adam Sandler. He was the third-most streamed artist on Spotify, marking his sixth straight year in the top five.

But all of his globetrotting and success only made Bad Bunny miss his home even more. Exacerbating that homesickness were the types of creeping criticisms that inevitably come with his level of success: from fans who accused him of abandoning his island for Hollywood; from critics who felt his 2023 album, *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana*, lacked the [joy](#) or [creative spark](#) of his past music. On that album, Martínez seemed all too aware of his perilous position at the top: “I am the biggest star in the whole world,” he rapped on “Nadie Sabe.” “There are many people who want me to fail.”

### **Read More:** [Bad Bunny’s Next Move](#)

For his next project, Bad Bunny could have attempted to reclaim his no. 1 position on Spotify (now occupied by Taylor Swift) by rapping in English or collaborating with superstars. Instead, he

went in the opposite direction. *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*, his sixth solo studio album, which arrived Jan. 5, is his most culturally authentic, musically ambitious, and emotionally vulnerable album: a deep dive into his identity and sense of self. It shows him seeking refuge from heartbreak, stardom, and politics, all while plunging deeply into Puerto Rico's musical history.

This album is not for the tourists. Listeners will have to traverse deeper than the sandy coastlines of the island, and into the mountains: a place of resistance, he calls it. "This is an album of Puerto Rican music, and a completely different vibe from what any other artist has done," he says. "I found what my roots are: the sound that represents me."



## Turning to Traditional Puerto Rican Music

For years, Bad Bunny's signature songs about sex, pride, and heartbreak have been anchored by reggaeton beats ready-made for *perreo* in the club. But shortly after wrapping his 2023 trap-oriented album *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana*, Martínez came to longtime producer MAG with an idea. "He wanted to create an album that takes you on a journey through the genres that make up Puerto Rican music," says MAG, a Nuyorican-Dominican

who produced most of Bad Bunny's *Un Verano Sin Ti*, which remains the most streamed Spotify album ever.

Sitting in a hotel conference room, draped in a heavy silver cross chain, long black trench, and Louis Vuitton sunglasses, Bad Bunny plays one of the first songs created for the record. "NuevaYol," its distinct spelling an homage to the [dialect](#) of his people, is built around a sample from El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico's salsa classic "Un Verano en Nueva York." Salsa, with roots in Cuba that were further nurtured by Boricuas in New York in the mid-20th century, is a prime example of the richness of the Puerto Rican diaspora. But few artists have attempted to blend salsa's lively congas and syncopated brass arrangements with the harder, sleeker beats from Dominican dembow.

The resulting song, with its genre-melding, cross-generational attention to detail, set the tone for the rest of the album.

"NuevaYol" nods to the Puerto Rican community in the Big Apple, with shoutouts to salsa legend Willie Colón and Maria Antonia Cay, better known as "Toñita," the owner of the last-standing Latino social club in Williamsburg, Brooklyn—a historically Puerto Rican neighborhood now facing rapid gentrification.

Martínez's album concept coalesced further at the Fiestas de la Calle San Sebastián in January 2024. The music festival, also known as "San Se," is Puerto Rico's way of marking the end of the [holiday season](#), which lasts from November through mid-January. Yearning for the *música típica* of his childhood, Martínez started to write the plena-inspired "Café con Ron" sitting on a balcony as he watched the festival below. (Plena was birthed around a century ago amid Puerto Rico's transfer from Spanish to U.S. rule, [combining](#) the musical traditions of freed African slaves, native Taino, and Europeans.)

Later in the year, Martínez called a slew of up-and-coming musicians into the studio, mostly from the local music school [Libre](#)

[de Música San Juan](#), and some of them teenagers. Together, they created “Baile Inolvidable,” a salsa track complete with wailing trombones and a piano solo; “Turista,” a heartbreaking bolero that explores the hollowness of tourism; “Bokete,” with just a sprinkle of bachata; and “Pitorro de Coco,” inspired by the [jíbaro music](#) that originated in the Puerto Rican countryside and one of the two singles released in advance of the album. Martínez says that his mother cried when she first heard the song, and wrote to him: “From trap to [jíbaro](#) music, my heart is very happy. I never imagined it.”

