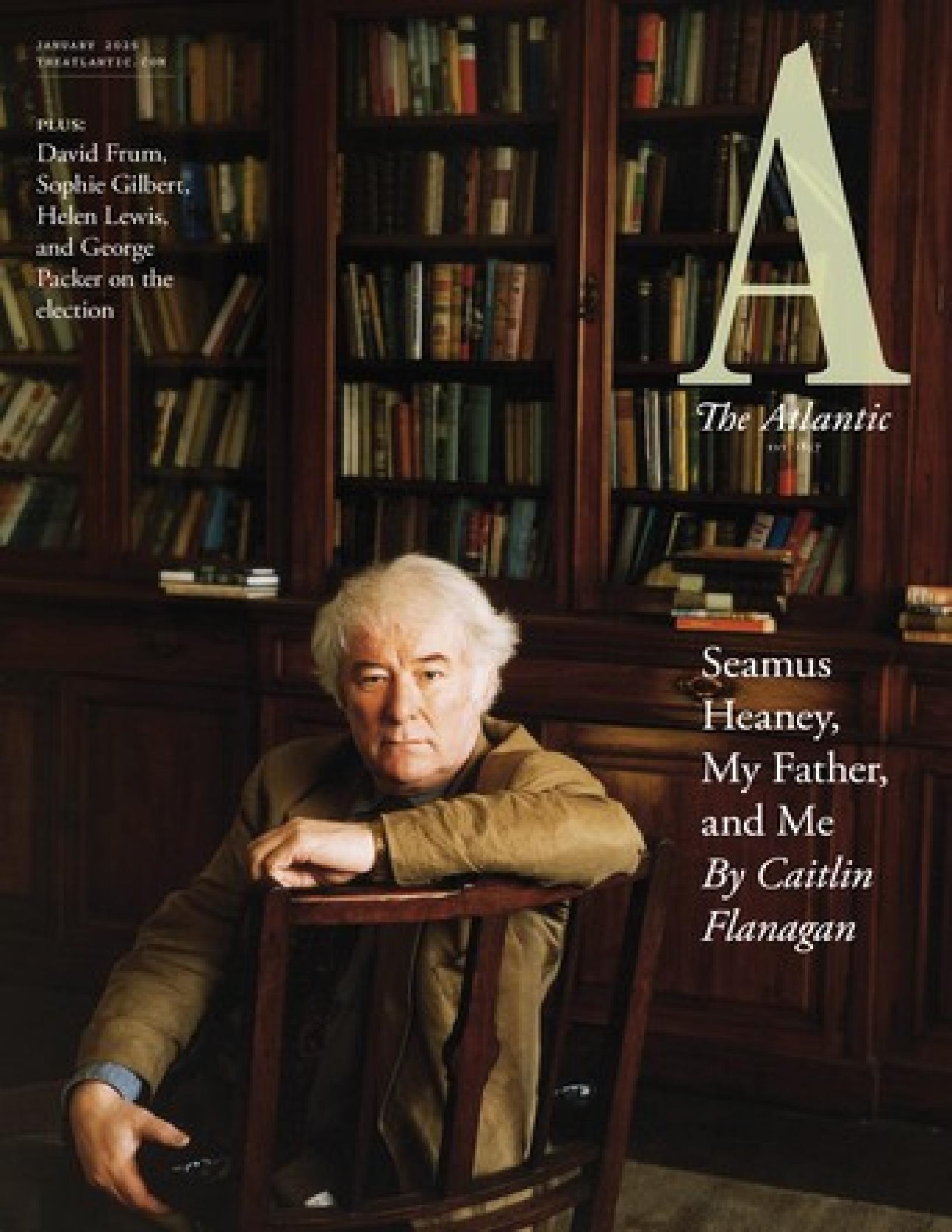


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The Business-School Scandal That Just Keeps Getting Bigger

The rot runs deeper than almost anyone has guessed.

by Daniel Engber



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For anyone who teaches at a business school, the blog [post](#) was bad news. For Juliana Schroeder, it was catastrophic. She saw the allegations when they first went up, on a Saturday in early summer 2023. Schroeder teaches management and psychology at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business. One of her colleagues—a star professor at Harvard Business School named

Francesca Gino—had just been [accused](#) of academic fraud. The authors of the blog post, a small team of business-school researchers, had found discrepancies in four of Gino’s published papers, and they suggested that the scandal was much larger. “We believe that many more Gino-authored papers contain fake data,” the blog post said. “Perhaps dozens.”

The story was soon picked up by the mainstream press. Reporters reveled in the irony that Gino, who had made her name as an expert on the psychology of breaking rules, may herself have broken them. (“Harvard Scholar Who Studies Honesty Is Accused of Fabricating Findings,” a *New York Times* [headline](#) read.) Harvard Business School had quietly placed Gino on administrative leave just before the blog post appeared. The school had conducted its own investigation; its nearly 1,300-page internal [report](#), which was made public only in the course of related legal proceedings, concluded that Gino “committed research misconduct intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly” in the four papers. (Gino has steadfastly [denied](#) any wrongdoing.)

Schroeder’s interest in the scandal was more personal. Gino was one of her most consistent and important research partners. Their names appear together on seven peer-reviewed articles, as well as 26 conference talks. If Gino were indeed a serial cheat, then all of that shared work—and a large swath of Schroeder’s [CV](#)—was now at risk. When a senior academic is accused of fraud, the reputations of her honest, less established colleagues may get dragged down too. “Just think how horrible it is,” Katy Milkman, another of Gino’s research partners and a tenured professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, told me. “It could ruin your life.”



Juliana Schroeder (LinkedIn)

To head that off, Schroeder began her own audit of all the research papers that she'd ever done with Gino, seeking out raw data from each experiment and attempting to rerun the analyses. As that summer progressed, her efforts grew more ambitious. With the help of several colleagues, Schroeder pursued a [plan](#) to verify not just her own work with Gino, but a major portion of Gino's scientific résumé. The group started reaching out to every other researcher who had put their name on one of Gino's 138 co-authored

studies. The [Many Co-Authors](#) Project, as the self-audit would be called, aimed to flag any additional work that might be tainted by allegations of misconduct and, more important, to absolve the rest—and Gino’s colleagues, by extension—of the wariness that now afflicted the entire field.

That field was not tucked away in some sleepy corner of academia, but was instead a highly influential one devoted to the science of success. Perhaps you’ve heard that [procrastination makes you more creative](#), or that you’re better off having [fewer choices](#), or that you can [buy happiness](#) by giving things away. All of that is research done by Schroeder’s peers—business-school professors who apply the methods of behavioral research to such subjects as marketing, management, and decision making. In viral TED Talks and airport best sellers, on [morning shows](#) and [late-night television](#), these business-school psychologists hold tremendous sway. They also have a presence in this magazine and many others: Nearly every business academic who is named in this story has been either quoted or cited by *The Atlantic* on multiple occasions. A few, including Gino, have written articles for *The Atlantic* themselves.



Francesca Gino (LinkedIn)

Business-school psychologists are scholars, but they aren't shooting for a Nobel Prize. Their research doesn't typically aim to solve a social problem; it won't be curing anyone's disease. It doesn't even seem to have much influence on business practices, and it certainly hasn't shaped the nation's commerce. Still, its flashy findings come with clear rewards: consulting gigs and speakers' fees, not to mention lavish academic incomes. Starting salaries

at business schools can be \$240,000 a year—double what they are at campus psychology departments, academics told me.

The research scandal that has engulfed this field goes far beyond the [replication crisis](#) that has plagued psychology and other disciplines in recent years. Long-standing flaws in how scientific work is done—including insufficient sample sizes and the sloppy application of statistics—have left large segments of the research literature [in doubt](#). Many avenues of study once deemed promising turned out to be [dead ends](#). But it's one thing to understand that scientists have been [cutting corners](#). It's quite another to suspect that they've been creating their results from scratch.

[Read: Psychology's replication crisis has a silver lining](#)

Schroeder has long been interested in trust. She's given lectures on "building trust-based relationships"; she's run experiments measuring trust in colleagues. Now she was working to rebuild the sense of trust within her field. A lot of scholars were involved in the Many Co-Authors Project, but Schroeder's dedication was singular. In October 2023, a former graduate student who had helped tip off the team of bloggers to Gino's possible fraud wrote her own "[post mortem](#)" on the case. It paints Schroeder as exceptional among her peers: a professor who "sent a clear signal to the scientific community that she is taking this scandal seriously." Several others echoed this assessment, saying that ever since the news broke, Schroeder has been relentless—heroic, even—in her efforts to correct the record.

But if Schroeder planned to extinguish any doubts that remained, she may have aimed too high. More than a year since all of this began, the evidence of fraud has only multiplied. The rot in business schools runs much deeper than almost anyone had guessed, and the blame is unnervingly widespread. In the end, even Schroeder would become a suspect.

Gino was accused of faking numbers in four published papers. Just days into her digging, Schroeder uncovered another paper that appeared to be affected—and it was one that she herself had helped write.

The work, titled "[Don't Stop Believing: Rituals Improve Performance by Decreasing Anxiety](#)," was published in 2016, with Schroeder's name listed

second out of seven authors. Gino's name was fourth. (The first few names on an academic paper are typically arranged in order of their contributions to the finished work.) The research it described was pretty standard for the field: a set of clever studies demonstrating the value of a life hack—one simple trick to nail your next presentation. The authors had tested the idea that simply following a routine—even one as arbitrary as drawing something on a piece of paper, sprinkling salt over it, and crumpling it up—could help calm a person's nerves. "Although some may dismiss rituals as irrational," the authors wrote, "those who enact rituals may well outperform the skeptics who forgo them."

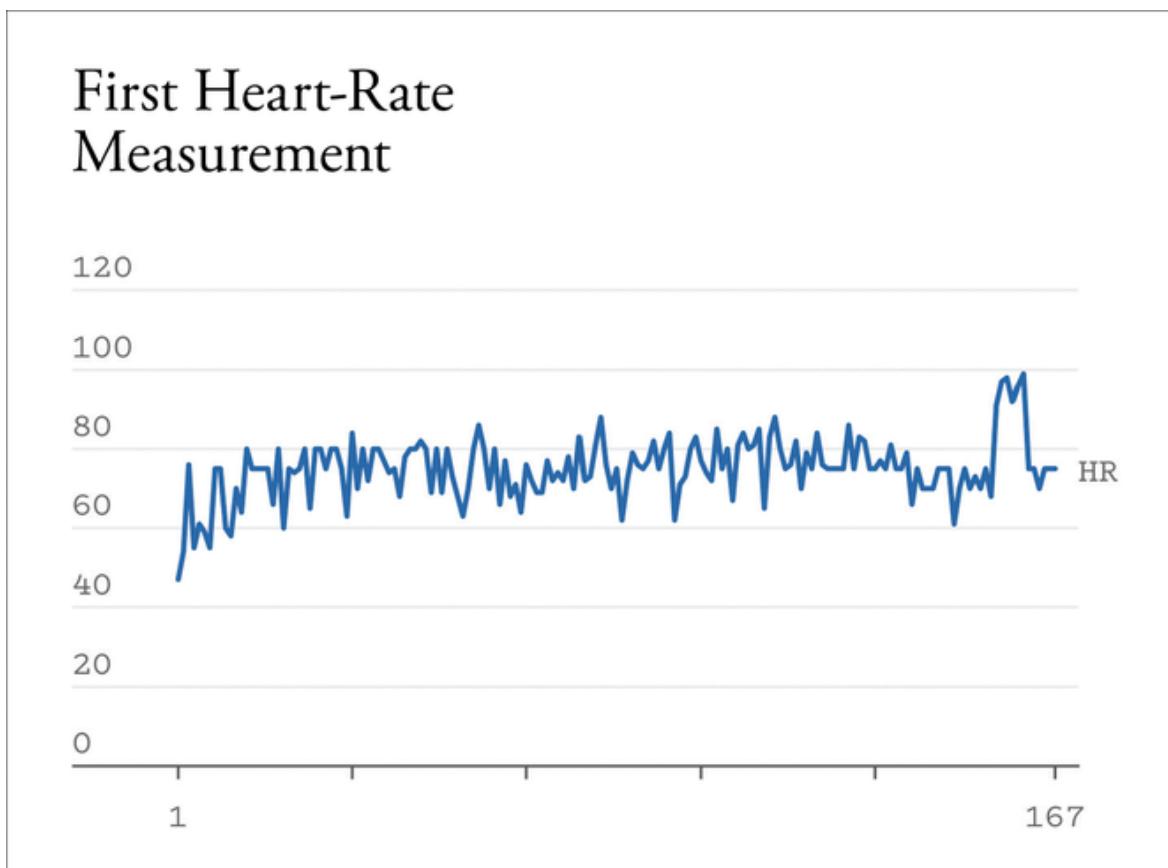
In truth, the skeptics have never had much purchase in business-school psychology. For the better part of a decade, this finding had been garnering citations—about 200, per Google Scholar. But when Schroeder looked more closely at the work, she realized it was questionable. In October 2023, she [sketched out](#) some of her concerns on the Many Co-Authors Project website.

The paper's first two key experiments, marked in the text as Studies 1a and 1b, looked at how the salt-and-paper ritual might help students sing a karaoke version of Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" in a lab setting. According to the paper, Study 1a found that people who did the ritual before they sang reported feeling much less anxious than people who did not; Study 1b confirmed that they had lower heart rates, as measured with a pulse oximeter, than students who did not.

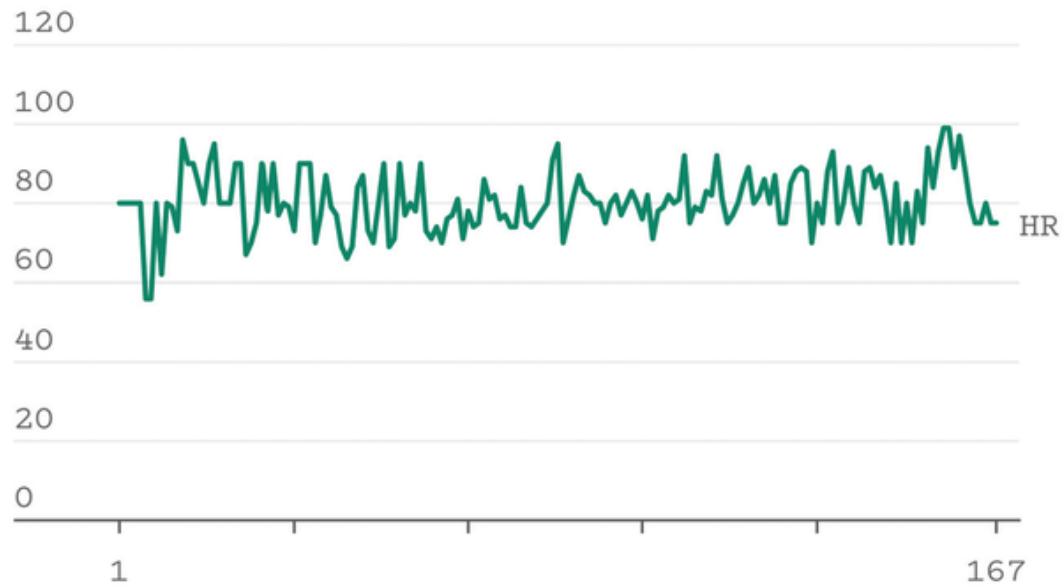
As Schroeder noted in her October post, the original records of these studies could not be found. But Schroeder did have some data spreadsheets for Studies 1a and 1b—she'd posted them shortly after the paper had been published, along with versions of the studies' research questionnaires—and she now wrote that "unexplained issues were identified" in both, and that there was "uncertainty regarding the data provenance" for the latter. Schroeder's post did not elaborate, but anyone can look at the spreadsheets, and it doesn't take a forensic expert to see that the numbers they report are seriously amiss.

The "unexplained issues" with Studies 1a and 1b are legion. For one thing, the figures as reported don't appear to match the research as described in other public documents. (For example, where the posted [research](#)

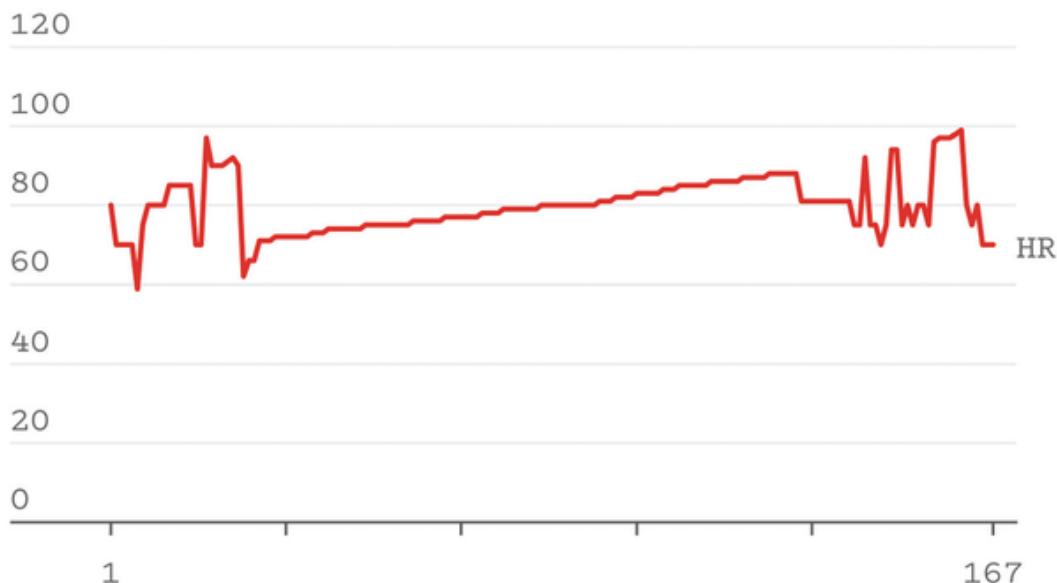
[questionnaire](#) instructs the students to assess their level of anxiety on a five-point scale, the results seem to run from 2 to 8.) But the single most suspicious pattern shows up in the heart-rate data. According to the paper, each student had their pulse measured three times: once at the very start, again after they were told they'd have to sing the karaoke song, and then a third time, right before the song began. I created three graphs to illustrate the data's peculiarities. They depict the measured heart rates for each of the 167 students who are said to have participated in the experiment, presented from left to right in their numbered order on the spreadsheet. The blue and green lines, which depict the first and second heart-rate measurements, show those values fluctuating more or less as one might expect for a noisy signal, measured from lots of individuals. But the red line doesn't look like this at all: Rather, the measured heart rates form a series going up, across a run of more than 100 consecutive students.



Second Heart-Rate Measurement



Third Heart-Rate Measurement



DATA FROM “DON’T STOP BELIEVING: RITUALS IMPROVE PERFORMANCE BY DECREASING ANXIETY” (2016), STUDY 1B
(Charts by *The Atlantic*. Based on data posted to [OSF.io](#).)

I’ve reviewed the case with several researchers who suggested that this tidy run of values is indicative of fraud. “I see absolutely no reason” the sequence in No. 3 “should have the order that it does,” James Heathers, a scientific-integrity investigator and an occasional *Atlantic* contributor, told me. The exact meaning of the pattern is unclear; if you were fabricating data, you certainly wouldn’t strive for them to look like this. Nick Brown, a scientific-integrity researcher affiliated with Linnaeus University Sweden, guessed that the ordered values in the spreadsheet may have been cooked up after the fact. In that case, it might have been less important that they formed a natural-looking plot than that, when analyzed together, they matched fake statistics that had already been reported. “Someone sat down and burned quite a bit of midnight oil,” he proposed. I asked how sure he was that this pattern of results was the product of deliberate tampering; “100 percent, 100

percent,” he told me. “In my view, there is no innocent explanation in a universe where fairies don’t exist.”

Schroeder herself would come to a similar conclusion. Months later, I asked her whether the data were manipulated. “I think it’s very likely that they were,” she said. In the summer of 2023, when she reported the findings of her audit to her fellow authors, they all agreed that, whatever really happened, the work was compromised and ought to be retracted. But they could not reach consensus on who had been at fault. Gino did not appear to be responsible for either of the paper’s karaoke studies. Then who was?

This would not seem to be a tricky question. The published version of the paper has two lead authors who are listed as having “contributed equally” to the work. One of them was Schroeder. All of the co-authors agree that she handled two experiments—labeled in the text as Studies 3 and 4—in which participants solved a set of math problems. The other main contributor was Alison Wood Brooks, a young professor and colleague of Gino’s at Harvard Business School.

From the start, there was every reason to assume that Brooks had run the studies that produced the fishy data. Certainly they are similar to Brooks’s prior work. The same quirky experimental setup—in which students were asked to wear a pulse oximeter and sing a karaoke version of “Don’t Stop Believin’”—appears in her [dissertation](#) from the Wharton School in 2013, and she published a portion of that work in a sole-authored [paper](#) the following year. (Brooks herself is musically inclined, performing around Boston in a [rock band](#).)

Yet despite all of this, Brooks told the Many Co-Authors Project that she simply wasn’t sure whether she’d had access to the raw data for Study 1b, the one with the “no innocent explanation” pattern of results. She also said she didn’t know whether Gino played a role in collecting them. On the latter point, Brooks’s former Ph.D. adviser, Maurice Schweitzer, expressed the same uncertainty to the Many Co-Authors Project.

Plenty of evidence now suggests that this mystery was manufactured. The [posted materials](#) for Study 1b, along with administrative records from the [lab](#), indicate that the work was carried out at Wharton, where Brooks was in

grad school at the time, studying under Schweitzer and running another, very similar experiment. Also, the metadata for the oldest public version of the [data spreadsheet](#) lists “Alison Wood Brooks” as the last person who saved the file.



Alison Wood Brooks (LinkedIn)

Brooks, who has published research on the value of [apologies](#), and whose first book—*Talk: The Science of Conversation and the Art of Being Ourselves*—is due out from Crown in January, did not respond to multiple requests for interviews or to a detailed list of written questions. Gino said that she “neither collected nor analyzed the data for Study 1a or Study 1b nor was I involved in the data audit.”

If Brooks did conduct this work and oversee its data, then Schroeder’s audit had produced a dire twist. The Many Co-Authors Project was meant to suss out Gino’s suspect work, and quarantine it from the rest. “The goal was to

protect the innocent victims, and to find out what's true about the science that had been done," Milkman told me. But now, to all appearances, Schroeder had uncovered crooked data that apparently weren't linked to Gino. That would mean Schroeder had another colleague who had contaminated her research. It would mean that her reputation—and the credibility of her entire field—was under threat from multiple directions at once.

Among the four research papers in which Gino was accused of cheating is one about the human tendency to misreport facts and figures for personal gain. Which is to say: She was accused of faking data for a study of when and how people might fake data. Amazingly, a different set of data from the [same paper](#) had already been flagged as the product of potential fraud, two years before the Gino scandal came to light. The first was contributed by Dan Ariely of Duke University—a frequent co-author of Gino's and, [like her](#), a celebrated expert on the [psychology of telling lies](#). (Ariely has [said](#) that a Duke investigation—which the school has not acknowledged—discovered no evidence that he “falsified data or knowingly used falsified data.” He has also said that the investigation “determined that I should have done more to prevent faulty data from being published in the 2012 paper.”)

The existence of two apparently corrupted data sets was shocking: a keystone paper on the science of deception wasn't just invalid, but possibly a scam twice over. But even in the face of this ignominy, few in business academia were ready to acknowledge, in the summer of 2023, that the problem might be larger still—and that their research literature might well be overrun with fantastical results.

Some scholars had tried to raise alarms before. In 2019, Dennis Tourish, a professor at the University of Sussex Business School, published a book titled *Management Studies in Crisis: Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research*. He cites a study finding that more than a third of surveyed editors at management journals say they've encountered fabricated or falsified data. Even that alarming rate may undersell the problem, Tourish told me, given all of the misbehavior in his discipline that gets overlooked or covered up.

“It’s embarrassing how few protections we have against fraud and how easy it has been to fool us.”

Anonymous surveys of various fields find that [roughly 2 percent](#) of scholars will admit to having fabricated, falsified, or modified data at least once in their career. But business-school psychology may be especially prone to misbehavior. For one thing, the field's research standards are weaker than those for other psychologists. In response to the replication crisis, campus psychology departments have lately taken up a raft of methodological reforms. Statistically suspect practices that were de rigueur a dozen years ago are now uncommon; sample sizes have gotten bigger; a study's planned analyses are now commonly written down before the work is carried out. But this great awakening has been slower to develop in business-school psychology, several academics told me. "No one wants to kill the golden goose," one early-career researcher in business academia said. If management and marketing professors embraced all of psychology's reforms, he said, then many of their most memorable, most TED Talk–able findings would go away. "To use marketing lingo, we'd lose our unique value proposition."

It's easy to imagine how cheating might lead to more cheating. If business-school psychology is beset with suspect research, then the bar for getting published in its flagship journals ratchets up: A study must be even flashier than all the other flashy findings if its authors want to stand out. Such incentives move in only one direction: Eventually, the standard tools for torturing your data will no longer be enough. Now you have to go a little further; now you have to cut your data up, and carve them into sham results. Having one or two prolific frauds around would push the bar for publishing still higher, inviting yet more corruption. (And because the work is not exactly brain surgery, no one dies as a result.) In this way, a single discipline might come to look like Major League Baseball did 20 years ago: defined by juiced-up stats.

In the face of its own cheating scandal, MLB started [screening](#) every single player for anabolic steroids. There is no equivalent in science, and certainly not in business academia. [Uri Simonsohn](#), a professor at the Esade Business School in Barcelona, is a member of the blogging team, called Data Colada, that caught the problems in both Gino's and Ariely's work. (He was also a motivating force behind the Many Co-Authors Project.) Data Colada has called out other instances of sketchy work and apparent fakery within the field, but its efforts at detection are highly targeted. They're also quite

unusual. Crying foul on someone else's bad research makes you out to be a troublemaker, or a member of the notional "[data police](#)." It can also bring a claim of defamation. Gino filed a [\\$25 million defamation lawsuit](#) against Harvard and the Data Colada team not long after the bloggers attacked her work. (This past September, a judge [dismissed](#) the portion of her claims that involved the bloggers and the defamation claim against Harvard. She still has pending claims against the university for gender discrimination and breach of contract.) The risks are even greater for those who don't have tenure. A junior academic who accuses someone else of fraud may antagonize the senior colleagues who serve on the boards and committees that make publishing decisions and determine funding and job appointments.

[Read: Francesca Gino, the Harvard expert on dishonesty who is accused of lying](#)

These risks for would-be critics reinforce an atmosphere of complacency. "It's embarrassing how few protections we have against fraud and how easy it has been to fool us," Simonsohn said in a 2023 [webinar](#). He added, "We have done nothing to prevent it. Nothing."

