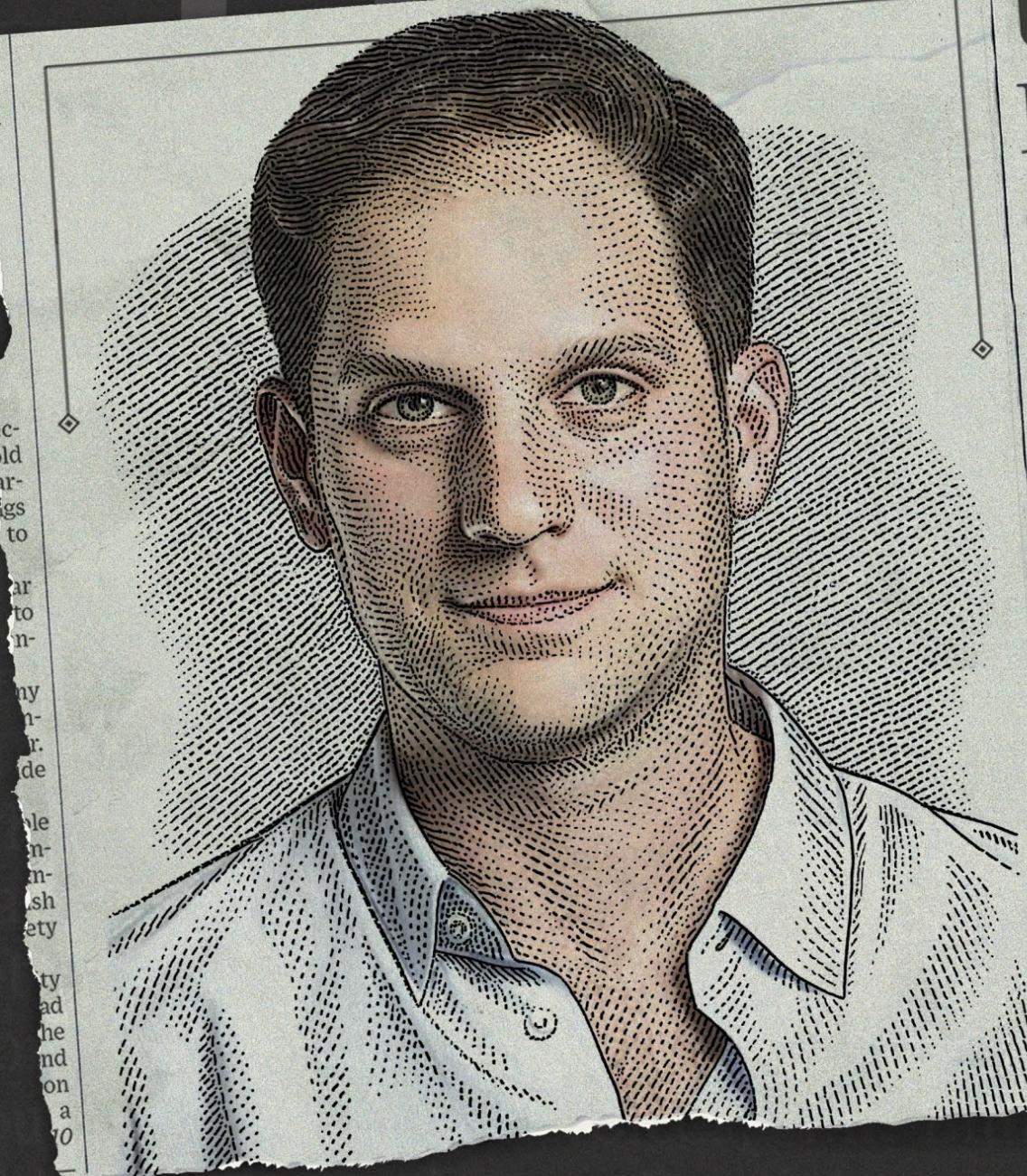


TIME



THE FIGHT TO FREE EVAN GERSHKOVICH

by
CHARLOTTE ALTER

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The Fight to Free Evan Gershkovich

Charlotte Alter is a senior correspondent at TIME. She covers politics, social movements, and generational change, and hosts TIME's Person of the Week podcast. She is also the author of *The Ones We've Been Waiting For: How a New Generation of Leaders Will Transform America*. Her work for TIME has won a Front Page Award from the Newswoman's Club of New York and has been nominated for a GLAAD Media award.



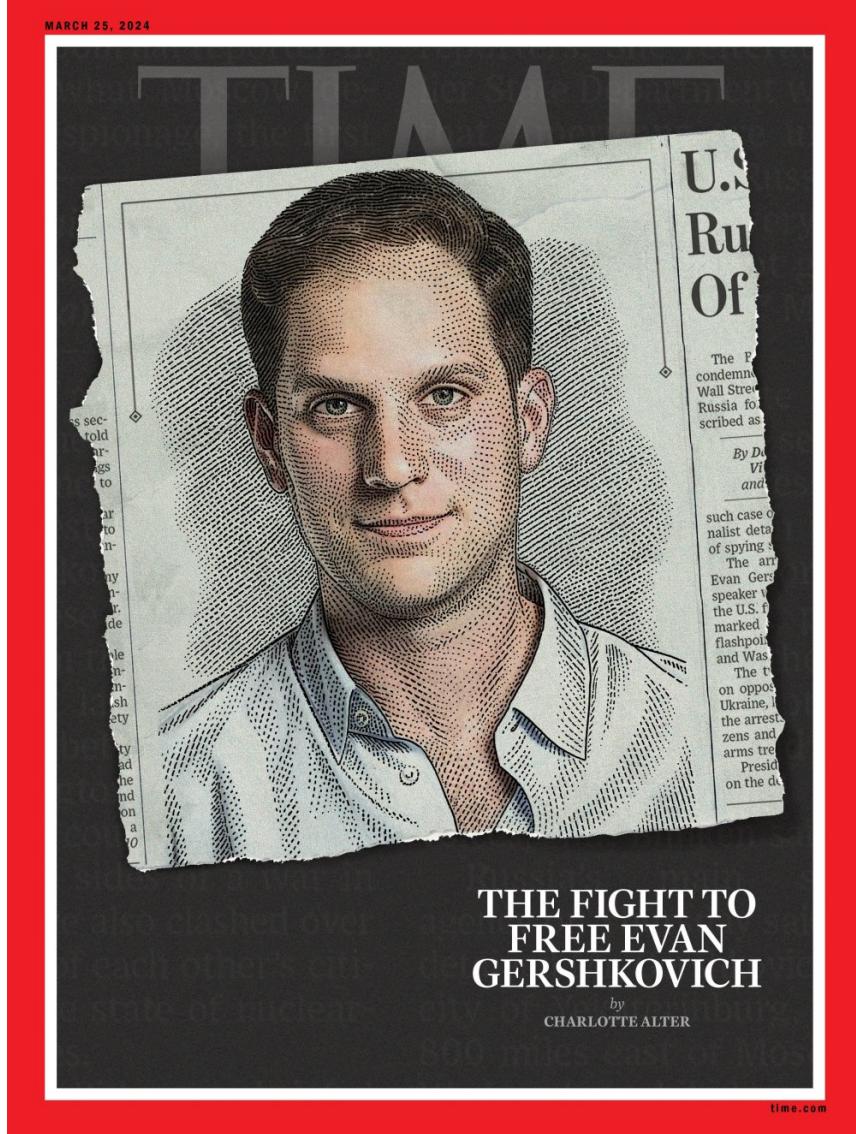
Growing up in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and '70s, Mikhail Gershkovich and Ella Milman learned to be careful. Children knew not to repeat what their parents said in their kitchens.

Mikhail recalls his father, who grew up under Stalin, offering a piece of advice: If you’re going to tell a political joke, “make sure there are no witnesses.”

Mikhail and Ella both emigrated to the U.S. in 1979, seeking to escape rising [antisemitism](#) and life under Soviet rule. They met in Brooklyn in the 1980s, got married, and raised an American family in suburban New Jersey. Their daughter Danielle took swimming and gymnastics. Their son Evan played soccer. “Here, we can relax,” says Mikhail. “Just find yourself. Decide what you want to do.”

Evan Gershkovich decided he wanted to be a journalist, a calling that took him back to his parents’ homeland. He had grown up speaking Russian, and wanted to use his familiarity with the language and culture to pursue his career. He worked as a reporter for the *Moscow Times*, Agence France-Presse, and [the Wall Street Journal](#). When Ella worried about him writing articles critical of the Russian government or economy, her son explained that he was an “accredited journalist,” his mother recalls, repeating the phrase as though it were a magic shield.

But it wasn’t. On March 29, 2023, Evan Gershkovich was [detained by Russian security forces](#) while meeting a source at a restaurant in Yekaterinburg, an industrial city about a thousand miles east of Moscow. He has been a political prisoner in Moscow’s Lefortovo prison for nearly a year, the first American journalist to be [accused of espionage in Russia](#) since the Cold War.



Gershkovich is not a spy. He has never worked for the U.S. government. The White House calls the charges against him “ridiculous” and classifies Gershkovich as “wrongfully detained.”

“Russia has taken Americans hostage before, but an accredited journalist is another level in terms of what it says about the country’s relationship with the West, or America specifically,” says Gershkovich’s friend Polina Ivanova, who [covers Russia](#) for the *Financial Times*. His arrest was a “watershed moment” that represents Russia’s disregard for international norms, Ivanova adds. “It wasn’t that Evan’s work had changed. It was that Russia changed.”

For his immigrant family, Gershkovich's detention shattered a belief that their son could chase his American dream in the country of his heritage. Perhaps the crudest irony is that Gershkovich loved Russian culture; his goal as a reporter, family and friends say, was to depict in its full complexity a country that is often reduced to caricature. Instead Gershkovich is trapped in limbo. So are his parents. Forty years after they fled Soviet Russia, their only son has become a political pawn in a new Cold War, a human bargaining chip for Vladimir Putin as relations between the two countries cratered with the [invasion of Ukraine](#).

On Feb. 20, Russian courts rejected the latest appeal filed by Gershkovich's lawyers. He is set to remain imprisoned through at least March 30, a year since he was originally detained. While the Biden Administration calls his release a "top priority," negotiations to free him have not made progress. Late last year, the U.S. presented a "significant proposal" to free Gershkovich and former U.S. Marine [Paul Whelan](#), who has been held by Russia since 2018 and is currently [serving a 16-year sentence](#) in a penal colony on spurious charges of espionage, according to State Department spokesman Matt Miller. The Russians [turned it down](#).



Putin has expressed openness to a potential prisoner swap. The U.S. and Russia [completed one](#) in December 2022, exchanging the American basketball star [Brittney Griner](#), who was detained in Russia for drug possession, for the notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout. But there are significant obstacles to consummating a deal now, according to two U.S. officials familiar with the talks.

Those officials say the U.S. isn't holding any prisoners Russia values highly enough to exchange for Gershkovich and Whelan. Putin has sought the release of the convicted Russian hit man Vadim Krasikov, who is serving a [life sentence in Germany](#) for assassinating a Georgian dissident of Chechen ethnicity in a Berlin park in 2019. But U.S. officials say Germany is not currently willing to include Krasikov in a swap.

The [suspicious death](#) of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny in a Siberian penal colony presents an additional complication. Allies of Navalny alleged on Feb. 26 that he was killed before he could be released in a deal that would have involved Gershkovich and Krasikov. A U.S. official familiar with the negotiations tells TIME that no formal proposal for a three-way prisoner swap had been extended involving Navalny and U.S. citizens, but that in "nascent" conversations, Germany seemed more willing to release Krasikov while Navalny was alive. Now that Navalny is dead, "Germany has very much cooled to the idea," the official says.

Read More: [*Why the Kremlin Tried to Obstruct Alexei Navalny's Funeral*](#)

The political context also contributes to the challenge. Putin may be reluctant to make a deal before the U.S. election in November, because he prefers that President Joe Biden [lose to Donald Trump](#) and is wary of making an exchange that might be seen as a victory for Biden, people familiar with the talks believe. "They're not looking to hand the Administration any wins," says a U.S. official.

The Administration says that Gershkovich's release is a top priority. "Not a day goes by without intensive efforts from the State Department and others across the U.S. government to reunite Evan and Paul with their families," Roger Carstens, the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, said in a statement to TIME.

Gershkovich's family and friends [have not given up hope](#). "Pessimism is a quality common in Russia," Milman says as she sits in Danielle's Philadelphia apartment. The walls are decorated with illustrations Evan gifted Danielle over the years: a cat wearing a tie, a devil playing a cello, a joke sign from a cemetery that says *Sorry, we're dead*. "It's the optimism that carries me on," Milman says. "If you accept the negative, it's like the game is over."



Gershkovich arrived in Russia in 2017. Three years out of college, he had landed a job at the *Moscow Times*, an independent online newspaper that publishes in both English and Russian. He formed a close-knit group of journalist friends who lived in the same Moscow neighborhood, Chistye Prudy. They hung out at hipster cafés, art exhibitions, and concerts. They joined Russian soccer teams. They rented a dacha outside the city, where they spent summers grilling and winters cross-country skiing. The job was endlessly interesting. “Russia was a place where journalists had freedom to maneuver and freedom to do lots of good work,” says Ivanova. “It was this exciting place to discover that he had lots of connections to and cultural knowledge about.”

When Gershkovich's parents arrived for a visit in 2018, Milman was struck by the country's transformation. The family walked through [the Hermitage](#) in St. Petersburg and sampled Evan's café recommendations in a "new, shiny Moscow," as Milman describes it. Evan "was excited to show them the Moscow he had come to love," says his close friend Pjotr Sauer.

Putin's Russia has always been a dangerous place for reporters. At least 39 journalists and media workers have been murdered in Russia since 1992, [according to the Committee to Protect Journalists](#). But Gershkovich was an American citizen with formal press accreditation from the Russian government. He felt his own safety risks were minimal. "Every year it was becoming more authoritarian," says Sauer. "But you still felt like you could talk to opposition leaders. There were protests. You could travel."

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, those freedoms were curtailed. There were [new laws](#) that inhibited journalists' movements, and new rules about what could and couldn't be said. Many journalists left; the ones who didn't were constantly looking over their shoulders. Gershkovich himself moved to London, but he returned to report as often as he could. "Reporting on Russia is now also a regular practice of watching people you know get locked away for years," [Gershkovich tweeted](#) in July 2022. He told friends he had occasionally been followed.

Read More: [*As Russia's Full-Scale Invasion Enters Its Third Year, Optimism for Ukraine Sinks*](#)

If anything, the exodus of colleagues made him more committed to his work. "He saw it as his mission to be back in Moscow," says Sauer. "He felt like he had a responsibility to tell this story."



Gershkovich was not in the habit of keeping his parents apprised of his whereabouts at all times. When he called on March 27, 2023, his mother had thought he was in London. “He called me to reassure me that everything was OK,” Milman recalls. “He said, ‘I’m delaying going back; I want to finish something.’” Milman was vaguely unsettled, but she trusted him.

Two days later, on the morning of March 29, Gershkovich exchanged texts with Sauer about Arsenal, their favorite soccer team. They made plans to meet up in Berlin for Easter. There was no hint of alarm. “We couldn’t imagine that he would be taken off the street and charged with espionage,” says Sauer. “It had never happened in modern Russia. It seemed out of the range of possibility.”

That afternoon, Gershkovich was [detained by Russia's Federal Security Services \(FSB\)](#) at a steak house in Yekaterinburg. He was escorted out of the restaurant with his hood pulled over his head.

Emma Tucker, the editor in chief of the *Wall Street Journal*, woke to her phone ringing shortly before 4 a.m. and knew the news was bad. Liz Harris, the *Journal*'s managing editor, was calling. There were unconfirmed reports online that the FSB had detained Gershkovich on suspicion of espionage, Harris told Tucker.

Tucker had braced for this. The previous day, Harris had notified her that Gershkovich had missed his check-in on the Dow Jones global security system, a standard procedure on dangerous reporting assignments. At first, Tucker took the news in stride. His phone could have died; there was no need to panic. But later that afternoon, Harris said that Gershkovich had missed a second check-in. Editors were worried.



After the second missed check-in, Tucker called Paul Beckett, then the *Journal*'s Washington bureau chief. Beckett was at a dinner in D.C. The appetizers had just been served. He walked out into the courtyard to take the call from his new boss. "Paul," Tucker said in her clipped British accent, "Evan Gershkovich has gone missing."

At that point, *missing* simply meant that editors hadn't heard from him. But Beckett began reaching out to national-security contacts. By a little before 8 p.m., he had contacted a top aide to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, called the State Department's press office, and emailed Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer. Finer called back within the hour, assuring Beckett that the Administration was taking the situation seriously. Around 10:30 that night, [Secretary of State Antony Blinken](#) called Beckett and Tucker.

The editors held out hope. "I kept waiting for the call saying, 'OK, he was roughed up by the security services, but he's out,'" says Tucker. "And that call just didn't come." Instead came an FSB press release announcing that Gershkovich had been arrested on espionage charges. It was a "body blow," says Almar Latour, CEO of Dow Jones, which publishes the *Journal*. "It confirmed our worst fears." With the spurious allegations of espionage, "the stakes went up," Latour adds, "and the level of complexity immediately became much greater."

[**Read More: Russia's Arrest of a Wall Street Journal Reporter Has More to Do With Geopolitics Than Espionage**](#)

Tucker had been the top editor of the paper for only a few weeks. She had just moved from London to take the job, and most of her furniture had not yet been delivered. She sat on a stool at her kitchen counter and got on a call with a few senior editors. Together they drafted a note to the newsroom relaying what they knew.

Beckett spent the next 36 hours wrangling government support. "It was important to us that the message come from the White House as quickly as possible that he is not a spy," Beckett says. Tucker embarked on a media tour. "Someone along the way gave us the advice that 'There are moments to be loud and moments to be

quiet, and this is a moment to be loud,'" Beckett says. "That became a bit of a mantra."

The legal team at Dow Jones focused on getting Gershkovich the right representation—a challenge complicated by the withdrawal of most Western law firms from Russia. One hurdle was finding a good lawyer who also wasn't "politically aligned in one way or another," recalls Jay Conti, Dow Jones' general counsel. "You don't want that to be a signal."



When Harris called Gershkovich's family to tell them Evan had gone missing, his mother was the one who answered the phone. "I've never experienced anything like it," Milman says. "It's a shock." Harris promised to call Milman every hour, whether there was news or not, and to update her as soon as she heard anything. "Time stops," Mikhail recalls. "It's hard to breathe."

Tucker and Harris went to Philadelphia to meet the Gershkovich family for lunch at a tapas restaurant. The meeting made the family feel that "we were not alone," Milman says. "We were supported." In recent months, the family has been in almost daily contact with the *Journal*. They hear from Carstens, the [special envoy for hostage affairs](#), roughly every week, whether or not there are major updates in the case. Usually, there aren't.

Milman has seen her son twice since his arrest. It's the cages that stick out in her mind. In late May 2023, when his parents visited him in Lefortovo, [Evan was in a metal cage](#). The second time, that June, they came to one of his pretrial appearances in a Moscow courtroom. This time the cage was glass. "We walked in and noticed a huge smile," Milman recalls. "We went and stood next to him, and immediately, Evan was already talking and joking." The family had a brief conversation through the glass. "We were laughing," Milman says. "Russians don't expect laughter in a court. Crying—that's what they expect. But we were laughing."

Gershkovich writes his family upbeat letters about once a week. Over correspondence, he plays long-distance chess with his father and trades jokes with his mother. Danielle sends him gossip about family members and celebrities, and does tarot card readings for him. Gershkovich spends time answering the mail he receives, which is translated into Russian and passes through prison censors. He reads Russian literature. Someone sent him a book of exercises you can perform in a small space using your own body weight. He tries to maintain his mental health. His primary focus, says his family, seems to be reassuring them from afar.

U.S. Ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy, who has visited Gershkovich eight times since his detainment, says she's been impressed by his "amazing resilience of spirit." Even behind bars, Tracy says, Gershkovich has been keeping up with U.S. current events. "Whatever topic I'm bringing," she adds, "I always have to have a little more information for the follow-up question that I know I'm going to get."

Lefortovo is notorious for conditions that can border on psychological torture. Most prisoners are [kept in isolation](#) so complete that guards make a special clicking sound as they escort prisoners through the hallways to warn prisoners from interacting in passing. "Physically it's fine—you know that you cannot be attacked by anyone. It's about psychology," says Andrei Soldatov, a

Russian journalist who has been questioned at Lefortovo. The interrogations are excruciating: long, slow conversations, in which the questioners constantly reformulate answers in bureaucratic language in order to trick prisoners into incriminating themselves.



For Gershkovich's family, friends, and colleagues, the ordeal has been a lesson in the agonizing dynamics of international hostage negotiations. The *Journal* has launched a task force and a media campaign called #IStandWithEvan. The arrest was a "signal" from Russia: "'Welcome to the world of dictators, where the rules are different,'" Latour says. "We have to make sure that this behavior is seen as unacceptable on the global stage."

Russian secrecy laws governing espionage charges make it difficult for either the attorneys or diplomats to get clear updates on the legal substance of his case. And there has been little apparent progress on the diplomatic front.

"What we're seeing is the Russian government treating innocent people as political pawns," Ambassador Tracy says. While she won't comment on the status of ongoing negotiations, she notes that the Russians are "transactional" in their approach. "This is hostage taking to trade for something."

The extension of Gershkovich's pretrial detention through the end of March creates an added complication. Until the trial, it won't be clear exactly what alleged evidence Russia is planning to bring against him. U.S. officials familiar with the situation say they're bracing for the possibility that Gershkovich may face a fate similar to Whelan's: a secretive sham trial, followed by sentencing to a penal colony.

In a [rare interview](#) in early February, Putin suggested to Tucker Carlson that he was open to releasing Gershkovich in a prisoner swap and said that Russia is in "ongoing dialogue" with the U.S. "I do not rule out that the person you are referring to, Mr. Gershkovich, may return to his motherland," Putin said. But Putin also appeared to allude to Krasikov, the Russian hit man imprisoned in Germany. Krasikov is "not currently available to us," says a U.S. official familiar with the negotiations, who notes, in addition to the death of Navalny, the heinous nature of Krasikov's crime. The U.S. is negotiating with allied countries in an attempt to cobble together other offers, adds the official. Biden Administration officials fear Putin may slow-walk negotiations during a [presidential election year](#). It wasn't a coincidence, one says, that Griner was released only after the 2022 midterms. "They're trying to maximize pain and political pressure," the official says.

In the meantime, Gershkovich sits in Lefortovo, writing to his family and friends, carrying on his active social life from prison. He keeps track of his friends' birthdays, and writes others with specific instructions for giving them gifts—which flowers to buy and how to deliver them. When Ivanova had a birthday in late January, another friend urgently requested to meet up with her, then handed her a bouquet of tulips. The note said, "From your friend who couldn't write the card himself." —*With reporting by Leslie Dickstein and Julia Zorthian*

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Thailand's New Prime Minister Is Getting Down to Business. But Can He Heal His Nation?

Charlie Campbell is a correspondent at TIME, based in the Singapore bureau. He covers business, tech, and geopolitics across Asia. He was previously China Bureau Chief.



There is zero chance, aides insist, of accessing the second floor. The upper reaches of Bangkok's Venetian Gothic Government House are strictly for official work. Journalists (and even respectable guests) are only permitted to loiter among the watercolors and marble ornaments that adorn the ground-floor reception rooms. Everything above the grand staircase is strictly off-limits.

It doesn't take long for Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin to overrule this staid protocol, beckoning me up to his inner sanctum on the second floor, banishing the chastened courtiers and settling down to chat for an hour without notes.

A former property mogul who took office in September, the 62-year-old Srettha is nothing if not outgoing. He has made over 10

foreign trips to court investors including China, Japan, the U.S., and the [World Economic Forum](#) at [Davos](#), Switzerland. The small meeting room where he sits down with TIME is ringed by whiteboards chock-full of scrawled policy objectives: digital wallets, national aviation hubs, potash mining, Tesla. His efforts are already paying dividends: foreign direct investment (FDI) in the fourth quarter of last year was double year over year. In November alone, he unveiled investments in Thailand by Amazon Web Services, [Google](#), and [Microsoft](#) worth a combined \$8.3 billion. It's with a salesman's avuncular charm that he says, "I want to tell the world that Thailand is open for business again."



It's about time. For the past two decades, the self-styled Land of Smiles has been racked by bitter political schisms that led the Thai military to seize power in a 2014 coup and rewrite the constitution to guarantee a guiding role for the nation's armed forces. (Srettha replaced the general who staged that putsch.) But under the following decade of fumbling quasi-military rule, Thailand's economy—Southeast Asia's second biggest—stagnated while inequality soared. In 2018, Thailand's richest 1% controlled 66.9% of its wealth, according to the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook. (In the U.S., it's around 26.5%) Meanwhile, thousands of young people took to the streets over the past four years to demand the military and royal palace stop meddling in the democratic process, flashing the three-fingered *Hunger Games* salute as a sign of dissatisfaction with both the democratic vacuum and fiscal bungling.

