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[Goings On](#)

Dances of the Georgian Court and Countryside

Also: Bang on a Can and St. Vincent in Richard Foreman’s “What to Wear,” the celestial folk of Cassandra Jenkins, Jennifer Wilson and Richard Brody on comfort in the cold weather, and more.

By [Brian Seibert](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Jillian Steinhauer](#), [Marina Harss](#), [Jane Bua](#), and [Jennifer Wilson](#)

January 9, 2026

[You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)

During the Cold War, classical ballet companies such as the Kirov and the Bolshoi were among the most prominent cultural weapons of the Soviet Union. But the arsenal also included another kind of ballet troupe, one that took regional folk dances and customs and professionalized them, arranging them choreographically and with much artistic license for maximal theatrical impact. The most famous of these troupes was the Moiseyev Dance Company, based in Moscow, though many Soviet Republics had their own groups. The Georgian State Dance Company was one of the best and most popular in the West.



“Samaia,” a dance inspired by Georgian history, will be performed at Carnegie Hall. Photograph courtesy the Georgian National Ballet Sukhishvili

Now called the **Georgian National Ballet Sukhishvili**—and not to be confused with the more classical State Ballet of Georgia—the company was officially founded, in 1945, by the husband-and-wife team Iliko Sukhishvili, a folk dancer, and Nino Ramishvili, a ballerina. It is still run by their grandchildren. Sukhishvili and Ramishvili drew inspiration from the countryside and the court. Their company became known for the polar attributes of bravura and delicacy. To this day, the men clank swords, leap over one another, run on the tips of their soft boots, and turn on their knees. The women stream across the floor, propelled by tiny steps obscured by long dresses. The costumes, many referencing Soliko Virsaladze’s original designs, are both sumptuous and subtly detailed.

The dance “Samaia” (pictured) was inspired by a fresco of Queen Tamar, Georgia’s first female ruler during the medieval period. In it, three women, crowned and bejewelled, as majestic and impassive as Byzantine icons, rotate at a regally slow speed. From the nineteen-sixties through the early two-thousands, the troupe performed often in the U.S., but in recent years its visits have been more scarce. Touring the country anew, it makes its [Carnegie Hall](#) début on Jan. 17.—*Brian Seibert*



About Town

Folk

In 2020, the singer-songwriter **Cassandra Jenkins** was ready to quit music. Kismet wouldn’t allow it. She ended up making her 2021 album, “An Overview on Phenomenal Nature,” because she’d already scheduled the studio sessions, but the resulting LP, a breathtaking display of ambient folk, opened up a realm of new possibilities. Jenkins has since evolved into a chamber-pop auteur. Her 2024 follow-up, “My Light, My Destroyer,”

honed her songcraft and magnified the intensity of her sound world through field recordings and more robust instrumentation. Jenkins's music is fixated on space, in both the cosmic and the immersive sense, testing the interplay between bioacoustics and sound design, and the ways heavenly bodies help put life on Earth into perspective.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Stone Circle Theatre](#); Jan. 17.)

Movies

On Dec. 17, the day **Rosa von Praunheim**, a pioneering filmmaker of queer life, died, at eighty-three, the Criterion Channel announced that his documentaries “[Tally Brown, New York](#)” (1979) and “[Fassbinder’s Women](#)” (2000) would be available to stream as of January. Both films are revelatory portraits of heroic artists whose successes proved nonetheless thorny. Brown, a classically trained singer, acted in films by Andy Warhol in the sixties and became a cabaret star; when Praunheim filmed her, she was injured and idled yet glamorous and insightful. As for Fassbinder, who died in 1982, at thirty-seven, after making nearly forty features in fourteen years, Praunheim interviews many of his key collaborators, who discuss the emotional demands and the self-punishing methods that fuelled his meteoric career.—*Richard Brody*

Art



An installation view of “Joe Overstreet: To the North Star.” Art works by Joe Overstreet / Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery / © 2025 Joe Overstreet / ARS; Photograph by Sam Glass

Joe Overstreet (1933-2019) was a restlessly inventive painter. His exhibition “To the North Star”—a footnote to the artist’s first major survey

in decades, presented last year by Houston's Menil Collection—offers a small sample of his experiments. In the nineteen-sixties, Overstreet made shaped canvases whose *sui-generis* forms both contain and clash with the ancient art-inspired motifs rendered on them. Next, he got really radical, by hanging, stretching, and draping his canvases into soft sculptures that evoke tarps and quilts. Two such works are the showstoppers here: cosmic color wheels that fuse radar screens with mandalas. In the nineties, Overstreet returned to more traditional formats, but his impastoed, layered surfaces retain a visceral power.—*Jillian Steinhauer* ([Eric Firestone](#); through Jan. 24.)

Dance

Many will remember Daniil Simkin for his technically brilliant dancing at American Ballet Theatre. He is now a freelancer and a producer; his latest project, “**Sons of Echo**,” is an evening of dances made by female choreographers for a quintet of distinguished male dancers: Simkin, the Cuban dazzler Osiel Gouneo, the South African-born Siphesihle November (now at the National Ballet of Canada), Jeffrey Cirio (English National Ballet), and the affable Danish virtuoso Alban Lendorf. “Real Truth” is by the New York City Ballet dancer Tiler Peck, a virtuoso in her own right. The éminence grise here is the minimalist choreographer Lucinda Childs, whose “Notes” is a distillation of her “Notes of Longing,” which premiered last year in the Netherlands.—*Marina Harss* ([Joyce Theatre](#); Jan. 14-25.)

Post-Rock Opera

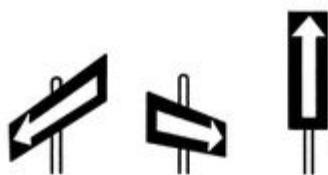


“*What to Wear*,” at BAM. Photograph by Douglas Mason

Unsurprisingly, the late experimental-theatre maven Richard Foreman had a distaste for, as he put it, “normal narrative.” Instead, he preferred to focus on “the depth of the moment.” In 2006, at the REDCAT in Los Angeles, Foreman sank into a series of moments that made up his post-rock opera **“What to Wear.”** Created with the composer Michael Gordon, “What to Wear” is a wealth of unmoored curiosities, including a giant duck that plays golf and a group of “Madeline X” figures who attempt to answer the titular question. The avant-garde phenomenon returns to the stage, as a part of the Prototype Festival—with a little help from Bang on a Can and St. Vincent. Surrender the normal and feel the depth of the moment.—*Jane Bua ([BAM](#); Jan. 15-18.)*

Movies

Gus Van Sant’s new drama, **“Dead Man’s Wire,”** eagerly but superficially details a peculiar real-life spectacle. In 1977, when a small-time Indianapolis businessman named Tony Kirsitsis (Bill Skarsgård) blames a mortgage company for his losses on a real-estate venture, he takes the company’s president, Richard Hall (Dacre Montgomery), hostage. Holed up in his own modest apartment, Tony threatens to kill Richard unless the firm offers an apology and financial compensation. Van Sant considers the role of a d.j. (Colman Domingo) and of a TV reporter (Myha’la) in the crisis but, above all, focusses on the gamesmanship of the two antagonists in mortal peril. Unfortunately, the movie lacks a point of view. With Al Pacino as Richard’s domineering father, the company’s real boss.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*



Pick Three

Jennifer Wilson on cold-weather comforts.

1. I can count on one hand the number of times I've skied, but I identify as a ski obsessive. I love the slopes primarily as a setting—for everything from marital discord ("Force Majeure") to celebrity intrigue (Gwyneth Paltrow's testimony in her Utah ski trial warranted a second Oscar). When I'm not listening to ski podcasts like "[Big Stick Energy](#)," I'm reading "[Hard Pack](#)," an edgy new ski magazine. Pick up Issue 6 for a raunchy short story about a bearskin rug as well as serious reporting about the bacchanalian parties that close out the ski season across the Rocky Mountains. Après ski comes the flood.

2. I can't see children sledding without being reminded of "[A Joke](#)," the short story by Anton Chekhov that simultaneously captures the terror and the thrill of young love. Little Nadia is afraid to go sledding on the big hill until a neighbor boy pressures her to go with him. Against the howling of the wind, she hears, in a whisper so soft she isn't sure it's real, "I love you" (the Russian verb "to love" has an aeolian *ooh* to it). Once safely at the bottom, Nadia looks at her neighbor turned sledding companion and says, "Let us slide down again." We've all been there, Nadia.

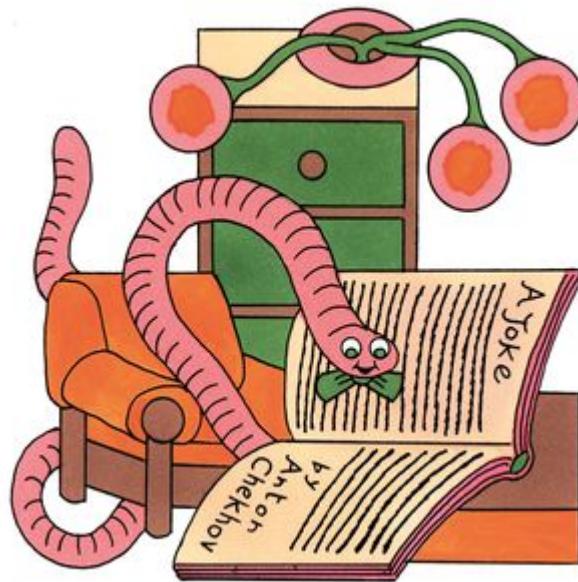


Illustration by Marco Quadri

3. Another tale of wind and wistfulness is Aki Kaurismäki's "[Fallen Leaves](#)." Part of the Finnish director's "Proletariat" series, the film revolves around a construction worker who gets the number of a pretty, recently fired

supermarket cashier only to lose the piece of paper to the gusty streets of Helsinki. Will they find each other by the time the leaves change, or will this be another cold winter alone? It's a rom-com, Nordic-style.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [What Emma Stone learned from Diane Keaton](#)
- [The entire history on planet Earth](#)
- [Odessa A'zion loves cheese-wrapped pickles](#)

[Brian Seibert](#) has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of “[What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing](#),” which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

[Sheldon Pearce](#) is a music writer for *The New Yorker’s Goings On* newsletter.

[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of “[Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard](#).”

[Jillian Steinhauer](#) received a 2023 Rabkin Prize for visual-arts writing. She teaches in the Journalism and Design program at the New School.

[Marina Harss](#) has been contributing dance coverage to *The New Yorker* since 2004. She is the author of “[The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky’s Life in Ballet](#).”

[Jane Buja](#) is a member of *The New Yorker’s* editorial staff who covers classical music for *Goings On*. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*.

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[**The Food Scene**](#)

All Hail the Jamaican Patty

A pastry as ubiquitous in New York City as pizza or bagels is getting its turn on the higher end.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

January 4, 2026



Jamaican patties stuffed into coco bread, at Chef Kwame's Patty Palace. Photographs by Shawn Michael Jones for *The New Yorker*

[You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)

The Jamaican patty is, I propose, a culinary avatar of New York on par with the hot dog, the pizza slice, and the bagel, those other portable totems of immigrant ingenuity and the city's knack for making the quick address of hunger into something like a civic religion. Today, in at least four of the five boroughs, you're always within two blocks of a patty ready to be bitten into, whether it's microwaved behind the counter at a bodega or a slice joint, or pulled from the steam cabinet at a dedicated patty shop: a flaky, golden half-moon filled with curried meat or fish or vegetables or whatever else can be coaxed into its turmeric-stained folds. As the knish descends from the metropolitan pantheon—ave atque vale to that Eastern European stalwart, its crust filled with onion-scented potato and the ghost of another century's promises—the patty, a thrilling, dynamic distillation of South

Asian, African, and Caribbean influences, should take its rightful place as the city's most iconic pastry.

At Kingston Tropical, in the Bronx's Wakefield neighborhood, open since the nineteen-seventies, the patties burst with meat and veggies, a hearty snack for around five bucks. Little Miss Muffin 'N' Her Stuffin, on the edge of Prospect Heights, makes barbecue-chicken patties that cannot be beat. Natural Blend, a plant-based Brooklyn mini-chain, turns out lentil-filled patties that are out of this world. The pastry's stature in the city was further boosted this year with the arrival of Juici Patties, a beloved Jamaican chain that opened outposts in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. Unlike the patties at the ubiquitous chain Golden Krust, which are reliably just O.K., Juici's patties are quick-service perfection: the fillings generous and vibrantly spiced, the texture a perfect uniform savory mush. The \$4.25 spicy beef has a broad, meaty flavor spiked with the curry-floral fieriness of Scotch-bonnet chiles. It's even better with the addition of a slice of American cheese, which melts around the beef and adds a facet of creamy sweetness. At any half-decent patty shop, you can get your pastry inserted into a big, fluffy piece of coco bread, a squishy Caribbean roll made with coconut milk. I love the carb-on-carb opulence of this sandwich, not least because the bread neatly contains all the pastry shards that otherwise tend to explode out with every bite, making an enormous mess of your lap or shirtfront.

The biggest story of the Jamaican patty lately has been its inroads into the higher end, following the same trajectory as pizza and bagels before it. Perhaps the first New York chef to place the patty on a pedestal was [Kwame Onwuachi](#), in 2022, when he opened [Tatiana](#), his glittering Lincoln Center restaurant, with a menu that included miniature, semicircular pastries filled with spicy curried goat. Onwuachi is a poetic interpreter of New York's Black culinary vernacular, and his upscale patties shared a menu with versions of other dishes generally considered unworthy of *haute-cuisine* attention—corner-store snack cakes, a truffled chopped cheese. But earlier this year he democratized his vision with Chef Kwame's Patty Palace, an apparent chain in the making, which began with a stall at Citi Field and recently expanded to Union Square's Time Out Market food hall. The patties at the Palace are full-sized and set into big, steamy wedges of gently sweet coco bread. Similar to the patties served at Tatiana, they come with a

pair of sauces—here, it's a slathering of jerk-spiced barbecue sauce and a tart green hot sauce, along with a bright tangle of ginger-cabbage slaw. Whether you've chosen a flaky pastry stuffed with piquant, cumin-scented curried chicken, or a doughy baked shell wrapped around bland and mushy jerk-spiced mushrooms, the forceful toppings tend to overpower whatever's going on inside the patties themselves. Still, the sandwiches are awfully good.

The leader of the fancy-patty movement, for me, though, is Bar Kabawa, the swanky, sexy East Village Daiquiri joint that's attached to [Kabawa](#), the chef Paul Carmichael's marvellous Caribbean tasting-menu spot. Carmichael's patties are cheffy and ambitious, for sure, with a dazzling array of creative fillings including curried crab with squash; pepper-pot-spiced duck with foie gras; and an unctuous blend of short rib, conch, and bone marrow. Some of the patties come with laminated Haitian-style casements that are burnished in a deep fryer. Others, with breadier wrappers, are baked. The prices are high—on a recent visit, a patty filled with kale and oats (richer and livelier than it sounds) was ten dollars, and one containing a briny, spicy mixture of lobster and herring cost more than twenty. (Coco bread, if you're feeling sandwich-y, was an extra four dollars.) Somehow, despite their decadence, these pastries never feel one bit haughty or pretentious: Carmichael understands that a patty isn't for fussing over. It's for tearing into. It's for devouring.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

Jamaican and other Caribbean immigrants brought the patty to New York beginning in the sixties, and it is still a staple of the city's West Indian enclaves. It's Caribbean food, Black food, American food—and, like so much of what makes New York's cuisine vital, it comes from communities whose contributions to the city often go unrecognized until they become impossible to ignore. In that sense, there's a bit of poignant irony in the patty's current elevation: it takes a moment of trendiness, of pageantry and gussying up, for the patty to claim its crown. My own first Jamaican patty came from a corner store on 111th Street. It was shoved into my hands one

hungover morning by a friend who had been living in the city a year or so longer than I had, and who had a lot to teach me. That patty, almost certainly mass-produced by Tower Isles, the city's ubiquitous patty distributor, remains my benchmark: warm as a kitten, neon-yellow, with a gooey filling that tasted mostly of salt and hot pepper. The great and grand patties of the new generation aren't better than that, though neither are they worse: they're just fancier, louder, higher-wattage. The Jamaican patty has made it into the ballpark, thanks to Onwuachi; perhaps next it'll be printed on T-shirts, or used as Big Apple shorthand in the movies, or added to the ranks of *MOMA*'s N.Y.C.-themed collection of Christmas ornaments, alongside the Anthora coffee cup and the yellow cab and the cranky pigeon. But the patty is what matters, the joy of it, the heat and the flake and the bite. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, has received multiple James Beard Awards, including one in 2025 for her [*Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi*](#).

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The Talk of the Town

- **Donald Trump Was Never an Isolationist**

He once defied the G.O.P. by blasting military interventions. But what looked like anti-interventionism is really a preference for power freed from the pretense of principle.

[Comment](#)

Donald Trump Was Never an Isolationist

He once defied the G.O.P. by blasting military interventions. But what looked like anti-interventionism is really a preference for power freed from the pretense of principle.

By [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

January 10, 2026



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

There aren't many moments in Donald Trump's political career that could be called highlights. But one occurred during the 2016 Republican primary debate in South Carolina, when Trump addressed the prickly issue of the Iraq War. It had been a "big, fat mistake," he charged. And the politicians who started it? "They lied."

Podcast: The New Yorker Radio Hour

[David Remnick talks with Daniel Immerwahr about Venezuela.](#)

The audience hated this. Trump's fellow-debaters Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio argued that George W. Bush—Jeb's brother—had kept the country safe. Trump plowed on loudly through the booing. It was as if an “angry Code Pink-style protester” had crashed the Republican debate, the journalist Michael Grunwald wrote.

Trump hadn't stood against the Iraq War from the start, as he has frequently claimed. (When asked, in the run-up to the invasion, whether he supported it, he replied, “Yeah, I guess so.”) But by 2004 he truly was opposed. He scoffed at the notion that the war would achieve anything. What was the point of “people coming back with no arms and legs” and “all those Iraqi kids who've been blown to pieces?” he asked. “All of the reasons for the war were blatantly wrong.”

Skepticism came easily to Trump, who had long been hostile to mainstream foreign policy. He made his political début, in 1987, by taking out full-page ads in several papers to complain of Washington’s “monumental spending” on defense for allies like Japan and Saudi Arabia. The foundations of U.S. supremacy since 1945—the aid packages, alliances, trade pacts, and basing arrangements that make up what the former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates calls the “symphony of power”—have all seemed to Trump like a colossal waste.

Critics have called Trump an isolationist. Given the unconcealed delight he takes in dropping bombs on foreign lands (seven countries in 2025 alone), that can't be right. A better diagnosis is that Trump doesn't think the United States should seek to superintend global affairs, to take responsibility for the operation of the system. “American foreign policy elites convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best interests of our country,” his recently released National Security Strategy explains. “Yet the affairs of other countries are our concern only if their activities directly threaten our interests.”

At times, Trump has veered oddly close to the left, which has opposed trade deals (“neoliberalism”), military interventions (“warmongering”), the bipartisan foreign-policy consensus (“the Blob”), and the U.S. policing of the planet (“empire”). In his 2016 race against Hillary Clinton, he scored points by spotlighting her support of the Iraq War. “In the end, the so-called

nation-builders wrecked far more nations than they built,” he said last year, “and the interventionists were intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves.”

What distinguishes Trump from the left, of course, are his narrow nationalism and his love of raw force. “I’m the most militaristic person there is,” he has boasted. He relabelled the Department of Defense the Department of War, and appointed a Secretary, Pete Hegseth, who has promised to give “America’s warriors” the freedom to “kill people and break things.” Forget the symphony of power; Trump just wants to crash the cymbals.

Trump’s second term has been cacophonous with threats—to acquire Greenland, ethnically cleanse Gaza, make a state of Canada, throw the world economy into convulsions. This is a self-conscious flight from principles toward what he calls the “iron laws that have always determined global power.”

Hence this past weekend’s assault on Venezuela, in which U.S. forces launched air strikes on Caracas and nabbed the head of state, President Nicolás Maduro. (At least a hundred people were killed, local authorities say.) Trump claims that his goal is to punish Maduro for heading a “vast criminal network” that has brought “colossal amounts of deadly and illicit drugs into the United States.” But this is hard to swallow. The drug that is killing people, fentanyl, is almost entirely produced in Mexico, and the drug Venezuela does play a (minor) part in transporting, cocaine, goes mainly from there to Europe. Also, didn’t Trump just pardon Juan Orlando Hernández, the former Honduran President, who had been sentenced to forty-five years in federal prison for conspiring to import four hundred tons of cocaine into the United States?

The pretext frayed further as Trump started speaking covetously of Venezuela’s oil. But who needs pretexts? Trump has spurned the sort of global influence that required the appearance of fairness. He favors instead the power of the bully, which is best flexed by arbitrary attacks. The message these send is clear: You could be next.

Even Venezuelans thrilled to see Maduro gone have reason to be unnerved. It's as if China had bombed Quantico, placed Trump in shackles, and whisked him to Shanghai for trial. No matter how much some people in the United States loathe Trump, they would, at minimum, have questions.

It's hard not to think, in this moment, of George W. Bush. He spoke forcefully against "nation-building" at one of his debates with Al Gore, in 2000. "I just don't think it's the role of the United States to walk into a country and say, We do it this way, so should you," he explained. Even as he went to war after 9/11, he plainly hoped to prevail through air strikes. Only when these failed to achieve their desired ends did he launch, in Afghanistan and Iraq, precisely the sort of protracted, bloody, and unpopular occupations he'd warned against.

Venezuela could become Trump's Iraq. Once again, a U.S. President is railing against "terrorists," eying oil reserves, flouting international law, and hunting down foreign dictators on factually dubious grounds. And, once again, fantasies of surgical strikes are yielding to messy realities. Watching Trump announce Maduro's capture, you could almost see the mission creep happening in real time. After glorying in the military operation, Trump contemplated its aftermath. "We're not gonna just do this with Maduro, then leave," he said. There might be a "second wave" of attacks. Either way, the United States would have to "run the country" and "rebuild their whole infrastructure." Trump was, he declared, "not afraid of boots on the ground."

A reporter asked: How does running Venezuela put America first? "I think it is because we wanna surround ourself with good neighbors," Trump answered. Speaking of which, "Cuba is gonna be something we'll end up talking about." The next day, he expanded his threats to include Colombia.

And so it begins. The press conference could have used a dash of 2016-era Trump. Someone to shout, "They're lying," and "This is a big, fat mistake." ♦

Daniel Immerwahr, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "[How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States](#)."

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Reporting & Essays

- **[How WhatsApp Took Over the Global Conversation](#)**

The platform has become a core technology around the world, relied on by governments and extended families alike. What are we all doing there?

- **[Denmark Is Sick of Being Bullied by Trump](#)**

The U.S., once Denmark's closest ally, is threatening to steal Greenland and attacking the country's wind-power industry. Is this a permanent breakup?

- **[How Marco Rubio Went from “Little Marco” to Trump’s Foreign-Policy Enabler](#)**

As Secretary of State, the President's onetime foe now offers him lavish displays of public praise—and will execute his agenda in Venezuela and around the globe.

- **[The Backcountry Rescue Squad at America’s Busiest National Park](#)**

In the Great Smoky Mountains, an auxiliary team of élite outdoorsmen answers the call when park-goers' hikes, climbs, and rafting adventures go wrong.

[**Annals of Technology**](#)

How WhatsApp Took Over the Global Conversation

The platform has become a core technology around the world, relied on by governments and extended families alike. What are we all doing there?

By [Sam Knight](#)

January 12, 2026



The app carries the feelings of three billion people—and unthinkable power to shape society. Illustration by Jennifer Daniel

The first WhatsApps weren't WhatsApps. In the spring of 2009, Jan Koum, a thirty-three-year-old computer programmer, was trying to get people interested in a product he had developed for Apple's App Store, which had opened the previous summer. Koum tweaked his app's name every few days—from Status App to Smartphone Status to iPhone Status—so that it would appear among the newest releases. The idea was that the app would show people what their contacts were doing before they called or messaged them. Maybe they were available, or at the gym, or sleeping. Between five

and ten thousand people downloaded Koum's app, but hardly anyone used it. They just called whomever they were going to call. Koum has a dry, somewhat brooding sensibility. "The app had no usability or functionality that was useful," he said. He wondered what he was doing with his life.

That June, Apple enabled push notifications on iPhones. Now, when one of Koum's users updated his status, it was broadcast to all of his contacts who were also on the app. People began to share real-time information: they were going to a bar, or to a movie. During the summer, Koum worked with Igor Solomennikov, a coder based in Moscow, to add a messaging function. They used open-source software and enlisted some friends to test the system.

Koum was in his office, on the second floor of his house, in Santa Clara, in Silicon Valley, when he saw that it was working. "It registered itself, connected, and messages started flowing between two people," he recalled. "I was, like, Holy shit, I just built a messenger for iPhone." WhatsApp became WhatsApp. "Almost everybody went from, like, Oh, this is useless to Oh, this is very useful," Koum said. The network came alive.

The first WhatsApp I sent to my wife, Polly, was a picture of some hills in Devon, in the southwest of England, taken from a graveyard outside a church. It was late June, 2014. I forwarded the image from a friend, who was at a wedding we were unable to attend, because our daughter Aggie had just been born, in London. The wedding had been threatened by rain. Now the weather had cleared.

WhatsApp was astonishing because it was basically free. (It had a one-dollar annual fee until 2016.) When I started using the app, texting an image on my British cellphone cost thirty-seven pence. WhatsApp also worked notably better than normal texting. I sent our friends at the wedding a picture of my wife, asleep with our six-day-old daughter, while I watched tennis on TV.

We had a new baby and were renovating our house. At first, we used WhatsApp mainly for images: of Aggie, of radiators, of floorboards. But gradually the app became our primary means of communication. In the past eleven years, Polly and I have exchanged some fifty-four thousand

WhatsApps, amounting to about three hundred and eighty thousand words, which is longer than “The Brothers Karamazov.”

[23/10/2018, 17:17:00] Sam: I shut Aggie’s fingers in the car door

[23/10/2018, 17:17:01] Sam: Yup

[23/10/2018, 17:17:08] Sam: Pretty sure not broken

[23/10/2018, 17:17:17] Polly: Oh dear

My sister created a family WhatsApp group, for relatives on both sides of the Atlantic, on July 8, 2017. By then, I was using the app for work. British politics and, arguably, the British state are coördinated by WhatsApp. Ninety-two per cent of U.K. internet users are on the platform. Police officers banter on it. The National Health Service relies on it. On the afternoon of March 13, 2020—ten days before the U.K. entered its first *COVID* lockdown—Dominic Cummings, a senior adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, formed a five-man WhatsApp group that came to more or less run the country.

That fall, a reporter from the *Daily Mail* asked a government spokesperson, via WhatsApp, whether it was true that national policies were being conceived this way. The spokesperson WhatsApped Simon Case, the country’s most senior civil servant, with a suggested response: “the PM does not make government decisions via WhatsApp.” Case replied on WhatsApp less than a minute later: “Erm—is that true? I am not sure it is. I think we will have to ignore.”

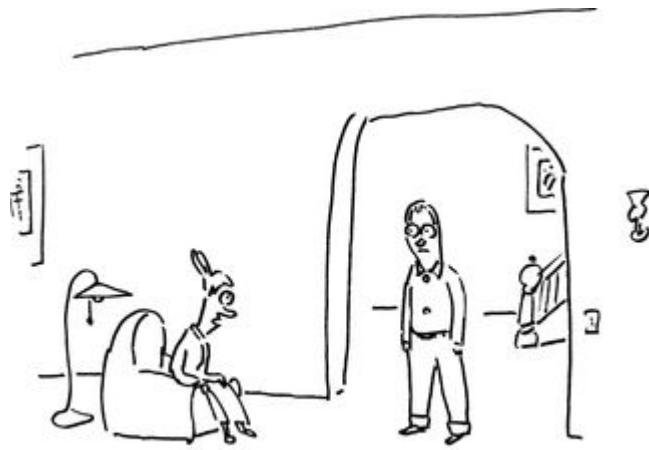
Koum grew up in a village outside Kyiv. He moved to California with his mother in the early nineties, when he was sixteen. His father, who worked in construction, stayed in Ukraine. “To instant-message my dad then would have been something,” he told an interviewer. His mother had cancer, and she and Koum lived on welfare for a while. In high school, Koum read “TCP/IP Illustrated,” by W. Richard Stevens, a six-hundred-page guide to the protocols of the internet. Then he read it again.

When WhatsApp was up and running, Koum was joined by Brian Acton, a former colleague at Yahoo, who became his co-founder. They wrote the software in Erlang, a programming language developed in the eighties by computer scientists at the Swedish telecom company Ericsson. The aim was

for WhatsApp to work better than cellphone text messaging—short-message service (S.M.S.)—which was taking off in the U.S., years after it had become popular in Europe and Japan. S.M.S. was lucrative for telecom companies, worth around a hundred billion dollars a year. But it was a mediocre product. You were limited to a hundred and sixty characters. Longer messages were broken up and sometimes delivered out of turn. Sending photos—especially to different brands of phones—was a gamble. Koum visited Europe often and understood how much people liked texting and how frequently the technology fell short. “You would have to call the person the next day and be, like, ‘Hey, did you get my S.M.S.?’ And half of the time the answer would be no,” Koum said. “The message was just dropped on the floor.”

The idea with WhatsApp was that it would feel like you had used it before. The logo was a combination of the iPhone’s dialer and messaging icons, against a vivid green that was just a shade or two darker than Apple’s. “We wanted it to look good next to the native phone,” Anton Borzov, WhatsApp’s first designer, explained. Borzov ran a small studio, called Tokyo, in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro. From the outset, Koum and Acton paid attention to populations in emerging markets. They hired Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesian, and Spanish speakers, to make local-language versions of the app for Brazil, Indonesia, and Mexico.

They built WhatsApp not just for iPhones but also for the BlackBerrys and Windows phones and Nokias that were common in Africa and South Asia. Engineers and designers assigned to WhatsApp’s various versions had to use those devices for their personal communication, to be alert to glitches and problems on the network. Chris Peiffer, the company’s first full-time U.S. employee, recalls being issued a bright-pink Nokia that was popular among Indonesian teen-agers. “We just really prided ourselves on: No, we’re going to make this work,” he said. “The messages are going to get through.”



"Cuffs? I don't know who you are with cuffs."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Koum loathed surveillance, which he grew up with in the U.S.S.R., and advertising, which he grew up mostly without. He kept a pair of walkie-talkies on his desk, to remind him of the simplicity of what he was trying to create, alongside a note written by Acton: “No ads! No games! No gimmicks!” When Koum thought of a person’s online connections, he pictured his grandfather, in Ukraine, leafing through his address book. “That’s the most intimate social network,” he said. “And it’s already there on your phone.” WhatsApp had no avatars or *pins* or passwords. Your online identity was yourself. During 2011, the number of users rose from ten million to a hundred million. New Year’s Eve was the busiest day of the year, as a rolling wave of midnights—through Jakarta and Delhi and Rio—hit the servers. In the spring of 2014, when the app had five hundred million users and a staff of about fifty, Koum and Acton agreed to sell WhatsApp to Facebook, for nineteen billion dollars. Koum signed the paperwork against the wall of the social-services office in Mountain View.

In the fall of 1914, Bronisław Malinowski, a young Polish ethnographer, began to study island communities off the coast of Papua New Guinea. “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away,” he wrote in the opening pages of “Argonauts of the Western Pacific,” an early classic of social anthropology, published in 1922. Malinowski intended to explain “the imponderabilia of actual life” on islands. Central among the imponderabilia of “Argonauts” was the kula, a

circular form of trade—of necklaces and armbands, made from shells—that took place among the Trobriand Islands.

Malinowski spent a lot of time thinking about language. In an essay from 1923, he observed that much of what people say—whether on the Trobriand Islands or in European drawing rooms—was devoid of any obvious meaning. Saying “Ah, here you are!” in Kraków was the same as saying “Whenst comest thou?” on Kiriwina, the largest of the Trobriands. It was about conveying sociability, rather than thoughts or ideas. Malinowski called this “phatic communion,” and he believed that it was essential to human society. It expressed “the fundamental tendency which makes the mere presence of others a necessity for man.”

WhatsApp is phatic before it is anything else. It is an architecture of presence. It winks with life, informing you who is online and when they were last seen. Tiny bundles of data—relayed on the app’s servers through sockets, or continuous connections—tell you that your best friend is typing. Koum introduced “read receipts,” to show that texts were being sent and seen. At first, he imagined miniature icons that would represent a message’s odyssey through the network—showing servers and hard drives—but Borzov suggested something simpler: one check mark to show that WhatsApp had received your message and two to show that it had been delivered. When the message was opened, the check marks turned blue.

Blue check marks have saved some lives (WhatsApp is often the platform of choice for disaster responders) and tested many relationships. Whether to respond to a message that someone knows you have read with a heart, a thumbs-up, or a crying-face emoji is a modern-day imponderable, although I’m pretty sure that Malinowski would have taken a hard line on the subject. (In phatic conversation, he notes, “taciturnity means not only unfriendliness but directly a bad character.”) WhatsApp’s settings allow you to opt out of read receipts and seeing when your friends were last online, but that goes against the convivial spirit of the app. “I find it annoying,” Koum told me. I turned my check marks off years ago.

Being able to say something without saying anything makes WhatsApp extremely popular among both Finns, who are comfortable with silence, and Brazilians, who overshare. “We are not too talkative and social,” Sakari

Taipale, a social scientist at the University of Jyväskylä, in central Finland, told me. “I think that WhatsApp is serving that very well, because you don’t need to be outgoing.” Every once in a while, Taipale’s wife shares a photograph with him and their grownup children in their family WhatsApp group—normally of a happy memory—but no one feels any pressure to reply. “It’s just enough that we have seen the thing,” Taipale said. “We all recall it at the same time. I think that’s a kind of communion.”

Linguists enjoy studying WhatsApp for the ways that it mimics—and reconfigures—conversations in real life. Like all forms of texting, it can be asynchronous or very synchronous indeed. Utterance chunking (when you send a blast of short messages without waiting for a reply) is generally considered more emotionally engaging than a smoothly punctuated paragraph. In 2019, Katharina König, a lecturer in German linguistics at the University of Münster, observed that WhatsApp conversations were more fluid and less chronological in form than those on S.M.S. People like to establish whether a contact is online and open to a directionless chat before unleashing the chunks.

Some people are better at texting than talking. Others leave voice notes that are forty-five minutes long. Some WhatsApp exchanges, especially chunky ones, can give rise to misunderstandings that would not occur in spoken conversation. Will Cathcart has been the head of WhatsApp since 2019. When his wife was pregnant, they texted about what to name their daughter. They settled on a name only to discover, after their child was born, that they disagreed on how to say Naomi. “It took us a while to figure out what had happened,” Cathcart said.

Sociologists who study WhatsApp family groups sometimes call them W.F.G.s. In 2023, Galit Alkobi and Natalia Khvorostianov, of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, published a study of Israeli W.F.G.s and suggested that there were three archetypal roles in these groups: kin-keepers, who are committed to online family life; flickerers, who are seemingly indifferent; and silent warm experts, who are problem solvers. We all know who we are. Alkobi conducted forty-three interviews with family members about their W.F.G.s and found that groups encompassing three generations showed extremely similar traits: problematic-discourse

avoidance, an exaggerated writing style (exuberant celebrations, morose commiserations), and routine ejections. Alkobi compared removing a problematic relative—or removing oneself—from the W.F.G. to someone slamming a door during an argument. “Like when I was a teen-ager and my father wouldn’t get me something,” Alkobi said. “I will slam the door and not talk with him one hour, two hours, three hours.”

Removing (and readmitting) loved ones from a W.F.G. is a social ritual that now transcends most cultures. In 2021, Gabriel Pereira, a graduate student at Monash University Malaysia, encountered the memorable case of the Palmilla family, whose chat, “Global Family v2,” was formed after the administrator of “Palmilla Gang Gang”—the previous version—removed everybody from the group except himself. Richard Karanja, a journalist and an I.T. entrepreneur in Kenya, told me that, in his W.F.G. of some sixty relatives, people get suspended for either bad behavior or when the rest of the family is planning to be nice to them in some way. The outcast must guess their fate. “We usually give them a cold shoulder for the time being,” Karanja explained. “We do not leak out the reason for the removal.”