Like so many other scientific scandals, the one Schroeder had identified quickly sank into a swamp of closed-door reviews and taciturn committees. Schroeder says that Harvard Business School declined to investigate her evidence of data-tampering, citing a policy of not responding to allegations made [more than six years](#) after the misconduct is said to have occurred. (Harvard Business School's head of communications, Mark Cautela, declined to comment.) Her efforts to address the issue through the University of Pennsylvania's Office of Research Integrity likewise seemed fruitless. (A spokesperson for the Wharton School would not comment on "the existence or status of" any investigations.)

Retractions have a way of [dragging out](#) in science publishing. This one was no exception. Maryam Kouchaki, an expert on workplace ethics at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and co-editor in chief of the journal that published the "Don't Stop Believing" paper, had first received the authors' call to pull their work in August 2023. As the anniversary of that request drew near, Schroeder still had no idea how the

suspect data would be handled, and whether Brooks—or anyone else—would be held responsible.

Finally, on October 1, the “Don’t Stop Believing” paper was removed from the scientific literature. The journal’s [published notice](#) laid out some basic conclusions from Schroeder’s [audit](#): Studies 1a and 1b had indeed been run by Brooks, the raw data were not available, and the posted data for 1b showed “streaks of heart rate ratings that were unlikely to have occurred naturally.” Schroeder’s own contributions to the paper were also found to have some flaws: Data points had been dropped from her analysis without any explanation in the published text. (Although this practice wasn’t fully out-of-bounds given [research standards at the time](#), the same behavior would today be understood as a form of “[p-hacking](#)”—a pernicious source of false-positive results.) But the notice did not say whether the fishy numbers from Study 1b had been fabricated, let alone by whom. Someone other than Brooks may have handled those data before publication, it suggested. “The journal could not investigate this study any further.”

Two days later, Schroeder posted to X a link to her full and final audit of the paper. “It took *hundreds* of hours of work to complete this retraction,” she wrote, in a [thread](#) that described the flaws in her own experiments and Studies 1a and 1b. “I am ashamed of helping publish this paper & how long it took to identify its issues,” the thread concluded. “I am not the same scientist I was 10 years ago. I hold myself accountable for correcting any inaccurate prior research findings and for updating my research practices to do better.” Her peers responded by lavishing her with public praise. One colleague [called](#) the self-audit “exemplary” and an “act of courage.” A prominent professor at Columbia Business School [congratulated](#) Schroeder for being “a cultural heroine, a role model for the rising generation.”

But amid this celebration of her unusual transparency, an important and related story had somehow gone unnoticed. In the course of scouting out the edges of the cheating scandal in her field, Schroeder had uncovered yet another case of seeming science fraud. And this time, she’d blown the whistle on herself.

That stunning revelation, unaccompanied by any posts on social media, had arrived in a [muffled update](#) to the Many Co-Authors Project website.

Schroeder announced that she'd found "an issue" with one more paper that she'd produced with Gino. This one, "[Enacting Rituals to Improve Self-Control](#)," came out in 2018 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; its author list overlaps substantially with that of the earlier "Don't Stop Believing" paper (though Brooks was not involved). Like the first, it describes a set of studies that purport to show the power of the ritual effect. Like the first, it includes at least one study for which data appear to have been altered. And like the first, its data anomalies have no apparent link to Gino.

The basic facts are laid out in a [document](#) that Schroeder put into an online repository, describing an internal audit that she conducted with the help of the lead author, Allen Ding Tian. (Tian did not respond to requests for comment.) The paper opens with a field experiment on women who were trying to lose weight. Schroeder, then in grad school at the University of Chicago, oversaw the work; participants were recruited at a campus gym.

Half of the women were instructed to perform a ritual before each meal for the next five days: They were to put their food into a pattern on their plate. The other half were not. Then Schroeder used a diet-tracking app to tally all the food that each woman reported eating, and found that the ones in the ritual group took in about 200 fewer calories a day, on average, than the others. But in 2023, when she started digging back into this research, she uncovered some discrepancies. According to her study's raw materials, nine of the women who reported that they'd done the food-arranging ritual were listed on the data spreadsheet as being in the control group; six others were mislabeled in the opposite direction. When Schroeder fixed these errors for her audit, the ritual effect completely vanished. Now it looked as though the women who'd done the food-arranging had consumed a few *more* calories, on average, than the women who had not.

Mistakes happen in research; sometimes data get mixed up. These errors, though, appear to be intentional. The women whose data had been swapped fit a suspicious pattern: The ones whose numbers might have undermined the paper's hypothesis were disproportionately affected. This is not a subtle thing; among the 43 women who reported that they'd done the ritual, the six most prolific eaters all got switched into the control group. Nick Brown and James Heathers, the scientific-integrity researchers, have each tried to figure

out the odds that anything like the study's published result could have been attained if the data had been switched at random. Brown's analysis pegged the answer at one in 1 million. "Data manipulation makes sense as an explanation," he told me. "No other explanation is immediately obvious to me." Heathers said he felt "quite comfortable" in concluding that whatever went wrong with the experiment "was a directed process, not a random process."

Whether or not the data alterations were intentional, their specific form—flipped conditions for a handful of participants, in a way that favored the hypothesis—matches up with data issues raised by Harvard Business School's investigation into Gino's work. Schroeder rejected that comparison when I brought it up, but she was willing to accept some blame. "I couldn't feel worse about that paper and that study," she told me. "I'm deeply ashamed of it."

Still, she said that the source of the error wasn't her. Her research assistants on the project may have caused the problem; Schroeder wonders if they got confused. She said that two RAs, both undergraduates, had recruited the women at the gym, and that the scene there was chaotic: Sometimes multiple people came up to them at once, and the undergrads may have had to make some changes on the fly, adjusting which participants were being put into which group for the study. Maybe things went wrong from there, Schroeder said. One or both RAs might have gotten ruffled as they tried to paper over inconsistencies in their record-keeping. They both knew what the experiment was meant to show, and how the data ought to look—so it's possible that they peeked a little at the data and reassigned the numbers in the way that seemed correct. (Schroeder's audit lays out other possibilities, but describes this one as the most likely.)

Schroeder's account is certainly plausible, but it's not a perfect fit with all of the facts. For one thing, the posted data indicate that during most days on which the study ran, the RAs had to deal with only a handful of participants—sometimes just two. How could they have gotten so bewildered?

Any further details seem unlikely to emerge. The paper was formally retracted in the February issue of the journal. Schroeder has chosen not to name the RAs who helped her with the study, and she told me that she hasn't

tried to contact them. “I just didn’t think it was appropriate,” she said. “It doesn’t seem like it would help matters at all.” By her account, neither one is currently in academia, and she did not discover any additional issues when she reviewed their other work. (I reached out to more than a dozen former RAs and lab managers who were thanked in Schroeder’s published papers from around this time. Five responded to my queries; all of them denied having helped with this experiment.) In the end, Schroeder said, she took the data at the assistants’ word. “I did not go in and change labels,” she told me. But she also said repeatedly that she doesn’t think her RAs should take the blame. “The responsibility rests with me, right? And so it was appropriate that I’m the one named in the retraction notice,” she said. Later in our conversation, she summed up her response: “I’ve tried to trace back as best I can what happened, and just be honest.”

“I would say that distrust characterizes many people in the field—it’s all very depressing.”

Across the many months I spent reporting this story, I’d come to think of Schroeder as a paragon of scientific rigor. She has led a seminar on “Experimental Design and Research Methods” in a business program with a sterling reputation for its research standards. She’d helped set up the Many Co-Authors Project, and then pursued it as aggressively as anyone. (Simonsohn even told me that Schroeder’s look-at-everything approach was a little “overboard.”) I also knew that she was devoted to the dreary but important task of reproducing other people’s published work.

As for the dieting research, Schroeder had owned the awkward optics. “It looks weird,” she told me when we spoke in June. “It’s a weird error, and it looks consistent with changing things in the direction to get a result.” But weirder still was how that error came to light, through a detailed data audit that she’d undertaken of her own accord. Apparently, she’d gone to great effort to call attention to a damning set of facts. That alone could be taken as a sign of her commitment to transparency.

But in the months that followed, I couldn’t shake the feeling that another theory also fit the facts. Schroeder’s leading explanation for the issues in her work—*An RA must have bungled the data*—sounded distressingly familiar. Francesca Gino had offered up the same defense to Harvard’s investigators.

The mere repetition of this story doesn't mean that it's invalid: Lab techs and assistants really do mishandle data on occasion, and they may of course engage in science fraud. But still.

As for Schroeder's all-out focus on integrity, and her public efforts to police the scientific record, I came to understand that most of these had been adopted, all at once, in mid-2023, shortly after the Gino scandal broke. (The [version](#) of Schroeder's résumé that was available on her webpage in the spring of 2023 does not describe any replication projects whatsoever.) That makes sense if the accusations changed the way she thought about her field—and she did describe them to me as “a wake-up call.” But here's another explanation: Maybe Schroeder saw the Gino scandal as a warning that the data sleuths were on the march. Perhaps she figured that her own work might end up being scrutinized, and then, having gamed this out, she decided to be a data sleuth herself. She'd publicly commit to reexamining her colleagues' work, doing audits of her own, and asking for corrections. This would be her play for amnesty during a crisis.

I spoke with Schroeder for the last time on the day before Halloween. She was notably composed when I confronted her with the possibility that she'd engaged in data-tampering herself. She repeated what she'd told me months before, that she definitely did not go in and change the numbers in her study. And she rejected the idea that her self-audits had been strategic, that she'd used them to divert attention from her own wrongdoing. “Honestly, it's disturbing to hear you even lay it out,” she said. “Because I think if you were to look at my body of work and try to replicate it, I think my hit rate would be good.” She continued: “So to imply that I've actually been, I don't know, doing a lot of fraudulent stuff myself for a long time, and this was a moment to come clean with it? I just don't think the evidence bears that out.”

That wasn't really what I'd meant to imply. The story I had in mind was more mundane—and in a sense more tragic. I went through it: Perhaps she'd fudged the results for a study just once or twice early in her career, and never again. Perhaps she'd been committed, ever since, to proper scientific methods. And perhaps she really did intend to fix some problems in her field.

Schroeder allowed that she'd been susceptible to certain research practices—excluding data, for example—that are now considered improper. So were many of her colleagues. In that sense, she'd been guilty of letting her judgment be distorted by the pressure to succeed. But I understood what she was saying: This was not the same as fraud.

Throughout our conversations, Schroeder had avoided stating outright that anyone in particular had committed fraud. But not all of her colleagues had been so cautious. Just a few days earlier, I'd received an unexpected message from Maurice Schweitzer, the senior Wharton business-school professor who oversaw Alison Wood Brooks's "Don't Stop Believing" research. Up to this point, he had not responded to my request for an interview, and I figured he'd chosen not to comment for this story. But he finally responded to a list of written questions. It was important for me to know, his email said, that Schroeder had "been involved in data tampering." He included a link to the retraction notice for her paper on rituals and eating. When I asked Schweitzer to elaborate, he did not respond. (Schweitzer's most recent academic work is focused on the damaging effects of gossip; one of his [papers](#) from 2024 is titled "The Interpersonal Costs of Revealing Others' Secrets.")

I laid this out for Schroeder on the phone. "Wow," she said. "That's unfortunate that he would say that." She went silent for a long time. "Yeah, I'm sad he's saying that."

Another long silence followed. "I think that the narrative that you laid out, Dan, is going to have to be a possibility," she said. "I don't think there's a way I can refute it, but I know what the truth is, and I think I did the right thing, with trying to clean the literature as much as I could."

This is all too often where these stories end: A researcher will say that whatever really happened must forever be obscure. Dan Ariely [told](#) *Business Insider* in February 2024: "I've spent a big part of the last two years trying to find out what happened. I haven't been able to ... I decided I have to move on with my life." Schweitzer told me that the most relevant files for the "Don't Stop Believing" paper are "long gone," and that the chain of custody for its data simply can't be tracked. (The Wharton School agreed, telling me that it "does not possess the requested data" for Study 1b, "as it

falls outside its current data retention period.”) And now Schroeder had landed on a similar position.

It’s uncomfortable for a scientist to claim that the truth might be unknowable, just as it would be for a journalist, or any other truth-seeker by vocation. I daresay the facts regarding all of these cases may yet be amenable to further inquiry. The raw data from Study 1b may still exist, somewhere; if so, one might compare them with the posted spreadsheet to confirm that certain numbers had been altered. And Schroeder says she has the names of the RAs who worked on her dieting experiment; in theory, she could ask those people for their recollections of what happened. If figures aren’t checked, or questions aren’t asked, it’s by choice.

What feels out of reach is not so much the truth of any set of allegations, but their consequences. Gino has been placed on administrative leave, but in many other instances of suspected fraud, nothing happens. Both Brooks and Schroeder appear to be untouched. “The problem is that journal editors and institutions can be more concerned with their own prestige and reputation than finding out the truth,” Dennis Tourish, at the University of Sussex Business School, told me. “It can be easier to hope that this all just goes away and blows over and that somebody else will deal with it.”



Pablo Delcan

Some degree of disillusionment was common among the academics I spoke with for this story. The early-career researcher in business academia told me that he has an “unhealthy hobby” of finding manipulated data. But now, he said, he’s giving up the fight. “At least for the time being, I’m done,” he told me. “Feeling like Sisyphus isn’t the most fulfilling experience.” A management professor who has followed all of these cases very closely gave this assessment: “I would say that distrust characterizes many people in the field—it’s all very depressing and demotivating.”

It's possible that no one is more depressed and demotivated, at this point, than Juliana Schroeder. "To be honest with you, I've had some very low moments where I'm like, 'Well, maybe this is not the right field for me, and I shouldn't be in it,'" she said. "And to even have any errors in any of my papers is incredibly embarrassing, let alone one that looks like data-tampering."

I asked her if there was anything more she wanted to say.

"I guess I just want to advocate for empathy and transparency—maybe even in that order. Scientists are imperfect people, and we need to do better, and we can do better." Even the Many Co-Authors Project, she said, has been a huge missed opportunity. "It was sort of like a moment where everyone could have done self-reflection. Everyone could have looked at their papers and done the exercise I did. And people didn't."

Maybe the situation in her field would eventually improve, she said. "The optimistic point is, in the long arc of things, we'll self-correct, even if we have no incentive to retract or take responsibility."

"Do you believe that?" I asked.

"On my optimistic days, I believe it."

"Is today an optimistic day?"

"Not really."

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The Hawaiians Who Want Their Nation Back

In 1893, a U.S.-backed coup overthrew the Islands' sovereign government. What does America owe Hawai‘i now?

by Adrienne LaFrance



[*Read this article in Hawaiian.*](#)

At the edge of a forest on the island of O‘ahu, through two massive metal gates—if you can convince someone to let you in—you will find yourself inside the compound of the self-appointed president of the Nation of Hawai‘i.

Dennis Pu‘uhonua Kanahele came to possess this particular 45-acre plot only after a prolonged and extremely controversial occupation, which he led, and which put him in prison for a time, more than three decades ago. Since then, he has built a modest commune on this land, in the shadow of an ancient volcano, with a clutter of bungalows and brightly painted trailers. He’s in his 70s now, and carries himself like an elder statesman. I went to see him because I had, for the better part of 20 years, been trying to find the answer to a question that I knew preoccupied both of us: What should America do about Hawai‘i?

More than a century after the United States helped orchestrate the coup that conquered the nation of Hawai‘i, and more than 65 years since it became a state, people here have wildly different ideas about what America owes the Hawaiian people. Many are fine with the status quo, and happy to call themselves American. Some people even explicitly side with the insurrectionists. Others agree that the U.S. overthrow was an unqualified historic wrong, but their views diverge from that point. There are those who argue that the federal government should formally recognize Hawaiians with a government-to-government relationship, similar to how the United States liaises with American Indian tribes; those who prefer to seize back government from within; and those who argue that the Kingdom of Hawai‘i never legally ceased to exist.

Then there is Kanahele, who has [wrested land from the state](#)—at least for the duration of his 55-year lease—and believes other Hawaiians should follow his example. Like many Hawaiians (by which I mean descendants of the Islands’ first inhabitants, who are also sometimes called Native Hawaiians), Kanahele doesn’t see himself as American at all. When he travels, he carries, along with his U.S. passport, a Nation of Hawai‘i passport that he and his followers made themselves.

But outside the gates of his compound, there is not only an American state, but a crucial outpost of the United States military, which has [12 bases and](#)

[installations here](#)—including the headquarters for U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the Pacific Missile Range Facility. The military controls hundreds of thousands of acres of land and untold miles of airspace in the Islands.

It seems unrealistic, to say the least, to imagine that the most powerful country in the world would simply give Hawai‘i back to the Hawaiians. If it really came down to it, I asked, how far would Kanahele go to protect his people, his nation? That’s a personal question, Kanahele told me. “That’s your life, you know. What you’re willing to give up. Not just freedom but the possibility to be alive.”



Dennis Pu‘uhonua Kanahele is the self-appointed president of the Nation of Hawai‘i. (Brendan George Ko for *The Atlantic*)

Sitting across the table from us, his vice president, Brandon Maka‘awa‘awa, conceded that there had, in the past, been moments when it would have been easy to choose militancy. “We could have acted out of fear,” he said. But every time, they “acted with aloha and we got through, just like our queen.” He was referring to Hawai‘i’s last monarch, Queen Lili‘uokalani, who was deposed in the coup in 1893.

People tend to treat this chapter in U.S. foreign relations as a curiosity on the margins of history. This is a mistake. The overthrow of Hawai‘i is what established the modern idea of America as a superpower. Without this one largely forgotten episode, the United States may never have endured an attack on Pearl Harbor, or led the Allies to victory in World War II, or ushered in the age of Pax Americana—an age that, with Donald Trump’s return to power, could be coming to an end.

Some Hawaiians see what is happening now in the United States as a bookend of sorts. In their view, the chain of events that led to a coup in Hawai‘i in 1893 has finally brought us to this: the moment when the rise of autocracy in America presents an opportunity for Hawaiians to extricate themselves from their long entanglement with the United States, reclaim their independence, and perhaps even resurrect their nation.

Keanu Sai is, today, one of the more extreme thinkers about Hawaiian sovereignty. Growing up in Kuli‘ou‘ou, on the east end of O‘ahu, Sai was a self-described slacker who only wanted to play football. He graduated from high school in 1982 and went straight to a military college, then the Army.

In 1990, he was at Fort Sill, in Oklahoma, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, annexing it as Iraq’s 19th province. International condemnation was swift; the United Nations Security Council declared the annexation illegal. An American-led coalition quickly beat back Saddam, liberating Kuwait. “And that’s when I went, *Wait a minute*. That’s exactly what happened” in Hawai‘i, Sai told me. “Our government was overthrown.” The idea radicalized him.

Before Hawai‘i’s overthrow, it had been a full-fledged nation with diplomatic relationships across the globe and a modern form of governance (it also signed a peace treaty with the United States in 1826). As a

constitutional monarchy, it had elected representatives, its own supreme court, and a declaration of rights modeled after the U.S. Bill of Rights. And, as people in Hawai‘i like to remind outsiders, ‘Iolani Palace had electricity before the White House did.

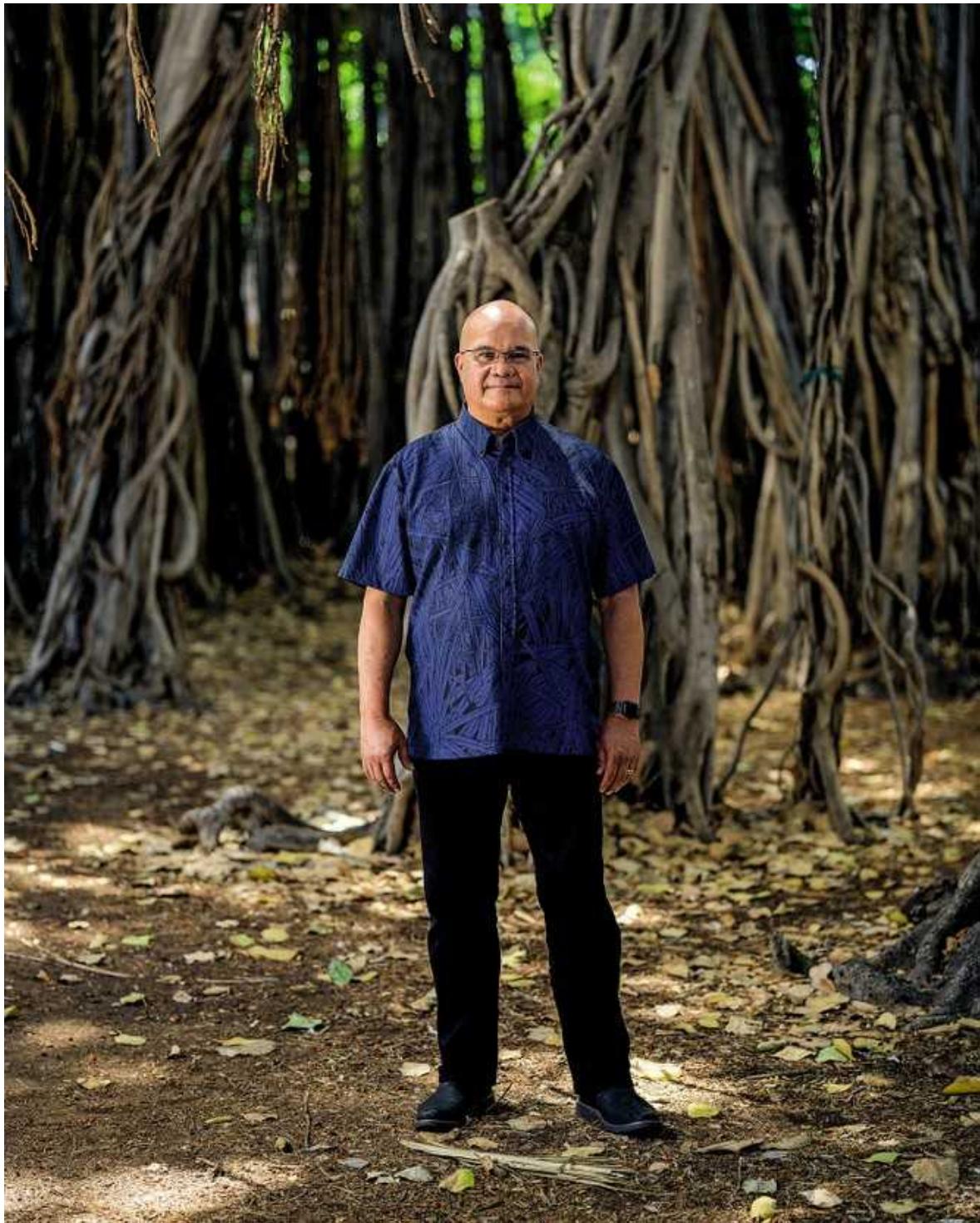
Then, in January 1893, a group of 13 men—mostly Americans or Hawai‘i-born businessmen descended from American missionary families, all with extensive financial interests in the Islands—executed a surprise coup. They did so with remarkable speed and swagger, even by coup standards. The men behind the effort referred to themselves as the Committee of Safety (presumably in a nod to the American and French Revolutions) and had good reason to expect that they would succeed: They had the backing of the U.S. foreign minister to the Kingdom of Hawai‘i, John L. Stevens, who called up a force of more than 160 Marines and sailors to march on Honolulu during the confrontation with the queen. Stevens later insisted that he had done so in a panic—a coup was unfolding! It was his duty to do whatever was necessary to protect American lives and property! A good story, but not a convincing one.

Months before the coup, Stevens had written a curious letter to his friend James Blaine, the U.S. secretary of state, in which he’d posed a bizarre and highly detailed hypothetical: What if, Stevens had wanted to know, the government of Hawai‘i were to be “surprised and overturned by an orderly and peaceful revolutionary movement” that established its own provisional government to replace the queen? If that were to happen, Stevens pressed, just how far would he and the American naval commander stationed nearby be permitted to “deviate from established international rules” in their response? The presence of U.S. Marines, Stevens mused, might be the only thing that could quash such an overthrow and maintain order. As it turned out, however, Stevens and his fellow insurrectionists used the Marines to ensure that their coup would succeed. (Blaine, for his part, had had his eye on the Islands for decades.) Two weeks after the overthrow, Stevens wrote to John W. Foster, President Benjamin Harrison’s final secretary of state: “The Hawaiian pear is now fully ripe, and this is the golden hour for the United States to pluck it.”

Queen Lili‘uokalani had yielded immediately to the insurrectionists, unsure whether Stevens was following orders from Harrison. “This action on my

part was prompted by three reasons,” she wrote in [an urgent letter to Harrison](#): “the futility of a conflict with the United States; the desire to avoid violence, bloodshed, and the destruction of life and property; and the certainty which I feel that you and your government will right whatever wrongs may have been inflicted on us in the premises.”

Her faith in Harrison was misplaced; he ignored her letter. In the last month of his presidency, he sent a treaty to the U.S. Senate to advance the annexation of Hawai‘i to the United States. (Lorrin A. Thurston, one of the overthrow’s architects, boasted in his [Memoirs of the Hawaiian Revolution](#) that in early 1892, Harrison [had encouraged him](#), through an interlocutor, to go forward with his plot.)



Keanu Sai argues that the Kingdom of Hawai‘i never legally ceased to exist.
(Brendan George Ko for *The Atlantic*)

Looking back at this history nearly 100 years later, Keanu Sai had an epiphany. “I was in the wrong army,” he said. Sai left the military and dove

into the state archives, researching Hawai‘i’s history and his own family’s lineage prior to the arrival of *haole* (white) Europeans and Americans. He says he traced his family’s roots to *ali‘i*, members of Hawai‘i’s noble class. “I started to realize that the Hawaiian Kingdom that I was led to believe was all *haole*-controlled, missionary-controlled, was all—pardon the French—bullshit,” he told me.

That led him to develop what is probably the most creative, most radical, and quite possibly most ridiculous argument about Hawaiian independence that I’ve ever heard. Basically, it’s this: The Hawaiian Kingdom never ceased to exist.

Though Sai has plenty of fans and admirers, several people warned me that I should be careful around him. I spoke with some Hawaiians who expressed discomfort with the implications of Sai’s notion that the kingdom was never legally dissolved—not everyone wants to be a subject in a monarchy. There was also the matter of his troubles with the law.

In 1997, Sai took out an ad in a newspaper declaring himself to be a regent of the Hawaiian Kingdom, a move that he said formally entrusted him “with the vicarious administration of the Hawaiian government during the absence of a Monarch.” He had started a business in which he and his partner charged people some \$1,500 for land-title research going back to the mid-19th century, promising to protect clients’ land from anyone who might claim it as their own. The business model was built on his theory of Hawaiian history, and the underlying message seemed to be: If the kingdom still exists, and the state of Hawai‘i does not, maybe this house you bought isn’t technically even yours. Ultimately, Sai’s business had its downtown office raided; the title company shut down, and he was convicted of felony theft.