Read More: *[Thailand's New Prime Minister Tries Old-Fashioned Populism](#)*

Average GDP growth in Thailand—a country of 70 million—has been below 2% over the past decade, while neighbors like the Philippines, [Indonesia](#), and Vietnam registered double to triple that rate and ate Thailand's lunch on FDI. Compounding matters, the pandemic devastated Thailand's vital tourism industry, with foreign arrivals still only 70% of its 2019 peak. "Thailand has been a real laggard in terms of recovery from the pandemic," says Gareth Leather, a senior economist for Asia at Capital Economics. "It's worse than pretty much anywhere else in Asia."

Srettha is straightforward about the stakes. Thailand is in an "economic crisis," he says, one that must be tackled head-on. Already, he's slashed fuel duties, announced a three-year debt moratorium for beleaguered farmers, and plans to roll out a digital-wallet scheme that will hand 10,000 baht (\$280) to every Thai adult to stimulate consumption. He's waived visas for visitors from China and India, with plans to extend to several other countries.

Aside from tourism, Srettha wants to boost Thailand's role as a logistics, health care, and financial hub. He's also set about raising Thailand's profile on the world stage, hosting U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and China's top diplomat Wang Yi in January for sensitive discussions between the superpower rivals. He hopes Thailand, America's oldest ally in Asia with deep historical and cultural links to China, can serve as "a bridge" and "safe space," he says, while enhancing its international prestige: "I want to see Thailand shine."

Yet the path ahead remains distinctly murky. Srettha's Pheu Thai (For Thais) party did not win May's general election but came in second behind the anti-establishment Move Forward Party, whose radical manifesto called for bridling the nation's generals, conglomerates, and royal palace. It was blocked from power by a military-appointed Senate despite securing a plurality of 151 out of 500 legislative seats. Pheu Thai then cobbled together a motley coalition of 10 royalist and establishment parties to secure Srettha the top job thanks to Senate backing.



The paradox is that Srettha is fighting to fix Thailand's economy by partnering with the same forces invested in thwarting major reform. And given the dire state of the Thai economy and his contentious route to power, he is under intense pressure to deliver real gains—

and fast. Not that Srettha chooses to frame things in quite those terms.

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“Pressure doesn’t come from being runner-up,” he says of the election. “Pressure comes from the need to [tackle] poverty, to improve the well-being of all Thais. Those are the pressures I face every day.”

Few Thais saw Srettha’s political rise coming. Formerly the CEO of property developer Sansiri, he only joined Pheu Thai in 2022 and held no public office until he scored the top one. After earning his undergraduate degree in economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Srettha then gained his M.B.A. at Claremont Graduate University. His nickname is Nid, which means *tiny* in Thai—a wry flick to that fact the 6 ft. 3 in. leader is anything but—and has a reputation for being both dynamic and short-tempered.

Srettha’s overwhelming desire is to cut to the chase. He is only the second Prime Minister in Thai history to install a bedroom at Government House rather than commute through Bangkok’s notoriously snarled streets. On the bed sits a stuffed-doll rendition of Srettha he was gifted, complete with trademark gaudy socks. (Srettha’s penchant for luminous red or pink socks has sparked heated social media debates on protocol.) Exposed racks of business suits and formal wear fill one corner; gym equipment occupies an anteroom. Aides glued to laptops crowd around a large communal desk.

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“I can have early-morning and late-night meetings, which is ideal,” he says of his new digs. “And I don’t have to disrupt the traffic with motorcades.” Not a single scrap of paper lies on Srettha’s official desk; he prefers to float between different teams depending on the discussion, though he always carries a tattered leather briefcase that he bought in Germany 36 years ago. “I think the only time I used the desk was to take a call from [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu,” he says.

Srettha is not the first businessman turned politician to strive for corporate dynamism in government, though all are confronted by the moment when the differences between boardroom and Cabinet are laid bare. For Srettha, that came barely a month into office when Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on Israel claimed the lives of 39 Thai migrant workers and took 32 others captive. His government has since negotiated the release of all but eight hostages. “The news came out slowly, but what struck me most were the deaths,” he says. “Soon it was eight, nine, 10. I just remember feeling, When is it going to stop?”

Since then, getting the country moving has been his overriding focus. In addition to Prime Minister, Srettha also serves as Finance Minister, yet Thailand still hasn’t passed a national budget, post-election wrangling severely hamstringing his ability to enact meaningful change. The digital-wallet rollout has put him at loggerheads with the Bank of Thailand, which fears the \$15 billion cash handout will spark inflation. “Being CEO of a company, you realize you have a limited amount of power,” he says. “But what I find most surprising is the lack of power that the Prime Minister has.”



Srettha less than most. Another more diminutive figure looms over Thai politics: Pheu Thai's founder and patriarch, billionaire former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, returned from 15 years of self-imposed exile on the same day that Srettha was confirmed as Prime Minister. Thaksin was arrested at the airport and sentenced to eight years for historical convictions of corruption and abuse of power, though within hours the 74-year-old was transferred from jail cell to a hospital suite. On Feb. 18, he was granted special parole.

That Pheu Thai entered a Faustian pact with the military and palace to engineer Thaksin's return has enraged both progressive Thais and diehard supporters, some of whom burned effigies in protest outside the party's headquarters. "Pheu Thai betrayed the Thai people," says Dr. Weng Tojirakarn, a former Pheu Thai lawmaker and a leader of the pro-Thaksin Red Shirt protest movement.

Bold reform plans like ending military conscription have since been shelved. The overwhelming impression across Thailand is that Srettha is merely a stooge for Thaksin and that same elite power nexus. "He's a puppet," says Chuwit Kamolvisit, an anti-corruption crusader. "Thaksin has the remote-control—right, left, Mr. Srettha has to go that way."

Srettha bristles at the suggestion. “I am in control,” he says resolutely.

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Srettha has made it abundantly clear where his focus is: foreign investment, trade, and trying to energize a moribund economy. Many Thais fear that values are back-burnered as a result. True, Srettha’s government is pushing through legislation on [marriage equality](#) and [LGBT rights](#), which have broad public backing and could boost tourism through so-called pink-dollar arrivals. Yet myriad other issues seem to be backslding. Srettha is mulling rolling back reforms to Thailand’s fishing industry, for example, which were designed to curb once rampant human trafficking. “It’s pretty clear that human rights are not at the top of Srettha’s agenda,” says Phil Robertson, Asia deputy director for Human Rights Watch.

Nor, it appears, is national reconciliation. Almost 2,000 young Thais are still facing prosecutions for actions connected to peaceful [pro-democracy protests](#) that gripped the nation in 2020 and 2021. On Feb. 12, two Thai journalists were arrested for interviewing an activist who spray-painted an anarchist symbol and a symbol critical of lèse-majesté royal-defamation laws on a Bangkok temple wall. Since November 2020, more than 200 people have been arrested under the draconian legislation, the youngest just 14 years old; last March a man was jailed for two years merely for selling satirical calendars featuring a rubber duck—a pro-democracy protest symbol. The Move Forward party’s manifesto pledge to reform the much-maligned law was one of the drivers behind its landslide election victory. Srettha, however, sees no issues. “The right to fair justice, the right to be heard, is there,” he insists.



Read More: *'People Have Been Really Angry.' The Political Journey of a Young Activist in Thailand's Democracy Struggle*

It's ruthless pragmatism that he applies to foreign policy too. In October, Srettha met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing to solicit Chinese investment, especially for a \$3 billion southern land-bridge project, which aims to link the Andaman Sea port of Ranong via road, rail, and gas pipeline to Chumphon on the Thai Gulf, some 60 miles away. Asked his impression of Xi, Srettha pauses. "As a world leader, there's an aura about him," he says eventually. "I think he wants to trade. I think he doesn't look to create any problems. He's not looking for war."

The same cannot be said of [Vladimir Putin](#), whom Srettha also met in October and invited to pay an official visit to Thailand despite an International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant for the Russian President related to the forced [deportation of Ukrainian children](#). (Thailand has signed but not ratified the ICC statute.) Srettha's cozying-up to Putin has naturally raised eyebrows in Washington. "We've made clear [to the Thai government] our concerns about Putin's actions and activities, including the unprovoked aggression in Ukraine," says a senior U.S. official, speaking on background because of the sensitive nature of discussions. The recent death of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny in a Siberian penal colony—

which President Joe Biden called “yet more proof of Putin’s brutality”—has added to the diplomatic unease. Srettha shrugs off any criticism. “Is there evidence that [Putin] is responsible?” he asks. “It’s a crime committed on their soil, if it is, indeed, a crime. We don’t interfere with other nations’ sovereignty.”

Read More: *How Tech Giants Turned Ukraine Into an AI War Lab*

For Srettha, the more than 1 million free-spending Russian tourists who visit Thailand every year take precedence. He has offered 90-day visa-free entry to all Russian passport holders—three times as long as Americans enjoy. “Srettha will leave no stone unturned in trying to bring more tourists to Thailand and do business deals,” says Robertson.

But while Srettha tours the world hawking Thailand as an investment destination, it’s common knowledge that the nation is an oligopoly dominated by a handful of large conglomerates. For one, selling small-batch beer is banned in Thailand under a decades-old law that shields two huge family-run corporations that monopolize 90% of an \$8 billion market. And for over two decades, one firm with close government ties has been awarded the sole duty-free concession to Bangkok’s main airports, creating a multi-billion-dollar family empire from scratch. “International companies would like to get into the telecom sector, the retail sector, the beverage sector, but everybody knows that these sectors are largely already occupied,” says Duncan McCargo, a professor and Thailand expert at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University.

Although [Pheu Thai](#)’s manifesto pledged to trim the power of conglomerates, just one week after he was confirmed as Prime Minister, Srettha attended a dinner hosted by half a dozen heads of the nation’s largest companies, sharing the photo on X. Today, Srettha doesn’t see much wrong with the status quo, insisting there’s space for both Thai and foreign entrepreneurs to find market

share. “I don’t think [the economy] is purely dominated by global conglomerates,” he says.

A large number of Thais disagree, as evidenced by the 14 million votes cast for Move Forward’s bold pledge for “de-centralization and demonopolization,” says the party’s former leader [Pita-Limjaroenrat](#), who by rights should today be Prime Minister. Srettha “is still stuck in the era of trickle-down economics,” Pita tells TIME inside Thailand’s teak-and-glass parliament building.

Srettha is all too happy to make unscheduled visits to Bangkok’s Suvarna-bhumi International Airport to chastise staff on inefficiencies, and publicly lament [Taylor Swift](#)’s decision to play the Southeast Asian leg of her Eras Tour in Singapore over Bangkok. But eschewing the pomp and protocol of Government House is the easy part. Srettha will ultimately be judged on making tough choices to uplift society’s bottom even at the expense of his elite backers. Bold reform, after all, is what the Thai economy desperately needs.

“From being the CEO of a company to the CEO of a country, there are many more stakeholders,” he says. And just like in the boardroom, power is never divided equally.

—With reporting by *Leslie Dickstein and Julia Zorthian/New York*

Correction, March 17

The original version of this story misstated Srettha’s educational background. He did not study at Chulalongkorn University.

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How Trump Steamrolled His Way to the GOP Nomination

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



Super Tuesday confirmed what's seemed clear for months: The Republican presidential primary is all but over. With a series of smashing victories, Donald Trump has effectively clinched the nomination. Before all the polls had even closed, the Associated Press called most of the 15 states in his favor.

While it will take at least another week for Trump to officially assume the mantle of presumptive GOP nominee, his ascent is a foregone conclusion. His last remaining opponent, former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, suspended her campaign on Wednesday. All that's left is for the rest of the party to fall in line behind Trump, and for his operation to join forces with the Republican National Committee, a process already well underway.

“They call it Super Tuesday for a reason,” Trump said to a crowd of supporters at Mar-a-Lago. “This is a big one.”

Trump’s triumph gets him another step closer to reclaiming the presidency and pursuing a draconian policy agenda unlike any the nation has ever seen. He has [vowed](#) to round up and deport millions of undocumented immigrants; reimpose his travel ban on Muslim-majority countries; purge the federal bureaucracy of civil servants and replace them with MAGA loyalists; force homeless Americans off the streets and into tent cities; and commandeer the Justice Department to exact revenge on his political enemies.

It also gets him closer to squashing two of his [four criminal prosecutions](#); as President, he could shut down the federal indictments against him, one for election interference and another for mishandling the nation’s secrets.

When Trump left office in January 2021, after unleashing a mob on the U.S. Capitol, few foresaw him engineering a one-sided victory three years later, in one of the least competitive open primaries in U.S. history. But Trump and his allies did. They had a plan, from the start, to kneecap GOP heretics and scare off potential challengers.

Their success was never inevitable. When Trump launched his candidacy in November 2022, he was under a dark cloud. Republicans had just suffered a disappointing midterm cycle, with many of his handpicked candidates losing critical races across the country. The party’s own top brass saw it as a sign to move on from the former President. Not a single member of Congress attended the Trump campaign kickoff at Mar-a-Lago.

Trump’s foremost priority was to neuter the man who many presumed his most formidable intra-party threat: Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who had just won a landslide reelection. Trump quickly went to work—debasing him with nicknames such as

“Meatball Ron” and “Tiny D”; unleashing a brigade of online trolls to mock his campaign missteps; and racking up endorsements from his state’s congressional delegation. The attacks not only undermined DeSantis’s attempt to pitch himself as a more competent version of Trump. They sent a message to would-be rivals: be prepared to face the career-destroying wrath of a MAGA onslaught.

Then came the indictments. Trump found a way to benefit from his legal peril by framing his prosecutions as an attack on his supporters. The maneuver enabled him to rise in the polls and raise millions with each new charge. At the same time, he cunningly used his ordeal to box in his GOP adversaries with a Catch-22: If they claimed he couldn’t win the White House because of his legal woes, he characterized them as part of a conspiracy to derail his candidacy. Yet if they defended him, as most did, they only amplified and corroborated his central argument with Republican voters.

From then on, Trump barely had to make an effort. He faced a weak field of rivals who were too timid to attack his greatest vulnerabilities. When Trump skipped every primary debate, he made the events seem like little more than auditions to be his running mate. That created an aura of invincibility and inevitability around Trump, leading to endorsements from party leaders such as Montana Senator Steve Daines, who runs the Senate GOP’s fundraising arm, and House Speaker Mike Johnson.

By the time Haley took the gloves off, she had already lost Iowa and New Hampshire and seemed to be mounting more of a symbolic anti-Trump mission than a serious presidential bid. But as she stayed defiantly in the race, she incurred the virulence of America First adherents. Deploying a similar playbook they used against DeSantis, Trump and his allies branded her as war-mongering neocon—even though her main foreign policy experience was serving as Trump’s envoy to the United Nations—

and set out to humiliate her. In her home state of South Carolina, Trump won the primary by 20 points. After securing her first primary contest, in Washington, D.C., the Trump campaign called her “the queen of the Swamp.”

Haley’s minor victory came as Trump had already signaled a turn to the general election. He proposed a revamp of the RNC, [installing](#) new loyalists to lead the organization, including his daughter-in-law Lara Trump and senior adviser Chris LaCivita. Last week, he and Biden visited separate border towns in Texas at the same time, creating a rare split-screen moment that previewed the coming matchup.

Trump could not mathematically win the nomination on Tuesday; he needs 1,215 delegates, and fewer than that have yet been afforded. The earliest he could cross that threshold is on March 12, when Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, and Washington will vote. But with Haley out of the race, the math no longer matters. The only remaining question is whether she will work to unite her supporters around Trump. Over the weekend, she seemed to renege on [a previous pledge](#) to back the eventual nominee, and sources say she doesn’t plan to endorse her former boss.

None of that seemed to be on Trump’s mind Tuesday night. Or at least, he wasn’t showing it. He never mentioned Haley’s name once. His victory speech focused instead on the last man standing in the way of his return to power. “We’ve watched our country take a great beating over the last three years,” Trump said. “We’re gonna take back our country.”

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How Warmer Weather Could Fuel a Massive Epidemic in Gaza

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



Amid seemingly endless death, destruction, and displacement, life in Gaza has long been unbearable. At least [30,000 people](#) have been killed and countless more wounded since the start of Israel's retaliatory bombardment following Hamas's Oct. 7 massacre. And the punishing winter weather, marked by heavy rain and temperatures as low as 48°F (9°C), has made the Strip all but uninhabitable for its more than 2 million inhabitants, many of whom were forced to flee their homes without warm clothes or blankets. Those who manage to find refuge in overcrowded shelters are considered the lucky ones. Others reside in makeshift tents, with nothing but tarpaulin and thin plastics to shield them from the elements.

While many may greet the arrival of spring as a much-needed reprieve from the cold, experts warn that the warmer temperatures

come with their own set of challenges—ones that stand to make the situation in Gaza much worse. That's because warmer weather, while beneficial in some respects, can accelerate the spread of communicable diseases, such as diarrhea and hepatitis A, even as it reduces the risk of others. "As the season changes to spring and summer, you will have a lower incidence of certain infectious diseases: the flu, COVID-19, other respiratory viruses that affect children," says Francesco Checchi, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine specializing in disease control in crisis. "That's just a seasonal effect that would happen in any given year—and that's perhaps the only plus that I can cite."

Read More: *Gaza Is Being Starved. Could Airdropping Food Be the Answer?*

Among Checchi's top concerns is that warmer weather could even lead to a cholera outbreak. "Something like cholera, if introduced into the Gaza Strip, would result in a really massive epidemic for the reasons you can imagine: It would be extremely transmissible because people are living on top of each other, there's not enough water, not enough sanitation," he says, noting that Gaza's decimated health care system doesn't have the resources to cope with illnesses that require extensive rehydration. The few health facilities that [still remain](#) are well past breaking point.

"It's the perfect environment for a massive epidemic to take hold," Checchi warns. "And perhaps we've just been a little lucky so far that one hasn't."



Perhaps the most acute crisis is the dire lack of food and other humanitarian aid entering the Strip—conditions that the U.N. and others have warned will make famine “[almost inevitable](#).” The level of desperation that the people of Gaza are facing was underscored on Feb. 29, when more than 100 Palestinians were killed and hundreds more wounded trying to access a rare aid convoy in northern Gaza, which has been all but cutoff from humanitarian aid. While Palestinian officials attributed the bulk of the casualties to the Israeli military, which reportedly opened fire on the crowds converging on the convoy, the Israeli military attributed the extent of the casualties to a stampede. An investigation by the *Washington Post*, which included video and eyewitness accounts of the event, [reported](#) that “the real panic didn’t start until Israeli soldiers and tanks began firing, hitting civilians and sparking a stampede.” Leaders in [the E.U.](#), the [U.K.](#), [France](#), and [Germany](#) have called for an independent investigation into the incident.

Read More: [*How World Leaders Have Reacted to the Deaths of People In Gaza Waiting For an Aid Convoy*](#)

While the U.S. joined other countries in airdropping [tens of thousands of meals](#) over the Strip over the weekend in an effort to stymie the hunger crisis, humanitarian organizations warn that

airdrops alone will not be enough to meet the extensive needs of Gaza's population. "Airdrops are not the solution to relieve this suffering, and distract time and effort from proven solutions to help at scale," the International Rescue Committee said in a statement. "All diplomatic focus should be on ensuring Israel lifts its siege of Gaza, reopens its crossings [...] and allows the safe and unimpeded movement of humanitarian aid—including fuel, food, and medical supplies—and for aid workers and medical personnel to aid sick and wounded people."

Fozia Alvi, a Canadian physician who recently returned from a medical trip to Gaza through her aid group Humanity Auxilium, tells TIME that she witnessed children who had symptoms of severe malnutrition, including some who she believes were suffering from rickets, a condition that often stems from dietary deficiencies. She also saw fungal infections and hepatitis A, the spread of which she attributed to widespread overcrowding. "The children and the adults who escaped the bombing and sniper shots, they will die from the diseases," Alvi says, referencing the more than 1 million Palestinians who fled to Gaza's southern cities of Khan Younis and Rafah, where she was based. "These are all things that we can prevent if we had the means to."



This mix of malnutrition and disease can result in a vicious cycle, Checchi warns, noting that children who are acutely malnourished are extremely vulnerable to infection. Indeed, at least 90% of children under the age of five in Gaza have been affected by one or more infectious diseases, according to UNICEF, the U.N. children's agency. Some 70% have suffered from diarrhea in the two weeks preceding its [Feb. 19 report](#), a 23-fold increase from the 2022 baseline. At least [15 children](#) have already died as a result in recent days, according to Gaza's health ministry.

"A child who is acutely malnourished usually will die of an infectious disease; not of starvation," Checchi says. "I'm just worried that we'll see rates of malnutrition that are consistent with some of the worst famines ever described."

This threat has prompted widespread alarm among [humanitarian organizations](#) and [governments](#) alike, many of which are now calling for a ceasefire to address the ongoing catastrophe, particularly in advance of [Israel's anticipated invasion](#) of Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, where the vast majority of the Strip's population currently resides.

Checchi says that even a three-week pause, albeit insufficient, could at least allow health experts to do a cholera vaccination campaign, for example—something that he says would require allowing humanitarian groups to bring food and medicine into the Strip and to circulate freely within it, neither of which is currently possible. At a bare minimum, he adds, people in Gaza need to have their basic food and water needs met, the latter of which is expected to increase as temperatures get warmer. "Even if things stay exactly as they are," he says, "the number of children falling into acute and severe acute malnutrition will exponentially increase, and I would expect that the burden of infectious diseases will do as well."

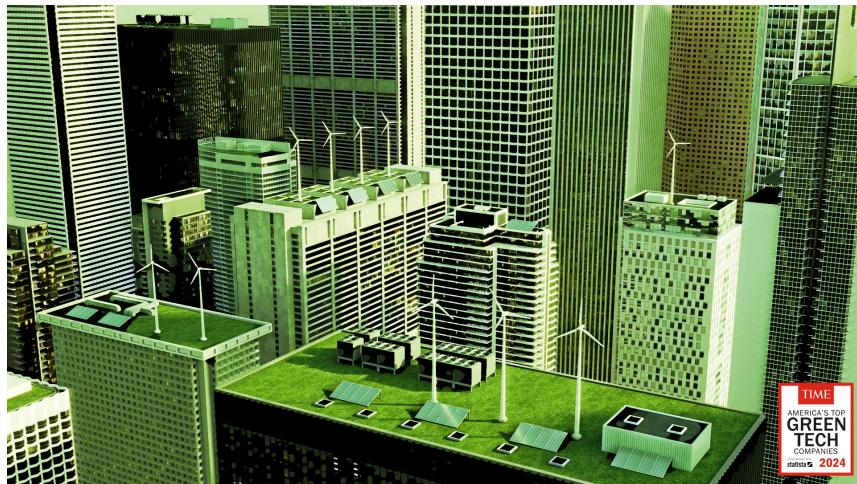
In a recent study conducted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and Johns Hopkins University, Checchi and his co-authors project that, even in the absence of epidemics, an additional 58,260 Palestinians will be killed over the next six months if things remain unchanged. That figure jumps up to 74,290 in the event of an escalation.

“The way things are heading right now is consistent with our worst scenario,” Checchi says, perhaps “even a little bit worse than that.”

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How TIME and Statista Determined America's Top GreenTech Companies of 2024



This year, TIME launched its inaugural list of [America's Top GreenTech Companies](#), in partnership with [Statista](#), a leading international provider of market and consumer data and rankings. The result of this quantitative study: 250 companies forging the path into a greener future. Here's how the winners were selected.

Methodology

The research project “America’s Top GreenTech Companies 2024” is a comprehensive analysis conducted to identify the top performing greentech companies in the United States. First, companies had to primarily focus on developing and providing green technologies, products or services that help mitigate or reverse the impact of human activities on the environment, and the companies had to be headquartered in the United States

Then, the study was built on three pillars: positive environmental impact, innovation drive and financial strength. In each of these three dimensions, a company received scores which were included into the final score. Statista gathered and scrutinized data for over

4,600 companies through desk research, online application forms, and collaborations with data and market intelligent companies.

To measure the first dimension, positive environmental impact, Statista collaborated with HolonIQ to assess a company on the quality and impact of their product/service portfolio based on KPIs specific to each industry, such as carbon capture, offsets, and renewable energy generated.

For the second dimension, financial strength, Statista analyzed revenue, employee and funding data, obtained from publicly available sources like annual reports, company websites, through media monitoring, and via databases. Additionally, company disclosures submitted via an online application form, which was freely accessible via the TIME website, were considered.

And for the third dimension, innovation drive, Statista cooperated with LexisNexis® Intellectual Property Solutions to analyze the quantity and value of a company's IP (intellectual property) portfolio. The scoring is based on the Patent Asset Index featured in LexisNexis PatentSight+.