Studies have shown that WhatsApp users are more likely to express both happiness and sadness on the platform than on other, more public-facing apps, like X or Instagram. The only downside of the intimacy of human presence is confronting the reality that the other person is not present after all. In 2019, researchers reported that Syrian refugees in the Netherlands spent up to three hours a day on WhatsApp, video-calling and chatting with family members caught up in war and violence at home. Perceived as constantly available, thanks to stable Dutch internet service, the refugees described a state of connected helplessness. “For me it’s really difficult to get all that information,” one interviewee said. “I’m here and they are there. But I have no option, I have to listen.”

The entanglement of WhatsApp in everyday feeling makes it an inviting place for theorizing about the human condition. Behavioral scientists have posited that Fijians might be more likely than Indians to experience loneliness on WhatsApp, because they come from a more collectivist culture, which makes the distinction between digital and lived relationships more acute. One day, I called an old friend, who is the most efficacious

WhatsApper I know, and she described a particular feeling that can overtake her on the weekend, when the rest of her family is busy and she unexpectedly has a moment to herself. She should read a book or take a walk, but she checks WhatsApp instead. “WhatsApp is the promise of something else,” she said. She can gauge how low she is feeling by how much she wants to find a warm message lying there, unread.

linus digim’Rina grew up on Kiriwina, in the Trobriand Islands, and later became the head of the anthropology department at the University of Papua New Guinea. He first studied the work of Malinowski as a student, in the eighties. When we spoke recently, through a faint connection on WhatsApp, digim’Rina said that Malinowski’s principal observations about concepts of exchange on the islands have held up pretty well over time.

It was evening in Port Moresby, where digim’Rina lives. He is in his sixties now, and tries to get back to Kiriwina every year. He explained that his main way of keeping in touch with life on the Trobriand Islands was through a pair of WhatsApp groups: one related to local politics, which had about three hundred members, and another that was purely social, and much larger. (WhatsApp groups are limited to a thousand and twenty-four people.)

Phatic communion was alive in the place of its discovery. digim’Rina said that it was customary, in Trobriand WhatsApp culture, to enter a chat with the words “I miss you” or “It’s been a long, long while” if you lived away from the islands. People liked rude jokes, as they always have. “I’m sure Malinowski didn’t miss that,” digim’Rina said. He enjoyed the politics group because it had a sense of focus, but the purely social chatter on WhatsApp was, to be honest, phatic all the way down. “It’s everywhere, anything, whatever,” digim’Rina said. “I can’t see the value of sitting there, let’s say wasting my time, just trying to know what each and every one is talking about.”

WhatsApp delivers a hundred billion messages a day, around the same number as there are stars in the Milky Way. The platform has more than three billion active users each month—pretty much the same number as Facebook, more than YouTube, and roughly twice as many as Apple’s iMessage. If you exclude China, where WhatsApp is banned, the app serves

approximately half the human population older than fourteen. About three-quarters of WhatsApp users are on Android devices, with the rest on iPhones—which more or less reflects the global smartphone market. One reason that WhatsApp has traditionally lagged in the U.S. is because of the unusual dominance of iPhones. But that is changing. Last year, the U.S. was one of the app’s fastest-growing markets, with the number of monthly users exceeding a hundred million for the first time.

For a couple of years after the Facebook acquisition, WhatsApp kept its own offices and leadership. In the spring of 2016, Acton and Koum introduced end-to-end encryption, which meant that messages and calls were readable only by their recipients. Just a few months later, however, the app disclosed that customers’ phone numbers, device information, and data about their usage would now be available to the wider “Facebook family of companies.” Acton left soon afterward. Later, he urged his social-media followers to #deletefacebook, and helped grow Signal, a privacy-focussed messaging app. (WhatsApp and Signal use the same encryption protocol, but Signal does not collect as much metadata.) In 2018, Koum announced that he was retiring to collect air-cooled Porsches.

If WhatsApp stops working, the guy who has to fix it is Dick Brouwer, a tall Dutchman with a master’s in aerospace engineering, who works out of Building 23 at Meta’s headquarters, in Menlo Park. “It’s kind of a weird idea,” Brouwer told me. “If something goes wrong somewhere in the world, at the end of the line, they’ll call me.” Brouwer grew up in Wassenaar, a coastal suburb near The Hague, where he dreamed of becoming an animator at Pixar. He thinks of WhatsApp as a very large collection of very small pipes, and that his team’s job is to keep as many of them as clear as possible at all times. “Stuff needs to flow,” Brouwer said. “If there’s a hiccup, there’s a problem, things are piling up on one side. We don’t want them to start overflowing.”

The numbers that Brouwer checks constantly are how many users are on the platform at a given moment—typically seven hundred million to almost a billion—and the flow of messages on the servers, which hovers between one and two million per second. “It’s an astonishingly stable metric,” Brouwer said. “A lot needs to happen for that to actually change.” The

busiest minutes in WhatsApp’s history occurred at the end of the World Cup final, in Qatar, in December, 2022. Because it wasn’t New Year’s Eve, Brouwer and his team weren’t really prepared. They sat at their laptops in the Bay Area, watching the messages spike to twenty-five million per second. The pipes flowed. “The big success here was that we didn’t do anything,” he said.

During other emergencies—when power fails on the Iberian Peninsula, as it did last April, or Russia threatens to block the app, which it did in the fall—Brouwer and a small team he calls the Graybeards use Erlang to rewrite WhatsApp’s code while it is still running, to redirect traffic, or to modify how the app is working in specific places. If the network is getting overwhelmed, they can reroute messages through specific data centers or disable features, like the auto-downloading of images. Making changes on the fly is known as a hot reload. “We try not to do that often, because it’s very dangerous,” Brouwer said.

There are fewer than a hundred engineers on WhatsApp’s infrastructure team. They wield godlike powers over human communication, but they spend most of their time solving problems that the rest of us do not register. In 2024, Brouwer and his team implemented a way to send large files, like images or videos, separately from their smaller encryption keys. If I text my wife, who is upstairs, a picture of a note on our fridge, my photo will, most likely, bounce off a relay station in Birmingham or on the edge of London, while its encryption key will zip off to Odense, in Denmark, and then back, before the parts are reunited into a double check mark in our bedroom, thirty feet away. “Things will feel more snappy then,” Brouwer said.

The problem underpinning every problem at WhatsApp is the sheer capaciousness of the system. Running on practically every type of phone, in practically every corner of the world, means that it is hard to know whom you are optimizing for. If you improve one aspect of WhatsApp for some users—sharpen the picture quality, say—then you are likely to degrade it for others. WhatsApp groups may feel less snappy in the Trobriand Islands.

“Almost every discussion we have internally, it’s all about: What are the trade-offs?” Brouwer said. WhatsApp already forces its users to upgrade their app every three months. The network must move as one. I asked

Brouwer if there was any practical reason why the whole world couldn't be on WhatsApp. He considered the question for a moment. "No," he replied. "Nothing fundamental. The challenges just add up."

The economics of WhatsApp have been mysterious for years. A 2023 study calculated that American users would not give up the app for less than thirty dollars a month (the figure was much more in some countries), which gave it a notional consumer value of twenty-five to thirty billion dollars a year. But WhatsApp generates only a fraction of that, from "Click to WhatsApp" links and from a business version of the service, which launched in 2018. In Meta's most recent earnings update, this past fall, WhatsApp's non-advertising income was included under "Other Revenue": a footling total of some six hundred and ninety million dollars for the preceding quarter. Meta's ad revenue for the same period was almost seventy times greater.

In 2020, the Federal Trade Commission sued Meta, accusing the company of building a monopoly in social networking through its acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp. (Meta won the case last year.) The F.T.C. asked Sinan Aral, a professor of management at M.I.T., to study Meta's monetization of WhatsApp so far. "It was very slow to do that, maybe deliberately," Aral told me. "I would consider it close to a failure."

But Aral also believes that this is about to change. "You will see the WhatsApp-monetization spigot get turned on like you have not seen before, in the near future," he said. In a voice note, Cathcart, the head of WhatsApp, told me that more and more businesses are paying for access to WhatsApp—to reach customers and sell them things—because users want them there. "We hear from a lot of people in countries where WhatsApp is particularly popular that messaging a business can be the easiest way to get something done," he said. "If you're trying to book an appointment or get an update on an order or order food from your favorite local restaurant, then it's certainly better than e-mail. It's better than calling and waiting on hold. You don't need a separate app." When I met Koum at a hotel in London, he had just ordered room service on WhatsApp. "I was just, like, Holy fucking shit," he said. "That's great."

In Delhi, you can buy your subway ticket to the airport and check in for your flight on WhatsApp. In Brazil, L'Oréal makes more than twenty per

cent of its online direct-to-consumer sales through what is known as “conversational commerce” over the app. Internet sales for beauty products in Brazil first spiked during the pandemic, but customers complained that it was a soulless experience. “They felt it was lonely,” Alan Spector, the chief digital and marketing officer at L’Oréal Brazil, told me.

There’s an app for that. In Brazil, L’Oréal’s virtual beauty assistants, known as E.B.A.s, are able to contact customers through website links to WhatsApp, via social-media ads, and, with shoppers’ consent, by dropping directly into their chats. Spector talked about a recent Mother’s Day campaign by Lancôme. “The E.B.A. starts asking, you know, ‘Tell me about your mom,’ ” Spector said. “Many times it can be a psychological conversation, you know, like a real emotional conversation, and it will eventually lead to conversion.” Spector told me that, when customers abandon an item in their shopping cart, WhatsApp is six times more effective than e-mail at persuading people to complete their purchases. “That’s where we’re really able to solve the doubt,” he said. In 2026, L’Oréal plans to introduce Beauty Genius, a fully A.I.-powered sales agent, on WhatsApp.

In the summer of 2025, after ten years of promising not to, WhatsApp introduced ads to the platform. As of now, they live in the Updates tab. In 2023, WhatsApp had launched Channels in the same tab, to allow brands and celebrities to broadcast information, much as they would on Facebook or Instagram. (Mark Zuckerberg has twelve million followers on WhatsApp.) Cathcart described a user’s journey into the more commercial zone of WhatsApp—to see what Shakira has been up to, to post their Status (more or less the same as a Story on Instagram), and to browse ads—as one of “progressive disclosure.” It is an “ability to kind of go into the app as far as you want to,” Cathcart added. “But you don’t have to.” Brouwer also leads WhatsApp’s growth team. He articulated the app’s emerging identity as “the place for people I care most about, but also then the place for *information* I care most about. This is much more nascent. But that’s kind of the idea.” He wasn’t entirely convincing.



"I'm bored."

Cartoon by Harry Bliss

In a recent book about WhatsApp, Amelia Johns, Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, and Emma Baulch—digital-media scholars who were based in Australia and Malaysia—argued that the app had evolved from a platform that served individuals to one that was increasingly oriented toward the needs of businesses and paying users. “It’s very hard for it to continue to be viewed as a simple messaging app,” Johns told me, “even though it is convenient for WhatsApp to promote it in that way.”

The app also functions as a major gateway to Meta’s A.I. projects. The company’s chatbot, powered by its large language model, Llama, first appeared as a glowing, multicolored ring in my conversations about a year ago. Alice Newton-Rex, WhatsApp’s head of product, said that people were engaging with Meta AI on WhatsApp more avidly than on any of the company’s other platforms. (She uses it to figure out what to cook for her kids.) “The way that you interact with A.I. these days is a chat,” she said. “It’s so intuitive.” Brouwer said that it was only a matter of time before A.I. chatbots joined WhatsApp groups. “A lot of my conversations day-to-day are now within A.I.,” he said. “These worlds are going to combine at some point.”

In the mid-nineteen-twenties, at the same time that Malinowski was sharing his findings from the Trobriand Islands, a handful of scientists were speculating about the next stage of human evolution and the rise of a global consciousness. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French paleontologist and a Jesuit priest, described an emerging “noosphere,” derived from the Greek word for “mind.” Teilhard imagined a “mechanized envelope” of humans and machines that would soon circle the Earth and create new thoughts and emotions. “No one can deny that a network (a world network) of economic and psychic affiliations is being woven at ever increasing speed which envelops and constantly penetrates more deeply within each of us,” Teilhard wrote, in 1947. “With every day that passes it becomes a little more impossible for us to act or think otherwise than collectively.”

I once asked Brouwer if he ever thought about WhatsApp as a vehicle for global consciousness. “It’s a pertinent question,” he replied. “We talk about it a lot. We think about it. I don’t think anybody has the answer, other than this is something that is happening. So how do we play into it as the world’s largest app?” Inevitably, there are trade-offs to be negotiated. Privacy and simplicity don’t necessarily square with generative A.I. and the desires of corporations to converse, genially, with an audience of three billion people. “If you don’t have those constraints, life becomes a lot easier,” Brouwer joked. (Your WhatsApp chats with Meta AI are not end-to-end encrypted.) Brouwer observed that some societies are already much further along in their WhatsApp progression than others. “There’s countries that just run on WhatsApp. Everything is done on WhatsApp. It feels a lot closer there,” he said. “I think the leap is actually not that far.”

In places like Kenya, Nigeria, and Argentina, WhatsApp is sometimes described as a “technology of life.” Mobile-phone providers often offer the app for a few cents a day, making it some users’ only connection with the internet. In these markets, WhatsApp resembles Asian super-apps—like WeChat, in China, or KakaoTalk, in South Korea—where it is possible to order groceries, hail a ride, and chat with your bank. In India, Brazil, Mexico, and Indonesia, you can send money on WhatsApp.

One afternoon, I reached Amber Sinha, a digital-rights lawyer and advocate, at his apartment outside Delhi. In 2011, when Sinha was in college, he was

found unconscious in his dormitory. When he woke up in the hospital, he couldn't remember anything from the previous year. Sinha never learned the reason for his brain injury, but he was able to reconstitute many of his memories by reading his voluminous instant-message archives. (He wasn't on WhatsApp yet.) Wading through his messages, he learned about WikiLeaks and that he had been through a messy breakup.

"It was illuminating," Sinha recalled. "I was simultaneously relieved but also—with every kind of every incremental thing that I was able to piece together about my life—disturbed by how much of it I lived on those platforms." On the day that we spoke, Sinha had reported a problem with his air-conditioner, received a delivery, wished his sister a happy birthday, and been notified about the cost of repairs to the elevator in his building, all on WhatsApp. He was keeping his check marks on, in order to communicate with real-estate agents, who were helping him move, and his location was being tracked to allow delivery drivers to find him. "I don't think this is something that one can necessarily say was even planned by the platform. It has just taken on a life of its own," Sinha said. "This is what people use. This is what you are forced to use."

In 2017 and 2018, Sinha traced fifty-four cases of mob violence in India—mainly following spurious reports of child abductions—that had been catalyzed by WhatsApp groups. In 2024, he studied the role of digital technology in ten elections across the world. WhatsApp was often the most prominent platform. In the past decade, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Malaysia have all experienced their first "WhatsApp election," as politicians and their associates have used the platform's extraordinary reach to gain influence among voters. The "I.T. cell" of the B.J.P., the ruling party of India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is generally reckoned to be the most formidable WhatsApp political operation on the planet. Before the B.J.P.'s narrow election victory in 2024, Srishti Jaswal, an investigative reporter, travelled to Mandi, a city in Himachal Pradesh, in the north, and found a network of more than four hundred B.J.P.-affiliated WhatsApp groups in operation—something like one for every seventy-five people in the town.

“From your heart to your fingers, blood travels,” Jaswal told me. “Similarly, from top to bottom, these B.J.P. I.T.-cell WhatsApp groups travel.”

According to one estimate, B.J.P. administrators run some five million WhatsApp groups—down to the level of each of India’s roughly one million polling stations. Information can be spread across the network in a little more than ten minutes. In Mandi, Jaswal found that the most inflammatory political content was often shared in groups that had no ostensible political purpose. They were meant to organize volunteers to clean up a town, or to discuss women’s issues, but were administered by B.J.P. supporters, who did not advertise their affiliation. “That tends to have a far more intimate effect on people,” Jaswal explained. “Where people would see that, you know, it’s coming from one of us.”

In India, WhatsApp’s penetration into politics, commerce, and human relations means that it is now almost impossible to contemplate its absence. “As a platform of communication, I think it is equivalent to the old telephone network,” Paresh Lal, a lawyer in Delhi, told me. “But in the hands of one company, and not as a shared, common resource with multiple watchdogs over it. It has immense power and is problematic. Deeply problematic.” In 2021, Lal worked for WhatsApp as its sole grievance officer in India, responsible for the concerns of its hundreds of millions of users there. Lal had signed an N.D.A. and did not discuss his time at Meta. But he resigned from the role after six months. “Would you not agree with me that no one person or company should have control over this?” he said. In response, a spokesperson for Meta described WhatsApp as “one of the most scrutinized apps in the world.” He continued, “The old telephone networks were much less secure and stored a lot of user information, which increased their power until another alternative came along.”

A few years ago, Ben Backx was reading “Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are,” by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, an American data scientist. Backx, a British technologist who worked at a bank in Singapore, found himself thinking about his conversations on WhatsApp. “It’s almost like the last honest place on the internet,” he told me.

When Backx moved to Singapore, in 2013, receiving an invite to join a WhatsApp group for expats proved to be a moment of acceptance. WhatsApp functioned as an all-purpose back channel at work. If you met someone online, moving the conversation to WhatsApp was promising. If Backx's digital personality resided anywhere, it was in his WhatsApp histories, which he could download in moments. "It's just that eureka moment," he said. "It's there."

Backx built an app, which he called Mimoto, to analyze every WhatsApp that he had sent or received. It didn't evaluate pictures or videos, but everything else was reviewed by an algorithm: speed of response; length; levels of encouragement, sympathy, or curiosity; whether you are starting the conversation or finishing it. "Do you laugh? Do you apologize? Is there a compliment?" Backx said. "I've completely gone over the top with it." Backx used Mimoto to study the dynamics of almost every relationship in his chats—with his wife, his boss, his friends, his W.F.G. There was banality and truth in the data: Backx's wife asked more questions than he had realized; his father's natural gregariousness didn't translate online. More than anything, Backx was confronted by the minute, ongoing narration of his life. Every argument, every celebration, every missed school pickup was inscribed. "I think a lot of people don't realize that, essentially, their WhatsApp history—across all their chats—is the diary they didn't know they'd been writing," he said.

After we spoke, I downloaded Mimoto and ran my WhatsApp history with Polly through its algorithm. There were positive findings: Polly and I text very equally. And chastening ones: her texts are more encouraging than mine; we spend more time talking about me than about her. Mimoto also looks for urgency and emotion, identifying the highest-scoring exchanges in your archive. (My highest-scoring chats with my sister involved driving directions and being late.) From my WhatsApps with Polly, the co-written Dostoyevsky novel of our relationship, Backx's algorithm correctly picked out its most stressful days: the weekend of May 9, 2020, when Polly was in the hospital, having given birth to our twin sons, during the pandemic. I was under lockdown at home, with our two young daughters, unable to visit. The girls and I took a care package—banana bread and some herbs that the

kids had picked from our garden—and stood in the deserted, spring-lit street below the hospital.

[10/05/2020, 11:17:31] Sam: Someone coming down for your package . . .

[10/05/2020, 11:20:40] Polly: I am in situ

[10/05/2020, 11:21:43] Sam: We are coming round.

[10/05/2020, 11:21:46] Sam: Cross road?

[10/05/2020, 11:22:12] Polly: Are you on tower street

[10/05/2020, 11:22:18] Polly: I can see you! Look up! ♦

Sam Knight is a London-based staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His first book is “[*The Premonitions Bureau: A True Account of Death Foretold*](#).”

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Denmark Is Sick of Being Bullied by Trump

The U.S., once Denmark's closest ally, is threatening to steal Greenland and attacking the country's wind-power industry. Is this a permanent breakup?

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

January 11, 2026



Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, a political scientist at the University of Copenhagen, says Danes used to believe that “the U.S. had some kind of recipe for making the world a better place.” Now, he says, “it’s hard to overestimate the sense of betrayal.” Illustration by Rob en Robin

Once upon a time—before the U.S. began threatening to take over Greenland and treating European democracies as enemies—the Danish politician Ida Auken was a deep admirer of America. Hanging on the wall of her office at the Folketing, the Danish parliament, where she has served since 2007, are framed photographs of two U.S. Presidents, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama, both seated in gently curving Danish-modern chairs. The images stand out in a setting that otherwise resembles a

Scandinavian mood board: a boldly striped black-and-white couch, modular bookshelves stocked with texts on climate change, red snow boots standing sentinel in a corner.

Auken, a gregarious forty-seven-year-old, visited America for the first time as a teen-ager, attending school for a semester in Charlotte, North Carolina, while living with a local family. Over the years, and especially when she served as her country's environment minister, between 2011 and 2014, Auken regularly travelled to the U.S., and she counts Republicans and Democrats, evangelicals and environmentalists among her many American friends. She even became fond of quoting Ronald Reagan's invocation of the U.S. as a shining city upon a hill. Now, though, some of her constituents were telling her that they were more afraid of the U.S. than of Russia. For Auken, the photographs of J.F.K. and Obama had become reminders "of the United States I *used* to look up to." Wistfully, she called them "my old friends."

Ever since President Donald Trump began his second term, he has resuscitated American imperialism while giddily alienating allies. Canadians have been so infuriated by his tariffs, and by his glib pronouncements about making their country the fifty-first state, that they've embraced a vigorous new patriotism: maple-leaf flags everywhere, boycotts of U.S. goods. Throughout Europe, Trump's upending of trade and climate-change agreements has stoked anger and sowed distrust in American global leadership.

Still, Denmark presents a special case. Rasmus Grand Berthelsen, a prominent political consultant in Copenhagen, told me that "Denmark has probably been the most American-friendly country in the E.U." Since 9/11, Denmark has adhered to so-called Super-Atlanticism, which makes alignment with the U.S. its foreign-policy priority. The country sent thousands of troops to serve in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Fifty-two Danish soldiers died in those operations—significant losses in a country with a population of only six million. Among NATO allies, Denmark maintained the highest level of popular support for the mission in Afghanistan, even though it sustained the highest number of fatalities per capita. Because of Denmark's unusually close coöperation with U.S. foreign policy, Berthelsen

said, it has been “shocking” to see how “serious the U.S. now is about ignoring our territorial integrity.”

Trump’s ambition to wrest away Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory within the Danish kingdom, has been a weirdly persistent keynote of his second term (though he floated it in his first). And he talks as if acquiring the Arctic island—which has its own parliament but receives an annual block grant of some six hundred million dollars from Denmark—is an inevitability. In speeches and interviews, and on Truth Social, Trump has offered variations on the lines “We have to have it” and “One way or another, we’re going to get it.” To justify this expansionist rhetoric, he has cited both national security—the island abuts a naval choke point between the Arctic and the Atlantic Oceans—and a need for unfettered access to Greenland’s mineral bounty. (It has deposits of oil, gas, diamonds, and rare-earth minerals, though many caches are trapped beneath glaciers.) Perhaps Trump is simply tantalized by its bigness, as he might put it. The territory looks disproportionately large in the Mercator projection, but we probably can’t count on Trump’s knowing that.

In May, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the U.S. had increased clandestine intelligence gathering in Greenland. The Danish public broadcaster DR subsequently revealed that at least three unnamed Americans tied to Trump were conducting covert “influence operations” there, such as identifying residents who might join a secession movement. Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Denmark’s foreign minister, summoned a top official from the U.S. Embassy in Copenhagen to discuss the allegations, denouncing “any attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of the kingdom.” In December, Trump appointed Louisiana’s governor, Jeff Landry, as a special envoy to Greenland. On X, Landry described his mandate bluntly: “To make Greenland a part of the U.S.” (Denmark has refused to accredit Landry’s role as legitimate.)

A day after the Trump Administration bombed Venezuela and kidnapped its President, Nicolás Maduro, Trump teased what might be next, declaring on Air Force One, “We need Greenland.” Katie Miller, a former Administration spokesperson and the wife of Stephen Miller, the deputy White House chief of staff for policy, posted on X a map in which

Greenland's interior was covered by an American flag. Stephen Miller then joined the fray himself, saying on CNN that "nobody's going to fight the United States militarily over the future of Greenland," and that the world is governed not by "international niceties" but by "strength" and "force." That day, Secretary of State Marco Rubio told lawmakers not to fret overmuch—Trump's goal was merely to *buy*, not to attack, the island. This reassurance was somewhat undercut by a White House statement on Greenland which noted that "the U.S. military is always an option at the commander-in-chief's disposal."

The Prime Minister of Denmark, the no-nonsense Social Democrat Mette Frederiksen, and the Prime Minister of Greenland, Jens-Frederik Nielsen, have repeatedly insisted that the island will never be for sale and cannot be forcibly annexed—and that territorial integrity is a principle to be respected, especially among allies. On January 5th, Frederiksen told DR, "Unfortunately, I think the American President should be taken seriously when he says he wants Greenland," adding, "I have made it very clear where the Kingdom of Denmark stands." Frederiksen then observed, "If the United States attacks another *NATO* country, everything stops." This defiance has rallied Danes behind her, though critics have questioned her ability to defend the homeland. On January 5th, the conservative-leaning newspaper *Berlingske* demanded to know how Danish defense forces would respond to American aggression, asking, "How should Greenlanders react if one day armed marines walk the streets of Nuuk, and government offices are occupied by Trump's henchmen?" Kenneth Øhlenschläger Buhl, an international-law expert and a former naval officer who served for forty years in the Danish military, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, told me that, according to a Danish decree from 1952, a foreign attack would require the country's "military forces to respond to the fullest extent." He noted that any specific defense plans would be kept secret so as not to "prompt Trump to act immediately," adding, "That's what I'd be afraid of."

Although Greenlanders have had a sometimes fraught post-colonial relationship with Denmark—in 1953, the island became a part of the Danish kingdom, rather than its colony, and it has gradually adopted more home rule since then—few of them seem eager to be subsumed by a chaotic superpower intent on reviving McKinley-era colonialism. Responding to

Katie Miller's Stars-and-Stripes-stamped map of Greenland, Nielsen called it a "disrespectful" image. According to a 2025 poll, only six per cent of Greenlanders want to become part of the United States. Aaja Chemnitz, one of Greenland's two members in the Danish parliament, told me that the talk of annexation made her constituents "quite anxious." She now keeps in her parliamentary office a *MAGA*-style red baseball cap. Its one-word slogan, "NAAGGA," means "no" in Greenlandic.

The Trump Administration has also been undermining Denmark economically, launching a sustained attack on wind-power technology, one of the country's major exports. In August, the Administration ordered work stopped on Revolution Wind, an offshore wind farm in New England which is eighty-seven-per-cent complete, according to its co-developer, the partly state-owned Danish energy company Ørsted. Revolution Wind, which began construction in 2023, was expected to power some three hundred and fifty thousand homes in Connecticut and Rhode Island, to reduce carbon emissions by eleven million metric tons, and to create about a thousand unionized jobs. After the project was halted, Ørsted's stock fell to an all-time low, and the company, which announced that it had spent five billion dollars on the project, sued the Trump Administration. In October, Ørsted revealed that it would be cutting a quarter of its workforce in the next two years.

Danes feel proud of Ørsted, which has succeeded financially while combatting climate change, a national priority. Gernot Wagner, a climate economist at the Columbia Business School who has co-written a case study on Ørsted, told me that wind power can generate up to a hundred and forty per cent of Denmark's electricity demand. Ørsted, formerly a state-owned fossil-fuel company, underwent a corporate conversion experience about a decade ago, renaming itself and becoming the world's largest developer of offshore wind power. Berthelsen, the Danish political consultant, told me, "We think of ourselves as having developed this energy and spread it across the world." Wagner warned that the abrupt reversal on Revolution Wind would have knock-on effects for the U.S. "What European company's board is going to sign off on a billion-dollar investment in the U.S. right now?"

Provocatively, the Trump Administration's stop-work order cited "national security" reasons for cancelling Revolution Wind. On CNN, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum offered this rationale: "People with, you know, bad ulterior motives to the United States would launch a swarm drone attack through a wind farm." This struck many experts as silly. Wind farms *can* interfere with radar-detection systems, but the wind industry has developed effective methods for countering that interference. James Rogers, an expert on drone warfare at Cornell University, told me, "The industry works closely with ministries of defense and with those responsible for air and coastal defense to make sure mitigation measures are in place." The Pentagon approved the Revolution Wind project in 2023.



Cartoon by Edward Steed

The far likelier reason for quashing the project is Trump's aversion to green energy in general, and to wind in particular. (In 2011, he failed to shut down an offshore wind farm that, he thought, marred the view from a golf course he owns in Scotland.) Over the years, he's offered, without evidence, a motley array of objections to wind power—that it's increasing cancer rates in humans, that it's driving whales "loco."

The Trump Administration, again citing national security, also initiated a federal investigation of foreign-made wind turbines. The argument was that, because most turbine components are manufactured abroad, America could be held hostage by nations seeking to "weaponize their control over supplies of wind turbines and their parts." The investigation could produce a recommendation for heavy tariffs on foreign turbine equipment, of which Denmark is a major supplier.

André Ken Jakobsson, a professor at the University of Southern Denmark, is a scholar of “hybrid warfare,” in which a country uses economic punishment, cyberattacks, and other aggressive means to harm another country, sometimes in concert with military operations. He told me, “The U.S. has been using all of its means short of conventional war in its campaign to try to get Greenland. We’re uncertain—and that is how hybrid warfare works—how to interpret some of the actions.” He mentioned Trump’s successful demand that the Danish pharmaceutical firm Novo Nordisk lower the prices of its popular GLP-1 drugs (or “fat shots,” as Trump calls them) by thirty per cent. Novo Nordisk has been another major driver of Denmark’s economy, which has been robust in recent years. So far, despite the Trump-led trade wars that *Berlingske* called “a frontal attack on the foundations of the Danish economy,” Denmark has proved resilient. Yet many of its citizens feel both whiplashed and confused. As Jakobsson put it to me, “Do Trump’s trade actions and criticism serve a tactical purpose with regard to Greenland? Or is this just what he wants trade-wise?”

In September, a U.S. federal judge ruled in Ørsted’s favor, saying that work on Revolution Wind could resume. But in December the project was blocked again when the Trump Administration froze leases that the Biden Administration had granted to five wind farms off the East Coast, including Revolution Wind. To Wagner, all the back-and-forth looked “erratic and vindictive.” Today, every country’s economy is tied to others, but a small nation that’s as historically dependent on trade as Denmark seems particularly vulnerable to Trump’s caprices.

Auken, the member of parliament, is, like many Danes, bullish on wind energy. In 2019, when the possibility of luring Trump away from his fossil-fuel fetish seemed more plausible, she posted a playful video in which she addressed him directly, arguing that renewable energy offers a better economic deal. She sat next to a model of a wind turbine, wearing a pretty floral top, and good-naturedly urged Trump to “listen to science, listen to your wallet, and make a new deal. It’s gonna be great.” Now, Auken admitted, it was futile to try to turn Trump green. But she clearly found his views illogical. She said, “Think about China. The most strategically governed country on the planet has chosen to invest in solar and wind,

which is by far the cheapest form of energy and the fastest to deploy—not volatile, like fossil fuel. China isn’t doing this to be Goody Two-shoes. It’s an economic choice.”

Auken had other reasons to be disappointed in the shining city upon the hill, including the growing contrast in America between “poverty and extreme wealth” and the unchecked power of Silicon Valley’s tech culture. But Trump’s posturing about Greenland and his contempt for clean energy, she said, had given shape to an unfamiliar feeling. “In a very short period of time, we went through disbelief and then almost like mourning,” Auken said. “It’s like we were *grieving* our relationship with the United States.”

Auken has never seen herself as a contentious politician—by Danish standards, she’s more of a centrist, both tactical and conciliatory. In her office, she was casually dressed in jeans and a black cardigan, with a small gold cross around her neck. (She has a degree in theology and previously worked as a Lutheran chaplain.) She showed me her knuckles, which were skinned from a karate class she takes with other parliament members, including someone from the party she “most disagrees with.”

But now, Auken said, she was eager to stand up to the Trump Administration’s bullying. The Danes, she noted, had given the Americans “access to many things,” from personal data to surveillance technology. “All of that has to be reconsidered,” she said, including “what kinds of weapons or tech to buy.”

Auken was particularly vexed by the statements of Vice-President J. D. Vance when he and his wife, Usha, made an awkward three-hour trip to Greenland, in March. (The Vances cancelled plans to attend a dogsled race and other events after it became clear that protesters would besiege them.) Vance told Fox News that Denmark had failed to adequately secure the territory from potential Russian and Chinese encroachment, and was therefore “not being a good ally” to the United States. In a speech before U.S. military personnel at Pituffik Space Base, in Greenland, an American installation, he declared, “Denmark hasn’t done a good job of keeping Greenland safe.”

In Denmark, Vance's fault-finding rankled in part because it was the U.S. that had chosen to pull back militarily from Greenland, winnowing the thirteen bases it maintained at the height of the Cold War down to one, Pituffik, by 2004. Berthelsen, the political consultant, said, "Since 1951, we've had this agreement with the U.S. that is a cornerstone of Danish foreign policy—we've allowed the U.S. military in Greenland. If they want to expand their presence there, they are more than welcome to do that. They don't need to invade the country in order to do so." As Buhl, the former Danish Navy officer, put it, under Trump the U.S. has been "kicking in an open door."

The Danish government's unwavering Super-Atlanticism sometimes got it into trouble with other European countries, and even with its own voters. In 2021, reports surfaced that, between 2012 and 2014, Denmark's military-intelligence agency had helped the U.S.'s National Security Agency tap the phones of European officials in Norway, Sweden, France, and Germany, including the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. (The Danes had to make extensive outreach to European allies to repair relations.) In 2023, under the Biden Administration, Prime Minister Frederiksen signed an agreement allowing the U.S. to station military personnel at three bases in Denmark for at least ten years. The agreement was relatively uncontroversial then, but when the time rolled around for the Danish parliament to officially ratify the treaty, this past June, Danes were feeling a lot more skeptical. Welcoming the U.S. military presence suddenly seemed like making good on an invitation you wished you'd never extended to a friend you'd since soured on. Parliament felt that it had no choice but to approve the agreement, because Frederiksen had already signed it, but polls showed that voters were unhappy about it.

Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, a political scientist at the University of Copenhagen, told me, "Our relationship with the U.S., after the end of the Cold War, at least, has been based on the idea that, even with the difference in size and influence in the world, we share some common values—and that the U.S. had some kind of recipe for making the world a better place." He added, "It's hard to overestimate the sense of betrayal." In a speech in March to Danish student activists, Auken wondered how Vance's claim that

Denmark hadn't been a "good ally" sounded to "Danish mothers and fathers who have lost their children in the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."

A prominently placed monument on the grounds of a seventeenth-century fortress in Copenhagen lists the names of Danish soldiers who have joined the U.S. in *NATO* operations. The memorial's official title, the Monument for Denmark's International Effort Since 1948, emphasizes a very Danish message: that peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid are just as important as military action. (Danish casualties of nonmilitary efforts are etched into the monument, too.) The memorial's designer, Finn Reinbothe, explained to me that the monument was "not about 'glory and honor,' or a Great Nation, but human beings, where the single member of society represents the highest value, and these values are not for sale."

In May, newspapers reported the results of a global opinion study, the Democracy Perception Index, which assessed the attitudes of more than a hundred thousand people in a hundred countries toward other nations, including China, Russia, and the U.S. The net popularity of the U.S. had fallen from twenty-two points in 2024 to minus five; in Denmark, it had fallen to minus forty-five. Nico Jaspers, whose firm, Nira Data, helped conduct the polling, told me he'd been "super surprised" that regard for the U.S. had fallen "so much so fast."

In a poll for *Berlingske*, ninety-two per cent of Danes said they agreed, or mostly agreed, that Denmark should look to Europe more than to the U.S. to guarantee its security. Forty-one per cent called the U.S. a threat to Denmark. This year's annual threat assessment from the Danish military-intelligence service seemed to concur. For the first time, it cited the U.S., along with Russia, China, and terrorist groups, as a risk to Danish security. The U.S., the report noted, was no longer ruling out "the possibility of employing military force—even against allies."