Martínez seems just as excited as his mom when he plays the album for TIME in New York. He sings along passionately to the lyrics of his collaborators—including the rising urbano artist RaiNao—and mimes playing the trombone and bongos.

Bad Bunny is far from the only young star channeling the music of the past. Fellow Boricua artist Rauw Alejandro covered the Frankie Ruiz classic “Tú Con Él” on his November album. Hopping on Grupo Frontero’s smash hit “unx100to,” Martínez also contributed to the rising popularity of Regional Mexican music, which artist [Peso Pluma](#) has further reignited through his *corridos*.

*Debí Tirar* features much more live musicianship than Martínez’s past records. His bandmates on the project mostly come from a new generation of Puerto Rican musicians, including the producer [Big Jay](#) and the band [Chuwi](#). Martínez sought to both channel their energy and encourage younger generations to pursue the music of their ancestors. “To be able to collaborate in that way, and give space to new people instead of looking for those who are established in the industry,” he says, “was something that for me was part of the purpose.”



## Fighting For His Homeland

Bad Bunny has long been engaged in politics, and he's had as much reason as ever to speak out in the lead-up to the new album. In 2019, he joined protests that led to the ouster of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. He has been vocal about [LGBTQ rights](#), and songs like “Andrea” call attention to gender-based violence. In 2022, he released a 23-minute documentary about Puerto Rico’s life-threatening blackouts, which have continued following the [privatization of the island’s power grid](#), and the more gradual threat of gentrification for the [music video](#) of his song “El Apagón.”

In October, Bad Bunny [jumped into the U.S. election discourse](#) after comedian Tony Hinchcliffe appeared at a Trump rally in New York at Madison Square Garden and declared: “There’s literally a floating island of garbage in the middle of the ocean right now. I think it’s called Puerto Rico.” Hinchcliffe later tried to dismiss the statement as a [joke](#), but the [backlash](#) from the Latino community was swift and loud.

Martínez responded quickly by posting a [video on Instagram stories](#) of Kamala Harris outlining her support of Puerto Rico. Martínez says he was in New York on the day of the rally with a

group of badass friends (“*cabrones*”) who were all incensed. “We were playing [around] about getting there on the bus and *prenderlo* [lighting it up],” he says.

Martínez says he understands, at some level, Hinchcliffe’s defense. “I consider myself a person who to a certain point likes dark humor,” he says. “But the detail was that it was not a standard comedy nor a comedy show, it was a political rally.”

“Most people don’t know who the f-ck you are,” he continues, talking about Hinchcliffe. “They’re going to assume that you’re a politician at a political rally. So that awakens people who may be there and think the same as you, and say ‘Yes, Puerto Rico [is]....’ And all those racist people, at that moment, [it] gives them empowerment for a joke.”

While this album is not always overtly political, Martínez does gesture toward Puerto Rico’s tenuous status within the American empire on the song “Lo Que Pasó a Hawaii.” Martínez says the song’s lyrics came to him in a dream, including the line “*No quiero que pase contigo lo que pasó a Hawaii*” (“I don’t want what happened in Hawaii to happen to you”). In 1898, both [Puerto Rico](#) and Hawaii were seized and declared U.S. territories. Hawaii became the 50th state in 1959 and is now significantly Americanized, while Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory and retains its own language and culture. Last fall, Martínez [came out](#) against the ruling New Progressive Party (PNP), which promotes statehood.

Drawn by [tax incentives](#), many wealthy foreigners have relocated to Puerto Rico, impacting locals’ access to housing and public beaches. Martínez contends that many show little interest in the island apart from what it can provide them. “Politically and historically, they know nothing about Puerto Rico, nor are they interested in knowing,” he says. “They don’t even know that Puerto Ricans on the island don’t even vote for the president, but they do

know that they can go to the island to legally evade taxes. That's something that shocked me."

While he says that his song "Lo Que Pasó a Hawaii" has a political bent, he asked that its message speak for itself. "Many times, when I want to express myself in a more political way, I do it in songs because it's the best way I can," he says. "I think that every Puerto Rican can listen to it and come to their own conclusion and do their research and understand it the way they think best."

Days before the album's release, Martínez put out a [short film](#) which further explores those same themes of economic and cultural alienation. The film depicts an elderly man, played by iconic Puerto Rican filmmaker Jacobo Morales, coming to grips with a Puerto Rico in which country and rock tunes play on his walk to a gentrified bakery—which is staffed by an English-language server offering vegan *quesitos*.