It struck me that, in another life, Keanu Sai would have made a perfect politician. He is charismatic and funny. A decorated bullshit artist. Unquestionably smart. Filibusters with the best of them. (He also told me that Keanu Reeves is his cousin.) Although Sai’s methods may be questionable, his indignation over the autocratic overthrow of his ancestors’ nation is justified.

Sai says that arguments about Hawaiian sovereignty tend to distort this history. “They create the binary of colonizer-colonized,” he said. “All of that is wrong. Hawai‘i was never a colony of the United States. And we’re not a tribal nation similar to Native Americans. We’re nationals of an occupied state.”

Following this logic, Sai believes international courts must acknowledge that America has perpetuated war crimes against Hawai‘i’s people. After that, he says, international law should guide Hawai‘i out of its current “wartime occupation” by the United States, so that the people of Hawai‘i can reconstruct their nation. Sai has attempted to advance this case in the international court system. So far, he has been unsuccessful.

At one point, Sai mused that I’d have to completely rework my story based on his revelations. I disagreed, but said that I liked hearing from him about this possible path to Hawaiian independence. This provoked, for the first time in our several hours of conversations, a flash of anger. “This is not the ‘possible path,’” Sai said. “*It is the path.*”

The island of Ni‘ihau is just 18 miles long and six miles wide. Nicknamed “the forbidden island,” it has been privately owned since 1864, when King Kamehameha IV and his brother sold it for \$10,000 in gold to a wealthy Scottish widow, Elizabeth Sinclair, who had moved her family to Hawai‘i after her husband and son were lost at sea.

Sinclair’s descendants still own and run the island, which by the best estimates has a population of fewer than 100. It is the only place in the world where everyone still speaks Hawaiian. No one is allowed to visit Ni‘ihau without a personal invitation from Sinclair’s great-great-grandsons Bruce and Keith Robinson, both now in their 80s. Such invitations are extraordinarily rare. (One of the two people I know who have ever set foot on Ni‘ihau got there only after asking the Robinsons every year for nearly 10 years.)

The island has no paved roads, no electrical grid, no street signs, and no domestic water supply—drinking water comes from catchment water and wells. In the village is a schoolhouse, a cafeteria, and a church, which everyone is reportedly expected to attend. One of the main social activities is

singing. The rules for Ni‘ihau residents are strict: Men cannot wear their hair long, pierce their ears, or grow beards. Drinking and smoking are not allowed. The Robinsons infamously bar anyone who leaves for even just a few weeks from returning, with few exceptions.

Ni‘ihau’s circumscribed mores point to a broader question: If one goal of Hawaiian independence is to restore a nation that has been lost, then which version of Hawai‘i, exactly, are you trying to bring back?



The volcano Diamond Head, or Lē’ahi, in Honolulu, circa 1872 (left) and in 2015 (right) (Royal Geographical Society / Getty; Ergi Reboreda / VW Pics / Universal Images Group / Getty)

Ancient explorers first reached the archipelago in great voyaging canoes, traveling thousands of miles from the Marquesas Islands, around the year 400 C.E. They [brought with them](#) pigs, chickens, gourds, taro, sugarcane, coconuts, sweet potatoes, bananas, and paper mulberry plants. Precontact Hawai‘i was home to hundreds of thousands of Hawaiians—[some scholars estimate that the population was as high as 1 million](#). There was no concept of private land ownership, and Hawaiians lived under a feudal system run by *ali‘i*, chiefs who were believed to be divinely ordained. This strict caste system entailed severe rules, executions for those who broke them, and brutal rituals including human sacrifice.

The first British explorers [moored their ships just off the coast of Kaua‘i](#) in 1778 and immediately took interest in the Islands. Captain James Cook, who

led that first expedition, was welcomed with aloha by the Hawaiian people. But when Cook attempted to kidnap the Hawaiian chief Kalani‘ōpu‘u on a subsequent visit to the Islands, a group of Hawaiians stabbed and bludgeoned Cook to death. (Kalani‘ōpu‘u survived.)

Eventually, fierce battles culminated in unification of all the Islands under Hawai‘i’s King Kamehameha, who finally conquered the archipelago’s last independent island in 1810. The explosion and subsequent collapse of the sandalwood trade followed, along with the construction of the first sugar plantations and [the arrival of whaling ships](#). Missionaries came too, and the introduction of Christianity led, for a time, to a ban on the hula—one of the Hawaiian people’s most sacred and enduring forms of passing down history. All the while, [several waves of epidemics](#)—cholera, mumps, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, smallpox, and bubonic plague—ravaged the Hawaiian population, which plummeted to about 40,000 by the end of the 19th century.

As exoticized ideas about Hawaiian culture spread, repackaged for tourists, Hawaianness was suppressed nearly to the point of erasure.

During this period, the United States had begun to show open interest in scooping up the Sandwich Islands, as they were then called. In the June 1869 issue of *The Atlantic*, the [journalist Samuel Bowles wrote](#):

We have converted their heathen, we have occupied their sugar plantations; we furnish the brains that carry on their government, and the diseases that are destroying their people; we want the profit on their sugars and their tropical fruits and vegetables; why should we not seize and annex the islands themselves?

From the June 1869 issue: The Pacific Railroad—Open

Elizabeth Sinclair’s descendants profited greatly from the sugar they cultivated, but they had a different view of what Hawai‘i should be. King Kamehameha IV is said to have sold Ni‘ihau on one condition: Its new owners had to promise to do right by the Hawaiian people and their culture. This is why, when the United States did finally move to “seize and annex the

islands,” the Robinsons supported the crown. After annexation happened anyway, in 1898, Sinclair’s grandson closed Ni‘ihau to visitors.

On the other islands, everything seemed to speed up from there. Schools had already banned the Hawaiian language, but now many Hawaiian families started speaking only English with their children. The [sugar and pineapple industries boomed](#). Matson ships carrying visitors to Hawai‘i [soon gave way to airplanes](#). As exoticized ideas about Hawaiian culture spread, repackaged for tourists, Hawaiianness was suppressed nearly to the point of erasure.

Through all of this, Ni‘ihau stayed apart. History briefly intruded in 1941, when a Japanese fighter pilot crash-landed there hours after participating in the attack on Pearl Harbor, which killed an estimated 2,400 people in Honolulu. Ni‘ihau residents knew nothing about the mayhem of that day. They at first welcomed the Imperial pilot as a guest, but killed him after he botched an attempt to hold some of them hostage.

If the overthrow had marked the beginning of the end of Hawaiian nationhood, the attack on Pearl Harbor finished it. It also kicked off a three-year period of martial law in Hawai‘i, in which the military took control of every aspect of civilian life—in effect converting the Islands into one big internment facility. The government suspended habeas corpus, shut down the courts, and set up its own tribunals for law enforcement. The military imposed a strict nightly curfew, rationed food and gasoline, and censored the press and other communications. The many Japanese Americans living there were surveilled and treated as enemies—Japanese-run banks were shut down, along with Japanese-language schools. Everyone was required to carry identification cards, and those older than the age of 6 were fingerprinted. Telephone calls and photography were restricted. Sugarcane workers who didn’t report to their job could be tried in military court.

Martial law was fully lifted in 1944, and in 1959, Hawai‘i [became the 50th state](#)—a move the Robinsons are said to have opposed. But whether they liked it or not, statehood dragged Ni‘ihau along with it. The island is technically part of Kaua‘i County, the local government that oversees the island closest to it. Still, Ni‘ihau has stayed mostly off-limits to the rest of Hawai‘i and the rest of the world. (The Robinsons do operate a helicopter tour that takes visitors to an uninhabited beach on the far side of the island,

but you can't actually get to the village or meet any residents that way.) Those who have affection for Ni‘ihau defend it as an old ranch community on a remote island that's not hurting anybody. The less generous view is that it's essentially the world's last remaining feudal society.

From the December 1958 issue: Hawaii and statehood

But no one is arguing that the rest of Hawai‘i should be run like Ni‘ihau. After all, the entire goal of the sovereignty movement, if you can even say it has a single goal, is to confer more power on the Hawaiian people, not less. The question is how best to do that.

John Waihe‘e’s awakening came the summer before he started seventh grade, when he checked a book out of the library in his hometown of Honoka‘a, on the Big Island, that would change his life. In it, he read a description of the annexation ceremony that had taken place at ‘Iolani Palace in 1898, when Hawai‘i officially became a territory of the United States. It described the lowering of the Hawaiian flag, and the Hawaiian people who had gathered around with tears in their eyes.

This was the 1950s—post–Pearl Harbor and pre-statehood—and Waihe‘e had never even heard of the overthrow. His parents spoke Hawaiian with each other at home, but never spoke it with Waihe‘e.

“I remember rushing back to my father and telling him, ‘Dad, I didn’t know any of this stuff,’” Waihe‘e told me. “He looks at me, and he was very calm about it. He said, ‘You know, son, that didn’t only happen in Honolulu.’” His father went on: “They lowered the flag in Hilo too, on the Big Island, and your grandfather was there, and he saw all of this.”

Waihe‘e was floored. Even nearly 70 years later, he remembers the moment. To picture his grandfather among those watching the kingdom in its final hours “broke my heart,” he said. Waihe‘e had never met his grandfather, but he had seen photos and heard stories about him all his life. “He was this big, strong Hawaiian guy. And the idea of him crying was—it was unthinkable.” The image never left him. He grew up, attended law school, and eventually became Hawai‘i’s governor in 1986, the first Hawaiian ever to hold the office.

Waihe‘e is part of a class of political leaders in Hawai‘i who have chosen to work within the system, rather than rail against it. Another was the late Daniel Akaka, one of Hawai‘i’s longest-serving U.S. senators—a Hawaiian himself. Akaka was raised in a home where he was not permitted to speak Hawaiian. He once told me about hearing [a roar from above on the morning of December 7, 1941](#), and looking up to see a gray wave of Japanese bombers with bright-red dots on the wings. He grabbed his rifle and ran into the hills. He was 17 then, and would later deploy to Saipan with the Army Corps of Engineers.

[Read: Adrienne LaFrance on December 7, the day “all hell broke loose”](#)

In 1993, Akaka, a Democrat, [sponsored a joint congressional resolution](#) that formally apologized to the Hawaiian people for the overthrow of their kingdom 100 years earlier and for “the deprivation of the rights of Native Hawaiians to self-determination.” I’d always seen the apology bill, which was signed into law by President Bill Clinton, as an example of the least the United States could possibly do, mere lip service. But the more people I talked with as I reported this story, the more I heard that it mattered—not just symbolically but legally.

Recently, I went to see Esther Kia‘āina, who was one of the key architects of the apology as an aide to Akaka in Washington, D.C., in the early 1990s. Today, Kia‘āina is a city-council member in Honolulu. People forget, she told me, just how hard it was to get to an apology in the first place.

Around 2020, for the first time ever, more Hawaiians lived outside Hawai‘i than in the Islands.

“Prior to 1993, it was abysmal,” Kia‘āina said. There had been a federal inquiry into the overthrow, producing [a dueling pair of reports in the 1980s](#), one of which concluded that the U.S. bore no responsibility for what had happened to Hawai‘i, and that Hawaiians should not receive reparations as a result. Without the United States first admitting wrongdoing, Kia‘āina said, nothing else could follow. As she saw it, the apology was the first in a series of steps. The next would be to obtain official tribal status for Hawaiians from the Department of the Interior, similar to the way the United States

recognizes hundreds of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes. Then full-on independence.

In the early 2000s, Akaka began pushing legislation that would create a path to federal recognition for Hawaiians as a tribe, a move that Kia‘āina enthusiastically supported. “I was Miss Fed Rec,” she said. It wasn’t a compliment—lots of people hated the idea.



Esther Kia‘āina was one of the key architects of the 1993 apology bill signed into law by President Bill Clinton. (Brendan George Ko for *The Atlantic*)

The federal-recognition legislation would have made Native Hawaiians one of the largest tribes in America overnight—but many Hawaiians didn’t want recognition from the United States at all. The debate created strange bedfellows. Many people argued against it on the grounds that it didn’t go far enough; they wanted their country back, not tribal status. Meanwhile,

some conservatives in Hawai‘i, who tended to be least moved by calls for Hawaiian rights, fought against the bill, arguing that it was a reductionist and maybe even unconstitutional attempt to codify preferential treatment on the basis of race. That’s how a coalition briefly formed that included Hawaiian nationalists and their anti-affirmative-action neighbors.

Akaka’s legislation never passed, and the senator died in 2018. Today, some people say the debate over federal recognition was a distraction, but Kia‘āina still believes that it’s the only way to bring about self-determination for Hawaiians. She told me that she sometimes despairs at what the movement has become: She sees people rage against the overthrow, and against the continued presence of the U.S. military in Hawai‘i, but do little else to promote justice for Hawaiians. And within government, she sees similar complacency.

“It’s almost like ‘Are you kidding me? We give you the baton and this is what you do?’” Kia‘āina said. Instead of effecting change, she told me, people playact Hawaiianness and think it will be enough. They “slap on a Hawaiian logo,” and “that’s your contribution to helping the Hawaiian community.” And in the end, nobody outside Hawai‘i is marching in the street, protesting at the State Department, or occupying campus quads for Native Hawaiians.

There is no question that awareness of Hawaiian history and culture has improved since the 1970s, a period that’s come to be known as the Hawaiian Renaissance, when activists took steps to [restore the Hawaiian language](#) in public places, to teach hula more widely, and to protect and restore other cultural practices. But Kia‘āina told me that although the cultural and language revival is lovely, and essential, it can lull people into thinking that the work is done when plainly it is not. Especially when Hawaiians are running out of time.

Sometime around 2020, the Hawaiian people crossed a terrible threshold. For the first time ever, [more Hawaiians lived outside Hawai‘i than in the Islands](#). Roughly 680,000 Hawaiians live in the United States, according to the [most recent census data](#); some 300,000 of them [live in Hawai‘i](#).

Hawaiians now make up about 20 percent of the state population, a proportion that for many inspires existential fear. Meanwhile, outsiders are getting rich in Hawai‘i, and rich outsiders are buying up Hawaiian land. Larry Ellison, a co-founder of Oracle, owns most of the island of Lāna‘i. Facebook’s co-founder Mark Zuckerberg owns a property on Kaua‘i estimated to be worth about \$300 million. Salesforce’s CEO, Marc Benioff, has reportedly purchased nearly \$100 million worth of land on the Big Island. Amazon’s founder, Jeff Bezos, reportedly paid some \$80 million for his estate on Maui. As one longtime Hawai‘i resident put it to me: The sugar days may be over, but Hawai‘i is still a plantation town.

At the same time, many Hawaiians are faring poorly. Few have the means to live in Hawai‘i’s wealthy neighborhoods. On O‘ahu, a commute to Waikīkī for those with hotel or construction jobs there can take hours in island traffic. Hawaiians have among the highest rates of heart disease, hypertension, asthma, diabetes, and some types of cancer compared with other ethnic groups. They [smoke](#) and [binge drink](#) at higher rates. A quarter of Hawaiian households [can’t adequately feed themselves](#). More than half of Hawaiians report worrying about having enough money to keep a roof over their head; the [average per capita income](#) is less than \$28,000. Only [13 percent of Hawaiians have a college degree](#). The [poverty rate](#) among Hawaiians is 12 percent, the highest of the five largest ethnic groups in Hawai‘i. Although Hawaiians make up only a small percentage of the population in Hawai‘i, the share of homeless people on O‘ahu who identify as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander has hovered at about 50 percent in recent years.

Kūhiō Lewis was “very much the statistic Hawaiian” growing up in the 1990s, he told me—a high-school dropout raised by his grandmother. He’d struggled with drugs and alcohol, and became a single father with two babies by the time he was 19. Back then, Lewis was consumed with anger over what had happened to the Hawaiian people and believed that the only way to get what his people deserved was to fight, and to protest. But he lost patience with a movement that he didn’t think was getting anything done. Today, as the CEO of the nonprofit Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement, he has a different view.

He still believes that Hawai‘i should not be part of America, but he also believes that Hawai‘i would need a leader with “balls of steel” to make independence happen. “That’s a big ask,” he added. “That’s a lot of personal sacrifice.” Until that person steps up, Lewis chooses to work within the system, even if it means some Hawaiians see him as a sellout.

“There is a wrong that was done. And there’s no way we’ll ever let that go,” Lewis told me. “But I also believe, and I’ve come to believe, that the best way to win this battle is going through America rather than trying to go around America.”



Portraits of the Hawaiian Kingdom’s monarchs—from King Kamehameha (*top left*) to Queen Lili‘uokalani (*bottom right*)—hang on the wall at the nonprofit Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement. (Brendan George Ko for *The Atlantic*)

When I spoke with Brian Schatz, Hawai‘i’s senior senator, in Washington, he said he is most focused on addressing the moment-to-moment crisis for

the Hawaiian people. Lots of Native Hawaiians, he said, “are motivated by the same set of issues that non-Native Hawaiians are motivated by. They don’t wake up every morning thinking about sovereignty and self-determination. They wake up every morning thinking about the price of gasoline, and traffic, and health care.” He went on: “They are deeply, deeply uninterested in a bunch of abstractions. They would rather have a few hundred million dollars for housing than some new statute that purports to change the interaction between America and Hawaiians.”

Ian Lind, a former investigative reporter who is himself Hawaiian, is also critical of sovereignty discussions that rely too much on fashionable ideologies at the expense of reality. I’ve known Lind since my own days as a city-hall reporter in Honolulu, in the early 2000s, and I wanted to get his thoughts on how the sovereignty conversation had changed in the intervening years. He told me that, in his view, an “incredibly robust environment for charlatans and con artists” has metastasized within Hawaiian-sovereignty circles. There are those who invent royal lineage or government titles for themselves, as well as ordinary scammers.

Even those who are merely trying to understand—or in some cases teach—the history have become too willing to gloss over some subtleties, Lind told me. It’s not so simple to say that Hawaiians were dispossessed at the time of the overthrow, that they suddenly lost everything, he said. Many people gave up farmlands that had been allotted to them after the Great Māhele land distribution in 1848. “They were a burden, not an asset,” Lind said. “People thought, *I could just go get a job downtown and get away from this.*”

But people bristle at the introduction of nuance in the telling of this history, partly because they remain understandably focused on the immensity of what Hawaiians have lost. “There’s a faction of Hawaiians who say that absolutely nothing short of restoring a kingdom like we had before, encompassing all of Hawai‘i, is going to suffice,” Lind said. “It’s like an impasse that no one wants to talk about.”

The whole thing reminds Lind of a fringe militia or a group of secessionists you’d find elsewhere. “It’s so much like watching the Confederacy,” he said. “You’re watching something, a historical fact, you didn’t like. It wasn’t your side that won. But governments changed. And when our government

changed here, it was recognized by all the countries in the world very quickly. So whatever you want to think about 130 years ago, how you feel about that change, I just think there are so many more things to deal with that could be dealt with now realistically that people aren't doing, because they're hung up waving the Confederate flag or having a new, reinstated Hawaiian Kingdom."

When you talk with people in Hawai'i about the question of sovereignty, skeptics will say shocking things behind closed doors, or off the record, that they'd never say in public—I've encountered eye-rolling, a general sentiment of *get over it*, even disparaging Queen Lili'uokalani as an "opium dealer"—but invoking the Lost Cause this way was a new one for me. I asked Lind if his opinions have been well received by his fellow Hawaiians. "No," he said with a chuckle. "I'm totally out of step."

Brian Schatz, a Democrat, grew up on O'ahu before making a rapid ascent in local, then national, politics. I first met him more than 15 years ago, when he was coming off a stint as a state representative. In 2021, he became the chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, meaning he thinks about matters related to Indigenous self-determination a lot. He's also on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, which makes sense for a person representing a region of profound strategic importance to the United States.

Because Schatz is extremely online—he is a bit of a puppy dog on X, not exactly restrained—I wanted to know his views on an observation I've had in recent years. As young activists in Hawai'i have focused their passion on justice for Hawaiians, I've sometimes wondered if they are simply shouting into the pixelated abyss. On the one hand, more awareness of historical wrongs is objectively necessary and good. On the other, as Schatz put it to me, "the internet is not a particularly constructive place to figure out how to redress historical wrongs."

Two recent moments in Hawaiian activism sparked international attention, but haven't necessarily advanced the cause of self-determination. In 2014, [opposition to the construction](#) of the Thirty Meter Telescope on the Big Island [led to huge protests](#), and energized the sovereignty movement. The [catastrophic fires on Maui in 2023](#) prompted a similar burst of attention to Hawai'i and the degree to which [Hawaiians have been alienated from their](#)

[own land](#). But many activists complained to me that in both cases, sustained momentum has been spotty. Instagrammed expressions of solidarity may feel righteous when you’re scrolling, but they accomplish little (if anything) offline, even when more people than ever before seem to be paying attention to ideas that animate those fighting for Hawaiian independence.

[Adrienne LaFrance: Hawaii is a warning](#)

“There’s a newly energized cohort of leftists on the continent who are waking up to this injustice,” Schatz said. “But, I mean, the truth is that there’s not a place on the continental United States where that story wasn’t also told.” The story he’s talking about is the separation of people from their language, their land, their culture, and their water sources, in order to steal that land and to make money. Yet “nobody’s talking about giving Los Angeles back,” he said.



Hawaiian activism has sparked international attention in recent years, but hasn't necessarily advanced the cause of self-determination. (Brendan George Ko)

One of the challenges in contemplating Hawaiian independence is the question of historical precedent. Clearly there are blueprints for decolonization—India’s independence following British rule may be the most famous—but few involve places like Hawai‘i. The world does not have many examples of what “successful” secession or decolonization from the United States looks like in practice. There is one example from elsewhere in the Pacific: In 1898, fresh off its annexation of Hawai‘i, the United States moved to annex the Philippines, too. People there fought back, in a war that led to the deaths of an estimated 775,000 people, most of them civilians. The United States promised in 1916 that it would grant the Philippines independence, but that didn’t happen until 1946.

Hawai‘i is particularly complex, too, because of its diverse population. Roughly a [quarter of Hawai‘i residents are multiracial](#), and there is no single racial majority. So while some activists are eager to apply a settler-colonialism frame to what happened in Hawai‘i, huge populations of people here do not slot neatly into the categories of “settler” or “native.” How, for example, do you deal with the non-Hawaiian descendants of laborers on plantations, who immigrated to the Islands from China, Japan, Portugal, the Philippines? Or the Pacific Islanders who came to Hawai‘i more recently, [as part of U.S. compensation to three tiny island nations](#) affected by nuclear-weapons testing? Or the people who count both overthrowers and Hawaiians among their ancestors? Schatz said that when it comes to visions of Hawaiian self-determination, “I completely defer to the community.”

But he cautioned that without consensus about what this should look like, “the danger is that we spend all of our time counting the number of angels on the head of a pin, and ignore the fact that the injustice imposed by the United States government on Native Hawaiians is manifesting itself on a daily basis with bad economic outcomes, not enough housing, not enough health care.” He went on, “So while Native Hawaiian leaders and scholars sort out what comes next as it relates to Native Hawaiians and their relationship to the state and federal government, my job is to—bit by bit, program by program, day by day—try to reverse that injustice with, frankly, money.

“Because you can’t live in an apology,” he added. “You have to live in a home.”

The question of how the ancient Hawaiians survived—how they managed to feed a complex civilization that bloomed on the most isolated archipelago on the planet—has long been a source of fascination and historic inquiry. They fished; they hunted; they grew taro in irrigated wetlands.

Hawai‘i is now [terrifyingly dependent on the global supply chain](#) for its residents’ survival. By the 1960s, it was importing roughly half of its food supply. Today, that figure is closer to 90 percent. It can be easy to forget how remote Hawai‘i truly is. But all it takes is one hurricane, war, or pandemic to upset this fragile balance.

From the October 1938 issue: Hawaii’s economy

To understand what Hawai‘i would need in order to become self-reliant again, I went to see Walter Ritte, one of the godfathers of modern Hawaiian activism, and someone most people know simply as “Uncle Walter.” Ritte made a name for himself in the 1970s, when he and others occupied the uninhabited island of Kaho‘olawe, protesting the U.S. military’s use of the land for bombing practice. Ian Lind was part of this protest too; the group came to be [known as the Kaho‘olawe Nine](#).

Ritte lives on Moloka‘i, among the least populated of the Hawaiian Islands. Major airlines don’t fly to Moloka‘i, and people there like it that way. I arrived on a turboprop Cessna 208, a snug little nine-seater, alongside a few guys from O‘ahu heading there to do construction work for a day or two.

Moloka‘i has no stoplights and spotty cell service. Its population hovers around 7,000 people. Many of its roads are still unpaved and require an off-road vehicle—long orange-red ribbons of dirt crisscross the island. On one particularly rough road, I felt my rented Jeep keel so far to one side that I was certain it would tip over. I considered turning back but eventually arrived at the Mo‘omomi Preserve, in the northwestern corner of Moloka‘i, where you can stand on a bluff of black lava rock and look out at the Pacific.

All over Moloka‘i, the knowledge that you are standing somewhere that long predates you and will long outlast you is inescapable. If you drive all the way east, to Hālawa Valley, you find the overgrown ruins of sacred places—an abandoned 19th-century church, plus remnants of *heiau*, or places of

worship, dating back to the 600s. The desire to protect the island's way of life is fierce. Nobody wants it to turn into O'ahu or Maui—commodified and overrun by tourists, caricatured by outsiders who know nothing of this place. For locals across Hawai'i, especially the large number who work in the hospitality industry, this reality is an ongoing source of fury. As the historian Daniel Immerwahr put it to me: "It is psychologically hard to have your livelihood be a performance of your own subordination."

The directions Ritte had given me were, in essence: Fly to Moloka'i, drive east for 12 miles, and look for my fishpond. So I did. Eventually, I stopped at a place that I thought could be his, a sprawling, grassy property with some kukui-nut trees, a couple of sheds, and a freshwater spring. No sign of Ritte. But I met a man who introduced himself as Ua and said he could take me to him. I asked Ua how long he'd been working with Uncle Walter, and he grinned. "My whole life," he said. Walter is his father.

Ua drove us east in his four-wheeler through a misty rain. This particular vehicle had a windshield but no wipers, so I assumed the role of leaning all the way out of the passenger side to squeegee water off the glass.

We found Ritte standing in a field wearing dirty jeans and a black T-shirt that said Kill Em' With Aloha. Ritte is lean and muscular—at almost 80 years old, he has the look of someone who has worked outside his whole life, which he has. We decided to head *makai*, back toward the ocean, so Ritte could show me his obsession.

