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BEFORE TAKING
THE WORLD

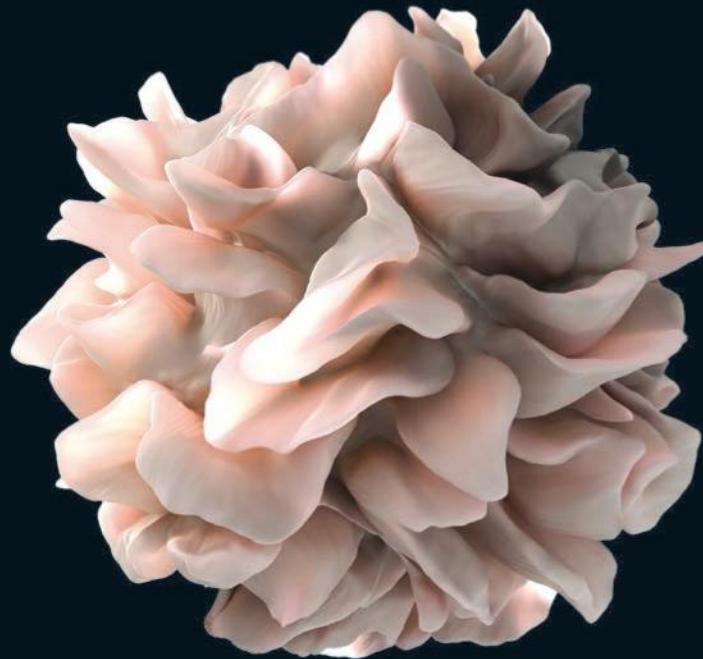
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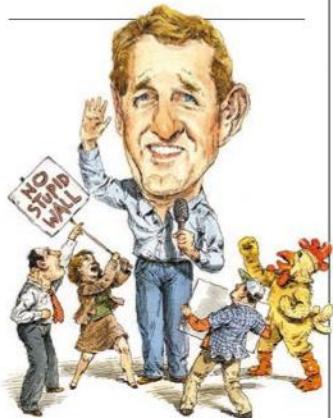
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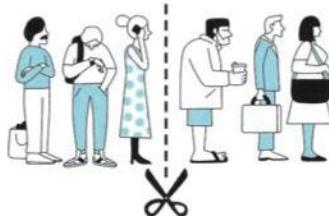


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THE CONVERSATION

RESPONSES & REVERBERATIONS



Telling Lola's Story

"Lola's Story" (June), by the Filipino American journalist Alex Tizon, quickly became the most-read story on TheAtlantic.com and garnered many emotional responses from people around the United States and around the world, particularly in the Philippines. Tizon, who died suddenly just a few weeks before the story's publication, wrote about Eudocia Tomas Pulido, the woman he called Lola and thought of as a grandmother but who was actually his family's slave. Until she went to live with Tizon and his wife, Melissa, late in life, Lola provided unpaid labor and suffered years of abuse from Tizon's parents. Since the June cover story was released, Melissa Tizon has, in several interviews, emphasized Alex and his siblings' love for Lola. While many U.S.-based readers drew parallels to antebellum slavery in America, many Filipino readers elucidated the cultural conditions that can lead to situations like Lola's. One regional news outlet, *Rappler*, sought out Lola's relatives in her hometown. Back in Seattle, where Tizon had lived and worked, the *Seattle Times* reporter who wrote Lola's obituary six years ago expressed shock and anger that Tizon had obscured the truth about Lola's enslaved status at the time. Melissa Tizon told the reporter, Susan Kelleher: "Sometimes it takes people awhile to get to the truth about their lives." Here is a sampling of responses to "Lola's Story." For more, please visit theatlantic.com/contemporaryslavery.

The use of underpaid and overworked *katulong*, *utusan*, and *kasambahay*—the kind of servitude Eudocia was forced to endure—is common practice among many Filipino families. It is an unjust practice that stems from a violent history of colonization and exploitation of the Filipino people. In the Philippines, thousands of Filipinos are brought to cities, suburbs, and wealthy households in the countryside as domestic help. Many of these domestic helpers are young women who face exploitative conditions. They are a product of the massive landlessness and joblessness brought about by feudalism in the Philippines.

Oppressive religious practices combined with lack of access to quality education produce a culture in which people internalize unquestioning obedience and *utang na loob* ("debt of gratitude"). They produce a society in which exploitation is downplayed as a temporary state worth bearing to prevent any collective resistance and thoroughgoing change.

Facilitated by Filipino laws and institutions, and dictated by foreign demands, migration has supplied the world with at least 12 million Filipinos, 4 million of whom are in the U.S. Beyond the reality that Filipinos are compelled to migrate abroad because of lack of economic opportunity at home, many are actually trafficked and forced to work in different countries. Indeed, Eudocia was one of hundreds of Filipinos who are trafficked into the U.S. every year as

teachers, bakery workers, shipyard workers, and more.

Adrian Bonifacio
CHAIRPERSON, ANAKBAYAN-USA
SAN JOSE, CALIF.

There is no way to excuse or mitigate the incredible cruelty that Eudocia suffered at the hands of Tizon's father and mother, nor the benefits that he and his siblings accrued from her coerced labor. There is no question that her unfreedom produced a sphere of freedom that could be enjoyed by the family. She was a slave, as Tizon says, in that her life and labor were stolen from her to benefit those for whom she was, at least in the early years, no more than an "*utusan*," someone to be ordered around, bereft of rights and dignity.

But despite her lowly status, the fact remained that she was not chattel. That she was not merely property who could be bought and sold might help to explain why she could also become part of the family, albeit a lowly and exploited member ... In Tizon's narrative (and in the everyday experience of Filipinos who grew up with servants), affective ties of pity (*awa*), reciprocal indebtedness (*utang na loob*), and shame (*hiya*) hold together the master and servant as much as they pull them apart. Thus the Tagalog term *Lola*, "grandmother," used to refer to Pulido. It is not a "slave name" as others have suggested, but a kinship term to refer to elders in the Filipino community, even as she was often humiliated and abused ...

Despite years of captivity, Pulido retains a resistant

capacity. Alex Tizon's essay can be read not simply as an attempt to confess a crime and expiate his family's guilt. It is also a testimony to the slave's ability to deflect the master's appropriative power. It is as much about Tizon's secret shame as it is about Pulido's resistant dignity.

Vicente Rafael

PROFESSOR OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
EXCERPT FROM A FACEBOOK POST

In sharing his story, it seemed Tizon wanted to show us that modern-day slavery can appear under many guises, and that the line between intimacy and subjugation can feel complicated. It can feel like love ...

When Tizon tells us that Eudocia is most at home within his house, that she is able to forget years of abuse after a day on the coast, that she was ambitionless, selfless, and easy to please, these moments reveal that he has not finished casting aside the fictions he has had to tell himself to live with Eudocia's enslavement.

Ultimately his story still bears the signs of a slave's story told from the perspective of the slavemaster's son.

Sukjong Hong

EXCERPT FROM A COMIC POSTED ON
THE NIB

It's weird and very fraught—especially in light of some of the slave narratives white slavery apologists have written in the United States—to say that someone who started out as a slave became a "true" member of the family that owned them. But at the same time, it's hard not to read the story and come away feeling that Tizon really did see [Lola] as a mother figure, and really did care about her. This and a thousand other details are what make Tizon's story such a gripping and infuriating and

confounding read. I can't stop thinking about it, and judging from the online reaction, neither can a lot of people. The ensuing conversation has been fascinating, ranging from some of the aforementioned questions about whether Tizon comes uncomfortably close to the apologetic slave narratives of the past, to Filipinos discussing the ongoing prevalence of this system of slavery to this day.

One category of response, though, seems to have picked up a bunch of steam online—that the story is simply *bad* because it "normalizes" or "apologizes for" slavery ...

It's *good* to normalize evil, in the sense of showing how otherwise "normal" people and institutions can perpetrate evil acts, and every attempt should be made to do so. That's how you prevent more evil from happening in the future.

One of the key themes of Tizon's article is that his family was, in many senses, almost a caricature of the striving, American-dream-seeking immigrant experience. They were *normal*. They were normal and yet they had a slave. To which one could respond, "Well, no, they're not normal—they are deranged psychopaths to have managed to simply live for decades and decades with a slave under their roof. That is not something normal people do, and it's wrong to portray it as such."

But the entire brutal weight of human history contradicts this view. Normal people—people who otherwise have no signs of derangement or a lack of a grip on basic human moral principles—do evil stuff *all the time* ... that's the human condition: We don't have

easy access to a zoomed-out view of morality and empathy. We do what the people around us are doing, what our culture is doing. Tizon's Filipino family came from a place where a form of slavery was quite common, and moving to America didn't change that fact.

Jesse Singal

EXCERPT FROM A NEW YORK
BLOG POST

In what I believe is the first photograph of me that exists, there is a woman standing behind me who is neither my mother nor my *lola* (with whom I lived for the first year of my life). It was a woman casually referred to as the "maid." In my visits to the Philippines over the years, I had noticed many such "maids." I was told that these were the poorest of the poor, those from far-flung provinces who had so little that they moved to the cities to clean, cook, launder, and care for the slightly less poor for the sake of survival, for the sake of sending something back to their families so that their children might have more someday.

I had completely forgotten about the woman in that photograph until a number of Filipino friends sent me Alex Tizon's article. When I read it, I had to fight back tears. It read to me like a confession, a balancing act of hatred for

#TWEET of the month

This story is intense and painful and probably more common than people want to admit

— @rgay

The writer Roxane Gay

the worst parts of self/family/culture/immigration and love for the best parts of Lola.

But the most important thing about the article was that it called the arrangement what it was—slavery. How complicit am I in such a system? Were/are my family's domestic "helpers" paid fairly, or were/are they enslaved? Did they choose that arrangement, or were they "given" to someone as Lola was? How widespread is such a situation in the Philippines and among Filipinos abroad today? What can we do for her family? What can we do about it globally?

Without Lola's story, I wouldn't have been asking these questions of myself. I hoped to find others' responses to these questions on social media. Instead, I was confronted with a much simpler one: Is Alex Tizon a villain?