Once the data was collected and evaluated, it was consolidated and weighted within a scoring model. The final score was calculated as follows: 45% x Impact score + 45% x Financial strength score + 10% x Innovation score. The companies with the highest score were [awarded as America's Top GreenTech Companies by TIME and Statista](#).

[See the full list here.](#)

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Why Reddit Users Have Turned Against the Company's IPO

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



Two years ago, Reddit users established themselves as a fearsome economic force when the subreddit community [WallStreetBets mobilized](#) to save GameStop's stock price from pessimistic Wall Street traders. Now, Reddit itself is hoping to tap into its users' unruly energy by allowing them to participate in the company's IPO. Reddit filed to go public last Thursday, seeking a valuation of at least \$5 billion. Crucially, the company said it would [set aside](#) a large number of shares for 75,000 of the company's most prolific users, who might be able to profit off the company's financial success and have a seat at the company table. "Now you can become one of our (non-corporate) overlords," Reddit wrote in a [public statement](#).

But rather than galvanizing the community, the news was met with fierce backlash and pessimism from many Redditors. Users on various subreddits responded by casting doubt on the company's

business model, complaining about recent changes to the site, and ironically threatening to wield their collective power to bet *against* the company's stock. The overwhelming negativity from Reddit's own community highlights the risk of the company's decision to go public and the challenges of social media companies keeping both their investors and users happy at the same time.

User Backlash

Reddit is one of the most-visited websites in the U.S., with 73.1 million daily active users. But the company is still unprofitable: While it grew 21% in revenue last year, it also [lost more than \\$90 million](#)—although that was an improvement on the \$158 million it lost the year before. Compared to Instagram, X and other social media platforms, Reddit has especially struggled to monetize its audience through ads, partially because its content is generally more freewheeling and untamed than its counterparts.

[**Read More: Reddit Allows Hate Speech to Flourish in Its Global Forums, Moderators Say**](#)

The company has many high-profile backers, including Tencent Holdings, Fidelity, and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who was once [briefly Reddit's CEO](#). Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs will serve as the offering's lead underwriters. But very few companies have even decided to go public in the last few years, [due to a turbulent stock market](#) and high interest rates. Reddit [will be the first](#) major tech initial public offering of 2024, and the first social media IPO since Pinterest in 2019.

Reddit is powered by users who post content and moderate the site for free. (Last fall, Reddit announced that users who created viral posts would be able to [earn money](#).) And while Redditors tend to be intensely devoted to their subreddits, many have grown increasingly disillusioned with the platform overall. Last summer,

hundreds of Reddit communities engaged in a [widespread blackout](#) to protest price changes for third-party app developers.

Now, many Redditors see the IPO as another example of how the company is prioritizing its bottom line at the expense of its users. “If anything I think it devalues Reddit because now the board has to do things for investors instead of doing things for the Reddit community,” [wrote one user](#).

Ed Zitron, the CEO of EZPR who also publishes analysis on tech and social media via a [podcast](#) and a [newsletter](#), argues that Reddit’s lack of focus on monetization is exactly what makes it so special as a platform. “Reddit is one of the last bastions of user-generated content on the internet that’s actually reliable and well-policed,” he says. “But the current way Reddit works is antithetical to good advertising.”

In order to try to make the community feel included in the IPO, Reddit has established a “Directed Shares Program,” which lets the most active Redditors buy shares at the same discounted price as major investors. But many Redditors responded to that idea with disdain as well. “They’re trying to trick us into buying their stock to pump the price,” [wrote one user](#). Another [compared the program](#) to a company throwing a pizza party for its workers, but then forcing its workers to buy the pizza.

One Redditor, Matthew Benedict, wrote in a message to TIME that they were invited by Reddit to participate in the IPO, but have no plans to buy any shares. Benedict is a moderator for [r/LegacyJailbreak](#), a community with 45,000 members that offers tips about circumventing software restrictions on Apple devices. The user said that recent changes to Reddit have made it harder for moderators to lead their community. “I’m not optimistic and find it very ironic that they want to invite moderators to participate in the IPO after making changes that have prevented my fellow moderators from moderating,” they wrote.

A spokesperson for Reddit did not respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for Goldman Sachs declined to comment. A spokesperson for Morgan Stanley did not respond to a request for comment.

Training Artificial Intelligence

As is the case with many business decisions this year, artificial intelligence is playing a role in Reddit's decision to go public. Reddit just announced a licensing deal for Google to use Reddit data to train and build its A.I. systems. Steve Huffman, Reddit's CEO, [said in a public letter](#) that the platform's "data advantage" in training AI models will allow the company to earn revenue. Reddit expects to make more \$203 million over the next three years from data licensing agreements, according to the IPO filing.

But on Reddit, users voiced concern that AI advances could only increase the proliferation of chatbots on the site. One user [speculated](#) that Reddit could be particularly susceptible to an increase in bots compared with other social media platforms, because most of its users are anonymous, reducing the site's appeal.

Zitron says that Reddit's issues with bots aren't unique, but potentially damaging all the same. "Like any other social media platform, there are forces at play who are going to spam it with nonsense and manipulate Reddit to their advantage," Zitron says. "If it's AI that's upvoting and downvoting posts, that will destroy the fabric of what makes Reddit useful."

Nick Smith, a senior research analyst at the IPO-focused Renaissance Capital, says that Reddit's data partnerships will help contribute to the company's growth and profitability. "But it's down an uncertain path," he says. "Reddit is highly unprofitable: Over the last 3 years, it hemorrhaged more than \$300 million in

free cash flow. That's one of the big issues, because investors are focused on profitability, and being more discerning in that aspect."

The Wall Street Bets factor

Looming over Reddit's IPO is the subreddit r/WallStreetBets, which is one of the platform's biggest and most powerful communities. In 2021, its users banded together to invest in "meme stocks" like [GameStop](#) and AMC, wreaking havoc on Wall Street trading firms that had bet against them. Their actions forced major investors to rethink the very premise of what made a stock valuable.

If r/WallStreetBets gets involved in the Reddit IPO, the community holds the collective power to move the company's stock price in unpredictable ways. While professional investors participating in IPOs typically hold shares for a long time, individual investors often sell shares more actively, leading to price swings. Reddit acknowledged this in its IPO filing, writing in its [Risk Factors section](#) that the participation of Redditors could "result in increased volatility."

In 2021, Robinhood, a stock trading app that itself was lifted up by r/WallStreetBets, went public and similarly allowed its ravenous users access to the IPO. But Robinhood's stock price [dropped significantly](#) after going public and has [failed to come close](#) to its IPO price.

The Robinhood IPO saga did not go unnoticed by WallStreetBets—and [many people](#) on that subreddit [responded scathingly](#) to Reddit's own IPO announcement. [Users especially](#) took umbrage with Huffman's [more than \\$193 million compensation](#) in 2023 (including stock and option awards), while volunteer [moderators who do the heavy lifting of organizing and overseeing the site's communities](#) make nothing. Many users actually [threatened](#) to "short" Reddit's stock: to bet on its failure. "They're selling user

generated content to AI companies without offering user compensation,” [wrote one user](#), adding: “Short these pricks.”

Smith believes it will be difficult and expensive for retail investors to actually short sell—effectively bet against—Reddit’s IPO in its initial trading days. But he says that institutional investors are monitoring the negative sentiment around the announcement and how it might impact Reddit’s profitability. “If the user anger translates into either slow or negative user growth, that will be a problem for institutional investors,” he says.

However, there are some users who still believe in the site’s viability and the potential of the IPO to be successful. One user, who said his name was Kevon but asked to remain anonymous over concerns about his job and personal life, wrote to TIME in a direct message that he planned to buy shares in the IPO, believing that the current negative sentiment was more of a product of Reddit’s tendency to devolve into hivemind than any actual expertise or insight. “Every year there are comments that the site/company are going downhill from what it used to be,” he wrote. “Yet it continues to grow at a rapid pace.”

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See a Map of Where the Deadly Texas Wildfires Are Spreading

Armani Syed is a world affairs reporter at TIME. She covers global affairs, with a focus on the SWANA region, arts and culture, and royal institutions.

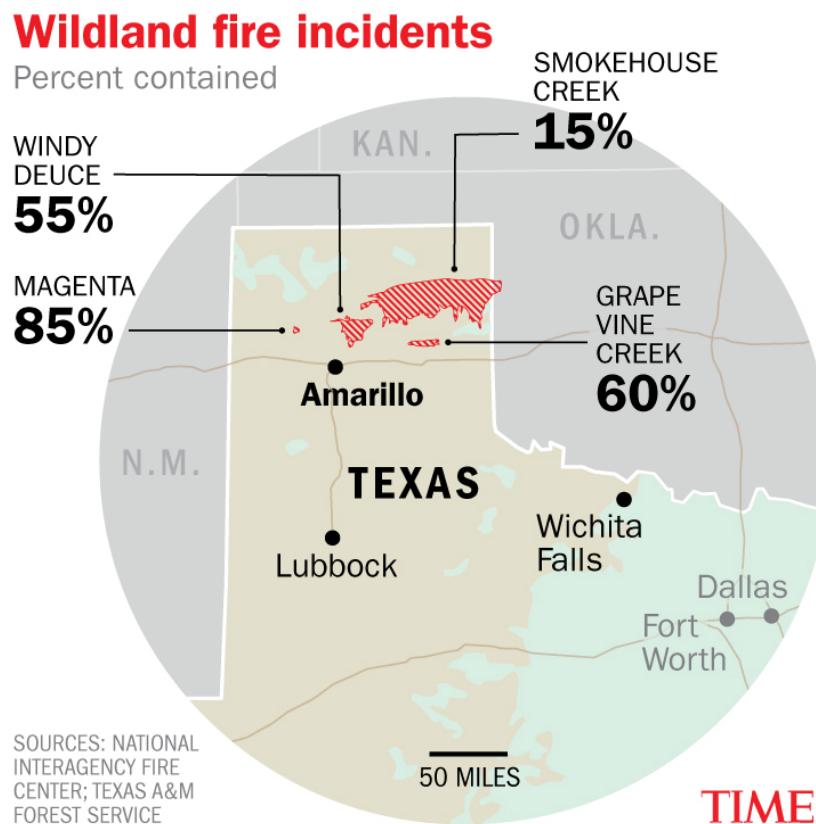


The second-largest wildfire in U.S. history, and the largest in state history, is currently [sweeping across the Texas Panhandle](#), burning through more than one million acres of land.

Two people have now been confirmed dead as a result of the blazes. Joyce Blankenship, an 83-year-old grandmother was discovered in the remains of her burned home, while Cindy Owens, an Amarillo woman in her 40s, died Tuesday after she exited her truck for an unknown reason while driving in the Texan city Canadian. Sgt. Chris Ray of the Texas Department of Public Safety said that “the fire simply overtook her,” [NBC reported](#).

The largest of the fires—which spans nearly 1.1 million acres—began at Smokehouse Creek and was [15% contained](#) as of Sunday,

according to the [Texas A&M Forest Service](#).



The Windy Deuce Fire in Moore County, which covers more than 144,000 acres, was 55% contained on Sunday. The Grape Vine Creek fire, at 34,800 acres, was 60% contained. The Magenta Fire in Oldham County, spanning approximately 3,300 acres, was 85% contained. The 2,000-acre 687 Reamer Fire was 10% contained.

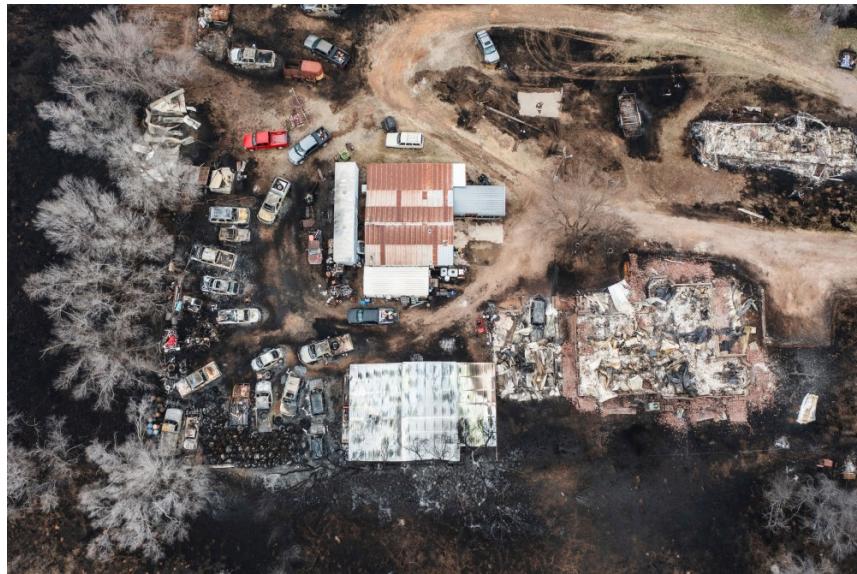
On Sunday, Moore County Sheriff's office [warned](#) that a new fire was possible in the Canadian River area because of high winds, low humidity, and large amounts of grass. The office told residents to prepare to evacuate if necessary.



Evacuations have been ongoing across the region. Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a state of disaster declaration [in 60 counties](#) earlier in the week. Citizens of Moore, Potter, Hemphill, and Hutchinson counties have been forced to leave their homes. Evacuation orders were also issued for communities in Wheeler, Allison, Kelton, and Briscoe, but those were [reportedly lifted](#) earlier this week.

Fourteen fires were also burning in the neighboring state of Oklahoma, across more than 319,000 acres, on Sunday—part spillover from the Smokehouse Creek blaze. [Oklahoma's Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry reported](#) two new fires that burned 933 acres.

The National Weather Service [issued a Red Flag warning](#)—indicating dangerously dry and windy weather—until 9 p.m. Sunday for Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. A cold front [was expected](#) to move into the area on Monday and could bring some relief.



During a visit to the southern border in Brownsville, U.S. President [Joe Biden spoke out](#) about the fires, thanking first responders for “risking their lives to save others” and urging locals to heed official warnings.

“When disasters strike, there is no red state or blue state where I come from. There are just communities and families looking for help,” he said, adding that Texas has received \$13 billion in relief funding throughout his presidency.

He also linked the disaster to environmental concerns, noting: “I love some of my Neanderthal friends, who still think there’s no climate change.”



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Jack Teixeira Pleads Guilty to Massive Leak of Pentagon Secrets

Vera Bergengruen is a senior correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. She covers the overlap of national security, politics, and technology. Her work at TIME has won the Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi Award and a New York Press Club Award.



The Massachusetts Air National Guardsman at the center of one of the [most significant leaks](#) of national-security documents in a decade pleaded guilty on Monday to posting dozens of highly classified intelligence records in an online chat group.

Jack Teixeira, 22, accepted a prison sentence of up to 16 years as part of his guilty plea to six counts of “willful retention and transmission of national defense information.” As part of the deal, the Justice Department will not pursue any further charges against him under the Espionage Act.

The revelations amounted to one of the most damaging disclosures of U.S. government documents in a decade, straining relations with

U.S. allies and triggering national embarrassment. The case also [revealed glaring blind spots](#) in the U.S. security-clearance process and added new urgency to the ongoing debate over the screening of online profiles of military service members and government officials for potential problematic affiliations and activities.

According to his plea agreement, Teixeira will have to participate in a debrief with officials at the Pentagon, the Justice Department, and intelligence agencies. He will also have to hand over any documents or other materials still in his possession. Compared to similar cases related to the mishandling of classified information, “this will be one of the longest sentences ever imposed,” says Stephanie Siegmann, the former chief of the national security unit of the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Boston.

“The secrets that he posted about were extraordinary,” Siegmann tells TIME. “The disclosures could have revealed sources and methods, and our intelligence capabilities, to foreign adversaries... it could be a matter of life and death. It was stunning.”

Read More: [*The Strange Saga of Jack Teixeira Reveals New Security Challenges.*](#)

Teixeira, who worked as an IT specialist with the 102nd Intelligence Wing at Otis Air National Guard Base in Cape Cod, [was arrested](#) last April. He was charged with posting the trove of secret military documents in a small chat group called Thug Shaker Central on Discord. At the time, Teixeira pleaded not guilty.

Photographs of the materials showed smoothed-out papers that were marked “SECRET/NOFORN,” meaning it is not meant to be shared with foreign countries. Others, which appeared to be briefing documents, had the seal of the Joint Chiefs’ intelligence arm. The documents, which included sensitive intelligence on the war in Ukraine, Chinese aircraft carriers, Iran’s nuclear program,

and the killing of Islamic State terrorists, sat in the chat group for over a month before surfacing on social media and drawing the attention of U.S. officials.

Read More: *The Mysteries of the Biggest Intel Leak in a Decade.*

Unlike many leakers of classified information, Teixeira seemed driven by hubris rather than ideology. Discord messages in court filings indicate that he reveled in showing off his access to the online chat group, which was largely made up of teenagers.

Teixeira's security clearance process had turned up an incident from his sophomore year in high school, when he was suspended for alleged violent and racial threats, including comments about bringing guns and Molotov cocktails to school. Nevertheless, he received a top-secret clearance upon joining the Massachusetts Air National Guard. After the Discord leaks became public, federal investigators found that he continued to regularly post “about violence and murder” in online forums, asked for advice on how to turn an SUV into an “assassination van,” researched mass shootings, and amassed an “arsenal” of weapons in his home, according to a filing from prosecutors in April.

Read More: *Why the U.S. Security-Clearance Process Has a Digital Blind Spot.*

After an internal [Air Force probe](#) released its findings in December, 15 airmen were disciplined for “failing to take proper action after becoming aware of [Teixeira’s] intelligence-seeking activities. The review lays out several incidents where Teixeira’s superiors were aware of “questionable activity” but “intentionally failed to report the full details of these security concerns [and] incidents … fearing security officials might ‘overreact.’” Col. Sean Riley, the commander of Teixeira’s unit, was relieved of his command. However, the report “did not find evidence that members of

Teixeira's supervisory chain were aware of his alleged unauthorized disclosures."

After Teixeira's arrest, the Pentagon conducted an internal review and took steps to tighten the way it controls access to national-security information. In July, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [released a memo](#) outlining recommendations to restrict classified information and security clearances on a "need to know" basis.

"The fact that so many people were disciplined in the Air Force National Guard in relation to this case shows the message being sent by the military that we will not tolerate this type of behavior and you need to report it," says Siegmann. "There were a number of warning signs."

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France Enshrines Abortion Rights in Its Constitution After U.S. Rollback

Armani Syed is a world affairs reporter at TIME. She covers global affairs, with a focus on the SWANA region, arts and culture, and royal institutions.



France became the world's first country to explicitly enshrine abortion rights into its constitution amid a [rollback](#) in reproductive rights in the [U.S.](#) and elsewhere.

Following a final vote on Monday evening, the bill was approved by members of Parliament who had been summoned to Paris by President [Emmanuel Macron](#) for a special meeting at the Palace of Versailles. The historic bill to protect abortion rights needed at least three fifths of the vote to pass.

“We’re sending a message to all women. Your body belongs to you and no one can decide for you,” Prime Minister Gabriel Attal told MPs and senators who had gathered in congress.

The newly approved amendment protects women seeking abortions under Article 34 of France's 1958 constitution. Macron's government proposed the wording, "The law determines the conditions by which is exercised the freedom of women to have recourse to an abortion, which is guaranteed."

In January, France's National Assembly—the lower house of its Parliament—[voted](#) overwhelmingly in favor of the bill. On Wednesday, the senate also [endorsed](#) the bill, tweaking the wording of the amendment to "guaranteed freedom" after pushback from conservatives.

The bill has been broadly well received across the political spectrum, with no major political parties in Parliament opposed. The move marks the 25th amendment made to the Fifth Republic's founding document.

In a [post](#) on X on Feb. 28, Macron said he is "committed to making women's freedom to have an abortion irreversible" with this bill.

The legislation is inspired by the rollback of reproductive rights in a number of countries, [particularly the U.S.](#) In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed Roe v. Wade, which had since 1973 provided federal protection of abortion rights to Americans.

"Unfortunately, this event is not isolated: in many countries, even in Europe, there are currents of opinion that seek to hinder at any cost the freedom of women to terminate their pregnancy if they wish," the French legislation introduction states.

Abortions in France have been legal since 1975, and may take place until 14 weeks after conception, following [updated legislation in 2022](#).

Following Wednesday's senate approval, French Prime Minister [Gabriel Attal](#) said: "When women's rights are attacked in the

world, France stands up and places itself at the avant garde of progress.”

But observers say the initiative is a political effort from Macron to appeal to left-leaning figures in his Renaissance party after controversial stances on pension reform and immigration.

Some have also argued that abortion is already constitutionally protected following a 2001 ruling in which France’s constitutional council approved abortion under liberties enshrined in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Anne Levade, a law professor at Paris-Sorbonne University, [told the BBC](#), “Beyond being a symbol... the revision will change absolutely nothing.”

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Zyn Is the New Vaping

Jamie Ducharme is a health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, Long COVID, mental health, vaping, psychedelics, and more. Her work for TIME has won awards from the Deadline Club, the New York Press Club, and the Newswomen's Club of New York. Additionally, she is the author of *Big Vape: The Incendiary Rise of Juul*, which was adapted for a forthcoming Netflix docuseries.



Not so long ago, [Juul was seen as the new Marlboro](#). Smoking wasn't that cool anymore—rates had plummeted among U.S. adults [and teens](#)—but then came Juul, a sleek, addictive product with [flashy advertising tactics](#) that took off like wildfire. It soon became clear that e-cigarettes were hooking teens who otherwise wouldn't have gone near nicotine.

Now, [Juul is out](#) and Zyn is in. It's even more discreet than Juul, with no plumes of vapor. A user simply tucks a small pouch of nicotine, additives, and flavorings under their lip for up to an hour. Over that time, it releases a steady hit of nicotine—more than that

in a cigarette, but delivered much more slowly. Like Juul, it contains no tobacco.

You're not alone if you're just hearing of Zyn, but it's been for sale in the U.S. since 2014. Like other products that launched around that time, including Juul, it entered the market when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had few regulations for new tobacco and nicotine products. The agency retroactively required these brands to [prove they benefit public health enough to stay on the market](#), and Zyn's manufacturer has [filed those applications](#), but the FDA hasn't reached decisions yet.

A lack of regulatory oversight hasn't stopped Zyn from becoming the latest product to lure people to a new and—at least seemingly—less-dangerous way to consume nicotine. "It's a parallel world with what happened with e-cigarettes," says Maciej Goniewicz, a nicotine and tobacco-control researcher at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in New York.

Still, Zyn is nowhere close to as ubiquitous as Juul once was, according to the most recent available data. About 4.5% of U.S. adults vaped and [11.5% smoked in 2021](#), but only about 2% used smokeless tobacco products. And just [1.5% of U.S. teenagers regularly used nicotine pouches in 2023](#). (For context, at the height of Juul's popularity in 2019, [27.5% of U.S. high schoolers vaped](#).) "It's not an apples-to-apples comparison," says Corey Henry, director of U.S. communications at Zyn's parent company, Philip Morris International (PMI). "To be honest, it's not even an apples-to-asteroids comparison."

But oral nicotine products have picked up significant traction in recent years. The Federal Trade Commission [recently reported](#) that the category's U.S. sales doubled from \$453 million in 2020 to more than \$1 billion in 2022. And Zyn's U.S. business grew by 62% from 2022 to 2023 alone, according to [an earnings report from PMI](#).

Zyn is also starting to go viral, which raises concerns about the product appealing to teens who might otherwise stay away from nicotine, says Dr. Robert Jackler, a tobacco advertising expert and professor emeritus at Stanford University. “The market for these pouches is rapidly growing, and it’s being driven by many attributes that would be attractive to young people in the way e-cigarettes such as Juul were,” Jackler says, including appealing flavors and advertising that makes users look attractive, active, and cool. “We’ve seen this playbook before,” he says.

There's even a name for people who post about the pouches—[Zynfluencers](#)—prompting concern from some public-health officials and lawmakers. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer recently [called for a crackdown on products like Zyn](#), warning parents that companies “lock their sights on young kids—teenagers, and even lower—and then use the social media to hook ‘em.”

Zyn does not hire influencers or use models younger than 35 in its ads, Henry says. It also bars anyone younger than 21 from accessing its website and flags social media posts that depict underage or dangerous use of Zyn to the platforms. But the company can't “police the internet,” Henry says. Platforms including [TikTok already prohibit](#) posts that show or encourage underage drug, alcohol, or tobacco use, yet Henry says these policies don't always catch everything.

Henry says PMI does everything required, and more, to prevent underage Zyn use. Its ads, he says, are meant to appeal to adult tobacco users looking to switch, not teenagers. The average Zyn user is 39 and previously used another tobacco or nicotine product, according to 2023 company research conducted among customers 21 and older.

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Research on the safety of nicotine pouches is ongoing. But other oral products—including [snus](#), which is similar to Zyn but contains tobacco instead of just nicotine—have been studied for decades and seem to present significantly lower risks of cancer and other diseases, relative to cigarettes. In 2019, the FDA allowed some snus products to be [explicitly sold as lower-risk alternatives](#).