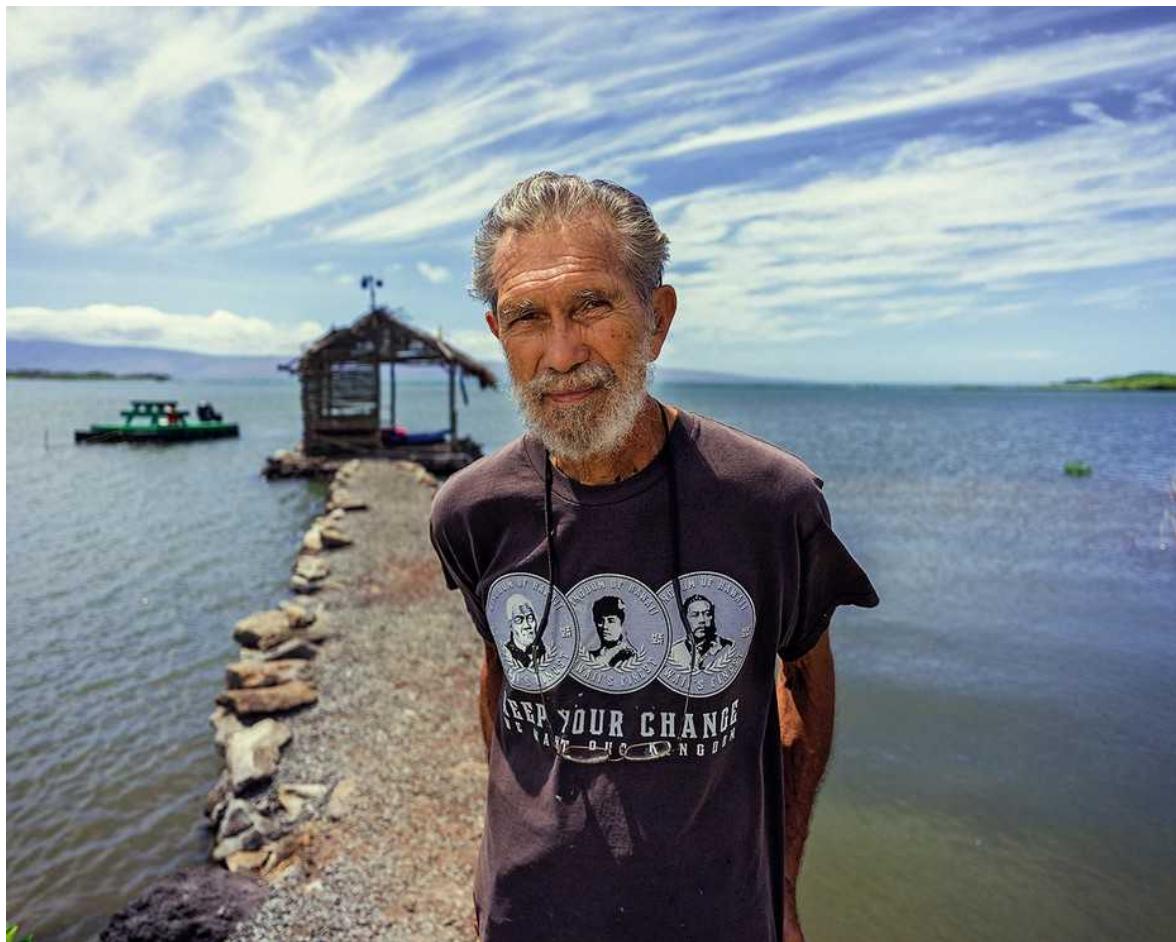
When we got there, he led me down a short, rocky pier to a thatched-roof hut and pointed out toward the water. What we were looking at was the rebuilt structure of a massive fishpond, first constructed by ancient Hawaiians some 700 years ago. Ritte has been working on it forever, [attempting to prove that the people of Hawai'i can again feed themselves.](#)

"I am not an American. I want my family to survive. And we're not going to survive with continental values."

The mechanics of the pond are evidence of Native Hawaiian genius. A stone wall serves as an enclosure for the *muliwai*, or brackish, area where fresh and salt water meet. A gate in the wall, when opened, allows small fish to

swim into the *muliwai* but blocks big fish from getting out. And when seawater starts to pour into the pond, fish already in the pond swim over to it, making it easy to scoop them out. “Those gates are the magic,” Ritte tells me.

Back when Hawai‘i was totally self-sustaining, feeding the population required several fishponds across the Islands. Ritte’s fishpond couldn’t provide for all of Moloka‘i, let alone all of Hawai‘i, but he does feed his family with the fish he farms. And when something goes wrong—a recent mudslide resulted in a baby-fish apocalypse—it teaches Ritte what his ancestors would have known but he has had to learn.



Walter Ritte has restored an ancient Hawaiian fishpond on the island of Moloka‘i. (Brendan George Ko for *The Atlantic*)

That's how his vision went from restoring the fishpond to restoring the *ahupua'a*, which in ancient Hawai'i referred to a slice of land extending from the mountains down to the ocean. If the land above the pond had been properly irrigated, it could have prevented the mudslide that killed all those fish. And if everyone on Moloka'i tended to their *ahupua'a* the way their ancestors did, the island might in fact be able to dramatically reduce its reliance on imported food.

But over the years, Ritte said, the people of Hawai'i got complacent. Too many forgot how to work hard, how to sweat and get dirty. Too few questioned what their changing way of life was doing to them. This is how they became "sitting ducks," he told me, too willing to acclimate to a country that is not truly their own. "I am not an American. I want my family to survive. And we're not going to survive with continental values," he said. "Look at the government. Look at the guy who was president. And he's going to be president again. He's an asshole. So America has nothing that impresses me. I mean, why would I want to be an American?"

Ritte said he may not live to see it, but he believes Hawai'i will one day become an independent nation again. "There's a whole bunch of people who are not happy," he said. "There's going to be some violence. You got guys who are really pissed. But that's not going to make the changes that we need."

Still, change does not always come the way you expect. Ritte believes that part of what he's doing on Moloka'i is preparing Hawai'i for a period of tremendous unrest that may come sooner rather than later, as stability in the world falters and as Hawaiians are roused to the cause of independence. "All the years people said, 'You can control the Hawaiians, don't worry; you can control them.' But now they're nervous you cannot control them."

During my visit to Pu'uhonua O Waimānalo, the compound that Dennis Kanahele and Brandon Maka'awa'awa have designated as the headquarters for the Nation of Hawai'i, Maka'awa'awa invited me to the main office, a house that they use as a government building to hatch plans and discuss foreign relations. Recently, Kanahele and their foreign minister traveled to China on a diplomatic visit. And they've established peace treaties with Native American tribes in the contiguous United States—the same kind of

treaty that the United States initially forged with the Kingdom of Hawai‘i, they pointed out to me.

These days, they are not interested in American affairs. They see anyone who works with the Americans, including Kūhiō Lewis and Brian Schatz, as sellouts or worse. To them, the best president the United States ever had was Clinton, because he was the one who signed the apology bill. Barack Obama may get points for being local—he was born and raised on O‘ahu—but they’re still waiting for him to do something, *anything*, for the Hawaiian people. As it happens, [Obama has a house](#) about five miles down the road. “I still believe that he’s here for a reason in Waimānalo,” Kanahele said, referring to this area of the island. “I believe the reason is what we’re doing.”

Outside, light rains occasionally swept over the house, and chickens and cats wandered freely. Inside was cozy, more bunker than Oval Office, with a rusted door swung open and walls covered in papers and plans. At one end of the room was a fireplace, and over the mantel was a large map of the world with Hawai‘i at the center, alongside portraits of Queen Lili‘uokalani and her brother King Kalākaua. Below that was a large humpback whale carved from wood, and wooden blocks bearing the names and titles of members of the executive branch. Another wall [displayed a copy of the Kū‘ē Petitions](#), documents that members of the Hawaiian Patriotic League hand-carried to Washington, D.C., in 1897 to oppose annexation.

Kanahele is tall, with broad shoulders and a splatter of freckles on one cheek. He is thoughtful and serious, the kind of person who quiets a room the instant he speaks. But he’s also funny and warm. I’ve heard people describe Kanahele as Kamehameha-like in his looks, and I can see why. Kanahele told me that he is in fact descended from a relative of Kamehameha’s, “like, nine generations back.” Today, most people know him by his nickname, Bumpy.

Kanahele’s vision for the future entails reclaiming all of Hawai‘i from the United States and reducing its economic dependence on tourism and defense.

The most animated I saw him was when I asked if he'd ever sat down with a descendant of the overthrows. After all, it often feels like everyone knows everyone here, and in many cases they do, and have for generations.

Kanahele told me the story of how, years ago, he'd had a conversation with Thurston Twigg-Smith, a grandson of Lorrin A. Thurston, who was an architect of the overthrow. Twigg-Smith was the publisher of the daily newspaper the *Honolulu Advertiser*, and Kanahele still remembers the room they sat in—fancy, filled with books. “I was excited because it was this guy, right? He was involved,” Kanahele said.

The experience left him with “ugly feelings,” he told me. “He called us cavemen.” And Twigg-Smith defended the overthrows. I mentioned to Kanahele that I’d read Twigg-Smith’s account of the coup, in which he refers to it admiringly as “the Hawaiian Revolution.”

Twigg-Smith told Kanahele that his grandfather “did the best thing he thought was right at the time,” Kanahele said. When Kanahele asked, “Do you think that was right?,” Twigg-Smith didn’t hesitate. Yes, the overthrow was right, he said. Kanahele’s eyes widened as he recounted the exchange. “He thinks his grandfather did the right thing.” (Twigg-Smith died in 2016.)

Kanahele and Maka‘awa‘awa aren’t trying to bring back the monarchy. They aren’t even trying to build a democracy. Their way of government, [outlined in a constitution that Kanahele drafted](#) in 1994, is based on a family structure, including a council of Hawaiian elders and *kānaka* (Hawaiian) and non-*kānaka* (non-Hawaiian) legislative branches. “It’s a Hawaiian way of thinking of government,” Maka‘awa‘awa said. “It’s not democracy or communism or socialism or any of that. It’s our own form of government.”

Kanahele’s vision for the future entails reclaiming all of Hawai‘i from the United States and reducing its economic dependence on tourism and defense. He and Maka‘awa‘awa are unpaid volunteers, Maka‘awa‘awa told me. “Luckily for me and Uncle, we have very supportive wives who have helped support us for years.” Maka‘awa‘awa said that they used to pay a “ridiculous amount” in property taxes, but thought better of it when [contemplating the 65-year lease awarded in 1964 to the U.S. military for \\$1](#) at Pōhakuloa, a military training area covering thousands of acres on the Big

Island. So about eight years ago, they decided to pay \$1 a year. The state is “pissed,” he told me, but he doesn’t care. “Plus,” he added, “it’s our land.”

I had to ask: Doesn’t an independent nation need its own military? Other than the one that was already all around them, that is. Some 50,000 active-duty U.S. service members are stationed throughout the Islands. Many of the military’s 65-year leases in Hawai‘i are up for renewal within the next five years, and debate over what to do with them has already begun. I thought about our proximity to Bellows Air Force Station, just a mile or two down the hill from where we were sitting. Yes, Kanahele told me. “You need one standing army,” he said. “You got to protect your natural resources—your lands and your natural resources.” Otherwise, he warned, people are “going to be taking them away.”

I asked them how they think about the Hawai‘i residents—some of whom have been here for generations, descendants of plantation laborers or missionaries—who are not Hawaiian. There are plenty of non-*kānaka* people who say they are pro-Hawaiian rights, until the conversation turns to whether all the non-*kānaka* should leave. “We think about that,” Kanahele said, because of the “innocents involved. The damage goes back to America and the state of Hawai‘i. That’s who everybody should be pointing the finger at.”

And it’s not like they want to take back all 4 million acres of Hawai‘i’s land, Maka‘awa‘awa said. “Really, right now, when we talk about the 1.8 million acres of ceded lands”—that is, the crown and government lands that were seized in the overthrow and subsequently turned over to the United States in exchange for annexation—“we’re not talking about private lands here. We’re talking strictly state lands.”

Kanahele calmly corrected him: “And then we will claim all 4 million acres. We claim everything.”

As I was reporting this story, I kept asking people: What does America owe Hawai‘i, and the Hawaiian people? A better question might be: When does a nation cease to exist? When its leader is deposed? When the last of its currency is melted down? When the only remaining person who can speak its language dies? For years I thought of the annexation-day ceremony in

1898 as the moment when the nation of Hawai‘i ceased to be. One account [describes the final playing of Hawai‘i’s national anthem](#), by the Royal Hawaiian Band, whose leader began to weep as they played. After that came a 21-gun salute, the final national salute to the Hawaiian flag. Then the band played taps. Eventually all kingdoms die. Empires, too.

The overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom set in motion a series of events that disenfranchised Hawaiians, separated them from their land and their culture, and forever altered the course of history in Hawai‘i. It was also a moment of enormous and lasting consequence for the United States. It solidified a worldview, famously put forth [in the pages of this magazine by the retired naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1890](#), that America must turn its eyes and its borders ever outward, in defense of the American idea.

[From the December 1890 issue: The United States looking outward](#)

But there were others who fought against the expansionists’ notion of America, arguing that the true American system of government depended on the consent of the governed. Many of the people arguing this were the abolitionists who led and wrote for this magazine, including Mark Twain and *The Atlantic*’s former editor in chief William Dean Howells, both members of the Anti-Imperialist League. (Other anti-imperialists argued against expansion on racist grounds—that is, that the U.S. should not invite into the country more nonwhite or non-Christian people, of which there were many in Hawai‘i.)

This was the debate Americans were having about their country’s role in the world when, in March 1893, Grover Cleveland was inaugurated as president for the second time. Cleveland, the 24th president of the United States, had also been the 22nd; Benjamin Harrison’s single term had been sandwiched in between. Once he was back in the White House, Cleveland immediately set to work undoing the things that, in his view, Harrison had made a mess of. Primary among those messes was what people had begun to refer to as “the question of Hawaii.”

After writing to Harrison in January 1893, Queen Lili‘uokalani had [sent a letter to her “great and good friend” Cleveland](#) in his capacity as the president-elect. “I beg that you will consider this matter, in which there is so

much involved for my people," she wrote, "and that you will give us your friendly assistance in granting redress for a wrong which we claim has been done to us, under color of the assistance of the naval forces of the United States in a friendly port."





Queen Lili‘uokalani (*top*) was deposed in the January 1893 coup; the insurrectionists had support from the highest levels of the U.S. government, and help from U.S. troops (*bottom*). (Photo12 / Getty; U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

Whereas Harrison, in the twilight of his presidency, had sent a treaty to the Senate to advance the annexation of Hawai‘i, Cleveland’s first act as president was to withdraw that treaty and order an investigation of the overthrow. Members of the Committee of Safety and their supporters, Cleveland learned, had seized ‘Iolani Palace as their new headquarters—they would later imprison Queen Lili‘uokalani there, in one of the bedrooms upstairs, for nearly eight months—and raised the American flag over the main government building in the palace square. Cleveland now mandated that the American flag be pulled down and replaced with the Hawaiian flag.

This set off a firestorm in Congress, where Cleveland’s critics [eventually compared him to a Civil War secessionist](#). One senator [accused him](#) of

choosing “ignorant, savage, alien royalty, over American people.”

America answered the “question of Hawaii” by deciding that its sphere of influence would not end at California, but would expand ever outward.

By then, the inquiry that Cleveland ordered had come back. As he explained when he sent the report on to Congress, the investigation had found that the overthrow had been an “act of war,” and that the queen had surrendered “not absolutely and permanently, but temporarily and conditionally.”

Cleveland had dispatched his foreign minister to Hawai‘i, former Representative Albert S. Willis of Kentucky, to restore the queen to power. Willis’s mission in Honolulu was to issue an ultimatum to the insurrectionists to dissolve their fledgling government, and secure a promise from Queen Lili‘uokalani that she would pardon the usurpers. But the Provisional Government argued that the United States had no right to tell it what to do.

“We do not recognize the right of the President of the United States to interfere in our domestic affairs,” wrote Sanford Dole, the self-appointed president of Hawai‘i’s new executive branch. “The Provisional Government of the Hawaiian Islands respectfully and unhesitatingly declines to entertain the proposition of the President of the United States that it should surrender its authority to the ex-Queen.”

This was, quite obviously, outrageous. Here Dole and his co-conspirators were claiming to be a sovereign nation—and using this claim to rebuff Cleveland’s attempts to return power to the sovereign nation they’d just overthrown—all while having pulled off their coup with the backing of American military forces and having flown an American flag atop the government building they now occupied.

In January 1894, the American sugar baron and longtime Hawai‘i resident Zephaniah Spalding testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations about the situation in Honolulu. “We have now as near an approach to autocratic government as anywhere,” Spalding said. “We have a council of 15, perhaps, composed of the businessmen of Honolulu” who

“examine into the business of the country, just the same as is done in a large factory or on a farm.”

The insurrectionists had, with support from the highest levels of the U.S. government, successfully overthrown a nation. They’d installed an autocracy in its place, with Dole as president.

Americans argued about Hawai‘i for five long years after the overthrow. And once the United States officially annexed Hawai‘i in 1898 under President William McKinley, Dole became the first governor of the United States territory. Most Americans today know his name only because of the pineapple empire one of his cousins started.

All along, the debate over Hawai‘i was not merely about the fate of an archipelago some 5,000 miles away from Washington. Nor is the debate over Hawai‘i’s independence today some fringe argument about long-ago history. America answered the “question of Hawaii” by deciding that its sphere of influence would not end at California, but would expand ever outward. Harrison took the aggressive, expansionist view. Cleveland took the anti-imperialist, isolationist one. This ideological battle, which Harrison ultimately won (and later regretted, after he joined the Anti-Imperialist League himself), is perhaps the most consequential chapter in all of U.S. foreign relations. You can draw a clear, straight line from the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom to the attack on Pearl Harbor to America’s foreign policy today, including the idea that liberal democracy is worth protecting, at home and abroad.

It’s easy to feel grateful for this ethos when contemplating the alternative. In the past century, America’s global dominance has, despite episodes of galling overreach, been an extraordinary force for good around the world. The country’s strategic position in the Pacific allowed the United States to win World War II (and was a big reason the U.S. entered the war in the first place). The U.S. has continued to serve as a force for stability and security in the Pacific in a perilous new chapter. How might the world change without the United States to stand up to Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin?



Some people in Hawai‘i now want to plan for how to regain—and sustain—
independence if the United States loses power. (Brendan George Ko)

But to treat the U.S. presence in Hawai‘i as inevitable, or even as a shameful but justified means to an end, is to disregard the values for which Americans have fought since the country’s founding. It was the United States’ expansion into the Pacific that established America as a world superpower. And it all began with the coup in Honolulu, an autocratic uprising of the sort that the United States fights against today.

Perhaps the true lesson of history is that what seems destined in retrospect—whether the election of a president or the overthrow of a kingdom—is often much messier and more uncertain as it unfolds. John Waihe‘e, the former governor, told me that he no longer thinks about how to gain sovereignty, but rather how Hawai‘i should begin planning for a different future—one that may arrive unexpectedly, and on terms we may not now be considering.

Waihe‘e is part of a group of local leaders that has been [working to map out various possible futures for Hawai‘i](#). The idea is to take into account the most pronounced challenges Hawai‘i faces: the outside wealth reshaping the Islands, the economic overreliance on tourism, the likelihood of more frequent climate disasters, the potential dissolution of democracy in the United States. One of the options is to do nothing at all, to accept the status quo, which Waihe‘e feels certain would be disastrous.

Jon Kamakawiwo‘ole Osorio, another member of the group, agrees. Osorio is the dean of the Hawai‘inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Undoing a historic wrong may be impossible, he told me, but you have a moral obligation to try. “If things don’t change, things are going to be really fucked up here,” Osorio said. “They will continue to deteriorate.” (As for how things are going in the United States generally, he put it this way: “I wouldn’t wish Trump on anyone, not even the Americans.”)

Osorio’s view is that Hawaiians should take more of a Trojan-horse approach—“a state government that essentially gets taken over by successive cadres of people who want to see an end to military occupation, who want to see an end to complete reliance on tourism, who see other kinds of possibilities in terms of year-round agriculture,” he told me. “Basically, being culturally and socially more and more distinct from the United States.” That doesn’t mean giving up on independence; it just means taking action now, thinking less about history and more about the future.

But history is still everywhere in Hawai‘i. On the east side of Moloka‘i, I drove by a house that had a sign out front that just said 1893 with a splotch of red, like blood. If you head southwest on Kaua‘i past Hanapēpē, and then on to Waimea, you can walk out onto the old whaling pier and see the exact spot where Captain James Cook first landed, in 1778. Not far from there is the old smokestack from a rusted-out sugar plantation. All around, you can see the remnants of more than two centuries of comings and goings. A place that was once completely apart from the world is now forever altered by outsiders. And yet the trees still spill mangoes onto the ground, and the moon still rises over the Pacific. Hawaiians are still here. As long as they are, Hawai‘i belongs to them.

Read: How to save a dying language

Over the course of my reporting, several Hawaiians speculated that Hawai‘i’s independence may ultimately come not because it is granted by the United States, but because the United States collapses under the second Trump presidency, or some other world-altering course of events. People often dismiss questions of Hawaiian independence by arguing, fairly, that if the United States hadn’t seized the kingdom, Britain, Japan, or Russia almost certainly would have. Now people in Hawai‘i want to plan for how to regain—and sustain—independence if the United States loses power.

Things change; Hawai‘i certainly has. All these years, I’ve been trying to understand what Hawai‘i lost, what was stolen, and how to get it back. What I failed to realize, until now, is that the story of the overthrow is not really the story of Hawai‘i. It is the story of America. It is the story of how dangerous it is to assume that anything is permanent. History teaches us that nothing lasts forever. Hawaiians have learned that lesson. Americans would do well to remember it.

This article appears in the [January 2025](#) print edition with the headline “What Happens When You Lose Your Country?”

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Fiction

- [**Zamboni**](#)

Zamboni

A short story

by Honor Jones



The children don't look real. It's because of what they're wearing—it's the color of their clothes. None of the T-shirts has any language or images—no slogans or athletes' names, no animals or action figures. Color conveying only the idea of color. Later, she can't remember what she noticed except

that the colors were very bright. That and the fact that she didn't recognize any of the children's faces, though this is the playground of her own child's school.

The children seem to be arranged in groups of three or four. They aren't moving. Well, they move—some have rubber balls that they hold out to other nearby children and then retract. But they stay in position, as if stuck to a mark on the blacktop. They make no sound. They're waiting.

Today is the beginning of her child's spring break. Otherwise he'd be here now, playing on the blacktop himself, in the jersey that he insists on wearing whenever it's not in the wash. It was white once, but now it's a pale gray-brown, a sort of kneecap color. He's wearing the shirt at the gym where she booked him for a day of ninja/parkour camp so she could go to work. She and her husband had thought about taking a vacation somewhere, but it's not convenient for him to do that right now, and they can't afford a trip anyway. She doesn't mind; she likes being home in the neighborhood, where everything is familiar.

When she picks up her son that afternoon, she tells him that they should go by the school, there's something happening, but she won't say what; it's a surprise.

Hurrying down the block, she starts to forget about the unreal children. The colors were probably only ordinary pinks and yellows, the children, after all, only ordinary children, the kind who pass from the mind as soon as they pass out of sight. But then she notices the Zamboni. It's the size of a small dump truck, and the word ZAMBONI is written on the front. She can think of no possible explanation for what it's doing here. Then she sees a tent with water bottles and snacks. Oh cool, she thinks, a movie.

When she picks up her son that afternoon, she tells him that they should go by the school, there's something happening, but she won't say what; it's a surprise. The children have disappeared, but the street is packed with trailers. Young people are everywhere, carrying lengths of metal, black boxes with knobs on them, clipboards, garment bags. They must have just finished shooting. The Zamboni has moved to the other end of the block. It has done what it came to do: It has driven through a dining shed.

All along one side of the street are splintered pieces of wood. Chairs have been crushed, tables knocked sideways. White plates have frisbeed and shattered into white pieces. There was no dining shed here that morning; the crew must have constructed and then demolished it in a matter of hours. One corner of the structure still stands, just solid enough to signify what it is meant to be.

Does this mean we won't have to go back to school? her child asks.

I'm sure they'll be done by the time spring break is over.

Can I be in the movie?

Maybe, she says, which is what she tells him when she knows something is impossible but it's not her fault.

She tries to get him to stand in the middle of the shed and pretend that he's the one who knocked it down so she can take a picture. Look like the Hulk, she tells him, and flexes her arms. He won't do it. He won't even step off the sidewalk. Come on, she says, we'll send it to Daddy. She mimes a ninja kick in the direction of a table. But he backs away from her. He's worried they'll get in trouble. She wants to say that this is their school, their street, that the movie people are only borrowing it. She thinks how much better most things would be if he would just do what she says.

Now one of the movie men approaches, fat extension cords coiled around both arms. He's going to ask them to keep moving, please. She pretends not to see him. Okay, she says to the child, let's go.

That was a Zamboni, she says. It smooths the ice at a skating rink.

How?

It melts it.

It melts the ice?

Just the top layer. The ice gets scratched by all the skates. You have to melt it to make the ice smooth again. She skated often as a child but can barely

remember what it felt like anymore. She's never taken her son skating. It seems like too much effort. But he's her child. How could anything be too much effort?

There's a restaurant on the corner, and it's funny to notice that just past the last bit of rubble from the movie dining shed is an actual dining shed. Her child stops. The movie chairs are pale wood. The restaurant chairs are white metal. But right between them is one table, set for dinner with plates and silverware and two clear glasses, with two chairs painted blue. Is this one real? her child asks. I think so, she says. Or no. She can't tell.

The restaurant doesn't open for another 10 minutes. She can see the waiters at the bar. They're finishing their own meal in what looks like silence; each one has a white apron folded over the back of his chair. She and the child could stay and watch—see if anyone comes to the door, asks to sit outside, is guided to the blue chairs. But even then, how would they know for sure if the people were ordinary diners? They could be movie people testing out the props. They could be rehearsing.

Even better, she and her son could have dinner here and request the table themselves. If they were given the blue chairs, they would know that the table was real, because they themselves were certainly real. But her husband won't like that. He's planning to cook tonight; he's going to be home early. She says they should come back tomorrow—tomorrow they can see if it's still there.