Generally, the tweets I read criticized the article as a well-written attempt to trick readers into sympathizing with a slaveholder. They equated it to the American South's attempts to justify slavery. They called out Tizon for doing nothing about Lola's situation once he became an adult. They mourned the erasure of Eudocia Tomas Pulido's identity and voice. They decried the lack of statistical context. The overall conclusion seemed to be that Tizon and his family should burn in hell, and we should all cheer for that.

These responses baffled me. I didn't feel as though Tizon had excused himself or his family from their sins. He confessed to his family's cruel treatment of Lola in great detail. He claimed his complicity and recounted his own feeble attempts to fix a

situation he didn't know how to fix. And, finally, he tried to tell Lola's story with the information he was able to glean from her and her family.

Of course, Alex Tizon was not perfect and neither is the article. Why didn't he include interviews with her surviving family members? Did he ever offer her family any kind of reparations? Do they *want* reparations? I don't know the answers to these questions, and unfortunately, Tizon is no longer alive to tell us.

But perhaps the answers to a lot of these questions are rooted in the same reasons all of us fail to do what is right in a thousand small ways every day. There's a pretty good chance that you're reading this on a smartphone, and I'm guessing that in the past few years you've come across a number of reports about the poor working conditions in Chinese smartphone factories or about the Congolese who mine the rare-earth metals that power those phones. Knowing this is all unspeakably unjust, what have you done? I'm not pointing this out to let Tizon off the hook or to put you on trial, but rather to suggest that asking why he wasn't better at doing what was right every step of the way isn't the most fruitful line of discussion. We are all complicit in a number of evils. We all perpetuate oppression throughout our daily lives (granted, some more than others). This is not a reason to give up all efforts to reduce the extent to which we do

so, but it is a reason not to spend all our time cataloging another individual's sins.

Randy Ribay
STANFORD, CALIF.

My main point of contention with Tizon's article, and perhaps with [my *Atlantic* colleagues'] editorial choices, is that the deep power dynamics of slavery are not always clearly articulated. The first clue is the use of the word *slave* to refer to Pulido ... My guess is that Tizon chose *slave* both because it is provocative and because he wanted to invoke the searing reality of American slavery. In doing so, he chose not to hide from an awful truth. His use of the word also undercuts the often pedantic debate over just how unfree labor has to be in order to be called slavery ...

Enslaved person has begun to supplant *slave* in scholarly circles (including among the curators of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture) as a way to "carry them forward as people, not the property that they were in that time," according to the writer Andi Cumbo-Floyd.

I prefer *enslaved person* not just because of that nod to humanization, but because of its closer proximity to the verb *enslave*. Especially in Pulido's case—absent the generational and legal context of African American slavery—slavery is not a fixed state. Enslavement is not a single action, either. Rather, like emancipation, enslavement is a process.

THE BIG QUESTION

On TheAtlantic.com, readers answered July/August's Big Question and voted on one another's responses. Here are the top vote-getters.

Q: What is the most underappreciated medical invention in history?

3. The application of statistics to medical problems. With the help of this tool, we can trace the development of epidemics, analyze the efficiency of drugs and medical procedures, and determine which pathogens cause which diseases.

— James E. Shockley

2. Vaccinations. The fact that we're seeing nearly

eradicated diseases making a comeback shows just how much we have taken them for granted.

— Summer Whitesell

1. Doctors' washing their hands before examining patients. Many post-op patients die of infection. Simply washing hands and instruments drastically changes outcomes.

— Sarah Brooks

Enslaved people are made over decades by the process of enslavement, they are broken and bent, ... warped against their wills. Calling Pulido a "slave" obscures the work that individuals did to assign that status ...

But the consequences of human exploitation run much deeper than Tizon appeared to recognize, and perhaps much deeper than our own editorial staff realized. One of the common critiques of "Lola's Story" is that it failed to shed much light on the fascinating woman Tizon called Lola, and seemed to view her only in the wide angles of Tizon's arc of redemption. That critique seems somewhat limited to me—Tizon did chronicle his

efforts to interview her, and did present some moments when we saw her personality. But perhaps it's also true that her lack of voice and independence in his story are part of the nature of enslavement. The worst sin of the peculiar institution in any of its worldwide forms is that it erases some lives to nurture others. Tizon's account does not grasp the extent of Pulido's erasure, but that inability highlights just how slavery warps both the enslaver and the enslaved.

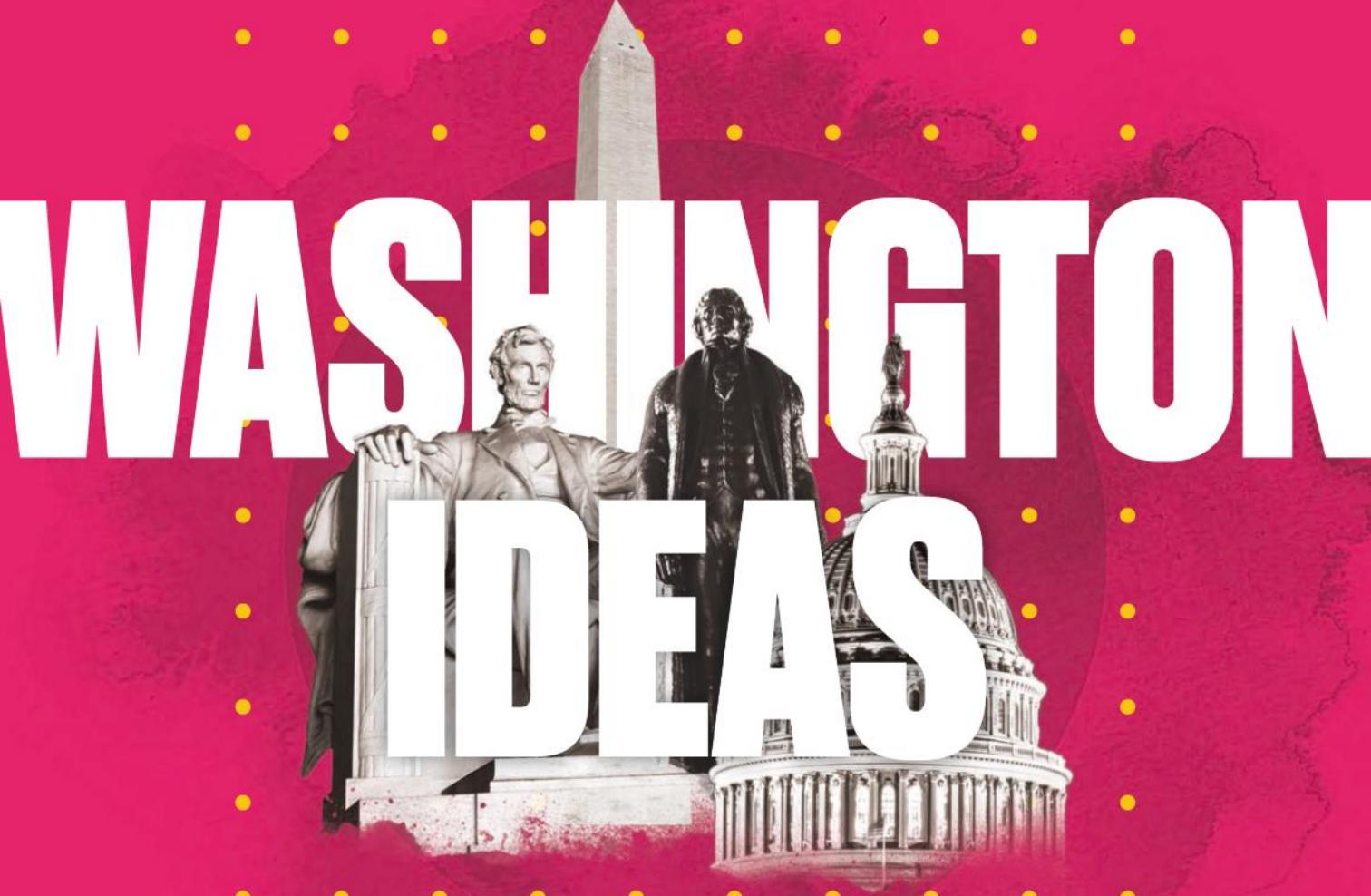
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DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS
September 2017

In Venezuela, a Big Mac costs about half a month's wages. Or rather, it did, until a bread shortage forced the burger off the menu.
—Rene Chun, p. 26

• POLITICS

The Rise of the Violent Left

A burgeoning antifascist movement wants to fight the alt-right's fire—with more fire.

BY PETER BEINART

SINCE 1907, PORTLAND, Oregon, has hosted an annual Rose Festival. Since 2007, the festival had included a parade down 82nd Avenue. Since 2013, the Republican Party of Multnomah County, which includes Portland, had taken part. This April, all of that changed.

In the days leading up to the planned parade, a group called the Direct Action Alliance declared, “Fascists plan to march through the streets,” and warned, “Nazis will not march through Portland unopposed.” The alliance said it didn’t object to the Multnomah GOP itself, but to “fascists” who planned to infiltrate its ranks. Yet it also denounced marchers with “Trump flags” and “red MAGA hats” who could “normalize support for an orange man who bragged about sexually harassing women and who is waging a war of hate, racism and prejudice.” A second group, Oregon Students Empowered, created a Facebook page called “Shut down fascism! No nazis in Portland!”

Next, the parade’s organizers received an anonymous email warning that if “Trump supporters” and others who promote “hateful rhetoric” marched, “we will have two hundred or



more people rush into the parade ... and drag and push those people out.” When Portland police said they lacked the resources to provide adequate security, the organizers canceled the parade. It was a sign of things to come.

For progressives, Donald Trump is not just another Republican president. Seventy-six percent of Democrats, according to a Suffolk poll from last September, consider him a racist. Last March, according to a YouGov survey, 71 percent of Democrats agreed that his campaign contained “fascist undertones.” All of which raises a question that is likely to bedevil progressives for years to come:

If you believe the president of the United States is leading a racist, fascist movement that threatens the rights, if not the lives, of vulnerable minorities, how far are you willing to go to stop it?