Based on what is currently known, Goniewicz, the nicotine researcher, says it's safe to assume nicotine pouches don't damage the lungs because users aren't inhaling anything. Pouches also contain fewer of the cancer-causing chemicals found in traditional chewing tobacco, he says. Their biggest health risk for adult users, in his view, likely lies in nicotine's potential to harm the cardiovascular system.

Products like these are also risky for oral health. “Anytime you park a foreign substance between your teeth and gums, you are taking a risk of dental problems,” such as cavities and gum disease, adds Jackler, who practiced for decades as an ear, nose, and throat physician.

Some researchers have raised additional concerns. [One 2023 study](#) found that oral nicotine products like Zyn contain low levels of potentially harmful substances, including ammonia and formaldehyde. And in [a small 2024 study](#) of adults who use nicotine pouches, almost all of them reported some kind of unpleasant side effect, including mouth lesions, nausea, and a sore throat or mouth. “They certainly seem to be safer than tobacco cigarettes,” says study co-author Ashley Dowd, a postdoctoral research fellow at Johns Hopkins University. “But having a general sense that they're safe would concern me”—especially, she says, if it prompts people who don't currently use nicotine to pick up a pouch thinking it's harmless.

Dowd's study also found that most pouch users continued to smoke or vape on the side. [Another 2023 study](#) found the same thing among users ages 15 to 24. Those findings suggest that some users can't or don't want to completely switch from smoking to using pouches—perhaps because they don't deliver nicotine to the bloodstream rapidly enough to quell cravings, as [some recent research](#) hints. Using multiple nicotine products is concerning, Jackler says, since it can "deepen addiction and make continuing smoking more likely."

But if people were to entirely quit cigarettes or vapes in favor of pouches, "as a physician, I would welcome that," Jackler says. "On the other hand, I wish they never got addicted to begin with."

Correction, March 4

The original version of this story misstated when 1.5% of teenagers reported using nicotine pouches. That estimate is from 2023, not 2022.

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Hackers Could Use ChatGPT to Target 2024 Elections

Vera Bergengruen is a senior correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. She covers the overlap of national security, politics, and technology. Her work at TIME has won the Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi Award and a New York Press Club Award.



The rise of generative AI tools like ChatGPT has increased the potential for a wide range of attackers to target elections around the world in 2024, according to a new report by cybersecurity giant CrowdStrike.

Both state-linked hackers and allied so-called “hacktivists” are increasingly experimenting with ChatGPT and other AI tools, enabling a wider range of actors to carry out cyberattacks and scams, according to the company’s annual [global threats report](#). This includes hackers linked to Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, who have been testing new ways to use these technologies against the U.S., Israel, and European countries.

With half the world's population set to vote in 2024, the use of generative AI to target elections could be a "huge factor," says Adam Meyers, head of counter-adversary operations at CrowdStrike. So far, CrowdStrike analysts have been able to detect the use of these models through comments in the scripts that would have been placed there by a tool like ChatGPT. But, Meyers warns, "this is going to get worse throughout the course of the year."

If state-linked actors continue to improve their use of AI, "it's really going to democratize the ability to do high-quality disinformation campaigns" and speed up the tempo at which they're able to carry out cyberattacks, Meyers says.

"Given the ease with which AI tools can generate deceptive but convincing narratives, adversaries will highly likely use such tools to conduct [information operations] against elections in 2024," the report's authors say. "Politically active partisans within those countries holding elections will also likely use generative AI to create disinformation to disseminate within their own circles."

Read More: [*How Tech Giants Turned Ukraine Into an AI War Lab.*](#)

The CrowdStrike report highlights how the digital battleground has expanded beyond active conflict zones like Ukraine and Gaza. In 2023, groups linked to Yemen, Pakistan, Indonesia and Turkey targeted entities in the U.S. and Europe "in retaliation against real or perceived support of Israel." In October, a Yemeni group claimed credit for a DDoS attack against an unidentified U.S. airport, according to the CrowdStrike report. A South Asian hacktivist group claimed a similar attack against a British military website, which was "accompanied by references to U.K. support for Israel." And an Indonesian group claimed to have breached the personal data of 790,000 doctors in the U.S. "reportedly in retaliation against U.S. support for Israel as well as to show support for Palestinians," according to the report.

Some of the tech companies developing AI tools have been sounding the alarm themselves. Last month, OpenAI announced it would be rolling out new policies meant to combat disinformation and the misuse of its tools ahead of the 2024 elections, including verified news and image-authenticity programs. Microsoft has warned that state-backed hackers from China, Iran, and Russia have been using OpenAI's large language models to improve their cyberattacks, refining scripts and improving their targeting techniques. While Microsoft has not yet found evidence of "significant attacks" employing their large language models, cybercrime groups, nation-state threat actors, and other adversaries "are exploring and testing different AI technologies as they emerge, in an attempt to understand potential value to their operations and the security controls they may need to circumvent," Microsoft said.

Read More: [*Election Workers Face Surge of Cyberattacks.*](#)

In one recent case, Microsoft and OpenAI analysts say they detected attempts from attackers working with Russia's military intelligence to use their tools to understand satellite communication protocols and radar imaging technologies. "These queries suggest an attempt to acquire in-depth knowledge of satellite capabilities," Microsoft said in a statement. One China-affiliated actor known as "Salmon Typhoon" used OpenAI tools to "translate technical papers, retrieve publicly available information on multiple intelligence agencies and regional threat actors, assist with coding, and research common ways processes could be hidden on a system," the company said in a post on Feb. 14.

While it's not clear to what extent these attacks will succeed in influencing upcoming elections, they have already caused disruptions. Taiwan's elections last month saw a sharp spike in cyberattacks targeting government offices from suspected China-linked actors, according to an analysis shared with TIME by U.S.-based cybersecurity firm Trellix. "Malicious cyber activity rose significantly from 1,758 detections on January 11 to over 4,300 on

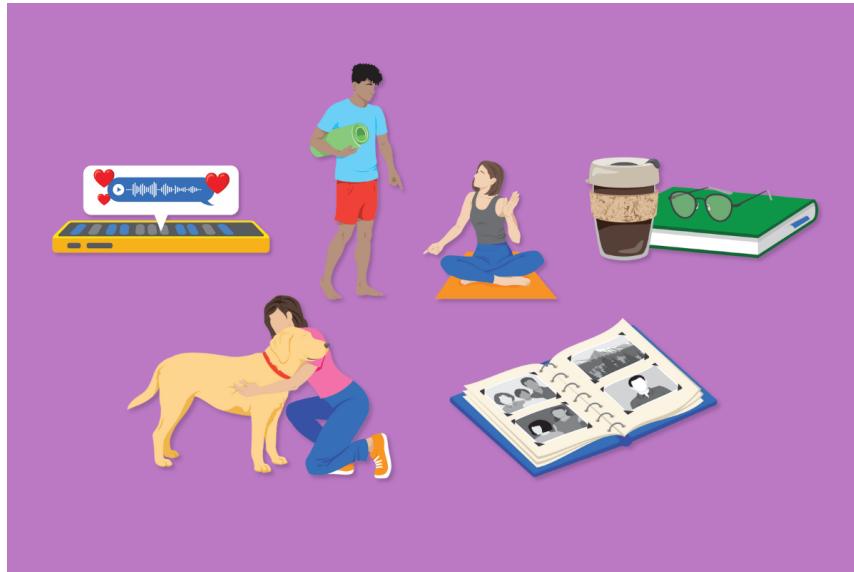
January 12,” the day before the election, according to Trellix analysts, before dropping dramatically again. “The timing suspiciously [suggests] a goal of influencing election outcomes.”

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9 Things Therapists Do When They Feel Lonely

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



True friendships can take years to develop—which isn’t exactly comforting to the [1 in 3 U.S. adults](#) who say they are lonely right now. But you don’t need to wait for a new BFF to feel better. Small acts can help give you immediate relief from loneliness, experts say. We asked therapists what low-effort steps they take in their own lives when isolation starts to creep in.

Join an easy group class

When Courtney Morgan, a therapist in Louisville, Ky., wants to be around like-minded people without having to try too hard, she goes to a yoga class. “Sometimes I want to feel connected without actively engaging in a conversation,” she says. She tells her clients to seek out structured programming that they’re interested in, too.

If want to try a group class—whether it’s fitness-related, educational, something artsy, or in a different realm entirely—

Morgan recommends searching for options through social media, email newsletters, or your local library. During your first class, aim to appear approachable, she suggests. Resist the [urge to look at your phone](#), make eye contact with people, smile, ask a stranger if you can sit next to them, and thank the instructor. All are small ways to feel better connected.

Do a 5-minute loving-kindness meditation

We're not always kind to ourselves when we're lonely. That's part of the reason why Suzette Bray, a therapist in Burbank, Calif., does a quick loving-kindness meditation, a type of practice that originates from the Buddhist tradition, first thing in the morning. "The idea is that you're going to set your intention to cultivate compassion and send loving wishes toward yourself and others," she says.

Close your eyes and repeat a few positive phrases—first toward yourself, and then toward others. For example: "May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I live with ease. May you be happy, may you be healthy, and may you live with ease."

"You're sending those wishes to neutral individuals like the barista, or your neighbor, or the person you drove past sitting at a bus stop," Bray says. "Then, the really cool part is you identify people you struggle with, and you send love to them, too. It really is a reminder of our connection to the world, and that we're all part of the shared human condition."

Do what you used to love as a kid

A friend once asked Allison Guilbault, a therapist in Morristown, N.J., where she found community as a child, before life got in the way of making time for personal pursuits. The answer: swimming and dancing. So Guilbault revisited those long-neglected interests.

Swimming more has opened up new social circles of like-minded people, and so has taking a dance class at a local studio. “It’s been absolutely incredible,” she says. “I enter the doors and find immediate connection. I legitimately have friends there.”

Flip through old photos

It’s so easy to forget fun, fulfilling times when you’re all alone. But looking at photos of favorite memories can help. “It immediately sparks joy,” says San Francisco therapist Erika Bent, who does this whenever she feels isolated. “Thinking of beautiful moments helps me remember that I’m worthy of connection.” It also helps “reignite the possibility” of feeling less alone, she says—which is sometimes the most powerful antidote to loneliness.

Go people-watching

When Samantha Bender, a social worker in El Paso, Texas, feels lonely, she heads to a local coffee shop where she can people-watch while sipping a saffron latte and reading the latest Stephen King novel. “Sometimes loneliness isn’t about our direct relationships,” she says, “but how we feel in relation to the world around us.” There’s so much going on in public spaces—new sounds, scents, and sights—that it grounds her in the present moment and distracts her from tinges of loneliness. “You can soak it all in and feel like you’re part of something without having to extend a lot of effort,” she says. “We don’t always have the mental energy and capacity to connect with others one-on-one.”

Try something new

Sometimes Bent gets stuck in the routine of heading straight home after work—but after many evenings doing the same thing, she starts to feel isolated. “Monotony makes me feel worse,” she says. In those moments, she takes out the to-do list where she logs new

things she'd like to try: a bar to check out, a new salsa dancing spot, a hiking meet-up. Trying something new sparks a shift in her mood while fostering much-needed connection.

The thought of going hiking with strangers, for example, had always made her anxious—but it stepping out of her comfort zone was “a beautiful way to meet people I otherwise wouldn’t have.” Even admiring new scenery helps her break out of a rut. And then there’s salsa dancing. The first time she went, it felt hard, and it was certainly a social risk: Dancers were paired with strangers. “But it was so much fun,” she says, and the experience made it almost impossible to feel lonely.

Send a voice text

Audrey Schoen, a marriage and family therapist in Granite Bay, Calif., loves communicating via voice message. When she meets someone new and exchanges contact info, she sends them an audio message instead of firing off a text. And when she feels lonely, she reaches out to friends in the same way—or replays old voice messages that she saved. “I love receiving voice messages, and I love sending them,” she says. “They feel so much more personal,” and are an especially fun way to keep in touch with friends who live far away.

Connect with yourself

If Bender is lonely but feels like staying home, she turns to creative hobbies like coloring, journaling, or reading. “They help me connect to myself,” she says. She particularly likes to do these activities while sitting next to her husband: no interaction necessary. Simply being in each other’s presence, she says, is healing, and helps squash any inkling of loneliness.

Cuddle a pet

Spending just **10 minutes** interacting with cats and dogs reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol—so it's no wonder Guilbault seeks out her pups when she craves company. “I find it hard to feel lonely in the presence of animals,” she says. “There’s love there, and there’s loyalty there.”

Plus, pets open the door to social opportunities. After Guilbault enrolled one of her dogs in agility classes, she met a number of acquaintances and made one good friend. She takes her pups on frequent hikes and inevitably sees other people on the trail—helpful on days when she feels lonely but not up to engaging in drawn-out conversations.

Guilbault once advised a client who was having trouble finding connection to take her two poodles to a local park and position herself in a way that was “really open.” That meant not scrolling through her phone and instead looking around and smiling. “Dogs are an invitation,” Guilbault says. “She didn’t walk away from this with her new best friend, but she had a really pleasurable afternoon where she made small talk with people who came over and asked to pet her dog.” Sometimes, experts agree, those small moments can make the biggest difference in overcoming loneliness.

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The New Age of Naval Power

Alessio Patalano is a professor of war and strategy in East Asia and co-director of the Centre for Grand Strategy at King's College London, where he specializes in maritime strategy and doctrine.



On Tuesday, Ukraine said that it [sank another](#) Russian warship, the Sergei Kotov, in the Black Sea. The loss of the Kotov ship and the [Tsezar Kunikov](#) before it last month now means that a whopping [one-third](#) of Russia's Black Sea fleet has been disabled. The Kotov and Kunikov have joined Russia's flagship [Moskva](#) at the bottom of the Black Sea and cemented the fact that the maritime theatre of the war in Ukraine remains the single most significant naval conflict since the [Falklands war](#) more than four decades ago.

These David vs. Goliath events raise an important question. Are ever-advanced [drones](#) rendering naval fleets obsolete? The fact that Ukraine is [winning at sea](#) would suggest as much. Yet the temptation to concede to this line of argument fundamentally misses two crucial points.

First, war at sea is deeply attritional. As a recent [study](#) conducted at the U.S. Naval War College pointed out, modern naval warfare relies on mass. The numbers of combatants—surface, submarine, and air—and a capacity to regenerate them at scale makes all the difference in war at sea. The U.S. navy's case in World War II is symptomatic in this respect. In June 1940, the fleet included 478 combatants. By Victory Over Japan Day in 1945, the U.S. navy had 6,768 active vessels, far above any other major power on Earth.

Ukrainian drones and missiles are adding a [21st century meaning](#) to the old truth that the ability to overcome losses makes all the difference in war at sea. In a conflict, a warship is safe only when it is outside the range of a cannon shot. A combatant, especially a numerically inferior one, will seek to close the gap and this is an assumption that navies need to address or else find themselves without a fleet. Yet losses are not a sufficient reason to suggest the coming obsolescence of fleets.

This leads to the second point. Russian losses fail to capture the extent to which naval power—and fleets capable of operating in a contested environment—has come back as a central feature of power struggles from the Black Sea to the Red Sea, South China Sea, and the Strait of Taiwan. This is not just about the strategic value of capital ships to project a nation's international standing and ambitions in an anarchical international system.

Naval power matters today more than ever because of how modern societies' relationship with the sea has evolved. Today we live in a maritime century, one in which the very foundations of the prosperity that underwrites open economies rests upon maritime physical and digital connectivity.

Read More: *The U.S. Navy Is Sinking in the Sand*

Sea-lanes feed us, keep us warm, and deliver the furniture of daily life. Some 97% of the internet, and a major portion of international

energy use, relies on an [undersea spaghetti bowl of cables and pipelines](#) that closely mirror commercial shipping routes. This multilayered network of physical and digital connectivity is safe and reliable only until it is not.

In recent years, places as diverse as [Somalia](#), [Tonga](#), the [U.K.](#), and [Taiwan](#) have experienced economic losses because of disruptions to critical undersea infrastructure. By the beginning of this year, the relatively sophisticated capabilities of Yemen's Houthis exposed just how vulnerable the steady supply of basic commodities—from [tea bags](#) to the average household in Britain, to core components of [electric cars](#) across Europe—can be.

This unprecedented reliance on maritime connectivity has made activities at sea a primary target of authoritarian regimes and non-state groups. Actions such as the sabotage of the [Nord Stream 2](#) pipeline, the [gas pipeline](#) linking Estonia, Finland, and Sweden, or the disruption to international shipping [caused by Houthi missiles and drones](#) share one thing.

These actions highlight a realization on behalf of leaders in Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran that maritime connectivity is a pressure point with significant political value. Countries like China, in particular, are pursuing the naval means to seize the opportunities emerging from such a realization. Whether in the field of technologies for deep seabed exploration and exploitation, shipping capacity, and, above all, in the context of [sheer naval might](#), China is setting new records in both quantity and quality of its [investments](#). In the last decade alone, China has added over twice the number of ships to its surface fleet than what the entire French navy commands.

Chinese authorities understand that, in a maritime century, its ongoing naval build-up is a downpayment for maritime superiority, if not supremacy, in a potential major war in the [China seas](#), in the [strait of Taiwan](#), or beyond. Xi Jinping's [appointment](#) of Hu

Zhongming, an operationally experienced submariner, at the helm of the navy confirms that a new generation of flag officers is entrusted to deliver readiness if ever needed.

This is why navies matter and why the U.S. and allies in Europe and Asia are actively debating how to invest in them. Leaders in countries like Japan and Australia are investing in their navies, from counterstrike to surface, carrier, and submarine projection capabilities, so that they can collectively meet the growing authoritarian challenge at sea. That includes Japan unveiling in December 2023 its largest defense budget in its post-war history, and Australia, which is already procuring nuclear-powered submarines through [AUKUS](#), announcing last month plans to [double its surface fleet](#).

However, others, like the U.S. and Britain, are finding it harder to meet growing naval demands. In the U.S., the navy will ask for only [one Virginia class submarine](#) for the next fiscal year budget instead of two, because of the limits of industrial capacity. In Britain, a recent [parliamentary report](#) noted how plans to introduce several new classes of ships needs more shipyards first.

In a contested maritime century, we should start thinking about navies as the ultimate national security insurance policy. Like any insurance, they demand regular investments against risks that are unlikely but potentially grave. Navies work best to deter would-be aggression, but the industrial base to generate their capabilities underwrites military credibility. Crucially, when all else fails, that credibility stands to make certain that in the hour of need, the hardest challenges will be met and overcome.

Correction, March 6

The original version of this story misstated the name of China's new naval commander. It is Hu Zhongming, not Dong Jun.

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Pakistan's Generals Fail to Fix the Election

Ian Bremmer is a foreign affairs columnist and editor-at-large at TIME. He is the president of Eurasia Group, a political-risk consultancy, and GZERO Media, a company dedicated to providing intelligent and engaging coverage of international affairs. He teaches applied geopolitics at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and his most recent book is [The Power of Crisis](#).



Pakistan's worst-kept secret is that its military dominates its government. Whether to safeguard the nation against chaos or to protect their own privileged access to power and wealth, its generals have manipulated the country's politics for decades. Pakistan's voters, like voters elsewhere, want change. February's ugly [election fiasco](#) shows that it's only getting harder for the army to prevent political disrupters from upending their plans but, unfortunately for Pakistan's future, they have yet again managed to [override public demand](#) for a new direction.

A brief recap: The generals and popular leader [Imran Khan](#) decided some time ago they could no longer trust one another. The army

then removed Khan from his post as Prime Minister and put him in jail, as it has done to many past Prime Ministers who refused to respect their dominance. He now faces more than 150 criminal charges, all of which he denies.

When the brass refused to let him contest February's national elections, even from prison, aides in Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party created [AI-generated Khan speeches](#) that were then broadcast around Pakistan. In a nation where 40% of voters are illiterate, army-dominated courts ruled that ballots could not include the symbol of Khan's party, a cricket bat to reference Khan's professional sporting prowess, but the party vowed to press ahead. When the generals refused to allow PTI members to appear on ballots, many ran as independents.

Both the army and a former Prime Minister, the exiled-then-rehabilitated Nawaz Sharif, were confident that destroying Khan's candidacy would assure a victory for Sharif. It did not. Even after manipulating courts and the media, stuffing ballot boxes, and turning off mobile phone service and social media in areas where Khan voters were setting their get-out-the-vote plans, the nation's self-appointed overlords could not stop voters from shocking Pakistan and the world by handing victory to the independents who stood for Imran Khan's PTI. They didn't win a majority, but they did win more seats than any single party.

It took the army and its political subordinates three weeks to untangle this mess and find a way to keep Khan's party out of power. On March 4, Pakistan's newly formed Parliament announced that Shehbaz Sharif—Nawaz's brother and the interim Prime Minister since the army grabbed power again last August—will again lead a coalition government. All in the name of "stability."

It's reasonable to wonder why Sharif, or anyone else, would want the job. Pakistan ranks 161st out of 191 countries in the U.N.'s

Human Development Index. Its economic prospects remain poor. About 40% of Pakistan's people live in poverty, and inflation stands at about 30%. Power outages are a fact of daily life. To pay its foreign debt to avoid default, Pakistan's government must come up with more than \$20 billion. Its current reserves have dwindled to less than \$10 billion.

The country is increasingly isolated. China and Saudi Arabia, traditional investors in Pakistan, increasingly see the country as a bad commercial bet. Traditional security partners in the U.S. are less interested, particularly since the U.S. withdrawal from neighboring Afghanistan. And though Khan has vowed that PTI lawmakers will sit in opposition, the party's followers have already demonstrated an ability and willingness to generate major trouble in the streets of Pakistan's largest cities.

Worse still, the army establishment has shown Pakistan's voters that their country's democracy cannot create the change they need. That bodes ill for the nation and all who would lead it, whether they're elected or not.

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Democrats Are About To Discover How Much They Needed Mitch McConnell

Philip Elliott is a senior correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau, where he covers national campaigns, elections, and government. He also writes TIME's politics newsletter, [The D.C. Brief](#).



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To liberals, Mitch McConnell is a dastardly master of the political dark arts, willing to do anything to serve his conservative aims. He enabled multiple GOP White Houses to play the long game, [twisting](#) himself when his previous pronouncements became inconvenient. The Kentucky Republican [puppet-mastered](#) into reality a regulatory [regime](#) that allows unchecked corporate and secretive individual [cash](#) back into politics after picking the scabs of McCain-Feingold campaign finance [law](#) until there was nothing left.

In the liberal worldview, not only did McConnell [steal](#) a Supreme Court seat from Democrats in 2016 and clear the way for the conservative bench that [dealt](#) the death blow to federal abortion rights, he also [stacked](#) the decks in lower courts to make life easier for polluters, right-wing ideologues, and Wall Street. And, when the opportunity arose to finally purge the Republican Party of Donald Trump for good with a history-making second impeachment trial, McConnell [looked away](#) from the carnage once more.

Well, those same liberals who profess nothing short of loathing for McConnell might be about to find how much worse things can get without the Senate chieftain keeping his unruly Republican Caucus in some semblance of order. One can't shake the [meme](#) asking "Miss Me Yet?"

McConnell on Wednesday announced that he was putting an end to his [record-setting](#) 17 years atop the Senate Republicans' hierarchy. Only one other incumbent Republican—Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa—has experienced Washington without McConnell pulling major levers of power. And just seven incumbent Republicans have served in a Senate where McConnell was not in the party's top job.

That longevity did little to mask McConnell's own disappointment in his announcement.

"Believe me: I know the politics within my party at this particular moment in time," McConnell said in the well of the Senate. "I have many faults; misunderstanding politics is not one of them."

As much as Democrats like to demonize McConnell, he has been a responsible cog for must-pass legislation to keep the government open and the national credit card working. McConnell's years working alongside President Joe Biden in the Senate have kept that line of communication open between his second-floor suite in the Capitol and the White House's satellite office nearby. McConnell

also helped Biden pass part of his infrastructure investment agenda and, during the Trump years, provided a reliable guard against some of Trump's most bananas ideas and watered down some of the others.

But absent McConnell's Senate trickery and caucus wrangling, the Senate could soon devolve into its own version of the chaotic cosplay of *The Hunger Games* that is the House. While Democrats have no love for McConnell's win-at-all-costs approach to politics, they often took it for granted when he rallied his ranks to dodge shutdowns and defaults.

Perhaps the shrewdest mind in politics on either side of the aisle right now, McConnell is fully cognizant that he is leading a party that fundamentally disagrees with him on major questions—or at least hews to Trump's prescriptions from afar out of fealty or fear. McConnell has fought an increasingly lonely fight within his party to secure funding to help Ukraine fight against Russia's invasion and attacks from afar, much to the dismay of Trump and his worldview that views NATO as a racket. A \$95 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan [cleared](#) the Senate this month with McConnell's blessing and vote, although it is stuck in park over in the House, where Trumpian elements have incredible sway.