In the morning, one of the moms at school has posted an article about the movie on Instagram. A famous actor is starring in it, and it's not a children's movie, as she'd assumed—because of the Zamboni and the color of the children's clothes, or because of the children themselves. The article names the director, who is known for black comedies and the discomfiting avant-garde, and it includes photos of the famous actor in his previous roles. But no other details have been released; the article says nothing of plot. She taps to the woman's next post, which is about the new war: a cute photo of her daughter eating a doughnut and the words *Another thousand murdered children. Imagine if yours was one of them.*

Spring break seems to go on and on; she can't wait for it to be over. The school gives a shape to her days. She sees the same people at the same time. The supers sorting the trash. The man carrying boxes of pastries into the coffee shop—there goes the baker with his tray like always. The dog people exchanging their phone numbers. The joggers passing the speed-walking Orthodox. The families like hers, iteration after iteration. When this routine and all its regulars are gone, she feels vaguely afraid, as if her child has only her and his father to depend on.

When she sees other parents in the neighborhood now, all they talk about is the movie. I saw the branches first, one of her friends says.

What does she mean, the branches?

Didn't you see? Fake budding branches clamped in the trees, like garlands, filling out the gaps. They must have needed it to be later in the spring.

Another friend has noticed the sod. The scuffed-up stretch behind the blacktop is lush with new grass. Someone asked the crew if they would leave the grass when they were done, but they said no—they had to roll it back up again. The fake branches, of course, will come down. Perhaps they're already gone, she's not sure. Each time she walks by, she forgets to look closely at the trees. Each time she forgets to look for the blue chairs.

Today her child is on a playdate. Her husband thinks she overschedules him. Why can't she just let him play at home? But she likes to see other parents, she likes to see where they live. It makes her feel part of things, as if life is holding on to her with many small buckles and clasps. Besides, it's impossible to get enough work done when her child is home; he has so many things he wants to say to her—mostly, that he's bored.

Her husband has agreed to get their son in a few hours, so she's free to go into the office; she can catch up on everything she's been putting off. But she can't seem to move toward the train. She always goes straight from the school to the station, always at the same time. This late in the morning, without the steady flow of people bearing her along, she finds that she just can't do it. She decides to take her laptop to a coffee shop instead.

On the way, she walks by the school. She's so used to the film crew now that she almost misses him—the star of the movie himself—sitting on the front steps.

The actor doesn't look anything like an ordinary person; immediately he looks like a celebrity. He is obviously more beautiful than a normal person. But looking at him, she sees many images of him at once, all the movies and gossip stories and fragrance campaigns. She knows, vaguely, that he played heartthrobs, then bad boys, and has aged lately into serious art. He might be 50, but it's hard to tell; the record of all his faces works on his face, on what she can see of it now. It's a bit like looking at her husband and son—otherwise ordinary people she can see only through a sheaf of her own precious impressions.

Then she sees that the actor is wearing an orthopedic boot on his right foot. The boot brings her back to reality. Probably it would be rude to mention it.

Hi! she says. My kid goes here. I just wanted to say we're all so excited about the movie.

Thank you so much, the actor says.

You must be almost done, right?

No, no, far from.

I just mean because spring break is ending.

Oh right. Done *at the school*. Yes, don't worry, we'll be out of your hair soon.



Illustration by Katherine Lam

Not at all, we've loved having you. Why is she speaking like some kind of representative for the community? She's not even on the PTA.

Walking away, she notices that she's not embarrassed by how awkward the interaction was. She understands that the actor is a real person, but—barely. She could have said anything and it wouldn't have mattered.

A few hours later, she's deep in a document when her husband calls. Is she still in the neighborhood? Would it be terrible to ask if she could? A client, a meeting, he owes her. She'll have to pick up her son after all.

How was the playdate? she asks him.

Fun.

What did you do?

We played.

What did you play?

World Cup.

What's that?

She's boring her child, but she persists. It's her job to teach him manners. I ask this, and you say that, and here you go, thank you very much—like something passed back and forth, the point being less the thing itself than the transaction of attention, the agreement that you both exist, saying *I* and *you* and placing the right amount but not too much into the other person's hands.

It's soccer but inside, and each time someone misses a goal you have to—

Unfortunately, as soon as he's talking, she realizes she's forgotten to listen. Sounds super fun, she says.

She wants to pay attention, but it's hard. Sometimes she has to force her son to talk, but other times he talks just to make her listen. Can I tell you something? he'll ask. And after she says yes, she realizes there was nothing he had to tell her. He just wanted her to turn her face to him. She can see him working to come up with something to say. All children do this, of course; sometimes her husband does it too. Can I tell you something? She waits. Did you know volcanoes still exist?

People say he looks like his father, and that makes her jealous. It's not that she wishes he had a small version of her face; she just wants it to be obvious that they belong together. She doesn't think he looks like anyone, really; not his father, not even himself. His face is always changing, always disorienting her. She recognizes most of all his knees, his shoulders, the circle of his belly.

The actor is right where she left him. He's leaning back on the steps, one leg bent and the other stretched flat. That's him, she tells her son from a discreet distance. He's the star.

When they reach him, her son immediately asks: What's on your foot?

A boot.

It looks like a spaceman's boot.

Thank you, that makes it sound cooler than it is. The actor squints in the sunlight; you wouldn't think he could make that face. I hear you go to school here.

How do you know?

I know your mom.

I'm in first grade.

Super. The actor looks like he's been polite twice to this local fan and now he wants the conversation to be over.

All of us have been wondering what the movie is about, she says.

We're not supposed to say.

Just the briefest summary.

There's an NDA.

What if I promise not to tell anyone else?

It's not really appropriate for kids, he says.

She tells him not to worry, it'll go over her son's head.

My character is a teacher at the school who's lost his wife. When I come back to work, everyone is really nice to me. My colleagues give me long hugs in the lounge. But almost right away, everyone moves on. The bell

rings every 45 minutes. First period, second period, like a ladder through the day. But this can't be real, I keep thinking. I would do anything to bring her back.

Then one day the children in my class begin to change. At first you think I'm imagining it, that they're little flashbacks maybe. But I'm not imagining it. My wife used to sing this old song when she thought I wasn't listening. She'll be coming 'round the mountain when she comes. She'll be driving six white horses when she comes. I thought it was something she'd sing to our own children, when we finally chose to have them. I had this image of her holding and rocking and singing some child that song. One day I'm walking down the hallway behind a girl and I hear her. She's humming. Then she sings: Oh we'll all go out to meet her when she comes. Oh we'll all go out to meet her when she comes. Oh we'll all go out to meet her, we'll all go out to meet her, we'll all go out to meet her when she comes. Close-up. Tears in my eyes.

In class, I notice a boy is sitting just like my wife did. She had this way of perching on a chair, her knees pulled up against her chest. It looked like something you'd do by a fire, in the grasslands, not at the kitchen table—like how prehistoric people would have sat in case a predator came. It bugged me. Couldn't she just sit comfortably?

Parents start coming in to tell me they're worried. Their child isn't sleeping. My wife had terrible insomnia. She rarely drifted off before 1 or 2. At school, the children look exhausted, poor guys. We've stopped doing the coursework by this point. I let them nap in class.

Sometimes at night my wife would get frightened and I would need to comfort her. I would stand by the bed and rub her back until she fell asleep. I don't know how much it helped—it wasn't enough, in the end, to stop her from doing what she did. I never wanted to see her in pain, but those were good moments, when I was attending to her fear. She got me thinking that maybe there really was something bad out there, and she needed my protection. Or maybe the feeling was that nothing was out there, and we were the only ones, and I liked that too.

When the children get the same frightened look, I start doing it in class. I have them put their heads down on their desks and I turn off the lights and I walk down each row, humming about her coming 'round the mountain and giving them each a little pat between the shoulder blades.

I can see that they're suffering in the same way she suffered. Worse, because they don't know what's happening, why they're being made to do and feel these things. I feel pretty guilty about it, but I can't stop. First period, second period, the sound of the bell muffled as if by my own hand. *Shh*, I think, don't disturb them. It's like the classroom is very small and down somewhere very low, and the light comes through a distant hole. They can do that with the camera.

By the end, actual events start replicating, here inside the school. I'll just tell you one. She was a competitive ice-skater as a kid. One day the water freezes in the water fountains. The pipes burst overnight, flooding the halls, and by the time the children come in the next morning, smooth black ice covers the floor from the nurse's office to the auditorium.

She stopped skating when she was 14 or 15, because she fell and broke her leg. So I slip in the hallway and break my leg. She had to miss a recital as a result. It was her first big disappointment, the first thing that was taken from her. She had to sit and watch her friends perform in their bright costumes, and then in came the Zamboni, oozing like a great mechanized slug over all traces of choreography, telling her it was over, she had missed her chance.

But worst are the children, too many for one man to rock and sing to, their drooping heads, their soft faces on which I'm stamping this record of experience, and all of them looking up at me, knowing how I wasted her time.

The funny thing is that, though I seem to have this power to force the children to embody her, I had no power over my wife herself. I could never make her do what I wanted, what I thought was good for her. By the end, she only laughed at me, when she laughed at all. Eventually I begin to wonder if it's me who's in charge, or her, because as much as I think I made this happen, I have no idea how to stop it. I go sit in the back of the classroom

and look at the blackboard, hoping that something, anything, will be written there. And: credits.

That's a bad story, says her son.

That's not polite, she says.

I told you it wasn't for kids, the actor says. But it'll be beautifully shot.

From across the street come a woman and two children. They're selling candy. The brother and sister are in front, each bearing their own cardboard box, each brand of candy in a tidy row. They stop in front of the actor. They must have no idea he's a celebrity; they think he's just sitting there. Chocolate? they say.

The actor pats his pockets, but he's not carrying anything. Tom! He calls over a man on the crew, his assistant maybe, who gives each child some cash. The man waves off the candy.

No, she thinks. Not my child. His face would be caught forever, expressing someone else's feelings in someone else's story.

Watching the family go, she explains to the actor and his assistant that there's a new shelter in the neighborhood for migrants. It's one of the reasons her husband has started talking about leaving the city; he says he doesn't want their son to have to see so much sadness, though she suspects that what their son sees is mainly kids with candy.

The other boy is wearing a jersey from the same team as her son, and socks with flip-flops so small for him, most of his heel is flat on the ground. She wonders what these children see when they look at the school. The shelter must be zoned for a different district because, as far as she knows, none of the residents goes here. Perhaps this place always looks like a film set to them.

Those kids should be in school, the assistant says.

It's spring break, she reminds him.

Still, terrible to see them being used that way.

I don't know, the actor says. What are they supposed to do? It's not like they can afford nannies.

But making the children walk in front like that. Because people are more likely to pay attention to the hardship of children. Less likely to resent their suffering. More willing to give money for it.

What would you prefer, the actor asks, for the parents to make them walk behind?

She thinks they both have a point: The children raise the stakes of the story. It would be dumb not to use them.

When the brother and sister get to the playground, they turn inside the chain-link fence while the mother waits. The movie children have filed out to the blacktop again to assemble in their groups of three and four. The siblings go among them, proffering their candy, but they look confused—none of the other kids acknowledges them. There are no parents here; they must be realizing how strange that is. Something is wrong with this place, with these unreal children.

Can I be in the movie? her son asks again.

Bad luck, the assistant says. It's already been cast.

Can I be extra?

An extra, the assistant says.

That's what I said.

No, not possible, let's not be rude, she starts to say, but the actor answers: You'd have to come all day and do whatever you're told.

I can do that!

And you can't talk, or play, until you're told to talk and play, and then it has to be the right way.

Please, I want to.

What do you think, Tom?

No, she thinks. Not my child. His face would be caught forever, expressing someone else's feelings in someone else's story. She pictures something being stretched over his head, taut as a swimming cap, with that synthetic smell, that tightness over the brow.

The assistant shakes his head. I'm afraid we're all set, he says.

Just put him in a scene, Tom.

You know I can't.

But look what I can do, her son says. He runs up the school steps. At the top, he puts his palms on the railing, leans his belly against it, lifts his feet off the ground, and hovers there. She's embarrassed. She's about to tell him they need to stop bothering these grown-ups, that it's time to go home, when he jumps down. He leaps to the side, spins, descends a step, leaps back, ducks under the railing. On the other side he does the same—leaps, spins, descends, leaps, ducks—and again. Back and forth he goes, down and farther down, bowing each time below the black bar that marks the center. It's like he's knitting one side of the school to the other. Sometimes he adds a kick, an extra twirl. Ninja moves, ballet moves, moves so particular to his own peculiar self, they have no name and she can think only: That's him, there he goes. He makes no sound, and neither do the men, watching on the sidewalk, surprised into respect by the opacity of what he's making, its buoyancy, its gravity.

When he reaches the bottom of the stairs, he stops. That's just a little dance, he says.

Sunday is the last day of spring break, and her husband tells her to relax; he'll take their son out. She asks where, and he says not to worry about it—they're having father-son time. Go back to bed, he says. She watches them

get ready to leave, the two people she loves most. The boy is talking about how he auditioned for the movie. He says he'll show his father the dance.

Mom, he says, Dad and I are going to talk about places we can move to. He says I can use his Google when we're on the bus.

His Google?

So I can look up pictures.

Hypothetically move to, her husband says. It's just for fun. Tell her.

Sure, their child says. For fun.

Tomorrow, she thinks, everything will go back to normal. They'll go to school, she'll join the people flowing to the train. She tidies and makes coffee. She gets out a book. The apartment is so quiet. By lunchtime, she wants her family back. Her husband sends her a laughing face—she's so pathetic, it's sweet. He says she can meet them at the restaurant by the school in half an hour.

She passes the school's front steps; she forgets, again, to look closely at the trees. Only one trailer is left—they're clearing out just in time. A man steps into her path. Ma'am, he says, could you wait here for just a moment? We're trying to get a last shot.

He's holding up one hand like a crossing guard, looking expectantly at the walkie-talkie in the other. She does as she's told. She waits a minute. Two.

Excuse me but how long will this take? I just need to get to the next block.

Not long. Five minutes tops.

I'm in a hurry. I have to meet my family.

We'll get you through as quick as we can.

This is a little ridiculous. Can't I just go on the other side of the street?

I'm sorry, that's not possible.

How can it not be possible? Look, where's Tom? Tom knows me.

I don't know who you're talking about.

You're acting like this is some issue of public safety, like you're a police officer. But you don't have any actual power, do you? To stop people from moving through their own neighborhood?

[From the September 2023 issue: “The Comebacker,” a short story by Dave Eggers](#)

And yet she doesn't push past him. She's so close, she can see the restaurant; she can see the people at the sidewalk tables; she can see them in the dining shed. They're laughing and eating and lifting their glasses as if for the same toast. And yes, right there—that's her family. Her child's back is to her. Around the edges of his head and shoulders, she can see another outline, the same shape, just taller and broader, like a prediction of the future—the shape of his father.

She realizes they're at the table with the blue chairs. Her son must have remembered. But there were only two of those chairs—where will she sit when she gets there? A band of fear snaps around her, like it's a crisis, like she can't just walk over and pull up another seat. But she can't, because she's trapped here, waiting. She can't see the cameras, but she knows they must be rolling. If she starts to run, the cameras will catch her. She'll be in the movie.

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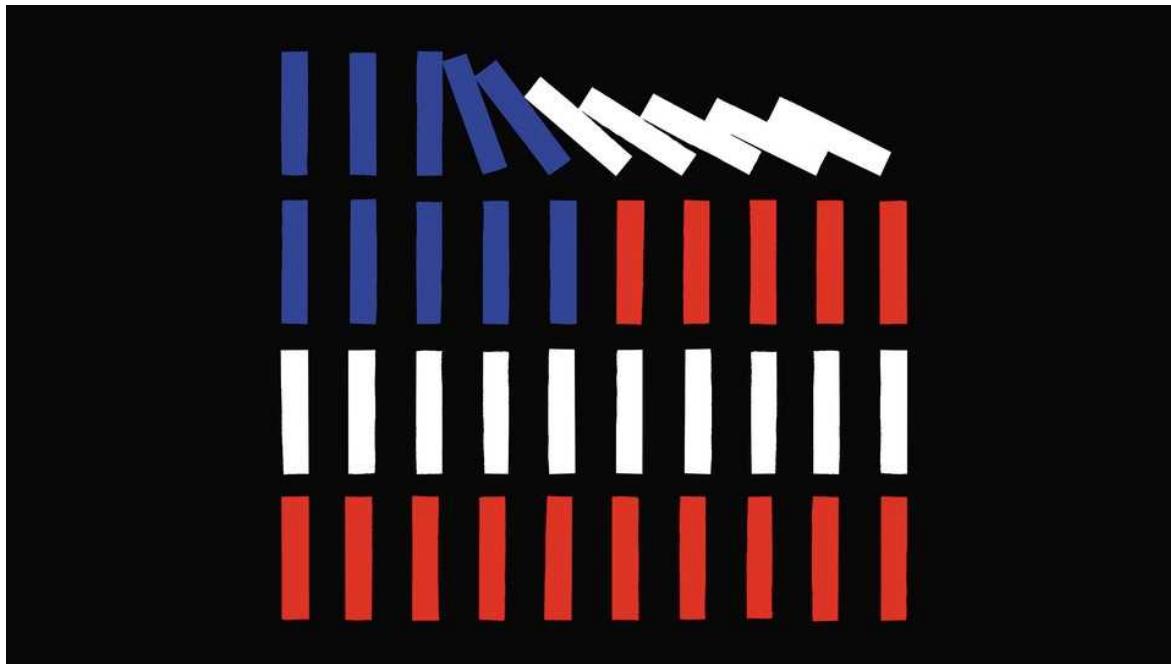
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The End of Democratic Delusions

The Trump Reaction and what comes next

by George Packer



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The Roosevelt Republic—the progressive age that extended social welfare and equal rights to a widening circle of Americans—endured from the 1930s to the 1970s. At the end of that decade, it was overthrown by the Reagan Revolution, which expanded individual liberties on the strength of a conservative free-market ideology, until it in turn crashed against the 2008 financial crisis. The era that followed has lacked a convincing name and a clear identity. It's been variously called the post–post–Cold War, post–

neoliberalism, the Great Awokening, and the Great Stagnation. But the 2024 election has shown that the dominant political figure of this period is Donald Trump, who, by the end of his second term, will have loomed over American life for as long as Franklin D. Roosevelt's dozen years as president. We are living in the Trump Reaction. By the standard of its predecessors, we're still at the beginning.

This new era is neither progressive nor conservative. The organizing principle in Trump's chaotic campaigns, the animating passion among his supporters, has been a reactionary turn against dizzying change, specifically the economic and cultural transformations of the past half century: the globalization of trade and migration, the transition from an industrial to an information economy, the growing inequality between metropolis and hinterland, the end of the traditional family, the rise of previously disenfranchised groups, the "browning" of the American people. Trump's basic appeal is a vow to take power away from the elites and invaders who have imposed these changes and return the country to its rightful owners—the real Americans. His victory demonstrated the appeal's breadth in blue and red states alike, among all ages, ethnicities, and races.

For two and a half centuries American politics alternated between progressive and conservative periods, played between the 40-yard lines of liberal democracy. The values of freedom, equality, and rule of law at least received lip service; the founding documents enjoyed the status of civic scripture; the requisite American mood was optimism. Although reaction has dominated local or regional (mainly southern) politics, it's something new in our national politics—which explains why Trump has been misunderstood and written off at every turn. Reaction is insular and aggrieved, and it paints in dark tones. It wants to undo progress and reverse history, restoring the nation to some imagined golden age when the people ruled. They want a strongman with the stomach to trample on the liberal pieties of the elites who sold them out.

Trump voters don't think he will destroy democracy; they think he'll restore it to the people.

This is why so many voters are willing to tolerate—in some cases, celebrate—Trump's vile language and behavior; his love affairs with foreign

dictators; his readiness to toss aside norms, laws, the Constitution itself. Asked by pollsters if they’re concerned about the state of democracy, these voters answer yes—not because they fear its demise, but because it has already failed them. They don’t think Trump will destroy democracy; he’ll restore it to the people.

The triumph of the Trump Reaction should put an end to two progressive illusions that have considerably strengthened it. One is the notion that identity is political destiny. For a long time, the Democratic Party regarded demographic change in America, the coming “minority majority,” as a consoling promise during interim Republican victories: As the country turned less white, it would inevitably turn more blue. In the past decade this notion was absorbed into an ideological framework that became the pervasive worldview of progressives—a metaphysics of group identity in which a generalized “people of color” (adjusted during the social-justice revolution of 2020 to “BIPOC”) were assumed to share a common experience of oppression that would determine their collective political behavior, driving them far to the left on issues such as immigration, policing, and transgender rights.

The 2024 election exploded this illusion. Nearly half of Latinos and a quarter of Black men voted for Trump. In New York City he did better in Queens and the Bronx, which have majority nonwhite populations, than in Manhattan, with its plurality of wealthy white people. M. Gessen of *The New York Times* called it “not a good night for solidarity,” but the presumption of like-mindedness among immensely diverse groups of voters should be retired, along with the term *people of color*, which has lost any usefulness for political analysis.

[Read: The cumulative toll of Democrats’ delusions](#)

Adjacent to the demographic illusion is a majoritarian one. By this theory, the Democratic Party is kept out of power by a white Republican minority that thwarts the popular will through voter suppression, gerrymandering, judicial legislating, the filibuster, the composition of the Senate, and the Electoral College. By this thinking, the ultimate obstacle to the American promise is the Constitution itself. The United States needs to become less republican and more democratic, with electoral reforms and perhaps a

second constitutional convention to give more power to the people. This analysis contains some undeniable truths—the public’s voice is thwarted by structural barriers, partisan machinations, and enormous quantities of plutocratic cash. As long as Republican presidents continued to lose the popular vote, the majoritarian argument was tempting, even if its advocates ignored the likelihood that a new constitution would turn out to be less democratic than the old one.

But every election is a reminder that the country is narrowly divided and has been for decades, with frequent changes of control in the House of Representatives. Now that Trump has won the popular vote and the Electoral College, the majoritarian illusion, like the demographic one, should be seen for what it is: an impediment to Democratic success. It relieved the party of the need to listen and persuade rather than expecting the *dei ex machina* of population and rule changes to do the work of politics.

When Democrats lose a presidential election, they descend into a familiar quarrel over whether the party moved too far to the left or to the center. This time the question seems especially irrelevant; their political problem runs so much deeper. The Democratic Party finds itself on the wrong side of a historic swing toward right-wing populism, and tactical repositioning won’t help. The mood in America, as in electorates all over the world, is profoundly anti-establishment. Trump had a mass movement behind him; Kamala Harris was installed by party elites. He offered disruption, chaos, and contempt; she offered a tax break for small businesses. He spoke for the alienated; she spoke for the status quo.

Democrats have become the party of institutionalists. Much of their base is metropolitan, credentialed, economically comfortable, and pro-government. A realignment has been going on since the early ’70s: Democrats now claim the former Republican base of college-educated professionals, and Republicans have replaced Democrats as the party of the working class. As long as globalization, technology, and immigration were widely seen as not only inevitable but positive forces, the Democratic Party appeared to ride the wave of history, while Republicans depended on a shrinking pool of older white voters in dying towns. But something profound changed around 2008.

I spent the years after the financial crisis reporting in parts of the country that were being ravaged by the Great Recession and the long decline that had preceded it, and were growing hostile toward the country's first Black president. Three things recurred everywhere I went: a conviction that the political and economic game was rigged for the benefit of distant elites; a sense that the middle class had disappeared; and the absence of any institutions that might have provided help, including the Democratic Party. It was hard to miss the broken landscape that lay open for Trump, but the establishments of both parties didn't see it, and neither did most of the media, which had lost touch with the working class. The morning after Trump's shocking victory in 2016, a colleague approached me angrily and said, "Those were your people, and you empowered them by making other people feel sorry for them—and it was wrong!"

The Trump Reaction is more fragile than it now seems.

In some ways, the Biden administration and the Harris campaign tried to reorient the Democratic Party back toward the working class, which was once its backbone. Biden pursued policies and passed legislation to create jobs that don't require a college degree in communities that have been left behind. Harris studiously avoided campaigning on her identity as a Black and South Asian woman, appealing instead to a vague sense of patriotism and hope. But Biden's industrial policy didn't produce results fast enough to offset the damage of inflation—no one I talked with in Maricopa County, Arizona, or Washington County, Pennsylvania, this year seemed to have heard of the Inflation Reduction Act. Harris remained something of a cipher because of Biden's stubborn refusal to step aside until it was too late for her or anyone else to make their case to Democratic voters. The party's economic policies turned populist, but its structure—unlike the Republican Party's mass cult of personality—appeared to be a glittering shell of power brokers and celebrities around a hollow core. Rebuilding will be the work of years, and realignment could take decades.

So much of the Trump Reaction's triumph is unfair. It's unfair that a degenerate man has twice beaten a decent, capable woman. It's unfair that Harris graciously conceded defeat, whereas Trump, in her position, would once again have kick-started the machinery of lies that he built on his own behalf, continuing to undermine trust in democracy for years to come. It's

unfair that most of the media immediately moved on from Trump's hateful rhetoric and threats of violence against migrants and political opponents. His campaign was unforgivable—but in the words of W. H. Auden's poem “Spain,” “History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.”

From the July/August 2017 issue: What's wrong with the Democrats?

The Trump Reaction is more fragile than it now seems. Trump's behavior in the last weeks of the campaign did not augur a coherent second presidency. He will surround himself with ideologues, opportunists, and crackpots, and because he has no interest in governing, they will try to fill the vacuum and turn on one another. The Trump administration, with a favorable Congress, will overreach on issues such as abortion and immigration, soon alienating important parts of its new coalition. It will enact economic policies that favor the party's old allies among the rich at the expense of its new supporters among the less well-off. It's quite possible that, approaching 80, Trump will find himself once more among the least popular presidents in the country's history. But in the meantime, he will have enormous latitude to abuse his power for enrichment and revenge, and to shred the remaining ties that bind Americans to one another, and the country to democracies around the world.

The Trump Reaction will test opponents with a difficult balancing act, one that recalls F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous line about a first-rate intelligence holding two opposed ideas in mind while still being able to function. The Democratic Party has to undertake the necessary self-scrutiny that starts with the errors of Biden, Harris, and their inner circle, but that extends to the party's long drift away from the most pressing concerns of ordinary Americans, toward the eccentric obsessions of its donors and activists. But this examination can't end in paralysis, because at the same time, the opposition will have to act. Much of this action will involve civil society and the private sector along with surviving government institutions—to prevent by legal means the mass internment and deportation of migrants from communities in which they've been peacefully living for years; to save women whose lives are threatened by laws that would punish them for trying to save themselves; to protect the public health from Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the nation's security from Tulsi Gabbard, and its coffers from Elon Musk.