In Washington, D.C., the response to that question centers on how members of Congress can oppose Trump’s agenda, on how Democrats can retake the House of Representatives, and on how and when to push for impeachment. But in the country at large, some militant leftists are offering a very different answer. On Inauguration Day, a masked activist punched the white-supremacist leader Richard Spencer. In February, protesters

violently disrupted UC Berkeley's plans to host a speech by Milo Yiannopoulos, a former Breitbart.com editor. In March, protesters pushed and shoved the controversial conservative political scientist Charles Murray when he spoke at Middlebury College, in Vermont.

As far-flung as these incidents were, they have something crucial in common. Like the organizations that opposed the Multnomah County Republican Party's participation in the 82nd Avenue of Roses Parade, these activists appear to be linked to a movement called "antifa," which is short for *antifascist* or *Anti-Fascist Action*. The movement's secrecy makes definitively cataloging its activities difficult, but this much is certain: Antifa's power is growing. And how the rest of the activist left responds will help define its moral character in the Trump age.

ANTIFA TRACES ITS ROOTS to the 1920s and '30s, when militant leftists battled fascists in the streets of Germany, Italy, and Spain. When fascism withered after World War II, antifa did too. But in the '70s and '80s, neo-Nazi skinheads began to infiltrate Britain's punk scene. After the Berlin Wall fell, neo-Nazism also gained prominence in Germany. In response, a cadre of young leftists, including many anarchists and punk fans, revived the tradition of street-level antifascism.

In the late '80s, left-wing punk fans in the United States began following suit, though they initially called their groups Anti-Racist Action, on the theory that Americans would be more familiar with fighting racism than fascism. According to Mark Bray, the author of the forthcoming *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, these activists toured with popular alternative bands in the '90s, trying to ensure that neo-Nazis did not recruit their fans. In 2002, they disrupted a speech by the head of the World Church of the Creator, a white-supremacist group in Pennsylvania; 25 people were arrested in the resulting brawl.

By the 2000s, as the internet facilitated more transatlantic dialogue, some American activists had adopted the name antifa. But even on the militant

left, the movement didn't occupy the spotlight. To most left-wing activists during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama years, deregulated global capitalism seemed like a greater threat than fascism.

Trump has changed that. For antifa, the result has been explosive growth. According to NYC Antifa, the group's Twitter following nearly quadrupled in the first three weeks of January alone. (By summer, it exceeded 15,000.) Trump's rise has also bred a new sympathy for antifa among some on the mainstream left. "Suddenly," noted the antifa-aligned journal *It's Going Down*, "anarchists and antifa, who have been demonized and sidelined by the wider Left have been hearing from liberals and Leftists, 'you've been right all along.'" An article in *The Nation* argued that "to call Trumpism fascist" is to realize that it is "not well combated or contained by standard liberal appeals to reason." The radical left, it said, offers "practical and serious responses in this political moment."

Those responses sometimes spill blood. Since antifa is heavily composed of anarchists, its activists place little faith in the state, which they consider complicit in fascism and racism. They prefer direct action: They pressure venues to deny white supremacists space to meet. They pressure employers to fire them and landlords to evict them. And when people they deem racists and fascists manage to assemble, antifa's partisans try to break up their gatherings, including by force.

Such tactics have elicited substantial support from the mainstream left. When the masked antifa activist was filmed assaulting Spencer on Inauguration Day, another piece in *The Nation* described his punch as an act of "kinetic beauty." *Slate* ran an approving article about a humorous piano ballad that glorified the assault. Twitter was inundated with viral versions of the video set to different songs, prompting the former Obama speechwriter Jon Favreau

to tweet, "I don't care how many different songs you set Richard Spencer being punched to, I'll laugh at every one."

The violence is not directed only at avowed racists like Spencer: In June of last year, demonstrators—at least some of whom were associated with antifa—punched and threw eggs at people exiting a Trump rally in San Jose, California. An article in *It's Going Down* celebrated the "righteous beatings."

Antifascists call such actions defensive. Hate speech against vulnerable minorities, they argue, leads to violence against vulnerable minorities. But Trump supporters and white nationalists see antifa's attacks as an assault on their right to

freely assemble, which they in turn seek to reassert. The result is a level of sustained political street warfare not seen in the U.S. since the 1960s. A few weeks after the attacks in San Jose, for instance, a white-supremacist leader announced that he would host a march in Sacramento to protest the attacks at Trump rallies. Anti-Fascist Action Sacramento called for a counterdemonstration; in the end, at least 10 people were stabbed.

A similar cycle has played out at UC Berkeley. In February, masked antifascists broke store windows and hurled Molotov cocktails and rocks at police during a rally against the planned speech by Yiannopoulos. After the university canceled the speech out of what it called "concern for public safety," white nationalists announced a "March on Berkeley" in support of "free speech." At that rally, a 41-year-old man named Kyle Chapman, who was wearing a baseball helmet, ski goggles, shin guards, and a mask, smashed an antifa activist over the head with a wooden post. Suddenly, Trump supporters had a viral video of their own. A far-right crowdfunding site soon raised more than \$80,000 for Chapman's legal defense. (In January, the same site had offered a substantial reward for the identity of the antifascist who had punched Spencer.) A politicized fight culture is emerging,

Antifa's violent tactics have elicited substantial support from the mainstream left.

fueled by cheerleaders on both sides. As James Anderson, an editor at *It's Going Down*, told *Vice*, "This shit is fun."

PORTLAND OFFERS PERHAPS the clearest glimpse of where all of this can lead. The Pacific Northwest has long attracted white supremacists, who have seen it as a haven from America's multiracial East and South. In 1857, Oregon (then a federal territory) banned African Americans from living there. By the 1920s, it boasted the highest Ku Klux Klan membership rate of any state.

In 1988, neo-Nazis in Portland killed an Ethiopian immigrant with a baseball bat. Shortly thereafter, notes Alex Reid Ross, a lecturer at Portland State University and the author of *Against the Fascist Creep*, anti-Nazi skinheads formed a chapter of Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice. Before long, the city also had an Anti-Racist Action group.

Now, in the Trump era, Portland has become a bastion of antifascist militancy. Masked protesters smashed store windows during multiday demonstrations following Trump's election. In early April, antifa activists threw smoke bombs into a "Rally for Trump and Freedom" in the Portland suburb of Vancouver, Washington. A local paper said the ensuing melee resembled a mosh pit.

When antifascists forced the cancellation of the 82nd Avenue of Roses Parade, Trump supporters responded with a "March for Free Speech." Among those who attended was Jeremy Christian, a burly ex-con draped in an American flag, who uttered racial slurs and made Nazi salutes. A few weeks later, on May 25, a man believed to be Christian was filmed calling antifa "a bunch of punk bitches."

The next day, Christian boarded a light-rail train and began yelling that "colored people" were ruining the city. He fixed his attention on two teenage girls, one African American and the other wearing a hijab, and told them "to go back to Saudi Arabia" or "kill themselves." As the girls retreated to the back

of the train, three men interposed themselves between Christian and his targets. "Please," one said, "get off this train." Christian stabbed all three. One bled to death on the train. One was declared dead at a local hospital. One survived.

The cycle continued. Nine days after the attack, on June 4, Trump supporters hosted another Portland rally, this one featuring Chapman, who had gained fame with his assault on the antifascist in Berkeley. Antifa activists threw bricks until the police dispersed them with stun grenades and tear gas.

What's eroding in Portland is the quality Max Weber considered essential to a functioning state: a monopoly on legitimate violence. As members of a largely anarchist movement, antifascists



An antifascist demonstrator burns a Blue Lives Matter flag during a protest in Portland, Oregon, in June.

don't want the government to stop white supremacists from gathering. They want to do so themselves, rendering the government impotent. With help from other left-wing activists, they're already having some success at disrupting government. Demonstrators have interrupted so many city-council meetings that in February, the council met behind locked doors. In February and March, activists protesting police violence and the city's investments in the Dakota Access Pipeline hounded Mayor Ted Wheeler so persistently at his home that he took refuge in a hotel. The fateful email to parade organizers warned, "The police cannot stop us from shutting down roads."

All of this fuels the fears of Trump supporters, who suspect that liberal

bastions are refusing to protect their right to free speech. Joey Gibson, a Trump supporter who organized the June 4 Portland rally, told me that his "biggest pet peeve is when mayors have police stand down... They don't want conservatives to be coming together and speaking." To provide security at the rally, Gibson brought in a far-right militia called the Oath Keepers. In late June, James Buchal, the chair of the Multnomah County Republican Party, announced that it too would use militia members for security, because "volunteers don't feel safe on the streets of Portland."

Antifa believes it is pursuing the opposite of authoritarianism. Many of its activists oppose the very notion of a centralized state. But in the name of

protecting the vulnerable, antifascists have granted themselves the authority to decide which Americans may publicly assemble and which may not. That authority rests on no democratic foundation. Unlike the politicians they revile, the men and women of antifa cannot be voted out of office. Generally, they don't even disclose their names.

Antifa's perceived legitimacy is inversely correlated with the government's. Which is why, in the Trump era, the movement is growing like never before. As the president derides and subverts liberal-democratic norms, progressives face a choice. They can recommit to the rules of fair play, and try to limit the president's corrosive effect, though they will often fail. Or they can, in revulsion or fear or righteous rage, try to deny racists and Trump supporters their political rights. From Middlebury to Berkeley to Portland, the latter approach is on the rise, especially among young people.

Revulsion, fear, and rage are understandable. But one thing is clear. The people preventing Republicans from safely assembling on the streets of Portland may consider themselves fierce opponents of the authoritarianism growing on the American right. In truth, however, they are its unlikeliest allies. ■

Timeline



HISTORY'S LESSONS IN TRUST

The Rise of Accountability

FOR EVERY MOVE potential investors plan to make, they deserve a standard of reliability and transparency; it's necessary that they can trust that their assets are secure and being used responsibly. In finance, one of the stewards of this trust is the fiduciary standard, which holds certain types of advisors accountable to act always and only in their clients' best interests. With roots in ancient Babylonia but a firm foothold in the modern-day regulatory matrix, accountability allows investors to keep tabs on their assets—and history has made clear that there are consequences when it is absent.