One breezy morning in Copenhagen, I met with Mikkel Hørlyck, a thirty-five-year-old who served in the Danish military and has since become a photojournalist chronicling wars, famines, and refugee crises in such places as Somalia and Ukraine. We talked in a lakeside café filled with spectators taking a break from cheering on runners at the annual Copenhagen Marathon. En route, I'd passed a troupe of blond Danes playing Japanese

taiko drums and a couple of cafés where—startlingly, for an American—babies slept in carriages parked outside while their parents ate inside. (Danes are big believers in the benefits of fresh air, and the city is quite safe.) Hørlyck is tall, with shaggy blond hair, elaborately tattooed forearms, and a warm, friendly manner. “I haven’t been to a place lately where Trump doesn’t come up in conversation right away,” he told me. “They’re angry.” Hørlyck, like Auken, had seen himself as someone who “really loves America.” He described a trip he made to New York a few years ago, to accept a photography prize for work he’d done in Moldova, as “an American Dream experience for me.” (He’d been thrilled to cross paths with Annie Leibovitz, who was also receiving an award at the ceremony.) Because of the human misery he documented in his work, Hørlyck said, he was particularly upset about the U.S.’s cuts to humanitarian assistance around the world—the gutting of U.S.A.I.D., for instance. In the past, he said ruefully, he’d thought of the U.S. as a kind of “guardian angel.”

How should a Danish civilian respond to all this? Some have been boycotting American-made products. A Danish-language Facebook group that offers tips on avoiding or replacing everything from Kellogg’s Corn Flakes to HP printers has gathered nearly a hundred thousand members. “At the risk of sounding heretical, I miss raisins, God help me,” one poster wrote. In early 2025, the Danish tech entrepreneur Martin Thorborg told a business newspaper that he was avoiding American goods and selling off stock in U.S. firms, even though it felt “a bit like breaking up with someone.”

In February, the Danish supermarket conglomerate Salling Group started placing black stars on products made by European-owned companies. Salling said that it would not stop stocking American goods, but that it was addressing “a number of inquiries from customers who want to buy groceries from European brands.”

Some items have been easier than others to swear off. In recent years, Teslas had become extremely popular in eco-conscious Denmark. That was before Elon Musk, the company’s C.E.O., spent several chaotic months in the Trump Administration, crudely slashing government programs. In

December, Reuters reported that, in 2025, Tesla sales fell by more than forty per cent in Denmark.

Although Denmark is known for the hyper-local, precisely assembled cuisine of its famed restaurant Noma—foraged herbs tweezered onto a plate—Danes are also surprisingly partial to Oreos, Heinz ketchup, and Coke. One night in Copenhagen, I had dinner with a documentary filmmaker who, when the talk turned to boycotts, confessed to having indulged in a Coke that day in his workshop. He mimed sneaking a drink, adding impishly, “It’s more contraband than reefer!” He’d decided to allow himself the occasional nip after learning that the Coke sold in Denmark was bottled in a local factory owned by the Carlsberg company. A plunge in sales, therefore, might cost Danish jobs.

Alexander Josiassen, a professor at Copenhagen Business School who researches consumer behavior, told me that Danish consumers are unusually attentive to “ecological sustainability and helping the less fortunate.” Moreover, most Danish citizens can afford to think about their purchases in this way: “The social safety net here is such that Danes feel life itself can hardly go wrong. If everything fails, they still have a house, a decent life, so they really have the freedom to look at other things—to act on their values.”

In May, Reuters reported that travel to the U.S. from Denmark had fallen by nineteen per cent. (The trade group Tourism Economics has calculated that the U.S. will lose \$8.2 billion in spending by foreign tourists in 2025, noting that “policy-related concerns” and “harsh rhetoric” had contributed to a “negative global travel sentiment” about America.) Danes had been alarmed by media accounts of European tourists being held in immigrant-detention centers. Two young Danish women had reported being taken into federal custody in Hawaii because they’d mistakenly obtained the wrong visa for volunteer work they were intending to do on organic farms. The Danish foreign ministry, like that of many European countries, issued warnings saying that travellers to the U.S., especially transgender people, might face risks to their safety.



"I could be as famous as Keats if we had a Grecian urn that didn't suck."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Last spring, Dominique Routhier, an art theorist at Roskilde University, turned down a Fulbright fellowship he'd been awarded for a research sabbatical at New York University. In an essay he wrote for the newspaper *Politiken*, Routhier noted that, "as a white man with his papers in order," he knew that he would "run a limited risk" by entering the U.S. His goal was to show solidarity with "thousands of so-called 'illegal immigrants,' 'criminals,' or political opponents wrongly labelled as terrorists" in Trump's America. Routhier told me that, although he hadn't seen anyone else "publicly decline offers like I did," the response to his article had been overwhelmingly positive. He'd been interviewed on Danish national TV and radio, and had accepted an offer to teach at the University of Toronto instead.

Meanwhile, Denmark, like other countries in Europe, was attempting to recruit American scientists and academics who'd suddenly lost their jobs or research funding, or who felt targeted by the Trump Administration because they worked on subjects that it disdained, such as climate change or gender. In an Instagram post in English, the chief executive of the Danish Chamber of Commerce, Brian Mikkelsen, addressed "all the brilliant researchers in the U.S. feeling uncertain right now," and told them, "There is an alternative. In Denmark, we value science. We believe in facts."

Last January, Prime Minister Frederiksen visited Brussels, Berlin, and Paris, in what was seen as an effort to enlist support from other European leaders in resisting Trump's designs on Greenland. In June, France's President, Emmanuel Macron, flew to Nuuk, the island's capital; Frederiksen joined

him there. “Greenland is clearly a wake-up call for all Europeans,” Macron said. “You are not alone.”

Frederiksen has also received support from the Danish royal family, whose long-standing popularity in Greenland has come in handy of late. The fifty-seven-year-old king, Frederik X, appears to be genuinely fond of Greenland’s icy expanses, its culture, and its people. In 2000, when Frederik was still the crown prince, he volunteered for a four-month dogsled trek with members of the Sirius Patrol, a Danish Navy unit that monitors the island’s northern and eastern edges. His two youngest children, the twins Prince Vincent and Princess Josephine, have Greenlandic middle names—Minik and Ivalo, respectively. Even some of the most independence-minded Greenlanders retain a soft spot for the royals, finding it touching, rather than cringe-inducing, when the family dons traditional Inuit garb on state visits to the territory. Nina Sikkersq Kristoffersen, a Greenlandic activist in Copenhagen, feels that for too long Danes have expected Greenlanders to be grateful for their benevolence while minimizing the ways Denmark benefitted from the island’s natural resources. But the royals, she said, “have this not at all racist view on Greenland. Frederik talks very respectfully about it and has been there so many times.”

When the King visited Greenland in April—looking jaunty and at ease while cruising on a fjord with the Prime Minister, and taking a coffee-and-cake break with locals at a cultural center in Nuuk—the contrast with Vance’s gloomy trip couldn’t have been starker. Shortly before the royal visit, the King had issued an updated coat of arms for the Kingdom of Denmark in which the symbols for Greenland and the Faroe Islands, the other Danish territory, take up more space. In the new flag, it’s easier to see that Greenland’s polar bear is roaring.

Denmark recently pledged to give Greenlanders an additional quarter of a billion dollars in health-care and infrastructure investments. Trump’s nakedly imperialistic rhetoric has also prompted Danish leaders to look more honestly at their own role as a colonial power. In August, for example, Frederiksen issued an official apology for a program, started in the nineteen-sixties and continued for decades, in which Danish doctors fitted

thousands of Indigenous Greenlandic women and girls with intrauterine birth-control devices, often without their consent or full knowledge.

Such reckonings are overdue. In 2021, Anne Kirstine Hermann, a Danish journalist, published a pioneering book, “Children of the Empire,” in which she chronicled how little say Greenlanders had in Denmark’s decision to incorporate the former colony into its kingdom, rather than granting it independence. Hermann told me, “Danes aren’t used to being the villain—we’re do-gooders. But Greenland has a whole different experience.”

Pernille Benjaminsen, a human-rights lawyer in Nuuk, said that Danes have always compared themselves, favorably, “to what happened in North America—putting Indigenous people in reservations, killing them.” But, she noted, “a lot of bad things also happened in Greenland—we had segregation between white Danish and Greenlandic people, we had eras when we were asked to leave stores when Danish people wanted to enter.” She added, “We need to kill the narrative that there can be a ‘good’ colonizer.”

Benjaminsen credited Prime Minister Frederiksen for being more forthright about the colonial past. Around the time that Trump returned to office, Frederiksen posted online that Danes and Greenlanders “have some dark chapters in our history together, which we, from the Danish side, must confront.”

Some people in Copenhagen told me that, for younger Danes, the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. had spurred soul-searching about their own country’s racism toward Inuit Greenlanders. But Denmark’s sudden attentiveness to Greenland was also an inadvertent gift from Trump. Hørlyck, the photographer, told me, “He has activated Danish people’s connection to Greenland.” Danes of his generation were asking themselves, in a way they hadn’t before, “What do I really know about Greenland? Have I really *talked* to Greenlanders?” He went on, “It’s quite funny that the strategy over there from Trump opens up something positive here.”

Trump’s antagonism toward Greenland has also changed Danish views about European unity. In the past, Danes had been soft Euroskeptics. They joined the E.U. in the nineteen-seventies, but they kept their own currency,

the krone, and in 1992 they voted against the Maastricht Treaty, which tightened European conformity regarding security, citizenship, and other matters. When Frederiksen recently called for more defense spending, she acknowledged, “European coöperation has never really been a favorite of many Danes.” They’d grumbled, she said, about everything from “crooked cucumbers and banning plastic straws” to open immigration policies, which Frederiksen’s government had rejected.

Ole Wæver, a professor of international relations at the University of Copenhagen, told me that Danes have long had a “kind of anti-E.U. sentiment, with a lot of the same arguments that you saw in Brexit—‘Oh, it’s big bureaucracy,’ ‘Brussels is far away,’ ‘It’s taking away our democracy.’ ” Such attitudes, Wæver said, had helped to make Denmark “go overboard” in its allegiance to America. Elisabet Svane, a columnist for *Politiken*, told me, “Our Prime Minister used to say, ‘You cannot put a piece of paper between me and the U.S., I’m so transatlantic.’ She’s still transatlantic, but I think you can put a little book in between now.”

In December, Frederiksen completed her turn in the six-month rotating presidency of the European Council. During her tenure, she successfully pushed for the goal of European defense independence by 2030. Speaking before the Danish parliament in June, she called Europe “a phoenix shaking the ashes from its wings.” As Svane wrote of her then, Frederiksen worked with “the most powerful European leaders, both inside and outside the E.U., helping to forge a European response to Putin’s Russia and Trump’s U.S.A.” (*Politico* recently named Frederiksen the second most powerful person in Europe—after Trump.)

When I returned from Denmark, I kept checking in with Auken. I once caught her on Zoom as she biked home from work on a Friday afternoon, along with seemingly half the population of Copenhagen. (She chatted as she rode.) On the weekend of Trump’s Venezuela incursion and Katie Miller’s flag post, Auken sent me an e-mail with the subject line “The sentiment in DK.” Her message included a forwarded social-media post of the Danish flag superimposed on a map of the U.S. The comments below it were full of gallows humor along the lines of “Vikings were there first, time to reclaim it, LOL.” Auken told me that Trump’s threats and insults had

been useful in the sense that they had prompted “Europe to get its act together”—to focus on its own defense and even pay for it independently.

But, Auken added, “it’s also a matter of recognizing that there are things we can affect and things we can’t”—including the anti-democratic direction of the United States. “Right now, it’s better and easier for us to build up Europe,” she said. Still, when Auken reached for a quote that summed up her feelings about Trump’s antagonism toward Denmark, it was from one of the most American figures imaginable. She asked, “What’s that Dolly Parton quote about the wind?” We laughed. It was this: “We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.” ♦

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How Marco Rubio Went from “Little Marco” to Trump’s Foreign-Policy Enabler

As Secretary of State, the President’s onetime foe now offers him lavish displays of public praise—and will execute his agenda in Venezuela and around the globe.

By [Dexter Filkins](#)

January 12, 2026



For Rubio, taking down the regimes in Venezuela and Cuba has long been seen as a way of ascending to the White House. Illustration by AJ Dungo; Source photograph by Andrew Harnik / Getty

Just after midnight on January 3rd, as American commandos surged into Caracas to seize President Nicolás Maduro, large sections of the city went dark. Blackouts are common in Venezuela, but the blasts that followed confirmed the arrival of the United States military, which for weeks had

kept thousands of troops poised offshore. The sky filled with helicopters—some skimming the rooftops—along with fighter jets and B-1 bombers. They had been dispatched to protect a Delta Force team heading to the Fuerte Tiuna military complex, where Maduro and his wife were hunkered down. There, the commandos undertook an operation that they had spent months practicing at Fort Campbell, in Kentucky: they shot their way past the defenses and, as the Maduros struggled to shut a heavy metal door, took them into custody. More than fifty of Maduro’s guards were killed, but the Americans left nearly untouched. President Donald Trump told Fox News afterward that it was like “watching a television show.”

At a press conference at Mar-a-Lago, the morning after the attack, a similar sense of gleeful unreality prevailed. Trump boasted of “an assault like people have not seen since World War Two,” and said, “We’re a respected country again . . . maybe like never before.” But his account of the motivation for the attack shifted. For years, he and his supporters have maintained, with little public evidence, that Maduro was a narco-trafficker on a global scale, bringing vast amounts of cocaine into the U.S. From the podium, Trump insisted that Maduro had “waged a ceaseless campaign of violence, terror, and subversion against the United States,” adding that he was responsible for hundreds of thousands of American deaths. Though Trump spoke of America’s interest in safeguarding “the good of the Venezuelan people,” he mentioned the country’s oil reserves—the largest in the world—no fewer than twenty times. The infrastructure needed fixing, he said: “It’s, you know, blowup territory. Oil is very dangerous. It’s a very dangerous thing to take out of the ground. . . . We’re going to be replacing it, and we’re going to take a lot of money out so that we can take care of the country. Yeah.”

As Trump spoke, Marco Rubio, his Secretary of State, stood quietly behind him. When he was finally called to the microphone, Rubio began what has become a familiar routine, offering Trump the kind of adulation that is ordinarily reserved for heroes. “People need to understand that this is not a President that just talks and does letters and press conferences,” he said. “If he says he’s serious about something, he means it.” He hailed Trump as not just “a President of action” but also “a President of peace.”

Rubio proceeded to the second phase of his routine: explaining that Trump's most flamboyant measures—in this case, the nighttime invasion of a sovereign state to capture its leader without congressional authorization—were, in fact, completely ordinary. "Nicolás Maduro was indicted in 2020 in the United States," he said. "He is not the legitimate President of Venezuela. That's not just us saying it. . . . He's not recognized by the European Union, in multiple countries around the world." Rubio pointed out that the State Department had offered a fifty-million-dollar reward for Maduro's arrest. Trump interrupted over his shoulder. "Don't let anybody claim it," he said. "Nobody deserves it but us."

As Secretary of State and also national-security adviser, Rubio is, at least in theory, the most powerful American diplomat since Henry Kissinger. But compared with Kissinger, whose crusading interventionism defined a generation of America's global relationships, Rubio often seems like a support staffer for the President. As Trump lurches from one crisis to another, Rubio—calm, articulate, and capable of projecting a Boy Scout's earnest charm—justifies his policies, soothes rattled allies, and puts the best face on initiatives that only a few years ago he would have denounced.

In the days after the attack on Venezuela, many observers made the inevitable comparison to Iraq, another oil-rich country where the U.S. toppled a strongman ruler, prompting a years-long quagmire. Rubio insisted in a series of appearances that the situations were not at all the same. On "Face the Nation," he said, "A lot of people analyze everything that happens in foreign policy through the lens of what happened from 2001 through, you know, 2015 or '16. . . . This is not the Middle East. And our mission here is very different."

Since Trump began his second term, his "America First" foreign policy has brought about an epochal change in the country's place in the world, as the U.S. casts off traditional commitments to pursue its immediate self-interest. The sprawling network of alliances, treaties, and foreign-assistance programs that the U.S. built at the end of the Second World War is being radically altered or simply discarded. Since January, the U.S. has cut tens of billions of dollars in humanitarian and development aid, withdrawn from such landmark agreements as the Paris climate accord, and curtailed

reporting on human-rights abuses. Entire government departments have been hollowed out. In their place is a highly personalized approach, largely dependent on the whims of Trump, whose foreign policy reflects a harsher, stingier, and less forgiving country.

Rubio, at fifty-four, is the policy's unlikely executor. Before joining the Trump Administration, he spent his career advocating for America as the leader of the world's democracies; the son of Cuban immigrants, he was a champion of aid to impoverished countries. Some observers believe that Rubio is working to provide consistency and balance in a tumultuous Administration. "He's doing his best to moderate Trump's worst impulses," a European foreign minister told me. "He understands the stakes. He's whispering in Trump's ear. But he has only so much influence." Others are less charitable. They believe that Rubio is presiding over the remaking of America as a kind of rogue nation, just as an axis of authoritarian rivals, led by China, rises to challenge the world's democracies. "Trashing our allies, gutting State and foreign aid, the tariffs—the damage is going to take years to repair, if it can ever be repaired," Eric Rubin, a retired ambassador who headed the State Department's diplomatic union, told me. "I hope it ruins his career."

By most standards, Rubio occupies a privileged post: his desk in the White House is just a few steps from the Oval Office. But it is not the position that he hoped to occupy. In 2016, Rubio ran for President and lost to Trump in the primary. He now serves his former opponent—an unstable leader who regularly traduces institutions that Rubio spent his career supporting. "Ultimately, he has to be a hundred per cent loyal to the President, and when the President zigs and zags Rubio has to zig and zag, too," a former Western diplomat told me. "He's had to swallow a lot of shit."

The election in 2016 is the only one that Rubio has ever lost—an anomaly in a carefully managed ascent. In 1999, he was elected to the Florida House of Representatives, from a largely working-class area of West Miami; though he didn't live in the district when the seat opened up, he moved there in time to campaign. Just four years later, he announced that he would run for speaker of the House. Florida had recently imposed term limits, and

many senior House members were retiring. The leadership was open, and Rubio wanted it.



"I knew it. He's wearing a scribe."

Cartoon by Paul Noth

Many people in Florida politics felt that the time was right for a Cuban American speaker, but Rubio faced a difficult issue. For years, public-school teachers in Florida's cities were paid more than those in rural areas, to compensate for their higher cost of living. A powerful group of legislators, mostly from rural north Florida, wanted salaries equalized across the state. No candidate for speaker had supported the change; Gaston Cantens, a Cuban American legislator who represented Miami, had refused to do so in the previous speaker race and ended up dropping out. But Rubio was amenable. "The rural legislators got their formula, and in exchange they went with Marco," a former senior Democrat in the legislature told me. "Cantens was a carcass on the side of the road." Rubio won. The *Florida Bulldog*, a regional newspaper, later calculated that the change had cost Miami teachers nearly a billion dollars. "The one constant in Marco Rubio's career is that he has betrayed every mentor and every principle he's ever had in order to claim power for himself," a political figure in Miami told me.

In Florida, term limits make it harder for elected officials to acquire deep experience, and Rubio's legislative record is relatively thin. For his first address as speaker, he placed a book titled "100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future" on every legislator's desk. The pages were blank; Rubio

said that he wanted to fill them with proposals gathered from voters. This effort resulted in a few dozen successful, though mostly marginal, pieces of legislation, including one that expanded scholarships for private-school education and another that created an advisory committee to help make the government more efficient. “Give him credit,” a lobbyist working in Florida at the time told me. “He didn’t have a lot of ideas himself. It was a clever thing to do.”

The same day that Rubio presented his idea book, he was inaugurated as speaker at the capitol. He gave a speech that summoned the experience of a young single mother, arguing that the government had a moral obligation to help her secure a better life for her child. Governor Jeb Bush, a longtime booster, sat in the front row, moved to tears. “I can’t think back on a time when I’ve ever been prouder to be a Republican, Marco,” he said afterward. He handed Rubio a golden sword, explaining that it was “the sword of a great conservative warrior”: a reference to the anti-Communist leader Chiang Kai-shek, who had been part of his family’s folklore since George H. W. Bush served as a diplomat in China. Rubio hung the sword in the speaker’s office. In his memoir, “An American Son,” he called Bush “the man I most admired in Florida politics.”

In the memoir, Rubio wrote about the ambition that propelled him: “All my life I’ve been in a hurry to get to my future.” He has repeatedly evinced an instinct for seizing opportunities, sometimes in ways that angered his colleagues. (He wrote that, in pursuit of the speakership, he made “a series of terrible blunders.”) In 2009, when his tenure as speaker had ended, Rubio announced that he would run for the U.S. Senate. He was thirty-seven and mostly unknown statewide.

His main opponent was Charlie Crist, who was finishing a term as governor. At one point, Crist was thirty points ahead in the polls, and Rubio considered dropping out. But Florida’s Republicans were becoming more conservative, and the right-wing movement known as the Tea Party was gathering strength. Rubio adopted its platform, vowing to repeal Obamacare, lower taxes, and shrink the government.

Crist’s record in office made him vulnerable; he had governed as a moderate and endorsed an economic-stimulus plan that Obama passed after

the financial crisis of 2008. Nearly every Republican governor had willingly accepted money from the plan, but Rubio, like many Tea Party candidates, argued that it was bankrupting the country. A pro-Rubio ad showcased a moment when Crist embraced Obama at a public event, and Rubio gleefully talked about it in interviews. “Why would I hug someone I don’t know?” he asked in one, smiling broadly with feigned bewilderment. Rubio captured the Party’s nomination, then the seat in the Senate. “Marco got lucky,” a Republican lobbyist in Florida told me. “Charlie fucked himself. He governed from the left, which he could get away with, but then hugging Obama? Marco just jumped on him.”

In the Senate, Rubio was known as a serious legislator with an engaging manner. He was passionate about football, which he’d played in high school and for a time in college; most mornings, he worked out in the Senate gym. “He wanted to be an N.F.L. player, but he can’t, so he’s a politician,” Alex Conant, who was the communications director for Rubio’s 2016 Presidential campaign, told me. “He approaches his life like an athlete does —very disciplined, very competitive.” A Senate staffer told me that Rubio often seemed like a different person in private: “In closed hearings, he’s funny and relaxed. The moment the doors open and the reporters come in, he changes. It’s a little sad.” Rubio is a crisp and polished speaker, especially in front of a camera; during the 2016 Presidential campaign, he was in demand on talk shows. “The TV bookers always wanted him, because whenever Marco came on their ratings went up,” Conant said.

The charm didn’t work on everyone. “He’s a hard guy to get close to,” a senator who knows Rubio told me. “After work, when we’d go out for a drink or a dinner, Marco never really went for that.” A former Rubio staffer said that he was an introvert, in a job that required relentless glad-handing. “He reads voraciously,” the staffer said. “Most senators don’t read.” During the 2016 campaign, Rubio wrote his own speeches, a rarity among modern politicians, and worked his way through a volume of “The Last Lion,” in which William Manchester depicts Winston Churchill in the years before he confronted Hitler.

Rubio’s focus was national security. He sat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and on the Intelligence Committee, which oversees America’s

spy agencies, including the C.I.A. and the N.S.A. He got to travel a lot. “Marco had never really left the U.S.—I think he went to Paris with his wife,” a former adviser to Rubio said. “The Senate helped him see the world.”

Rubio established himself as an heir to Ronald Reagan, who advocated relentless anti-Communism, robust military force, and unapologetic support for human rights abroad. “He always viewed domestic politics as political issues, as opposed to foreign policy, which he viewed as bipartisan, and more serious,” the former adviser told me. In 2014, after Russia invaded Crimea, Rubio gave an impassioned floor speech calling for a vigorous response—not just because the Ukrainians deserved help but also because the invasion threatened the global order. “We cannot allow this to go unpunished, and I tell you that the only way that this can be punished is if the free countries of the world rally together and impose sanctions and costs for having taken this action on Vladimir Putin and on his cronies,” he said. “And that will never happen . . . unless the United States of America leads that effort.”

When there were elections at stake, though, Rubio proved more malleable. After Obama won a second term, in 2012, G.O.P. leaders concluded that they had to find a way to appeal to Latino voters, so they decided to soften the Party’s stance on illegal immigration. For years, efforts to reform the immigration system had ended in stalemate, with Republicans favoring tougher border security and Democrats wanting to legalize the millions of undocumented immigrants already in the country. Now, with Republicans signalling that they were open to compromise, a deal began to take shape. The senators leading the initiative, four Republicans and four Democrats, became known as the Gang of Eight. The Republicans included such veterans as John McCain and Lindsey Graham, but Rubio emerged as the most important among them. He was the group’s lone Republican Latino, an articulate conservative from a state that had experienced waves of illegal immigration. G.O.P. leaders saw him as uniquely capable of selling the legislation in venues like Fox News. In 2013, he appeared on the cover of *Time* with the headline “The Republican Savior.”

But opposition began to rise from the Party's surging right wing. In the Senate, a young aide named Stephen Miller compiled a handbook of statistics and talking points to discredit the bill. On talk radio, Rush Limbaugh railed against welcoming "illegals" and said, "It is all about expanding government, creating a power base that can never, ever lose." Even as the legislation headed for victory in the Senate, some House members started backing away. After Rubio made a trip to New Hampshire to assess his chances in a Presidential campaign, he, too, withdrew his support. "An 'all or nothing' strategy on immigration reform would result in nothing," Conant, his spokesman, said at the time. After Rubio signalled his ambivalence, the bill died in the House.

Rubio later insisted that he had abandoned the legislation because Democrats were trying to change it. But proponents of reform blamed him for the bill's failure. Frank Sharry, an immigration advocate, said, "If Rubio had stayed with it, and provided leadership—if he'd had a backbone—we would have passed immigration reform." Rubio's Republican colleagues in the Gang of Eight were blunt about his prospects. "We don't need another young guy not quite ready," Graham said. "He's so afraid of the right."

The failure of immigration reform did not deter Rubio, who soon declared that he would run for President in 2016. The decision put him in direct competition with Jeb Bush, his friend and mentor—a leading candidate at the time. "Jeb fully expected that Marco would stand aside out of loyalty," a former Rubio associate told me. "But Marco knew Jeb was not suited to the current moment." (The friendship was ruptured, but the two have since made peace. "Marco is the prodigal son, and Jeb always forgives him," someone who has worked with both men said.)

On the campaign trail, Rubio spoke of growing up in a family of Cuban immigrants. His father, Mario, was a hardworking bartender; his mother, Oriales, was a hotel maid. "You know what my parents achieved?" Rubio said at an event before the Florida primary. "They owned a home in a safe and stable neighborhood. They retired with dignity. And they left all four children better off than themselves. That's the American Dream."

But Trump, whose shameless venality was still a novelty in national politics, dominated the primary. Rubio's efforts to push back gave the

campaign its most colorful moments. He savaged Trump as a “con artist” who was perpetuating “the biggest scam in American political history.” After Trump dubbed him “Little Marco,” Rubio countered by mocking his relatively small hands—“and you know what they say about guys with small hands.” (His line about Trump’s spray tan was arguably wittier: “He should sue whoever did that to his face.”)

Rubio publicly apologized for the crude remarks, explaining that they had embarrassed his children. Yet, even as he and Trump exchanged insults, they developed a friendly rapport backstage, the former Rubio adviser told me: “They would joke with each other, when none of the other candidates would talk to Trump, because they thought he was too toxic, or they just didn’t like him.”

In the primary, Rubio lost every one of Florida’s sixty-seven counties, except for his home base, Miami-Dade. He dropped out of the race in time to run for reëlection to his Senate seat. He kept his distance from Trump, skipping the Republican Convention and staying away when he came to Florida to campaign. “Everyone assumed Trump was going to lose anyway,” Alex Conant told me. Instead, Trump won Florida and the Presidency, and his victory transformed the G.O.P.

Rubio won, too, and as he returned to the Senate he remade himself as a Trump-style partisan. In 2021, after Trump refused to accept that Joe Biden had won the Presidency, Rubio voted to certify the results, proclaiming that “democracy is held together by people’s confidence in the election.” But, as Trump insisted that he had won, Rubio began casting doubt on the election, baselessly alleging fraud in places like Wisconsin and Arizona.



"We'd better clean this up before Mom and Dad find out we weren't hibernating."
Cartoon by Amanda Chung

When Rubio released “An American Son,” in 2013, he wanted to tell the sunny story of a child of immigrants who’d risen on the strength of hard work and family values. Ten years later, he published “Decades of Decadence: How Our Spoiled Elites Blew America’s Inheritance of Liberty, Security, and Prosperity.” It was an angry book, in which he excoriated the country’s leaders, Republican and Democratic, for conspiring to destroy the working class by shipping jobs overseas while concentrating on identity politics and transgender rights. In foreign policy, Rubio advocated a more focussed deployment of resources, aimed at confronting China. The book is closely argued but at times shrill and inconsistent. In one section, Rubio refers to the Biden Administration as “the most radical, Marxist presidency the country has ever seen.” Elsewhere, he lauds the Paycheck Protection Program, a huge COVID-relief bill that he helped design. Subsequent audits have found that the program, which cost more than eight hundred billion dollars, was riddled with inefficiency and fraud.

During Biden’s term, nominees for senior posts often came before the Foreign Relations Committee for approval. According to a Senate staffer who regularly attended committee meetings, Rubio frequently allowed nominations to proceed without raising objections—then afterward recorded his vote as a no. Though this practice is not uncommon, Rubio seemed unusually intent on creating a record to show that he had resisted

Biden's nominees. "Over the course of four years, he did this hundreds of times," the staffer said.

In Trump's first term, his foreign policy was a loosely articulated mix of positions and prejudices. Soon after taking office, he supplied Ukraine with sophisticated weapons to use against Russia; six months later, he held an inexplicably affectionate meeting with Putin in Helsinki, talking to him in private, with no advisers in the room. He denounced America's European allies as "freeloaders" and "delinquents," but he succeeded, where his predecessors had failed, in forcing them to spend more on their own defense.

Trump came into his second term with a more substantial policy, much of it provided by the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. This vision was guided by two deep grievances. The first was that the U.S. was upholding international laws and alliances at the expense of ordinary citizens, who paid taxes to sustain the country's overseas entanglements and who surrendered their children to its wars. The second was that America was being economically exploited. According to this idea, which most economists rejected, the U.S. was harmed by importing far more than it exported.

Under Trump, America would focus on dominating the Western Hemisphere, leaving Eurasia to China and Russia. The goal of foreign policy would be not diplomacy but commerce, enabled by tariffs on nearly all goods imported from foreign countries, friend or foe. Trump promised in his Inaugural Address, "From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world."

Trump's attack on the status quo reflected a momentous change: the bipartisan consensus that had characterized American foreign policy since the Second World War was breaking apart. Defenders of the status quo noted that the postwar period was a time of unprecedented peace, free of the great-power wars that had killed about a hundred million people in the previous century. The era of American supremacy had also brought immense prosperity; in 2025, the U.S. accounted for roughly a quarter of the world's G.D.P.

But America First proponents say that this account fails to acknowledge the societal and economic devastation that swept many parts of the U.S. “Our country is a lot weaker in 2023 than it was, say, in 1983,” Kevin Roberts, the head of the Heritage Foundation, told the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page. Roberts asserted that the American social order, measured by such things as marriage rates, had splintered, and that huge fiscal deficits meant that the country could soon “literally be bankrupt.” Rubio, in “Decades of Decadence,” offered his family as an economic benchmark: “This country has undergone immense economic and social changes since my parents first came to this country. Many of these changes have not been for the better.”

As the mood turned against foreign involvement, Tom Shannon was a mainstay at the State Department. Shannon was an archetypal Foreign Service officer: an Oxford graduate, fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, who served as a diplomat for thirty-four years, including stints as Ambassador to Brazil and, during Trump’s first term, as Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

Shannon told me that the disillusionment with diplomacy began after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when the U.S. launched wars that went terribly wrong. “We spent trillions of dollars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and all we got were dead kids,” he said. “And then, if you add in the financial crisis, the heartland of this country was thrown into a deep malaise.” Shannon drew a surprising comparison to the political upheavals of 1968. “Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and eventually Cesar Chavez all came out against the Vietnam War,” he said. “They believed that the focus on pumping resources into these conflicts deflects us from addressing the political issues in our own country.” Trump appealed to the MAGA base with a version of the same message, Shannon said: “How much is it costing us? How many hospitals in the United States, how many schools, how many roads, how many free-tuition universities, could we have built instead?”

Some supporters understood this vision as anti-interventionist. In reality, it was hostile to anything that prevented America from securing quick results, and to any alliance in which the U.S. didn’t have the better end of the deal. “Trump doesn’t talk about Central Europe or Indochina,” Shannon said.

“He talks about Canada, Greenland, and Panama—the United States as a regional hegemon that protects itself from attacks coming over the Arctic. That means the Canadians have to be locked in. And what better way to lock them in than make them the fifty-first state? And Greenland? You can’t trust the Danes to do it. We’re going to have such a fearsome military that nobody is going to mess with us. And it’s not up to us to protect others.”

I told Shannon that this was the most lucid explanation of Trump’s foreign policy I’d heard in months of reporting. “That’s part of the problem,” he said. “This is one of the most inarticulate Administrations in American history.”

As the 2024 election approached, Rubio was on a shortlist of candidates for Vice-President—but, unlike J. D. Vance, he didn’t lobby for the job. “The President kept saying, ‘Why doesn’t he call me?’ ” a Washington lawyer who speaks to Trump often told me. When Vance, who is not a natural retail politician, made a series of awkward statements during the campaign, Trump sometimes mused that he would have been better off with Rubio. (The White House denied this.) “The thing about Marco is, he’s very comfortable with the guys,” the lawyer said. “He’s a guy’s guy—which I think is why Trump likes him.”

When Rubio was nominated for Secretary of State, America First advocates were suspicious that he represented the vestiges of the Old Guard. “Rubio was the neocon candidate in 2016,” Curt Mills, the editor of *The American Conservative*, told me. “Nobody forgot that.” But a senior White House official told me that Trump and Rubio were not as far apart on the issues as their 2016 campaign rhetoric had suggested. “Honestly, times have changed,” the official said. “The Party has changed. Marco has evolved. The President has evolved the other way. So, by the time they got together in January, there really wasn’t much of a gap. And there’s no question in Marco’s mind about who’s in charge.” The desire to have a steady hand running foreign policy meant that getting him through the Senate would be easy. “The White House understood that there wasn’t going to be any opposition,” Mills said. He was confirmed by a vote of 99–0.

Still, Rubio sometimes had to contort himself to meet the realities of Trump’s second term. Not long after taking office, he visited the American

Embassy in Guatemala City to discuss painful news. The U.S. had been spending about two hundred million dollars a year to bolster Guatemala's government and economy, in part to relieve the surge of migrants to the U.S. Now those initiatives were imperilled. Soon after taking office, Trump had signed an executive order freezing foreign assistance and had placed some ten thousand aid workers on leave. Days before Rubio's visit, Elon Musk, the tech mogul charged with slashing government spending, had declared that the U.S. Agency for International Development would be abolished, and its surviving functions overseen by an office in the State Department. Aid to Guatemala would be cut by nearly forty per cent.

At the Embassy, Rubio spoke to staffers in the courtyard and could do little more than try to offer reassurance. According to a person familiar with the discussion, he said that he hadn't known that there would be aid cuts when he'd agreed to become Secretary, and that he didn't like them. Though he acknowledged that there would be changes to eliminate waste at U.S.A.I.D., he said that assistance would remain robust. "Rubio's message was, he didn't know about the cuts, didn't sign off on them, and that he'd fight to restore them," an American official who saw the address said.

A few weeks later, Rubio told a different story. Testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee, he claimed that he'd made the cuts himself. "The *DOGE* team didn't do any-thing," Rubio said. "I did it. I was the one who made the decisions. . . . I remember being in a hotel—I believe in Guatemala—going through, line by line, on spreadsheets of contracts that were cancelled." Afterward, Rubio changed his story yet again: in private meetings, he assured senators that he would try to reverse the cuts. "My impression was that he didn't have much power," a source on Capitol Hill told me.