***Read More: [How Puerto Ricans Are Fighting Back Against the Outsiders Using the Island as a Tax Haven](#)***

Despite Martínez's devotion to his island, his ascension on the global stage and his association with the Kardashians has been taken as proof by some that he's out of touch with his roots. But Martínez's Puerto Rican heritage is the thing that will always differentiate him, particularly in white-dominated spaces like Hollywood. It's a topic that comes up indirectly throughout the interview, especially as the conversation veers from politics to music and back again. He has used his music and platform to repeatedly show how the political is personal: How politicians have made decisions about the island's roads, access to electricity, and public spaces, with foreigners attempting to [privatize beaches](#) for high-end luxury resorts, and all of these moves are felt acutely by locals. Puerto Rico has one of the highest poverty rates in the U.S., and Congressional actions in 2016 resulted in [austerity measures](#) that cut back public services on the island.

*Debí Tirar Mas Fotos*' focus on Puerto Rico is both a rejoinder and an attempt to create a safe space. If his 2022 smash album *Un Verano Sin Ti* represented Puerto Rico's sunniest beaches, then *Debí Tirar* is a family affair in the *campo*, or countryside, of the island, he says. "They're trying to take away my beaches, little by little: they keep coming and selling them," he says. "There are a lot of people who are fighting, raising their voices, and protecting the beaches, but at the same time, it's like we're looking for a refuge in the countryside. A resistance in that way."

## Healing and Nostalgia

Nearly two years ago, Bad Bunny became a sudden fixture of U.S. gossip sites when he was photographed with the world's highest-paid supermodel, Kendall Jenner. In the summer of 2024, they appeared together in Paris in matching outfits. But [they are now](#) rumored to no longer be together.

Often embedded between upbeat melodies and rhythms, lyrically, *Debí Tirar* deals heavily with heartbreak: the longing for a text or phone call from a lover, making peace with the end of a relationship, and trying to get over the potential of what could have been. The titular song on the album, "DtMF," touches on that feeling as Martínez mulls over what he neglected to do: kiss, embrace, and photograph a love he now misses.

However, Martínez says that the songs on *Debí Tirar* aren't necessarily about specific people. "I have written songs inspired by people that people don't have a f-cking clue who they are," he says. "The meaning of the song can vary in many things, like the absence of a person who is no longer with you, or a love. But it can be many other things too, that are no longer there."

To solely identify *Debí Tirar* as an album about romantic love would be an incomplete reading. In retreating further to his roots, Bad Bunny delivers authenticity as he celebrates the markers of his

heritage as a way to bring back joy—a feeling that Martínez has sought both in the midst of heartbreak and as his career has taken him away from Puerto Rico for prolonged periods. “At times you are perhaps a little nostalgic, a little sentimental... But at the same time, you are enjoying other things: playing dominoes with grandparents or with the family,” Martínez says. “Since we are also in Puerto Rico, we are at home, we are with the group: That is a reason to be happy, to be content.”

The search for that nostalgic element is reflected in the date of the album release, which Martínez intentionally chose to fall on *Víspera de Reyes*, a celebration within Puerto Rico’s Christmas season in which revelers listen to *jíbaro*, *plena*, and *bomba*. “It can be mixed with lots of modern-day music and rhythms,” he says, reminiscing on the sounds of his grandfather’s favorite music that he hopes will now be heard year-round.

Whereas in *Nadie Sabe*, Bad Bunny gloats about his achievements and success, Martínez is more humble about his stardom during our discussion about *Debí Tirar*’s final track “La Mudanza.” “People see me as this giant superstar who has done all these things and is recognized,” he says, “But nothing would be possible if my parents hadn’t met and made me.” The final track of the album, which he says is all about his rise to global fame, is partially a tribute to his family. Artfully rapping over a salsa beat, he shares the story of how his parents met, giving shout-outs to his grandparents, nieces and nephews, and ultimately, his countrymen. “Yo soy de P f-ckin’ R,” he deliberately includes on the last song, a reference to his 2020 hit that became an anthem of Puerto Rican pride.