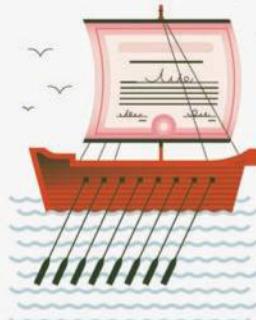


1754 B.C. Code of Hammurabi

Financial accountability is one of many legal issues that Babylonian King Hammurabi's code addresses: "If any one give another silver, gold, or anything else to keep, he shall show everything to some witness, draw up a contract, and then hand it over for safekeeping." Hammurabi's law outlined the mechanism necessary to build trust in finance: a top-down mandate of transparency that is in service of the client.

1550–1600 Joint stock companies

As exploration boomed in the New World, external funding was needed—and that required mechanisms to ensure trust in enterprises. The issuance of stock certificates allowed multiple investors to pool assets with confidence as they and the enterprise agreed on methods and goals. This made the promise of integrity and accountability a matter of law.



1929 The Great Depression

In eight months, the U.S. stock market fell by 89 percent, almost \$400 billion in today's currency, wiping out great fortunes and investments alike—and exposing stark betrayals of trust. Banks, for example, had been using depositors' money to invest in stocks without telling them. It took a broad range of new financial regulations during FDR's New Deal, including formation of the Securities and Exchange Commission, to rebuild investors' trust in the market.

1961 The case of Cady, Roberts & Co.

Aviation company Curtiss-Wright exposed another gap in accountability when it decided to reduce its shareholder dividends. A board member told the firm Cady, Roberts & Co. before the news became public, allowing the firm to cut its losses. As a result, SEC Chairman William Cary ruled that anyone with inside information would have to disclose it or avoid the investment. The practice, "disclose or abstain," remains a cornerstone of trust across the industry.



2017 The present day

In the aftermath of the Great Recession came waves of new regulation to steady and restore trust in financial institutions. The Accountability Act of 2009 demanded a radically greater level of transparency, requiring bailed-out companies, for example, to disclose their use of public funds in detail. The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 initiated discussion about the potential for a broader application of the fiduciary standard (a discussion still ongoing today), among other provisions. In an increasingly complicated market, it's vitally important to trust the right people. For investors, it's worth the time and effort to consider an independent advisor who is also a fiduciary, one who puts their clients' best interests ahead of their own and helps their clients understand the best ways to achieve their financial goals.



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• SKETCH

The Gentleman From Arizona

In this political climate, can a nice guy like Jeff Flake defend basic decency? Can he even hang on to his Senate seat?

BY MCKAY COPPINS

THE CONSTITUENTS FILING into the Mesa Convention Center one evening in mid-April for the Republican senator Jeff Flake's town hall had a decidedly un-Republican look. Tattoos and political T-shirts abounded. Activists stood near the entrance distributing stickers, flyers, and other paraphernalia of the resistance and urging attendees to get loud. While chants of "No stupid wall!" and "Health care for all!" echoed through the auditorium, a young woman in a chicken costume wandered the perimeter, clucking and posing for

selfies in an act of protest whose meaning remained mysterious to me even after I asked her about it ("Jeff Flake is George Dubya's chicken," she said).

Flake couldn't see any of this from backstage, but he knew that a hostile crowd likely awaited him. The early months of the Trump presidency had inflamed the grassroots left, and Republican lawmakers across the country had lately found themselves standing awkwardly in rooms like this one while liberal voters berated them. Flake is up for reelection next year, and some of his campaign advisers—wanting to avoid

the kind of contentious scene that might end up in an attack ad—had suggested that he skip public forums for a while, as many of his colleagues were doing. But he insisted on going ahead.

"People here have legitimate concerns and are afraid," Flake told me as he waited in the wings. Still, he hoped the audience would be able to distinguish him from the president, whom he spent last year's election season steadfastly refusing to endorse—making him one of the few Never Trump Republicans in Congress who never caved.

But when it came time for Flake to take the stage, he was met with a fierce swell of hisses and boos. "Thank you!" he said over and over again, without irony. "Thank you!" When the crowd quieted, he took a stab at self-deprecation. "Senators are great at filibustering, but I don't want to do that. I want to get right to questions." With that, the flogging began.

The audience battered the senator with one hostile question after another, then interrupted each of his answers. When Flake tried to defend Republicans' decision to block Merrick Garland's Supreme Court confirmation, a man near the front barked "Bullshit!" while the rest of the crowd chanted "Shame on you!" When a constituent mentioned the shooting death of an 8-year-old boy in a question about gun laws, Flake began, "As a father, I can't imagine—" and was promptly met with impatient shouts of "Answer the question!" At one point, a man with a buzz cut walked up and flipped him off with both hands before casually ambling back to his seat.

Throughout the ordeal, Flake remained almost suspiciously good-natured. He waited patiently for each noisy round of jeering to pass, then smiled and invited the next question. After a while, his preternatural nice ness began to irritate some people. "I hope behind that smile that you're doing some serious soul-searching," one man reprimanded.

As the night wore on, even some of Flake's detractors expressed grudging respect for his stamina. By the time the town hall wrapped up, he had been

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—Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Boston Globe*

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going for two and a half hours—blowing well past the scheduled end time. But he noticed a small group of constituents congregated in front of the stage, so he stuck around to chat.

These lingerers were not all, or even mostly, fans, but as Flake talked with them, the vitriol that had permeated the evening seemed to dissipate. Several people thanked him for staying; a couple of them requested his office's help navigating a tricky bureaucratic issue. One constituent—a friendly guy who would later reveal himself to me as an MSNBC connoisseur—leaned in to deliver Flake a parting message. "Even if you disagree with us on legislation and everything, when the president says these insane things, if ... [you] can just stand up and go, 'We don't all believe that'—that's all we're asking. Just stand up."

Flake nodded affably. "I appreciate that," he said, smiling. "I've tried to do so."

Not quite satisfied, the constituent took another run at him. "You've got to be a little more ..." he began, but adjectives failed him. As the senator moved on to the next handshake, the man's words hung in the air: A little more *what?* Brash? Loud? A little more like Donald Trump? Is there no longer a place in politics for someone like Jeff Flake?

WITH HIS gently sloped mouth and perpetually arched eyebrows, Flake wears a default expression that might be described as resting troubled and saddened face. He doesn't relish criticizing other people, but when he does, it is usually in a fatherly tone of disappointment (he has five children, who have presumably given him some practice). He sometimes seems as if he has just crash-landed here in a time machine from some bygone era of seersucker suits and polite disagreements. In today's climate of staged presidential beheadings, and reporter body-slamming, and senatorial f-bomb-dropping, the gentleman from Arizona seems altogether uncomfortable. "I'm not a fan of the way it's become," he told me when I visited his Capitol Hill office a few weeks after the struggle session in Mesa.

Complaints like this are endemic in Washington, of course. Whichever party's base is more fired up at any given moment, you can bet the leaders on the other side have recently rediscovered a reverence for decorum. But Flake's indictment of this political moment is unusual because it implicates his own party. After a decade and a half in Congress, he has come to believe that the defining story of his time in Washington is one of goodwill gutted and cynicism weaponized, culminating with the election of Donald Trump.

When I asked him to pinpoint the beginning of this story, he recalled the fallout from the 2000 presidential election ("A lot of Democrats just didn't want to recognize Bush as a legitimate president"), as well as rabid right-wing attacks on Barack Obama. (Flake was among a small handful of Republicans who formally admonished their colleague Joe Wilson for shouting "You lie!" at Obama during a presidential address to Congress.) "I frankly enjoy watching the House of Commons," he told me, offering up his best imitation of a feisty MP—"Ah, *rubbish!*"—before returning to his point. "But this is a different system," he said. "I think you have to have some kind of decorum here."

For Flake, one of the most jarring illustrations of Washington's growing decency deficit came the night of the 2012 State of the Union address. He was seated next to Gabby Giffords, a friend and fellow member of Arizona's congressional delegation. Giffords, a Democrat, had been shot in the head a year before and was still struggling to recover. Throughout the evening, Flake gently helped her up when she wanted to join the Democrats in a standing ovation—a gesture that meant he was often the only Republican on his feet during Obama's applause lines. "I started getting texts and emails from people saying, 'Why are you standing? Why are you standing?'"

Things only proceeded to get worse. Flake watched Trump's various instigations on the campaign trail with growing alarm. "I mean, you watch those rallies, Republican rallies, the 'Lock her up!' chants, the depictions of Hillary Clinton, the posters that are just—" He sighed. "It's beyond the pale."

Plenty of Republicans criticized Flake for his refusal to fall in line behind Trump. But perhaps his gravest sin against the gods of partisanship was a tweet he sent after Clinton tapped Senator Tim Kaine as her running mate: "Trying to count the ways I hate @timkaine. Drawing a blank. Congrats to a good man and a good friend."

Many Capitol Hill Republicans were apoplectic, Flake told me, recounting a surreal meeting in which one stood up and said, "If you can't say anything mean, then don't say anything at all!" The admonition, made with no discernible self-awareness, struck Flake as "a stark admission that we have really gone off the rails."

As we spoke, Flake repeatedly stressed that he was not fretting over the coarsened political culture simply because he finds it distasteful, nor was he advocating bipartisanship for its own sake. A libertarian-minded Republican with a pristinely conservative voting record, he insists that he has not gone "squishy," and that he harbors no desire to "sing 'Kumbaya.'" But the decline of civility in politics, he said, has made it nearly impossible for government to function properly.

He seems to blame this state of affairs primarily on the political leaders who cynically egg on their base's bad behavior. At one point during our conversation, while Flake described the "unbelievable" language he had seen deployed on social media, I asked whether Trump's Twitter feed colored his assessment.

The senator's eyes flashed with what seemed like real outrage. "Yeah!" he exclaimed. "Yeah! You always expect

Flake seems as if he has just landed in a time machine from some bygone era of polite disagreement.

that there are going to be people out there who do it, but for politicians to join in, lead the charge, not condemn it—that's what's troubling."

In Flake's view, Trump is both a product of the rot afflicting politics and a cause of its continued decay. "It didn't start with him, but he's taken advantage of it." He pointed to the "birther" episode—in which Trump became an overnight sensation on the right by suggesting Obama was a secret foreigner—as emblematic of his party's failures. "It was just wrong," he said. "People who knew better should have stood up."