As Rubio entered the State Department, a contingent was gathering there to carry out Trump's agenda. A core group of influential supporters came from the Ben Franklin Fellowship, a network of conservative foreign-policy thinkers that seeks to reshape American diplomacy, much as the Federalist Society has reshaped the courts. The group—including Christopher Landau, who became Deputy Secretary—espoused a stringent resistance to "unlimited interventions" abroad. It was also determined to change the way

that employees were hired and promoted. The fellowship's members are mostly white men, and many of them argue that the department under Biden had privileged minority and female candidates. Simon Hankinson, a former Foreign Service officer who is now a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, told me, "We had two hundred and fifty years of racism in this country, and the Biden Administration decided that the only way to reverse that was with more racism." Hankinson said that the left-wing ethos extended to installing Black Lives Matter and gay-pride flags at U.S. embassies, even in conservative countries. "Flying a gay-pride flag doesn't go down well in East Africa," he said.

The European foreign minister suggested that, amid the fervor of cost-cutting, Rubio had quietly worked to limit the damage: "He has protected, I think, sensible people at the State Department—and he has a couple of Trumpian commissars watching him at all times." The minister explained that the White House had placed loyalists at the department: "Marco's got people around him who he clearly didn't pick, and who keep an eye on him."

To help run the department, Rubio brought his two closest allies from his Senate office, Mike Needham and Dan Holler. Both were former longtime employees of the Heritage Foundation. Heritage rose to prominence in the nineteen-eighties as a think tank promoting small government at home and anti-Communism abroad. Since Trump's first election, though, it had aligned itself more overtly with his views, sometimes taking a Christian-nationalist tone. A scholar who recently resigned from Heritage told me, "These are people who think Vladimir Putin is the savior of Christendom and the white race."

Although Rubio never espoused anything like that in public, some of the new arrivals at State did. One of them was Darren Beattie, the acting Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Beattie, who has a Ph.D. in political theory from Duke, was a speechwriter for Trump during his first term, until he was fired after speaking at an event attended by white nationalists. Out of government, he routinely wrote racist and authoritarian missives on social media. A month before Trump's victory in 2024, he posted, "Competent white men must be in charge if you want things to

work. Unfortunately, our entire national ideology is predicated on coddling the feelings of women and minorities, and demoralizing competent white men.” Beattie told me that he had not intended the posts to be read literally. “I approach Twitter in a provocative and sometimes hyperbolic manner to make an underlying point,” he said. Beattie is still at the State Department, and also presides over the recently renamed Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace.

The State Department released pronouncements unlike anything that had come from there before. In May, Samuel Samson, a twenty-seven-year-old senior policy adviser, published an article titled “The Need for Civilizational Allies in Europe” on the department’s Substack. In it, he claimed that élites were conspiring to destroy Europe’s ancestral heritage: “The global liberal project . . . is trampling democracy, and Western heritage along with it, in the name of a decadent governing class afraid of its own people.” Much of the America First agenda is predicated on the idea that European culture is threatened, in both Europe and the U.S.; the White House’s newest National Security Strategy warned that Europe, amid waves of unrestrained immigration, faced “civilizational erasure.”

Even Rubio put out memos that would previously have been inconceivable. In April, an order was sent in his name to embassies around the world, urging employees to report colleagues for “anti-Christian bias.” The memo specified that “reports should be as detailed as possible, including names, dates, locations.” Violators would be disciplined, it noted. Another memo informed diplomats that they would be rewarded for “fidelity to the Secretary”—that is, to Rubio.

At times, the department seemed as if it were in the throes of a revolution. “It felt like Year Zero, when the Khmer Rouge took over—anything that came before 2025 should be purged,” a former longtime diplomat told me. In the weeks after Trump’s Inauguration, new political appointees gathered for meetings from which career diplomats were excluded; by some accounts, I.D.s were checked at the door. The appointees competed to demonstrate loyalist zeal. “There is an outer circle of MAGA people who are desperate to show that they’re part of the team, so they overcompensate,” the former diplomat said. On a trip to Europe to discuss

aid programs in Afghanistan, a new Trump appointee announced to officials from some thirty countries that the U.S. would no longer take part. When the officials looked stunned, the *MAGA* appointee shut them down. “We’re not going to be repeating the failures of the past four years,” she said.



“Well, we’re all here—what is it you just can’t wait to tell us?”

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Despite Trump’s rhetoric around avoiding foreign entanglements, he has intervened indiscriminately around the globe. He ordered the destruction of Iran’s key nuclear facilities, loosing a stream of thirty-thousand-pound bombs—something Presidents before him had threatened but never done. He shipped immense numbers of sophisticated weapons to Israel, even as those weapons were deployed to kill tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians. He imposed steep tariffs on India, one of America’s most important allies, for buying Russian oil, but refrained from imposing them on China, which buys far more. He has made common cause with Christians in Nigeria, and spun up a phony “genocide” of white farmers in South Africa. “With Trump, you have to resist the temptation to intellectualize what he is doing,” a former National Security Council staffer told me. “They’re emotional responses, flying all over the place.”

In January, during one of Rubio’s first visits to the Oval Office as Secretary, Trump picked up the phone and called Laura Loomer, the right-wing influencer. Loomer had visited Panama, to film migrants passing through the Darién Gap on their way to the U.S., and also to document what she described as a Chinese takeover of the Canal Zone. Trump had posted some of Loomer’s footage on his Truth Social account and threatened to seize the

canal, prompting Panamanians to burn effigies of him. During the call in the Oval Office, he said, “Laura, send Marco all your reports.” Rubio flew to Panama a few days later. In the capital, he met with the Panamanian President, José Raúl Mulino. The men entered a negotiating room stone-faced.

In the following months, Rubio emerged as one of the main enforcers of the President’s immigration crackdown. After leaving Panama, he visited El Salvador, where he made a deal with Nayib Bukele, the populist President, to accept about two hundred and fifty Venezuelan immigrants into a fearsome maximum-security prison called *CECOT*. Bukele has disregarded due process and repealed term limits in El Salvador; according to Human Rights Watch, prisoners at *CECOT* are routinely tortured. The Trump Administration alleged that the deportees were gang members and drug traffickers, although many did not have criminal records. The immigrants did not receive trials or deportation hearings. Trump removed them under the Alien Enemies Act, which gives the President enhanced powers in wartime; court challenges ensued. In exchange for Bukele’s coöperation, the U.S. paid his government about five million dollars. During a signing ceremony, Rubio called the deal “the most unprecedented, extraordinary migratory agreement anywhere in the world.”

Rubio has also used visas as a weapon against what the Administration regards as hostile elements. Since taking office, he has revoked the visas of at least eighty-five thousand people, many of them students at American universities, on the ground that they pose a threat to the “citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles” of the United States. The revocations punished not just actions but also speeches, articles, and Facebook musings. In March, Rubio ordered American diplomats to scour the social-media posts of people who had applied for student visas. That month, Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish graduate student at Tufts University, was walking down a street in Massachusetts when she was seized by masked immigration agents, thrown into a van, and sent to a detention center in Louisiana. No charges were made public, but her supporters say that her offense was co-writing an op-ed supporting divestment from Israel. She was held for six weeks; her case is still unresolved.

Trump's critics, including the President of Colombia and the former Presidents of Costa Rica and Panama, were also prevented from entering the country. Rubio barred judges from the International Criminal Court after they condemned Israel's conduct in the war in Gaza, and he threatened to keep out foreigners who criticized Charlie Kirk, the assassinated pro-Trump commentator. He even paused visas for thousands of truck drivers, who are mostly from Mexico, warning that "the increasing number of foreign drivers operating large tractor-trailer trucks on U.S. roads is endangering American lives." One exception he made was for athletes; a team from Venezuela was allowed to attend the Little League World Series.

After taking over the State Department, Rubio fired some two hundred and fifty diplomats and about a thousand civil-service employees. The raw number—about seven per cent of the department's U.S.-based staff—was not necessarily catastrophic; even with the reductions, the department was above its pre-pandemic level of employment. But the positions that were eliminated suggested a blunt, even indiscriminate, approach. Entire offices were closed or gutted, including the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy; and the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, which dispatched officers to countries emerging from civil war.

Nowhere was the diminishment of America's global ambitions more evident than in the dismantling of U.S.A.I.D. Before Trump returned to office, the agency had distributed about forty billion dollars a year to support a vast array of initiatives, ranging from food assistance to training police to combat drug trafficking. The new Administration quickly eliminated ninety per cent of the agency's staff. Rubio announced that he would cut more than eighty per cent of its programs, and approved sharp reductions to efforts that tracked human-rights abuses and provided health care, including for people with H.I.V. The cuts baffled some experts, especially given that the programs totalled less than one per cent of the federal budget. Richard Fontaine, an N.S.C. aide during George W. Bush's Presidency, predicted that the Administration would come to regret its choices. "One day, they're going to wake up and decide that they don't want to bomb people—that they want to try something other than military," he told me. "And many of the soft-power tools they once had are going to be gone."

Jeremy Lewin, a former *DOGE* operative who helped restructure the State Department after the cuts, argued that U.S.A.I.D. had become a corrupt, inefficient, and “consultant driven” bureaucracy that rewarded a well-paid administrative class at the expense of the American people. “There’s a ton of waste,” he told me. “You had all these left-wing organizations paying their C.E.O.s millions of dollars. It became a cottage industry.” Lewin said that U.S.A.I.D. had pushed human-rights and democracy programs indiscriminately, in a way that alienated allies. “The idea was: We’re going to have a bunch of civil servants doing democracy promotion, civil liberties, and, whatever, running multilateral institutions,” he said. “We’re going to bring all these authoritarian countries together and liberalize them. That has demonstrably failed, of course, and now we see the rise of nondemocratic countries all around the world, the rise of China.”

Yet the cuts to foreign aid have undermined American influence across the globe, even as the U.S. is struggling to compete with China. Experts are concerned about China’s domination of the world market for rare-earth minerals, which are essential to the equipment that powers much of modern life. Many crucial sources are found in Africa and Asia. Tom Shannon, the former Under-Secretary, explained, “The battle for technological superiority and economic dominance is going to be built through the markets and the resources of the Global South. Why would you take the one instrument that you have that connects you to all the Global South countries—and not just to governments but to peoples and societies—and blow it up?” In addition to foreign aid, “you need a really competent, capable diplomatic corps that can walk the world for you and help secure these relationships,” Shannon argued. “Access to resources and markets can no longer be assured through colonialism. You can’t just go in and capture large swaths of the world and force these countries to hand over their minerals. The competition is going to be ferocious.”

Indeed, in many places where the United States has diminished its presence, China has already moved in. During the Cold War, Radio Free Europe broadcast news to parts of Eastern Europe that were under Communist dominion. Its modern-day counterpart, Radio Free Asia, built an estimated weekly audience of fifty-eight million people in fifteen languages, employing reporters to dig up news in places where free expression is

ruthlessly suppressed. In 2017, a Radio Free Asia reporter named Shohret Hoshur broke the story that the Chinese government was holding members of the fiercely oppressed Uyghur minority in concentration camps in Xinjiang. The story caused a sensation; after it emerged that inmates were being forced into slave labor, Rubio co-authored a bill in the Senate banning imports from the region. In 2020, Radio Free Asia revealed that China was covering up deaths from *COVID-19*.

When the cuts went into effect, the network lost ninety per cent of its staff, including nearly all the reporters. Bay Fang, the president and C.E.O., told me, “The Chinese picked up right where we left off.” After Radio Free Asia was forced to give up the sixty-plus frequencies it broadcast on, China’s government began using many of them to reach its former audience.

When U.S.A.I.D. was dismantled, Senator Jeanne Shaheen, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, dispatched staff members to assess the impact in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The results, published in an ninety-one-page report, make for sobering reading. The report details dozens of defunct programs in places where America is struggling to secure its interests. One was in sub-Saharan Africa, where the U.S. had backed a half-billion-dollar loan and twenty million dollars in grants to develop a rail line that would move valuable minerals from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo to a port on the Atlantic Ocean. The project had attracted hundreds of millions of dollars in additional investments. It was halted for almost all of 2025. China, meanwhile, continued building its own billion-dollar railway, from Zambia to the opposite coast. “The Chinese didn’t stop—they’re going to move the minerals straight to China,” a committee staffer who visited the region told me.

Lewin suggested that America could maintain its influence by directly cultivating national leaders. “What Secretary Rubio is doing is, he’s making a department that actually works in this new era of great-power competition,” he said. The State Department would still promote democracy, but mostly in hostile places such as Cuba and Venezuela, not in countries that are friendly to the U.S., no matter how autocratic they are. Much of the money from cancelled programs could be dispensed according

to the desires of Rubio and Trump, rather than those of the State Department or aid groups. (Or those of Congress, which has legal authority over such funding.)

Lewin offered an example: In September, the Philippine President, Ferdinand (Bongbong) Marcos, visited Washington, and Rubio decided to give his country two hundred and fifty million dollars in public-health aid. The State Department provided few details about the Philippines grant or any other new program—not to the press, to the public, or to Congress—despite the fact that these disclosures are required by law. The committee staffer told me, “We’ve asked for information, and we’ve gotten almost nothing.” (The State Department says that it has fully complied with the law.) Periodically, the Administration announces new initiatives by press release. In Africa, it has pledged billions of dollars to deeply corrupt governments in Kenya, Liberia, and Uganda, claiming that the grants will encourage self-sufficiency. But without American aid workers overseeing programs, it’s not clear how the new system will insure that money isn’t wasted or stolen.

As a senator, Rubio made both moral and tactical arguments for helping other countries. “We don’t *have* to give foreign aid—we do so because it furthers our national interest,” he said in a speech in 2013. Rubio sat on the board of the International Republican Institute, which provided training to fledgling democracies, teaching candidates how to campaign and poll watchers how to observe elections. The institute operated in more than a hundred countries, including Cuba, where it supported dissidents facing down the Communist government. In the current round of cuts, the I.R.I. lost more than half its budget and furloughed two-thirds of its staff.

In 2022, Rubio wrote Biden a letter urging him to boost U.S.A.I.D.’s budget to counter Chinese influence. Three years later, when the aid cuts were announced, he spoke as though he had opposed U.S.A.I.D. all along, celebrating “the close-out of an agency that long ago went off the rails.”

In May, Rubio testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which had launched him toward confirmation just a few months earlier. The mood had soured among many of his former colleagues. The committee’s Democratic members savaged Rubio for diminishing America’s global role;

the meeting grew so rancorous that Senator Jim Risch, a Republican from Idaho who was Rubio's closest friend in the Senate, had to repeatedly bang his gavel to bring order. The most bitter exchange came when Senator Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat from Maryland, denounced Rubio's role in gutting humanitarian aid. "We didn't always agree, but I believe we shared some common values—a belief in defending democracy and human rights abroad and honoring the Constitution at home," he said. "That's why I voted to confirm you. I believed you would stand up for those principles. You haven't."

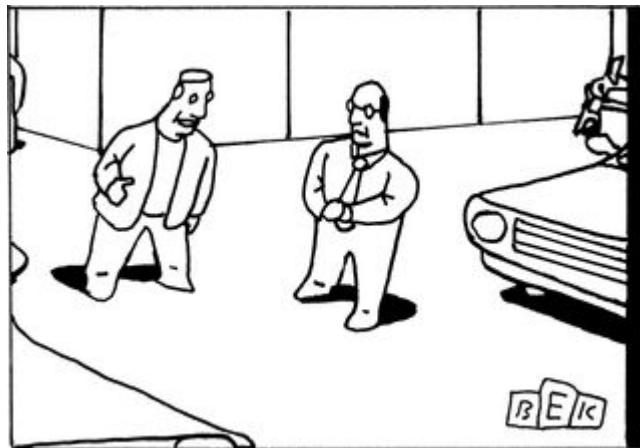
Van Hollen spoke about Sudan, which is enduring a simultaneous famine and genocide. When Rubio signed off on U.S.A.I.D.'s demolition, the U.S. froze food assistance to Sudan, closing as many as eleven hundred emergency kitchens. "People died because of those actions—mothers, fathers, and children. And tons of emergency food that could have saved their lives was left rotting in warehouses, because you and Elon Musk refused to let U.S.A.I.D. do its job," Van Hollen said. "I have to tell you directly and personally that I regret voting for you for Secretary of State."

Rubio shot back, "Your regret for voting for me confirms I'm doing a good job."

Many of the world's diplomats are watching Rubio to see which of his old convictions he will stand up for. "The previous Marco Rubio, he was genuine," a former senior European official said. "He *did* believe those things. He understands what is at stake, that people could die because of decisions that are being made. Once in a while, if you listen to Rubio, you get a sense that deep down, somewhere, there is still a person there, under a very thick layer of whatever it is that's covering him."

Rubio's position in the Trump Administration is one of uncertain and shifting influence. In an ordinary government, the Secretary of State would take the lead on addressing a few crises around the world and spend the rest of the time maintaining relationships with America's allies and trading partners—what a former U.S. official, who worked in diplomacy for many years, described as "global glue." This Administration, however, does not believe in global glue. Though Rubio meets nearly every day with foreign

dignitaries, his most consequential work, advising the President, takes place in private.



"I'm looking for a car that's crazily wide that will torture all the other cars on narrow roads."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

The two men have developed a comfortable rapport, enlivened by Rubio's knowledge of sports trivia. "Marco sees the President as much as any single person," the senior White House official said. But a former official who regularly advises the Administration told me that three other people are contending for Trump's ear on foreign policy: the chief of staff, Susie Wiles; her deputy Stephen Miller; and the Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent. In any case, it is not clear that the President is listening. Rubio often sits in as Trump receives briefings from the intelligence agencies. They are typically unproductive. "Trump mostly just talks," a former senior official who has attended briefings with the President told me. "He doesn't listen to anything from anyone."

One of Rubio's persistent concerns is China, which he has criticized fiercely for years. At one point, he brought a Uyghur activist to the State of the Union address. Trump has been as inconsistent with China as he is with everything else; he imposed stiff tariffs, then lowered them, then raised them again, then backed away, each time spreading chaos in the world's capital markets. (China was the only country to retaliate with significant tariffs of its own, and the President was forced to back down. As the former official who advises the Administration told me, "Trump felt that he'd been checkmated.")

More recently, China sought to purchase sophisticated microchips from Nvidia, a California-based company that is a global leader in artificial intelligence. Many observers argued against allowing the transaction, saying that the U.S. would be sacrificing an important technological advantage. In early December, Trump abruptly announced that Nvidia could sell China advanced H200 chips, as long as it gave the government a quarter of the proceeds. According to the former official who advises the Administration, Trump made the decision at the behest of his A.I. adviser, David Sacks, and Nvidia's C.E.O., Jensen Huang. "Every chip that goes to China will be one less chip that goes to an American company, because there aren't enough available," the former official said. "Trump may have just handed China dominance—not just in A.I. but in the military as well."

The need to stay close to Trump means that Rubio is mostly absent from the State Department offices. "Rubio is more invisible than any Secretary in the postwar era," Rubin, the retired ambassador, told me. "He's rarely seen inside the building." In his absence, the day-to-day functioning of the department is handled by Mike Needham and Christopher Landau.

From the start, Rubio found that much of his position's power had been taken away. The N.S.C. has been drastically shrunk. "The policy staff is basically the size that it was at the dawn of the age of color television," the former official told me. "It's entirely emasculated." The three most pressing national-security issues—Iran's nuclear program and the wars in Gaza and Ukraine—have been largely ceded to Steve Witkoff, a New York businessman who has been friends with Trump since his early days as a real-estate developer.

In a world where diplomats travel in carefully assembled teams, Witkoff flies on a private jet with his personal staff and sometimes his girlfriend or Jared Kushner; during several meetings with Putin, according to NBC, he relied on the Kremlin's translator. (The White House denies that he has violated protocol.) Witkoff's approach has been to minimize America's commitments while boosting trade and investment. He has little interest in dealing with the complex structures of foreign administrations. Instead, he focusses on direct contact between Trump and other heads of state.

The Administration has boasted of an unbroken string of diplomatic successes, stopping “eight wars in eight months.” In fact, most of the advances have been splashy but tenuous. In Gaza, Witkoff and Kushner achieved a tentative ceasefire and a partial pullback of Israeli forces, but have made little progress toward a longer-term plan. A similar pattern applied to conflicts in eastern Congo and between Thailand and Cambodia. “They declare peace, and then they walk away,” the former U.S. official said. “Only six people in the government are allowed to make policy, so nobody does follow-through implementation.”

In this milieu, Rubio’s persistence stands out. “We need Rubio, because he’s a bulwark against worse things,” the former official said. “But he’s clearly picking his battles. He does not want to touch Gaza in any way, shape, or form. He doesn’t want to be the one deciding when you get tough with Bibi. He just wants to be pro-Israel.” Rubio is also apparently keeping his own counsel on ethical matters. In many of the places where the Administration has focussed its diplomatic efforts, relatives of senior officials—including Witkoff’s sons, Trump’s sons, and Kushner—have signed lucrative business deals. “Rubio is the only one in this pantheon who has no money of his own,” the former U.S. official added. “He’s not making money off these deals, while everyone around him is. So he’s not going to tell them which governments they can make drug deals with—though he’s not pushing back, either.”

The ideological rift within the Administration became most apparent in the struggle over the war in Ukraine. In one camp are Vance, Witkoff, and Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby, who have sought to restrain overseas commitments. Vance once said, “I don’t really care what happens to Ukraine, one way or the other.” Earlier this year, senior Pentagon officials held up key arms transfers to Ukraine, apparently without the assent of Trump or the State Department. In the other camp, increasingly, is Rubio.

Rubio’s position on Russia has vacillated over the years. As head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, he led an inquiry that found Moscow had tried repeatedly to interfere in American elections; the report noted that one of his own campaigns had been targeted. When Russia first sent troops into

Ukraine, Rubio backed a vigorous response. But, as Trump campaigned to return to the White House, he flipped; in early 2024, he voted against sending some sixty billion dollars in military aid. “What we are funding is a stalemate,” he declared, days after Trump’s election.

Still, European diplomats say that Rubio has quietly reassured them since becoming Secretary of State. Dmytro Kuleba, who until 2024 was Ukraine’s foreign minister, told me, “Rubio is the one who is trying to steer developments in the direction that Ukraine would consider right, within the limitations imposed on him by Trump and the inner circle.” Others noted indications that he was exerting influence behind the scenes. “Within a week of Rubio getting the N.S.C. job, the intel on Ukraine-Russia that was going into Trump’s brain seemed to be getting more accurate,” the former U.S. official told me. “He’s helping the President get better information and not just go on his 1985 view of the world.”

At times, Rubio has given hints of discomfort with the Administration’s policy. In February, President Volodymyr Zelensky came to the White House to ask for help, and Trump and Vance scolded him on live television for expressing insufficient gratitude. (“Have you said thank you once?” Vance asked.) Rubio sat a few feet away, deep in the couch, his hands folded in his lap and his face stricken.

The Oval Office meeting was widely seen as a disaster: an American Administration had publicly turned on an embattled ally. Admiral William McRaven, a former head of the U.S. Special Operations Command, wrote in an open letter to Trump, “You have embarrassed us in the eyes of our children, humiliated us on the world stage, and, worst of all, divided us as a nation.” Special scorn was directed at Rubio. “We all saw you. You tried to shrink in your chair,” the Democratic congressman Eric Swalwell posted on X. But, as the European foreign minister put it, “Rubio knows what the rules are.” After the meeting, Rubio insisted that Zelensky should apologize and gushed with praise for Trump: “Thank you @POTUS for standing up for America in a way that no President has ever had the courage to do before.”

In October, as the White House was preparing for a summit between U.S. and Russian leaders in Budapest, Rubio held a call with Russia’s foreign

minister, Sergey Lavrov. Russia had been demanding vast tracts of Ukrainian territory in exchange for peace, and on the call Lavrov refused to back down. Afterward, Rubio apparently described his intransigence to Trump, and the summit was quickly cancelled.

But the policy soon seesawed again. (“The children are fighting,” as the former U.S. official put it.) Later that month, Witkoff met with the Russian envoy Kirill Dmitriev in Miami and emerged with a twenty-eight-point peace plan that effectively gave Putin everything he wanted. Soon afterward, a group of senators announced at a press conference that Rubio had briefed them on Witkoff’s plan, telling them that it was merely Moscow’s “wish list,” forwarded to the White House. “He made it very clear to us that we are the recipients of a proposal that was delivered to one of our representatives,” Senator Mike Rounds, a Republican, said. “It is not our recommendation. It is not our peace plan.” Rubio denied making these comments, but the controversy had already dimmed the chances that Witkoff’s deal would go through.

For now, the Ukrainian government is trying to prepare the country for a war that will grind on for at least several more years, regardless of what the White House decides. “I think we can rule out the possibility that President Trump will walk away from Ukraine,” Kuleba, the former foreign minister, said. “He can say he is washing his hands. But, in a week or in a month, the situation on the ground will make him drown his hands in the blood and dirt of the war.” Yet neither Kuleba nor other observers I spoke to held out much hope that the Administration would increase the pressure on the Russians. “The one constant is Trump’s inability to do anything that would upset Vladimir,” the European foreign minister told me.

Rubio has not given a major speech on any subject during his year as Secretary. Instead, he tends to appear on television, or at press events, justifying the President’s actions. After Trump outraged Canada by insisting that he intended to make it America’s “fifty-first state,” Rubio visited Quebec and couched the issue of sovereignty as a mere difference of opinion. “The Canadian government has made their position, how they feel about it, clear,” he said, with a shrug. “The President has made his argument

as to why he thinks Canada would be better off joining the United States, for economic purposes.”

The job of Trump’s advocate is not an easy one. As the President insults allies, woos dictators, and spurns long-standing commitments, Rubio has to convince his counterparts that America will not entirely abandon its friends. A senior British official told me that Rubio was effective in gatherings of diplomats. “I’ve been in these meetings,” he said. “All the foreign ministers are reading scripts written by ChatGPT. They all sound the same. No one is listening. Everybody’s on their phones. Rubio is different. He speaks in a human way, looks at you, doesn’t read the script. He has everybody hooked.”

After Trump threatened to impose severe tariffs on Mexico, America’s largest trading partner, Rubio visited to ameliorate the outrage. “Rubio did not apologize for the President—he was loyal—but he managed to convey that he understood what we were going through,” a senior Mexican official told me. “I think he was going as far as he could go.”

Despite the expressions of sympathy, the tariff threats didn’t stop. The economy is just one of many areas in which America’s credibility has been profoundly damaged. European officials told me they no longer trust that the U.S. would come to their aid if Russia attacked, which they believe is an increasing possibility. “We were born and raised in the transatlantic spirit,” the former senior European official told me. “There was a strategic clarity about the U.S.’s will to defend Europe. Now it is what you would call strategic ambiguity. The United States is no longer a trustworthy ally. It hurts. We do not like to say these things.” Officials from Europe and the U.S. have made repeated statements about the enduring strength of the alliance. But “the private conversations are very different,” Nathalie Tocci, the director of the Rome-based Institute for International Affairs, told me. “There is a real structural break. We all understand that we will not be going back to the good old days of transatlantic partnership. All this flattery of Trump—the humiliation that we inflict upon ourselves—is not going to get us anywhere.”

When Rubio first spoke with Trump about serving as Secretary of State, he said that he wanted to be the main driver of policy in Central and South

America. This is not a part of the world that has historically concerned Trump. As the senior White House official acknowledged, “Marco has a bigger interest in Latin America than the President does.” The America First policy made Latin America a higher priority. Trump’s goals were to stop the flow of illegal immigrants; marginalize China, which had made deep economic inroads in the region; and neutralize hostile regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.



Cartoon by Paul Karasik

For Rubio, who grew up among Cuban immigrants in Florida, hostility toward leftist governments in Latin America was a kind of birthright. As recently as 2023, he had warned of “the horrors occurring not far from our shores.” People who know him say that this was not just rhetoric. “He really believed that Venezuela and Argentina and Brazil and Colombia should be great countries, and that they should be staunchly anti-Communist,” the former U.S. official said. “They should be the engines of a reinvigorated South America.” Rubio has a special loathing for Nicolás Maduro, whose regime devastated Venezuela’s economy and sent millions of citizens streaming out of the country. Maduro was aided substantially by Cuban intelligence officers, who helped root out threats to his rule. As part of the alliance, Venezuela sent Cuba about fifty thousand barrels of oil a day, propping up an otherwise desperate economy. In Florida, the expat community has long dreamed that if Maduro fell his allies in Havana would

follow. “If Rubio took down Maduro and the regime in Cuba, he’d be a hero in Miami forever,” a former Florida politician who knows Rubio told me. A successful intervention could also build support in his base for another run at the White House. “It’s part of his Rubio-for-President strategy,” a former U.S. official who worked in Latin America said.

In 2019, Rubio was deeply involved in an attempt to force out Maduro—a combination of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation that Trump described as a “maximum pressure” campaign. Though the U.S. stopped short of using force, the intention to remove Maduro was clear; as Rubio said, “It’s only a matter of time.” Soon afterward, the White House encouraged a revolt by senior Venezuelan military leaders and other government officials—a hapless, underplanned effort that quickly fell apart. “It just flat-out failed,” a former senior American official who was involved told me.

In Trump’s second term, Rubio’s Venezuela strategy was sidetracked by immigration concerns, the President’s highest priority. The Administration revoked a rule that gave some three hundred thousand Venezuelans temporary residency in the U.S.—a deeply unpopular move in Miami, home to the country’s largest Venezuelan community. “The majority of people getting deported are Venezuelans,” a former U.S. official who worked in Latin America said. “Rubio is getting hammered for this.” Trump also deported thousands of Cubans, and Rubio did not step in to save them. Billboards went up around Miami condemning Rubio and the area’s three Cuban American Congress members—all Republicans—for supporting the deportations. One sign bore a photo of Rubio and the others, with the caption “*TRAITORS*.”

At first, Trump gave the task of dealing with Venezuela not to Rubio but to his envoy Richard Grenell—a former Ambassador to Germany who, before entering government, built a reputation as an unusually tenacious public-relations man. Grenell’s strategy was to seek an accommodation with the Venezuelan regime. He met with Maduro and secured the release of six American hostages, along with an agreement to accept deportees from the U.S. He also began talks to give American oil companies greater access to Venezuela. “The President wanted to get a deal for the energy right away,” a

U.S. businessman who spoke with Trump told me. “Maduro was fully game on giving American companies priority.”

But Grenell’s deal collapsed when the Cuban American Congress members from Miami protested that Trump was doing business with a dictator. They made it clear that, unless he resumed his hard line against Maduro, they would vote down his tax bill, the centerpiece of his agenda. Some close observers believe that the representatives were acting in concert with Rubio. “I think Rubio played a much better bureaucratic knife game than Grenell did,” the former U.S. official who worked in Latin America told me. In the coming months, Trump all but stopped negotiating with Maduro. The new policy was regime change, with Rubio in the lead. As tensions rose, Maduro warned, “Mr. President Donald Trump, watch out, because Mr. Rubio wants to stain your hands with blood.”

In Trump’s first term, the campaign against Maduro had been couched as an effort to restore democracy and human rights in Venezuela. This time, the Administration emphasized issues closer to Trump’s heart: illegal immigration and drug trafficking. The rhetoric, particularly about narcotics, aroused skepticism. Experts said that, although elements of the Venezuelan military were involved in drug smuggling, the shipments reaching the U.S. were relatively small, and did not include fentanyl; the claim that Maduro was a kingpin had no apparent support. “The people around Trump decided that the only way to get the American public’s attention was to press all the right buttons,” Phil Gunson, an analyst for the International Crisis Group, in Caracas, told me. “Trump is not interested in human rights and democracy. If you can present a plausible case that Maduro is a narco-terrorist invading the U.S., which is total bullshit, then you can move forward. Rubio used that to mount his military campaign.”

Trump dispatched an armada, including the U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier and some fifteen thousand troops, to the waters off Venezuela’s coasts. Since September, he has ordered at least thirty-five air strikes on boats that he claimed were ferrying drugs to the U.S., killing more than a hundred people. Trump did not seek congressional authorization. Instead, he invoked a dubious legal rationale, declaring that drug traffickers such as the Tren de Aragua gang, which he claims are responsible for the

smuggling, were a terrorist organization attacking the United States. As the strikes raised accusations of war crimes, Trump provided few details to the public and minimal information to the Senate. A senator who attended a classified briefing told me that the information Rubio gave differed markedly from what Trump said in public. “The President has made statements since that briefing that are not consistent with what we heard,” the senator said.

Just weeks before the lightning raid that removed Maduro, Rubio and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told legislators that they had no plans for regime change. After the strike, Rubio maintained that the operation didn’t need congressional approval, because it was a law-enforcement exercise. Besides, he argued, it was too sensitive—a “trigger-based mission”—to be trusted to Congress.

In the coming days, Trump mused about intervening around the world: Mexico, Panama, Greenland, Iran. Rubio spoke ominously about the prospect of regime change in Cuba. “If I lived in Havana and I was in the government, I’d be concerned,” he said. He noted that thirty-two of the guards killed in the operation were Cuban.

After Maduro’s capture, Rubio was constantly in the news, while Vance, his likely rival for the G.O.P.’s Presidential nomination, was notably quiet. Trump announced that the U.S. was now “in charge” of Venezuela, and Rubio became the main conduit to the new government. But he was left with a complicated task: running the Venezuelan state and restoring its ravaged oil industry, which Trump has repeatedly invoked as the primary objective of America’s presence there. U.S. companies, including Chevron, have substantial operations in Venezuela, which have been hobbled by Western economic sanctions. Restoring them won’t be easy; years of neglect have ravaged the infrastructure for pumping, refining, and transporting oil. By some estimates, revamping the system will cost more than a hundred billion dollars and take years. The Trump Administration and its allies will need time—as well as a pliant administration in Caracas. As the U.S. businessman put it, “They want a government that is fully agreeable to American interests.”

One of the most striking parts of Trump’s intervention in Venezuela was that he sidelined the country’s democratic opposition and its leader María Corina Machado, whom Rubio had championed. Machado, a conservative Catholic and an enormously popular figure among critics of the regime, went into hiding last year, after Maduro claimed victory over her party in an election that most observers regarded as stolen. In the aftermath, the Venezuelan opposition coördinated its activities with Rubio and stayed in constant touch. Machado also worked to cultivate Trump. Last fall, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and dedicated it to him, declaring that he ought to have shared in the victory.

In the months before Maduro was seized, Machado’s allies were optimistic. An opposition leader told me, “Venezuela doesn’t have religious issues, we don’t have warlords, we don’t have tribes—we are a unified country. The moment the regime is removed, you are not going to see the streets lighting on fire and people trying to destroy institutions.” At the press conference announcing Maduro’s capture, though, Trump dismissed Machado as “a very nice woman” who lacked “the respect within the country to lead.” Instead, he spoke warmly of Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro’s Vice-President, who also led the national petroleum company. “Trump threw the opposition under the bus,” the former U.S. official who worked in Latin America told me.

The arrangement that Trump described was difficult to distinguish from the one that Grenell negotiated last year. Venezuela would open its oil fields to U.S. companies, but its government would remain largely the same. Senior military and civilian leaders, at least fourteen of whom faced indictments for drug trafficking, would stay in place. So would other officials who are suspected of profiting from illegal mining and smuggling.

Rather than working with his ally Machado, Rubio was obliged to deal directly with Rodríguez, who had been hastily inaugurated as the interim leader. Her coöperation seemed less than assured. Rodríguez is a hard-line leftist with deeply anti-American views learned from her father, a Marxist guerrilla commander who died at the hands of Venezuelan security forces. Though there were hints that she had offered up Maduro to the Americans to save herself, she remained publicly defiant, describing the U.S. incursion

as a “barbary” and insisting that Maduro was the only legitimate President of Venezuela. The government ordered police to “immediately begin the national search and capture of everyone involved in the promotion or support for the armed attack by the United States.”

To secure compliance, Rubio outlined a strategy that relied less on diplomacy than on coercion; he said the Administration intended to blockade Venezuelan oil exports if Rodríguez did not comply with American demands. Under duress, she agreed to turn over as many as fifty million barrels of oil.

Some observers still hold out hope that the U.S. will help the opposition take control of the country. Under the Venezuelan constitution, elections must be held within thirty days of the Presidency being vacated, or six months under emergency circumstances. Trump has said that Venezuela may remain under U.S. control indefinitely, but Rubio is likely to push for elections, which Machado would almost certainly win. “Rubio is a true believer—he wants regime change and democracy in Venezuela,” the former U.S. official who worked in Latin America said.