For McConnell, who arrived in office thanks to the same [1984](#) ballots that saw Ronald Reagan win 49 states, a Cold War worldview has evolved but never evaporated, and Moscow's aggression needs to be answered on the battlefield and done so decisively.

That put McConnell on a collision course with the Trumpists in his party, including some voting lawmakers who in recent years have grown emboldened in their face-to-face criticism of their leader. It's not unheard of to hear screaming in the hallway outside Senate Republicans' weekly private lunch, and McConnell is often the target. After one particularly nasty session, the ever-in-control

McConnell coolly [responded](#): “Are you suggesting I’m enjoying this?”

Since securing the party’s top role in 2007, McConnell has taken the criticism in stride. The self-described [Grim Reaper](#) of the Senate knows the rules well enough to thwart any legislation or nominee he found objectionable. In one legendary 1994 speech to the conservative Heritage Foundation, McConnell said inaction was, in itself, an action. “I am a proud guardian of gridlock,” he [said](#). Through an often-inscrutable smirk, McConnell watches the chessboard of Washington move with few surprises. After all, the former campaign operative has run every model 20 clicks downstream, polls [showing](#) him to be the most unpopular elected official in national politics be damned.

But McConnell, who judges success in the Senate just as clinically as he does when watching his [beloved](#) University of Louisville Cardinals basketball and football teams, plainly saw his efficacy fading. In recent months, the 82-year-old Minority Leader has faced health challenges; after alarming freezing episodes, Congress’ doctor [released](#) a terse statement clearing him to serve, but the famously private McConnell has refused to be more candid than that.

Even as McConnell was delivering Trump legislative wins and confirming his judges, the then-President continued an unyielding series of insults at both McConnell and his wife, who happened to be serving in Trump’s Cabinet as his Labor Secretary. While McConnell employed his mastery at advancing Trump’s agenda—or blocking Democrats’ efforts where he deemed it necessary—he did so without any measure of appreciation from the President, who was focused on the few areas where McConnell refused to go his way.

The antipathy did not abate, even after McConnell spared Trump in his impeachment trial over a [role](#) in sparking the Jan. 6, 2021, riot

that overran the Capitol. “Former President Trump’s actions that preceded the riot were a disgraceful, disgraceful dereliction of duty,” McConnell [said](#) on the floor of the Senate. “Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day.” Then, McConnell voted against convicting him.

Still, Trump is the biggest figure in the Republican Party and seems coasting to a third presidential nomination despite the ongoing legal challenges he faces on multiple fronts. Trump just orchestrated the ouster of the Republican National Committee’s top ranks. In early 2022, Trump backed a leadership challenge to McConnell from Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, an effort that flamed out. And the grudge match with McConnell seems to be nowhere close to abating, [telling](#) Fox News that the relationship was far from healed: “I don’t know that I can work with him.”

A relative eternity exists between now and the next Leadership elections, [expected](#) to come after November’s elections that will decide which party controls the chamber come January 2025. The Three Johns—Thune of South Dakota, Barrasso of Wyoming, and Cornyn of Texas—have long been setting themselves up as McConnell’s heir. Ambitious colleagues like Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Scott are also mentioned as favorites of the conservative wing of the GOP. And Sen. Steve Daines’ turn leading Senate Republicans’ campaign arm has made the Montana Republican an attractive option, too. Each of these men—and, yes, again they’re all men at this point—would face his own challenges in managing relationships inside a caucus where every single one of them looks in a mirror and sees a President, to borrow a well-trod [trope](#). But, in the end, the winner very well may turn on who is seen as most agreeable—or pliable—to Trump.

As McConnell was informing his colleagues of his decision Wednesday, lawmakers [struck](#) a partial funding bill to [dodge](#) a shutdown, its fourth temporary spending plan since October. Instead of running out of money on Friday, some of the

government has funding through March 8, while a new March 22 deadline has been put in place for other corners of government. The kick-the-can-down-the-road approach has left mainstream lawmakers of both parties and at all levels deeply frustrated. Republicans in the House are trying to insert riders into the budget to block access to abortion medications and to slash a proposed effort to boost spending for food programs for poor children and women, ideas that are likely to doom any progress.

McConnell plans to remain in the Senate, returning to rank-and-file status and likely an unchallenged shift to chairman or ranking member on any committee of his choosing. “I still have enough gas in my tank to thoroughly disappoint my critics, and I intend to do so with all the enthusiasm to which they have become accustomed,” he told the Senate, where his aides lined the walls to watch the boss start unspooling a remarkable run atop the GOP.

The Kentucky Republican’s legacy will be studied for generations, much of it focused on his obsessive partisan focus. But as Leader, he was a voracious student of history and precedent. And, most importantly for Democrats, McConnell has never shielded his point of view or his priorities. That predictability helped the Senate stand as a guard against House-caliber chaos. At best, there will be a learning curve for McConnell’s successor. At worst, the Senate may lose its traditional check. It would be, as McConnell himself observed in 2013, a landmark: “No Majority Leader wants written on his tombstone that he presided over the end of the Senate.” Washington cannot afford that norm to be the one that falls next.

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Inside Fatih Birol's Push to Transform the IEA Into a Clean Energy Authority

Justin Worland is a senior correspondent at TIME in the Washington, D.C. bureau. He received Covering Climate Now's inaugural Climate Journalist of the Year award in 2022, among other awards. He is the Outrider Foundation fellow at TIME.



(To get this story in your inbox, subscribe to the TIME CO2 Leadership Report newsletter [here](#).)

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many energy experts spoke about the energy dynamics as a hard-to-control, slow-moving train wreck. The vacillations of both the weather and Vladimir Putin would determine whether Europe—reliant on Russian gas for 40% of its gas needs—could make it through the winter without blackouts—and the ensuing political chaos.

Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy Agency (IEA), saw it differently: a series of key policy moves, executed quickly and diligently, could stave off disaster. Within weeks, the IEA had

crafted a [10-point plan](#) to do just that. Countries would need to implement aggressive energy efficiency programs, create subsidies to keep energy prices in check for consumers, and keep their nuclear power plants running longer than anticipated. Significantly, Birol argued, the European Union should accelerate its [clean energy and climate ambitions](#). “Government policies do matter,” he told me in his office in Paris last year, reflecting on the IEA’s response to the crisis.

The plan worked. The European Union survived two winters with minimal disruption while continuing to cut its emissions. On Feb. 13, at an event in Paris commemorating the agency’s founding 50 years ago, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that the bloc had made it through those winters “first and foremost, thanks to you, Fatih Birol.”

The moment is emblematic of the rise of the IEA from a sleepy outpost in Paris mainly focused on crunching oil market data to a significant geopolitical player with [a leading role in the energy transition](#). In the nearly nine years since he took over, Birol has led the agency’s efforts to publish a flurry of reports and analyses that show policymakers where countries are on their decarbonization journeys and how they can accelerate. “I don’t think there’s an organization right now that’s as impactful at helping all of us transition into clean energy,” says David Turk, the U.S. deputy energy secretary who previously worked at the agency.

But, for all the IEA’s vocal support, success in meeting climate goals will depend on whether countries and businesses actually follow the decarbonization scenarios the IEA lays out. Supportive energy officials say [the IEA’s work](#) has created a clear path to follow; oil and gas industry stalwarts remain skeptical, if not indignant, that the IEA’s scenarios will come to fruition.

The outcome of the debate will have significant consequences for the future of climate action, but we don’t need to wait for it to play

out to understand the significance of the IEA. Spend enough time in climate circles and you'll almost certainly hear about the need to evolve international institutions to make them "fit for purpose." The World Bank needs to galvanize more investment in climate solutions. The United Nations needs to bring countries to a joint solution to address global warming. And, while success has come slowly elsewhere, the IEA has actually evolved to remain useful at this juncture. Decarbonizing the economy is a gargantuan task; the IEA has built a road map.

The IEA was born half a century ago out of a different crisis. In 1973, a group of Arab oil producing countries blocked exports to the U.S. and a handful of other countries in response to their support for Israel. Energy prices skyrocketed and shortages ensued. In response, the U.S. and a group of 16 others, most of them European, formed the IEA as a counterweight. The organization wouldn't set policy in member states like the OPEC oil cartel does, but it would provide data, offer recommendations, and create a venue for collaboration.

The energy crises of the 1970s eventually faded, and over the following decades so did the organization's influence. By the time Birol took over the agency in 2015 many environmental advocates had come to view the IEA as too cozy with the oil and gas industry. Indeed, for Birol's first five years leading the organization activists vocally criticized the IEA for underestimating the potential growth of clean energy and failing to lay out policy roadmaps that would adequately address climate change.

Behind the scenes, however, Birol, who had spent two decades at the agency, including as its chief economist, had already set out on an ambitious effort to change the organization's agenda and reputation. He sought to bring emerging economies into the IEA's fold and redoubled its expertise in clean energy. "Governments need to give very clear political signals," he told me in 2020, explaining his focus on clean energy.

The key moment came in 2021 with the release of the IEA's so-called [net zero report](#). The document laid out 400 milestones that, if taken together, should put the world on course to eliminate its carbon footprint by the middle of the century. Crucially, the agency said that no new investments in new fossil fuel resources were needed to keep the lights on. That statement became a rallying cry for climate advocates who praised the report for illuminating the necessary path forward. At the same time, energy companies criticized it as too optimistic. To stop new fossil fuel drilling would mean expanding renewables and using energy with record efficiency.

Since then the fissure has only grown. The IEA has published a series of key reports focused on how the energy system needs to change to address climate change, and, last fall, the IEA said that even under existing policies demand for oil and gas would peak by 2030. That [statement](#), and the profound implications for investors and policymakers, once again shook up the public debate. “Every speech I give around the country tells people that within the next decade, absent any new climate policy, we’re going to see peak oil and gas,” says Jonathan Wilkinson, Canada’s minister of energy and natural resources, reflecting on the significance of the report.

The pushback was ferocious. Industry voices and OPEC countries dismissed the IEA’s finding as politically motivated. Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman [told a conference](#) in September that the finding amounted to “political advocacy.” In November, OPEC released a [statement](#) decrying the IEA and calling its assessment of the future of oil “undiplomatic to say the least.”

The intensity of the debate is an indicator of just how influential the IEA has become. IEA reports aren’t predictions; they instead offer an assessment of how the energy system will change under certain conditions. Its net zero assessments evaluate which policies would allow the world to decarbonize. And yet even releasing such

an analysis is enough to leave the oil and gas industry feeling threatened.

There is a kernel of truth to the pushback. The IEA's net zero pathway looks increasingly difficult as countries fail to implement policies at the scale the analysis demands. Policymakers and investors should not take for granted that the world will follow a sustainable development pathway—even if we should—and unfounded optimism could leave the world unprepared. And yet where would we be without such guideposts? The IEA's research dares to imagine what decarbonization would look like—and it's hard to see the world getting to net zero without such an effort.

Outside old-school energy circles, Birol appears to be winning the public debate. Birol is on the speed dial of energy ministers who rely on him for advice on how to navigate both long-term energy transition challenges and short-term needs. He attends the G7 summits—joining in the family photo alongside heads of government. In 2022, member countries gave Fatih Birol an unprecedented third term as the head of the agency, and, last week, energy ministers gathered in Paris formally agreed to embed climate change into the agency's mission.

And, in this tense time for geopolitics, even outsiders want to join what had once been a club of western powers. Last week, countries formally began discussions on India's request to become a full member.

Many things stand out about Birol in my many conversations with him over the years. He is deep in the weeds of energy policy and simultaneously skilled at explaining his analysis in an accessible fashion. He is energetic, almost jovial. And, despite his seriousness, he somehow often manages to bring up his favorite soccer club from his native Turkey (he has put his team's colors in the design of key reports, for example).

What I find most interesting, and in many ways different from other leaders of his stature, is his ability to juggle the long and short view of energy and climate. He has adapted the IEA to respond quickly to energy challenges—think of the response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, he homes in on long-term strategic questions that often elude leaders focused on the next political cycle or quarterly returns. That forward thinking is in part what prepared the IEA to rise to occasion when climate broke through on the international agenda.

In a recent conversation in his office, Birol shared his “one piece advice for companies and investors”: pay attention to clean energy investment trends. Last year, more than **\$1.7 trillion** was invested in clean energy globally. As the system transitions, fossil fuel projects risk being left in the dust—undesirable and unprofitable.

It’s an interesting reminder. Oil executives can complain as much as they want about Birol’s aggressive projections; the truth will ultimately be determined in the marketplace.

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No Recession? Thank Women

Lipman is a Yale lecturer and former editor in chief of USA Today. Her new book is [NEXT! The Power of Reinvention in Life and Work](#).



Remote work allowed Alyson Velasquez to juggle her demanding roles as a Wells Fargo talent recruiter and as mother of two young children, including a son with special needs. The flexibility made sense both for her job, working with hiring managers across the country, and for her kids, ensuring she would be available for medical appointments and pickups. Remote work “is wonderful for working moms,” she says.

Women like Velasquez have flooded into the fulltime workplace over the past few years, spurred by newly flexible options combined with the rollback of pandemic-era school and daycare restrictions. The percentage of “prime age” working women—defined as ages 25 to 54—set [a record](#) in 2023, with moms of very young children leading the way.

These women have become the economy's secret weapon—and one of the reasons why the recession that just about everyone predicted hasn't happened. [Despite almost two straight years of dire forecasts](#), unemployment remains low, consumer spending has held steady, and [productivity is on the rise](#). Just last week (feb 20), the [Conference Board](#), which had been warning of a recession since July 2022, finally gave up and abandoned its call. “The strong labor force participation of women workers and the strength of the economy are intertwined,” Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told me in a recent email exchange. She attributes the employment gains for women in part to the child tax credit and other initiatives. “But also important is the increased flexibility of the workplace that came as a result of the pandemic,” she said.

That flexibility has been key for women like Laura Podesta, who left her role as a CBS television correspondent in 2022, when her sons were three and one. Her long overnight hours in the studio, along with frequent travel, “made me start to reassess what I was committing to,” she says. She pivoted to a hybrid position, overseeing communications for Fiverr, a freelance platform. “I decided to make the move in large part so I could work from home part of the week,” she says.

Flexibility helps corporate bottom lines, too, because employees are less likely to quit, [recent research](#) suggests. Replacing just one employee [can cost twice as much as their salary](#), after factoring in recruiting and training costs, according to Gallup. Valerie Danna, a Seattle mother of five who spent years as a communications and human resources executive at companies including Starbucks, today spends part-time coaching other women who are transitioning in their careers. “Some want to switch companies... and some are looking to start their own,” she says. “But they all want hybrid.” By providing flexibility, she says, companies “retain the talent longer, which saves the company money.”

[Read More: Flexible Bosses Were a Pandemic Blip](#)

Yet now that progress is being threatened by a wave of return-to-office mandates. High-profile companies [including Disney and Meta](#) have announced mandates requiring three or more days a week in the office. [Bank of America](#) threatened employees who don't comply with "disciplinary action." [IBM](#) told remote workers they must move to be near a company office or quit. [United Parcel Service](#) says that as of March, all employees must work on premises five days a week. And a global survey of CEO's found that almost [two-thirds](#) expect a full five-day-a-week return to office by 2026.

About 40% of employees work remotely at least one day a week, according to Stanford University economist Nick Bloom, a figure that has remained steady since December 2022. But fully remote opportunities are drying up—and researchers have found that those workers are [more likely to be laid off](#) than peers who spend time on premises.

As a long-time manager of teams, I empathize with the importance of in-person work for collaboration, mentoring and culture. But at a time when women – finally! – have made historic employment gains, and are contributing to the economy's resilience in the process, why put policies in place that will instead chase them away?

Inflexible mandates are already squeezing out women who *want* to stay in the fulltime workforce. Livia Fine, a litigator who worked for years at a major Manhattan law firm, moved during the pandemic to a town two hours outside the city to raise her two young children. She believes she can be just as effective working remotely—but mainstream law firms don't agree, and she has yet to find a comparable position. In her Hudson Valley town, she says, she is surrounded by professional women in other fields who are similarly boxed out.

“These are some of the most vibrant, intelligent, community-oriented, brilliant women I’ve met,” she says. “What a waste” for companies that won’t hire them, she adds. “You’re creating a society that’s pushing us out.”

A global [Gallup poll](#) found that the majority of women want to work—including a majority of women not currently in the workforce. They boost the economy in multiple ways. Research by the [National Partnership for Women and Families](#) estimated that leveling up U.S. women’s participation would add \$650 billion to GDP. A 2022 [Moody’s](#) analysis calculated that increasing U.S. female labor participation could add \$1 trillion to the economy over the next decade.

Women’s economic contributions are outsized, providing “a little extra oomph” because they tend to be more educated and more productive than typical employees, says Claudia Sahm, a former Federal Reserve economist and founder of Sahm Consulting. She considers women an “[untapped resource](#)” for economic growth. And the surge in women workers has already helped tame inflation, says Boston College economist Alicia Munnell. Without it, “the labor markets would be even tighter than they were otherwise,” which would have led to wage increases, making inflation harder to get under control.

To be sure, adding workers of any gender gives the economy a lift, by increasing goods and services as well as spending power. And current [labor force participation](#) among prime-age workers overall is strong, reaching 83.3% in January, topping even pre-pandemic levels. But “a big driver of this is likely the ability to work from home, particularly for women and for workers with a disability who have seen some of the largest [rises in working rates](#),” says Stanford’s Bloom.

Indeed, employment rates for the disabled and other groups that need flexibility have also reached new heights. Employees at the

Fletcher Group, a fully remote public relations and marketing firm, include a man whose autoimmune disease prevents in-office work, a father of a special-needs child, and single parents. “This isn’t ‘lifestyle with a side of business,’” stresses Austin, Texas-based founder Jennifer Tramontana. “We are hiring people who want a career,” but “who have things going on that would impair their ability to go into an office every day.”

That’s why it’s so confounding that companies are rushing headlong to dismantle flexible options. J.P. Morgan is among firms that have called back senior executives five days a week, and other employees three days a week. Chicago-based Abby Schmeling, a vice president of content strategy and mother of an infant and a toddler, was able to get permission to work remotely. But she is an outlier. “If you can’t trust someone to work remotely, you made a bad hire,” she says. “Because I can tell you right now, I do better work from home, and I’m certainly working more hours without a commute.” She adds, “The landscape has changed, and it’s time to rethink corporate America.”

Certainly, there are multiple other factors beyond women’s employment driving the economy’s resilience. Paul Gruenwald, global chief economist at S&P Global Ratings, credits significant productivity gains. And Harvard University Nobel Prize winning-economist [Claudia Goldin](#) told me that interconnected strands of data about female employment and economic strength can be hard to pull apart to demonstrate causality: “If women’s employment increases and we see the economy doing well, what caused what? this isn’t a question I would like to answer on the fly, although it does seem like the entire economy is the dog and women’s employment is the tail.”

Either way, let’s not erase women from the conversation about the economy. By not acknowledging their contributions, companies will continue to take actions that often squeeze women out. That includes Velasquez herself. The Grover Beach, Calif., mom says

she was laid off from her six-figure job Wells Fargo job last year, after the bank called her back three days a week to an office three hours away. She and her husband have since put on hold their plans to buy a house and have considered cost-cutting options like selling a car or pulling their three-year-old out of preschool.

Return-to-office mandates are “pushing us out of the market, people like myself,” Velasquez says. “A lot of the moms I worked with that are still unemployed are in the same boat. What do we do now?”

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Why We're Spending So Much Money

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



My credit card is a mangled thing. Its blue plastic backing is peeling so much that it doesn't work in swipe machines; it looks like a dog chewed it up and spat it out. It seldom leaves my wallet anymore. But that doesn't matter. In the two weeks before I wrote this story, I spent more than \$4,000 on my card without laying eyes on it.

Each of these transactions was made online, where my card number is stored by Uber or Walmart or Google Chrome. That's probably why I didn't flinch when I spent \$333 on groceries for a weekend with friends, or \$48.34 on a pizza through Uber Eats, or even \$1,533 for an Airbnb when my extended family comes to visit.

Without having to type in my card number, the pain of the purchase was dampened.

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Frictionless transactions are common in today's economy—you can wave your cell near a cash register, press “buy” on Amazon without really knowing which credit card you’re charging, and send money to a stranger via your phone without having met them in person. There’s even a company, McLear, marketing a ring that you can use to pay for things.

These technologies, often referred to as “fintech,” for financial technology, make spending easier than ever before—and there’s growing evidence that they’re making us shell out more than we realize. With so many different accounts to keep track of and so many merchants smoothly debiting what we owe every month, we just keep on spending, whether we can afford it or not.

U.S. consumers spent a record \$19 trillion in December 2023, up 6% from a year prior and 29% from February 2020. Spending has soared despite high inflation, high interest rates, and repeated commentary from economists that this ebullience can’t continue. And yet it has.

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There are, of course, a few reasons why people are spending a lot of money right now. Consumers saved a lot of money when they were stuck at home during the pandemic, and now they’re making up for lost time by traveling, eating out, and doing all the things they couldn’t during quarantine. The government helped consumers feel flush by sending out stimulus checks and pausing student loan payments. After years of slow wage increases,

workers' payments are [finally growing more quickly than prices](#), giving them extra pocket money.

But there's one additional factor that has changed since the beginning of the pandemic: people are more accustomed to using financial technology to pay for things, which eliminates barriers that might have once slowed their spending. "Convenience makes it much easier to enjoy the process of shopping, removing the additional difficulties of buying things," says Yuqian Xu, a professor at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School who has studied frictionless payment methods. Research shows that the more frictionless the payment method, the more money people spend.

By 2023, 73% of consumers had paid for something through a website or browser on a phone or computer, [according to a McKinsey survey](#), up from 46% in 2019. People are also more comfortable using mobile payment apps like Apple Pay, Google Pay, PayPal, and Venmo; more than 53% of Americans surveyed by [Forbes Advisor](#) in 2023 said they used digital wallets more often than traditional payment methods.

Paying with a mobile phone is faster than using a credit card—it takes an average of 29 seconds versus 40, according to Xu, the UNC professor. That speed and convenience accelerates spending, Xu and her colleagues found in a July 2023 study that tracked spending after the launch of Alipay, a mobile payment service. It indicated that credit card transaction amounts increased by 9.4% once people could use a mobile device, while the frequency of transactions increased by 10.7%.

The result is a cycle of tech adoption that has loosened customers' wallets. Once consumers started using mobile payments, they became more comfortable with making credit-card payments on their computers, and started moving more money digitally. And

once they were comfortable spending money digitally, they started spending more money overall.

Elizabeth Mendoza, a 33-year-old who lives in Washington state, says she was getting her debt under control before the pandemic by setting aside cash twice a month for various budget categories like groceries, gas, or her cat. She found that she spent less using cash, because she would think twice about parting with a large bill.

But once COVID-19 hit, Mendoza got into the habit of buying things online and saving her credit card information in different apps. Soon, she found herself back in about \$20,000 worth of debt. “Once I stopped using my cash,” she says, “I stopped paying attention to what I was doing.”

In October 2023, Mendoza vowed to get out of debt and removed her credit card from any app that would save it, including Apple Pay. She creates colorful envelopes every month to put her cash in to make the process more fun. It’s more of a hassle to buy things online now since she has to go find her wallet and type in her information. But she says it’s made a huge difference in her spending. “It’s just so easy to fall into using your credit card and not keep track of what’s going on,” she says.

Economists refer to the way people organize and spend their money as mental accounting. Humans are often irrational with the way they choose to spend and save money—splurging with a \$100 bill found on the sidewalk while fastidiously saving every penny of their salary, for instance, or spending more money on the same item if they’re paying via [credit card](#) than if using cash.

Read More: [*The Solar Power Industry Is in Trouble.*](#)

Mental accounting is a big reason people spend more with frictionless payments. Consumers think of new apps like [Buy Now Pay Later](#) or Apple Pay as a separate budget category that enables

new spending, says Michael Gelman, a finance professor at the University of Delaware. In an experiment, Gelman tracked the behavior of consumers who had received a random credit card in the mail. While those consumers' spending behavior on their old credit cards remained the same, they started to splurge on their new one, dropping 26% more than people who had not received a new card. "Once you open a new budget category, you manage it separately," he says. "It can have an effect on total consumption: you consume more because you have the opportunity."

Yanibel Colon, a 35-year old account manager who lives in the Bronx, was once the type of person who would buy things with cash and use her credit cards for emergencies. But cooped up at home during the pandemic, she started putting more things on her credit card, and using Buy Now Pay Later services. She mentally categorized Buy Now Pay Later spending as cash, which got her into trouble. "I was like, 'Well, it's not a credit card, I don't have payments,'" she says. Now, she sets a budget every month for certain categories like food, and makes sure she doesn't exceed them, no matter how she is paying.

Strong consumer spending has helped stimulate the economy and provided healthy profits for companies that depend on the American consumer. Walmart, for instance, saw online sales grow 17% in the last quarter, and made about **\$1.2 million a minute in 2023**. Amazon reported its highest operating profit in history in its February earnings report.