Martínez understands all too well the push and pull between immigrants chasing their dreams abroad while still yearning for home. Sitting in the hotel room, some 10 miles from where he performed [two iconic sold-out shows](#) at Yankee Stadium and shot part of his music video for the massively popular “[Tití Me Preguntó](#),” he speaks tenderly of New York. He recounts a memory

of when he was 12, and his mom surprised him with a trip to the city. “I started to cry, and she thought it was because I was so excited,” he recalls. “It was because I didn’t want to go. I said, ‘I don’t want to leave. I’m never going to leave Puerto Rico.’”

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# The True Story Behind I'm Still Here, the Oscar Contender Pushing Brazil to Confront Its Dark Past



*This story was originally published on Jan. 7. We are republishing it after [I'm Still Here won the 2025 Oscar for Best International Feature](#).*

When the celebrated Brazilian author Marcelo Paiva started writing his 2015 memoir *Ainda Estou Aqui (I'm Still Here)*, he wanted to record his family history as his mother, Eunice Paiva, started losing her memory. Eunice was in her eighties and had been living with Alzheimer's for over a decade—causing her to forget her past as an influential human rights lawyer and activist in Brazil. Much of her work had been devoted to indigenous rights, but her lifelong pursuit of justice was personal: her former husband and Marcelo's father, Rubens Paiva, an engineer and former congressman, was arrested by military police and forcibly disappeared on Jan. 20, 1971. It became clear only decades later that Rubens was tortured and murdered by Brazil's military dictatorship, which ruled from 1964 to 1985. His body was never found.

Through this family lens, Marcelo Paiva's story also took on a greater meaning regarding Brazil's dark—and largely unspoken—past. The book was a domestic best-seller, but now, the Paivas' family story has gone global with the critically acclaimed film *I'm Still Here*. Releasing in the U.S. on Jan. 17 after premiering to raves and a Best Screenplay award at the Venice International Film Festival, the movie was adapted from Marcelo's book by his friend Walter Salles, one of Brazil's most accomplished filmmakers, known for *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and *On the Road*.

Salles' first Brazilian feature film in 16 years and first feature in over a decade, *I'm Still Here* has fought its way into the conversation this [awards season](#). On Jan. 5, it won one of the two [Golden Globes](#) for which it was [nominated](#), Best Actress in a Motion Picture – Drama for star Fernanda Torres. She beat Nicole Kidman, Angelina Jolie, and Kate Winslet to become the first Brazilian actress to win this award, 25 years after her mother, Fernanda Montenegro, who plays an older version of Eunice in *I'm Still Here*, was nominated in this category for another Salles film, *Central Station*. It is widely predicted that *I'm Still Here* will be nominated for Best International Feature Film at the 97th Academy Awards. Now, Torres is in a front-row seat to earn a Best Actress nomination too.



The film portrays the Paivas' idyllic family life by Ipanema beach in Rio de Janeiro in the early '70s, while, in the background,

military police cracks down on leftist guerrilla groups resisting the dictatorship. The family's joy is brutally interrupted by Rubens' home arrest by the military in 1971 over his suspected links with such groups. Eunice (Torres) and one of her four daughters are then arrested and interrogated in prison. After their release, and throughout Rubens' continued disappearance, Eunice begins a decades-long fight for the truth about what happened to him. The film eventually jumps to 1996, when she finally receives his death certificate, and then to 2014, when the 85-year-old Eunice only fleetingly remembers her past.

As of [late December](#), over 3 million people had gone to see *I'm Still Here* in Brazilian cinemas, generating \$11 million domestically, and making it Salles' most successful film there after a three-decade long career. As the film's popularity grows in Brazil, [more and more people are reckoning](#) with the country's brutal history, and seeing parallels with the far-right there today. Crucially, the book and film's releases coincided with major events in Brazil connected to the true story of the Paivas, providing a sense of urgency and a case of life reflecting art.

## A film about Brazil's past—and present



As Marcelo Paiva was writing his book, the National Truth Commission (*Comissão Nacional da Verdade*) was launched in Brazil by former president Dilma Rousseff—who had herself been jailed and tortured during military rule—to investigate crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship. It was thanks to [that report, published in 2014](#), that Rubens Paiva was confirmed as one of 434 people killed or disappeared by the military regime, while tens of thousands more were tortured.

“I realized that my mother was losing her memory while Brazil was discussing its own memory,” Paiva told TIME. “It was a very weird parallel and paradox to write about.”