For now, though, Rubio finds himself responsible for a vast country with a powerful, deeply corrupt Army, which is likely to resist any attempt at constraint. “Machado wouldn’t be able to control the military,” Gunson said. “But it’s not clear that Rodríguez can, either.” Rooting out corrupt generals and criminal networks could take months, or even years. Guerrilla armies roam the country’s western border, and private militias stand ready. “They could unleash chaos,” Gunson said. As Rubio tries to sort this out, Trump will likely insist that the oil keep flowing. As the former U.S. official who worked in Latin America told me, “If it all falls apart, Rubio will get the blame.” ♦

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[U.S. Journal](#)

The Backcountry Rescue Squad at America's Busiest National Park

In the Great Smoky Mountains, an auxiliary team of élite outdoorsmen answers the call when park-goers' hikes, climbs, and rafting adventures go wrong.

By [Paige Williams](#)

January 12, 2026



Wallace Stegner called reserving the country's signature landscapes for public enjoyment "the best idea we ever had." But funding and staffing aren't keeping pace with the parks' popularity. Photographs by Mike Belleme for The New Yorker

America's busiest national park isn't Yosemite or Yellowstone; it's the Great Smoky Mountains, which straddles the heavily forested border of North Carolina and Tennessee. Half the country can drive there in a day. The park measures 522,427 acres, nearly the size of Rhode Island. The terrain is choked with rhododendron and dog hobble, ground cover that makes it easy to get lost and hard to be found. There are eight hundred and forty-eight miles of trail, and countless manways, which masquerade as trails. The many waterfalls are fed by rain on par with that of the Pacific Northwest. The rivers rise and boil with astonishing speed. There's little to no cell service.

Every year, the park logs more than twelve million visits, some of which go poorly. From the annals of misadventure and bad luck: A fifteen-year-old boy jumped between rocks at a scenic overlook and fell five hundred feet. Lightning struck near where a man lay reading in his tent; the charge “welded” him to the ground for at least ten seconds. A cyclist hit a deer and flew over the handlebars. A hundred and seventy-five feet deep in a cave, two spelunkers ran out of rope. A child got separated from his family and wound up at the base of a cliff. Hikers discovered a man freezing on the Appalachian Trail, seventy-four miles of which pass through the park; he didn’t have a coat, and had wrapped his feet in underwear and duct tape. A fisherman was stung more than a hundred times by yellow jackets. Three stranded backpackers, unable to figure out how to build a proper fire, even with a small blowtorch, burned their clothes. A kid tried to cross a flooding river after his friends warned him not to, and was swept downstream. An inner tuber fell into a river and got trapped between submerged rocks. “The river will take you,” John Sharbel, a veteran white-water rafter, told me the other day. His friends call him Sharbs. He had just texted me a video of himself on Class V rapids, where—*bloop!*—he popped right out of his boat. In the national parks, drowning ranks behind only motor-vehicle crashes as the leading cause of accidental death. Sharbs’s rafting drama ended with him dragging himself onto a riverbank and bushwhacking his way back to camp, where one of his buddies, Big Bill, unaware of the bloop, asked, “Why’re you so dirty?” Sharbs also texted me a photo of a random male rafter wearing cartoonishly enormous silicone boobs, and a shot of the under-chin of the youngest of his three sons, who had just spent a morning in the E.R. (Pogo stick; five stitches.)

Sharbs, who is in his early forties, grew up in Knoxville, thirty-six miles north of the park, and has been a Smokies regular since elementary school. In the early two-thousands, he and his wife, Laura, a veterinarian, worked on cattle ranches in California. “When we would do roundups, there was this old firefighter who’d come out and help us, and I’d talk to him and think, *That sounds like a pretty cool life style,*” he said. Firefighting didn’t stick. Sharbs joined the Tennessee Army National Guard. In 2012, he deployed to Afghanistan and spent a year in Helmand Province, as a combat medic. He was telling me about it over sandwiches in the park, at a picnic table beside the Little River, when an acorn the size of a golf ball very

nearly fell on my head. Sharbs went “Holy shit!” Then he said, “Also a big killer in the park? Falling tree branches.” Dead, dangling limbs are called widow-makers. Jonathan Dee, the park’s medical director, who is a family physician, told me that a patient once asked him which of the park’s wild animals frightened him most; he said that nothing scared him more than the wind.

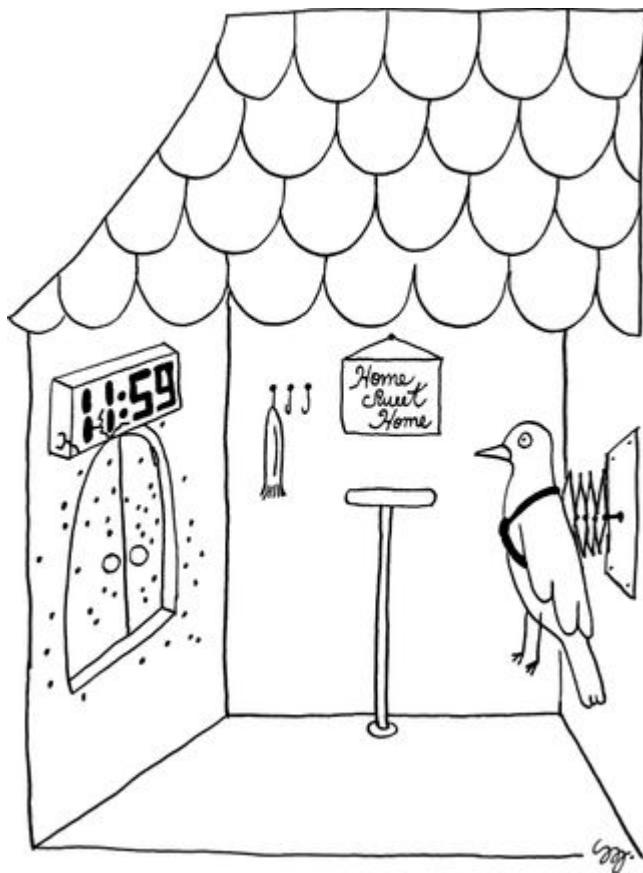
In the American West, visitors to national parks know to expect remoteness. The Smokies’ proximity to cities creates a false sense of security. The park is headquartered in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, which has been characterized as an amusement venue posing as a town. You can step out of the forest and play laser tag or eat a corn dog. Chockablock on the main street there’s Smoky Vapes, Pancake Pantry, Gatlin’s Rugged Ropes Adventure Course, the Hollywood Star Cars Museum, Ripley’s Believe It or Not!, Ripley’s Mountain Coaster, Ripley’s Davy Crockett Mini-Golf, Ripley’s Haunted Adventure, Ripley’s Super Fun Zone!, Ripley’s Motion Blaster, Ripley’s Mirror Maze (and, behind it, Ripley’s Aquarium of the Smokies), plus an attraction where, after a ten-minute ascent on a canary-yellow chairlift, you can cross a gorge via a cable footbridge designed to tilt and sway with each step. There’s a Trump Superstore, and a sky phallus called the Space Needle. Oversized humanoid art installations appear seasonally on downtown benches; I witnessed “pumpkin people” in October, “snow people” in November.

A brochure describes Gatlinburg as America’s “mountain paradise.” Allow me to vouch for the following: Tennessee barbecue; a rock shop owned by a mountaineer who told me ghost stories; a handwritten sign at the checkout counter of Old Dad’s General Store which reads “Please Do Not Lick Your Fingers to separate your cash when you are paying”; serendipitous bluegrass performances on the front steps of the convention center; and the elevated patio of a certain creekside restaurant where, one golden afternoon, as I ended the day with a cocktail and a book, a big bear ambled by. (Nineteen hundred black bears live in the Smokies.) People on the patio leapt from their seats and crowded the railing, holding up their phones. No one stayed to admire the bear; they just wanted the picture. According to Reddit, travellers often go to the Smokies looking for a “good nature area to drive around in,” or for “outdoors without the outdoors.”

In the Great Smoky Mountains, which have been called a Bermuda Triangle of volatile conditions, a hike can start at noon in tank-top weather and end at night in a snowstorm. Visitors have been known to climb to a high point to watch a sunset, forgetting that they'll need light to get back down. They don't think to bring water. They misjudge distances and underestimate the landscape, which isn't just steep; it's slippery, snaky, rocky, rooty, humid, buggy, foggy, and misty. Each year in the national park, there are more than a hundred backcountry emergencies. Andrew Herrington, a former park ranger, told me, "The people that get in trouble are the ones that are wearing flip-flops and shorts, and they buy a one-dollar trail map and decide to hike—and take a wrong turn. Now it's dark, they're trying to navigate with their phone, the phone's dying, the kids and the wife are screaming, everybody's mad and crying and scared." Sometimes accidents just happen. Lodged in my brain is a photo that Herrington showed me of a woman's right leg, bare from the knee down and shaped like a hockey stick: the foot cocked ninety degrees to the left. She had snapped her ankle while hiking to Laurel Falls, which search-and-rescue workers have nicknamed Everybody Falls. (The park recently shut down the trail, for refurbishments.)

Park rangers respond to and manage every emergency, but they routinely need outside help to conduct rescues, especially deep in the backcountry. Herrington, like Sharbs, is a seasoned search-and-rescue volunteer. They, and others like them, are essential to public-safety operations in the Smokies, in part because they have so much experience in that highly specific environment.

One afternoon in October, I met Herrington at Look Rock, the apex of the Foothills Parkway, on the western end of the park, near Townsend, which calls itself "the peaceful side of the Smokies." The crowds and traffic are less intense than in Gatlinburg, and the mountain views are unimpeded; decades ago, Townsend limited development. A Ripley's Peaceful Side is unimaginable.



Cartoon by Debora Szpilman

Herrington and I left our vehicles in a deserted parking lot and followed a manway through a band of trees, stepping over roots the size of boa constrictors. At the dizzying edge of a sandstone cliff, he spread a park map on a boulder and ran a hand across it. "It's hard to grasp the immensity," he said. A particularly remote pocket, Tricorner Knob, has a reputation for being one of the nation's "true wilderness areas." When I asked Herrington to describe the park's personality, he said, "The park is just neutral. People are, like, 'Mother Nature's out to kill you' or 'Mother Nature's out to help you.' It doesn't *care*. It just does its thing."

Herrington had turned fifty the previous day. He has a reddish-gray beard and bright-blue eyes, and shaves his head. He talks fast and drinks not much alcohol and no coffee. He is twice divorced, with an eleven-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter. He lives just outside the park, in a house that he built on a mountainside, with a catfish lake at the foot of his driveway and a yard full of chickens, which he keeps mainly for the eggs. To get there, you drive an infamous eleven-mile section of two-lane

highway called the Dragon's Tail, which has three hundred and eighteen curves. When I visited, in November, photographers had stationed themselves at pull-offs, to shoot pictures of motorcycle daredevils and a nose-to-bumper caravan of candy-colored Corvettes. Herrington told me, "If my kids ever want a motorcycle, I'll tell them, 'First, you're gonna go work the Dragon's Tail for a year with the Blount County Rescue Squad. Pick up all the pieces, see what *that's* like.' "

Herrington grew up in Australia, where his mother is from, and south of Nashville, in the rural town of Thompson's Station, the site of a Civil War battle. More than anything, he liked being outdoors. "I thought 'survival' was making arrowheads and wearing a loincloth around the woods, going barefoot," he told me. In school, Herrington competed in wrestling. (He may have been drawn to martial arts because an uncle, Rowdy Herrington, directed the original "Road House.") He also kayaked and climbed. In 1993, the day before he turned eighteen, Herrington was sport climbing in a state park near Chattanooga when a rock fell about sixty feet and broke his skull. He wasn't wearing a helmet. His friends saw him collapse, unconscious. One of them, a cross-country runner, sprinted for help. Rescue was delayed because a responding park ranger had a heart attack during the hike in.

Herrington's injury, a depression fracture, temporarily paralyzed much of the left side of his body, and derailed his goal of becoming an Army Ranger. Instead, he studied wildlife biology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, as he recovered from a cranioplasty. (There's now a metal plate in his head.) He entered what he called his bushcraft phase. "I wore all wool clothes, carried a big axe," he said. He travelled to Canada to study with survival instructors, and he read a lot: "The Forager's Harvest," "The Outdoor Survival Handbook," "Six Ways In and Twelve Ways Out," "98.6 Degrees: The Art of Keeping Your Ass Alive!" He told me, "When I get into something, I get *really* into it."

In 1998, Herrington heard an interview, on NPR, with Rick Varner, who hunted feral hogs for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Varner described the creatures as diabolically cunning, destructive, and nocturnal. He would hike ten or twelve miles at night, hunting, and spend daylight

hours in camp, reading. Some weeks, it rained every day. A lot of the time, his knees hurt. He would assemble and bait chain-link traps, which had been dropped by helicopter. The policy was to shoot and bury your catch. Critics complained about squandered meat, but Varner told NPR, “Nothing goes to waste in the wild.” He considered it payback when bears came across that “chunk of protein”—feral hogs are an invasive species.

To Herrington, Varner’s life sounded like “a boy’s *dream*.” He volunteered in the Smokies’ hog-hunting program, and called Varner Rambo Ricky. Soon, he got hired, and asked to be assigned to the Twentymile district, a remote posting near the Dragon’s Tail. Long stretches of solitude neither bothered him nor appeared to impair his sociability. Herrington is more gregarious and diplomatic—though perhaps not less introspective—than what you might expect from someone who’s spent so much time alone in the woods. One day, he told me, “Men typically have either a trust issue or an unworthiness thing. If it’s that unworthiness thing, you start to seek external validation through achievement, adventure, women, all that type of stuff.”

In 2008, Herrington became a Smokies law-enforcement ranger, energized by the thought of hunting poachers of ginseng and game. He often put his hand up for search-and-rescue missions, and realized that he wanted to be involved in SAR work for the rest of his life after he and Rambo Ricky found a pair of lost grandparents by blowing whistles, a low-tech piece of lifesaving gear. As the grandparents reunited with their family, Herrington had to step away and compose himself.



In the Smokies, which has nearly eight hundred and fifty miles of trail, the conditions can be volatile: a hike may start at noon in tank-top weather and end at night in a snowstorm.

The Park Service closed Twentymile's station. Herrington couldn't think of anything worse than being posted to Gatlinburg, or saddled with "sneaking around campgrounds looking for dope smokers, babysitting tubers, or typing report after report." While listening to a podcast called "Peace Revolution," he decided that staying on for the next twenty-five years wasn't worth a future pension of twelve hundred dollars a month. In 2013, he resigned, giving his written reason as "new chapter of life." You sure? his boss asked. Until recently, a job with the federal government was one of the most stable in the United States. Herrington was sure. A month later, he filed incorporation papers for a new company, BigPig Outdoors, and became a wilderness educator.

The survivalism-and-bushcraft industry is expected to surpass three billion dollars by 2034. Herrington had no plans to turn BigPig into an elaborate

survival school (those do exist); he just wanted to live an outdoors life, provide for his family, and help others reconnect to what we, as humans, already instinctively know how to do. Using his own near-death experience as an example, he stressed preparation and critical thinking over the kind of “primitive skills” that were hyped—dangerously, he thought—on reality television. In a life-threatening situation, nobody lost in the woods needed to be trying to make a bow and arrow. What that person did need to know was how to keep the body’s core temperature up, and how to build a fire in “real shitty weather.” The one item that Herrington would want with him during a backcountry emergency isn’t a big-ass knife—it’s a sleeping bag. He told me about a lost hiker who’d survived by simply “laying in his sleeping bag for four days.” A case that haunts him and others concerned a woman who got turned around in the Smokies while walking back to her car. She did what no one should do when lost: she kept walking. The search lasted for days and involved nearly two hundred people. Sharbs found the woman lying face up in shallow water, dead from hypothermia, wearing only leggings. Hypothermia can trick the body into thinking it’s burning up, and cause a victim to strip, a sign of imminent death known as paradoxical undressing. If she had stayed put, rescuers might have reached her in time. A simple trash bag—another low-tech piece of lifesaving gear—could have preserved her body heat: poke three holes in it and wear it like a poncho. Herrington likes to say, “If you can treat your injury and stay warm and hydrated, you’ve got a pretty good chance to make it out.”

At BigPig, Herrington’s students ranged from middle schoolers to game wardens. He taught land navigation, wilderness first aid, foraging. He customized courses for women’s groups, companies, and families, and trained prospective contestants of the Discovery Channel show “Naked and Afraid,” in which a man and a woman are stranded in a remote location without clothes, food, or water, and with one personal item each, and must work together to survive for three weeks. At R.E.I., he taught a free course, “Reality of Survival.” On BigPig’s blog, he published roundups of global search-and-rescue cases, often posting (and unpacking the correct responses to) hypotheticals. You slip and knock yourself out while deer hunting, and wake up disoriented; stranded by a freak snowstorm, you’re running low on food after three days in a backcountry shelter. Now what?

Herrington homesteaded. He ate daylilies, violet greens, chickweed, shepherd's purse, greenbrier tips, sheep sorrel, thistle stalks. He learned how to make bamboo-pokeweed spring rolls, persimmon ice cream, spicebush muffins, dandelion jelly, pan-fried groundnuts, watercress soup, acorn cookies, roast squirrel glazed with honey and balsamic vinegar. If a wild hog came onto his property, he killed, butchered, and ate it, then freeze-dried the leftovers. He dried stalks of goldenrod and mint on racks. His interest in flowers led to teasing from "the high testosterone crowd," he wrote on the BigPig blog, adding, "I have killed wild boar with knives, tracked armed fugitives, and had a couple cage fights, so I feel I have enough 'man points' built up to call bullshit." The average male, he explained, had been culturally conditioned to think that "flowers are for girls, guns and hunting is for guys." Flowers, he wrote, "are for everyone." Much of the world's food supply depends on them.

Disaster preparedness was also something that Herrington thought about a lot. He encouraged people to store food and water in case of catastrophe: "A trip to Costco can get you 50 pounds of beans and 50 pounds of rice providing 160,000+ calories for around \$75." His intention wasn't to stoke fear but to promote self-reliance. "If you trace your lineage back," he wrote, "you won't have to go far to find members of your family that were living more independently than we do nowadays."

Herrington was two years into his "new chapter of life" when he started missing search-and-rescue work. He approached his former boss, Steve Kloster, the Smokies' chief ranger at the time, with a proposal to support the national park by creating an independent "all hazards" emergency-response team of élite outdoors athletes who were willing to step away from their jobs and families in, say, the middle of the night, or on a holiday, and in weather that you wouldn't let your dog out in, to save the life of a stranger. They would train for the gnarliest missions: swift-water rescue, long-distance carry-outs, winter rescue, and technical rescue, which involves complex systems of ropes, pulleys, and carabiners. Herrington wanted to name the team *BUSAR*, for Backcountry Unit Search and Rescue. Kloster liked the idea. He asked Herrington how he planned to keep his guys motivated. Herrington told him, "Leave that to me."

In the U.S., SAR missions overwhelmingly rely on volunteers, Chris Boyer, the executive director of the National Association for Search and Rescue, told me. “It’s the local Safeway butcher, it’s the lawyer, the teacher.”

Herrington’s first recruit was one of his survival-class students, Matt Jernigan, a Knoxville native and a hard-core mountain biker who worked a high-paying job in software product management but had only ever wanted to be a park ranger. Jernigan had hiked all hundred and fifty trails in the Smokies. The moment Herrington mentioned *BUSAR*, Jernigan said, “I’m in.” He’s the team’s president.

Other members came by word of mouth, and occasionally by happenstance. Dee, the family physician, had no formal connection to the park, though he and his wife, Whitney, a pediatrician, avidly hiked there with their four children. The Dees live in Maryville, which, like Gatlinburg, is one of the park’s “gateway” communities. One day, in 2019, Dee, who’s in his mid-forties, was on Facebook and clicked on an image of a waterfall, which took him to *BUSAR*’s page. A recruitment poster, whose language Herrington had borrowed from an apocryphal Ernest Shackleton ad, read “Experienced outdoor athletes wanted for hazardous work. No wages. Long hours. Adverse weather. High level of fitness required.” The team worked out together every Tuesday evening near Dee’s home. A photo showed a couple dozen men and women in matching neon-yellow gear, standing resolutely on a mountaintop. “Something inside me kind of leapt,” he told me.

Dee had no spare time. But, after three days of being unable to stop thinking about “rescuing people in the woods,” he e-mailed the address on the Facebook account, writing, “I don’t know anything about search and rescue, but the idea of crawling through the mountains, rescuing people, really appeals to me.” Herrington invited Dee out to eat with some of the team, and when that went well he invited him to a workout.

Herrington and his teammates designed their workouts to be brutal—every *BUSAR* I’ve met has confessed to craving what one called “purposeful shared suffering.” A team member would concoct an exercise; the rest would do it. The exercises mimicked the demands of difficult backcountry missions. Someone who could walk up and over a picnic table for thirty minutes, wearing a twenty-pound pack, with a fifty-pound sandbag slung

over his shoulder, would likely be able to help tote a rescue litter, even if, as once happened, the patient weighed four hundred pounds.

The fittest park rangers could do that, too; there simply weren't enough of them. A tricky rescue may warrant dozens of people, possibly more than are on duty and available at any given time. The Park Service required that a ranger assigned to "arduous" duty be able to walk three miles on flat ground, carrying a forty-five-pound pack, in less than forty-five minutes. The arduous pack test was how *BUSARs* warmed up. Herrington told me, "In ten minutes, I can gauge whether a candidate has the mental and physical fortitude to do this job. There's a certain personality that that appeals to."

Most of Dee's strength was in his lower body—he's an ardent road cyclist. He had no trouble passing the pack hike or the picnic-table exercise, or, as *BUSAR*'s fitness test also required, completing at least fifteen two-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound dead lifts within a minute. Then came the burpee pullups.



"Technically, we're just two people having a conversation at a coffee shop, but if we talk loud enough the room might collectively think, Wow, they should have a podcast."
Cartoon by Colin Tom

A burpee pullup entails lying belly flat, popping straight up and into a pullup—chin above the bar, please; none of that Marjorie Taylor Greene fish-flop flailing around—and then dropping back to the belly, in one fluid

motion. The exercise works all the major muscles. The *BUSAR* test called for fifty burpee pullups within ten minutes—while wearing a twenty-pound pack. Dee failed. He went home devastated. His wife told him, “Johnny, I’m just gonna say it. You need to train and do what it takes to pass this test, because I’ve never seen anything light you up like this has.”

Dee trained for months. When his family vacationed in the backcountry of Alaska, he took rubber resistance bands. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, and I’m wrapping them around trees,” he told me. He passed the second tryout and became a *BUSAR*. “I started from absolute zero and just ate it up,” he said. He developed such an aptitude for technical rescue that he now teaches the subject for the national parks. Last spring, when the Smokies’ longtime medical director retired, the park asked Dee, who by then was *BUSAR*’s vice-president, to replace him. He agreed on the condition that, during *SAR* missions, he be considered “one of the grunts.” Working search and rescue reminded him of the decision that he and his wife made to become foster parents, and then adoptive parents, after they’d had two biological children of their own: it felt like the right thing to do.

The world’s first national park, Yellowstone, was established in 1872, in what were then the territories of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. The writer and conservationist Wallace Stegner later called reserving the country’s signature landscapes for public enjoyment “the best idea we ever had.” There are now sixty-three national parks and hundreds of park “units”—monuments, historic battlefields, scenic roadways, seashores—all run by the National Park Service, under the Department of the Interior.

Funding and staffing aren’t keeping pace with the popularity of the parks, which hit a record three hundred and thirty-two million recreational visits in 2024. By the end of that year, there was a twenty-three-billion-dollar maintenance backlog. Then, in 2025, the Park Service lost twenty-four per cent of its permanent staff; at least a thousand positions were slashed by the Department of Government Efficiency. “This isn’t becoming more ‘efficient,’ ” Phil Francis, who for eight years served as the Smokies’ deputy superintendent and for three as acting superintendent, told me. “The staff can’t do as much as they once did, because there’s just not as many of

them.” He described what is happening to the national parks as “death by a thousand cuts.”

The most recent shutdown of the federal government was also the longest: October 1st to November 12th. President Donald Trump insisted that the national parks remain open—at least skeletally. The National Parks Conservation Association declared that the Administration “considerably exacerbated” the Park Service’s resource crisis by “pushing remaining staff to their limits.” The looming threat of a full shutdown hit the Smokies just in time for leaf-peeping season and fall break, a particularly busy period that helps local businesses survive through the winter. Tourists spend \$2.2 billion annually in the area, making the Smokies, according to *Forbes*, the most economically valuable of the national parks. A consortium that included Sevier County, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and a prominent nonprofit, Friends of the Smokies, stepped in and kept the park running.

The Smokies, which was established in 1934, has never imposed an entrance fee, but in 2023 it started charging for parking—five dollars a day, forty for the year. The fee generates five million dollars annually. Some of the proceeds were used to create a Preventative Search and Rescue team, or *PSAR*, which has seven full-time positions. These rangers educate visitors about avoidable behaviors that may, in turn, trigger a *SAR* mission, which can be risky and expensive. (Between 2019 and 2023, the Park Service spent twenty-two million dollars on search and rescue. Rescues aren’t asked to pay anything, even when carelessness or ignorance caused the problem.) I spent the better part of one autumn day watching Joshua Albritton, the Smokies’ *PSAR* chief, genially engage with dozens of hikers on Alum Cave Trail, a popular five-and-a-half-mile route that leads to a backcountry lodge. He’d ask if they had enough water, and how far they planned to walk. Just above a steep, winding staircase at Arch Rock, a picturesque landmark about a mile and a half in, he told a family with small children, “The terrain gets a lot more difficult at this point, just for your information.”

When the park needs rescue help, it issues a callout to a local emergency-services network, which includes *BUSAR*, whose members receive mission

requests in a Signal chat that Herrington set up. More than half of the search-and-rescue workers who show up for the most trying missions are *BUSARs*. Currently, there are nineteen of them, all men. Herrington leads the recruiting, and encourages nicknames. Big Bill is Bill Ivey, a Smokies wildlife ranger and a marine reservist who is six feet six. Jernigan is Jernigator, who, this year, at age fifty-five, left his software career to become a wilderness E.M.T. and a park ranger, the life he'd wanted all along. Captain Morgan is Andrew Morgan, a physician's assistant and a former member of the Army Special Forces. Superman is Ken Miller, a retired surgeon who serves with nine local, state, and federal *SAR* organizations but—so goes a joke—assures his wife that he belongs to only one. (Several years ago, when Miller turned eighty, the guys were so excited about throwing him a surprise party that they forgot to invite him.) Lando, Ben Landkammer, grew up in Montana and trains canines. Silkwood, Mark Silkwood, is also ex-Special Forces, and an Army contractor. Cody Watson, *BUSAR*'s quartermaster, recently retired early from the Air National Guard; he's an E.M.T., as is John Danner. Zack Copeland, who chairs *BUSAR*'s board, is a former wildlife biologist turned poultry farmer. Howitzer, Andrew Howe, is a civil engineer and a competitive mountain biker. Kelly Street is a Knoxville lawyer and a former military-intelligence officer. Caleb Edmiston is a chiropractor who, like Herrington, has competed in mixed martial arts. Greg Grieco played football at the University of Tennessee and now runs a nonprofit that rescues bear cubs. Obi-Wad, Jeff Wadley—a pastor, an author, and a former Civil Air Patrol officer who's been working *SAR* missions in the Smokies for more than forty-five years—teaches courses on “lost-person behavior” and may be the greatest living expert on airplane crashes in the park. Daz, Andrew Randazzo, started a company that provides continuing education for medical-industry professionals; he did emergency-response work in New York City during the *COVID-19* outbreak, and near the border of Syria and Turkey after the earthquakes in 2023. Ski is Brian Borkowski, who flies Black Hawk helicopters for the Tennessee Army National Guard.

Sharbs is a critical-care flight medic for the Guard. He's often the guy at the end of Ski's rescue cable. *BUSAR*'s unofficial motto, “Right foot!,” derives from “*RTFOOT*,” an acronym inspired by a response that Sharbs once gave when a teammate asked how a mission had turned out: “Rescued the fuck

out of them.” Every prospective member of *BUSAR* must pass Herrington’s winter-survival class. The final exam requires students to build a fire in the woods after having been submerged in a frigid creek. *BUSARs* have been known to retake the course for fun.

The Smokies, like other national parks, pays some outside search-and-rescue forces an hourly wage, ranging from about twenty-five to thirty-three dollars. But a third of *BUSARs* take no pay at all, and the income is so negligible that Herrington doesn’t mention it when he recruits. “Here’s the thing,” he told me. “My guys don’t *have* to be here. They’re here because they want to be.”

BUSARs always roll for a child, or for someone with dementia. Most members have a spouse or kids at home. Big Bill’s wife, Jennie Ivey, a professor of equine nutrition and exercise physiology at the University of Tennessee’s Institute of Agriculture, told me that her husband got involved in *BUSAR* when their children were little: “It was, like, ‘What do you mean you need to go out again? It’s a volunteer thing!’ But it was really meaningful for Bill to find that community. And to know that you’re giving back? If our kids were hurt, I’d want somebody to *go*.”

One Sunday in August of 2019, J. R. Huber, who worked in the residential-mortgage industry in Knoxville, took his twin daughters, Peyton and Lauren, for a short hike in the Smokies. The girls were fourteen. They chose a moderate trail, to Fern Branch Falls—four miles round trip. Huber wanted a quick in-and-out so that he could get home in time to play a soccer match. They carried water but little else. Peyton, a promising soccer player who was starting her freshman year of high school, ran up ahead, to take a selfie at the top of the waterfall. Her dad had just opened his mouth to warn her to be careful when she slipped. “I could see her reach for—there was nothing to reach for,” he told me. “The vision that will not ever leave my mind is my daughter in the air, falling.”

Peyton landed about twenty feet below, on a narrow rock ledge. Huber clawed through underbrush to reach her. She was bleeding from a gash in her head, but she was conscious. She told her dad, “I’m sorry!” He told her, “You’re alive!” Her left wrist was broken; her left femur had snapped. The

femur is the human body's longest, strongest bone, and among the most agonizing to break. Peyton kept saying, "I want to die!"



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Huber sent Lauren up the mountain, to try for a cellphone signal. He knew that he had to get Peyton away from the water, to keep her dry and warm. Even in temperate conditions, trauma can cause hypothermia. (Organs shut down as the body loses heat; think of a person walking through a house, turning off the lights.) "I'm going to have to carry you," Huber told Peyton. When he picked her up by the armpits—"like Simba in 'The Lion King,'" she told me—she could see the grotesque deformity of her leg, which was "dangling."

Huber carried Peyton off the ledge and into the woods, about ten feet away. He used some of their drinking water to clean her head wound. Beyond that, there wasn't much that he could do but hold her head in his lap, tell her to take deep breaths, and play Kenny Chesney songs on his phone. Lauren came back. She'd been able to call 911. "They're on their way, but it's

going to be forever,” she told her dad and sister. “They have to assemble a team.”

Every search-and-rescue mission begins with an investigation. Who needs help and why? Where are they, or where were they last seen? How old are they? What kind of physical shape are they in? What are they carrying? The incident commander—always a park ranger—may order a “hasty,” in which a scout, or two, gets on scene, assesses the situation, and radios out details that will help determine the size and nature of the response. Sharbs did the hasty for Peyton. He crawled through stinging nettles to where she lay, beside a log. When he saw the waterfall, he considered her lucky for having landed where she did. If she’d missed the ledge, she’d have been “deader ‘n Dillinger,” he told me. He zipped Peyton into an emergency blanket and started an I.V. He was authorized by radio to administer the maximum amount of painkillers for her size and age. Huber told me, “It was still never enough.”

There’s a saying in SAR: rescue is not imminent. Park staff and outside search-and-rescue workers may be busy on other calls, or they may have to drive all the way around, or through, the park just to reach the staging area and start hiking in. Peyton’s team eventually arrived with a Stokes basket, a lipped titanium litter that has netting and straps to secure a body during difficult transport. They wore helmets and carried ropes and harnesses, and their waistbands were racked with carabiners and gloves.

The team decided that the best way out was down the front of the waterfall. Huber watched them unfurl ropes and design rigging, later describing the system to me as “this contraption that they created on the fly.” Tech rescue, in fact, requires considerable—and consistent—practice. I recently spent a day watching one such practice at Newfound Gap, a scenic overlook where President Franklin D. Roosevelt formally dedicated the Smokies, in September, 1940. Two dozen rangers, *BUSARs*, and park volunteers situated themselves on a service road flanked by a steep wooded slope above and another below. At the direction of Albritton, the *PSAR* chief, the teams mountain-goated up and down the pitches, which were slick with autumn leaves. They brushed up on the alpine-butterfly knot, the Prusik, the figure eight, the Distel hitch. In one drill, several team members stood forty yards

upslope, pulling, as others below guided and balanced a silicone dummy in a litter. “Ready to haul!” the person at the bottom would yell. Someone positioned roughly mid-slope would repeat, “Ready to haul!”

“Up slow!”

“Up slow!”

“Stop!”

“Stop!”

“Reset!”

“Reset!”

At one point, Albritton announced a hypothetical: a broken femur. The team fitted a dummy with a traction splint. Ethan Schwartz, a park ranger and an E.M.T. who’d been telling us about having lived in a South American rain forest where he adopted a howler monkey named Paula, explained, to newer members, “We’re preventing increasing muscle contractions and spasms that would cause the sharp, severed bone to puncture the femoral artery.” A patient can bleed to death without the bone ever breaking the skin.

A traction splint can ease the pain. This proved untrue for Peyton. As the team lowered her down the waterfall, buckled into her litter, the basket unavoidably bumping the rock wall, she screamed repeatedly at Sharbs, “I hate you, John!,” which even her horrified father had to admit was kind of funny. Sharbs later told me, “I was, like, ‘Yeah, I get it. I’m causing you a lot of pain right now. But we’re also saving your life. So suck it up, buttercup.’ ”

It got dark. Peyton’s rescuers turned on their headlamps. They mounted her litter on a large treaded wheel and, where they could, rolled her through the forest, which resounded with crickets and frogs. They inched her across a rushing creek, on a log bridge barely as wide as the litter, and, ultimately, to a waiting ambulance, which took her to a medevac chopper.

Peyton had been asking if she'd be able to go to soccer practice on Monday. "No, honey," Sharbs told her. She missed her freshman year of play but started, as a goalie, for her remaining three years of high school, setting Tennessee's state record for shutouts. She now starts for Liberty University. In 2025, she was named her conference's Goalkeeper of the Year. When I called her family, in November, Peyton's team had just won the conference championship and was en route to the N.C.A.A. tournament.

That wasn't the only waterfall story I heard in the Smokies. Watson, *BUSAR*'s quartermaster, had recently discovered that he was neighbors with Nadi Gray, who, in July, 2020, took his then wife and some friends into the park to Spruce Flats Falls, a multipart cascade with a shallow pool, thirty-five miles west of where Peyton went down. Barefoot and wearing only swim trunks, Gray climbed to the fourth level, then went higher, looking for a fifth. He fell and landed forty feet below, on his back, on a log. A friend who witnessed this thought that he was dead.

Gray spent so much time in the backcountry alone that he carried a personal SOS beacon. But the beacon was in his backpack, which he'd left at the bottom of the falls. He later recalled "negotiating" with himself about when to become conscious. One half of his brain would say to the other, *Are you ready?*, and the other half would answer, *No*. "At the moment I said yes, all of the pain and the noise and the sight flooded in," he told me. He was able to tell his wife how to activate the SOS beacon.

Two *BUSARs*—Jernigan and Lando—arrived with a park ranger, followed by Herrington and several others. Somehow, Gray had wound up in the water; his veins had contracted to the point that the ranger, who was a paramedic, couldn't place an I.V. for painkillers. A needle had to be jammed directly into Gray's shin.



"O.K., so I'm twelve. Why do you always drag my age into it? I never drag your age into it."
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

I'd been trying to meet up with Gray when Herrington, Jernigan, and I happened to run into him one night at Peaceful Side Social, a restaurant in Townsend. Gray and a friend, and their husky mixes, were finishing dinner at a picnic table. "Last time I saw you, you were—I was the guy that had the plastic over you," Herrington told him. "We made a little plastic tent to keep you warm, because you were getting hypothermic."