But many American consumers are spending beyond their means. Household debt reached a record \$17.5 trillion in the fourth quarter of 2023, and has increased by \$3.4 trillion since the end of 2019, according to data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Credit card debt has "passed a milestone," says Michele Raneri, VP and head of U.S. research and consulting at TransUnion. Credit card balances now stand at \$1.05 trillion, 13% higher than a year ago. The percent of credit card balances that are 90 days or more

delinquent ticked up in the last quarter of 2023, according to the New York Fed, reaching nearly 10%.

That's partly because people have a hard time keeping track of all the places they're spending money, credit counselors say. The rise of digital payment systems like Apple Pay and Buy Now Pay Later "creates this scattered universe of different payment options that can lead to overspending and financial instability," says [Bruce McClary](#), senior vice president at the National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC), the largest nonprofit financial counseling organization in the U.S.

"People ask me, 'How could you let this happen,'" says Britt Reynolds, 28, who uses TikTok to chronicle her journey getting out of \$36,000 of debt. "I want to say, 'Credit card companies gave me a \$43,000 credit line, and spending money is the easiest thing in the world.'"

Tanya Menendez, the co-founder and CEO of Snowball Wealth, a financial tracking and education app, says she frequently sees clients who have lost track of their spending because of the many ways they can pay for things. She recently held a workshop for clients and asked them to estimate how much they spent every month on ride-share apps like Uber. They'd estimate they spent \$400, she says, only to find that they spent double that on average.

Many of the apps that helped people track their spending have disappeared in recent years. Mint, the personal finance app, [will be shutting down on March 23](#), according to Intuit, the company that owns it. There aren't many good free options left. "Tracking your spending is really difficult," Menendez says. "It's like a vitamin that people aren't taking."

Credit counselors have a variety of tips to help combat overspending on frictionless transactions. Jessica Spangler, a money educator whose book, *Invest Like a Girl*, comes out March

26, recommends not storing payment information in apps. She also tells people to set up their phones so that they get a notification every time they make a purchase, no matter what payment method they use. “That way you’re not just swiping into the void,” Spangler says.

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McClary, of NFCC, recommends having only a few accounts where you spend money so you can more easily track them. It's easy, he says, to set up new accounts through Google Pay, for example, and then forget which credit card it's linked to, which makes it harder to calculate whether you're overspending. And those mobile accounts aren't doing you any favors—the more time you have to think before you make a purchase, he says, the more likely you'll evaluate whether you can afford it.

As for me, I've started putting reminders on my calendar to check my credit card balances so that I can track how my spending on apps is piling up. Not that it's easy. Digital payments are swift but the process of logging into my account to track them is a headache that involves remembering bank passwords and logins and then waiting for the bank to send me a code to verify my identity. If spending money was as hard as tracking it, we might not do so much of it.

Your Money

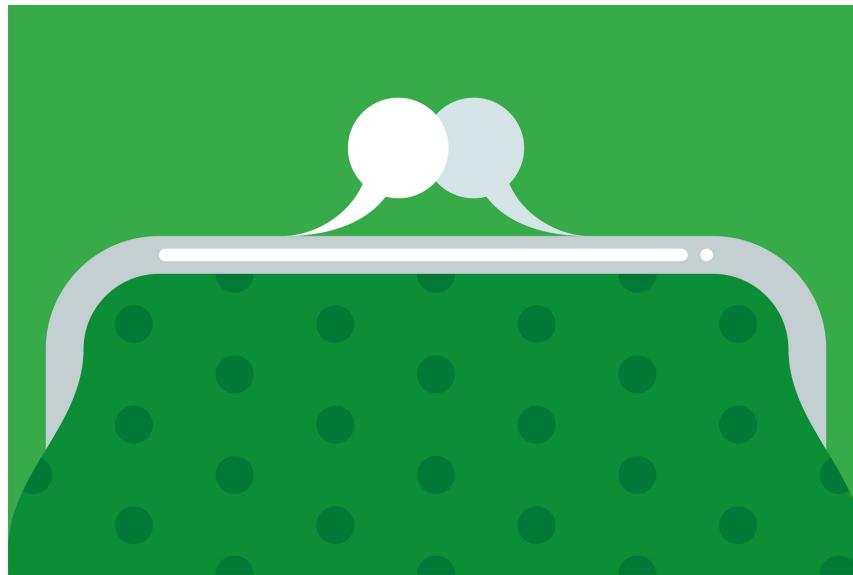
- [My \\$18,000 Debt Journey](#): *Jamie Feldman carried a lot of debt and a lot of shame. Then she turned to TikTok.*
 - [Why Burgers Cost So Much](#): *We break down the inflated cost of the classic meal—bite by bite.*
 - [Reset Your Spending Mindset](#): *Experts explain how to better manage your relationship with money.*
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How to Reset Your Thinking Around Spending Money, According to Experts

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



Money is one of the most significant stressors for Americans, according to a 2023 American Psychological Association [report](#).

The number of Americans who reported money as a stressor, has [only increased](#) since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Of parents who said they have multiple stressors causing significant strain on their lives, nearly 80% said that money is one of those factors. Single adults pointed it as the most significant source of stress, over housing costs and personal safety.

The report comes [despite a resilient](#) U.S. economy. Job growth seems to be at a steady pace—although numbers fell short of the gains seen in 2021 and 2022—and the unemployment rate has [remained below](#) 4% for the past two years. However, inflation has

remained persistently [high](#), with rising energy, food and housing costs putting a strain on households.

Still, even Americans who appear to be doing well financially struggle. More than 50% of Americans who make more than \$100,000 a year are living paycheck to paycheck as of September 2023, [according to a Lending Club report](#). “A lot of Americans don’t necessarily realize that there’s a difference between your wants and your needs,” says Dr. Traci Williams, a financial therapist and board certified clinical psychologist. “When things are tight, we have to focus on our needs and maybe let go of our wants temporarily.”

According to the American Psychological Association report, 61% of adults say that people around them [expect them to](#) just “get over their stress,” without providing any [actionable guidance on how to do so](#).

TIME spoke to experts about how to better manage your relationship with money. Here are their tips.

Understand your ‘money story’

Before trying to budget and figure out a financial plan, experts advise people to assess their personal relationship with money. That involves thinking about their parents’ relationship with money, how adults around them modeled spending, and whether they personally overspend or underspend.

“The hard part is it’s not something that’s really tied to your personality,” says Jack Heintzelman, a certified financial planner. “It’s just really how you grew up and how you were educated on money...If you’re able to think back on [it], It gives you a different perspective.”

In order to best assess areas to improve, Williams advises folks to recognize their triggers and note their reaction. “What are the things that money is providing that speak to you as a person that can help you to get some indicators,” says Williams. “For some people that might look like: ‘I am looking for security’ or ‘I am bored,’ or ‘I do not feel a sense of high self esteem. And so money helps to provide that for me.’”

Read More: [*7 Ways to Manage Financial Stress*](#)

Williams notes that spending money releases [endorphins](#) and [dopamine](#), triggering feelings of pleasure. “There are other things that you can do to feel good in your life, that can create those feel good hormones,” she says. “Whether it’s spending time with loved ones, or baking with your kid, or going for a walk, listening to music, things can be affordable.”

Meanwhile, so-called underspenders, who worry about money despite being financially stable, might have to work on neutralizing what it means to spend money. “There is no such thing as the right or wrong way to do things. They’re just the choices that we make,” Williams says.

Come up with personal goals

Experts say that everyone’s financial plan should accommodate their own desires, needs, and lifestyle. For some, it can be as simple as checking their credit card’s app and looking at the amount they spend on categories like food, bills, or subscriptions. For others, it might be better to physically highlight a bank statement or write out purchases to adequately visualize their spending.

Heintzelman says he’s personally a fan of the 50-30-20 method, which has individuals spend 50% of their income on their needs, such as rent or food, 30% towards less essential “wants,” and 20%

towards savings. But he stresses that everyone should work around what best suits their future goals. “Try your best to not worry about what other people are doing and just think about the path that you’re on and be comfortable with that,” he says.

Read More: *Why a 60/30/10 Budget Could Be the New 50/30/20*

The goal is to eventually be able to instinctively set aside a certain amount of money and know that it cannot be touched. “If you can be more natural with it and let it automate, then that can help with being more under control,” Heintzelman says.

Recognize when you need support

While finances are one of the leading causes of stress, only [52% of U.S. adults](#) say they feel comfortable discussing it with others. But experts say it’s better to discuss financial goals, plans, and stress with a spouse, friend, family member, or others to get different perspectives and share anxieties.

Around 35% of U.S. adults [have a financial advisor](#). Heintzelman says they can be helpful for clients who are looking for someone to make them accountable for their financial decisions.

Financial therapists, meanwhile, work at the intersection between a client’s finances and their mental health.

Read More: *11 Ways to Get Free Financial Advice*

“If your worries are affecting your ability to work or your relationships with your family members or your friends, or your ability to take care of yourself, those are usually indicators that you need extra help,” says Williams. “That help can look different for different people depending on what your situation is and what your need is.”

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Why a Burger Costs More Now

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



The good news about inflation in recent months is that it's slowing, but that probably doesn't matter much to the American consumer; slowing inflation still means that prices are rising. The cost of groceries ticked up just 0.3% from the previous month in January, but has grown 28% since January 2019. No wonder Americans still get sticker shock when they look at their grocery bills.

It may seem contrary that prices are still rising when so many of the events that kicked off the high inflation of recent years—the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting supply chain headaches, the war in Ukraine—started years ago. But there are dozens of different factors that go into food inflation.

To explain these factors, TIME picked a meal that might be typically consumed by an American household—a cheeseburger and fries—and looked at what's driving prices higher for different ingredients. We found that the cost of ingredients for a cheeseburger and fries—\$4.69—is roughly a dollar more than in 2019, though just pennies from a year ago.

Wells Fargo chief agricultural economist Michael Swanson explains the factors driving up prices bite by bite:

White bread: Up 59% since 2019

Bread is one of the items that jumped the most in price since the beginning of the pandemic. The dollar figure isn't much—a pound of white bread costs \$2.03 now, up from \$1.27 in January 2019, according to [government data](#). What happened? Bread was really cheap for a long time, Swanson says. The price was so low that it essentially fell from 2014 to 2019, as cheap wheat and robust bakery competition forced bread makers to lower prices. The bread business was so tough that many bakeries went out of business or consolidated.

Prices started rising at the beginning of the pandemic, but really jumped in early 2022 after Russia invaded Ukraine and the price of wheat spiked. The price of wheat has since cratered, but the Russian war gave producers an excuse to increase prices. For years, bakeries really needed the price of bread to go up to cover their labor, energy, and transportation costs, and finally, they had the opportunity. “Once the dam broke, it was going to be quite awhile for the inflation to go back down,” Swanson says.

Processed cheese: Up 25% since 2019.

In 2022, the price of milk was too low for farmers to make money, so they started culling their herds; cheese buyers, anticipating that

there would be a shortage of cheese, started “leapfrogging each other to get supplies purchased,” Swanson says. That drove cheese prices up to their peak in April 2022. The same thing may be happening now, he says; a recent milk production report showed heavy signs of culling.

Even if the price of cheese drops on commodities markets, it can take awhile for consumers to feel the difference. When cheese prices skyrocketed in 2022, retailers couldn’t raise prices that much, Swanson says. So when cheese prices fell back down, retailers tried to recover what they had lost. The price of processed cheese is still 25% above what it was in January 2019.

Ground beef: Up 32% since 2019

In the beginning of 2024, there were only 87.2 million cattle and calves in the United States. That may seem like a lot of cows—roughly one for every four people in the U.S., but that number actually represents the lowest inventory since 1951. Fewer cows means higher prices for the ones that are getting sold and turned into meat.

U.S. herds are at such low levels primarily because of drought and high supply costs. In the last four years, as drought plagued Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and other cattle-raising regions, farmers found that it was costing a lot of money to feed their cows. They started selling them—and, unusually, they also sold female cows, who would typically have been held back for breeding, according to [economists from](#) the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Now, El Nino has brought moisture to much of the U.S., and farmers are trying to rebuild their herds. But doing so will be expensive, keeping the cost of beef high. While the U.S. had a record corn crop in 2023 and prices of feed are falling, some farmers are holding back cows they otherwise would have sold in order to rebuild their herds. With higher interest rates for borrowing

and more expensive cows, beef prices aren't likely going anywhere soon. In February, economists from the [American Farm Bureau Federation](#) predicted that 2024 would be characterized by record-high beef prices in the grocery store.

Tomatoes: Down 1% from 2019

One of the only foods that have not experienced major price increases over the past four years. That's in part because they were already expensive compared to other fruits and vegetables. But tomato prices are also affected by trade rules; ever since 2013, U.S. and Mexican producers have essentially agreed to set the price of tomatoes so one country's farmers don't have an advantage over another.

Potatoes: Up 30% from 2019

Potato crops in 2021 and 2022 were severely affected by drought and wildfire smoke, reducing yields. With fewer potatoes in the U.S. and abroad, prices jumped. In 2023, though, U.S. potato production increased for the first time in seven years, which should temper prices.

Romaine Lettuce: Up 19% from 2019

An insect-born virus destroyed huge swaths of lettuce crops in California in 2022, causing costs to spike. The price has fallen since then, but labor and transportation costs are still higher than in 2019, which means suppliers aren't rushing to bring down prices further.

You Won't Save Money Dining Out

Your restaurant burger is probably going to get more expensive, too, as wages continue to rise in a competitive job market. "Across

the board, everything is just up,” says Brian Arnoff, the co-owner of Meyer’s Old Dutch, a hamburger restaurant in Beacon, N.Y., his restaurant has done two pricing increases since the pandemic, its burger now costs \$16, up from \$13 in 2019.

Read More: *How Much Should You Tip? 5 People Share Their Habits*

For restaurants, though, labor accounts for much of the increased cost of food. Meyer’s Old Dutch can’t even get applicants to come to interviews unless he offers \$18 an hour, significantly higher than the state minimum wage of \$15 an hour. Wages across his business have climbed as he tries to retain talent; cooks who made \$18 an hour in 2019 are now starting at \$20. Until the pandemic, Arnoff says, the cost of food and other supplies surpassed the cost of labor. Now, he spends more on labor than on ingredients.

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How to Have a Successful Low-Spend Month

Simmone Shah is a reporter at TIME. She covers international and tech news.



Living in New York City, which has the [highest cost of living](#) in the United States, has left Hannah Yoo all too aware of how easily expenses can add up. “You step outside your house and you’ve already spent \$200,” she says. “It’s crazy how quickly things can get out of control.”

To better track her spending, Yoo, 26, decided to try out a “low-spend month”—a budgeting trend in which participants aim to spend only on essentials, like rent or car payments, while limiting or cutting out discretionary spending entirely.

Yoo is not alone in looking for new ways to save. Videos tagged with #lowspendmonth have received over 13.5 million views on TikTok. “The cost of living has been really tough for a lot of folks,” says Catherine Arnet-Valega, a wealth consultant at Green Bee Advisory. “People are paying attention to their finances more than they used to.”

A low-spend month can give you the opportunity to pay off debt, save for a bigger purchase, or gain a better understanding of your monthly spending. “Fighting overconsumption and becoming more intentional with your spending is a muscle that you have to practice,” says Yoo, who did her first low-spend month last August. “As I’ve continued to do it, I’ve seen my mindset change.”

Here are some tips for how to have a successful low-spend month.

Set your intentions

Before starting a low-spend month, it’s important to identify why you’re doing one. The reason can vary by person—maybe you’re hoping to pay down debt or save up for a new car—but setting your intentions will help you stick to your goal even when you’re tempted to stray.

“There’s going to be times when it gets tough,” says Meg, who declined to give her last name because she worries people on social media will find out where she lives. As she did her first low-spend month in January in an effort to cut down on impulse purchases, “I always went back to the why, because I knew without that I wouldn’t be motivated to continue.”

Read More: [*Why We’re Spending So Much Money*](#)

Be mindful about purchases

Next, take a hard look at your monthly budget—even if the prospect seems scary. “A lot of people don’t know what their normal monthly spending is,” says Sarah Paulson, a financial planner with Valkyrie Finance.

Paulson recommends that, rather than cutting out all discretionary spending, you start the challenge by cutting back on one category you overspend on—like making coffee at home rather than buying

it daily, or refraining from food delivery orders.” Maybe now you think Whole Foods is necessary for groceries, but it doesn’t have to be at that level,” says Paulson. “You can be more frugal about your purchases without cutting yourself off.”

For Meg, 31, a big part of the challenge was refraining from impulse buying trendy products she was seeing on social media. “I would just see something and suddenly buy it or feel pressure to buy it and then have it right away,” she says. During her low-spend month, instead of immediately adding to her shopping cart, Meg began to make a wish list of things she wanted to buy when the month was over. “A week or two later,” she says, “I’d look back and think, ‘I don’t really need this anymore.’”

Read More: [*How to Make A Budget in 6 Simple Steps*](#)

Don’t be too restrictive

Sometimes cutting back too much in a low-spend month can result in overspending as soon as the challenge is over. “It’s like a rubber band snapping back,” says Paulson. “You do really well for a month, and then you go overboard.”

The key, Paulson says, is to be honest with yourself about where you might be overspending, without completely depriving yourself of joy. If you look forward to your monthly facial or treat yourself with takeout on a Friday night, it’s okay to personalize the rules to reflect that. “Saying no to yourself constantly doesn’t feel good,” she says. “Spending isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s just when we let it get away from us.”

Read More: [*What Is a Good Credit Score?*](#)

Repurpose your savings

To avoid overspending once the month is over, Jack Heintzelman, a financial planner at Boston Wealth, suggests putting the extra money in your budget towards your savings goal. “If you find that you can spend \$100 less in a certain category, the next month, take that \$100 that you were spending in that category and immediately save it somewhere,” he says.

Automating the saving process, whether towards a retirement or savings fund, or to paying down debt, can help you keep your goals front of mind and prevent you from impulse spending the extra cash you learned how to save during your low-spend challenge.

Read More: [*How to Reset Your Thinking Around Spending Money*](#)

Join a community

Asking your partner, family member, or friend to join you in the challenge can help you stay on track. “If you speak it out loud or surround yourselves with others that understand what you’re doing and your goals, then that helps with accountability,” says Heintzelman.

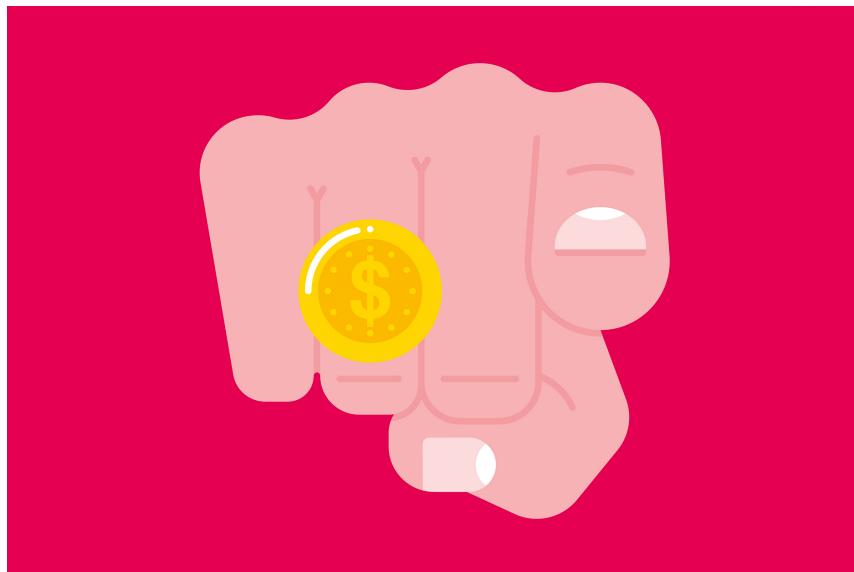
For Yoo, posting about her low-spend journey on TikTok helped her rein in her shopping. “I can’t spend a crazy amount at a random sample sale because I’m going to have to share that with somebody,” she says. “It can’t be my secret.”

Most importantly, be patient with yourself and understand that slip-ups don’t mean you have to give up. Yoo and Meg both say that, though they struggled with the challenge at first, pushing through encouraged them to build habits that lasted beyond the month.

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I Carried \$18,000 in Debt and a Lot of Shame. Then I Turned to TikTok

Feldman is a journalist and a [Tiktok content creator](#)



I'm generally not ashamed to talk about personal matters. In fact, I'm known for oversharing. At parties, I'm always good for a few cringey anecdotes plucked from my lackluster dating life. As a writer, I've never shied away from sharing the vulnerable, sometimes ugly, side of my evolving relationship with self-worth. Even my earliest report cards mention my garrulous nature: "Jamie Feldman: Talks too much."

[video id=j61GOaRi autostart="viewable"]

But there's one topic that I've kept quiet for as long as I could remember: money—or in recent years, the lack of it.

I've maintained a fluctuating level of credit card debt for over a decade. At its highest, it hovered around \$18,000. From that first moment in my hopeful early 20s when I felt the shiny piece of plastic in my hands, I was hooked. Now this, I thought, was

freedom. I recklessly opened card after card, blatantly ignoring interest rates, skating by on minimum payments, and maintaining a hefty balance at all times.

Growing up, there wasn't a whole lot of talk about money in my house. There was just a general sense there was never really enough of it. As a result, I have, for the majority of my adult life, maintained a pretty precarious balancing act of both living in a scarcity mindset and way beyond my means. I've gone through periods of unflinchingly forking my credit card over at a \$100-per-person group dinner, then spent the following weeks living off of ramen and tinned fish. I've thrown caution to the wind and booked trips because "I deserve it!" then spent hours spiraling at the sight of my bank account, if I wasn't too afraid to even check my bank account, that is. Add to that a pretty deep seated propensity to people please and an inability to say no, and you have a person who is pretty much guaranteed to spend money they don't have.

I never revealed the extent of my troubling money habits to anyone, and frankly, I didn't actively fret over them. The consequences of my behavior felt so removed from my day-to-day life that I treated them as if they weren't there. I didn't have judgments about other people's debt, either—because I naively assumed I was the only one with this kind of debt. But considering the fact that American household debt hit a record [\\$16.9 trillion](#) in 2022, the only explanation I can fathom for this mindset was deep, internalized shame.

The facade started to show its cracks in 2021, when smack in the middle of the pandemic, I lost my job—a job that I had held for over seven years and was the only thing keeping me afloat in the sea of my spending habits. Suddenly, the debt wasn't something I'd get around to paying off eventually. It was something I needed to face. Now.

Read More: [Overwhelmed By Debt? Here's Where to Start](#)

First, I confided in a close friend, which admittedly was terrifying. I was convinced that she'd see me differently, or feel as though I'd tricked her into thinking I was a good person all of these years when, actually, I had this deep, dark secret the whole time.

What actually happened was this: She simply said, "OK," marched me straight into her office, pulled up a chair and her favorite budgeting software, Tiller, and sat there with me at her desk for hours, teaching me how to use it and exactly how to make a budget. Most importantly, she taught me how to stop avoiding the problem. She showed me that my trouble with finances was not—and is not—indicative of who I am as a person. It was invaluable.

Once I opened that door to the secret, I realized it was up to me to make sure it stayed open. Telling one person provided me with a huge sense of relief. I wasn't alone. But then came the hard part: holding myself accountable. I needed to do something so brash, loud, and dramatic that nothing would remain in the shadows of my denial. I needed to conjure the Jamie Feldman that "talks too much."

Telling the entire internet might sound extreme, but I knew I'd be less inclined to give up if there were some stakes involved." So I opened a TikTok account and started talking. In one breathless post, I shared the full story of my debt. As a 30-something millennial with only a vague understanding of how TikTok worked at the time, the "entire internet" felt more like screaming into the void. I didn't know anyone using it, so there was a sense of anonymity that gave me confidence that this was just a mental exercise.

Of course, as I'd soon realize, it was not anonymous at all. Suddenly people started liking my videos. I went from a couple hundred followers to 20 thousand followers within a few weeks. I realized I hadn't really thought this out. What would all these people think of me?

But what came next was far scarier. Friends, acquaintances and family members started to follow me. What was I thinking? Not only was I worried about embarrassing myself, I was worrying about embarrassing them. What would my mom think? My aunt, my nana, what would all our family friends think? What would my mom's ex-coworker who I met exactly one time think? I braced for judgment.

Turns out, I was bracing for nothing. Not only did the thousands of strangers reach out with kind words, so did my friends and family. My mom sent supportive, emoji-filled cheers. My friends encouraged me to keep going, invited me over for dinner, and indulged my new budget-friendly suggestions when we made plans. But what was perhaps more surprising was that everyone had their own money story to share. People wanted me to know that they had debt and how they got out of it. These were stories I'd never heard, from some of the people in my life that I am closest to.