Journalists will have a special challenge in the era of the Trump Reaction. We're living in a world where facts instantly perish upon contact with human minds. Local news is disappearing, and a much-depleted national press can barely compete with the media platforms of billionaires who control users algorithmically, with an endless stream of conspiracy theories and deepfakes. The internet, which promised to give everyone information and a voice, has consolidated in just a few hands the power to destroy the very notion of objective truth. "Legacy journalism is dead," Musk crowed on his own X in the week before the election. Instead of chasing phantoms on social media, journalists would make better use of our dwindling resources, and perhaps regain some of the public's trust, by doing what we've done in every age: expose the lies and graft of oligarchs and plutocrats, and tell the stories of people who can't speak for themselves.

A few weeks before the election, Representative Chris Deluzio, a first-term Democrat, was campaigning door-to-door in a closely divided district in western Pennsylvania. He's a Navy veteran, a moderate on cultural issues, and a homegrown economic populist—critical of corporations, deep-pocketed donors, and the ideology that privileges capital over human beings and communities. At one house he spoke with a middle-aged white policeman named Mike, who had a Trump sign in his front yard. Without budging on his choice for president, Mike ended up voting for Deluzio. On Election Night, in a state carried by Trump, Deluzio outperformed Harris in his district, especially in the reddest areas, and won comfortably. What does this prove? Only that politics is best when it's face-to-face and based on respect, that most people are complicated and even persuadable, and that—in the next line from the Fitzgerald quote—one can "see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise."

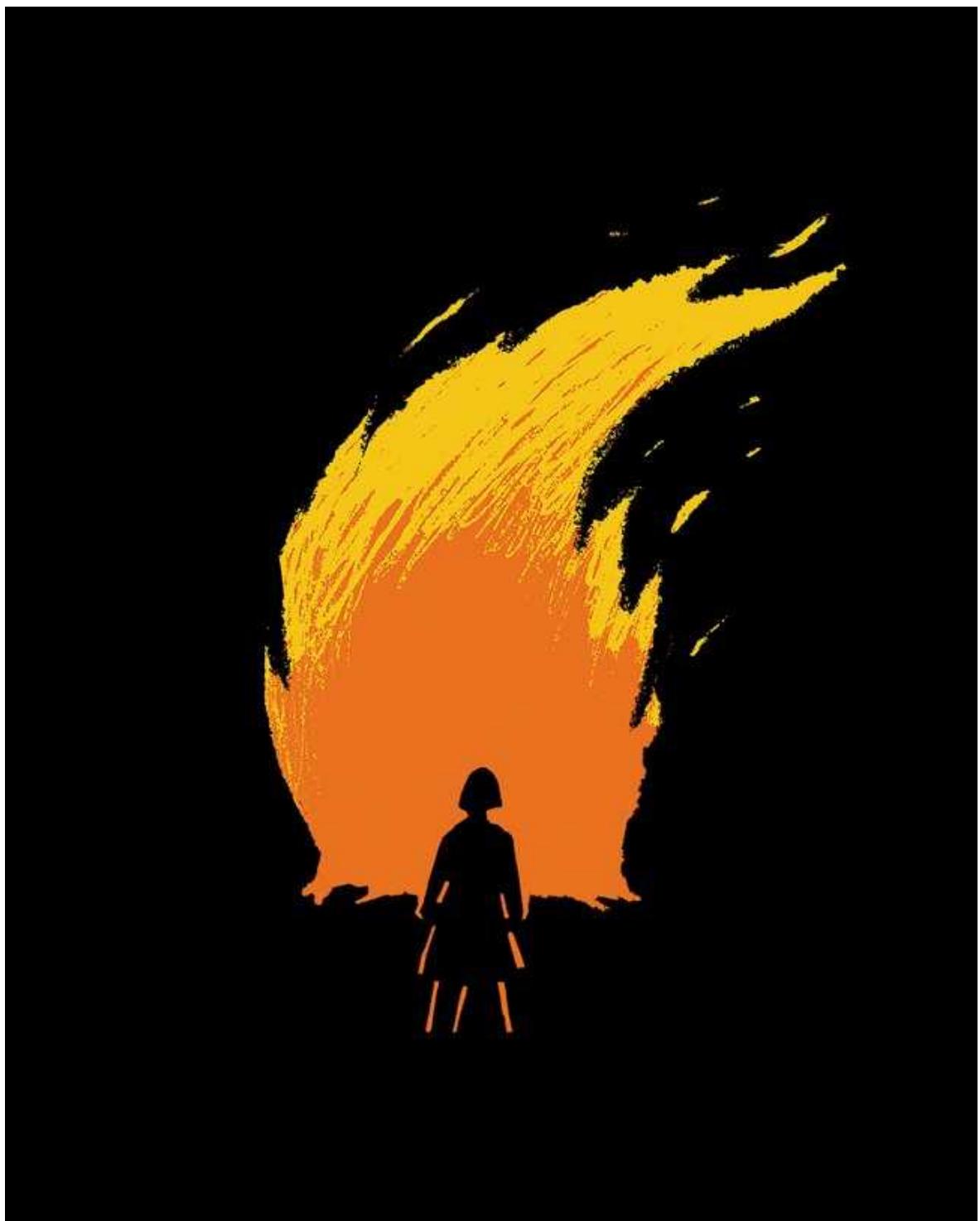
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Misogyny Comes Roaring Back

Donald Trump will return to Washington flanked by an entourage intent on imposing its archaic vision of gender politics on the nation.

by Sophie Gilbert



This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)

Throughout American political history, two capable, qualified, experienced women have run for president on a major-party ticket. Both have lost to Donald Trump, perhaps the most famous misogynist ever to reach the

highest office. But in 2024, what was even more alarming than in 2016 was how Trump's campaign seemed to be promoting a version of the country in which men dominate public life, while women are mostly confined to the home, deprived of a voice, and neutralized as a threat to men's status and ambitions.

This time around, I wasn't hopeful. I didn't let myself entertain any quixotic notions about what having a woman in the most powerful position in the world might mean for our status and sense of self. I simply wished for voters to reject the idea, pushed so fervently by those on Trump's side, that women should be subservient incubators, passively raising the next generation of men who disdain them. This wish did not pan out. "Your body, my choice. Forever," the white-supremacist influencer Nick Fuentes, who has dined with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, posted on X on Election Night. "Women threatening sex strikes like LMAO as if you have a say," the right-wing troll Jon Miller wrote on the same site.

Read: The end of American romance

For Trump, eliminating the constitutional right to an abortion was apparently only the beginning. Bolstered by that definitive Supreme Court win and flanked by a hateful entourage intent on imposing its archaic vision of gender politics on the nation, the Trump-Vance ticket seemed to outright reject ideas of women's autonomy and equality. Theirs was a campaign of terminally online masculinity, largely designed for men, expressed in brutish terms of violence, strength, and power. Trump insisted, in one late campaign appearance, that he would be a protector of women, "whether the women like it or not." The vice president-elect, J. D. Vance, was revealed to have personal disgust for child-free women, whom he had described as "cat ladies" and "sociopathic." He'd also, on one podcast, affirmed that the entire function "of the postmenopausal female" was caring for grandchildren. The super PAC founded by Elon Musk, who has shown great enthusiasm for personally inseminating women, released an ad referring to Kamala Harris as a "C word." (The ad, which was deleted a few days later, winkingly revealed the C to stand for "Communist.") And on X, Musk himself reposted a theory that "a Republic of high status males is best for decision making." The former Fox News host Tucker Carlson excitedly compared Trump's

return to office to [a strict father](#) coming home to give his wayward daughter “[a vigorous spanking.](#)”

None of this is new, necessarily. But as of this writing, men ages 18 to 29 have swung a staggering 15 points to the right since 2020, according to an [Associated Press survey of registered voters](#). A few years ago, researchers at Penn State found that people’s alignment with the ideals of “hegemonic masculinity”—the celebration of male dominance in society and of stereotypically masculine traits—[predicted their support](#) for Trump in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Since then, our cultural environment has been flooded with ever more avatars of dopey machismo: steroid-ingesting, crypto-shilling, energy-drink-chugging bros; YouTubers and podcast hosts and misogynist influencers, all profiting wildly from the juvenile attention economy. The language that the Trump-Vance campaign used was intended to resonate with this audience, even if it sounded asinine to everyone else. (“Tampon Tim,” the right-wing social-media nickname given to Tim Walz for approving a measure that supplies period products to Minnesota public-school students, is an insult only if you’re 8 years old or terrified of women’s bodies.)

[From the January/February 2024 issue: Four more years of unchecked misogyny](#)

But the philosophy of the people soon to be in power isn’t informed just by emotionally stunted Twitch streamers and playground bullies. Peter Thiel, the entrepreneur and conservative power broker who [did more than anyone](#) to further Vance’s post-law career and [helped fund](#) his bid for Senate, [wrote in a 2009 essay](#) that women getting the vote had doomed “capitalist democracy.” Trump’s [ally and former aide](#) John McEntee [posted](#) on X in October: “Sorry we want MALE only voting. The 19th might have to go.” For all the attention-getting antics of Trump’s extremely online contingent, his brain trust consists mainly of very wealthy, very powerful men who think women’s rights have simply gone too far. Forget the hope for a female president, or the fury at the fact that a charming, hardworking, genuinely inspirational candidate like Harris couldn’t break through all the accreted layers of American prejudice. What is going to happen to women now?

Not all Trump voters embrace misogyny. And preliminary exit polling shows that a sizable minority of American women [voted for him this time](#); in an economy that's getting more precarious for every successive generation, both men and women may have been swayed by the promise of prosperity. Still, the teased enforcement of outdated gender roles has clearly connected with young men in particular. Among voters ages 18 to 29, the gender gap was striking: about 16 points, [according to the AP](#).

The Trump-Vance administration can't obligate women to go back to the 1960s, though. It can't force women out of the workforce. And it can't mandate that women be subservient to men, sexually, romantically, or professionally. One has to wonder, then, what will become of the men who have been reared on Andrew Tate TikToks and violent gonzo porn devoted to women's sexual degradation. The gender divide is about to grow into a chasm.

The old terms we use to describe sexism in politics aren't sufficient to deal with this onslaught of hatred.

In the U.S., 63 percent of men under 30 are currently single, compared with 34 percent of women in the same age group, [according to the Pew Research Center](#). This suggests that women aren't the only ones who may ultimately suffer from this coming rupture in American life. So, too, will the men who have been trained to see women as disgusting, untamable, [fundamentally inferior](#) to them.

[“Good on Paper”: Are young men really becoming more sexist?](#)

For all Vance and Musk purport to worry about birth rates, I'd argue that they have done more to dissuade women from having children than almost anyone else, by enabling the radicalization and isolation of Gen Z men. For thousands of years, marriage was a necessity for women—a means of financial security and social acceptance. This isn't true anymore. Many women simply aren't willing or remotely motivated to attach themselves to men who denigrate them, or to stay in abusive marriages for the sake of their children, as Vance once seemed to suggest that they should.

In my own circle of friends, I see women living contentedly alone rather than settling for men who don't respect them. I see intelligent, kind, high-achieving friends thriving in their community, spending their own money, appreciating culture, taking care of their own needs and taking care of one another. Within hours of the election result becoming clear, Google searches went up sharply for South Korea's [feminist protest movement "4B"](#)—a social philosophy that advocates for women not to date, marry, have sex with, or have children with men. (South Korea currently has [the lowest fertility rate](#) of any country in the world.)

[Anna Louie Sussman: The real reason South Koreans aren't having babies](#)

American conservatism has long fetishized motherhood in a way that made it proximate to power—mothers are lionized and even encouraged to seek political office, as long as it's understood that they're doing so on behalf of others. Sarah Palin, the first female vice-presidential candidate on a Republican ticket, tried to defang her own ambition by suggesting that she was just a hockey mom who got involved. But the kind of motherhood now being promoted on the right is much more passive, and powerless. It's the kind modeled by the former Supreme Court clerk Usha Vance, who [stands by silently](#) while her husband [weakly brushes off his racist fans' attacks](#) on his family. It's also exemplified by the tradwives of TikTok and Instagram, who cater to the male gaze with their doe-eyed; paisley-smock-wearing; [Kinder, Kirche, Küche](#) performances of submissive domesticity.

The gender dynamics of this moment cannot be a surprise to anyone. Since his arrival in politics, in 2015, Trump has made his thoughts on women abundantly clear. He's propagated the idea that those of us who don't flatter or agree with him are not just difficult but "nasty," using the language of disgust to make women seem contaminated and morally reprehensible. [He has shamed women](#) for the way they look, for aging, for having opinions. (Those of us who have public personas online have experienced this sort of treatment too, and have seen it snowball with his encouragement.) None of this is in any way negated by his decision to make a woman his chief of staff, or to nominate women for key positions.

Even before Harris officially became the nominee in 2024, Trump's allies were attacking her in sexualized terms, subliminally linking female power to

the so-called threat of unfettered female sexuality. Early in July, Alec Lace—the host of a podcast dedicated to fatherhood, if you can believe it—referred to Harris on the Fox Business channel as “the original Hawk Tuah girl,” a reference to a viral clip about oral sex. In August, Trump circulated a post on his social-media platform, Truth Social, that insinuated that Harris had performed sexual favors to establish her career in politics. In September, Semafor reported that a shadowy conservative network had been paying influencers to promote sexualized smears of Harris. In October, a billboard in Ohio briefly drew consternation for displaying a mocked-up image of Harris on her hands and knees, about to engage in a sex act. (It was paid for by a towing company.)

The old analytical terms we use to describe sexism in politics aren’t sufficient to deal with this onslaught of repugnant hatred. Michelle Obama was right, in her closing argument of the 2024 campaign, to note that Harris had faced an astonishing double standard: Both the media and Americans more broadly had picked apart her arguments, bearing, and policy details while skating over Trump’s “erratic behavior; his obvious mental decline; his history as a convicted felon, a known slumlord, a predator found liable for sexual abuse.” She also captured the stakes of the election when she said that voters were fundamentally making a choice in 2024 about “our value as women in this world.” On that front, the people have spoken. But women don’t have to play along.

All his life, Trump has ruined people who get close to him. He won’t ruin women, but he will absolutely destroy a generation of men who take his vile messaging to heart. And, to some extent, the damage has already been done.

This article appears in the [January 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Gender War Is Here.”

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America's Lonely Future

What happens when the nation takes a zero-sum approach to the world?

by David Frum



In his first major address as president, Harry Truman urged Americans to use their enormous power “to serve and not to dominate.”

The date was April 16, 1945. Adolf Hitler was still alive in his bunker in Berlin. Americans were readying themselves for a bloody invasion of the Japanese home islands. The atomic bomb remained a secret.

Yet Truman's thoughts were already shifting to the postwar future. "We must now learn to live with other nations for our mutual good. We must learn to trade more with other nations so that there may be, for our mutual advantage, increased production, increased employment, and better standards of living throughout the world."

Truman's vision inspired American world leadership for the better part of a century. From the Marshall Plan of the 1940s to the Trans-Pacific Partnership of the 2010s, Americans sought to achieve security and prosperity for themselves by sharing security and prosperity with like-minded others. The United States became the center of a network of international cooperation—not only on trade and defense, but on environmental concerns, law enforcement, financial regulation, food and drug safety, and countless other issues.

By enriching and empowering fellow democracies, Americans enriched and empowered themselves too. The United States has led and sustained a liberal world order in part because Americans are a generous people—and even more so because the liberal world order is a great deal for Americans.

Open international trade is nearly always mutually beneficial. Yet there is more to the case than economics. Trade, mutual-protection pacts, and cooperation against corruption and terrorism also make democracies more secure against authoritarian adversaries. Other great powers—China, India, Russia—face suspicious and even hostile coalitions of powerful enemies. The United States is backed by powerful friends. These friendships reinforce U.S. power. By working with the European Central Bank, for instance, the U.S. was able to freeze hundreds of billions of dollars of Russian assets after the attack on Kyiv in 2022. Russia imagined those assets beyond American reach; they were not domiciled in the United States. Yet when necessary, the U.S. could reach them thanks to its friends.

Trump's deepest policy grievance is against those foreigners who sell desirable goods at an attractive price to willing American buyers.

Americans who lived through the great tumult of Truman's era understood that the isolationist slogan "America First" meant America alone. America alone meant America weakened. That lesson was taught by harsh

experience: a depression that was deepened and prolonged by destructive tariff wars, by each afflicted country's hopeless attempt to rescue itself at the expense of its neighbors; a world war that was enabled because democratic powers would not act together in time against a common threat. The lesson was reinforced by positive postwar experience: the creation of global institutions to expand trade and preserve the peace; the U.S.-led defeat of Soviet Communism and the triumphant end of the Cold War.

But in the years since, the harsh experience has faded into half-forgotten history; the positive experience has curdled into regrets and doubts.

[Read: What Europe fears](#)

Donald Trump is the first U.S. president since 1945 to reject the worldview formed by the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War.

Trump's vision has no place for "mutual good" or "mutual advantage." To him, every trade has a winner and a loser. One side's success is the other side's defeat. "We don't beat China in trade," he complained in the first Republican presidential-primary debate of 2015. "We don't beat Japan ... We can't beat Mexico." His deepest policy grievance is against those foreigners who sell desirable goods and services at an attractive price to willing American buyers.

Trump regularly disparages U.S. allies, and threatens to abandon them. "We're being taken advantage of by every country all over the world, including our allies—and in many cases, our allies are worse than our so-called enemies," he said at a rally this November. But unlike the "America First" movement before World War II, Trump's "America First" vision is not exactly isolationist. Trump's version of "America First" is predatory.

[Read: A good country's bad choice](#)

In a midsummer interview, Trump demanded that Taiwan pay the United States directly for defense. "I don't think we're any different from an insurance policy," he said. When the podcaster Joe Rogan asked Trump in October about protecting Taiwan, Trump [answered in a more revealing way:](#) "They want us to protect, and they want protection. They don't pay us

money for the protection, you know? The mob makes you pay money, right?"

American allies in fact make large contributions to collective security. Total assistance to Ukraine from the European Union nearly matches that of the United States. South Korea pays for the construction and maintenance of U.S. facilities in Korea—and for the salaries of Koreans who support U.S. forces. But Trump wants direct cash payments. In a speech to the Economic Club of Chicago in October, he called for an annual levy of \$10 billion from South Korea as the price of protection against North Korea.

Trump seems to have his eye on other payments too; in his first term, he collected benefits for himself and members of his family. Countries that wanted favorable treatment knew to book space at his Washington, D.C., hotel or, it seemed, to dispense business favors to his children. According to a 2024 report by Democrats on the House Oversight Committee, Trump's properties [collected at least \\$7.8 million from foreign sources during his first term.](#)

In his second term, the stream of payments may surge into a torrent. Trump owes more than half a billion dollars in civil penalties for defamation and fraud. How will he pay? Who will help him pay? Trump's need for funds may sway U.S. foreign policy more than any strategy consideration. One of his largest donors in 2024, Elon Musk, stands to benefit hugely from U.S. help with government regulators in China and the EU. Musk is also a major government contractor—and one with strong views about U.S. foreign policy. Over the past few years, he has emerged as one of the fiercest critics of American support for Ukraine. On November 6, Musk joined Trump's first postelection call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Those who invest in Trump—be they foreign agents or mercurial billionaires—may, over the next four years, annex U.S. power to reshape the world to their liking and their profit.

In 2019, Trump delivered a Fourth of July address on the National Mall. The speech exulted in the fearsome lethality of the U.S. military, but Trump had little to say about American ideals or democratic institutions. Trump has never accepted that the United States is strengthened by its values and principles, by a reputation for trustworthiness and fair dealing. The U.S., to

him, should command respect because it is the biggest and strongest bully on the block. When his friend Bill O'Reilly asked him in a 2017 interview about Vladimir Putin, Trump scoffed at the idea that there might be any moral difference between the U.S. and Russia. "You think our country's so innocent?"

Open trade and defensive alliances were already bumping into domestic resistance even before Trump first declared himself a candidate for the presidency. The U.S. has not entered into a new trade-liberalizing agreement since the free-trade agreements with Colombia and Panama negotiated by the George W. Bush administration and signed by President Barack Obama. The Trans-Pacific Partnership was rejected by a Republican Senate during Obama's last year in office. The Biden administration maintained most of the protectionist measures it inherited from Trump, then added more of its own.

But Trump uniquely accelerated America's retreat from world markets, and will continue to do so. His first-term revision of the North American Free Trade Agreement preserved existing access to U.S. markets for Canada and Mexico in return for raising higher barriers around all three North American economies. He has nominated Jamieson Greer, who he said "played a key role during my First Term in imposing Tariffs on China and others," as U.S. trade representative. The tariffs Trump desires, the protection money he seeks, and his undisguised affinity for Putin and other global predators will weaken America's standing with traditional allies and new partners. How will the United States entice Asian and Pacific partners to support U.S. security policy against China if they are themselves treated as threats and rivals by the makers of U.S. trade policy?

Under Trump, America will act more proudly, yet have less to be proud of. Its leaders will pocket corrupt emoluments; the nation will cower behind tariff walls, demanding tribute instead of earning partnership.

Trump supporters tell a story about Trump's leadership. They describe him as a figure of strength who will preserve world peace by force of personality. Potential aggressors will be intimidated by his fierce unpredictability.

This story is a fantasy. Trump was no more successful than his predecessors at stopping China from converting atolls and sandbars in the South China Sea into military bases. Chinese warships menaced maritime neighbors on Trump's watch. In September 2018, one passed within 45 yards of a U.S. destroyer in international waters. In January 2020, Iran fired a missile barrage against U.S. forces in Iraq, inflicting 109 traumatic brain injuries. During Trump's first presidency, the United States continued to fight two shooting wars, one in Afghanistan and one against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Over those same four years, the Russian forces that invaded Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 inflicted more than 500 civilian casualties.

Every president puts a face on the abstraction that is the American nation, and gives words to the American creed. Few spoke more eloquently than Ronald Reagan, who famously compared the United States to a “shining city on a hill.” In his [farewell address](#), Reagan asked, “And how stands the city on this winter night?” Reagan could answer his own question in a way that made his country proud.

The “city on a hill” image ultimately traces back to the New Testament: “A city that is set upon a hill cannot be hid.” The visible hilltop location imposed extra moral responsibility on the city dwellers. Now the hilltop will become a height from which to exercise arrogant control over those who occupy the lower slopes and valleys—the dominance against which Truman warned. Under Trump, America will act more proudly, yet have less to be proud of. Its leaders will pocket corrupt emoluments; the nation will cower behind tariff walls, demanding tribute instead of earning partnership. Some of its citizens will delude themselves that the country has become great again, while in reality it will have become more isolated and less secure.

Americans have tried these narrow and selfish methods before. They ended in catastrophe. History does not repeat itself: The same mistakes don’t always carry the same consequences. But the turn from protector nation to predator nation will carry consequences bad enough.

This article appears in the [January 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Marauding Nation.” It has been updated to reflect the fact that, after the article went to press, Donald Trump nominated Jamieson Greer as U.S. trade representative.

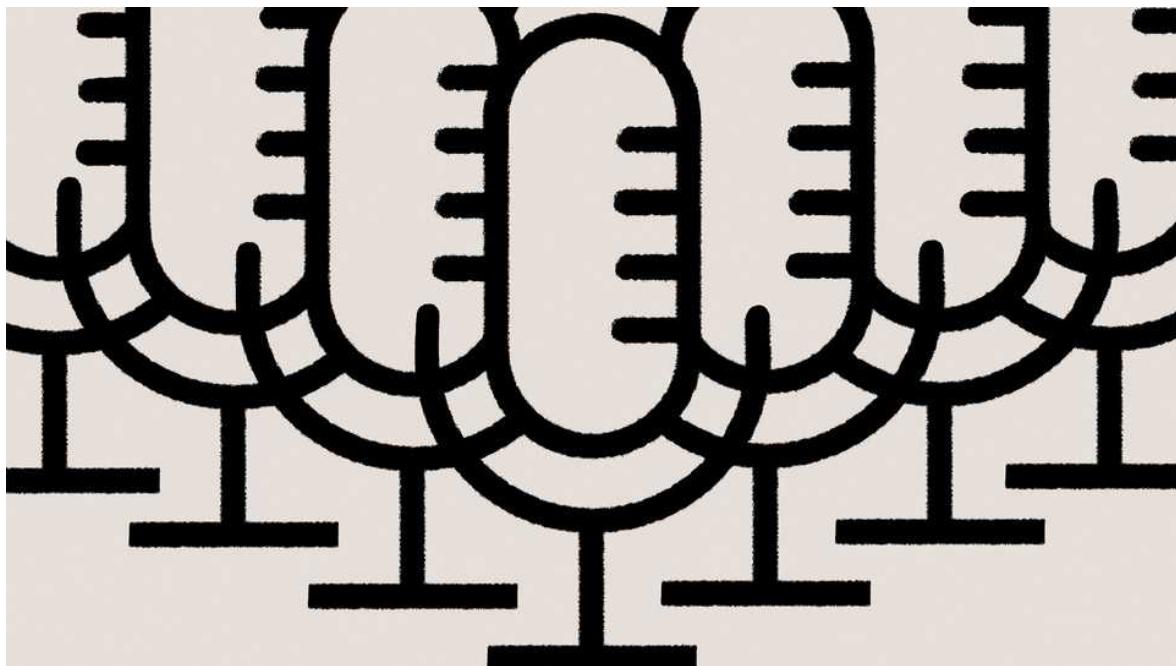
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The ‘Mainstream Media’ Has Already Lost

The newspapers and networks of the 20th century are ceding ground. And the people taking their place aren’t playing by the same rules.

by Helen Lewis



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This October, in the closing days of the presidential election, the podcaster Joe Rogan said something extraordinary. He had just hosted Donald Trump for a three-hour conversation in his studio in Austin, Texas, and wanted to make clear that he had discussed a similar arrangement with Kamala Harris's campaign. "They offered a date for Tuesday, but I would have had to travel to her and they only wanted to do an hour," he [posted](#) on X. "I strongly feel the best way to do it is [in the studio in Austin](#)." And so Rogan declined to interview the vice president.

What a diva, some people said. If you're offered an interview with a presidential candidate, get off your ass and get on a plane! But Rogan could dictate his own terms. He is not competing in the snake pit of D.C. journalism, where sitting opposite a major candidate delivers an instant status bump. He is the most popular podcaster alive, with a dedicated audience of right-leaning men who enjoy mixed martial arts, stand-up comedy, and wild speculation about aliens (space, not illegal); they are not political obsessives. Rogan knew that Harris needed him more than he needed her.

Nothing symbolizes the changed media landscape of this past election more than Rogan's casual brush-off. Within a week, his interview with Trump racked up [more than 40 million views](#) on YouTube alone, and millions more on other platforms. No single event, apart from the Harris-Trump debate, had a bigger audience this election cycle. By comparison, Harris's contentious interview with Bret Baier on Fox News, the most popular of the cable networks, drew 8 million viewers to the live broadcast, and another 6.5 million on YouTube.