This past fall, the film’s release in early November in Brazil came a few weeks before a [police report](#) rocked Brazilian politics. It revealed that military allies of Brazilian far-right politician and former president [Jair Bolsonaro](#)—many of whom were part of the dictatorship and never faced accountability—were planning a coup against [President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) after [Bolsonaro lost the election in 2022](#). This attempted military coup [involved](#) a shocking

plan to kill Lula, his Vice President-elect Geraldo Alckmin, and a Supreme Court Justice.

**Read more:** [\*What Brazil's Failed Coup Means for the Future of Its Democracy\*](#)

“At the beginning of this journey, I thought that we were going to offer a reflection of the past to better understand where we’re at,” Walter Salles told TIME, “but little by little, as the zeitgeist in Brazil changed and the far-right acquired an important presence that we didn’t anticipate, it soon became clear that the film was also about the present.”

Torres agrees: “We were on the edge of something done by people who admired the dictatorship from the ‘70s. And there was a problem with remembering... not only in Brazil, but in the world. [Many people thought] that the dictatorship was not so bad, that torture perhaps didn’t exist, that the problem is democracy.” The news of this attempted coup was, for her, “a mirror image of what that [Paiva] family faced.”

A major reason why she, Salles, and others who worked on the film felt this mirror-effect is because Bolsonaro is a passionate supporter of Brazil’s military dictatorship, [calling](#) the military coup in 1964 “Liberty Day.” Most of his supporters follow his fondness for that period. Around 58 million Brazilians [voted](#) for Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections, over 55% of votes, and though he lost to Lula in 2022, his supporters staged a massive anti-democratic attack on the Brazilian congress in 2023, drawing [obvious parallels](#) with the Capitol attack by Trump supporters in 2021.

## Honoring the legacy of a widow turned national hero



This political context was felt in the room when *I'm Still Here* began production in 2023, but Salles said it became a source of motivation: “We collectively understood what was at stake while we were shooting it, which helped bring us focus and make the exact same film, which is something fundamental in cinema.”

Torres invoked the concept of “*o homem cordial*” (“the cordial man”), coined by Brazilian sociologist Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, as a key way of understanding Brazilian identity and how Brazilians tend to deal with serious issues.

“We [Brazilians] are very friendly. We are very open. We are very familiar. On the other hand, we tend to solve our state problems, political problems, in a private way... We put things under the carpet.”

Despite [attempts](#) by the Brazilian far-right to boycott the film, it became a national phenomenon. This took Torres by surprise, as she expected a film about Rubens Paiva, a symbol of the crimes committed by the military, to be attacked even beyond those furthest to the right. “Everybody got affected and touched by this [Paiva] family... the right-wing, left-wing, the center, so we were not attacked.”

Brazilian historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, who was himself imprisoned in Brasilia during the dictatorship and met Rubens and Eunice Paiva in his youth, said that much of the film’s popularity is owed to its focus on an affluent family in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s, and its synchronicity with current events.

He told TIME that films about the military dictatorship used to be “militant films about urban guerrilla warfare, and militants ready to kill and die. Now we see a very happy family of the Brazilian haute-bourgeoisie, not involved in subversive actions, that is struck by this bolt of lightning falling on their house, and it coincides with the discovery that there was a plan to kill Lula by people in Bolsonaro’s entourage.”

The historian said that the film has struck Brazilian youth so much that on YouTube and TikTok there are “daughters of former political prisoners making videos showing photos and telling their family stories”—something unthinkable for older generations of Brazilians. This viral effect is not only online: In São Paulo, where Eunice Paiva, who died in 2018 at 89, is buried, her tomb has [reportedly](#) become a pilgrimage site for admirers of this woman who fought for Brazil’s democracy.

“My mother transgressed the stereotype of a widow into a hero, and built a new personality, a new persona as a lawyer,” says Marcelo Paiva. The acclaimed Brazilian writer is the only son of the five children Eunice raised alone after Rubens disappeared, while she became a human rights lawyer. The family lived in a big

house in Leblon in Rio when Rubens was around, but were forced to move after his enforced disappearance. Since his death was not made official until 1996—25 years later—Eunice couldn't access his bank accounts or sell his belongings to support her family. The whole cast and crew were in awe of Eunice's life. For Torres, the goal was to make "a movie that she would be proud of."

