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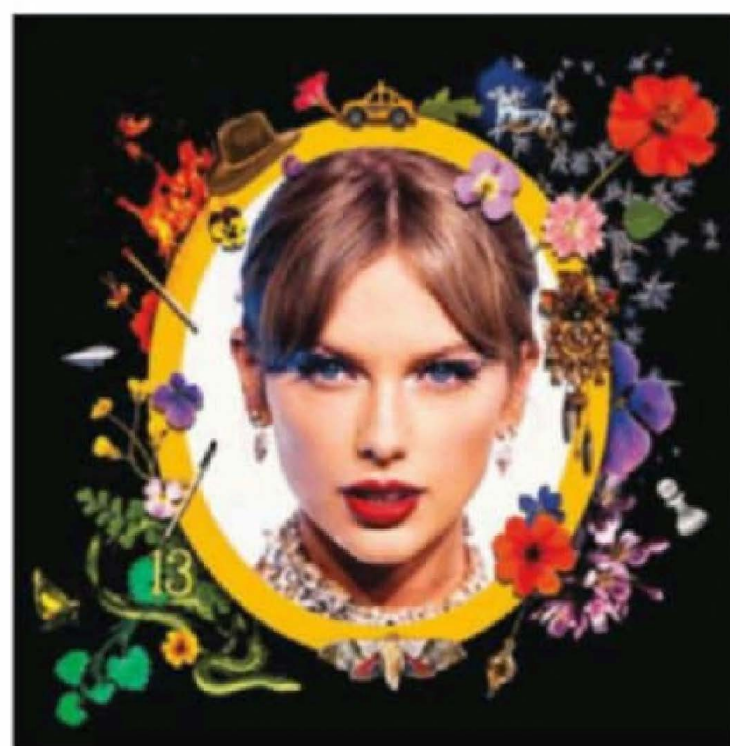
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THIS WEEK IN THE NEW YORKER APP



Taylor Swift's Master Plan

When the star decided, in 2019, to rerecord her albums and take control of the music rights, the idea was applauded as an act of feminist reclamation. Was it? Tyler Foggatt reports.

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THE MAIL

BY THE PEOPLE

Adam Gopnik, in his survey of recent Civil War literature, asks whether the conflict was, after so much death and suffering, worth it (Books, April 28th). He writes that “we accept mass dying with enormous aplomb” and that we view it as “the price of the history that seemingly rewards us now.” In addition to the eight hundred thousand dead, another casualty of the Civil War that’s often overlooked was civil liberties. Abraham Lincoln suspended habeas corpus during the conflict—first unilaterally, and then with the accession of Congress, after Chief Justice Roger Taney stated that only the legislative branch has the authority to take such action.

Americans seem to accept wartime intrusions on our civil liberties with the same equanimity with which we accept thousands of soldiers dying to defend those very freedoms. Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus led to Woodrow Wilson’s crackdown on dissent after the United States entered the First World War, which led to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War and George W. Bush’s establishment of a surveillance state during the war on terror.

This long history of the expansion of executive power, often with the acquiescence of the courts, to violate and restrict civil liberties in the name of national security has ultimately brought us to our current situation. President Trump is blatantly ignoring court rulings and due process, and justifies many of his actions with the dubious idea that we are at war with any country from which immigrants have fled to enter the U.S. illegally. War, as Randolph Bourne put it, may very well be the “health of the state,” if we define the state as the executive branch. One can imagine Trump agreeing with that definition, seeing himself as a kind of modern-day Louis XIV, proclaiming, “I am the state.”
Jason Schlabbach
Cincinnati, Ohio

Gopnik concludes that too many political obstacles made the Civil War unavoidable, but that the mass death that resulted still needs to be more widely and deeply acknowledged. Although I don’t disagree with those assessments, he glosses over the experiences of enslaved people.

He is right to foreground the conflict’s enormous costs, in death and injuries, and the false promise of emancipation, given that what followed was Jim Crow and other manners of organized oppression throughout the country. But the Civil War’s bloody canvas must also be considered alongside the violence inflicted daily upon the millions in servitude—violence that, in Gopnik’s “gradual emancipation” scenario, would have continued for years. How might one weigh that hypothetical suffering against the actual misery and destruction caused by the Civil War?

Paul Weichselbaum
Hendersonville, N.C.

“Specious” is what Gopnik calls Lincoln’s argument, in the Gettysburg Address, that the question posed by the Civil War was whether any nation “so conceived and dedicated” to liberty “can long endure.” But Lincoln was right: no political institution—not a nation, a state, or a school district—can survive if a disaffected minority is free to withdraw. The institution can endure only if its constituents are obligated to go along with measures they dislike and to accept that they may act on their objections only within the rules of the institution. If splintering the institution is always an option, the result is ongoing anarchy.

John Ross
Bend, Ore.

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