Flake was raised on a cattle ranch in Arizona, in a giant Mormon family—an upbringing that he says influenced both his political style and his outlook, particularly on immigration. "I grew up alongside migrant labor," he told me, rattling off the names of Latino workers his family had befriended. "I could never look at them and see a criminal class." In 2013, Flake was part of the bipartisan "Gang of Eight," which helped pass a comprehensive immigration-reform bill in the Senate (it died in the House). He recalled for me his deep personal frustration watching Trump and his fellow Republicans make naked appeals to "nativist sentiment" last year. When Kaine traveled to Florida and in fluent Spanish praised the patriotism of newly naturalized citizens, "I almost cried," Flake said. "I just thought, *That should be us. That was us, and now it's not.*"

Talk like this will do little to win over the GOP's Trumpian wing, of course. Already, Flake has one primary challenger—an immigration hawk who attacked him on Breitbart.com as a "big-government globalist"—and Trump has reportedly threatened to spend \$10 million to take him down.

All of which raises a larger question about where Flake fits at this fraught moment. He clearly sees himself as engaged in a fight for the soul of his party—beating back the barbarian populists at the gate, standing up for decency and old-fashioned conservative values. But the political battlefield has never looked more uninviting to a warrior of Flake's kind.

ON THE MORNING of June 14, a 66-year-old man armed with a rifle opened fire on a park in Alexandria, Virginia, where Flake was practicing with his fellow GOP legislators for the upcoming Congressional Baseball Game. For several harrowing minutes, police tried to subdue the shooter, and lawmakers scrambled for cover. By the time it was over, five people had been shot. Flake rushed to the side of the Louisiana congressman Steve Scalise, who lay soaked in blood, and helped apply pressure to his wound as they waited for medics to arrive. He then called Scalise's wife, so that she wouldn't find out about the shooting on TV.

In another era, an event like this might have occasioned a brief respite from partisan acrimony. But any hope of

that was lost as soon as it was reported that the shooter was a former campaign volunteer for Bernie Sanders and an eager participant in the online cesspool that now passes for political discourse. "Trump is a traitor," he had written on Facebook. "Trump Has Destroyed Our Democracy. It's Time to Destroy Trump & Co." Conservatives pounced, accusing Democrats of stoking hysteria and violence. The left responded with its own recriminations, and some smirking about the GOP's gun-control platform.

Flake, for his part, barely had time to change out of his blood-spattered clothes before his conservative primary opponent's campaign sent out an email denouncing his "America Last" policies and pledging that his "days in the Senate are numbered." Flake's aides spent



• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

HITLER'S SWEET TOOTH

HITLER KNEW his eating habits would be talked about, along with everything else the public could glean about his personal life, and by the early 1930s an official version of his daily life had been established, casting him as a man of modest ways and simple tastes. What got left out of that account was his addiction to sweets: He had a perpetual, ferocious craving for cakes, pastries, and biscuits. Once, an associate saw him spooning sugar into a glass of fine Gewürztraminer and drinking it down happily. Friedelind Wagner, the composer's granddaughter and a fervent anti-Nazi, remembered Hitler eating two pounds of pralines a day when he was visiting Bayreuth. While planning the invasion of Norway, an aide wrote, he kept darting out of the conference room to gobble sweets in his study. Asked whether he was hungry, Hitler said no. "For me, sweets are the best food for the nerves," he explained. Even in the bunker, as the Russians approached and his own death loomed, he was stuffing himself with cake.

— Adapted from *What She Ate: Six Remarkable Women and the Food That Tells Their Stories*, by Laura Shapiro, published by Viking in July

How to Cut in Line

A scientific approach

BY JUDE STEWART

the day monitoring the comments on his official Facebook page for hate speech and threats. "I hope the next guy has better aim," read one deleted comment.

When I visited Flake and his wife, Cheryl, in his office on Capitol Hill the day after the shooting, he looked drained. Resting his head on the back of his armchair, he recounted the preceding 24 hours in a quiet, halting voice. "It was a long day," he said, glancing at Cheryl. "Just—I'm just glad to be here." He seemed to view the episode as a grim validation of his worst fears about the country. "The deterioration of political discourse in general aids this," he said. "When we ascribe motives to our opponents, that they are evil, then we've almost given license to extreme behavior."

Cheryl marveled at how the climate had worsened since her husband first took office. "Up until, I'd say, this past year, I've never felt threatened or unsafe." But as the political onslaught against Flake has intensified—from both sides—so too has her fear of their family getting caught in the crossfire. She no longer allows photos of their children to appear on campaign billboards or Flake's public social-media accounts. Unruly public forums now make her skittish, and she has begun to worry about their home's security. Earlier this year, a group of protesters staged a rowdy demonstration just outside their Mesa subdivision. "I'd never felt so grateful that I lived in a gated community," she said. "And that's not who I am."

About a mile from where we sat, thousands of people were streaming into Nationals Park to take in the Congressional Baseball Game that evening. Ticket sales had spiked in the day since the shooting, and people on TV were asking whether this moment of patriotic unity might serve as a healing balm for a nation sick with rage. Flake wanted to believe that, but he remembered better than most the last time an attack on a lawmaker was supposed to usher in a new era of civility.

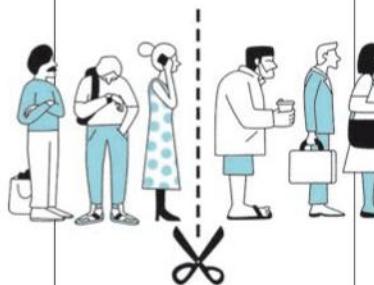
"This tends not to last," he said. Still, he insisted he wasn't giving up hope. "I don't know how much further you can go this way before people recoil and say, 'Let's change it.'"

WAITING IN LINE is a scourge of modernity. According to David Andrews's book, *Why Does the Other Line Always Move Faster?*, it wasn't common until the Industrial Revolution synchronized workers' schedules, causing lines that gobbled up lunch hours and evenings. Given that Americans are estimated to collectively waste tens of billions of hours a year in lines, it's no wonder that some people try to cut, and others bitterly resent them. Yet jumping the queue without inviting violence is possible. Below, some pointers, courtesy of social science.

First, pick the right queue. It's virtually impossible to cut the line for a once-in-a-lifetime event—the Cubs playing the World Series, say. But in a repeating scenario like a security line, people are more likely to let you in, perhaps because they anticipate needing a similar favor someday. Using game theory to determine what conditions would make line-cutting socially permissible, researchers found that people queuing just once display little tolerance for line-cutting. But when the queue repeats, people let in intruders who claim an urgent need

or who require minimal service time. [1]

An excuse for cutting helps, but it needn't be bulletproof. In one much-cited study, experimenters tried to jump photocopier queues using one of three explanations. A small, polite request without justification—"Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine?"—enabled them to cut 60 percent of the time. Adding that they



were rushed allowed them to cut 94 percent of the time. And "May I use the Xerox machine, because I need to make copies?" was almost as effective, despite its flimsiness. [2]

Bribing can also work, and it may not even cost you. In one study, queuers were offered cash by an undercover researcher if they'd let the researcher cut. A majority agreed, but oddly, most of them then refused the cash. They appreciated the offer not out of greed, but because it proved the intruder's desperation. [3]

The person directly behind an intrusion usually gets to decide whether to allow it, according to a study co-authored by the psychologist Stanley Milgram. If that person doesn't object, other queuers tend to stay quiet. The experiment also found that two simultaneous intruders provoked greater ire than one—so if you're going to line-jump, travel solo. [4]

Keep in mind that tolerance for line-cutting varies across cultures. One survey of foreigners living in Spain revealed many national differences in queuing rules. An Irish respondent fumed, "They say 'I just want to ask a quick question' and go right up to the counter ... I'm ready to explode."

A German subject indignantly described a fellow supermarket shopper: "A woman walked right in front of me and put her things on the counter. She says 'No [it's] okay, we're together' pointing to the other woman who had just finished paying ... It seems that in Spain that's allowed. Incredible." [5]

Back in America, the worst sin of line-cutting is pretending you're not doing it. Like members of any community, queuers want their customs observed. We'd all escape line-waiting if we could, but that way anarchy lies. So if you must cut, just ask—nicely. Doing so reinforces the social contract, and it works. A

Jude Stewart is based in Chicago. She is the author of *Patternalia*.

THE STUDIES:

[1] Allon and Hanany, "Cutting in Line" (*Management Science*, March 2012)

[2] Langer et al., "The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action" (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, June 1978)

[3] Oberholzer-Gee, "A Market for Time" (*Kyklos*, Aug. 2006)
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[5] Páñies et al., "Uncovering the Silent Language of Waiting" (*Journal of Services Marketing*, 2016)

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• BUSINESS

Are Index Funds Evil?

New research suggests that they may enable corporate collusion and harm the economy.

BY FRANK PARTNOY

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, you've cheered the decades-long rise of index funds—investment vehicles that seem (these days) to be a rare case of financial innovation that actually helps regular people. By trying merely to match the market, not beat it—investing passively in stocks that mimic a published market index, like the S&P 500—they're able to offer both low fees and peace of mind for people not inclined to try to pick which stocks to buy and sell.

Index funds have grown exponentially since John Bogle founded Vanguard in the mid-1970s. The top three families of index funds each manage trillions of dollars, collectively holding

15 to 20 percent of all the stock of major U.S. corporations. Best of all for their investors, index funds have consistently beaten the performance of stock-pickers and actively managed funds, whose higher fees may support the Manhattan lifestyle of many bankers, but turn out not to deliver much to customers.

It's a feel-good story—a populist victory, as finance goes. Except there's a problem, or might be. Over the past year or two, a growing chorus of experts has begun to argue that index funds and shareholder diversification are strangling the economy, and need to be stopped. That's the maximalist claim, anyway, and it is a strain of thinking that is spreading with surprising speed.