## The thin line between dictatorship and democracy



*I'm Still Here* is split between a beautiful innocence in Rio and a suspended grief following Rubens' disappearance. Salles was childhood friends with the Paiva children, and remembers spending time with them in the late '60s in their "very luminous" house by the beach, where "the windows and doors were constantly open, the political discussion was free and the music was constant... In that house pulsated the dream of another country, which was really different from the reality of Brazil at that point, because the country was under military dictatorship and censorship, and the military was so present in everyday life."

Decades later, although Brazil has changed significantly and returned to its democratic roots, many still feel that this "dream of another country" Salles speaks of remains distant as political parallels between then and now continue. "Both in Brazil and in the

U.S., there is a very thin line between a dictatorship and a democracy,” Marcelo Paiva said. “Fortunately, we resisted, but I don’t know for how long. But the movie is important to create a sense of responsibility for the population about the future.”

Can a film help a country confront its dark past? Probably not fully, but Salles certainly believes that culture can play a role in this discussion. “There’s a vitality to Brazilian cinema and art in general that is triggered by the desire to offer a reflection of our own identity, and this film is part of this larger picture,” he said. “It’s not standing alone.”

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## It's Time for the Oscars to Take Horror Seriously

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



When Demi Moore won the Golden Globe for her turn as aging star Elisabeth Sparkle in French director Coralie Fargeat's body-horror hit *The Substance* on Jan. 5, she shared in her acceptance speech that it was the first real award she'd received in her more than 45 years in Hollywood. The moment was a bright spot of the night, with Moore touching on how the movie helped break her out of a particularly disheartening professional slump.

"I was at kind of a low point" when the unconventional script came across her desk, she recalled. "And the universe told me that you're not done."

But while recognition of the 62-year-old actor was long overdue, it was perhaps a surprise that it came for a role that involved donning grotesque prosthetics and graphically birthing a younger version of herself, considering horror's grim awards-season track record.



In the nearly 100 years since the Oscars debuted, a grand total of seven horror movies (now including *The Substance*) have been nominated for Best Picture. Only 1991's *The Silence of the Lambs*—which is also a detective story—has won. Fargeat also earned a nod for Best Director, making her this year's sole female nominee in the category and giving her a chance to become the second director to ever win for a horror film (behind only *Silence of the Lambs*' Jonathan Demme). A statuette for Moore, who received her first ever nomination on Jan. 23, would make her just the seventh actor to receive an Oscar for their role in a horror movie. It's an egregiously low success rate for a genre that's delivered some of film's most memorable performances.

And Moore is just the chosen representative of a year that produced many stellar turns in a wide range of scary movies. There was Hugh Grant as a fiendishly charming religious zealot in *Heretic*, Naomi Scott as a pop star fighting both literal and figurative demons in *Smile 2*, and Justice Smith as a shy teen who develops an obsession with a cult horror series in *I Saw the TV Glow*. Christmas-day release *Nosferatu*, Robert Eggers' remake of F. W. Murnau's 1922 silent vampire classic, swiftly climbed into the top 50 highest-grossing horror movies of all time as critics heaped praise on star Lily-Rose Depp. Though Grant was nominated for a

Golden Globe, the others have been overlooked, save for largely genre-specific or indie-focused accolades.



Gory and gruesome, *The Substance* was never a shoo-in for mainstream success. But a buzzy Cannes debut, a message about aging women that resonated widely, and a box-office haul of \$76 million on a \$17.5 million budget are all testament to how powerful a vehicle horror can be for talented actors. Still, even if Moore ends up on the podium on March 2, it doesn't change the fact that, historically, the Academy has made a habit of snubbing some of the most deserving performances. To name just a few from the past decade: [Toni Collette](#) in *Hereditary*, [Lupita Nyong'o](#) in *Us*, [Florence Pugh](#) in *Midsommar*, [Mia Goth](#) in *Pearl*.

“At the end of the day, I think the value of award shows is to show innovation in cinema,” Nyong’o said of the apparent bias against horror in a 2020 interview with [BuzzFeed](#). “So having a discrimination against a genre feels so silly really.”