Those figures demonstrate the absurdity of talking about the "mainstream media" as many still do, especially those who disparage it. According to a [2021 Pew Research Center survey](#), Americans with a wide range of political views generally agree about which outlets fall within this definition: newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and television networks such as CNN. Everyone else who's disseminating information at scale is treated like a couple of hipsters running a craft brewery who are valiantly competing with Budweiser.

From the October 2024 issue: Helen Lewis on how Joe Rogan remade Austin

That's simply not true. Rogan is the "mainstream media" now. Elon Musk, too. In the 2024 campaign, both presidential candidates largely skipped newspaper and television sit-downs—the tougher, more focused "accountability" interviews—in favor of [talking directly with online personalities](#). (J. D. Vance, to his credit, made a point of [taking reporters' questions](#) at his events and sat down [with CNN](#) and [the Times](#), among others.) The result was that both Trump and Harris got away with reciting slogans rather than outlining policies. Trump has not outlined how his promised mass deportations might work in practice, nor did we ever find out if Harris still held firm to her previous stances, such as the abolition of the death penalty and the decriminalization of sex work. The vacuum was filled with vibes.

The concept of the mainstream media arose in the 20th century, when reaching a mass audience required infrastructure—a printing press, or a broadcast frequency, or a physical cable into people's houses—and institutions. That reality made the media easy to vilify. "The press became 'the media' because the word had a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and [the press hated it](#)," Richard Nixon's speechwriter William Safire wrote in his 1975 memoir.

Somehow, the idea that the mainstream media is made up of major corporations has persisted, even though the internet, smartphones, and social media have made it possible for anyone to reach an audience of millions. Two of the most important information sources of this election cycle have a job that didn't exist even a decade ago: Acyn Torabi and Aaron Rupar, who watch hours of political rallies and TV appearances in order to clip them for social media. These "clippers" can drive days of discussion, particularly when the context of a remark is disputed—such as when Vance's 2021 remarks characterizing Democrats as "childless cat ladies" went viral.

Today, the divide between the "mainstream" and the outsiders is not about reach. Sixty-three percent of American adults get at least some of their news from television, 42 percent from radio, and 26 percent from print publications, according to [a 2024 Pew report](#). But 54 percent get at least

some of their news from social media—meaning that, alongside established outlets, they’re relying on sources such as Infowars videos, Facebook memes, and posts on X.

The divide is not about influence, either. During Trump’s victory speech in Florida, he invited the UFC boss Dana White to say a few words. White thanked the streamer Adin Ross, the podcaster [Theo Von](#), the YouTubers known as the Nelk Boys, and the former NFL players Will Compton and Taylor Lewan, as well as Rogan. During the campaign, all of these men had hosted Trump for softball interviews, often with the encouragement of Trump’s 18-year-old son, Barron; Ross even [gave Trump a gold Rolex and a customized Tesla Cybertruck during their livestream](#). (You don’t get treatment like that from the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board.)

[From the May 2024 issue: Is Theo Von the next Joe Rogan?](#)

Trump’s showmanship, aggression, and ability to confabulate suit this new environment. His inconsistency is not a problem—these interviews are designed to be entertaining and personal, not to nail down his current position on abortion or interrogate his income-tax policies. Trump has been especially enthusiastic in his embrace of this new media class, but the Democrats also understand its power: In 2023, Jill Biden addressed a White House holiday party for hundreds of influencers. “You’re here because you all represent the changing way people receive news and information,” she [reportedly said](#). At the Democratic National Convention, more than 200 “content creators” [were credentialed](#) along with traditional journalists.

Being outside the mainstream is, today, seen as more authentic, more in tune with Real America.

Finally, the media divide is not about resources, either. Although some of the legacy outlets are still large, well-funded companies, so are many of the upstarts. Vance, Peter Thiel, and Vivek Ramaswamy have all invested in the video platform Rumble, which [went public in 2022](#) with a reported valuation of \$2.1 billion. When *The Daily Wire*, a right-wing online news organization, tried to hire the internet personality Steven Crowder, he was offered \$50 million over four years. He rejected this, calling deals like these “slave contracts.”

As for Rogan, he has apparently [chosen to forsake fact-checkers](#) and lawyers in favor of some guy named Jamie who looks up stuff on Google, but he doesn't have to do that. His last deal with Spotify was reportedly worth as much as \$250 million. He could hire a whole newsroom if he wanted to. But Rogan has intuited, correctly, that many Americans no longer trust institutions. They prefer to receive their news from trusted individuals.

The main beneficiary of our outdated ideas about the “mainstream media” is the political right. Not so long ago, conservatives resented their exclusion from the MSM, because they thought it painted them as extreme: Sarah Palin complained about the “lamestream media,” while the late Rush Limbaugh preferred to call it the “state-controlled media” or the “drive-by media.”

But that's changed. Being outside the mainstream is, today, seen as more authentic, more in tune with Real America. Trump's constant criticisms of the “fake-news media” have been enthusiastically embraced by his downballot copycats. Complaints about alleged liberal media bias have been amplified by commentators who are themselves overtly partisan: Tucker Carlson, Russell Brand, Dan Bongino, Megyn Kelly, Charlie Kirk, Alex Jones. The underlying premise is that all media skew toward one side or another, but at least these people are honest about it. That allows them to speak alongside Trump at rallies (Kelly), [embrace bizarre conspiracy theories](#) (Jones), talk about their encounters with demons (Carlson), and continue to work despite multiple allegations of sexual assault (Brand, who has denied the claims)—all things that would be out-of-bounds for actual journalists.

And let's be clear, some influencers are very cozy indeed with the subjects they cover. You may not have heard of the Instagrammer and Substacker Jessica Reed Kraus, who was formerly a lifestyle influencer, but she has more than 400,000 subscribers on Substack, where she boasts about her access to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Trump. In January, she [joined Kennedy on his catamaran](#) in Hawaii, sipping mimosas and eating pineapple; she attended Trump's Super Bowl party at Mar-a-Lago. Reed Kraus is open about focusing on personalities, not policy. “Average Americans don't have the time or patience to sift through what separates one candidate's health

care plan from another,” [she told *Semafor*](#). “But they relate and respond to intimate aspects that speak to one’s character.”

Often, these very same influencers are the loudest voices complaining about the failures of “the media.” On the eve of the election, Rogan hosted Musk, that other great titan of the new media, to make the case for Trump—whom Rogan then endorsed. “The legacy media, the mainstream media, is not balanced at all,” said Musk, who personally donated more than \$100 million to Trump’s reelection efforts. “They’re just a mouthpiece for the Democratic Party.” Never mind that, for example, CNN’s Andrew Kaczynski [broke the single most damaging story](#) to the Harris campaign—that she had indeed, in Trump’s phrase, supported “transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison.” (This became a staple of Republican attack ads.) Nor did it matter to Musk that, amid his complaints about the standards of the mainstream media, he has repeatedly promoted fake stories: [about Nancy Pelosi’s husband](#), [about gangs attacking polling stations](#) during the recent Venezuelan election, and even about [a dead squirrel](#) whose euthanasia the right saw as evidence of government overreach. When he is proved to be wrong—often by the same legacy media that he decries—he tends to delete his posts without a correction or an apology.

What happens next? To me, the picture looks bleak: more conspiracy theories, more noise, more loudmouths complaining about other people’s bias. It’s hard to see how journalistic institutions get rebuilt when so many of their business models have collapsed. The migration of ad dollars to Google and Meta means that—with few exceptions—20th-century newsrooms are not coming back.

We cannot reverse the drift from institutions to individuals. Nor can the new partisan outlets be forced to adopt 20th-century norms. The Fairness Doctrine—the policy, repealed under Ronald Reagan, that required broadcasters to reflect contrasting views—is gone for good. We have to let go of the notion that “mainstream media” is a category reserved only for journalists guided by a professional code of ethics, a mission of public service, and an aspiration toward objectivity or at least fairness.

Many independent reporters do good and important work—I’m thinking of the YouTuber Coffeezilla’s work on crypto scams, for example, and Jason

Garcia's investigations into Floridian politics on his Substack, Seeking Rents—but they are surrounded by a clamorous sea of partisans who operate under new and different rules. Flaunt your bias, get cozy with your subjects, and don't harsh their mellow by asking uncomfortable questions. "You are the media now," Musk told X users as the election results came in. It was the truest statement he had made in months.

To the folks building their own platforms, to the influencers hopping on catamarans with politicians, to the streamers handing out Teslas to their guests—well done on your triumph. Welcome to the mainstream media. Now hold yourselves to the same standards you demand from others.

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No One Has to Settle for Bad Pizza Anymore

With a bit of practice, you can make restaurant-quality pies in your own yard. And you should.

by Saahil Desai



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In pizza heaven, it is always 950 degrees. The temperature required to make an authentic Neapolitan pizza is stupidly, unbelievably hot—more blast furnace than broiler. My backyard pizza oven can get all the way there in

just 15 minutes. Crank it to the max, and the Ooni Koda will gurgle up blue flames that bounce off the top of the dome. In 60 seconds, raw dough inflates into pillow-y crust, cheese dissolves into the sauce, and a few simple ingredients become a full-fledged pizza.

Violinists have the Stradivarius. Sneakerheads have the Air Jordan 1. Pizza degenerates like me have the [Ooni](#). I got my first one three years ago and have since been on a singular, pointless quest to make the best pie possible. Unfortunately, I am now someone who knows that dough should pass the windowpane test. Do not get me started on the pros and cons of Caputo 00 flour.

An at-home pizza oven is a patently absurd thing to buy. Much to my wife's consternation, I now own two. It's all the more ridiculous considering that I live in New York City, where amazing pizzerias are about as easy to spot as rats, and space is a precious commodity; this is not a town that favors single-use kitchen tools. These devices do one thing well (pizza) and only that one thing (pizza). My 12-inch Ooni is among the cheapest and smallest high-heat pizza ovens out there, and it still clocks in at \$400 and 20 pounds. You can get an 11-in-1 combination Instant Pot and air fryer for a fraction of the cost.

You want the pie to be medium rare: The crust should be crispy but still pliable, the cheese melted but not burned.

But somehow, the portable-pizza-oven market is booming. Ooni makes nine different models—including a \$900 indoor version that's like a souped-up toaster oven—and similar products are available from companies including Cuisinart, Ninja, Gozney, and Breville. Oprah included a pizza oven in [her 2023 gift guide](#). Florence Pugh has Instagrammed her portable-oven odysseys.

[Read: America before pizza](#)

The paradox of pizza has long been this: America's favorite food—one that an eighth of the country [eats on any given day](#)—is difficult, if not impossible, to make well at home. Not anymore. We are in the middle of a pizza revolution; there has simply never been a better time to make pizza at home.

The traditional home oven is great for lots of things: chocolate-chip cookies, Thanksgiving turkeys, roasted brussels sprouts, whatever. Pizza is not one of them. Let's consider a classic New York pie, which doesn't require the same extreme heat as its Neapolitan brethren. It sounds weird, but you want the pie to be medium rare. The crust should be crispy but still pliable, the cheese melted but not burned. The only way to achieve that is to blast pizza dough with heat from both top and bottom—about 600 degrees at the very least, preferably 650. But nearly every kitchen range tops out at 550 degrees. “By whatever accident of fate, the level of heat that’s necessary is just out of the reach of a typical home oven,” Adam Ragusea, a food YouTuber who is helping open up a pizzeria in suburban Knoxville, Tennessee, told me. That temperature discrepancy matters a lot. Try making pizza on a simple aluminum sheet tray in your home oven, and by the time the crust is golden brown, it’ll be brittle like a cracker and the cheese will have puddled into grease.

Overcoming the limitations of the reviled kitchen range has long stumped homemade pizza enthusiasts. Julia Child [laid out tiles in her oven](#) to soak up the oven’s heat and transfer it to the crust for extra crispiness. That inspired the pizza stone, an oversize ceramic tile that you insert into your oven. At times, the human will to make a decent pizza at home borders on farce. Before making pizza, some recipes suggest that you should leave your oven at full heat for 45 minutes, or an hour, or even two. In the 2000s, one software engineer in Atlanta realized that in self-cleaning mode, ovens can hit 800 degrees—but the door locks. So he snipped off the safety latch with a pair of garden shears. Others have done the same, voiding the warranty on their oven in the name of better pizza.

Still, nothing you can do in a standard kitchen competes with the tools that a pizzeria has at its disposal. Traditional commercial pizza ovens are gigantic and expensive, sometimes costing upwards of \$20,000. Some of the oldest pizzerias in the United States still use their original ovens, manufactured nearly a century ago. Even if your oven reaches 750 degrees, its walls “are not going to be as thick as the walls of a commercial pizza oven,” J. Kenji López-Alt, a chef and the author of [The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science](#), told me. “So there’s just less heat energy trapped in there.”

Portable ovens are like the iPhones of home pizza making: They have changed everything. The prototype for the first Ooni, launched on Kickstarter in 2012, looks more like a medieval torture device than anything you could feasibly use to cook. It was soon joined by the Roccbox, a stainless-steel dome that can run on either wood or gas. Newer models have gotten progressively better. The ovens aren't that complicated, but they are genius. They are fairly inexpensive, and small enough to take on camping trips and beach vacations. For the home cook who isn't making a hundred pizzas in one go, "it'll do a great job at mimicking a restaurant oven," López-Alt said.

[Caroline Mimbs Nyce: J. Kenji López-Alt thinks you'll be fine with an induction stove](#)

For a while, these ovens could be found in relatively few backyards. Then America went pizza-oven wild during the pandemic. What's better than nurturing a sourdough starter? Nurturing a sourdough starter, topping it with sauce, and launching it into the flames. In 2020, Ooni sales increased by 300 percent. The ovens have stayed in high demand, Joe Derochowski, an analyst at the market-research firm Circana, told me. At housewares shows these days, he said, "you see pizza ovens all over." Scott Wiener, a pizza expert who leads tours in New York City, always asks his groups if they make pizza at home and how they cook it. "One person will say 'Ooni,' every time," he told me.

Perhaps part of the appeal of these home ovens is that they satisfy the same urge that using a grill does: Let's face it; fire is fun. Traditionally, though, pizza has been thought of as an extension of *baking*; in Italy, pizza originated with bread bakers looking to sell cheap food to workers. Many of the earliest pizzerias in the U.S. were founded by bakers who had arrived from Italy. But making pizza is really a lot more like grilling a burger than baking bread. Let your pizza sit for a few seconds too long, and the flames will take the dough from lightly singed to fully incinerated. (All pizza is better than no pizza—except when that pizza is so burnt, it tastes like ash.)

Home pizza ovens represent the next generation of grilling; they take those familiar, irresistible propane flames and apply them to another arena of cooking entirely. And as with grilling, to make good pizza, you need

accoutrements. I slide my homemade pizza into the Ooni using one tool, spin it around with another, and then monitor the heat with yet another. Pizza ovens “echo the barbecue world and the home-grilling world,” Wiener said. For \$1,000, you can buy an Ooni that lets you cook three pizzas at once and remotely track the temperature from your phone. As Ragusea put it: “Men love their fucking toys.”

Tools and gadgets can only take you so far. Even with the fanciest oven on the market, you still have to learn how to stretch the dough and get it into the oven without creating an oblong mess. “There’s all these special techniques involved in pizza that don’t apply to any other kind of cooking,” López-Alt said. If you want to learn, there are pizza forums, pizza Facebook groups, and so, so many pizza YouTube videos.

My pizzas are not better or even that much cheaper than what you’d find in a great pizzeria, but they are *mine*.

My first pizza, made in my kitchen oven, was so oversauced that it was more like tomato soup in a bread bowl. A ridiculous number of videos later, my pizza game has gone from JV to the big leagues. Pizza ovens beget videos on how to use them, begetting more interest in ovens, begetting more videos. It is a spin wheel of great pizza.

Even in the Ooni, my pizzas are not better or even that much cheaper than what you’d find in a great pizzeria, but they are *mine*. I get why my fellow pizza diehards gather online not only to hone their technique, but also to share their creations (even when they might give any Italian *nonna* a heart attack). Candied lemon and ricotta pizza! Mexican street corn pizza! Detroit-style Chongqing-chicken pizza topped with green onion and sesame seeds!

The irony of the pizza revolution is that this should be a moment for a pizza recession. Remember when the only thing you could get delivered was pizza, and maybe Chinese food? When you least wanted to cook, [it was pizza time](#): In 2011, one of the biggest days for pizza eating was the day before Thanksgiving. Now you can DoorDash penne alla vodka or a pork banh mi. Yet Americans have fallen even deeper [in love with pizza](#).

[From the October 1949 issue: Pizza, an introduction](#)

You can now find amazing pizza just about everywhere. Pizza pop-ups are opening using newer, larger versions of the cheap portable ovens. “Five years ago, if you wanted to open a mobile pizza company, then you would have to spend easily \$5,000 on an oven and a trailer,” Wiener said. “Now you can spend half of that, and get two of these ovens.”

Still, the pizza sicko doesn’t always win. Recently, the pizza cravings got me late one evening. I fired up the Ooni, fiddled with the dough, and was ready to launch a pie when my hunger sapped my concentration. The dough had a hole in it, and disintegrated into sloppy goo in the oven. So much for that.

Part of getting a pizza oven is learning how to use it. The other part is learning when you should just leave it to the professionals.

This article appears in the [January 2025](#) print edition with the headline “I’m a Pizza Sicko.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

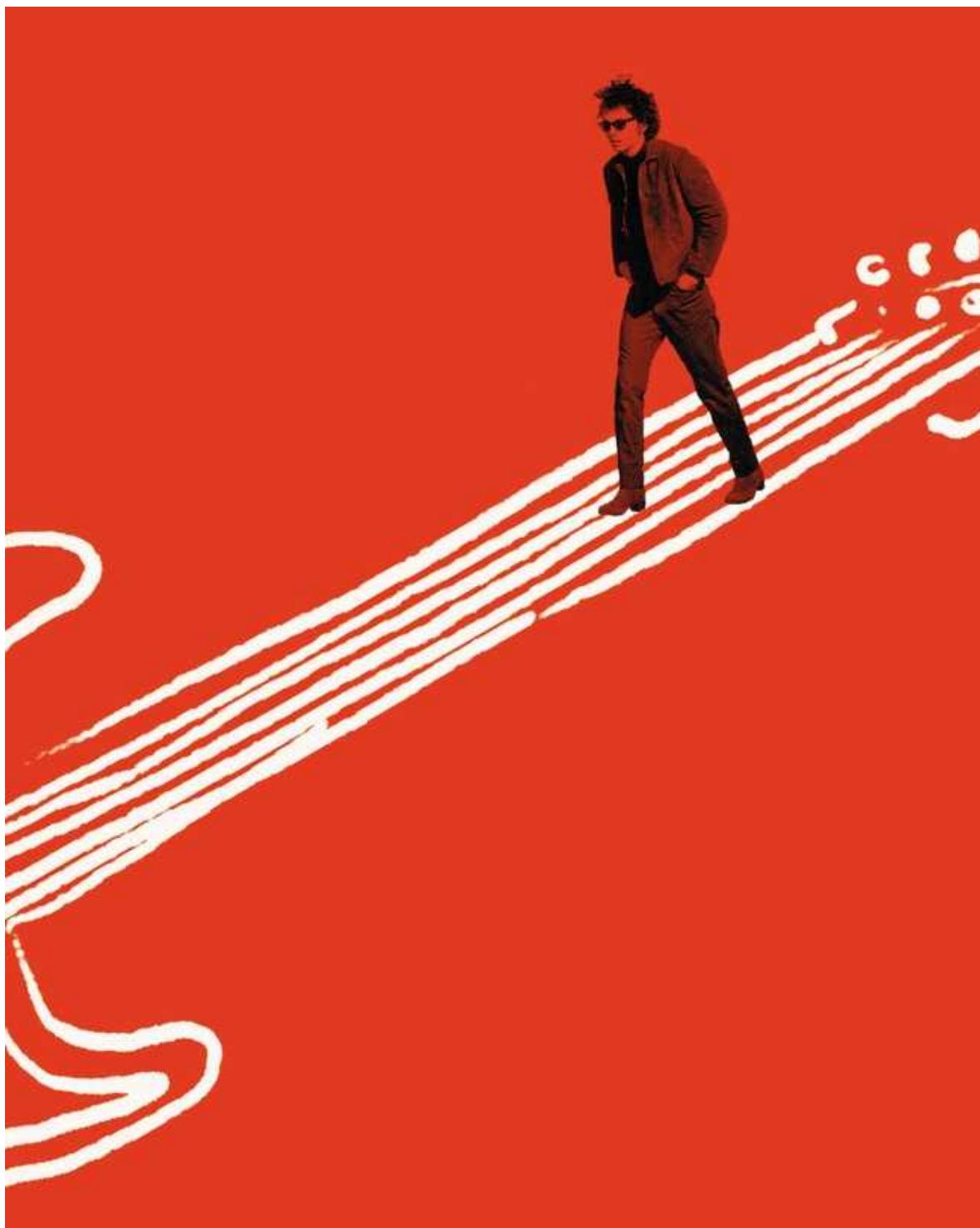
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Bob Dylan's Carnival Act

His identity was a performance. His writing was sleight of hand. He bamboozled his own audience.

by James Parker



Everything, as Charles Péguy said, begins in mysticism and ends in politics. Except if you're Bob Dylan. If you're Bob Dylan, you start political and go mystical. You start as an apprentice hobo scuffing out songs of change; you become, under protest, the ordained and prophetic mouthpiece for a sense of

mass disturbance otherwise known as the '60s; and then, after some violent gestures and severances, you withdraw. You dematerialize; you drop it all, and you drift into the recesses of the Self. Where you remain, until [they give you a Nobel Prize](#).

James Mangold's *A Complete Unknown*, like all the best movies about rock stars—*Sid and Nancy*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Control*—is a fairy tale. It takes liberties: Dylanologists will scream. It dramatizes, mythicizes, elides, elasticizes, and tosses twinkling magic showbiz confetti over the period between Dylan's absolutely unheralded [arrival in New York](#) in 1961 and his honking, abrasive, ain't-gonna-work-on-Maggie's-farm-no-more headlining appearance, four years later, at the [Newport Folk Festival](#), where [his new electric sound drove](#) the old folkies berserk and the crowd (at least in Mangold's movie) bayed for his blood.

Timothée Chalamet plays Dylan, and he does it very well, with a kind of amnesiac intensity: He mooches, twitches, mumbles, makes things up, as if the young Robert Zimmerman, in the ferocity of his effort to shed his history and become Bob Dylan, has temporarily cauterized his own personality. Ed Norton, his high forehead glowing with benevolence, plays Pete Seeger, the folk-activist father figure whom Dylan will betray. Scoot McNairy, in an amazing wordless performance, plays Woody Guthrie, immobilized by Huntington's disease at the Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital, in New Jersey. Dylan makes a pilgrimage to Greystone with his guitar and fumbles through a beautiful, uncanny bedside version of "Song to Woody":

Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song
'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along
Seems sick an' it's hungry, it's tired an' it's torn
It looks like it's a-dyin' an' it's hardly been born

How did he do that? How did this nobody from nowhere, at the age of 20, contrive to sound simultaneously like the creaky religious past and the howling incoming future? It wasn't his musicianship: As a guitarist, he was stumpy and street-level, and his god-awful harmonica playing now sounds like a kind of comic punctuation, the harmonica less a musical instrument than a place to put his face after delivering an especially jagged line. But his young-old voice, with its swoops and smears and its relentless edge, was a

vehicle for cutting through: The world would have to wait for John Lydon of the Sex Pistols to hear another voice so crystallized with frozen wrath.

And when his words, or his visions, reached the pitch of nightmare—*I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleeding*—he sounded not scared but aroused, as if by imminent and gleeful vindication. The musician Robyn Hitchcock, listening to Dylan while pent up in an English boarding school, felt the full revelation. As he describes it in [his recent memoir, 1967](#), Dylan seemed “to have accessed (or created?) a world outside morality, faith, rules or superstition: [he’d] found the sad, doomed kingdom where things simply are—for no apparent purpose—and whose denizens haplessly await their fate.”

A Complete Unknown, like all the best movies about rock stars, is a fairy tale.

One of the young Dylan’s foundational fibs, as he skulked and sputtered around Greenwich Village, was that he had learned his songcraft while [traveling with a carnival](#). This is important, because I’ve begun to suspect that a major division in American life, perhaps *the* major division, is the one between carnies and non-carnies; that is, between those who understand instinctively—animalistically, sometimes—that life is theater, that people will believe what they want to, and that all the most essential things happen in the imagination, and ... everyone else. Carnies don’t have much respect for reality, because they know they can bend it and knock it around. Non-carnies are condemned to the facts—to what Stanley Elkin called the “plodding sequiturs.”

Was young Bob a carny? He wanted to be, and compared with the courageous and sweetly high-minded Seeger, he certainly was. His identity was a performance. His writing was sleight of hand. He wowed and bamboozled his own audience. And when, in *A Complete Unknown*, he tries out the carnival story on Joan Baez (played by Monica Barbaro), embroidering it freshly with the addition of a cowboy guitar player called Wigglefoot, she looks at him and says—thrillingly deadpan—“You are so completely full of shit.” Which is exactly what you say to a carny.



Timothée Chalamet as Bob Dylan in *A Complete Unknown* (Macall Polay / Searchlight Pictures)

And it was all very theatrical, very over-the-top, the way they lauded him and garlanded him and made him the Voice of a Generation. (Don't all those contemporary cover versions of his songs—with the exception of Hendrix's smoking "All Along the Watchtower"—now sound like misunderstandings, mistranslations?) The earnestness and humorlessness of the folkies was unbelievable. He had come to save us all. The line would be unbroken: From Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan, the torch had been passed.

Except that, if you were Bob Dylan, there was no torch, and no one to pass it to, anyway. So he had to be perverse and disruptive and ungrateful and electrified, and make a noise that would horrify poor old Seeger: punk rock *avant la lettre*. *A Complete Unknown* makes an especial villain out of Alan Lomax, which is interesting: The venerable activist-archivist becomes, in the movie, a thuggish folk enforcer, cursing Dylan for his impurity and tussling with his manager Albert Grossman during the set at Newport.

It's in the Newport scenes, with the crowd roaring in distress, that the movie really does some fancy shuffling of events. History records that Lomax did actually brawl with Grossman. But no one at Newport shouted "Judas!" at Bob Dylan: That wouldn't happen until the following year, when [he played the Free Trade Hall, in Manchester, England](#). And Ian Bell, in his [*Once Upon a Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan*](#), makes the point that most of the festivalgoers at Newport—a hip audience, after all—would have known what to expect from Dylan that day: "'Maggie's Farm,' supposedly the main cause of all the Newport trouble, is neither a secret nor a surprise to anyone with the slightest interest in Dylan by the time the festival begins." (Dylan's keyboardist Al Kooper has said that "85 to 90 percent" of the crowd was enjoying the Dylan performance.)