"I was in the river for three hours!" Gray said.

Gray, who is in his early sixties, with silver hair and a perpetual tan, grew up in Nashville. He changed his name from Scott to Nadi after spending time in India, where he travels for work. He described himself to us as an experienced outdoorsman, and said that whenever he went ice kayaking he'd make himself swim, to remind his brain that his body could "handle" the cold.

"You probably don't remember, but I was setting up a rope system," Herrington told him.

"I do remember! And I was terrified!" Gray said. He had fallen in what he called a deep "slot" in the earth. The SAR team planned to raise him up enough that he could be carried out via a manway. "I was terrified because —have you ever broken a rib?" Gray asked us. (He had broken seven.) "This arm? Completely tore away from my clavicle and shoulder. I had

bleeding in my lungs. My pelvis wasn't broken, but it really was not happy. Burst eardrum. Sprained wrist." The Tennessee Army National Guard ended up sending a Black Hawk and dropping a long hoist cable. Gray remembered a flight medic standing over him "like a Stormtrooper."

The day after we saw Gray, I visited him at home. He was living in a campground on the peaceful side, in an elegantly outfitted Airstream, next to a well-organized trailer stocked with outdoors gear. The Airstream had a Kamala Harris decal on the back. This had cost Gray a couple of friendships in the campground. He didn't mind.



"The glass isn't to keep shoplifters out—it's to keep that guy in."
Cartoon by Ellie Black

Over coffee, he told me about his YouTube channel, where he pairs meditations and poems that he's written with footage shot in national parks, and he showed me his collection of first-edition books by John Muir, and some of the tchotchkies that he'd brought home from his travels: rocks, river glass, a tiny Buddha. "I tell people, 'Every year, you should find yourself in a place where you are completely naked in the wild. The first time you do it, be somewhere where there's no chance anybody will see you. You will discover how completely out of your element you are,'" he said. "When I go out into the wild by myself, it's not because I want to be naked. It's because I want to know who I am."

It worried Gray that digitalization was creating an "alternative reality." He went on, "And people rely on it! If it ever breaks, the true crisis of society will be people not having any capability to cope. We have to accept that it's going to be non-governmental approaches that solve problems. *BUSAR* is a perfect example. Most people don't know about the cuts to the parks,

because, on the surface, the Interior Secretary has said, ‘Keep the window dressing, everybody! Keep the buses and trains running.’ Yet they’re cutting the biologists and the rangers. People that maintain trails in the backcountry are unheralded—they go out with chainsaws, and on horseback, and clear trees and repair trails. If you don’t have that, what happens within a generation is that the park falls apart.”

At busy times, *BUSAR* “pre-deploys,” which means hanging out in the Smokies in case something happens. *BUSAR* and the park have been talking about pre-deploying more. The logistics would need to be worked out—*BUSAR* is a nonprofit with no full-time staff. Park rangers drive automobiles from the federal fleet; *BUSARs* show up in their own vehicles. Herrington has a 2009 Honda Pilot with two hundred and forty-nine thousand miles on it, a crack running across the windshield, and shredded armrests. *BUSARs* buy their own gas and stock much of their own equipment. They need new emergency radios. They have no headquarters. Their skills must be continually practiced and recertified, which costs money. The organization relies on donations and grants, but the most it ever collected in a single year was fifty-six thousand dollars, in 2022. *BUSARs* would rather hike all night in a blizzard than fund-raise, or do admin.

One Saturday in mid-November, Team *BUSAR* convened in the woods in Tallassee, Tennessee, just outside the park, on the peaceful side, for a quarterly training. A friend of Herrington’s lets him use private land for that and for BigPig’s classes. Training lasts all day, and, afterward, anyone who wants to camp spends the night. It was just after nine in the morning when I got there and parked on a dead-end dirt road, behind *BUSAR*’s equipment trailer. To the right, flat ground fronted a creek; to the left rose steep woodland. Twenty yards up a visible manway stood a semi-open tepee structure cloaked by a salvaged parachute. There was seating around a fire pit. At the manway’s entrance, a rope swing hung like a storybook doorbell.

Several *BUSARs* had already set up tents; Sharbs brought a one-person cot pod. My tent got pitched near the creek. At the other end of camp loomed a gigantic khaki military tent, which Watson and Herrington had erected the previous day so that the team’s children could bunk together. Herrington collectively calls them cobra kids—the cobra is a *BUSAR* symbol. The kids

ranged in age from four to twelve; the military tent was soon being referred to as the Thunderdome, so constant was the ruckus.

Watson unpacked tables and chairs and a grill and coolers and butane cannisters and groceries and ice. Copeland, who competes in chili cook-offs, got ready to make a huge pot of chili. The forecast called for overnight temperatures in the low forties and little to no rain. Sharbs told me that at the last quarterly training it had “monsooned.” Training, like searches and rescues, happens in every kind of weather.

Around midafternoon, after refreshers on tech rescue, land navigation, and tracking, the *BUSAR*s loaded into vehicles and were driven a couple of miles away. They were dropped off with instructions to hike, in pairs, to predetermined coördinates in the forest, where they would find Herrington playing the part of a schoolteacher who’d fallen ill while leading an elementary-school field trip.

Herrington and eight kids and I walked to the designated point, to wait. He told the children not to be alarmed when he started acting “out of it.” As the first pair of yellow helmets appeared in the forest—Captain Morgan and Kelly Street—Herrington curled into the fetal position and went silent, shivering.

Cap knelt beside him and checked his vital signs. Street asked the kids the patient’s name, and the kids, giggling, said, “Mrs. Herrington!” Cap pulled a *BUSAR* beanie from his pack and put it on Herrington’s head. Street took out an emergency blanket, and he and Cap wrapped Herrington in it, insulating him from the “cold” ground. Street turned and said, “All right, kids, can y’all help me collect some dry sticks?”

Sharbs and Lando arrived, with Lando’s working canine, Kato, a German shepherd who wore a *BUSAR* harness and yellow-rimmed goggles. Street, kneeling two feet away from Herrington’s calves, constructed a small cone of twigs. As he worked, he kept up the act with the kids: “Where’re you from?” They replied, “*BUSAR* Academy.”

Street built the fire the way Herrington had taught everyone, using tinder, fatwood, and Vaseline-soaked cotton balls, hit with a spark from a ferro rod.

Every *BUSAR* carries personal fire-starter kits and a twenty-five-pound pack filled with gear: headlamps, extra batteries, survival blanket, chem light, grid reader, pens, hemostatic gauze, trash bag, dry bag, gaiters, gloves, spork, M.R.E.s, flagging tape, two types of tourniquets, HotHands, 550 cord, multi-tool, folding saw, microspikes. Showing me all of this one day, Sharbs held up a small item and told me what Herrington had told him: “This is the best fire starter in the history of man.” It was a Bic lighter.

Jernigan and Daz arrived. They strung a tarp, on paracord, at an angle between trees, sheltering Herrington and the fire. Watson played dispatcher: “*BUSAR* One, Seven Hundred.”

“Seven Hundred, this is *BUSAR* One,” Cap said.

“Sit-rep?”

“We have a fifty-year-old female, presently hypothermic.”

“Location?”

Sharbs read off their coördinates, which he’d written in a field notebook.

Shelter in place overnight, dispatch instructed. Within minutes, makeshift structures mushroomed in the woods.

The sun was setting. The kids were getting punchy. As Watson casually quizzed them about hypothermia, one mentioned an insect that “climbs up your pants and bites your balls.” Watson, suppressing a laugh, said, “Stop it, watch your mouth.”

Herrington came out of character and lay flat on his back with both hands behind his head as if at home on the sofa, watching a football game. He looked so cozy next to the fire that the kids clamored to get under the shelter with him. Then he jumped up, assessed the *BUSARs*’ shelters one by one, and said, “All right, break it down!”

As Street dismantled his setup, I asked him why he’d joined *BUSAR*. He told me that he’d served in the Army from 1995 to 2005, then got out, got

married, went to law school, had kids. “What I realized as I got into my forties was that I wasn’t done serving,” he said. “So this scratches that itch. It’s really low on bullshit, and I enjoy being a part of something that’s useful.” Glancing at his teammates, he said, “I’m *surrounded* by people who are useful.” Then he showed Miller and me the logger’s knot that his granddaddy had taught him in childhood.

Half the team stayed to camp. We made a fire at the tepee, drank beer, and stayed up late. Lando described the quarterly trainings and campouts as *BUSAR*’s “sinew.” They were still processing their most harrowing rescue in recent memory, which began on September 27, 2024, the day that Hurricane Helene reached the Smokies. An SOS beacon from a personal device pinged 911, alerting rangers to a crisis at Tricorner Knob, where a diabetic hiker was gravely sick, and deteriorating. Hiking to Tricorner takes at least four hours—in good weather. As in much of the park, all-terrain vehicles are of no use, because the trails are so rugged and narrow. Choppers couldn’t penetrate the cloud cover. The trail was a river. The Tricorner mission lasted thirty-six hours and required dozens of people. “Everybody was *smoked*,” Big Bill told me. When he got home, he fell asleep eating a burrito.

In search and rescue, a mission may require a body bag. Corpse recovery is part of the job. The Tricorner hiker survived. He reached out to the park, to say thanks. SAR workers rarely hear from the people they save, or even learn whether they ultimately survive, or how their lives turn out. I did hear about a guy who got rescued in 1974 and whose mother took a poinsettia to park headquarters every Christmas thereafter until she died, in 2020. Now the son delivers the poinsettia.

During the campfire portion of *BUSAR*’s quarterly training, Herrington sometimes asks his teammates to throw written questions into a hat. Everyone is expected to answer. Tell us about your craziest rescue. Tell us your worst memory from childhood. Copeland once said that *BUSAR*s tend to be “first responders, military, and former athletes with a smattering of childhood trauma.” Herrington told me that members join “for whatever reason, but they all stay for the brotherhood.” When one member deployed to Kosovo, the others mowed his family’s grass. When Herrington was

juggling a divorce, a sick parent, and a busted transmission, the team pooled money to help him pay legal bills. The memory still choked him up. “In my dad’s era,” he told me, “the only emotion you were allowed to express as a man was anger.”

The kids were up at daybreak, congregating beneath the parachute, having already swung on the rope swing, picked on one another, cried a little, and gotten into a cooler of sodas. One was eating sour cream and shredded cheddar for breakfast until a dog slurped it off her plate. Another made a “rifle” out of duct tape and sticks. Two had turned huge dried leaves into “fairy hats.”

Watson cooked scrambled eggs and bacon. Daz made coffee. Lando had gone home to get Koa, his Belgian Malinois puppy, whom he kept on a leash. (“He does bite work.”) The head of Sharbs’s cot pod had collapsed overnight, and he’d gone on sleeping, at an angle, with one hairy bare leg protruding from the zipper. When he emerged, he told us about having been attacked by a donkey and a rooster, in separate incidents, which led somebody to suggest that he reëxamine his relationship to nature. The group had planned to jump off a bridge and into a river—one kid said, “Good, now I’ll know what hypothermia feels like”—but time ran out. Watson had an ambulance shift; a couple of kids had wrestling matches. Before breaking camp, the fathers and their children lined up in a row, like a ground-search team, and walked forward together, scanning for forgotten items and trash.

Herrington has long admired a passage from a book called “Last Child in the Woods,” by Richard Louv: “Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart.” He and Sharbs often talked about how cool it would be if even one cobra kid grew up to become a *BUSAR*. The Smokies weren’t going anywhere. The week after we left the woods, a woman who lived in one of the gateway communities was driving to her bank job when a bald eagle dropped a cat through her windshield. A three-hundred-and-seventy-five-pound bear got stuck on the roof of Ripley’s Motion Blaster. The bear survived; Big Bill participated in the rescue. The cat had run out of lives. ♦

[Paige Williams](#), a staff writer, writes *U.S. Journal*, a series that Calvin Trillin created, in *The New Yorker*, in 1967. She is the author of “[The Dinosaur Artist](#)” and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.

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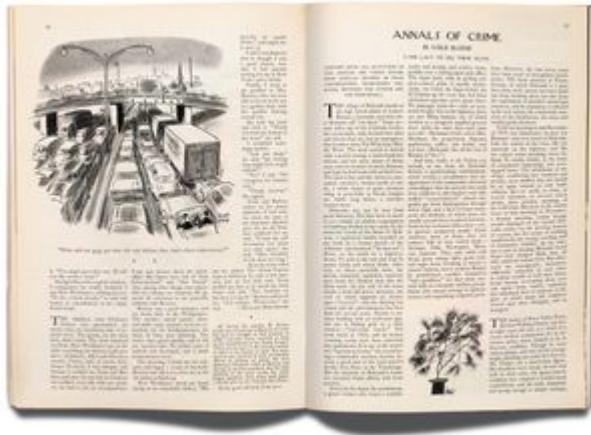
Capote's journalistic transgressions were serious, but there is no denying the awesome influence of his work.

[Takes](#)

Patrick Radden Keefe on Truman Capote’s “In Cold Blood”

By [Patrick Radden Keefe](#)

January 11, 2026



September 25, 1965

[New Takes on the classics. Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.](#)

In 1972, on “The Tonight Show,” Johnny Carson asked Truman Capote about capital punishment. Capote had written, in unsettling detail, about the hanging of two killers, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Carson said, of the death penalty, “As long as the people don’t have to *see* it, they seem to be all for it”; if executions occurred “in the public square,” Americans might stop doing them. Capote wasn’t so sure. His hands laced together professorially, he murmured, in his baby-talk drawl, “Human nature is so peculiar that, really, millions of people would watch it and get some sort of vicarious sensation.”

Capote's book "In Cold Blood," which began, in 1965, as a four-part series for this magazine, was preoccupied both by the peculiarity of human nature and by the vicarious sensations that peculiarity can arouse. Perusing the *Times* in 1959, Capote noticed a story, "*Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain*," about the apparently random murder of Herb and Bonnie Clutter and their two teen-age children in Holcomb, Kansas. Capote set off for the high plains.

He was fascinated, as he later explained, by "the homicidal mentality," and felt confident that readers would share his interest. Lurid tales of real-life murders were a staple of pulp magazines. But Capote wanted to elevate this tawdry genre into art, using careful reporting, subtle characterization, and (in his own immodest explanation) his "20/20 eye for visual detail." He announced (with further immodesty) that "In Cold Blood" marked the advent of a new form, the "nonfiction novel," which employed "the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual."

As boasts go, this one was ill-judged. By his own admission, Capote had been inspired by Lillian Ross's 1952 account of the making of a Hollywood movie, "Picture," which also originated in *The New Yorker* and exemplified the kind of narrative reportage that he now claimed to be pioneering. Worse, "In Cold Blood" wasn't "immaculately factual." It included not just imagined dialogue but invented scenes. One problem was that Capote disdained notebooks and tape recorders, relying instead on his memory, which he insisted was also 20/20—or close to it. "Sometimes he said he had ninety-six-per-cent total recall, and sometimes he said he had ninety-four-per-cent total recall," George Plimpton joked. "He could recall everything, but he could never remember what percentage recall he had."

Capote's transgressions were serious, but there is no denying the awesome influence of "In Cold Blood," which encouraged both readers and writers to rethink the possibilities of nonfiction. Capote hadn't visited Kansas before arriving in Holcomb, and his book is suffused with a rich sense of place: the merciless weather, the vernacular music of local voices ("Time was wasn't anybody here wasn't my kin"). With the structural precision of a suspense novelist, he crosscuts between the Clutters during their last days and the ex-cons who will rob their home. Nancy, aged sixteen, writes in her diary that

final night. Capote quotes the entry—it is moving in its banality—but also notes that Nancy changes her handwriting throughout the diary, “slanting it to the right or to the left” as she tries to settle on what kind of person to be.

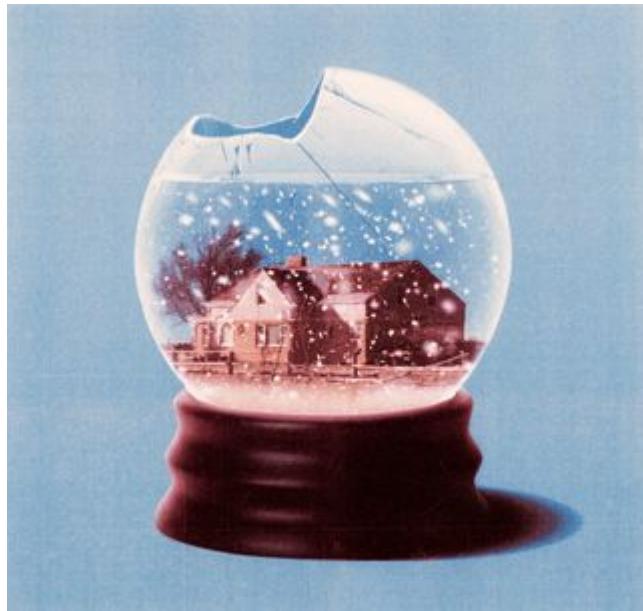
The most startling aspect of “In Cold Blood” is its nuanced portrait of the criminals. Covering the case over five years, he came to know both men with a discomfiting intimacy, particularly Smith, the more soulful of the two. Capote keeps returning to Smith’s strange physique—his bulky upper body, honed by weight lifting, atop stunted legs and feet so tiny they could have “fitted into a delicate lady’s dancing slippers.” Like Dostoyevsky, Capote doesn’t portray his killers as demonic ciphers, instead capturing their messy complexity. The real horror is that the murderers are so thoroughly human.

A tale starting with one set of violent deaths ends with another, in the execution chamber. Capote finds little vindication there. “Nice to see you,” Hickock says to the spectators, as if “greeting guests at his own funeral.” He seems sad that no Clutter relatives are present, as though “the protocol surrounding this ritual of vengeance was not being properly observed.”

Alvin Dewey, the Kansas lawman who apprehended the killers, does attend. He recalls the first time he saw Smith, on a police-station chair, his little feet “not quite brushing the floor.” As Smith’s body jerks on the rope, Dewey sees those “same childish feet, tilted, dangling.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of one of the killers of the Clutter family.

[**Read the original story.**](#)



In Cold Blood—I: The Last to See Them Alive

An unspeakable crime in the heartland.

Patrick Radden Keefe, a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2006. His books include “[London Falling: A Mysterious Death in a Gilded City and a Family's Search for Truth](#)” (2026).

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **Mom and Dad: The Performance Review**

Accomplished: Mom made partner and ditched skinny jeans; I quit cello and started seventh grade; Dad looked for a job.

[**Shouts & Murmurs**](#)

Mom and Dad: The Performance Review

By [Bruce Headlam](#) and [Stephen Sherrill](#)

January 12, 2026



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Mom, Dad, thanks for being on time this year. Dad, I can see by your T-shirt that it was a challenge. So you've already exceeded expectations.

Remember, performance reviews are not about criticism. They're about nurturing an abundance mind-set. Let's start!

Benchmarks

We all accomplished a lot in 2025. Mom, you made partner at your firm and—per last year's review—solutioned out of skinny jeans. Jordan continued his onboarding (i.e., potty training) just in time for pre-K. I started seventh grade and quit cello. And, Dad, shaving again was a brave step on the strategic staircase! So was coming up the actual staircase from your “office” on weekends. Congratulations all around!

Key Learnings

Mom, having three glasses of wine (“because of the pandemic”) doesn’t mean it’s O.K. to loudly sing Charli XCX. Nobody wants to “guess the color of [your] underwear,” least of all the other parents at gymnastics. Dad, as part of your Performance Improvement Plan (*PIP*) last year, you committed to improving your Family Value Proposition (F.V.P.). We thought that would involve finding full-time work, not just listening to Joe Rogan and wearing pants with something called a “gusseted crotch.”

Opportunities for Growth

In 2024’s review, I specifically used the phrase “STOP EMBARRASING [sic] ME.” Yet Mom has continued to FaceTime me from her hatha-yoga class. I had to tell my friends that you were in early-stage dementia. Dad, you demonstrated a dance that you saw on TikTok (note: not “the TikTok”) at the library book fair that definitely fell short of expectations, which, I’ll remind you, are that you never set foot on school grounds. Both of you need to recommit to this goal, especially you, Dad, and before the doctor removes your walking cast.

Also, you both continue to struggle in high-pressure situations—for example, at our Thanksgiving off-site at Uncle Doug’s. Dad, when Pop-Pop began talking about politics, you used the term “Orange Jesus,” which was not the kind of Cross-Functional Collaboration (C.F.C.) that would have allowed me to watch “Love Is Blind” in the living room uninterrupted.

In your self-evaluations, you both mentioned the Sunday last July that we spent in the emergency room. Again, there was no way for me to see that glass table when I was swinging the tennis racquet. However, in the spirit of Total Activation Team Responsibility (*TATR*), I agree that we all could have performed better that day and that I wasn’t the one drinking hard cider during Pictionary.

Communication

It’s the backbone of any successful team, so why do I still have Mom’s crappy old iPhone 14? Maybe if the battery didn’t die after six hours I could see Dad’s dozens of panicky texts and the “Amber Alert,” which—hello?—is not even my name. And, Mom, for the zillionth time, I don’t know who “got into” your drawer of CBD gummies.

Cohort Analysis

I'm in seventh grade now, so my competitive set includes all of middle school plus Zoe and her cousin. She flew with her family to the Taylor Swift concert in Amsterdam, which I've learned is in Europe; we drove to see Taylor Swift in Buffalo. Yes, I'm aware that the tickets cost "all the Amex points we were saving for a new kitchen." I've attached a separate document about priority-setting called "The Butterfly Mindset," which, although it was written for tween girls, I think you'll find insightful.

A Note on A.I. Adoption

Rest assured, you won't be replaced as parents by A.I., but you will be replaced by human parents who know how to use A.I. So I'll need my own ChatGPT Pro account this year. Those essays don't write themselves.

Social Justice and Inclusion

You have both benefitted from the patriarchy. Even you, Dad. So, the next time you ask, "What's this four-hundred-dollar Uber charge for a trip to Boston?," or "Why is your photo on an Albanian website?," maybe pause first to check your privilege. Sure, you pay the mortgage, feed us, clothe us, take us to school, drive us to lessons, schedule our playdates, and send us to camp. But are you prepared to do the hard work? (Sensitivity note: please stop sending emojis of people of different races.)

Looking Ahead

In your self-evaluation, under "actionables," you both mentioned wanting to have another baby, in order to, in Dad's words, "take one last stab at happiness." Jordan and I have discussed your request and have decided that the family has already been right-sized.

So let's try to make 2026 the best year yet. And, remember, my door is always open. Even when it's shut and locked, so please never come in.

Great work, everyone! ♦

Bruce Headlam is the editorial director of Aventine, a nonprofit research institute, and a host of the podcast "Broken Record."

Stephen Sherrill has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

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Fiction

- **Reflections**

Do you see what I see (in this guy's sunglasses)?

- **"Kim's Game"**

She didn't much care for him or his video camera. But then, she's never much cared for anthropologists.

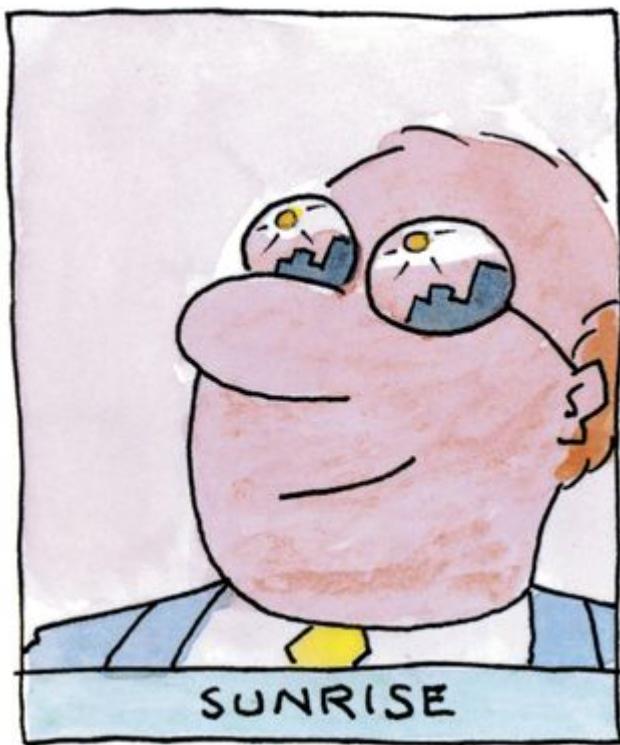
Sketchbook

Reflections

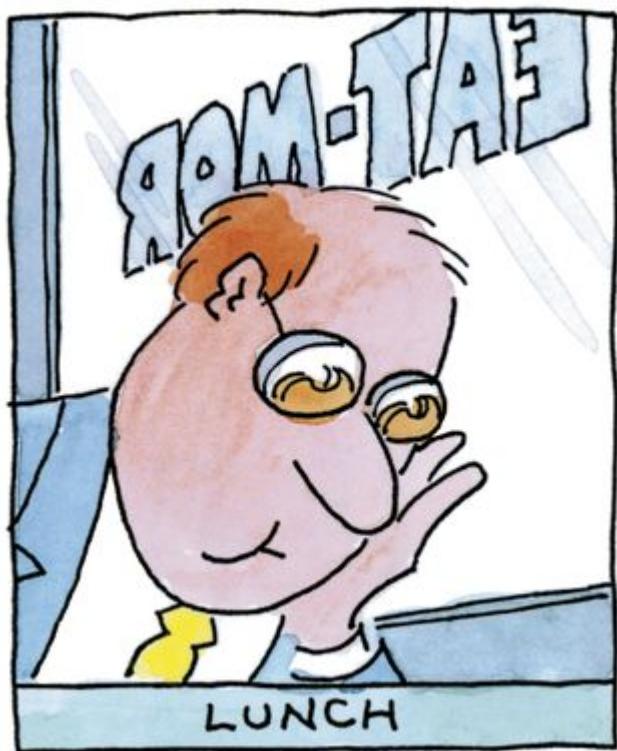
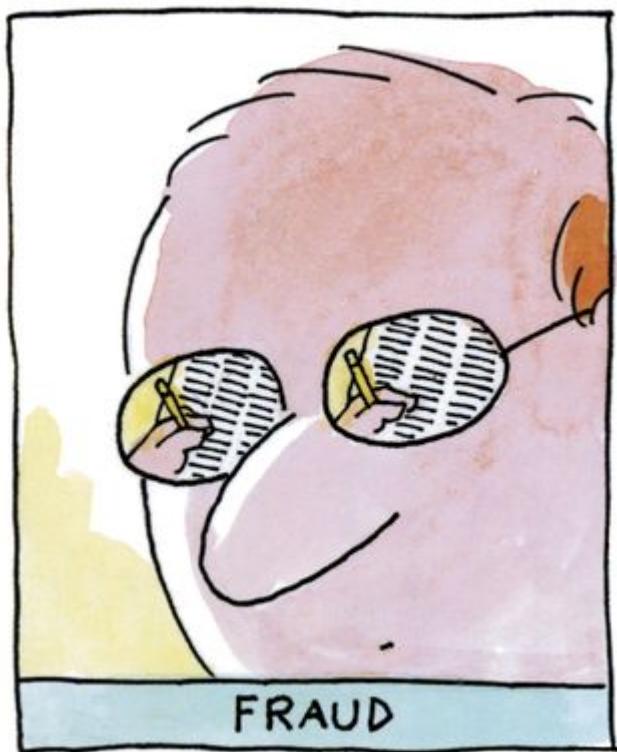
Do you see what I see (in this guy's sunglasses)?

By [Jack Ziegler](#)

January 12, 2026











PERSONAL BELONGINGS



SUNSET

ZIEGLER

[Jack Ziegler](#) contributed cartoons to *The New Yorker* from 1974 until his death, in 2017.

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Kim's Game

By [Sadia Shepard](#)

January 11, 2026



Photograph by Delaney Allen for The New Yorker

It still feels strange not to start her day with the first milking. Unnatural, somehow. From where Helen stands, she has a good view through her kitchen window of the land she sold last month—five hundred hectares of open pasture, bordered by another three hundred of native forest. She pours herself a cup of strong tea and pictures her cows in their stalls, their udders heavy and swollen, as they stamp their hooves with impatience. She can hear the rhythmic, repetitive sound of the milking machine and smell the sharp, pungent odor of the parlor when the cows nose their way into the troughs and she attaches the cups to their teats. The new owner's sons take care of it all now, and they do a fine job. Still, she is not accustomed to changing her habits. She puts her empty mug on the counter and observes her hand as if it belonged to someone else. It looks like a stranger's hand. An old woman's hand.

Helen hears Thiago's truck in her driveway, and watches from the screen door as he ambles up her steps, making his familiar raspy, bronchial sound in greeting. He wears a T-shirt and a pair of Wranglers, his favorite, with an old checked shirt that once belonged to Helen's brother, Paul, tied around his waist. More than three decades ago, when she arrived in Brazil to work with her brother as a missionary, Thiago was her first teacher, showing her how to place her tongue against the back of her teeth and pull sounds from her throat to speak the language of his people. Now that Paul is gone, Thiago likes to check on her. His concern makes her feel grateful, in the way that prayer used to. He pulls an envelope out of his pocket and offers it to her on the flat of his outstretched palm.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

“I found this,” he says. “In your mailbox.”

Thiago brings her things. A macaw's feather. A stone shaped like a dog's ear. A cat in need of saving, its fur matted and paws bloody. Helen takes the envelope, squinting at it in the bright sun, and wonders for a moment what kind of bad news there is left to get from Nebraska. She and Paul heard about the deaths of their relatives in letters like this, about the slow peeling away of everyone they'd known as children. But the envelope isn't addressed to her. It is addressed to Kim K. Siddiqi, c/o Paul Klassen. Whoever sent the letter to her address doesn't know that her brother is dead.

The thought of having to tell the story of his illness again, even to herself, exhausts her.

“It’s for the fellow with the ponytail,” Thiago says, pointing to the addressee’s name.

Helen nods. She remembers Kim. Strange name for a tall brown American. He spent six months in the area last year, on a fellowship funded by the U.S. government. She didn’t much care for him or his video camera. But then, she’s never much cared for anthropologists. Or graduate students. She particularly doesn’t care for the kind who have their mail sent to her without asking.

The next morning, Helen sits at the kitchen table, pinching one of the seed pods that Thiago gave her between her thumb and forefinger and spinning it like a top. She thinks of her brother sipping his tea in the chair across from hers, telling her about the new sprinkler system he was thinking of buying. His absence feels like something eating at her from the inside. She opens Kim’s envelope quickly, roughly. She pulls out the tissue-thin pages and reads them fast, running her fingers over the indentations of a ballpoint pen.

Dear Kim, I have not been able to stop thinking about the night before you left. Ammi has been asking every day what is wrong with me, because I am so different. I wish you could see me now. You joked that I should marry one of the boys that Ammi has in mind for me. But how can I, when I know what you and I could be to each other? I think about you all the time. I can barely sleep. . . .

Helen tucks the letter inside the front pocket of her apron. She washes her clothes and hangs them on the line, weeds her garden, sweeps the porch. She finds that the letter intrudes on her thoughts, crowding out her own words. She leans against the kitchen table and reads it again, her heart beating fast.

Three weeks later, in early October, Kim knocks on Helen’s door.

“Ms. Klassen, how nice to see you,” he says as she opens it. Kim’s teeth are sharp and white, like baby teeth, and his skin is a smooth, wheatish beige.

His long black ponytail reminds Helen of the way that Thiago's people wore their hair when they first came out of the forest, nearly forty years ago. This annoys her most of all. She dislikes a copycat.

"Morning," Helen says. She turns, motioning to Kim to follow her into the kitchen. She has a sitting room with a low table, a couch, and a rug, but it doesn't get much use. Paul's reading chair is there, his footstool, and his lamp. She knows that she should put away his bifocals, which are lying face down on the table, but she likes the way they look there, as if he might still pick them up.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Sadia Shepard read "Kim's Game."](#)

She offers Kim a seat at the kitchen table and pours him a cup of yerba mate. She slides the letter and a metal straw toward him and takes a seat.

"You might have mentioned that you were handing out our address," she says, shifting her weight. Her knees hurt today. Bone spurs, the doctor in Campo Grande said. He told her she needed steroid injections to relieve the pressure on her joints, but she doesn't like needles.

"It's just the one person—sending me mail, I mean," Kim says. "She kind of insisted on having an address to send stuff to."

"My brother died four months ago," she says. "Stomach cancer. I guess you didn't know that."

"I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am," Kim says, rotating a leather cord on his right wrist. "He was a kind man."

Helen looks down, chin to her chest. When people offer her condolences, there is never anything to say back. She wonders about the girl who wrote the letter. She points to the ragged edge of the envelope where she ripped it open.

"I didn't know it wasn't mine," she says.

“No worries,” Kim says. He picks up the cup and sucks at the straw, drawing the warm liquid into his mouth. What an irritating phrase, Helen thinks. Who is it, exactly, that has no worries?

Helen asks Kim about his field work and what he plans to do while he is in Brazil. He says that this time he’s in the region for eighteen months. He plans to set up a tent in Thiago’s village, a mile outside of town, and spend most of his time accompanying the men on hunting trips farther into the forest. Once a month, he’ll walk back to town for supplies and to send and receive letters. With her permission, he’d like to come by her house on these trips, to pick up his mail. As for his dissertation research, he plans to record the elders’ songs and prayers, and interview them about their meanings. Helen points out that Thiago’s people go to the church that she and Paul helped plant three decades ago. Most don’t want to relive their past in the interior territory.

“Some don’t mind,” Kim says. “I already recorded a few songs on my last trip. I think I can do it again.”

The boy is arrogant, Helen thinks. What does that girl see in him?

“About the mail,” Kim says. “You’re the only person I know here with a bona-fide address.”

“That’s from a girl, then?” she asks, motioning to the envelope, trying to feign ignorance. She is not accustomed to lying.

“Yeah,” Kim says, taking another sip. He places the cup on the table and wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve. Helen thinks for a moment, studying the boy’s shiny forehead. She hasn’t had anything to be curious about in a long time.

“Well, I suppose you can use my address,” she says, surprising herself.

Two weeks later, Helen finds Thiago on her porch with another letter for Kim.

“Morning,” she says, waiting for Thiago to speak. Because of her knee trouble, she relies on him for an account of what’s happening in the village and in town. “Any news?”

Thiago looks out at the cows grazing and adjusts the sweatband on his wrist. Recently, he told her about miners with bulldozers encroaching farther into the protected lands. There have been skirmishes with Thiago’s distant relatives, the ones still living in isolation deep in the territory. Today, Thiago reports that Kim has been filming the men of the village with his video camera and trying to learn how to hunt wild boars.

“Can he hunt?” Helen asks.

“He’s better with the video camera than with the boars,” Thiago says, and smiles his lopsided smile. “He spends too much time looking around. Sometimes he gets too far from the group, and then we have to find him and bring him back.”

Helen shakes her head. “As if anyone has time for this foolishness.”

Helen places Kim’s letter in an old shoebox and sets the box upon a high shelf in the kitchen, on top of a stack of books. In the course of the day, she pulls the box down from time to time and takes the letter out. She studies the return address: Maryam Rehman, Department of Chemistry, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Helen tries to stay busy, but the letter proves distracting. She holds it up to the light, trying to guess at its contents. Kim probably doesn’t even appreciate these letters, she thinks. People like him are used to things coming easily.

She begins to wonder if there is some way to read the letter without Kim knowing. Then she hits upon the idea of steaming it open. She puts a kettle on the stove, daring herself to stop, then daring herself to go through with it, as she watches the column of steam escape the spout. It is a sin to snoop like this. Or isn’t it? She can’t decide. That’s the thing about being alone—there’s no one to check your behavior against. She runs the envelope through the steam so that she can peel back the flap and slip the letter out. She takes a deep breath and begins reading.

Dear Kim, I know you said that we shouldn't make any decisions and that you don't want to rush into anything. But I'm sorry—I couldn't help it, and I told Ammi that we spent the night together. I thought she would be furious, and it's true that she was very surprised. But, once she understood that we are serious, she was so happy for us! Ammi says that the best marriages come from a place of mutual understanding and trust, and I know that we have that. I haven't heard from you. Please write to me. As I walk to work every day, I think about you sleeping alone in your tent. . . .