Critically-acclaimed horror movies like *Psycho*, *The Exorcist*, *Jaws*, *Carrie*, and *The Sixth Sense* used to be able to break through and at least nab some of the big-five Oscar nominations. Past acting wins in the genre have gone to Kathy Bates for 1990’s *Misery*, Ruth Gordon for 1968’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, and Fredric March for 1931’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as [Jodie Foster](#) and [Anthony Hopkins](#)’ victories for *Silence of the Lambs*. But after

that you'd have to jump 20 years to [Natalie Portman](#), who prima ballerina-ed her way to the most recent horror acting Oscar in 2010's *Black Swan*.

In the 15 years since, [Get Out's Daniel Kaluuya](#) has been the only horror actor to even receive a nomination. And are the films becoming contenders even *horror* horror at all? Oscar honors seem to be reserved for movies that are considered to have transcended the genre (in itself a fairly subjective category) in some way. As [The Exorcist](#) director William Friedkin put it in 2015, “I thought it was a film about the mystery of faith...I didn’t set out to make a horror film.”



More recently, even as movies like 2014's [The Babadook](#) and Eggers' 2016 breakout [The Witch](#) began to give rise to the [controversial](#) term “elevated horror”—a subjective descriptor for a horror movie that has supposedly achieved a higher level of artistic merit than the genre's more mainstream fare—the chances of awards recognition seem to have dropped.

Despite its undeniable cultural impact, [position as the fastest growing genre at the box office](#), and heightened critical attention, horror clearly continues to be viewed by many Academy voters as less-than or low-brow, at least as compared to the period dramas

and biopics that frequently earn awards glory. If the Academy doesn't reward those like Moore who are willing to take the horror leap of faith, it tacitly disincentivizes what she described in her Globes speech as "magical, bold, courageous, out-of-the-box, absolutely bonkers" performances from some of the best names in the biz. Scary thought, isn't it?

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## The U.S. Surgeon General Has One Last Piece of Advice

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](#).



[Dr. Vivek Murthy](#) served two terms as U.S. Surgeon General—first under former President Obama, then under President Biden. During his tenure, Murthy was a calm and reassuring voice during COVID-19, one of the biggest health challenges the country has faced in recent years.

But most of the time, the “nation’s doctor” highlighted public-health issues that usually fly under the radar: loneliness, gun

violence, the dangers of social media, overwhelming parental stress.

As he prepares to leave office, Murthy wrote a “[parting prescription](#)” for the country, reflecting what he feels Americans need most to become healthier and happier. In an interview (lightly edited for clarity and length), Murthy shared with TIME his learnings and his hopes for the health of the nation.

## **TIME: Is a “parting prescription” a tradition for Surgeon Generals to leave behind?**

**Murthy:** It’s not a tradition that I’m aware of. But for me, this was important to do. I realized over two terms that there were critical questions I have been grappling with. What was driving the deeper pain, the unhappiness I was seeing for years across the country?

I wanted to lay out some of the answers I have found and the path I hope we can travel down as a country to help us be healthier, happier, and more fulfilled. To me, this is the synthesis of the most important learnings that I have taken away from conversations with people all across the country, and from science and research that I have seen over my two terms.

## **In your prescription, you focus on the need to rebuild a sense of community. How do you define community?**

Community is a place where we have relationships, help each other, and where we find purpose in each other. Those three elements are the core pillars of community. Community is also a place fueled by a core virtue: that’s love, which manifests in generosity, kindnesses, and courage. When you put these together,

then you have a place where people find a sense of belonging and meaning.

What I have found over my two terms is that for many people, that sense of community has eroded. We have millions of Americans struggling with loneliness: a third of adults and half of young people. People's participation in both formal and informal service remains low. And more than half of young adults in a recent survey said they felt either low or no sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

To me, these are all red flags. They are warning signs telling us that the fundamental elements we need to live fulfilling lives are vanishing and getting weaker. If we don't do something about them, it may not matter that we have the best policy proposals or are making big financial investments in communities. People won't thrive the way they need to.

## **What effect does that have on the public's health?**

As community is deteriorating or diminishing in people's lives, we are starting to see many different manifestations of that. Some involve mental health; others are physical-health related. We are also seeing that when people struggle with loneliness and isolation, it impacts their productivity and engagement at work, and also how kids do in school. When community is weak, we are more easily polarized, divided, and turned against each other.