But so what? *A Complete Unknown* is a movie, and a movie—or a movie like this, which in one sense is a parable of artistic ruthlessness—needs a climax. And Bob Dylan, more than most rock stars, is a myth. In all senses of the word. He made himself up, he disappeared himself, and in doing so, he became a lens: Rays of otherworldly insight poured through him, and he trained them upon us like somebody frying ants with a magnifying glass.

He had shimmering visions and torture chambers in his mind; he could make God and Abraham talk with each other like two hustlers on a street corner; he let everybody down, ditched everybody, and then taught them how to be exhilarated by that abandonment. Something in me wants to talk about the hard rain that is falling right now, and to wonder who will step up to sing about it: who will be our minstrel of the End Times; our guiding, undecievable voice; and so on. But to ask that kind of question—to think in those terms—is to lapse into the great mistake, isn't it? And here endeth the lesson of Bob Dylan.

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America Needs to Radically Rethink What It Means to Be Old

As 100-year lifespans become more common, the time has come for a new approach to school, work, and retirement.

by Jonathan Rauch



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July 1977: A 105-degree afternoon in Phoenix. I'm 17 and making deliveries in an underpowered Chevette with "4-55" air-conditioning (four open windows at 55 miles per hour), so I welcome the long runs to Sun City,

when I can let desert air and American Top 40 blast through the car. Arrival, though, always gives me the creeps. The world's first "active retirement community" is city-size (it would eventually span more than 14 square miles and house more than 40,000 people). The concentric circles of almost-identical tract houses stretch as far as I can see. Signs and bulletin boards announce limitless options for entertainment, shopping, fitness, tennis, golf, shuffleboard—every kind of amenity.

Sun City is [a retirement nirvana](#), a suburban dreamscape for a class of people who, only a generation before, were typically isolated, institutionalized, or crammed into their kids' overcrowded apartments. But I drive for blocks without seeing anyone jumping rope or playing tag (no children live here). I see no street life, unless you count residents driving golf carts, the preferred form of local transportation. My teenage self wonders: *Is this twilight zone my eventual destiny? Is this what it means to be old, to be retired, in America?*

In its day, Sun City represented a breakthrough in American life. When it opened, in 1960, thousands of people lined up their cars along Grand Avenue to gawk at the model homes. Del Webb, the visionary developer, understood that the United States was ready to imagine a whole new stage of life—the golden years, as marketers proclaimed them.

A cultural revolution was in full swing. Social Security and private pensions had [liberated tens of millions of older Americans from poverty](#) and dependency; modern medicine had given them the health to enjoy what was then a new lifestyle: leisure. In 1965, Medicare ameliorated the old-age fear of medical bankruptcy. In 1972, President Richard Nixon and the Democratic Congress, outbidding each other for the senior vote, increased Social Security by 20 percent and indexed it to keep up with inflation. With these two programs on fiscal autopilot, the entitlement state was born, and the elderly were its prime beneficiaries.

When I gazed at Sun City, I was seeing the embodiment of the U.S. government's greatest 20th-century domestic achievement: the near elimination of destitution among the elderly. By 1977, the poverty rate among those 65 and older had fallen from almost 30 percent in the mid-1960s to half that level. In 2022, it was 10.9 percent, according to the

Census Bureau, slightly below the poverty rate for those ages 18 to 64 (11.7 percent)—and very significantly below the poverty rate among children and youth (16.3 percent).

“The struggle chronicled in this book—the struggle to build a secure old age for all—has been in many ways successful,” James Chappel writes in *Golden Years: How Americans Invented and Reinvented Old Age*. For most seniors, life is “immeasurably better” than it was a century ago. But he and Andrew J. Scott, the author of *The Longevity Imperative: How to Build a Healthier and More Productive Society to Support Our Longer Lives*, agree that the ’60s model of retirement needs updating in the face of new demographic, fiscal, and social realities. What comes next?

Life expectancy at birth was 18 years in the early Bronze Age, 22 in the Roman empire, and 36 in Massachusetts in 1776.

For clues, Chappel, a historian at Duke University, looks to the past, tracing the 100-year evolution of Americans’ notions of aging. He proceeds from the clarifying premise that aging is as much a social phenomenon as it is a biological one—perhaps even more so. “There is no ‘natural’ way to age—we have to be taught, by our cultural and political and religious institutions, how to do it well.”

[From the December 2014 issue: Jonathan Rauch on the real roots of midlife crisis](#)

Today’s conceptions of old age and retirement are modern inventions. In 19th-century America, Chappel writes, “the presumption was that ‘old age’ was not a long phase of life that began at sixty-five, but a short one that was marked by disability and decline … Basically, older people were to seek contemplation and tranquility.” In the mid-1800s, the average 30-year-old could expect to live only about 30 more years. That began to change as the fruits of industrialization and science ripened. As more people lived to become old, social activists mobilized for pensions, led by Civil War veterans. Now forgotten, the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association argued in the 1890s for pensions as a form of reparations for the formerly enslaved. No one today will be surprised to

learn that this group was suppressed, its proposals were buried, and its leader, Callie House, found herself in jail on trumped-up charges.

Still, the movement to end dependency and penury in old age gathered force and triumphed with the enactment of Social Security in 1935, the crowning achievement of the New Deal. Although its initial design favored men over women, white people over Black, and industrial over agricultural workers, it laid the foundation for the concept of retirement that made 65 officially old. *Senior citizen* replaced *aged* in the lexicon, and seniors became a self-aware identity group. The decades that followed brought rapid expansion of elder benefits and programs, and with it a far-flung social infrastructure: senior centers and retirement communities; continuous-care and assisted-living facilities; educational and recreational opportunities, such as Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes and Elderhostel (now Road Scholar); and, not least, AARP (originally the American Association of Retired Persons), a marketing juggernaut and among the largest and most powerful lobbying groups ever.

But today, Chappel argues, progress toward a healthier, more secure, and more inclusive concept of old age has stalled, largely because the U.S. government has stalled. Though private activism and inventive experiments continue, “they will always be insufficient in the absence of aggressive state action.” A parsimonious Congress looks for budget cuts while conservatives push to privatize Social Security and [Medicare](#). Just as worrisome, in Chappel’s view: Older Americans have embraced the idea that they are the same as younger people, except older—a vision that blurs the distinctive needs of elders and undercuts their identity-based activism. What’s called for, he suggests, is an ambitious expansion of the welfare state to cover unmet necessities, such as long-term care.

[Read: The kind of smarts you don't find in young people](#)

This raises some questions. For one, who will pay for expensive new government programs? Social Security and Medicare are rapidly headed for insolvency and already hold the rest of the federal budget in a tightening vise. “The entire long-term deficit growth is driven by Social Security, Medicare, and the interest cost of their shortfalls,” Brian Riedl, a budget

analyst with the Manhattan Institute, a center-right think tank, has written. Chappel breezes past any such fiscal concerns.

Even more puzzling, he does not pause to consider why further subsidizing the elderly should be the country's top public-policy priority. He notes in passing that children are poorer than seniors, but he waves away the subject of generational equity, saying that "security is not a scarce resource" and dismissing as "vicious" a 1988 *New Republic* article, by the late Henry Fairlie, arguing that to seriously address competing social priorities, "we must shake off the peculiar notion ... that old age is a time in which people are entitled to be rewarded."

Chappel is not a policy wonk; as history, his book is valuable and authoritative. Perhaps it is not a historian's job to answer philosophical questions about generational equity, political questions about hard choices, or fiscal questions about affordability. Still, one wishes he had at least teed them up, because they are unavoidable. Fortunately, Scott addresses them in *The Longevity Imperative*. An economist at London Business School, he identifies two longevity revolutions. The first has already arrived and, for all its multifaceted implications, is simply stated: Most people grow old.

Of course, old age as such is not new, but until quite recently, comparatively few people lived to see it. Life expectancy at birth was 18 years in the early Bronze Age, 22 in the Roman empire, and 36 in Massachusetts in 1776. It's 77.5 years in the U.S. today, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Those averages include child mortality, which partly accounts for shorter lifespans in earlier epochs. Even excluding child mortality, though, the improvements in longevity are astounding. Since the 1880s, so-called best-practice life expectancy—how long you'll live if you do everything right and receive good health care—has increased, on average, by two to three years every decade. By now, the average American 65-year-old can expect to live another 18.5 years. Eighty is the new 68, inasmuch as the mortality rate of 80-year-old American women in 2019 was the same as that of 68-year-old women in 1933. An American child born today has a better-than-even chance of living to age 95. The first person to live to age 150 [may have already been born](#).

[From the October 2014 issue: What happens when we all live to 100?](#)

Yet that triumph poses a challenge. The first longevity revolution “was about getting the majority to reach old age; the second will be about changes in how we age,” Scott writes. Will those additional years be vigorous and healthy? Or will they be filled with chronic illness and frailty? Will society capture the creative and productive potential of its rapidly expanding older population? Or will ageism and archaic conventions waste that potential? Scott makes an optimistic case that the second longevity revolution presents an opportunity to “rethink the way we live our whole life. Right now, though, we are not set to reap the benefit of these longer lives.”

The core problem today, he argues, is that lifespan outruns [health span](#). In other words, not all of the years we add are healthy ones. The time has come for an ambitious, all-of-society effort to close that gap. Health-care priorities should shift more toward prevention, which today receives only 3 percent of U.S. health-care spending. Public-health measures should help further reduce smoking, alcoholism, obesity, and social isolation. More research dollars should flow to slowing the biological aging process, as well as treating frailty and disease.

The second longevity revolution will also require new institutions, expectations, and attitudes. With millions of people living vigorously into their 80s and beyond, the very idea of “retirement”—the expectation that people will leave the workforce at an arbitrary age—makes no sense. In fact, out the window goes the whole three-stage structure of American life, with education crammed into the first couple of decades, work heaped in the middle, and leisure stuck at the end. Jobs need to be made more friendly to older workers (through measures as elaborate as shifting physical tasks to robots and as simple as providing different footwear and chairs); employers need to exploit age diversity (which improves team productivity by blending older workers’ experience and skill with younger workers’ creativity and drive); education and training need to be available and encouraged throughout life. “The key is to see aging as a state of flux involving us all and not an event or a state that segregates one group from another,” Scott writes. Accordingly, he rejects the entire premise of age-based entitlements: “Tax breaks and other benefits should not be distributed simply because people reach a certain age.” (Henry Fairlie, call your office!)

Some of these changes are expensive, complex, or controversial, but Scott is right to argue that the really big barrier lies in American culture's relentless negativity about aging. "Debate about an aging society rarely goes beyond mention of spiraling health costs, a pensions crisis, dementia and care homes," he writes. "It is never seen as exciting, challenging or interesting."

Reading Scott's book together with Chappel's can be whiplash-inducing, because they are in many respects antithetical. Where Chappel seeks to reinforce the country's commitment to retirement security, Scott challenges the very concept of retirement; where Chappel endorses age-based programs and politics, Scott wants to erase age boundaries and base policies on individuals' needs and abilities; and where Chappel sounds downbeat about aging in the United States—emphasizing that "many older Americans are in trouble" as they juggle the costs of medicine, housing, and especially long-term care—Scott emphasizes the unprecedented opportunities that the longevity revolution affords.

There is truth in both authors' views (as they would probably agree). Supporting a rapidly growing aging population poses some daunting challenges, most notably in improving the country's fragmented provision of long-term care. Yet Scott's perspective is, I think, closer to the mark. The Sun City idea of aging and retirement is no longer either affordable or desirable as a template; viewing "the elderly" as an identity category makes little sense at a time when living to 85 is commonplace and some 85-year-olds are as vigorous as many 65-year-olds. Now on the doorstep of routine 100-year lifespans, America needs to rethink the meaning of school, work, and retirement—and what it even means to be old.

[Read: The future of work is a 60-year career](#)

I'll propose, however, a friendly amendment to Scott. He envisions a world where boundaries in life are decoupled from age; what matters is what you can do, not how old you are. But the big conceptual categories of childhood, adolescence, middle age, and old age are too deeply rooted to toss aside. We could use a new category, one reflecting the fact that longevity is inserting one, two, or even three decades between middle age and old age.

As it happens, such a category is available: late adulthood. Associated with such thinkers as the sociologist Phyllis Moen, the psychologist Laura Carstensen, the social entrepreneurs Chip Conley and Marc Freedman, and the activist and writer Ashton Applewhite, the notion of late adulthood captures the reality of a new stage of life, in which many people are neither fully retired nor conventionally employed—a phase when people can seek new pursuits, take “not so hard” jobs, and give back to their communities, their families, and their God.

And no, this is not a pipe dream. Copious evidence shows that most of what people think they know about life after 50 is wrong. Aging per se (as distinct from sickness or frailty) is not a process of uniform decline. It brings gains, too: greater equanimity, more emotional resilience, and what Carstensen and others have called the positivity effect, a heightened appreciation of life’s blessings. Partly for that reason, the later decades of life are, on average, not the saddest but the happiest. Contrary to popular belief, aging does not bring mental stagnation. Older people can learn and create, although their styles of learning and creativity are different than in younger years. Emotional development and maturation continue right through the end of life. And aging can bring wisdom—the ability to rise above self-centered viewpoints, [master turbulent emotions](#), and solve life’s problems—a boon not only to the wise but to everyone around them.

[Read: Caitlin Flanagan on turning 60](#)

Late adulthood is a time when the prospects for earning diminish but the potential for grandparenting, mentoring, and volunteering peaks. It is—or can be—a time of reorientation and relaunch, a time when zero-sum goals such as social competition and personal ambition yield to positive-sum pursuits such as building community and nurturing relationships.

If anything, Scott undersells the second longevity revolution. Right now, Americans are receiving more than a decade of additional time in the most satisfying and prosocial period of life. This is potentially the greatest gift any generation of humans has ever received. The question is whether we will grasp it.

This article appears in the [January 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Longevity Revolution.”

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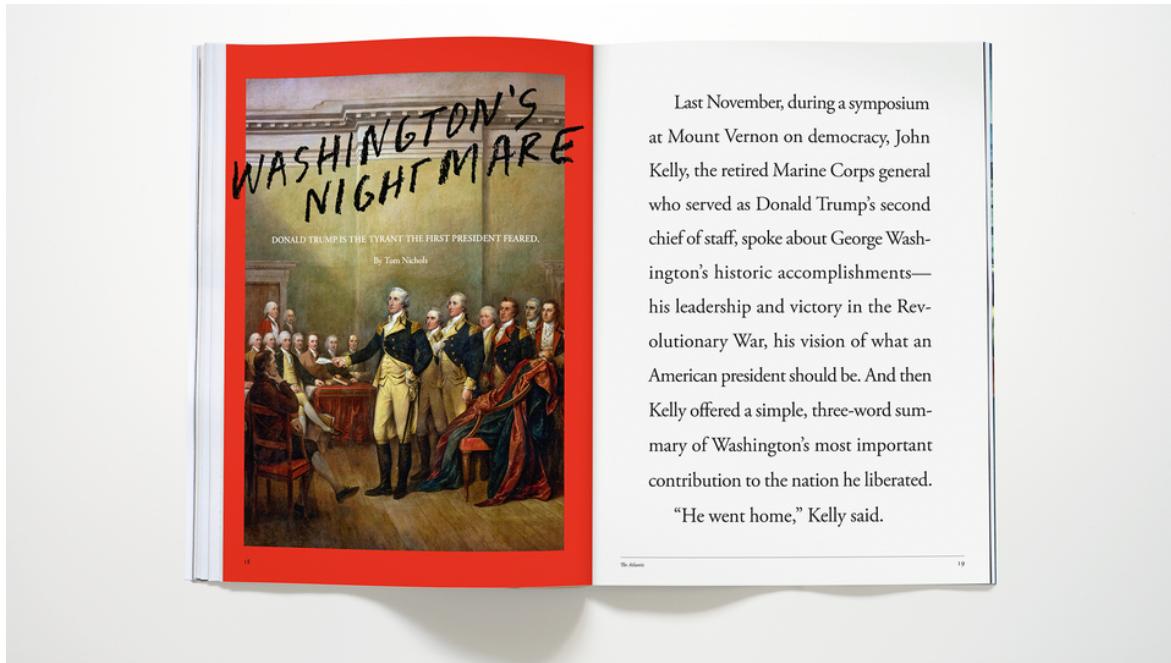
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America Needs a Leader, Not a Salesman

Readers respond to our November 2024 cover story and more.



Washington's Nightmare

Donald Trump is the tyrant the first president feared, [Tom Nichols wrote in the November 2024 issue.](#)

Thank you, Tom Nichols, for your timely article profiling our Founding Father. President George Washington modeled key tenets of public service: Be a citizen, serve with integrity, graciously pass the responsibility on to the

next citizen. Choosing to juxtapose Washington's virtues against the abomination that is Donald Trump not only is appropriate, but should serve as a wake-up call to all Americans.

Sadly, it seems many Americans have lost touch with our history. I hope this changes before we find ourselves in a mad scramble to reclaim our more perfect union. Our patriots fought hard for our independence; our forefathers died to keep it. For nearly 250 years, we've dedicated ourselves to getting it right.

Do we have any idea what we stand to lose?

Peter Brown

Lyman, Maine

I admire Tom Nichols's writing and analysis. I teach courses on leadership and ethics at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. I conducted a review of 44 peer-reviewed academic-research articles that analyzed various aspects of Trump's leadership style. My conclusion was that Trump has extremely limited leadership skills. He is a domineering bully who retaliates against anyone who challenges him. His moral decision making is based on self-interest; he lacks emotional intelligence, and his personality is defined by paranoia and victimhood. His principal skill for influencing others is creating an attractive image and selling a product. In times like these, we need a true leader, not a salesman.

Kenneth Williams

Chapel Hill, N.C.

As I read "Washington's Nightmare," I returned to the historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar's [Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge](#). Dunbar's book tells the story of a woman enslaved by George and Martha Washington, who fled the president's residence in 1796. Washington pursued Judge until his death.

The article and book make for a problematic juxtaposition: I, too, celebrate Washington's achievements, his heroism and devotion to the republic. But Tom Nichols's sometimes hagiographic treatment of the first president gave me pause. Nichols devotes only one passage—about 150 words—to the problem of Washington and slavery. I understand that his larger interest is in how Washington “set the standard of patriotic character for his successors” and not necessarily in the glaring contradiction of Washington and the people he enslaved. But if one is to compare Washington's virtues with Trump's, this contradiction demands attention. Shouldn't we consider Ona Judge's nightmare, as she was pursued relentlessly by the Washingtons for having dared to claim what Washington himself had fought for—freedom, dignity, certain unalienable rights? Nichols prominently features General John Kelly's remark that after serving as president, Washington went home. When the Washingtons returned to Mount Vernon, what did their slaves think?

I'm grateful for Nichols's assessment of Washington's legacy. But this aspect of it deserves deeper engagement.

Kevin L. Cole

Sioux Falls, S.D.

Tom Nichols replies:

Thank you to the many readers who appreciated my look back at our first president. I, too, found the distance between George Washington and Donald Trump almost too painful to grasp. Peter Brown raises the real problem of poor historical literacy among Americans, but I wonder if the larger issue is that our politics have become amoral and transactional, something that Washington would have abhorred and that education alone cannot solve. Perhaps Kenneth Williams is closer to the mark by noting that Trump, above all else, is the product of a modern phenomenon—marketing.

I understand Kevin Cole's objection regarding Washington and slavery, but not every thought and reflection dealing with the first president ought to center on slavery. Washington rebelled against an important institution of his day—monarchism—and to judge him from the 21st century because he

did not right one of the other grievous wrongs of the 18th strikes me as ahistorical and, potentially, a diversion from the example he offers us in our current struggle with authoritarianism.

The End of Judicial Independence

One of America's greatest achievements could disappear overnight, [Anne Applebaum wrote](#) in the October 2024 issue.

Anne Applebaum provided an important reminder that some Supreme Court justices appear loyal to President Donald Trump and not the Constitution. But their bad behavior does not end there: Some are loyal, too, to the billionaire class.

Justice Samuel Alito went on an expensive fishing trip with the billionaire Paul Singer, staying at a lodge that charges more than \$1,000 a night for a room. Afterward, Alito did not recuse himself from cases involving his benefactor's hedge fund. Justice Clarence Thomas, not to be outdone, has enjoyed gifts and favors from several billionaires, taking at least 26 flights on private jets. Thomas and Alito claimed that they didn't know that they were obligated to report these far-from-trivial gifts.

Something has to be done to put an end to this. We need an enforceable code of conduct for the nation's highest court.

Seth Wittner
Worcester, Mass.

I graduated from law school in 2010. I didn't know then that those were the halcyon days, when precedents such as *Roe v. Wade* and its landmark arguments seemed unassailable. I was only 25. I had bought into the teachings about the sanctity of the judiciary's role in our legal system. I believed—I still believe—in the ethics of my profession, in the dignity of our highest courts and what they and their decisions symbolize. Respect for tradition and the analysis of capable scholars and judges of years past was

crucial to my training. But I wonder what younger people sitting in constitutional-law classes must think today, having now witnessed the ugly, frayed edges of our democracy. What do these sobering, disappointing lessons mean for the practice of law in the future?

Brittlynn Mourgue

New York, N.Y.

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[Walk on Air Against Your Better Judgment](#)," Caitlin Flanagan writes about her relationship with the poet Seamus Heaney. Heaney first met the Flanagan family during a year spent teaching English at UC Berkeley, where Flanagan's father, Tom, was a professor. Heaney became a second father of sorts, Flanagan writes, and the poet and his work shaped her understanding of the world. The cover image shows Heaney at the Royal Society of Literature, in London, in 1995, months before he was awarded that year's Nobel Prize in Literature.

— **Paul Spella**, *Senior Art Director*

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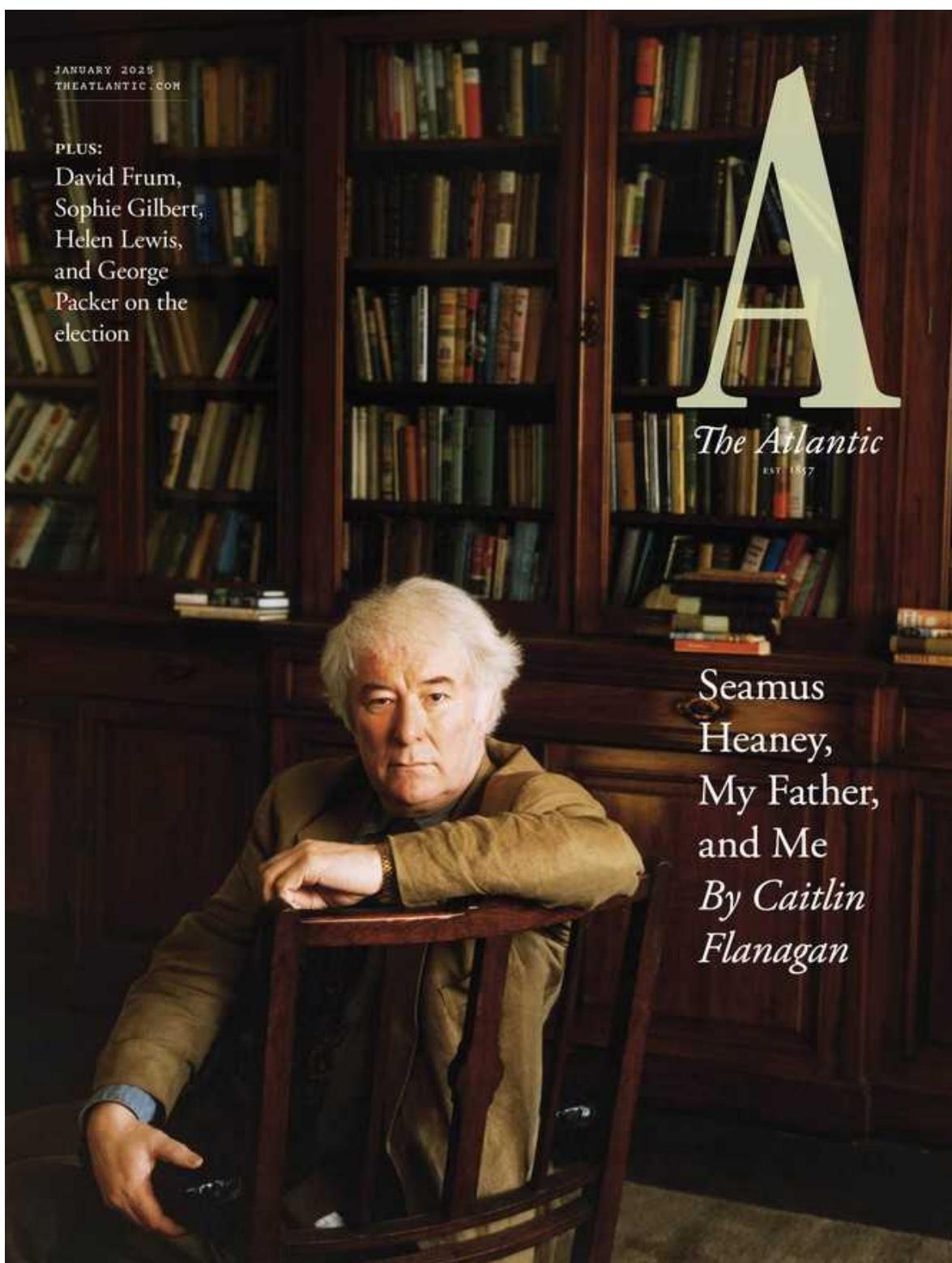
David Frum,
Sophie Gilbert,
Helen Lewis,
and George
Packer on the
election



The Atlantic

EST. 1857

Seamus
Heaney,
My Father,
and Me
*By Caitlin
Flanagan*



Correction

“[The Most Remote Place in the World](#)” (November 2024) stated that, relative to the universe, the plane of the International Space Station’s orbit never changes. In fact, because of the Earth’s oblateness, it does shift over time.

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Poetry

- [**Says the Wind**](#)

Says the Wind

by David Baker



She's got her eyes down.

He's got his head down
as far as he can pull it into his scarf and burly coat.

Their shoulders are pitched forward hard to cut
through the city headwind. But there is no wind—

...

What we see of a wind is what we see
of the world of things. Not wind but a chaff

of pollen choking in that whirl. Muster of leaves
above in the puffed-out ash. What she says—

...

What we cannot hear but see on each face.
Now he's walking ahead. Now he's lost

in a fluster of subway riders shoving up
out of the sudden portal. Shh says the wind—

...

The soul of another lies in darkness.
Now she is running and now she is calling

into the choppy pool of people. Everyone
shoves into this wind. But there is no wind—

This poem appears in the [January 2025 print edition](#).

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