When she's finished reading, Helen paces the kitchen. Then she slides the letter back into the envelope and runs a thin, invisible layer of gum arabic along the edge. She smooths it shut with the side of her thumb and slides the envelope underneath a heavy book. When she removes it, an hour later, the letter looks as if it were never opened. She feels a flicker of pride at her handiwork, followed quickly by a flash of embarrassment. It was wrong of her to pry like that.

Helen walks into Paul's bedroom and closes the door. She looks at his bed, neatly made, his prescription pills and his hairbrush on the nightstand, his address book on the chair. She gathers the pills, the brush, and the book in her arms and lies down on the bed. Why didn't Paul prepare her better for a life without him? She closes her eyes. Maybe I just need to rest, she thinks. As she falls asleep, she sees Maryam walking to work, Paul chopping wood. She wakes up two hours later, disoriented, the hairbrush poking her thigh.

On the first, second, third, and fourth of November, Helen watches her porch for signs of Kim. The rainy season has begun, and the air feels heavy. When he arrives on the fifth, she feels strangely impatient, almost offended—as if he has kept her waiting. They sit at her kitchen table again. This time, she gives him black tea.

Helen sips from her cup, weighing her words. "Who named you Kim?" she asks. "Your mother or your father?"

"Oh, my real name is Kamil," Kim says, smiling. "It's a nickname. When I was a kid, my dad and I used to play something called Kim's Game. Do you

know it?”

Helen shakes her head.

“My father would arrange a handful of objects on a tray—an old coin, a ribbon, a rock, a thimble, that sort of thing—and ask me to memorize them. Then he’d cover the tray with a newspaper and ask me to describe what I remembered. Sometimes, he’d take something away to see if I noticed. In the Kipling novel, the game is part of Kim’s training to be a spy. I wanted to be just like him.”

It makes sense that Kim’s boyhood dream was to be a spy, Helen thinks. To seep into the seams of a place and extract information.

“Your parents are from India?” she asks.

“Close,” Kim says. “They’re from Pakistan. They moved to a town outside of Boston before I was born. That’s where I grew up. When my dad died, two years back, my mom’s best friend and her daughter moved in with us. The daughter, Maryam—she’s the one who insists on writing to me.”

Ah, Helen thinks. The gears of Kim and Maryam’s story click into place.

Kim notices a row of objects lined up on one side of the kitchen table. Several stones. An old perfume bottle. Feathers. A dried leaf. He picks up a broken piece of pottery, turning it over in his hand.

“Let’s play with some of these,” he says. “It’s easy. I’ll teach you.”

Kim reaches for the tea tray, removing the cups and saucers and placing a dozen or more items in an irregular arrangement. “Take a look,” he says, holding the tray in front of Helen. “Examine it carefully.”

Kim tells Helen to memorize what she sees. He takes a bandanna from his back pocket and lays it over the tray, so that everything is obscured from view. He asks her to close her eyes and tell him how many objects she saw on the tray.

“Easy,” Helen says. “Fifteen.”

“Describe them,” Kim says, and Helen recites what she saw, imagining the pattern they made on the tray.

“Are you sure there were fifteen?” Kim asks, and tells her to open her eyes. He whips the bandanna away like an amateur magician. “What’s missing?” he asks, peering at her face.

“The gray rock,” Helen says. “And the feather.”

“You’re good!” Kim says, laughing, and Helen laughs also. Then Kim brings another rock from behind his back, a small, curved black stone. “You forgot this one.”

“Ah,” she says.

They play again. This time, Helen gets everything right. This pleases her more than she’d like to admit. She can’t remember the last time she played a game.

“This is how I find my way back to the village,” Kim says, replacing the objects on the table and smiling with satisfaction. “When we hunt far from the village, I check for differences in the vegetation, rocks, and leaves along the path, that sort of thing. I memorize the details.”

Helen looks at Kim and sees him bouncing in his seat as he talks, his confidence seeping out like wild honey.

“You need to be careful in the forest,” she says. “This isn’t some adventure story.”

She slides Maryam’s letter across the table and watches for Kim’s reaction. She observes him as he picks up the letter and casually stuffs it into his pocket, as if he were indifferent to its contents.

“This is none of my business,” she says. “But why does the girl write to you?”

Kim looks surprised by Helen’s question. “Maryam? It’s a childhood crush, I suppose. She has this idea that we’ll get married someday. Why?”

Helen fixes a stare at Kim, assessing him. “It seems to me that if you don’t care for her, you ought to tell her. It seems to me that it would be the right thing to do.”

Kim looks taken aback. Then he gives her a grin, as if he were a naughty child who had been given an empty threat. “Yes, ma’am,” he says, and offers her a mock salute.

The next letter for Kim arrives a week later. For an entire day, Helen resists the impulse to read it. On the second day, she finds it more difficult to ignore. On the third day, she can’t stand it any longer. She boils water and steams the envelope open to find a letter from Kim’s mother.

Beta, Maryam has told me that you two are engaged. I am surprised that you did not tell me this news yourself. However, Maryam is like a daughter to me already. May Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala bless you and grant you peace, and may He join you together in joy. I am awaiting a letter from you to tell me when you plan to return home for the nikkah. Maryam is ordering the clothes now. Love, Amma

Helen puts the letter down and glances around her empty porch.

“Well, this is a fine mess,” she says aloud, as if Paul can hear her.

It is already the twelfth of December, later in the month than Kim usually comes for his mail. When he arrives, early in the morning, with a rapid knock, Helen pours two cups of tea. Kim looks a little the worse for wear. Thinner and dirtier than the last time. He probably hasn’t bathed in a week or more, Helen thinks. He keeps his hands around the teacup, as if the warmth of the drink is something he hasn’t felt in a while.

“How’s the research?” Helen asks.

Kim puts one hand, then the other, on the table. He seems to be noticing the caked mud underneath his fingernails for the first time. His smile is tight.

“Truthfully, it’s harder than I thought,” he says. “The men don’t always like to have me along when they hunt, which makes it tougher for me to do my

recordings.”

Helen gets up and busies herself at the sink, glad to have her back to Kim so he can’t see the scowl on her face. “My brother used to say that we ought to remember that we are guests here,” she says. “You need something from these men. But they don’t need anything from you.”

She turns and sees Kim playing with a ring on his right hand. She wonders if he’s listening.

“I have a favor to ask,” Kim says, interrupting her thought. He pulls the ring free and holds it out to her. “Will you keep this for me while I go on this next hunt? It belonged to my dad. I’ve lost weight, and it’s gotten a little big. I’d hate to lose it.”

Helen takes a deep breath. She picks up the ring and turns it over, examining it. The band is silver, with a flat, dull-crimson stone embedded in the center. She lets the stone catch the light and sees some intricate lettering carved there that she can’t make out.

“It’s an *āyah*,” Kim explains. “A verse from the Quran. It says, ‘Indeed, with me is my Lord; He will guide me.’ ”

“Do you believe that?” Helen asks. “That God will guide you?”

She misses the comfort that her faith once gave her. The sureness and solidity. The routines that determined her days.

Kim pauses, considering her question. “I do, yeah. Most of the time, anyway. I like the ring because it reminds me of what I *want* to believe in.”

Helen sits back at the table, still holding the ring. She places it with the other objects, tucking it between a feather and two stones, and hands Kim the letter from his mother.

It’s January, and the rain comes and goes. On a dry morning, Thiago helps Helen repair the fence around her property. They work in silence, digging a trench and inserting logs in neat rows. Splitting and stacking the wood was

her brother's job, one of his favorite tasks. If she closes her eyes, she can see him raising the axe above his head and bringing it down on a stump, making a clean cut each time. It's true what he used to say: it is satisfying work, giving new purpose to existing materials. Strange, Helen thinks, how you can live with a person your whole life and know him differently after he's gone.

That afternoon, Helen finds herself restless. She tries doing housework, then some crocheting, but she can't keep her mind on anything. She thinks about the trunk she prepared when she was new to Brazil and thought that marriage would be part of her ministry. She remembers the dresses she sewed from patterns, the set of enamel dishware her mother gave her, and the cotton sheets she starched and ironed. She thinks of John, her brother's friend, and how, after he broke off their engagement and moved home to Missouri, Paul said that it would be best to take the trunk to the village and place it by the fire, so that the items of Helen's trousseau could be divided equally among the households. For some years afterward, Helen saw the dresses she had made on other women. Once, she was offered a drink of water from one of the enamel cups and refused it. It was curious how these material objects had lived other lives that had nothing to do with her.

Before she can change her mind, Helen gets into Paul's jeep and drives down the long dirt road toward town, past patches of knee-high grass and underbrush. She parks in front of the church and starts walking to the village. As she follows the path through the trees, she feels herself sweating, and her knees begin to ache. She wonders if she's being foolish. Then she sees a little girl, perhaps eight or nine years old, running toward her. The girl's eyes widen with recognition, and she turns around and dashes back in the direction she came from. Helen knows that the news of her visit will be shared and discussed. She keeps going, and, at the mile mark, as she gets closer to the settlement, she feels the hard stares of two women hanging wet clothes on a line. She hasn't been here in more than a year, since before Paul got sick. The girl reappears, and Helen hands over a loaf of her homemade bread, which the girl cradles in the crook of her elbow like a doll. She runs to present the bread to a group of adults sitting around an unlit fire pit, and two other small children rush up to Helen, hanging on the straps of her shoulder bag as they search her pockets for candy.

Kim's tent isn't hard to find. The families here make their homes from local wood and dried palm leaves. Kim's tent looks like something out of a mountaineering catalogue. Dark-green nylon, buckles, and clamps keep the frame in place, and it's zipped up, as if he is sleeping. "Kim!" she says sharply. "Wake up!"

There is no sound, and Helen begins to get annoyed. Why is he asleep in the late afternoon? She unzips the flap and bends down to enter the tent, where she is hit with the odor of unwashed clothes. No sign of Kim. Somehow, this irritates Helen even more. She sits and looks through the detritus of his belongings—clothing, photographs, and a handful of books. She's not sure what she's searching for. Then, in a corner of the tent, she sees a small stack of the letters that Kim has received. Near them is a pen and a yellow legal pad, with a few lines scratched in an uneven, boyish hand.

Dear Maryam, I've been thinking about you and what you wrote to me about getting married. Before I go on my next hunting trip, I want to write this letter so that you have something from me, in my own words.

Helen hears an elder call her name outside the tent and replies that she's coming. She stuffs the legal pad and the pen in her bag and walks toward the fire pit, where people make space for her to join the circle. She greets the eldest man first, a kind, wrinkled grandfather holding a giant green sippy cup. She nods at his wife, a tiny woman with long gray hair, weaving a basket. Then Helen greets everyone else, in order of her best guess at seniority. To explain to the elders that she doesn't plan to stay long is useless. There are no short visits. And yet she is tired. After about thirty minutes, she gets up and walks to the older man, begging his forgiveness because she needs to take her leave before the sun sets. He lays his hand on her head, and they exchange goodbyes in his language. She passes Kim's tent and begins the walk back to town, studying the path carefully in the fading light. Once she reaches the jeep, she starts the engine and drives fast, a cloud of dust puffing into her rearview and obscuring the road behind her.

When she gets home, she pulls out Paul's box of stationery and his pen case and sits at the kitchen table to write a letter. "Dear Maryam," she begins. "My name is Helen Klassen."

She looks out the window, unsure of what to write. What does she want to tell Maryam, exactly? She wants to give her a warning—a signal. Then again, perhaps she should mind her own business. She gets up and paces the kitchen, considering the options. She walks into the sitting room and sits in Paul’s empty chair. If her brother were here, he might say that she should be wary of arrogance. Who is Helen to think that she has a better idea of what these young people should do with their lives than they do? She feels a wave of shame break over her. She goes back into the kitchen and puts the stationery and the pen case away.

Anticipating the arrival of letters has become part of the rhythm of Helen’s day, part of the light shifting across the kitchen floor and the cuckoo of her wooden clock announcing every hour. For the next week, nothing comes in the mail, and Kim doesn’t return to the house. Thiago brings Helen a Y-shaped stick. The year ahead stretches out in front of her, unbroken and untold.

Helen is making tea when she hears Thiago at her screen door. He looks concerned. Some of his relatives went hunting with Kim ten days ago, he says. Perhaps he should have told her before this, but he didn’t want her to worry. Early one morning, Kim disappeared. His pack with his video camera was gone, too. Now Thiago’s cousins are saying that he must have gone farther into the forest to try to locate their uncontacted relatives. “That stupid boy,” Helen says, shaking her head. Inside, she feels something stirring, an uneasy feeling she can’t put her finger on.

For the next week and a half, Thiago comes to her door with updates. His relatives have gone out in small groups on horseback, looking for Kim in different directions. Every couple of days, they go a little farther—to the edges of the protected lands on one side and to the river on the other. There’s no sign of Kim.

One night, Helen can’t sleep. She goes outside and sits on a rocking chair on the porch, alert to every rattle and wheeze of the land and the animals around her. She looks up at the sky and remembers Kim telling her that he believed that God was with him and would guide him. She thinks about the tray of rocks and sticks and feathers that he arranged in her kitchen. She

thinks about how every life is a game, and how she might play her game differently if she had the chance to do it again.

A week later, when Kim's body is found, face down at the base of a waterfall, his neck broken and his camera next to him, shattered from the fall, Thiago's relatives say that he ventured too far into the forest. That his desire to see something that few outsiders ever do was what got him killed.

After Helen hears the news, she sits at her kitchen table for a long time, wishing she could change the end of the story. She wraps Kim's ring carefully in an old cloth napkin, tucking it inside a small cardboard box with some of the other objects Kim played with. Then she picks up Kim's legal pad, looking closely at the letter he started. "Dear Maryam," he wrote. "I've been thinking about you and what you wrote to me about getting married. Before I go on my next hunting trip, I want to write this letter so that you have something from me, in my own words." It won't be hard to learn the boy's slanted, shaky handwriting, Helen thinks. It won't be hard to write how much he's looking forward to getting married and how, when he's alone in his tent, he imagines his wife-to-be. When the news of Kim's death reaches Maryam Rehman, Helen thinks, his letter and the contents of the box will be small comfort, but they will be something. ♦

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The New York Shooting That Defined an Era

On a mild December day in 1984, a man named Bernie Goetz shot four Black teen-agers on a subway. The incident galvanized the city. Are we still living in its wake?

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

January 12, 2026



Was the Goetz incident an inflection point in history, or was it merely a bubble on the surface of deeper currents that were shifting on their own? Photograph by Danny Lyon / Magnum

The New York of the nineteen-eighties was, warily, a city in transition. The frightening “Taxi Driver” New York of the previous decade—steaming manholes, blackouts, riots—still hung over the town, but so did the potent downtown renaissance that had begun at the same time, stretching from punk music at CBGB to a still intact SoHo, where a genuine village of art reigned and the world crowded into 420 West Broadway on Saturdays to see what might happen next. Yuppies, as they were called, were a real phenomenon. The idea that young professionals might build their lives in the city rather than flee it was still a novelty, with the “consumption benefits” of urban living now outweighing the “production benefits.” You came because this was where the life was, not because this was where the jobs were.

[Ed Koch](#) was mayor, with an expansive Jewish-uncle manner—“How’m I doin’?” was his constant refrain—memorably captured in a Claymation version in an Oscar-winning short. Old-school New York in style, he was quietly rumored, despite his public romance with a Jewish former Miss America, to be a closeted gay man. By 1984, an obscure real-estate striver named Donald Trump had slipped onto the cover of *GQ*—the last man you’d want to sit next to on a plane, perhaps, but also the last man you’d imagine as the agent of democracy’s undoing. If you were starting out in the arts or the professions, you likely lived in a tiny place on the far West or East Side of Manhattan, or a slightly larger, funkier one on the Lower East Side. Very few people you knew lived in Brooklyn.

The New York City subway, running all day and night, was the perfect emblem of this era. A sometimes breathtaking “wild style” graffiti had flourished in the system, but the same spray paint was also a marker of disorder, romanticized at a cost. Outside, the full-car murals were unforgettable and, in their way, influential in the worlds of painting and design; inside, the signage devolved into tags, mere scrawled names that hinted at the city’s inability to police even its own interiors.

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It’s hard to explain to people who weren’t there how the subway managed to feel more dangerous than it does now even as violations of the normal order felt less menacing, because they *were* part of the normal order. The subway not feeling safe meant that you had no illusions that it ought to be.

People are good at intuitively computing dangers—the snake-or-stick problem—and we did it then, rapidly sorting the real threats from the feigned ones. Even the most naïve new New Yorker learned the choreography of avoiding trouble, the small dance of changing cars. It was the price one paid to live in New York. For the growing number of immigrants arriving in the city, it was a price worth paying. Anyway, it was the price you had to pay.

In that atmosphere of fear, on an unseasonably warm December day in 1984, on a 2 express train in downtown Manhattan, a troubled young man named Bernhard Goetz—believing, whether reasonably or not, that he was about to be mugged—shot four Black teen-agers. All were badly wounded; one of them, Darrell Cabey, was left permanently paralyzed and cognitively impaired.

For much of the following year, and well beyond, the shooting became the first true eighties tabloid spectacular, the kind that Tom Wolfe tried to render as black comedy in “[The Bonfire of the Vanities](#).” All the forces and clownish figures of the moment, from [Howard Stern](#) to [Al Sharpton](#), weighed in. For a time, everyone knew Bernie Goetz’s name and face. By the decade’s end, [Billy Joel](#) would include Goetz in the long roll call of “We Didn’t Start the Fire,” rhyming him, in proper period fashion, with “foreign debts” and “homeless vets.”



Police escort Bernie Goetz out of a New York courthouse. Photograph from Bettmann / Getty

Was the Goetz incident a genuinely significant event, crystallizing something that was passing through the city, and perhaps is still with us today? Or was it merely a tabloid eruption, memorable for its shock value

but, in the end, only a bubble on the surface of deeper currents that were shifting on their own? Now, four decades on, two new books return to the shooting, and to the circus that followed, from very different perspectives. “[Five Bullets](#)” (Penguin Press), by the CNN legal analyst Elliot Williams, is a carefully wrought account that manages some broad sympathy for all sides. Heather Ann Thompson’s “[Fear and Fury](#)” (Pantheon) provides an even more detailed reconstruction—very much in the vein of her excellent, indignant history of the Attica prison uprising, from 2016—but is far more polemical. She treats the Goetz episode as the first whitecap on the surge of racial rage that rose with the Reagan era and has carried into our own. It would be overstating things to claim that the authors’ feelings about the event divide neatly along either side of the subway car; both, within the limits of their viewpoints, are doggedly fair-minded narrators. But Thompson ends her story with Cabey and his mother, while Williams closes with an interview with Goetz, who is allowed to emerge, if not exactly sympathetically, then at least as a three-dimensional figure.

The four teen-agers—Cabey, Barry Allen, Troy Canty, and James Ramseur—came from the South Bronx at a time when the borough was still a national byword for immiseration and hopelessness. Suspicious cops and the threat of incarceration were not distant spectres, as they were for most white New Yorkers, but part of the everyday fabric of life. In a sense, the teens never had a real chance. Yet they really were headed downtown to commit a crime, albeit the relatively trivial one of stealing from video-arcade machines while one of them distracted the employees, and they were carrying screwdrivers for that purpose. But they were not the menacing “sharpened screwdrivers” that the newly reactionary *New York Post* or the still reactionary *Daily News* insisted they were. Nor were the tools ever displayed, much less brandished, as the tabloids suggested.

Goetz, in turn, was not, as he was often portrayed at the time, a fed-up citizen. He was a recognizable Travis Bickle type, straight from the “Taxi Driver” template: an isolato from a German background, with an engineering degree from N.Y.U. and a brief, failed marriage behind him. By 1984, he was self-employed, living in a one-bedroom apartment on West Fourteenth Street, still a rough part of town. He was a reclusive man whose fear and resentment—punctuated by racist remarks, though how often and

how intensely he made them remains contested—had led him to apply for a concealed-carry permit. When he was rightly denied one (you could still be refused a permit then, absent a demonstrable need for self-protection), he simply bought a Smith & Wesson revolver and carried it everywhere, certain, like his “Taxi Driver” analogue, that the city’s disorder was looking directly at him. He had been mugged once already; if he wasn’t actively looking for an armed encounter, he was certainly ready—and perhaps reaching—for one.

Both books, with varying degrees of confidence, agree that Canty approached Goetz and asked for five dollars. Whether this was a genuinely threatening gesture or the sort of panhandling that straphangers (as they were still called) had learned to evade or ignore is disputed. The teens’ later statements make clear that a cultural misalignment in signalling played a part. They understood their approach as hassling, but well within the boundaries of what passed as acceptably obnoxious behavior—no more sinister than walking through the park with a boom box on your shoulder. It was annoying, and it was meant to be annoying, but it wasn’t intended as a prelude to violence, and nothing in that mode of street nuisance would lead one to expect to be shot. The poignancy of their shock still resonates. “Why did he shoot me?” one wounded teen asked, plaintively.



“I’m going to drop Sam off at two, and then pick up Ellie at two-thirty-five, which should leave me just enough time to do absolutely nothing.”

Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Certainly, the other riders in the car—including two friends on their way to SoHo and a recently arrived West African computer engineer—did not feel threatened enough to move, and were as stunned by the gunfire as the teens themselves. Several agreed that Goetz pursued the teen-agers after they had retreated, firing again at Cabey, severing his spinal cord, and delivering a once notorious New York line: “You don’t look so bad. Here’s another.”

Goetz fled the scene after speaking briefly and coolly to the train conductor. The wounded teen-agers were taken to Bellevue and to the now closed St. Vincent’s Hospital, and the hunt for the subway shooter became an instant tabloid mania. Goetz slipped north to Vermont and New Hampshire, where he turned himself in, after burying his gun and wandering the snowy roads, in a tableau that could have come out of “The Sopranos”: the violent New Yorker adrift in some beatific rural elsewhere. At first, he had wanted to get in touch with the Guardian Angels, a largely Black and Hispanic self-appointed subway-patrol group that had recently sprung up under the command of a man named [Curtis Sliwa](#). Instead, he went to the Concord police department, and the N.Y.P.D. dispatched several officers and an Assistant District Attorney to take his confession.

He was strikingly forthcoming, speaking in language uncannily close to what a liberal screenwriter of the time might have put in his mouth. Goetz said that his act of revenge, though provoked by the entire “system,” had not proved satisfying. “It’s the worst thing in your life when you’re on the losing side, and when you’re on the winning side it makes you sick,” he said. “If there’s a God, God knows what was in my heart. And it was . . . sadistic and savage.” He seemed appalled by his own actions. Yet those were not the words that echoed. What made the headlines were some other words that he uttered: “I’m sorry for what happened, but it had to be done.”

The shooting took place on December 22nd, at a moment when New York was experiencing, in a herald of the coming era, a boom in holiday tourism. City officials were acutely aware that a subway gunman could spook the newly arrived Christmas crowds, and there was a palpable institutional eagerness to cast the shooting as an act of vigilante “revenge” against muggers, rather than as a recurrence of the random, destabilizing violence

associated with the Son of Sam period, which had seared itself into civic memory in the late seventies.

Only weeks earlier, the city had been shaken by the murder of Caroline Isenberg, a recent Harvard graduate and an aspiring actress who was attacked and dragged to the rooftop of her West End Avenue apartment building by Emmanuel Torres, the twenty-two-year-old son of its superintendent. Torres's brother, Alfredo, was a resident physician—a reminder of how starkly the lives of two people born under the same roof could diverge. This story dominated the tabloids and fed a general sense that violence in the city was not merely rising but becoming random, intimate, impossible to make sense of.

Even now, the cultural touchstone that comes to mind when reading about Goetz is the Charles Bronson film "Death Wish," which had been released a decade before the shooting took place, and which remained very much part of the era's cultural circuitry. The *Post* and the *Daily News* immediately dubbed Goetz "the Death Wish Shooter," and Bronson himself was called on for approving comment. Though he later denied that he was endorsing Goetz's act, it certainly sounded at the time as if he were endorsing Goetz's act.

"Death Wish" was the dark New York story of its era—an anti—"Annie Hall" for the armed and aggrieved. An architect sees his wife killed and his daughter raped by muggers and responds by embarking on a vigilante shooting spree. It's a strangely existential movie, one that conjures the city and misrepresents it at the same time: its subway is pristine compared with the real thing, with no graffiti inside or out, and the killings are, implicitly, both celebrated and condemned. Although the film became a template for white revenge fantasies, its street thugs are assembled with almost comic care to avoid racial bias. On the subway, Bronson shoots white men; two Black men whom he kills appear in a station corridor. (Brian Garfield, the author of the novel on which the film was based, was appalled by the way it was received; his book was meant to show how easily people become brutalized, not to celebrate the brutalization.)

That "Death Wish" had already supplied a script for a shooting a decade later suggests that Goetz's act was hardly a product of the newly Reaganite

Zeitgeist. Long before the eighties, this idea—that an ordinary New Yorker, pushed past endurance by street crime, might turn vigilante—lay within the bounds of the civic imagination. Subway vigilantism existed as a vivid possibility long before there was ever a subway vigilante. The fantasy reflected a wider, populist response to the genuine urban upheavals of the sixties and seventies—the steep rise in violent crime that reshaped American cities and, with them, American politics, often pitting the old ethnic Catholic neighborhoods, Irish and Italian above all, against newly arrived Black communities.

The panic about street and subway crime had already changed big-city politics: Philadelphia elected the far-right police commissioner Frank Rizzo as mayor in 1971, presaging Al D’Amato’s own belligerent anti-crime campaigns to secure and retain his seat in the Senate. The TV character Archie Bunker—a compendium of cranky New York working-class attitudes that would one day be identified as Trumpian—was a seventies icon. It would be difficult to argue that, had Jimmy Carter been reelected and the Reagan era not arrived, the Goetz shooting would not have happened, or would have happened in some fundamentally different key. Presidential epochs tilt an era; they do not determine it. The deeper currents of urban life had been running for decades. That December, the subway was moving along channels that had been bored much earlier.

As the Goetz case unfolded, it took on a Sidney Lumet, “Dog Day Afternoon” style of dark-comic energy. Goetz had been readily identified shortly after the shooting, and the detectives on the case, in a moment of guileless procedure, simply left notes on his apartment door and his mailbox asking him to call, which, as one officer later acknowledged, “wasn’t a great piece of detective work.” Goetz, by then in New England, kept phoning a startled neighbor on Fourteenth Street for help: a woman he had encountered mostly in passing in the lobby, and who had been Janis Joplin’s publicist until the singer’s death. Hoping to keep Goetz from panicking when he returned, she removed the detectives’ notes—an illegal act, if a well-meant one.

Goetz, on his homecoming, was treated by many as a hero. His support was not as neatly racially coded as later memory sometimes assumes. In

surveys, almost half of Hispanic New Yorkers backed him, as the popularity of the Latino-dominated Guardian Angels might have predicted, but so did forty-five per cent of African Americans. Professional opinion was divided. Seasoned old-fashioned ethnic liberals like Sydney Schanberg, in the *Times* —who had seen more than enough real danger in the killing fields of Cambodia—and Jimmy Breslin, in the *Daily News*, asked the right questions, condemning the shooting as a slide toward anarchy, and, not incidentally, toward open season on Black youths. But [William F. Buckley, Jr.](#), now fondly recalled as a kind of benign Tory, likened the event, bizarrely, to the American massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, arguing that the subway shooting, too, had taken place in a kind of fog of war, and was therefore inevitable and excusable. Howard Stern, then a rising shock jock on terrestrial radio, went all in, calling for Goetz to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. On the other side, the Reverend Al Sharpton, a corpulent, demagogic presence, took up the victims' cause, and was seen by some as a radical, and by almost everyone as an opportunist.

The legal consequences of the shooting were exhausting and convoluted—not because the system was dragging its feet but because a thoroughgoing judiciary insisted on doing its work. The distinguished Manhattan D.A. Robert Morgenthau, a member of one of New York's most illustrious Jewish families, was determined, against the grain of public sentiment, to get Goetz convicted. When a grand jury refused to indict him for any violent crime—astonishing for the time—Morgenthau convened a second. (Meanwhile, [Rudy Giuliani](#), an ambitious new federal prosecutor, declined to open a civil-rights investigation, despite Goetz's having uttered at least one openly racist slur in front of witnesses years earlier.) Much of public opinion stayed with the first grand jury. Senator D'Amato, in a letter to the *Times*, had written, “The issue is not Bernhard Hugo Goetz. The issue is the four men who tried to harass him. They, not Mr. Goetz, should be on trial.”

Morgenthau pressed on and obtained a new indictment, only to have the judge dismiss most of the charges, arguing that prosecutors had inaccurately described the right to self-defense, which allows individuals to use deadly force if they feel in imminent danger. Morgenthau diligently pursued his appeal until, in July of 1986, Sol Wachtler, the chief judge of the New York

Court of Appeals and another stalwart of New York's legal establishment, made clear that self-defense required an objective standard: it was not enough to say that you felt threatened; you had to show that either a threat existed or that it was "reasonable" to believe that it did. The right of self-defense did not extend to opening fire on unarmed teen-agers because you had begun to imagine that they might shortly mug you.



One of the four teen-agers shot by Bernie Goetz receives aid on the 2 express train. Photograph by Carmine Donofrio / Getty

The case finally went to trial in December of 1986. Goetz had on his side Barry Slotnick, a hyperaggressive defense lawyer who represented clients as varied as John Gotti and the Lubavitchers. The prosecution was led by the equally dogged Gregory Waples. Both worked hard. Waples tried to portray Goetz as "a deeply suspicious, paranoid individual . . . seething inside with suppressed, self-righteous anger." Slotnick, in turn, had the lawyerly chutzpah to use Waples's own portrayal of Goetz as a reason for the jury to disregard Goetz's incriminating statements: even the prosecutor, he argued, thought that Goetz was too nuts to be a reliable narrator.

The defense's most potent witness turned out to be James Ramseur, one of the four teen-agers. Five months after the shooting, he had taken part in the brutal stairway rape of a pregnant woman, an attack so violent that she required surgery. He had been convicted and sentenced to a long prison term and was forced, angrily, to acknowledge this on the stand. The trial ended—shockingly—with Goetz acquitted of everything but a weapons charge.

In “Fear and Fury,” Thompson, understandably outraged by the verdict, tends to play down the significance of Ramseur’s crime; she’s sympathetic to his claims of having been set up, even while conceding that he had, at a minimum, been present and passive during an assault on a helpless woman. But, though Ramseur’s testimony in the Goetz case was eventually ruled inadmissible, it shaped the verdict. That there was no evidence to show that Goetz could reasonably have believed he was about to be assaulted was a legal point lost on the jury, which evidently concluded that someone who could take part in one horrible crime in May might have been intending to take part in another the previous December. It was bad legal reasoning, but it was an unsurprising emotional conclusion.

In a curious way, the verdict was determined in the same spirit as the O. J. Simpson verdict, a decade later. Both juries absorbed the totality of the circumstances and reached for a lever of indignation rather than the strict logic of the law. The Simpson jurors, despite overwhelming evidence, refused to reward a police department that they believed had treated Black defendants with contempt. The Goetz jurors, despite an absence of any reasonable threat on the subway that afternoon, refused to reward young men whom they regarded as predators. It was not so much reasonable doubt as a kind of unreasoning pout: *No, sorry, we won’t convict this guy on this basis.* The Goldman and Brown families, in the Simpson case, were outraged by what they saw as a perversion of justice; the Cabey family understandably felt the same. But juries are seismographs of public feeling as much as they are slot machines of law.

As in the Simpson case, the families, having lost in criminal court, turned to civil court. The Cabeys won a forty-three-million-dollar judgment against Goetz—an amount that was, given Goetz’s scant resources, essentially comical. He declared bankruptcy, and although the judgment stood, and still stands, it remains a symbolic victory for a family left with a paralyzed, brain-damaged son and no form of recompense.

All these years later, everything has changed. SoHo is now a bedroom community for Wall Street. CBGB has long been closed; a replica of its bathroom was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Donald Trump is no longer a surprising apparition on the cover of magazines. And, if you are

trying to ascend in the arts or the professions, everyone you know lives in Brooklyn.

The literary memorial of the Goetz case is usually thought to be Wolfe’s “Bonfire of the Vanities,” with its collision between affluent white insularity and sudden violence. But Wolfe, in truth, redirected his story away from a subway setting after the Goetz shooting, and, more important still, he made his protagonist a Master of the Universe. Wolfe’s subject was a clash of classes; the Goetz shooting was a racial confrontation among ordinary New Yorkers. The fantasy of a courtroom showdown between predatory wealth and the vengeful many has its appeal, but it’s not what happened.

In narrow New York terms, the subway shooting marked the end of one period as much as the start of another. The money that had begun flowing into the city after its near-bankruptcy in the seventies kept flowing, and crime started to fall, sharply and steadily. Within seven years, even the cinematic image of street violence had shifted. In Mike Nichols’s “Regarding Henry,” from 1991, a yuppie lawyer played by Harrison Ford is shot in the head by a would-be mugger, and, on the whole, the injury improves his character.

There is, inevitably, a literature arguing that Wachtler didn’t go far enough, that self-defense claims should be barred the moment they rely, even implicitly, on discriminatory inference. But that stance, whatever its moral appeal, brushes against the obvious: a person crowded by four teen-age boys—Black or white—is likely to feel more apprehension than someone crowded by four elderly women. The deeper point is that no one before had ever behaved as Goetz did, and no one has since. Other New Yorkers, when confronted with trouble, did the ordinary, sensible thing: moved away, changed cars, or just got off the train. Subway crime was real; the armed, preëmptive vigilante fantasy that Goetz embodied was not. It happened exactly once.

What really made the tragedy possible was that Goetz had an illegal revolver in his pocket. As Gregory Waples, the prosecutor, put it during the trial, Goetz was “the perfect example of a person who should not be carrying a gun in New York City.” Every civilized country grasps the point

that eludes ours: arm enough citizens and you guarantee that a commonplace confrontation will, sooner or later, turn fatal. Without the gun, Goetz would have changed cars. With it, five lives were shattered. Catastrophically, the Supreme Court has recently dismantled a century of precedent—and urban common sense—by insisting that the individual right to own a gun for something as amorphous as “self-defense” is close to absolute. Under that regime, Goetz could carry his Smith & Wesson on the subway today without fear even of a weapons charge.

Meanwhile, the West African immigrant in the car that afternoon was, in retrospect, a more telling portent than the violence he witnessed. West African immigration, meagre until then, soon rose; so did immigration from South Asia. Largely invisible at the time, especially compared with the vast Italian and Jewish migrations a century earlier, these influxes were ultimately just as transformative. They helped make New York more genuinely diverse than the old stage for bruising conflicts between first-wave ethnic whites and Black Americans—a world that had run from Frank Rizzo through Boston busing to Bernie Goetz. And it’s the passing of that world which underwrites the Mamdani moment. Over the past century, the mayors of New York have almost all been children of that first great immigration, overwhelmingly Jewish, Irish, and Italian, with two African Americans from the later Great Migration north. Now that consolidated compact is broken. The old immigrants are likely to remain—in the manner of the occasional Wasp legatee (Wagner, Lindsay) who poked in during the buoyant sixties—more visitors to wars over civic power than victors in them. We live in a new New York.

The rest of the supporting cast of characters, remarkably, are mostly still with us, if in a cheerier register. For all the clichés about contemporary “rage,” the temperament of New York’s ethnic and racial skirmishing has softened over time. [Zohran Mamdani](#)’s genial grin would have seemed unsustainably mild in the angry eighties, when Koch’s sarcasm fenced with Giuliani’s snarl, occasionally relieved by Mario Cuomo’s solemnity. Curtis Sliwa has settled into the role of amiable, if chronically unsuccessful, political perennial. Al Sharpton appears on “Morning Joe” as a slim, avuncular presence. Howard Stern has become a genial nostalgia-monger, his eager conversations with Billy Joel all over YouTube—though Stern

seems never to have asked Joel why, in his chronicle of unforgettable American events, he felt compelled (was it simply for the rhyme?) to include that name.