Concerns about the potential dangers of shareholder diversification first surfaced back in 1984, not long after index funds themselves did. Julio Rotemberg, then a newly minted economist from Princeton, posited that “firms, acting in the interest of their shareholders,” might “tend to act collusively when their shareholders have diversified portfolios.” The idea, which Rotemberg explored in a working paper, was that if investors own a slice of every firm, they will make more money if firms compete less and collectively raise prices, at the expense of consumers. Knowing this, the firms’ managers will de-emphasize competition and behave more cooperatively with one another. Rotemberg was advised by Larry Summers, then a Harvard economist, and bolstered his argument with 30 pages of mathematical theory. But the argument was counterintuitive and lacked empirical support; his paper sank into obscurity.

Nearly three decades later, José Azar, a young economics consultant who had also gotten his doctorate from Princeton, was having lunch with his colleague Isabel Tecu. Azar’s dissertation had touched on how corporate behavior might change when large investors held highly diversified portfolios. Tecu had worked with airline data, and the two discussed how they might be able to test whether airfares had been influenced by the growth of large shareholders. Azar scoured the literature, uncovering Rotemberg’s paper, and then enlisted an old classmate, Martin Schmalz, to help with the analysis. Schmalz told me he was initially skeptical of Azar’s thesis, saying he found it an “interesting theoretical curiosity, but with no clear evidence in practice.” And so, one of the most controversial studies in modern finance was born.

In April 2014, Azar, Schmalz, and Tecu posted an early draft of a paper titled “Anti-competitive Effects of Common Ownership.” The paper made several astonishing claims. Overall, it said, the high concentration of share ownership had caused serious harm to consumers in the airline industry:

Ticket prices were as much as 12 percent higher than they otherwise would have been, because of common ownership of shares. The authors measured how competitive individual routes were, based not only on how often each airline flew a given route—which regulators already examine—but also on the degree to which each airline's shares were held by common investors. They found that adding common ownership increased the level of concentration on the average route to more than 10 times higher than the levels that regulators presume to be a problem. The paper noted that three mutual-fund families—BlackRock, State Street, and Vanguard—collectively control about 15 percent of the shares of major U.S. airlines, although these funds are by no means the only common owners. At the end of 2016, for instance, Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett's company, owned 7.8 percent of American Airlines, 8.3 percent of Delta, 7 percent of Southwest, and 9.2 percent of United Continental.

Traditionally, economists have believed that higher prices result from concentration within a consumer market. If one airline has monopoly power over a particular route, the price of a ticket will be high. Likewise, in many cases, prices rise after two airlines merge. For decades, this kind of industry-focused thinking dominated the debate about antitrust enforcement.

The common-ownership argument is different. Instead of looking at the number of companies in a market, it looks at the number of major shareholders those companies have in common. This argument doesn't obviate the old concerns, but rather adds to them. It suggests an economy in which the incentives for companies to compete and to innovate are smaller than Americans might typically believe, and the opportunities to gouge customers larger. Both market concentration and common ownership have increased in the U.S. over the past two decades, a time that coincides with a slowdown in economic growth. No one would claim this is simple causation—growth results from a complex alchemy of factors. Yet there is no denying that

consumers themselves seem unhappy about their treatment by big firms—airlines, banks, insurance companies, cellphone providers, pharmaceutical manufacturers—or that the economy appears sclerotic.

AZAR, SCHMALZ, AND TECU'S paper went viral among academics, launching a whole new field of inquiry and many heated debates. An array of new research blames common ownership for various ills, including high bank fees and stratospheric CEO pay. At the annual meeting of the American Law and Economics Association, in May, common ownership was the subject of multiple presentations and nonstop chatter.

Various remedies have already been proposed, some of which are punitive. One journal article argues that large index funds are violating antitrust law; another recommends a limit on index funds owning stock in more than one company in an industry. No one expects these ideas to lead to political action under the current presidential administration, but they are gaining traction among Democratic lawmakers.

The obvious question, of course, is *how*, exactly, common ownership would encourage these ills. Would common owners actually pressure company managers to collude and raise prices? Would those managers, facing less investor pressure, simply stop competing so hard with one another, enjoying fat paychecks and allowing prices to float up and cost-saving innovation to wither? And would any of that plausibly happen when index funds own just 15 percent of an industry?

Not surprisingly, the managers of index funds have thrown cold water on these possibilities, and on the empirical research itself. In March, BlackRock published a 24-page missive on common ownership, disputing much of the evidence and many of the claims. The analysis—echoed by other critics,

including many academics—finds unconvincing, for instance, the airline paper's claim that higher fares were "a direct result" of the 2009 merger between BlackRock and Barclays Global Investors (which increased BlackRock's share of airline stocks by only a few percentage points). I spoke with several senior executives at Vanguard who likewise expressed skepticism. They denied any attempt at collusion, and underlined their hands-off approach to investing: One reason Vanguard is able to charge such low fees is that it doesn't expend a lot of resources investigating individual companies or meeting with managers. Vanguard does have some actively managed funds and a "stewardship group" that meets with

hundreds of companies about corporate governance, but its index-fund managers don't engage with companies about their businesses. If they did so, they'd have to change their investment guidelines and make thousands of new regulatory filings.

What's more, these funds have frequently been allies to shareholder activists seeking to improve the efficiency and bottom line of individual companies. BlackRock says it votes with activists more than it votes with managers. And even if index funds could cause airline fares to go up, they might not benefit: Those higher fares would mean higher business-travel costs to many other companies in their portfolios.

No academic has accused shareholders of directly asking corporate managers to raise prices—that would clearly violate antitrust law. Azar emphasized to me that common ownership is less problematic if index funds own only a small share of a company's stock, or if the company has other very large shareholders who don't also own shares in the company's competitors. But the three authors were unwavering about the anticompetitive effects of common ownership generally. A revised draft of the airline paper, published in

If investors own a slice of every firm, they will make more money if firms collude to raise prices.

March, is more circumspect about why common ownership leads to higher consumer prices, but remains firm in the conclusion that it does. So far, some other scholarship has supported that position—but the jury is still out.

Edward Rock, an antitrust expert at NYU School of Law, told me that the debate about common ownership is so intense because the underlying issues are fundamental to American capitalism and the country's long-standing distrust of concentrated power. "The last time we had this degree of concentrated financial power was in the Morgan days," Rock noted—as in J. P. Morgan, the man. Still, he cautions against overreacting. Rock and his colleague Daniel Rubinfeld have suggested a less disruptive response than most that have so far been proposed: modest antitrust guidelines that would constrain shareholders when they approach a significant stake—say, 15 percent.

Passive investment has been a boon to the affluent and the upper-middle class, at the expense of a relatively small number of much richer bankers. But only about half of Americans own any stocks at all—the rest are consumers but not investors. And so they bear the weight of any damage caused by higher prices, not just for air travel but potentially for every product and service. (Whether common ownership might influence prices in industries that are not dominated by just a few companies—software, say, or consumer goods—is an open question.) Ultimately, the new theory of common ownership is a theory about inequality: To the extent that passive investing shifts costs to consumers, it makes the rich richer, and the poor poorer.

Sometimes academic fights are so vicious because the stakes are so low. But this battle really matters. Diversification has brought undeniable benefits to large numbers of Americans. If recent scholarship is right, it has brought hidden costs to many more. The difficult question, hotly debated but as yet unanswered, is which effect matters more. A

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BIG IN ... VENEZUELA

BITCOIN MINING

IN VENEZUELA, home to some of the worst hyperinflation since the Weimar Republic, a Big Mac costs about half a month's wages. Or rather, it did, until a bread shortage forced the burger off the menu. The annual inflation rate is expected to hit 1,600 percent. Life resembles an old newsreel: long lines, empty shelves, cashiers weighing stacks of bills.

To survive, thousands of Venezuelans have taken to *minería bitcoin*—mining bitcoin, the cryptocurrency. Lend computer processing power to the blockchain (the bitcoin network's immense, decentralized ledger) and you will be rewarded with bitcoin. To contribute more data-crunching power, and earn more bitcoin, people operate racks of specialized computers known as “miners.” Whether a mining operation is profitable hinges on two main factors: bitcoin’s market value—which has hit record highs this year—and the price of electricity, needed to run the powerful hardware.

Electricity, it so happens, is one thing most Venezuelans can afford: Under the socialist regime of President Nicolás Maduro, power

is so heavily subsidized that it is practically free. A person running several bitcoin miners can clear \$500 a month. That's a small fortune in Venezuela today, enough to feed a family of four and purchase vital goods—baby diapers, say, or insulin—online. (Most web retailers don't ship directly to Venezuela, but some Florida-based delivery services do.)

Under these circumstances, a miner starts to look a lot like an ATM. Professors and college students have mined bitcoin; so, rumor has it, have politicians and police officers. It has become a common currency even among non-miners: Peer-to-peer online exchanges (think Venmo, but with cryptocurrency) allow everyone from shopkeepers to a former Miss Venezuela to buy and sell with bitcoin.

But recently, Maduro has begun cracking down on mining operations, apparently finding in them a convenient political scapegoat—much as he calls those who seek to profit off inflation “capitalist parasites.” Yet *trading* bitcoin is still condoned. It's as if Maduro realizes that cryptocurrency is one of the few things holding the country together.

Because Venezuela has no cryptocurrency laws, police have arrested mine operators on spurious charges. Their first target, Joel Padrón, who owns a courier service and started mining to supplement his income, was charged with energy theft and possession of contraband and detained for 14 weeks. Since then, other bitcoin rigs have been seized—and, in many cases, rebooted by corrupt police for personal profit. As a result, Padrón told me, many people have stopped mining. But Rodrigo Souza, the founder of BlinkTrade, which runs SurBitcoin, a Venezuelan bitcoin exchange based in Brooklyn, says that for others, the temptation is still too great to resist. “People haven't stopped mining,” he told me. “They've just gone deeper underground.”

Venezuela's most resourceful miners, in fact, are moving on to a new inflation-buster: the cryptocurrency ether (ETH). The profit margins are higher and, more important, the risk factor is much lower. “Mining ETH or bitcoin is pretty much the same principle: using free electricity to generate cash,” one Venezuelan miner told me. “But ETH mining is more affordable—all you need is free software and a PC with a video card. Any police officer is easily fooled into thinking your ETH miner is just a regular computer.”