**There is a lot of frustration and even anger now about inequities and barriers in the U.S. health care system, from drug pricing to coverage, as evidenced by the reaction to the fatal shooting of the UnitedHealthcare CEO. How do we address those challenges?**

One of the biggest challenges in any job, including a job like the Surgeon General, is picking which issues to focus on. We had to make some tough choices at the beginning about how to pick among many worthy issues.

My thinking has been, where are we uniquely as an office positioned to be able to pull back the curtain on an issue, work out a strategy, and solve a problem? Where can our voice make a unique contribution?

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I saw very clearly in my first term that mental health was a profound challenge for the country, and it continued to get worse, particularly for young people. I knew coming into the second term that while COVID-19 was a major public-health emergency, the pandemic would make the mental-health struggles we were seeing even worse—so we needed to focus on that as much as possible.

Part of what I tried to do was widen the lens through which we look at health by recognizing that mental health and social health are also part our well-being and impact each other, as well as our physical health. If we want people to be healthy and want to support their well-being, we've got to understand and support all three dimensions.

**You oversaw one of the biggest public health threats in our country's history. Have any lessons from COVID-19 changed U.S. health care for the better?**

We learned a lot from the pandemic. The government learned a lot about how to produce and distribute vaccines much more rapidly than we thought perhaps ever possible. We learned how to work

with industry to rapidly develop treatments and get them out to people.

Where I have the greatest concern is that what we saw during the pandemic was that health misinformation spread rapidly, and many people didn't know who to trust. But what we did find was that trust in friends, family members, and individual doctors, nurses, and local health departments often remained healthy, even though trust in larger institutions may have eroded.

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To me, that means we have to invest a lot more in doing the hard work to build local connections between doctors, nurses, local health departments and hospitals, and the communities they serve. Those local relationships are going to become central to future pandemics, where misinformation will likely continue to swirl online. A lot of that is contingent on both the government and private sector being able to get accurate information out to people in a timely and trustworthy way.

## **How can health officials rebuild the public's trust in science and health institutions?**

We have to ask ourselves how we can do better so people don't feel judged when they have a different point of view, and how we can be even more transparent with the reasoning behind decisions or recommendations. How do we build a stronger relationship with the public, and how do we do that not just during a crisis but in between?

When we have a relationship with the public, they come to know people in institutions, how an institution functions, and how it makes decisions. It doesn't guarantee that people will trust them,

but it increases the chances significantly that when you do have a crisis, even if people disagree with a recommendation, they understand why you did it and are at least open to hearing about the reasoning behind the process.

## **How can we as a country start to build community?**

When people are not invested in each other, it makes it hard to come together and advocate for and support the policy solutions that we need. If I don't have children, and don't know people who have children—or if I'm not caring for an aging parent or don't know people who are—then I won't go out to advocate for safer schools and home care. But if I am connected to my neighbors, friends, and family, then their concerns become my concerns.

## **What's next for you after you leave the Surgeon General's office?**

I don't 100% know what I'm going to do next. What I do know for sure is that the issues I worked on over the last two terms—and in particular, the question of how we rebuild community and the social fabric of our country and the world—will remain central issues to me. I see these as issues we have to address if we want to make the world more hospitable and more nourishing for our kids.

I asked my kids, who are 6 and 8, what I should do after being Surgeon General. It probably says something about me that I'm looking for career advice from a 6 and 8 year old. They looked at me and smiled and said, 'Papa, we think you should spend more time playing with us.' I thought that was the right advice.

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I find myself learning a lot by watching my kids. I find that kids, especially when they are really young, tend to be authentic, vulnerable, and also kind and generous. They also tend have an appreciation for the simple wonders in life. I realized that those are the things I want to recenter my life on as well. I want to rediscover the wonder of the simple things in life. I want to experience gratitude more and more in my day-to-day life. I want to figure out how to cultivate more generosity, love, and kindness in my own life —and figure out how to support and nurture that in world around me.

There are a lot of big challenges we face as a country. But I think these moments of great change and uncertainty can also be powerful moments for us to ask the question: how can we live better lives, how can we make changes to create a better world for our children? Those are the questions I want us to grapple with now. If we do that, then I feel very optimistic that we have what it takes to create a community all us deeply need in our lives, and ultimately help us find the fulfillment we all seek.

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