Bernie Goetz himself became an advocate for fair treatment of the squirrels in Union Square, and was later arrested for selling marijuana. The final irony is that the Goetzes of the world are the ones who have truly faded from Manhattan. No one can imagine a disgruntled Travis Bickle type living in the expensive neighborhood of West Fourteenth Street now. He would have to find another place to live, probably in Queens, or even, possibly, the Bronx. ♦

Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include “The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery.”

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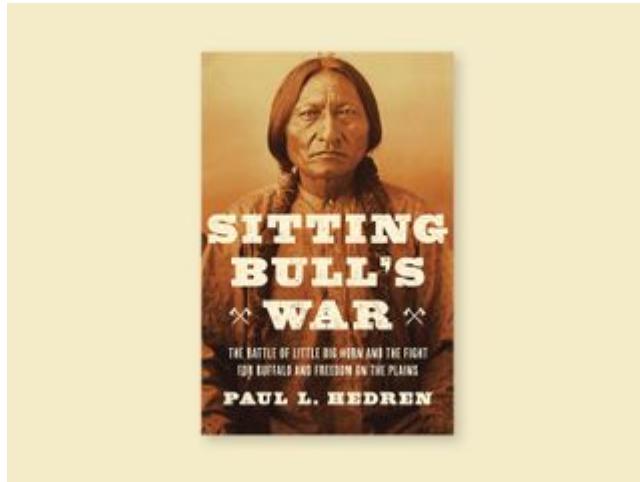
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Books

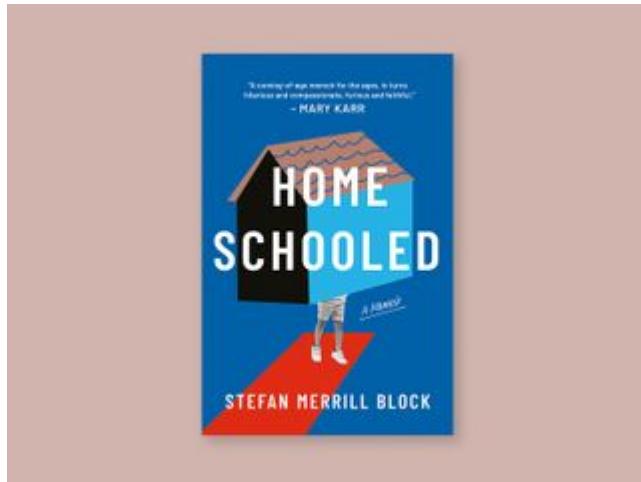
Briefly Noted

“*Sitting Bull’s War*,” “*Homeschooled*,” “*Lightbreakers*,” and “*Before I Forget*.”

January 12, 2026



Sitting Bull’s War, by Paul L. Hedren (Pegasus). This chronicle of the Hunkpapa war chief Sitting Bull is told primarily from the perspectives of the Lakotas and the Northern Cheyennes who fought in the Great Sioux War of 1876, in which Army forces battled for control of the Black Hills. Hedren creates a vivid portrait of Sitting Bull by drawing on a vast array of sources, from interviews with Lakotas conducted by the military to twentieth-century accounts by survivors. Ultimately, the book is both a fine military history and an affecting study of the intertwined calamities that ended the Lakota way of life, including the decimation of the Northern Plains buffalo.



Homeschooled, by *Stefan Merrill Block* (*Hanover Square*). A highly unorthodox homeschooling experience is the subject of this precisely rendered memoir, written by a novelist. While Block is in the fourth grade, after his family moves from Indiana to Texas, his mother withdraws him from school, convinced that a traditional academic environment will stifle his budding writerly gifts. What follows is less an education than an enclosure: days in which lessons are improvised or abandoned, and experiments such as being forced to crawl in order to improve his handwriting. Written largely in the present tense, the book sustains an almost unnerving intimacy as it relates the story of how Block's childhood and adolescence became “a sometimes scary quicksand of time.”

What We're Reading

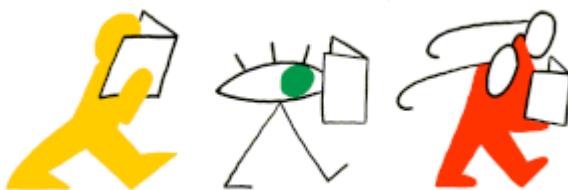
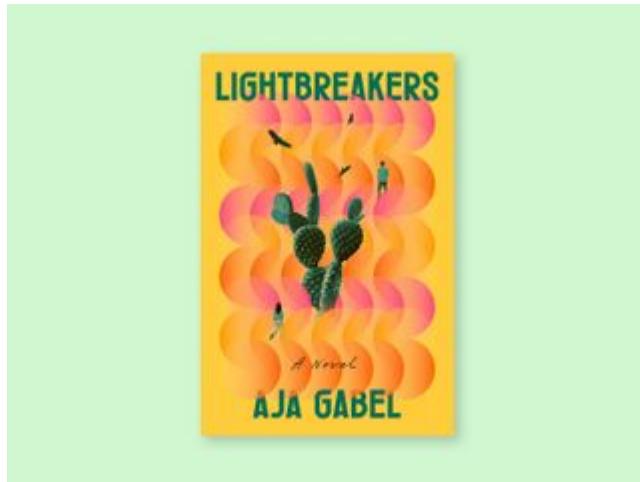


Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



Lightbreakers, by Aja Gabel (*Riverhead*). In this thrilling work of speculative fiction, a quantum physicist is invited by a billionaire to participate in a secret project at a laboratory in Marfa, Texas. At first, the physicist's wife, an artist, is excited to go along—her day job has lost its lustre. But, once in Marfa, the couple finds themselves drawn to former lovers. The physicist also learns that one reason he has been invited is because he suffered the loss of a child, and that the project involves transporting him into his memories. Though his prospective journey carries risks, he judges that the project may be worth it. The novel is a penetrating meditation on time and grief. “You never get over it,” one character notes. “There is only the day you turn the corner, when something new is born.”



Before I Forget, by Tory Henwood Hoen (*St Martin's*). Cricket Campbell, the protagonist of this novel, endured an unspeakable tragedy at her family's summer house when she was sixteen—one that changed the

trajectory of her life and fractured her relationship with her father, Arthur. Ten years later, Cricket returns to the house for the first time to become a full-time caregiver for Arthur, who has Alzheimer's. As she steadily adjusts to her new role, and as Arthur's dementia progresses, Cricket begins to notice something uncanny: Arthur has developed a keen, almost miraculous, ability to tap into the emotions of others, hers included. This quietly charming narrative asks readers to reconsider who is caring for whom, and to ponder the illimitability of human connection.

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Books

How to Recover from Caring Too Much

If you laugh at unfunny jokes, raise your hand too quickly, or can't decide on your favorite color, you may be exhibiting a fawn response.

By [Katy Waldman](#)

January 12, 2026



According to the psychotherapist Meg Josephson, fawning is alternately a path to self-annihilation and a “subtle superpower” of heightened perception and sensitivity. Illustration by Cristina Daura

It is the afternoon of the fawn. Everywhere you turn, in workplaces and households alike, yearlings with saucer eyes, brown felt noses, and stilt-like legs are wondering if you're mad at them. The fawn response, as it's known in some precincts of social media, bundles various forms of ingratiating, people-pleasing behavior. It can manifest in threatening situations, where expressing authentic emotion could elicit a powerful person's wrath or cruelty, or it might be more banal: laughing at a vindictive supervisor's unfunny joke, saying you love a gift when you don't, laboring over the perfect string of whimsical emojis to append to an opinion that you've

expressed over text. In a new book, the clinical psychologist Ingrid Clayton recalls hearing about the concept and feeling that she'd found a skeleton key for understanding both her patients' lives and her own. "It was like I saw fawning everywhere," she writes. "We were having a collective awakening."

Clayton is the author of one of two recent books that try to release fawners from their plight. Her contribution, the rhapsodic and quirky "[Fawning: Why the Need to Please Makes Us Lose Ourselves—and How to Find Our Way Back](#)" (Putnam), joins the chatty and pragmatic "[Are You Mad at Me? How to Stop Focusing on What Others Think and Start Living for You](#)" (Gallery), by the psychotherapist Meg Josephson. Both authors are white women who live in California; both have large followings on Instagram. Josephson's book originated with a viral video in which she summoned for her audience the reassurances that her younger self would have most liked to hear. "They aren't secretly mad at you," she promised. "Your mind is lying to you because it's scared. I know you may have this fear that you're secretly a bad person and it's just a matter of time before everyone finds out, but you're actually safe." Within hours, Josephson recounts, the post had blown up across social-media platforms, with hundreds of commenters expressing recognition and relief. "Why am I crying?" one user wrote.

The Best Books of 2025

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Both authors write as recovering fawners, weaving their own stories through case studies and explication of therapeutic motifs. (They explain

that they prefer the term “fawning” to “people-pleasing” or “codependency” because it sounds less judgmental, and because, in their formulation, it addresses the wellspring of the tendency: childhood wounds.) Each one grew up in a home that required her to curry favor with volatile and inconstant parents—a menacing father figure, a recessive and enabling mother—and each found a fragile safety in her caretakers’ occasional good will. The authors were diligent students, high achievers. When they left home, they engaged in self-destructive patterns: Josephson developed a drinking problem; Clayton dated terrible men. “Well into my thirties,” the latter writes, “I joked that I must be wearing a sandwich board that read: users and abusers, please apply here.” As Josephson tells it, fawning is alternately a path to self-annihilation—a “belief that we need to neglect ourselves for the comfort of other people”—and a “subtle superpower” of heightened perception and sensitivity.

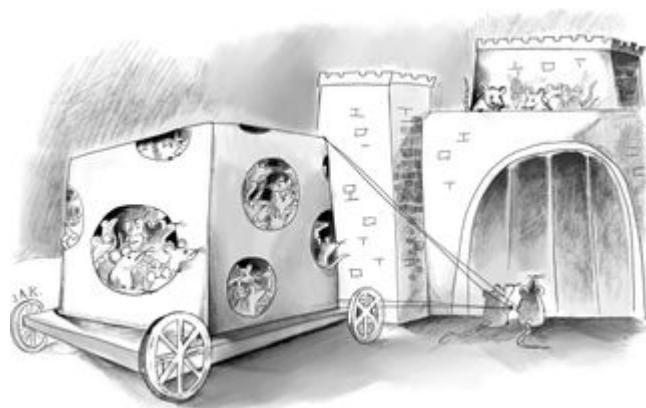
The books draw on the work of the psychotherapist Pete Walker, who, in his book [Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving](#), from 2013, defined fawning as a trauma response, analogous to fighting, fleeing, or freezing—a way that victims seek safety “by merging with the wishes, needs and demands of others.” The idea reverberates in recent efforts within domestic-violence advocacy to reframe victims’ solicitousness as a survival mechanism. In a 2023 paper co-written with Jaycee Dugard, who was kidnapped as an eleven-year-old and held hostage for nearly two decades, the psychologist Rebecca Bailey argued that a victim’s bond with her captor might be better understood as a “powerful instinctual strategy to survive and thrive.” By some interpretations, the fawner resembles Scheherazade, forestalling death through creative feats that appease the men around her.

In Clayton’s and Josephson’s hands, though, the fawn response becomes something more pliable, less a sign of acute threat than a broadly anxious orientation to the world. “For some people, fawning is about being *more* of who they are—smart, generous, successful, funny, or beautiful,” Clayton writes. “For others, it’s about being *less*: vocal, ethnic, creative, self-assured, or able to set boundaries.” Fawning wears various faces: perfectionism, promiscuity, self-deprecation, workaholism, overspending. (“We can’t show up as an authority in our financial lives any more than we can anywhere else,” she adds.) The fawner, scarred by past experiences of

rejection, courts not just individuals but people in the aggregate—a monolithic other, dangling validation like a carrot.

A refrain running through the books is that fawners don't feel real to themselves. While shopping for bath towels for her first apartment in New York, Josephson realizes that she doesn't know what her favorite color is, and contemplates checking Instagram to see which colors other people like. “*Am I even real?*” she recalls thinking. “*Or am I just a medley of other people's personalities and preferences?*” Clayton and Josephson cast their gazes over the social order, dismayed by constellations of inauthenticity and self-erasure. Some fawners are prone to approval-seeking behaviors, like pursuing prestigious but soul-sucking careers. Others take on last-minute babysitting gigs for friends and feel their pulses quicken when someone calls in distress—reactions that might look, to the untrained eye, like ordinary kindness. Wearied by the myriad inconveniences and injuries that come with other people, the authors wonder whether all this adds up to one big, unacceptable compromise. They look, as Mr. Rogers once instructed, for the helpers. Then they ask them: Wouldn't you like to be free?

If fawning involves one kind of hypervigilance—“walking on eggshells, being preoccupied with the worst case scenario, not sleeping well, startling easily,” per Clayton—*unfawning* requires another, in which your every motivation merits inspection, then reinspection. Clayton invites her readers to examine whether they truly wish to give to charity or are simply trying to purge trauma-induced feelings of low self-worth. “We aren’t being generous if it’s at our own expense,” she explains. When a client, whom she calls Lily, a “perpetual babysitter, party thrower, cheerleader,” agrees to watch a friend’s nervous dog, Clayton is incredulous. “Lily, do you even like dogs?” she exclaims. “Would you say yes to such an impossible task if she asked again?”



“Nice try.”

Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

During the unfawning process, Clayton writes, “we practice *not* being the first one to volunteer, to offer to pay, to jump in to help, or to rescue another person when things go wrong.” Nor should the recovering fawner be faulted for actions she took in the throes of her anguish. “Lying to ourselves and others in fawning is not a moral indiscretion,” we learn—in part because trauma has overwritten the victim’s relational playbook, instilling reflexes that hurt her at least as much as they hurt you. Narrating how one of her patients feigned a heroin addiction to gain sympathy, Clayton notes that the fabrication was an unconscious response: “She didn’t set out to lie. The lies were involuntary, reflexively spilling out.”

The fawner depends on others to prop up her self-image; the unfawner knows when to discard them entirely. “Fawning enmeshes us with our environment, with the people around us,” Josephson warns. The books, reversing a once ubiquitous pop-cultural injunction to empathy, pick up on an ambient suspicion that we’d all be better off if we could just keep our eyes on No. 1. On social media, we scroll past pastel-hued infographics about securing our own oxygen masks first, past flowery defenses of cancelling plans, past ads for A.I. companions which urge us to find friendship and contentment in enchanted mirrors. In the political sphere—an arena that’s increasingly entangled with social media—figures such as Elon Musk decry empathy as an emasculating plague. Some right-wing Christians, including the pastor Joe Rigney, the author of “[The Sin of Empathy](#),” have wondered if “an excess of compassion” is leading believers astray. The sentiment’s reactionary appeal is obvious: if our softheartedness is to blame for feelings of helplessness or misuse, then the berserk

strongmen running roughshod over the world (not to mention their fawning associates) are in the clear.

For Clayton and Josephson, choosing oneself is more of a treatment plan than an act of tyranny. Like so many before them, they conscript the diagnostic form to suggest that disconnection has curative properties. One radical prescription is to sever toxic relationships, as Clayton does with her mother, who allowed Clayton's stepfather's predations. The books also model subtler tactics for quieting the fawner's social impulses. Josephson likes to turn down the volume on the outside world, cocooning her readers in the white noise of affirmation. "You're not in trouble," she soothes.

Clayton tends to turn people into tropes: her patients are beleaguered heroines, surrounded by ogres. Before meeting her husband, she writes, she dated the same noxious man, "with a different face, over and over." These constructions evoke the "solitary fantasy systems" that Janet Malcolm argued are fundamental to human relationships—the projections that block us from truly seeing one another. But why not envision the potential beneficiary of a charitable donation, whom Clayton readily sets aside? Or the friend who, contrary to Josephson's reassurances, really *is* mad at you? An unfortunate, and perhaps unavoidable, side effect of embracing one's main-character status is demoting everyone else to—in the words of the Muskian gamers turned tech barons—an N.P.C.

Ironically, the unfawning project would seem to diminish a person's life rather than expand it. The patients in Clayton's and Josephson's books emerge as more rough-grained and specific than the doctrine that contains them: we meet a history teacher who dreams of writing novels but is consumed by bouts of creative self-doubt, a woman who drives around looking for the perfect slice of pie to deliver to a man who hasn't texted her back. Such human details are treated as illness presentations. The ordinary pleasures and frustrations of interdependence wither under fawning's pathologizing scaffold. What the theory offers, instead, is a sphere of social and moral exception—it declares our agency extinguished, our desires flattened, and our actions pre-ratified by our singular pain. "*All this behavior—the stuff I was proud of, and the stuff I was not—was fueled by a trauma response,*" Clayton writes. All of it?

Both authors invoke trauma as the source of their people-pleasing, from Clayton’s yearning to be “picked” to the formation of what Josephson ruefully calls her “chameleon cool-girl vibe.” Yet there’s another, perhaps obvious explanation for such compulsions: being online. Clayton and Josephson are influencers, after all, and the anxiety of the fawner—of feeling unreal, of collapsing into the world’s estimation of you, of mining something deep and internal for the consumption of others—is also the anxiety of social media. In “[Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other](#),” from 2011, the sociologist Sherry Turkle described how the loose ties of digital life make us feel exposed and precarious, causing us to scrabble for status and other measures of safety. The internet, in other words, turns us all into fawners.

But the concept’s popularity is surely rooted in something deeper. Clayton and Josephson have seized on a prevailing sense of powerlessness: we feel burdened by expectations to perform, and obligated to care for other people, especially in the absence of political and economic protections. A few years ago, fawning behaviors might have been diagnosed as symptoms of the patriarchy, and the fawn identity—delicate, endearing, self-abnegating—attributed to the unempowered woman. But the pop-feminist frame fell short for the same reason that the pop-therapy frame does now: both try to ferry us on individual journeys, rather than rouse us to a sense of common cause. Also, as both books aptly observe, men can fawn, too.

Partway through “Fawning,” Clayton reminds us that “fawners are seeking approval, safety, and connection.” Later, she writes that “we want to be chosen, to feel safe and loved.” It’s easy to see why she and Josephson prescribe a strict regimen of detachment: as long as other people have the power to confer or withhold their love from us, they will always be intolerable. But we, too, can love—and, in the best case, we do so not because it gives us control but because it awakens us to the world as it is. Surveying the healed fawner’s sterile cloister—the lone protagonist, the ghostly supporting cast—I thought of the novelist Iris Murdoch, who argued, in a 1959 essay, that “love is the perception of individuals.” “Love,” she wrote, “is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real.” ♦

Katy Waldman, a staff writer, has written about books and culture for *The New Yorker* since 2018.

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[The Theatre](#)

In Tracy Letts's “Bug,” Crazy Is Contagious

A Broadway revival arrives at a moment when paranoia plots are everywhere.

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)

January 9, 2026



Carrie Coon and Namir Smallwood build a cracked but genuine intimacy. Illustration by Jovana Mugoša

The Manhattan Theatre Club revival of Tracy Letts's funny, ultimately heartbreakingly psychological thriller “Bug” opens with Carrie Coon—who plays Agnes White, a lonely waitress holed up in an Oklahoma motel room—standing in front of a half-open door and holding a wineglass upside down, radiating isolation. Soon, someone picks up her signal: Peter Evans, a sad-sack drifter who has tagged along with Agnes’s honky-tonk buddy R.C. and then sticks around. Peter is a weird guy and a bit younger than Agnes, but he’s polite and willing to keep her company, to drink her wine

and smoke some crack. (He won't snort powder cocaine, though: that stuff is bad for you, he explains.) And then he wakes up with a bug bite. When Agnes can't see a bug that he points at, frantically, he urges her to look closer. She does—and maybe she sees something.

Agnes learns that Peter, a veteran of the Gulf War, understands certain dark realities about the world—and suddenly these two strangers have everything in common. As she soaks up Peter's paranoia about infestation and he swats away her skepticism, their conversation lights up, at once broadening and narrowing as they obsess about "plant aphids" and "coke bugs," egg sacs and military implants. It's a crisis that they can face together without ever leaving the room, which begins to feel like the only real place on earth. In the director David Cromer's spare, intelligent production, the set hovers inside an inky blackness. Together, the pair build a cracked but genuine intimacy, a bond that escalates frighteningly in the second act, in a way that brought to mind the country song "Fade Into You," which ends with the lines "There'll be no trace that one was once two / After I fade into you." By the show's unnerving final moments, Agnes and Peter don't even have to speak to know what to do next.

When "Bug" premiered, in 1996, the role of Peter was designed as a showcase for the handsome, cadaverous charisma of Michael Shannon, whom Letts met when Shannon was a sixteen-year-old launching himself into Chicago's experimental-theatre scene. Shannon had played a trailer-trash fuckup in Letts's early hit, the nihilist neo-noir "Killer Joe," and for "Bug," a more humane but equally dark-humored project, he channelled a different kind of intensity, a neuro-atypical, weirdo strength, all striated muscles and bug eyes. It made sense that Agnes couldn't look away.

Namir Smallwood, an ensemble member at Steppenwolf, the Chicago repertory company where the new production originated, plays Peter as a much softer, more recessive figure. He's a little sluggish, his volume turned way down. In early scenes, he exudes a puppyish, confused sweetness, and there is logic to this interpretation. His Peter is unthreatening enough for it to make sense that Agnes, who is hiding from her ex-con husband, lets him get so close to her—even after they sleep together, he seems less like a lover than like a lost child. There's no frisson when they are naked together,

as they are for long periods. He's muted compared with the other, more intense figures in Agnes's life: the vivacious broad R.C. (played with rangy, liberating hilarity by Jennifer Engstrom) and that mean ex. Over time, his sweetness darkens, then hollows out. When, at a key moment, Coon leaps into Smallwood's arms in abandon, it feels like watching a person jump happily into an empty pool.

In Cromer's framing, that hollowness begins to feel like the play's sad theme: when someone is on a desperate hunt for meaning, the source of it ultimately doesn't matter very much. It also turns the play into a story about Agnes, not Peter—her decision to believe, in "X-Files" terms. Coon, who is Letts's wife, builds an Agnes who, despite her fragility and naïveté, also comes across as a sharp, observant woman—and the actress, with her pretty moon face and coltish legs sticking out of denim short shorts, has a natural likability, scoring laughs from a hundred tiny gestures, such as a skeptical glance in the mirror. Smallwood's Peter gets a few deadpan comebacks, but by Act II he is less a seducer than a reply guy, a dedicated pattern finder pivoting to fend off challenges to his theories.

In a crucial scene, Agnes herself wonders out loud about this imbalance. "I don't know why I love you so much. I don't even know you very well," she tells Peter plaintively, as they lie in bed. "I guess I'd rather talk with you about bugs than talk about nothin' with nobody." The reason for this is awful: everything else she could talk about is so much worse.

Maybe the strangest thing about this revival is how ordinary these characters are likely to seem to an audience in 2026, especially Peter, a figure you might stumble on in any Reddit thread. For the original production—which was staged at the Gate, the tiny experimental theatre in London—the script was written quickly by Letts as a nimble follow-up to "Killer Joe" and constructed to match the needs of an intimate space. The play has become a staple of small companies, with its one set (used brilliantly here, in ways not worth spoiling) and its series of febrile monologues, including a final one that Coon eats for breakfast. But, when "Bug" was written, it had a specific historical referent: Letts, who grew up in Oklahoma, was so shocked by Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building that he looked for answers on the then

rudimentary web, where he found conspiratorial rabbit holes, freshly dug. He studied psychosis and folie-à-deux madness, investigating how mental contagions spread.

Thirty years ago, Peter’s state of mind was likely bracing and exotic for audiences. Now, in the age of *covid*, QAnon, Pizzagate, and the Epstein files, it’s the substance we are all soaking in, our toxic Palmolive. Although it’s never remarked on in the text, casting Smallwood, a Black man, as the only actor of color in a drama set in Oklahoma works as an intensifier for Peter’s view of the world. When he talks about the Tuskegee experiment and the Jonestown massacre, these references carry extra weight—though it also seems unlikely that he wouldn’t bring up race and that his enemies, particularly Agnes’s crude ex, wouldn’t either.

There are moments in “Bug” that seem eerily modern, including an encounter in which Peter insists that a human being is a robot. It mirrored the plot of the gonzo film “Bugonia,” in which a pair of wack jobs kidnap a C.E.O. they believe is an alien, and of the nutso ending of “Eddington”—I could go on. Contemporary culture is a delirium of both conspiracy-mongering and conspiracy-puncturing, in every medium. On television shows from “Severance” to “Stranger Things,” the people who believe the worst are inevitably correct, either because in a serialized thriller it makes sense for each sinister revelation to climb higher up the ladder—or because sometimes the head *is* where the fish is rotting from. The superfan mind-set can feel uneasily adjacent to a QAnon fixation.

But mystery is just as interesting. That was the subject of HBO’s “The Leftovers,” in which Coon gave one of her best performances to date, as a woman who had lost her entire family to an inexplicable extinction event, forcing her to build a new self from scratch. Her Agnes is up to something similar, this time as a team sport. At the heart of “Bug” is a romantic craving—to be with someone and not be judged for your craziest thoughts. It’s a play about painkillers of all kinds, but also about how much easier grief is to handle when it’s reimagined as a battle to be won. Terrible things may be happening to you and your partner, but you’re at the center of it, together.

Even in an era in which paranoia has become the default setting, “Bug” feels more pungent, more punishing, and—for all its perversity—more crushing than similar stories, precisely because it’s about how people “catch feelings,” not just ideas. In Coon’s openhearted, subtly joyful portrayal, Agnes is not a broken person who is tricked into faith; she is someone who makes a series of choices to get something she needs, a glue to fix a broken world. In her final monologue, this all becomes clear: it’s liberating to see a pattern in your pain, instead of a nightmare that makes no sense. Who among us wouldn’t bite at the chance? ♦

Emily Nussbaum, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2011, is the magazine’s theatre critic. Her books include “*Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV*.”

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[The Current Cinema](#)

The Zealous Voyagers of “Magellan” and “The Testament of Ann Lee”

In two historical bio-pics, the directors Lav Diaz and Mona Fastvold employ bold formal devices to hold their protagonists at a compelling remove.

By [Justin Chang](#)

January 9, 2026



Gael García Bernal stars as the rapacious colonist Ferdinand Magellan, in Lav Diaz's film. Illustration by Laurie Avon

When we first glimpse the explorer Ferdinand Magellan in the stunning new film that bears his name, he is lying on a corpse-strewn beach, looking near death himself. It's 1511, and he has just participated in the Portuguese conquest of Malacca, a historic state in what is now Malaysia. "Magellan" was written and directed by the Filipino filmmaker Lav Diaz, who composes this scene—and many others that follow—as a kind of tableau vivant, presented at a remove that places equal emphasis on characters and environments. Diaz's technique allows you to relax into the frame and absorb every detail: the bodies scattered along the shore, the tide running red with blood. It takes a moment to register Magellan's presence at all, and

to see that he is played by Gael García Bernal, a stealer of hearts the world over but, in this role, neither a romantic lead nor a conquering hero.

Two years later, Magellan is again by the sea, but now back in Lisbon, where he's confronted by a host of women in black: they are the widows of men who perished on the voyage, and they're desperate for answers. (Here, too, Diaz tempers realism with near-ceremonial formalism.) Magellan cannot account for his actions; he knows only the cold, acquisitive language of power. Hoping to impress King Manuel of Portugal, he ticks off the benefits of a westward sea route to the Spice Islands: "More territories for Portugal. More Christian conversions. Halting the Islamic advance." But the poet Francisco de Sá de Miranda (Paulo Calatré) provides a clearer-eyed assessment: "We are killing so many . . . in the name of the crown and God." Magellan experiences no such pangs of conscience, and he shows no loyalty to any one crown. Spurned by Manuel, he aligns himself with Spain, which grants him the fleet he desires. More killing awaits.

Diaz, now sixty-seven years old, is a venerated figure at international film festivals, his work justly acclaimed for its observational acuity and novelistic texture. His approach is often described in terms of what he doesn't do: he is skeptical of narrative convention, allergic to closeups, and loath to move the camera within a scene—unless, as in "Magellan," it happens to be on a raft, floating downstream under a gentle tropical shower, or on a ship, bobbing along on Atlantic waves. (The director shot and edited the film himself, with Artur Tort.) He also shies away from direct depictions of slaughter, preferring to cut to the aftermath, with gruesome matter-of-factness. "Magellan" isn't an action movie; it's a consequence movie. But Diaz, within all this meticulous subtraction, adds dramatic heft and political meaning. In draining any visceral excitement from violence, he subtly decolonizes the camera's gaze. "Magellan," a tale of death, disease, mutiny, and mutually assured destruction, is the most powerful anti-imperialist epic I've seen since Lucrecia Martel's "Zama" (2018), which fixed a withering comic glare on the expansionist bloodlust of eighteenth-century Europe. Diaz's instincts aren't as viciously funny, though a bone-dry comedy does rear its head when one character loses his: during the voyage, a shipmaster, caught having sex with a cabin boy belowdecks, is put to death for "crimes against nature."

Where does such a charge leave Magellan, despoiler of every Eden he encounters? The film, to its credit, does not skimp on paradisiacal visions. Every shot of the tropics is a painterly study in lush foliage and golden-pink sunlight; the beauty of the natural world seems, if anything, magnified by Magellan's encroaching, annihilating threat. Such visual wonders will hardly surprise admirers of Diaz, whose work has encouraged contemplation, and at marathon lengths. His "Evolution of a Filipino Family" (2004) clocks in at nearly eleven hours, and he has spoken of a nine-hour cut of "Magellan," which purportedly gives a fuller account of the explorer's briefly seen wife, Beatriz (Ângela Azevedo). Presumably, it would dive even deeper into the conflicted soul of Enrique (Amado Arjay Babon), an enslaved man who serves as Magellan's interpreter, and who, in this telling, plays a role in his master's ignominious defeat, in 1521.

By Diaz's standards, this abridged version is fairly smooth sailing. It has a movie star at the helm, after all, and runs a mere two hours and forty-three minutes. Truthfully, it doesn't run so much as flow, with hypnotic grace and a grim, sorrowful momentum, but it does build to a properly cacklesome finish, not long after Magellan's men attempt to force their Christianity on the Philippine island of Cebu, where the Indigenous would-be converts respond with force of their own. You'd think the leader of the first expedition to circumnavigate the globe would know that what goes around comes around.

What are we to make of the season bringing us not one but two artful biopics, each centered on a boldly ambitious, stubbornly deluded visionary who sets out across the sea, bent on converting the masses to Christ? I'm not sure, but Ann Lee, the British-born evangelist who sailed to America in 1774 and led the Christian sect known as the Shakers, would scoff at the idea of coincidence. In "The Testament of Ann Lee," a mesmerizing oddity from the director Mona Fastvold ("The World to Come," from 2021), Amanda Seyfried proselytizes up a storm as Mother Ann, as Lee is known to her coterie of faithful followers in eighteenth-century Manchester. Bent on experiencing a radical depth of intimacy with God, Ann leads her disciples in extended, highly expressive sessions of musical worship: again and again, the Shakers close their eyes, hurl their arms heavenward, and

transfigure their ecstasy into song. “All is concert / all is summer,” they croon, in the most fervently incantatory of their numbers.

Fastvold takes the “all is concert” part quite literally. The women may wear bonnets and Pilgrim-esque collars, but “The Testament of Ann Lee” is stylized in ways that go beyond the traditional cinematic grammar of the period piece; it’s a full-bore musical extravaganza. The Shaker hymnal, in the hands of the composer Daniel Blumberg, becomes a maddeningly infectious soundtrack. The cinematographer William Rexer follows the actors through dance formations that are choreographed with stately simplicity but executed with a furious, stomping athleticism; the lilting repetitions of the music are matched by chest slaps and footfalls. Crossing the sea to New York, Ann and her flock aim to worship without ceasing, even—or especially—when the ship is tossed about in a violent tempest. Jesus calmed the waters with a simple “Quiet! Be still”; the Shakers kick up such a holy ruckus that some members of the crew are tempted to chuck them overboard.

How reasonable you find this temptation may determine the limits of your own tolerance for “The Testament of Ann Lee.” I confess that I was held so spellbound by Fastvold’s musical flights of fancy—and by the attendant sweep and muscularity of her filmmaking—that I felt let down by the more prosaic moments, when everyone *doesn’t* erupt into song and dance. The music tells the story: amid such relentless melodic heaves and percussive thrusts, you needn’t listen too closely to detect a whisper of sublimated eroticism. That’s fitting, for the Shakers preach a doctrine of strict celibacy—one that Ann attributes to a God-given vision, although the movie traces it back to her cramped and impoverished Manchester childhood, during which she’s repulsed by the sight of her father pawing at her mother. Ann’s sexual disgust deepens years later, when, still in England, she marries a lusty blacksmith, Abraham (Christopher Abbott), and births four children, none of whom survives infancy—a tragedy that she sees as divine punishment for fornication. By the time the couple land in New York, Ann has renounced the gratifications of the flesh, and, eventually, Abraham abandons the marriage. Ann’s closer companion is her adoring brother, William (Lewis Pullman), who obeys her without question—even forsaking his male lover, in a glancing subplot, to pursue the Shaker way.

This is the latest picture that Fastvold has co-written with her partner, the director Brady Corbet; they also worked together on his films “The Childhood of a Leader” (2016), “Vox Lux” (2018), and “The Brutalist” (2024), a fictional portrait of a postwar Hungarian American architect which felt richer and truer in its detailing than do most bio-pics. “The Testament of Ann Lee,” by contrast, is a bio-pic that feels contorted into fiction, although, like “The Brutalist,” it’s an immigrant saga, with more than a passing interest in design principles. (The Shakers, of whom only three practicing adherents remain today, are most famous for their minimalist wood furniture, a few examples of which we see here.) What unites the two films, beyond a highly artisanal sense of craft, is a respect for their protagonists’ ultimate unknowability. Just as Corbet beheld his brutalist with frosty admiration, Fastvold uses the stylings of the movie musical to dramatize, without quite penetrating, the mysteries of Mother Ann’s faith. Even as we follow this woman through her own stations of the cross—persecution, imprisonment, humiliation, martyrdom—we are kept at a skeptic’s respectful distance: thoroughly shaken, but not entirely stirred. ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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- **“Changing Table”**

“The thing about children is: / they disappear.”

- **“Men’s Beds”**

“I was promiscuous / With my feelings most of all.”

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Changing Table

By [Meghan O'Rourke](#)

January 12, 2026

The thing about children is:
they disappear.

They disappear as they appear.
More themselves, less yours.

Here the baby is on the table,
kicking his silken, pillow-y legs,

looking you in the eyes, squirming,
farting, smiling.

Their past, leaving them for good,
is ever more with you—

a kind of distributed
emptiness fills the rooms

where they used to coo
and call *ma, ma, ma*.

Bins of plush, sticky animals,
a grimy wooden stove, silence

where the current of play
once flowed. Now I hear

traffic streaming into the future
and the lost birds, the cardinal

and the mourning dove, too.

Meghan O'Rourke, a former editor at *The New Yorker*, is the author of the poetry collection “[Sun in Days](#),” “[The Invisible Kingdom: Reimagining Chronic Illness](#),” which was a finalist for the National Book Award in Nonfiction, and the memoir “[The Long Goodbye](#),” among other books. She teaches creative writing at Yale.

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Men's Beds

By [Richie Hofmann](#)

January 12, 2026

I was promiscuous

With my feelings most of all.

Under stars,

I sprayed saline solution into two wineglasses

And took out my contacts.

I didn't want summer to end, but it did.

Many lives

Happened inside those walls,

And, for a season,

I wore a designer hoodie

And got iced americanos every morning.

I slept in men's beds:

They took turns breaking

Me. It felt good, but one's absence

Weighed on me like a death.

Late summer blurred

Feelings together

With rain.

At least I wasn't going to be lonely.

I moved around the city,

Buying paperbacks,

Putting sunscreen on my neck.

Who hasn't yearned for a stranger?

The trains were free.

I mean: No one checked your ticket.

This is drawn from “[The Bronze Arms](#).”

[Richie Hofmann](#) is the author of books including “[A Hundred Lovers](#)” and “[The Bronze Arms](#). ”

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A moderately challenging puzzle.

[Crossword](#)

The Crossword: Tuesday, January 6, 2026

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Paolo Pasco](#)

January 6, 2026

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Paolo Pasco, a games editor at TED, won the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in 2024 and 2025. He is the author of “[Crossword Puzzles for Kids](#).”

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