And so, as the presses churn out worthless bolivares, the miners carry on, tapping into the power grid, turning electrons into dollars.

—Rene Chun



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• TECHNOLOGY

When Silicon Valley Took Over Journalism

How the pursuit of digital readership broke my century-old magazine—and an entire industry

BY FRANKLIN FOER

CHRISS HUGHES was a mythological savior—boyishly innocent, fantastically rich, intellectually curious, unexpectedly humble, and proudly idealistic.

My entire career at the *New Republic* had been spent dreaming of such a benefactor. For years, my colleagues and I had sputtered our way through the internet era, drifting from one ownership group to the next, each eager to save the magazine and its historic mission as the intellectual organ for hard-nosed liberalism. But these investors either lacked the resources to invest in our future or didn't have quite enough faith to fully commit. The unending search for patronage exhausted me, and in 2010, I resigned as editor.

Then, in 2012, Chris walked through the door. Chris wasn't just a savior; he was a face of the zeitgeist. At Harvard, he had roomed with Mark Zuckerberg, and he had gone on to become one of the co-founders of Facebook. Chris gave our fusty old magazine a Millennial imprimatur, a bigger budget, and an insider's knowledge of social media. We felt as if we carried the hopes of journalism, which was yearning for a dignified solution to all that ailed it. The effort was so grand as to be intoxicating. We blithely dismissed anyone who warned of how our little experiment might collapse onto itself—how instead of providing a model of a technologist rescuing journalism, we could become an object lesson in the dangers of journalism's ever greater reliance on Silicon Valley.

When Chris first invited me for a chat one jacketless day in earliest

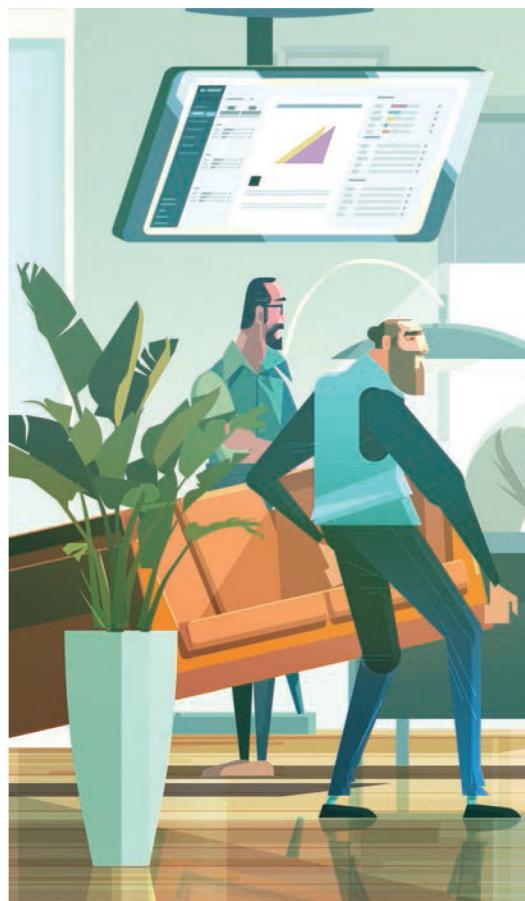
spring, we wandered aimlessly across downtown Washington, paper coffee cups in hand. During those first weeks of his ownership, Chris had booked himself an endless listening tour. He seemed eager to speak with anyone who had worked at the magazine, or who might have a strong opinion about it. But as we talked, I wondered whether he wanted something more than my advice. I began to suspect that he wanted to rehire me as the *New Republic*'s editor. Before long he offered me the job, and I accepted.

In my experience, owners of the *New Republic* were older men who had already settled into their wealth and opinions. Chris was intriguingly different. He was 28, and his enthusiasm for learning made him seem even younger. During his honeymoon, he read *War and Peace*; the ottoman in his SoHo apartment was topped with seemingly every literary journal published in the English language. "When I first heard the *New Republic* was for sale," he told me, "I went to the New York Public Library and began to read." As he plowed through microfiche, the romance of the magazine's history—and its storied writers, among them Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, Edmund Wilson, Ralph Ellison, and James Wood—helped loosen his hold on his wallet.

Even after Facebook went public, leaving Chris with hundreds of millions of dollars in stock, he seemed indifferent to his wealth, or at least conflicted by it. He would get red-faced when people pointed out that he owned two estates and a spacious loft; he was apt to wear

the same blazer every day. The source of his fortune didn't define him—indeed, he always spoke of Facebook with an endearing detachment. He didn't even use it that much, he once confessed to me at dinner. It was an admission that I found both disarming and hugely compelling. We soon began to remake the magazine, setting out to fulfill our own impossibly high expectations.

OVER THE PAST GENERATION, journalism has been slowly swallowed. The ascendant media companies of our era don't think of themselves as heirs to a great ink-stained tradition. Some like to compare themselves to technology firms. This redefinition isn't just a bit of fashionable branding. As Silicon Valley has infiltrated the profession, journalism has come to unhealthily depend on the big tech companies, which now supply journalism with an enormous percentage of its audience—and, therefore, a big chunk of its revenue.



Dependence generates desperation—a mad, shameless chase to gain clicks through Facebook, a relentless effort to game Google’s algorithms. It leads media outlets to sign terrible deals that look like self-preserving necessities: granting Facebook the right to sell their advertising, or giving Google permission to publish articles directly on its fast-loading server. In the end, such arrangements simply allow Facebook and Google to hold these companies ever tighter.

What makes these deals so terrible is the capriciousness of the tech companies. Quickly moving in a radically different direction may be great for their bottom line, but it is detrimental to the media companies that rely on the platforms. Facebook will decide that its users prefer video to words, or ideologically pleasing propaganda to more-objective accounts of events—and so it will de-emphasize the written word or hard news in its users’ feeds. When it

makes shifts like this, or when Google tweaks its algorithm, the web traffic flowing to a given media outlet may plummet, with rippling revenue ramifications. The problem isn’t just financial vulnerability, however. It’s also the way tech companies dictate the patterns of work; the way their influence can affect the ethos of an entire profession, lowering standards of quality and eroding ethical protections.

I never imagined that our magazine would go down that path. My first days working with Chris were exhilarating. As an outsider, he had no interest in blindly adhering to received wisdom. When we set out to rebuild the *New Republic*’s website, we talked ourselves into striking a reactionary stance. We would resist the impulse to chase traffic, to clutter our home page with an endless stream of clicky content. Our digital pages would prize beauty and finitude; they would brashly announce the import of our project—which he

described as nothing less than the preservation of long-form journalism and cultural seriousness.

Chris said he believed that he could turn the *New Republic* into a profitable enterprise. But his rhetoric about profit never seemed entirely sincere. “I hate selling ads,” he would tell me over and over. “It makes me feel seedy.” And for more than a year, he was willing to spend with abandon. With the benefit of hindsight, I might have been more disciplined about the checks we, I mean *he*, wrote. But he had a weakness for leasing offices in prime locations and hiring top-shelf consultants. I had a weakness for handsomely paying writers to travel the globe. I moved quickly to hire a large staff, which included experienced writers and editors, who didn’t come cheap. Chris didn’t seem to mind. “I’ve never been so happy or fulfilled,” he would tell me. “I’m working with friends.”

Eventually, though, the numbers caught up with Chris. Money needed to come from somewhere—and that somewhere was the web. A dramatic increase in traffic would bring needed revenue. And so we found ourselves suddenly reliving recent media history, but in a time-compressed sequence that collapsed a decade of painful transition into a few tense months.

AT THE BEGINNING of this century, journalism was in extremis. Recessions, coupled with readers’ changing habits, prodded media companies to gamble on a digital future unencumbered by the clunky apparatus of publishing on paper. Over a decade, the number of newspaper employees dropped by 38 percent. As journalism shriveled, its prestige plummeted. One report ranked newspaper reporter as the worst job in America. The profession found itself forced to reconsider its very reasons for existing. All the old nostrums about independence suddenly seemed like unaffordable luxuries.

Growing traffic required a new mentality. Unlike television, print journalism had previously shunned the strategic pursuit of audience as a dirty, somewhat corrupting enterprise. The *New*



The New Republic held an extreme version of this belief. An invention of Progressive-era intellectuals, the magazine had, over the decades, become something close to a cult, catering to a loyal group that wanted to read insider writing about politics and highbrow meditations on culture. For stretches of its long history, however, this readership couldn't fill the University of Mississippi's football stadium.

A larger readership was clearly within reach. The rest of journalism was already absorbing this lesson, which Jonah Peretti, the founder of *BuzzFeed*, had put this way: $R = \beta Sz$. (In epidemiology, β represents the probability of transmission; z is the number of people exposed to a contagious individual.) The equation supposedly illustrates how a piece of content could go viral. But although Peretti got the idea for his formula from epidemiology, the emerging science of traffic was really a branch of behavioral science: People clicked so quickly, they didn't always fully understand why. These decisions were made in a semi-conscious state, influenced by cognitive biases. Enticing a reader entailed a little manipulation, a little hidden persuasion.

Chris not only felt urgency about the necessity of traffic, he knew the tricks to make it grow. He was a fixture at panels on digital media, and he had learned about virality from Upworthy, a site he had supplied with money to help launch. Upworthy plucked videos and graphics from across the web, usually obscure stuff, then methodically injected elements that made them go viral. As psychologists know, humans are comfortable with ignorance, but they hate feeling deprived of information. Upworthy used this insight to pioneer a style of headline that explicitly teased readers, withholding just enough information to titillate them into reading further. For every item posted, Upworthy would write 25 different headlines, test all of them, and determine the most clickable of the bunch. Based on these results, it uncovered syntactical patterns that almost ensured hits. Classic examples: "9 out of 10 Americans Are Completely Wrong About This Mind-Blowing Fact" and "You Won't

Believe What Happened Next." These formulas became commonplace on the web, until readers grew wise to them.

The core insight of Upworthy, *BuzzFeed*, Vox Media, and other emerging internet behemoths was that editorial success could be engineered, if you listened to the data. This insight was embraced across the industry and wormed its way into the *New Republic*. Chris installed a data guru on our staff to increase our odds of producing viral hits. The guru kept a careful eye on Facebook's trending topics and on what the public had craved at the same time the year before. "Super Bowl ads are big," he told the staff at one of our weekly meetings. "What can we create to hit that moment?" Questions like these were usually greeted by hostile silence.