The first time one of my videos hit 1 million views, I realized this was much bigger than me. My story is not unique. It's just that most of us are suffering in silence. My DMs were flooded with people telling me their debt stories and my comments were full of cheers of recognition and solidarity. In some cases, I was the first person they'd ever spoken to about it. Most people said they'd never told anyone about their credit card debt. Breaking my silence helped them break theirs, and together we realized that talking about it was the only way to escape the deep shame that underlies that silence—and the only way to pave a different path forward.

I'm not a personal finance expert, and I don't pretend to be. In fact, I find most experts get it wrong. Most of them tell you to change your behavior but don't acknowledge the deep seated reasons why that behavior started in the first place. Popular methods for personal finance also rely on their own shame tactics to change your behavior: you don't work hard enough; you're stupid for

getting yourself into this situation in the first place; you should feel like you're suffering while you pay debt down so you don't get yourself into it again. This is only doubling down on the root cause. Instead, my goal is this: to continue telling my story, and to help people get comfortable with the fact that getting out of debt is a group sport, not a solo mission.

We cannot feel empowered to shift our situation—financial or otherwise—if we don't feel empowered to share our truths first. I was never going to squeeze myself out of debt without pushing through the shame first and talking about it honestly.

My life looks a lot different now than it did three years ago. My social calendar and circles are smaller. I move slowly and with intention. I track my spending and, for the first time in my life, I have a budget. And I have a community of people to share that with, who see me, debt and all, and refuse to believe my financial issues have anything to do with my goodness or humanity.

I have rejected all of my prior judgments of being in debt—both toward myself and others. Shame is not an effective tool for creating change, but connection certainly is.

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Why a 60/30/10 Budget Could Be the New 50/30/20

Martha C. White writes about consumer credit, debt and retail banking for TIME.com and previously contributed to AOL's WalletPop.com. She has written about business, finance and the economy for outlets including Slate, the New York *Times*, MSNBC.com and *Fast Company*. A native of New Jersey and graduate of Princeton University, White resides in upstate New York.



A money-management formula introduced nearly 20 years ago by Elizabeth Warren still has relevance, financial planners say—with a few tweaks.

Back in 2006, Warren—now a Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, then a Harvard Law School professor—popularized the [50/30/20 rule](#), detailed in the book *All Your Worth: The Ultimate Lifetime Money Plan*, which Warren co-wrote with her daughter, Amelia Warren Tyagi.

In this model, half of your income goes towards “needs” including your rent or mortgage, utilities, car payment and so on. An additional 30% goes towards “wants”—that is, discretionary purchases like vacation flights or “upgraded” expenses, such as springing for the ad-free streaming package. The remaining 20% is for socking away in an emergency fund or retirement account, or to pay down high-interest debt such as credit card balances.

Read More: *Why Credit Card Debt Is So High Right Now*

It sounds great in theory, but in an economy where housing costs alone can easily consume half a paycheck—particularly for young adults earning entry-level income—it can feel difficult, if not flat-out impossible.

Financial advisers say molding this budget advice to today’s economy means embracing a certain degree of flexibility.

“It’s important to have rules of thumb and structures that can help guide us and get things organized, but there aren’t any rules that are written in stone, and that’s important to know—that it’s never a concrete situation. It’s important to be flexible,” says Kevin L. Matthews II, founder of the financial education firm BuildingBread.

Read More: *8 Reasons Your Credit Card Was Declined (And What To Do About It)*

60 is the new 50—especially in an expensive city

“For someone making good money in a reasonable cost of living area, that rule works fine,” says Elizabeth Pennington, a senior associate at the financial planning firm Fearless Finance. “Where it breaks is for most of my clients living in high cost-of-living areas.”

For this reason, Pennington says she encourages clients to embrace the idea of the 50/30/20 formula without applying it as a mandate. “A rule of thumb is meant to be an entry into the conversation and less an end-all, be-all of what we’re trying to achieve,” she says.

According to [Moody's Analytics](#), while incomes have climbed by 77% since 1999, rents have soared by 129%. Nationwide, average rents equal 30% of median income, and young adults in particular are feeling the financial squeeze of high housing costs. [Survey results](#) published in November 2022 by mortgage agency Freddie Mac found that about a third of adults age 25 and younger say they don't ever expect to be able to afford to own a home.

Read More: *Is It Finally Time to Buy a House?*

If you still have decades ahead of you to save for retirement, it's OK to cut yourself some slack on the 20% part of the model. If you're a young adult, “60/30/10 is just fine,” says Michael Finke, professor of wealth management at the American College of Financial Services. “Then you can gradually, as you reach middle age, increase that savings rate.”

Take five (years)

“If you’re taking someone that’s just starting or living paycheck-to-paycheck, it can be unrealistic or overly drastic, especially as they’re beginning to really get a handle on their finances,” says Brian Walsh, head of advice and planning at digital bank SoFi. “This is probably one of the biggest challenges we come across when we’re working with young professionals.”

Rather than trying to conform to the 50/30/20 model as soon as you graduate college, give yourself a five-year window to work up to your optimal savings level, Matthews suggests. By that point in your career, you’ll likely have enough work experience to obtain a

higher-paying job, either by climbing the corporate ladder at your current employer or getting a new job entirely.

People who establish good money habits in their early or mid-20s have a window of opportunity each time they get a raise or take a new job with a higher salary, Walsh adds. “What people decide to do when they get a raise or they get a bonus has a much bigger effect on their overall financial well-being,” he says. If you can maintain your current budget and lifestyle, or even increase your budget by half of your new income level, you can work up to that 20% goal without feeling deprived.

Don’t cut these corners

If you work for an employer that offers any kind of a match for retirement account contributions, prioritize your savings to ensure that you contribute at least enough to get it. “Make sure you get every single cent of the employer match. It’s a 100% return on your investment,” Finke says. Remember, those employer contributions count towards that savings percentage, so a 50% match on your 6% contribution would bring you within striking distance of that 10% savings goal.

Likewise, paying off high-interest credit card debt and building an emergency fund should go to the top of every young adult’s to-do list, Pennington says. New credit card interest rates are at a record high of 20.74%, according to Bankrate.com, which means that even a small outstanding balance can quickly become a big drag on your finances.

“Usually if there’s high interest debt, that’s the place we start,” she says. “If someone has debt and they don’t have enough extra money to pay towards the minimum, don’t have an emergency fund and have no way of building one, ending up with credit card debt can be a lot more dangerous.”

And while it might sound counterintuitive, Matthews advises against trying to make the 50/30/20 model work for you by slashing the 30%—the part of your budget that goes towards discretionary purchases. “I never recommend taking that to zero because it’s just human nature—it’s like a crash diet. If you deprive yourself of everything, you’re going to overspend and put yourself in a much worse position,” he says.

Read More: *[How to Reset Your Thinking Around Spending Money, According to Experts](#)*

The bottom line, financial planners say, is that budget models can be helpful starting points, but they should reflect your personal financial priorities and be revisited as your financial situation changes over the years. The 50/30/20 formula works best when you can adhere to it well enough that the money habits it helps you instill become permanent.

“The most important part is dealing with the emotional side of finances and making small, short-term changes that really add up,” Walsh says.

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

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



When Sunny Choi informs strangers she's heading to the Paris Olympics for breaking—more colloquially known as [breakdancing](#)—she gets her fair share of quizzical stares. Sometimes people laugh. And she's seen the comments when, say, the Team USA account posts on X about her event. “What the?” replied one man. “Please no,” wrote another. Someone used the clown emoji.

[video id=5ItRra7O autostart="viewable"]

Often Choi laughs with her haters. *I know, it's crazy, right?* She explains that breakers today don't carry around cardboard and start spinning on street corners, like they did in the 1980s. The sold-out inaugural Olympic competition in August will take place at a dedicated venue in the [Place de la Concorde](#), the largest public square in the French capital. But it can be difficult to convince someone, on the spot, of breaking's worthiness as an Olympic sport.

"I just have to hope that you see it one day," says Choi, 35, over green tea at a coffee shop in Queens, N.Y., where she's lived, and danced, for more than a decade.

Breaking is a judged event, just like ratings darlings gymnastics and figure skating. No one says those aren't sports. Even better, since breakers battle head-to-head in a tournament format, there's no convoluted points system. Whoever moves better moves on. At the Pan American Games in Santiago, Chile, in November, Choi front-flipped in the air, shuffled her feet, spun to the ground before flashing a peace sign at her opponent, B-girl Luma of Colombia, as if to say, "This is mine." The judges agreed. The crowd cheered—and her team piled on top of her—when Choi was declared the winner.

"There's no doubt in my mind this is a sport," says Choi, whose first name is actually Sun. Her parents nicknamed her Sunny at a young age, and she kept it for her B-girl stage name. "Dance, art, sport, all together. These things aren't mutually exclusive. It's one of those things, like politics. When somebody is so far in one direction, you can't help them see the other. I don't feel like it's my place to change everybody's mind."

And yet if the appearance of breaking at the Olympics is unexpected, so, too, is Choi's participation. A 30-something Korean American daughter of PhDs who grew up in Tennessee listening to classical music and attended the Wharton School at the University

of Pennsylvania before becoming a cosmetics executive making the debut U.S. Olympic team for breaking was probably not on anyone's betting slip. "Breaking comes from Black and brown communities in the Bronx," Choi says, "and when it goes to the Olympics, we know these aren't the ones who are going to get all the money. I think it's our responsibility, as the first breakers who go, to be mindful of this."

Still, as she prepares for the Games—perhaps the most unlikely Paris Olympian in Paris' most unlikely Olympic sport—she feels she's exactly where she's supposed to be. "What's so cool about breaking is you get to be authentically you," says Choi. "Nobody dictates who you need to be while you're dancing."

Jung-In Choi went into labor in November 1988, while teaching a statistics class at Tennessee Tech, in Cookeville, 80 miles east of Nashville. Students called her husband, Kyung-Ju Choi, who arrived to drive her to the hospital where Sunny, the third of their four kids and the only girl, was born.

Sunny's mother and father had emigrated from Daegu, South Korea a decade earlier as doctoral candidates at the University of Tennessee in math and polymer engineering, respectively. They raised their kids to work hard in school and put them all in piano lessons. Sunny also became a competitive gymnast. "I remember her doing cartwheels in diapers," says her oldest brother Jin, a financial-marketing executive in Louisville. She watched the 1992 Olympic gymnastics competition in her *Little Mermaid* tutu. On the drive to her first gymnastics class, at a local YMCA, 3-year-old Sunny asked her mom if she was getting the gold medal that day.



Though she considered pursuing the Olympics, when she was around 12, the family decided against it. She kept competing while attending high school in Kentucky, where the family moved when she was 7, but the decision not to go quite as big did little to prevent her from burning out. She threw herself into AP classes and would conk out while studying. “I even volunteered to do her math homework so she could sleep,” says her mom. “She said no.” A pair of knee injuries also took a toll. In high school, Choi says, she had suicidal ideation. She was so fatigued she sometimes hallucinated, once stopping her car on the highway late at night, because she thought she saw an object in front of her. Luckily the road was empty. “I was a mess,” says Choi.

Like many an overachieving high school student, Choi let loose when she got to college. “I was drinking almost every single day,” she says. One night during her freshman year, however, she spotted members of Freaks of the Beat, the Penn breaking club, dancing on a campus walkway. They persuaded her to come to a class. Given Choi’s gymnastics background, she had a leg up, and breaking gave her the same adrenaline rush in a more communal environment. “You don’t go upside down in many other sports,” she notes. Her parents didn’t quite get this new extracurricular. “I thought it was crazy,” says Jung-In.

Choi graduated in 2011 and held a series of marketing and project-manager jobs in Philly and New York City before landing at Estée Lauder. But she kept breaking on the side. By 2014, she was taking part in international competitions. Her family was still unsure what to make of it. “They were like, ‘When are you going to get married and have kids? When are you going to grow up?’” says Choi, who has three circles tattooed on her right wrist, each representing what she says was an encounter with ghosts in college.

Breaking was added to the Paris Olympic program in 2020. In late 2021, at a camp outside Philly for the top U.S. breakers, a coach asked any aspiring Olympians to raise their hands. Every hand went up except Choi’s. Working full-time as Estée Lauder’s director of global creative operations for skin care while training to make the Olympic team seemed untenable. Plus, even though she was “miserable” in the corporate world, she was still contending with societal expectations. Should she follow the prescribed path: college, steady job, marriage, kids? Or chase a crazy dream? “It was a really hard decision,” she says. “My whole entire life, I’ve been doing what I should be doing as dictated by other people, society, culture.”

She finished second at the World Games in July 2022; within six months, she had left her job. She had a bit of financial security, though hardly a guaranteed spot on the U.S. team. In September 2022, Jung-In attended a breaking event for the first time. Choi spotted her in the middle of the crowd for her first battle, which she won. But before the next one, she couldn’t find her mom. Thinking Jung-In had bolted, her heart sank. Turns out mom had moved closer for a better view of the action. “It was just so exciting,” says Jung-In. “It was so fun.”

Choi’s Pan Am Games gold automatically qualified her for Paris. She has sponsorship deals with Nike and Samsung. “I’m so much happier since leaving my job,” says Choi. “I feel lighter. I have

more energy for the things I want to do. I feel present. I definitely feel like a very different person.”



Breaking’s name is derived from dancers hitting the floor during the instrumental interludes on a record—the break—at parties in the Bronx in the 1970s. Along with deejaying, emceeing, and graffiti artistry, breaking is considered one of the four pillars of [hip-hop](#), which celebrated its 50th anniversary last summer. It was an object of American fascination, as evidenced by a slew of dance films, like *Flashdance*, *Wild Style*, *Breakin'*, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, and *Beat Street*, released in the early 1980s. “If those dancers weren’t reacting to that music, hip-hop as we know it would have never started,” says [Serouj “Midus” Aprahamian](#), assistant professor of dance at the University of Illinois and author of *The Birth of Breaking: Hip-Hop History From the Floor Up*.

Media coined *breakdancing* to explain the form more broadly. But that term now is considered a bit pejorative, carrying dated connotations that hark back to breaking’s pop-culture heyday. “If you call it breakdancing, you’re not a breaker,” says Choi. “We’re not 14-year-old kids,” explains Kevin Gopie, a.k.a. DJ Renegade, a mainstay of the U.K. hip-hop and dance scene. “We’re grown-ass men who don’t dress in garish colors anymore.”

In 1982, the New York City Rap Tour introduced the pillars of hip-hop to a global audience, stopping in cities like Paris, Lyon, and London. But thanks to oversaturation and the rise of West Coast gangsta rap, breaking soon fell out of favor. “If you were still breaking in the late ‘80s, early ‘90s, people thought you’re a bit of a loser,” says DJ Renegade. “If you went to a club and you tried to break, they would kick you out.” The scene moved underground, and the ‘90s brought the start of international competitions, like Battle of the Year, which began in Germany in 1990. Red Bull sponsored its first competition in 2001, and its events became some of the most prestigious and well-attended worldwide. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), always looking for youth-oriented additions to the program (see [skateboarding](#), [surfing](#), [Big Air](#), BMX, [climbing](#)), gave breaking a trial run at the 2018 Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires. Breaking was an unqualified success, attracting more than 50,000 fans, 2.5 million social media views, and earning a spot in Paris.

While breaking enthusiasts acknowledge the opportunity the Olympics provide young dancers, some consider breaking’s inclusion in the Games bittersweet. The pioneers are unlikely to share in the spoils. “I’m not particularly excited about breaking in the Olympics,” says Imani Kai Johnson, associate dance professor at University of California, Riverside. “My investment is in hip-hop as a culture with Africanist aesthetic foundations, and not as a sport that is increasingly detached from any cultural context.”

Another sore spot: the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF), which, as an IOC-approved governing body, oversees the sport. The WDSF, which has its roots in competitive ballroom dancing, has called in breakers like DJ Renegade to help devise a judging system and, according to WDSF president Shawn Tay, “ensure that the cultural values of the dance remain intact and the competition on offer is totally authentic.” But many feel it has failed to elevate the sport, or culture, in any meaningful way. “The WDSF has

dropped the ball here,” says DJ Renegade. “They’ve done nothing, man. No promotion. Breaking is in the f-cking Olympics, man. Are you insane? This should be plastered everywhere.” Tay points to WDSF’s work organizing events and training camps throughout the world, educating and licensing officials, and granting scholarships, despite limited budgets. “Such statements are not terribly productive, but with any project of this size and stature you can expect a certain amount of criticism, warranted or not,” he says. “We have worked tirelessly over the years together with Paris 2024 and the IOC to prepare breaking for the Olympic Games.”

No matter how much enthusiasm breaking generates in Paris, or how well Choi performs, you won’t see it, or her, in L.A. in 2028. The sport was left off that program—flag football, well capitalized by the NFL, was one of the new sports to make it in. But a strong showing could catapult its Olympic return in 2032 and beyond. Thirty-two dancers—16 B-boys and 16 B-girls—will participate this year, and coming off her gold at the Pan Am Games, Choi is a medal contender.



“She’s got the high-scale aerial power moves,” says Mary Fogarty, an associate professor of dance at York University in Toronto, who has judged events. “Sunny is someone who has enough material to go all the way through.” Fogarty suggests, however, that Choi show more swagger. After all, the judges will be basing their evaluations, in part, on personality and performativity. “I always wanted to see more of the funky side of her, because she’s got it,” says Fogarty. “She’s top of the world when all the pieces land for her. Especially if you’re representing the U.S., you’ve got to bring that funk out and show everyone that full package.”

Choi’s a muscular 5 ft. 1 in. and quick to flash a wide smile. Despite all the spinning on her hands, she’s obsessed with keeping

her nails impeccable. Her strength coach, Aja Campbell, is pushing for a nail sponsor. And she builds a mean gingerbread house. “The cool thing about Sunny is, you know, she’s dressed in baggy clothing and she really embodies that breaker look, but then she has these parts of her that are so, so girlie and fun,” says Campbell.

Choi has no regrets about her new career path and hopes to open a breaking center in New York City at some point after the Games. But she believes she’s sometimes her own worst enemy. She still struggles with self-doubt, which she partially attributes to growing up Asian American in majority-white areas in Tennessee and Kentucky. She was mocked. She felt invisible. She didn’t fit in at Wharton, and for years even felt like an outsider in breaking. While Choi now feels accepted in the breaking world—“I was ostracizing myself,” she says—she hasn’t fully shaken her imposter syndrome. “I walk into battles all the time, I’m like, ‘I can’t win this,’” says Choi. “‘Today’s not my day.’”

In the months before the Games, she’ll be meeting with a sports psychologist to work on her mindset, lifting weights with Campbell, and keeping her diet healthy—she’s eating a lot of salmon—to ensure peak performance. She *is* confident about one thing. If you give breaking a chance, and appreciate the beats and acrobatics, you won’t be disappointed. “You feel our energy,” says Choi. “You feel the excitement, you feel the happiness or the anger or whatever emotion that the dancer is expressing in that moment. It’s so visceral and raw. I don’t think you get that anywhere else.”

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Netflix's *3 Body Problem* Transforms a Dense Sci-Fi Novel Into a Smart, Gripping Thriller

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



Netflix's *3 Body Problem* might be the biggest TV series to hit Earth this year. The science-fiction epic unites *Game of Thrones* creators [David Benioff and D.B. Weiss](#) with *The Terror: Infamy* co-creator Alexander Woo in an adaptation of one of the 21st century's most celebrated books. Chinese author Cixin Liu's Hugo-winning *The Three-Body Problem*—published in his home country in 2006, then expanded into a trilogy that has been translated into dozens of languages—is a fascinating novel of ideas. The cover of the American edition boasts an endorsement from Barack Obama, who calls it “[wildly imaginative](#).”

It certainly is. Choppily written, dense with theoretical physics and philosophy, and dependent on the depiction of an alien race whose physical form is never described, the book also poses unique challenges for anyone looking to adapt it for the screen. Benioff, Weiss, and Woo have been remarkably successful at transforming Liu's work into a gripping sci-fi thriller (premiering March 21),

without either dumbing it down or boring viewers with hours' worth of whiteboard lectures.

The first of two interconnected storylines, set decades apart, follows a brilliant young astrophysicist, Ye Wenjie (played by Zine Tseng and later Rosalind Chao), during the [Chinese Cultural Revolution](#) of the 1960s. After the revolutionaries' anti-intellectual reign of terror destroys her family and an encounter with [Rachel Carson's contraband *Silent Spring*](#) further inflames her pessimism about the human race, Ye is recruited to work at a remote, mountaintop military base on a secret initiative known as Red Coast. One choice she makes there will reverberate around not just the globe, but also the universe.



Meanwhile, in 2024, scientists are dying by suicide. This might have something to do with the fact that, as Saul Durand (Jovan Adepo) puts it, “science is broken.” The Oxford physics grad’s work as a research assistant at his alma mater has suddenly stopped yielding comprehensible results. His friends from college are having similarly inexplicable experiences. Auggie Salazar (Eiza González), the founder of a cutting-edge nanomaterials startup, begins to see fiery numbers flash across her field of vision—a countdown, but to what? Star physicist Jin Cheng (Jess Hong, excellent) gets sucked into an uncannily immersive VR game of

mysterious origin, which is also the setting for the most inspired of the show's breathtaking visuals. Rounding out the crew are Jack Rooney (John Bradley, *Thrones'* beloved [Samwell Tarly](#)), who dropped out of Oxford to found a multimillion-dollar snack-food empire, and Will Downing (Alex Sharp), a soft-spoken high school physics teacher who's secretly in love with Jin.

With help from a gruff, rule-breaking intelligence operative ([Benedict Wong](#)'s Da Shi), the so-called Oxford Five seek out an explanation for the crisis wreaking havoc on their field. These U.K.-based characters constitute the Netflix adaptation's biggest departure from Liu's novel, in which their roles are filled by a single present-day protagonist: a bland nanotech scholar in China who spends much of the book completing RPG-style missions. The creators' decision to relocate this part of the story to England and add a clique of cool 30-somethings might seem like pandering to a Western TV audience. And maybe it is. But it also allows *3 Body*'s characters to talk through the book's most difficult philosophical and scientific questions, and grounds its central concern—the fate of humanity—in the relationships between regular people.



What resonates most about the series is its ambivalence about the prospect of an alien civilization annihilating humanity. The Oxford Five's debate on the matter does seem timely, in a world where, in a state with anti-trans policies, a [non-binary teen dies](#) a day after being beaten at school; and the massacre of 1,200 people in one country is answered by the killing of [30,000 people and counting](#) next door. Even without extraterrestrial meddling, scientists'

decades of warnings about the climate crisis didn't prevent 2023 from [setting a record](#) for carbon emissions from fossil fuels.

In China, despite his insistence that it's just a story, Liu's trilogy has been interpreted as an [allegory for China's geopolitical predicament](#): while the Chinese embody the outmatched but tenacious human race, Western powers are the space aliens using technology to force them into submission. But the series highlights more compelling parallels between the threat of climate change and *3 Body*'s depiction of a planet that must innovate for the sake of future generations. It's the rare apocalypse epic that does justice to the enormity of an international project to save the world. As one character points out: "The last time we gave the best physicists in the world insane resources, [they gave us Hiroshima](#)."

We may hear some grumbling from fans who savored the books' work-showing, in lengthy government reports and painstaking accounts of aliens' experiments with protons. The heart of this story isn't an equation, though. It's an inquiry into the nature of human civilization and the role of scientific progress in our salvation—or our doom. Netflix's *3 Body Problem* sometimes tries too hard to be cool, sprinkling in Lana Del Rey needle drops and recreational drug use. But ultimately, the creators succeed in extracting the story's urgency without lobotomizing the source material.

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Kristen Wiig's Palm Royale Is a Delightfully Deranged '60s-Set Soap

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



Vietnam. Stonewall. [Charles Manson](#). *Easy Rider*. [Woodstock](#), the [Harlem Cultural Festival](#), and the tragedy that was [Altamont](#). These are the touchstones that define 1969 in our collective memory. But in the Palm Beach of 1969, as conjured by the delightfully deranged Apple TV+ soap *Palm Royale*, which premieres on March 20, they barely register. Insulated from the war, free love, and societal upheaval, the resort community's wealthy denizens have a different set of preoccupations. Like securing membership in the most exclusive social club in town.

That walled haven, a headquarters for ladies who lunch and the husbands who fund their leisurely lifestyles, is called the Palm Royale. Into its haughty, pastel-hued world vaults—as in, literally—enters the club by going over its fence—the plucky outsider Maxine (executive producer [Kristen Wiig](#)). Queen bee Evelyn ([Alison Janney](#)), her ascendant rival Dinah (Leslie Bibb), and their clique of frenemies clock the interloper immediately and freeze her

out. So begins Maxine's tireless campaign to gain acceptance in Palm Beach society's most rarefied social circle.



She must prove herself a useful confidant in a land whose currency, especially for those who don't have millions of dollars at their disposal, is secrets. That quest will bring her to places Palm Royale members would never venture into, from a feminist bookstore where the liberated Linda ([Laura Dern](#), also an executive producer) leads consciousness-raising sessions to the extracurricular haunts of the confusingly ubiquitous club employee Robert ([Ricky Martin](#)). At the same time, she's elbowing her way into campily ostentatious Palm Beach parties that give the show a festive vacation vibe—like an upper-crust cousin of Wiig's cult comedy [*Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar*](#).

The self-aware soap is an increasingly popular format, and *Palm Royale* adheres to familiar conventions. But showrunner Abe Sylvia ([Dead to Me](#)), loosely adapting Juliet McDaniel's novel *Mr. and Mrs. American Pie*, makes it feel fresh by nailing both the comedy and the melodrama, in a punchy first season that gets weirder with each episode. The cast is similarly well balanced, with actors like Dern and Janney counterweighting comic performers like Wiig, who makes an unhinged social climber lovable, and the legendary [Carol Burnett](#) as the funniest convalescent you've ever

met. You'll find mild wealth satire if you're looking for it, but—like an afternoon spent poolside at a club that wouldn't have you as a member—*Palm Royale* is best enjoyed as pure, mischievous fun.

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Paul Simon's Many Lives Are on Display in a Jubilant New Docuseries

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



If you didn't grow up with a well-worn copy of *Sounds of Silence*, *Bookends*, or *Bridge Over Troubled Water* among the LPs stacked near the family hi-fi, your parents or grandparents probably did. From the mid- to late 1960s, the sounds of Simon & Garfunkel were so ubiquitous you couldn't escape them if you wanted to. Their songs, not overtly political, dealt with everyday things like friendship, impending breakups, the simple pleasures of spending a day at the zoo, and their opaline harmonies had a soothing, shimmering quality. [Paul Simon](#) and Art Garfunkel—who'd been friends and musical compatriots since their childhood in Queens—broke up, somewhat acrimoniously, in 1970; it took fans ages to recover. While Garfunkel pursued acting, Simon soldiered on as a singer-songwriter, and the numerous highs—and occasional lows—of his career form the arc of [Alex Gibney](#)'s perceptive and

comprehensive two-part docuseries *In Restless Dreams: The Music of Paul Simon*. (The docuseries airs in two parts on MGM+, on March 17 and March 24.)

Gibney, known for docs like *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* and *Taxi to the Dark Side*, threads Simon's past and present into a graceful whole. He spends time with Simon in the small, cozy studio adjacent to his Wimberley, Texas, home—a facility with the kind of luxe, cowboy-rustic quality that only lots of money can buy—as Simon, now 82, prepares his 15th solo album, *Seven Psalms*, released last May. After the Simon & Garfunkel breakup, Simon became hugely successful, with some bumps along the way. He took chances on projects that didn't work—1980's *One Trick Pony*, a movie in which he played a fictional version of himself, flopped, and his 1983 studio album *Hearts and Bones*, written and recorded around the time of his intensely brief marriage to Carrie Fisher, disappointed fans who'd been hoping for a Simon & Garfunkel reunion album. The [two had reconciled in 1981 for a blowout concert](#) in Central Park, though as the documentary makes clear, Simon still couldn't get past his erstwhile partner's annoying habits and perceived self-centeredness, which is why he decided to cut himself free once again.

Even so, in the context of such a vast and varied career, those small dips seem inconsequential. Gibney frames Simon's past—beginning with charming black-and-white publicity photos of teenage Paul and Art taken around the time of their first, baby-step hit, "Hey Schoolgirl," in 1957—with the realities of his present. His marriage to [fellow singer-songwriter Edie Brickell](#) appears to be one of ardent closeness. (Brickell tells a wonderful story about performing her hit "What I Am" on *Saturday Night Live*, in 1988, and botching the words as she catches sight of Simon standing near one of the monitors. Gibney illustrates the moment with a clip—we get to see the lightning bolt hit.) But as Simon writes and records *Seven Psalms*, circa 2021, he struggles with hearing loss, and he's

frank about how much this distresses him. He's able to write with the help of small Bose speakers attached to his computer, but has trouble figuring out how to sing. He runs through a lyric in front of the mic and stops short after hitting a clunker: "I'll have to grab that note another day."

Mostly, though, *In Restless Dreams* rings with jubilance. Simon still revels in the mystery of where songs come from, and we also learn some tricks about how they become dazzling, finished artifacts. (The echoing drums featured on Simon & Garfunkel's "The Boxer" were recorded, by ace engineer Roy Halee, near an elevator shaft.) Gibney includes choice clips of Simon appearing on talk shows in the 1970s, a thoughtful, elfin presence with a dry sense of humor. (At one point he says that he loves hearing his songs in an elevator, or, better yet, being hummed by a stranger on the street.) Look for his sly smile as he sits side-by-side with George Harrison, performing "Here Comes the Sun" on *Saturday Night Live* in 1976. Even for a big deal like Paul Simon, getting to perform with a Beatle is clearly a *very* big deal.

Best of all is the footage from the [era of Simon's 1986 *Graceland*](#), showing him talking and laughing with musicians in Johannesburg —though he's also listening to them intently, and learning from them. The album was controversial in its era: Simon had broken the cultural boycott against South Africa, imposed as a response to apartheid, and he was also accused of cultural appropriation. But Gibney reframes that controversy by including vintage clips of exiled musicians Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, both of whom toured with Simon after the album's release. For these artists, unwelcome in their home country, the chance to perform with Simon and to bring their music to new and bigger audiences constituted a spiritual homecoming, at least. As Wynton Marsalis, one of Simon's collaborators on *Seven Psalms*, puts it, his work represents "not the reduction of feeling, but the expansion of

feeling.” That’s how a kid from Queens can reach out to the bigger world—and give it back to us, heard anew.

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How the Documentary Frida Tells an Iconic Artist's Story in Her Own Words

Olivia B. Waxman is a staff writer at TIME. She covers history and education.



The early 1940s self-portraits of Mexican painter [Frida Kahlo](#) that show monkeys wrapped around her neck may seem playful on the surface. In reality, [Kahlo](#) painted them during a suffocating period of her life when she was tangled in a messy divorce and desperate for work.

Frida, a new documentary produced by [TIME Studios](#) out in select theaters on March 7, explores how Kahlo endured several personal tragedies and fueled her experience into her art, creating the vibrant surrealist paintings and self-portraits that made her an iconic artist.

The film, which streams on Amazon Prime on March 14, brings Kahlo's paintings to life through animation, archival footage, and snippets from the artist's personal writings, billing itself as the first documentary to be told entirely through her own words as well as those of her intimates. Director Carla Gutierrez's team scoured

museums for Kahlo's letters and used excerpts from the artist's published diary, voiced by Fernanda Echevarría Del Rivero, in the film, which allows her [sharp tongue](#) to be put on full display. In her writings, she works through her feelings on men, the economics of art, the nature of independence, and the world. She lobs a critique at the U.S.: "Everything is about appearances but deep down it's a pile of sh-t."

While Kahlo's story has been covered in biographies and films, *Frida* stands out for its innovative use of animation that makes her iconic paintings come alive.

***Frida* and self-portraits**

Kahlo started painting after fracturing her pelvis in a bus crash when she was a teenager. "It wasn't violent but silent. Slow," she reflects in the film in voiceover. "The handrail went through me like a sword through a bull."

The crash altered everything. Kahlo spent months in a body cast—"bored as hell," as she once put it—and her mother devised a makeshift easel that allowed her to paint in bed. She even hung a mirror over her daughter's head so she could paint [self portraits](#), which became a motif throughout her career. One reason Kahlo painted so many self portraits is because it was so [painful](#) to go out and about. "She was pretty immobile later in life, so the model that she had available was herself," Gutierrez. In one excerpt from Kahlo's writing that appears in the documentary, she describes her self-portraits as "the true expression of my emotions."

How art became a lifeline for Frida Kahlo

The documentary shows that painting was a cathartic outlet for [Kahlo](#) when she was grieving after a [miscarriage](#) in 1932. In an emotional rollercoaster, she initially considered an [abortion](#)

because she was afraid her body was too fragile to carry the fetus to term, but a doctor encouraged her to keep the baby. When she miscarried, she coped by painting, including the 1932 self-portrait “Henry Ford Hospital,” in which she’s lying in a pool of blood in a bed. As she once wrote, per the documentary, “the only thing I know is that I paint because I need to.” Kahlo suffered through two more miscarriages in her life.

“The paintings that came after that, that came from that loss and pain, are what actually made her find her voice as an artist,” says Gutierrez.



Then [Kahlo](#) saw painting as necessary to support herself so she wouldn’t be dependent on her husband, the artist [Diego Rivera](#), who married her in 1929 but had several affairs with other women, including Kahlo’s own sister. “I need to paint so I can make a living. Then I will be free,” she wrote, the documentary shows. “I no longer accept a damn cent from Diego. I will never accept money from any man until I die.” The couple divorced, but Rivera begged her to marry him again, and she agreed but continued to support herself with the earnings from her work and split household expenses. The [1937 self-portrait “Memory, the Heart”](#) reflects her disappointment with Rivera, by showing a metal band

piercing her heart and imps sitting on either end like they're on a seesaw.

Kahlo struggled to sell paintings until she passed away in 1954 at the age of 47. But what's clear is that painting was about much more than a paycheck. Per her words in the documentary, "I've painted little without the slightest desire for glory or ambition, with the sole conviction to give myself pleasure, and the power to make a living with my trade. I've lost so many things I wanted for my life, but painting completed my life."

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How Beyoncé Fits Into the Storied Legacy of Black Country

Randall is an award-winning professor, songwriter, and author of *My Black Country: A Journey Through Country Music's Black Past, Present, and Future*



On March 16, 1983, the Country Music Association (CMA) celebrated its 25th anniversary, and I was invited. Buddy Killen, the song publisher who pitched “Heartbreak Hotel” to Elvis Presley, thought “the Black girl from Harvard” might just be the second coming of that hit’s songwriter, Mae Boren Axton. He put me on the guest list and paid for the tickets.

It was a complicated night. The event was held at the DAR Constitution Hall, built by the Daughters of the American Revolution, an infamous venue whose management had refused to allow Black opera star Marian Anderson to perform on its stage in 1939. I took special pleasure in seeing guitarist and singer [Charley Pride](#) stride onto that stage—in a building named to honor the U.S. Constitution, but run to exclude Black artists—and stake his claim as part of that “We the People” that document claims to represent.

At one point in the ceremony, singer Roy Acuff announced that “country music is a family.” Then he proclaimed Jimmie Rodgers “the father” of that family. But he did not mention Lil Hardin Armstrong, the pianist who played on Rodgers’ hit “Blue Yodel No. 9.” Acuff nodded to Will Rogers, the comedian, but shamelessly omitted [DeFord Bailey](#), the Grand Ole Opry’s first superstar.

[video id=scIYubME autostart="viewable"]

My idea to name and spotlight the First Family of Black Country was conceived in that moment. It was nurtured in the silence of missing names. Quiet as it was being kept, country had Black founders. I knew it; Buddy Killen, who arrived in Nashville playing bass for a blackface comedy act on the Grand Ole Opry, knew it; Roy Acuff, who had played on stages with Bailey, Ray Charles, and Pride, knew it. And more than four decades later, Beyoncé knew it when she broke the internet on Super Bowl Sunday by surprise—releasing two country songs and announcing an album, [Cowboy Carter](#), which has her devoted fans in the Beyhive buzzing about line-dancing into the summer of country.

Read More: Beyoncé Has Always Been Country

That evening back in 1983 was constructed to be country’s coming-out party as a musical genre worthy of exceptional respect because it was a reflection and celebration of America at its best. And that best was being defined as a family having only white founders—and not a single Black woman in sight. It was a fallacy that could only last so long.

The way I see it, modern Black country was born on Dec. 10, 1927, when Bailey, descended from enslaved Tennesseans, lifted his harmonica to play “Pan American Blues” on the Nashville radio show *Barn Dance*. Fast forward to July 16, 1930, in Los Angeles, where Armstrong made country music history as the first Black

woman to play on a hillbilly record that sold a million copies. And Lil didn't just play on the session—her piano *drove* the session.

Country is not as many have posited: a genre with Black influence but without Black presence. Black women have been present since the earliest days of country's existence as a recorded and commercially marketed music form. But a custom of cultural redlining has not only kept Black women out of country writing rooms, off country airwaves, off rodeo stages, off the country charts; it has also worked to keep the few Black women who managed to evade the gatekeepers off the entertainment pages, and out of the history books.

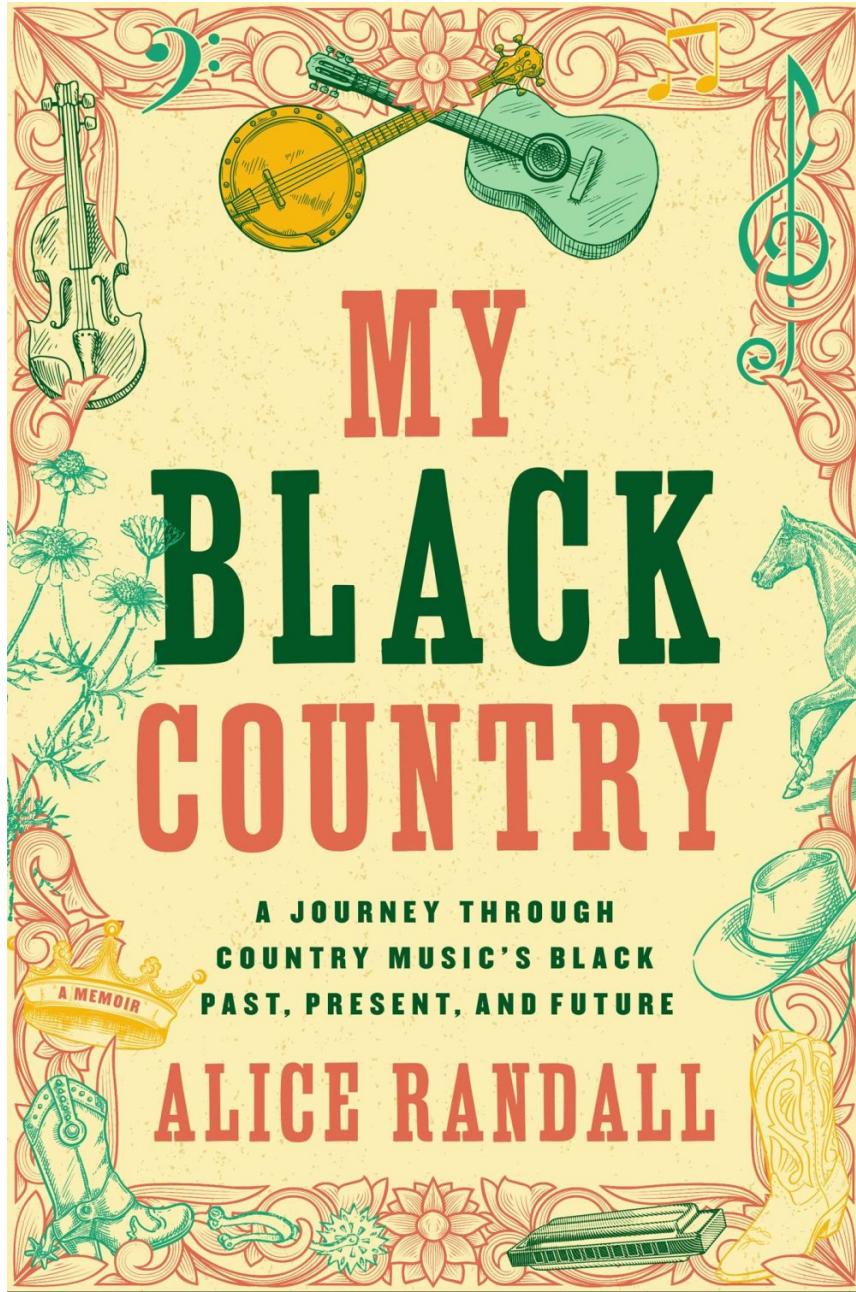
This would change. Nobody sitting in the room that night knew it, but there was a little girl toddling around a two-story house in Houston who would bring the long era of -erasing Black country sounds and stories to an abrupt end. The calculated erasure that began at one large public party with expensive tickets in 1983 ended during another, Super Bowl LVIII, when Beyoncé released “Texas Hold ’Em” and “16 Carriages.”

Along with “Daddy Lessons” off of 2016’s *Lemonade*, these songs have established Beyoncé as heir to a Black country musical tradition that dates back to the 17th century, when the first banjo was strummed by Black hands on American soil. Like DeFord Bailey’s, Beyoncé’s country songs are grounded in aural rural realities: the screech of the passing train, the sound from the local bar where folk are dancing. Like Lil, she understands the power of a costume and a trumpet. Like Ray Charles she brings a whiff of the Black cosmopolitan. Like Charley Pride she exudes a radiant Old Testament Song of Songs sexuality that is at once hot and holy. Like Herb Jeffries she embodies the cowboy who stays close to nature and guns.

The erasure did not end just because Beyoncé Knowles Carter became the first Black female artist to top the country charts,

though she did that, on Feb. 24. And there are many others who have laid the groundwork for this catalytic moment: Linda Martell, the Pointer Sisters, Rissi Palmer, Rhiannon Giddens, Mickey Guyton, Brittney Spencer, Reyna Roberts, and O.N.E the Duo, to name just a few.

The erasure ended when she started a sustained national conversation, getting America to talk about and celebrate neglected Black country legacy. The question of “Who can be in country music?” often masks a deeper query about “Who can be a real American?” Beyoncé’s was a loud announcement of a reality long denied, that she was “We the People.” And so were people who looked like her.



I've often said that country music is three chords and four truths: life is hard, God is real, whiskey and roads and family provide worthy compensations, and the past is better than the present. That last truth is one of the places where country often experiences a racial split. In much of white country, the past that is better than the present exists in a longed-for and lost mythical Dixie. In Black country, the past that is better than the present exists in a longed-for and lost Africa before colonization.

Country music is commonly defined as American folk music with Celtic, African, and evangelical Christian influences. My ancestors

come from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Mali, from Scotland, England, and Ireland. I am country music, embodied. I started songwriting sitting under a Motown cherry tree, about the age of 5, in 1964. I would eat candied cherries, watching a sea of cars flow by on the John C. Lodge Freeway, and let country songs—from my grandmother’s lips, my mother’s radio, my aunt’s stereo—roll ’round my head. I started off singing other people’s words then one day I started singing my own, the auspicious beginnings of a career that would land me in the top spot on the country charts.

Read More: [*Black Artists Helped Build Country Music—And Then It Left Them Behind*](#)

My daddy hipped me to the fact that it was Lil Hardin on Jimmie Rodgers’ biggest hit, and that there were probably a lot more Black folks passing for white on country records. He would look at some sheet music or hymnal, then ask, “What you bet Traditional was a colored girl?”

I write country music because it is a way to make what is too hard to bear somehow bearable. Beyoncé in “Texas Hold ’Em” does this same work, squaring off against tornadoes, heat waves, and lovers losing courage, as DeFord had squared off against a sense of being relentlessly pursued in “Fox Chase.” Both songs transform hardship into a particular flavor of playful and hopeful joy I recognize as country.

To close out the CMA anniversary show, Ray Charles sang “America the Beautiful.” Listening to the man behind what has been called the greatest country album, 1962’s *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, it struck me how entwined he was in the legacy of Black country. This was Armstrong and Bailey’s genius child. Next to him was country-as-corn-bread Pride, a spiritual love child to Bailey. On the other side of the family tree, Herb Jeffries, who wasn’t present in the auditorium but should have been, was Armstrong’s stepchild.

Among a sea of white people, including the President and Vice President of the U.S. and the presidents of every major country-music label, I had an inkling I was the only person in that room worried about singing Black cowboys, worried about Jeffries, wondering why he wasn't there.

Now Beyoncé has changed that room entirely. *Cowboy Carter* is poised to be a brilliant new beginning and a culmination. As I see it, Beyoncé is the genius child of Ray Charles. The daughter who eclipses the father. The reflected light of her triumph makes visible both the lineage from which she aesthetically descends and the reality that Black country is a big tent with many entry points: from banjos, harmonicas, and cowboy songs to movies and Motown cherry trees. Beyoncé raises this question: If country owes a significant debt to Black culture, what in America doesn't?

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Nicholas Sparks Reflects on The Notebook's Legacy as the Musical Comes to Broadway

Annabel Guterman is a content strategy editor at TIME. She also covers books.



[Nicholas Sparks](#) is used to seeing his books come to life. More than ten of his bestselling novels have been made into movies, from *Message in a Bottle* (1999) to *The Choice* (2016). And, of course, there is the 2004 film [The Notebook](#), based on Sparks' beloved 1996 novel. The movie, which starred Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams, brought in more than \$100 million at the box office and became a staple in the [rom-com canon](#). Now, for the first time, Sparks is experiencing what it's like to watch his novel move from the big screen to the stage as *The Notebook* makes its Broadway debut.

The musical, with a book by Bekah Brunstetter and music and lyrics by Ingrid Michaelson, centers on the same story as the novel and movie, following the decades-long relationship between [Noah](#)

[and Allie](#), two people from very different worlds who fall in love. In the new adaptation, which opens on Broadway on March 14, three sets of actors play the couple over distinct periods in their lives; in the latest of these periods, Noah cares for Allie as she struggles with Alzheimer's.

Sparks spoke to TIME about the show, the enduring power of *The Notebook*'s story, and his favorite [romance novels](#).

TIME: What was your involvement in the making of the *Notebook* musical?

Sparks: I worked closely with the producers. When they were thinking about Ingrid Michaelson for the music, they sent me a couple of her songs to decide if she could capture this story in an original way and speak with a new voice. I thought, yes, of course. The one thing I've learned about adapting my work into different mediums, because I've had a number of films and now a Broadway show, is that they are different mediums. A novel is a story told with words. A film is a story told with pictures. A musical is a living, breathing version of the story told with song and dance. It's important to realize going into any adaptation that some things work really well in one medium, and don't work in another.

Do you have a favorite song?

“Sadness and Joy” is pretty tough to top. I was thrilled that both the songs by Ingrid and the book by Bekah Brunstetter really complemented each other in a way that made the show feel whole and easy to follow. This is a show about the ins and outs of memory, and what we imagine our future might be. I thought they did that incredibly well. One of my biggest delights is how they incorporated humor into the show in the most wonderful way. It's

not a comedy, but there are moments when you laugh and boy, they did an incredible job.

What was it like watching your book play out onstage?

The main thing I felt was awe. What surprised me most was that it wasn't the book, and it wasn't the film. It was its own unique version of this story.

***The Notebook* is a best-selling novel. The 2004 movie was a blockbuster hit. Why are audiences so drawn to this story?**

There's certainly a number of universal elements. It's about life, passion, love. It's about choosing to be who you want to be as much as it is about choosing who you love. Most people are familiar with the heartbreak elements of Alzheimer's. The story speaks to a universal desire to be loved no matter what, even when things are awful. With all of that said, I wrote the book. It's really up to everyone else to decide what it is about *The Notebook* that appeals to them. Is it the love? Is it the passion? Is it the decision that Allie made? Everyone might have some similarities in their answers, but there might also be some answers that surprise you.

What's a memorable fan response you've gotten to *The Notebook*?

It was memorable for a sad reason. I was at a book signing, and a woman said, "My husband of 42 years recently died, his funeral is in three hours, and I'm wondering if you would be OK with me putting these passages in his coffin." She had these copies of the passages that he particularly loved. I said, "of course." I've also

received hundreds of letters from people who tell me, “This is the story of my grandparents” or “You wrote about my mom and dad!”

What do you make of the huge moment romance novels are having on platforms like TikTok?

As an author, I just want people to read, and not for my own selfish interests. Books have given me great joy in my life. When I find a novel that resonates with me, I end up treasuring that experience. That’s the greatest feeling in the world.

What are some of your favorite romance novels?

You’d start with Jane Austen, but then you’d go to *A Farewell to Arms*. If that was written today? It would probably be a best seller. I also like *The Horse Whisperer* and *The Bridges of Madison County*. I thought *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon was really original and well written with such an epic feel.

Do you cry easily?

I cry less easily now than I used to. I was young when I lost my mother. Then, I lost my father and my sister in a seven-year period. I felt like I was cried out, because that’s what happens when you lose the people that are important to you. I’ve been blessed that my children have been healthy. If anything happens to them, I’ll be a puddle.

What’s a movie that’s made you cry?

Toy Story 3. The original *Toy Story* was the first film that my oldest son was able to sit through, he was 3 or 4. Then, *Toy Story 3* comes out just at the right time, and Andy’s growing up just as my kids are

getting ready to head off to college. It brought a tear to my eye in the very best ways.

If you could pick another one of your books to become a musical, which would you choose?

A Walk to Remember, because music was already part of that film. It's a story that would lend itself well to the stage because it covers a brief period. Some of my novels cover months and months or they have multiple characters and multiple viewpoints. But no one's asked me about it. We're gonna see how *The Notebook* does. I'm excited for people to see it—I think they're gonna love it.

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