While I didn't care for the tactics, I didn't strenuously resist them either. Chris still encouraged us to publish long essays and deeply reported pieces. What's more, he asked a perfectly reasonable question: Did we really think we were better than sober places like *Time* or *The Washington Post*? Clicks would rain down upon us if only we could get over ourselves and write about the same outrage as everyone else. Everyone else was doing this because it worked. We needed things to work.

ONE OF THE EMBLEMS of the new era in journalism haunted my life at the *New Republic*. Every time I sat down to work, I surreptitiously peeked at it—as I did when I woke up in the morning, and a few minutes later when I brushed my teeth, and again later in the day as I stood at the urinal. Sometimes, I would just stare at its gyrations, neglecting the article I was editing or ignoring the person seated across from me.

My master was Chartbeat, a site that provides writers, editors, and their



bosses with a real-time accounting of web traffic, showing the flickering readership of each and every article. Chartbeat and its competitors have taken hold at virtually every magazine, newspaper, and blog. With these meters, no piece has sufficient traffic—it can always be improved with a better headline, a better approach to social media, a better subject, a better argument. Like a manager standing over the assembly line with a stopwatch, Chartbeat and its ilk now hover over the newsroom.

This is a dangerous turn. Journalism may never have been as public-spirited an enterprise as editors and writers liked to think it was. Yet the myth mattered. It pushed journalism to challenge power; it made journalists loath to bend to the whims of their audience; it provided a crucial sense of detachment. The new generation of media giants has no patience for the old ethos of detachment. It's not that these companies don't have aspirations toward journalistic greatness. *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, and the *Huffington Post* invest in excellent reporting and employ first-rate journalists—and they have produced some of the most memorable pieces of investigative journalism in this century. But the pursuit of audience is their central mission. They have allowed the endless feedback loop of the web to shape their editorial sensibility, to determine their editorial investments.

Once a story grabs attention, the media write about the topic with repetitive fury, milking the subject for clicks until the public loses interest. A memorable yet utterly forgettable example: A story about a Minnesota hunter killing a lion named Cecil generated some 3.2 million stories. Virtually every news organization—even *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*—attempted to scrape some traffic from Cecil. This required finding a novel angle, or a just novel enough angle. *Vox*: “Eating Chicken Is Morally Worse Than Killing Cecil the Lion.” *BuzzFeed*: “A Psychic Says She Spoke With Cecil the Lion After His Death.” *TheAtlantic.com*: “From Cecil the Lion to Climate Change: A Perfect Storm of Outrage One-upmanship.”

In some ways, this is just a digitally enhanced version of an old-fashioned media pile-on. But social media amplify the financial incentive to join the herd. The results are highly derivative. Joshua Topolsky, a founder of *The Verge*, has bemoaned this creeping homogenization: “Everything looks the same, reads the same, and seems to be competing for the same eyeballs.”

Donald Trump is the culmination of the era. He understood how, more than at any other moment in recent history, the media need to give the public the circus that it desires. Even if the media disdained Trump’s outrages, they built him up as a plausible candidate, at which point they had no choice but to cover him. Stories about Trump yielded the sort of traffic that pleased the data gods and benefited the bottom line. Trump began as Cecil the lion and ended up president of the United States.

CHRIS AND I ONCE sat at the breakfast table of an august Washington hotel, pondering the core qualities of the *New Republic*—the *New Republic* that we would re-create together. We didn’t say so explicitly, but we were searching for a piece of common ground, an adjective that could unite us. If there had been a whiteboard—and Chris loved whiteboards—it would have been filled with discarded terms.

“We’re *idealistic*,” he said finally. “It ties together our storied past and our optimism about solutions.” *Idealism* was a word that melted my heart, and I felt uncontrollable joy at the prospect of agreement. “Boom. That’s it.”

We were idealistic about our shared idealism. But my vision of the world was moralistic and romantic; his was essentially technocratic. He had faith in systems—rules, efficiencies, organizational charts, productivity tools. Around the second anniversary of Chris’s ownership, he shared a revised vision of the magazine’s future with me. As the months had slipped by, he had gotten antsy. Results, by which he meant greater web traffic and greater revenue, needed to come faster. “To save the magazine, we need to change the magazine,” he said. Engineers and marketers were going to begin playing a central role in the editorial process. They would give our journalism the cool, innovative features that would help it stand out in the marketplace. Of course, this required money, and that money would come from the budget that funded long-form journalism. We were now a technology company, he told me. (Hughes denies saying this.) To which I responded, “That doesn’t sound like the type of company that I’m qualified to run.” He assured me that I was.

Two months later, I learned from a colleague that Chris had hired my replacement—and that my replacement was lunching around New York, offering jobs at the *New Republic*. Before Chris had the chance to fire me, I resigned, and most members of the magazine’s editorial staff quit too. Their idealism dictated that they resist his idealism. They didn’t want to work for a publication whose ethos more clearly aligned with Silicon Valley than with journalism. They were willing to pay careful attention to Facebook, but they didn’t want their jobs defined by it. The bust-up received its fair share of attention and

then the story faded—a bump on Silicon Valley’s route to engulfing journalism.

Data have turned journalism into a commodity, something to be marketed, tested, calibrated. Perhaps people in the media have always thought this way. But if that impulse existed, it was at least buffered. Journalism’s leaders were vigilant about separating the church of editorial from the secular concerns of business. We can now see the cause for fanaticism about building such a thick wall between the two.

Makers of magazines and newspapers used to think of their product as a coherent package—an issue, an edition, an institution. They did not see themselves as the publishers of dozens of discrete pieces to be trafficked each day on Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Thinking about bundling articles into

something larger was intellectually liberating. Editors justified high-minded and quixotic articles as essential for “the mix.” If readers didn’t want a report on child poverty or a dispatch from South Sudan, they wouldn’t judge you for providing one. In fact, they might be flattered that you thought they would like to read such articles.

Journalism has performed so admirably in the aftermath of Trump’s victory that it has grown harder to see the profession’s underlying rot. Now each assignment is subjected to a cost-benefit analysis—will the article earn enough traffic to justify the investment? Sometimes the analysis is explicit and conscious, though in most cases it’s subconscious and embedded in euphemism. Either way, it’s this train of thought that leads editors to declare an idea “not worth the effort” or to worry about whether an article will “sink.” The audience for journalism may be larger than it was before, but the mindset is smaller. **A**

This essay is adapted from Franklin Foer’s forthcoming book, World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech.

Like a manager with a stopwatch, Chartbeat and its ilk now hover over the newsroom.

The CULTURE FILE



THE OMNIVORE

The Whitest Music Ever

Prog rock was audacious, innovative—and awful.

BY JAMES PARKER

“WE ARE THE most uncool people in Miami.” So begins, promisingly enough, David Weigel’s *The Show That Never Ends: The Rise and Fall of Prog Rock*. Weigel, along with 3,000 fellow Yes-heads, Rush-oids, Tull freaks, and votaries of King Crimson—cultural underdogs all, twitching and grimacing with revenge-of-the-nerds excitement—is at the port of Miami, about to embark on a five-day progressive-rock-themed cruise: a floating orgy of some of the most despised music ever produced by long-haired white men.

Do you like prog rock, the extravagantly conceptual and wildly technical post-psychadelic subgenre that ruled the world for about 30 seconds in the early 1970s before being torn to pieces by the starving street dogs of punk rock? Do you like the progers, with their terrible pampered proficiency, their priestly robes, and their air—once they get behind their instruments—of an inverted, almost abscessed Englishness? I don’t. At least, I think I don’t. I like Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” which is a kind of wonderful satirical compression of prog rock, a fast-forward operetta with goofy existentialist trappings and a heavy-metal blowout in the middle; I like the bit of Mike Oldfield’s *Tubular Bells*

that became the theme music for *The Exorcist*. And there are contemporary bands I adore that have been grazed by prog: the moody, alchemical Tool, the obtuse and crushing Meshuggah. But for naked prog, the thing itself, I seem to lack the mettle. The trapped, eunuch ferocity of Geddy Lee’s voice, squealing inside the nonsense clockwork of Rush, disturbs me. And Yes’s *Tales From Topographic Oceans* is an experience to me unintelligible and close to unbearable, like being read aloud a lengthy passage of prose with no verbs in it.

Hated, dated, sonically superannuated ... One could enjoy prog ironically, I suppose—listen to it with a drooping and decadent ear, getting off on the fabulous obsolescence, etc. But that’s not what Weigel is about. He loves prog, and his argument, his prog polemic, is that the glory of this music has been obscured from us by sneering decades of hipster rock criticism and prejudice against 20-minute songs:

Teams of highly trained visionaries paced themselves against their influences and their peers to write songs they were confident no one else would think of writing. They took the music far, far away from the basics, so that some later groups of jerks could take it “back to basics” and be praised for *their* genius. Every new artistic movement rebels against whatever came right before it. But the progressives’ rebellion was the weirdest and the best.

Put like that, it does sound rather tasty. Prog as a wild chamber of experimentation, a sci-fi trespass across the limits of popular music, driving clear of fashion and orbiting the Earth forever. Awesome. The problem comes, for me, when

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I actually listen to the stuff. Is it not a form of aesthetic dissipation to praise something for its ambition and its bold idiosyncrasy when that something is, objectively speaking, crap? I think it might be. Gentle Giant, in 1972, took a poem from *Knots*, a book by the great heretic psychiatrist R. D. Laing, and turned it into an intricate, multivoice chant: *It hurts him to think that she is / hurting her by him being hurt to think / that she thinks he is hurt by making her / feel guilty at hurting him by her thinking / she wants him to want her.* The idea is great on paper. But listen to the song, to its scurrying, fidgety instrumentation, its fussy avoidance of anything like a melody. It is not enjoyable. At all. Magma, the French prog band, invented not only its own L. Ron Hubbard-style cosmic origin story but its own language (Kobaian, which reads like a sequence of Gothic expletives: *Nebähr gudahtt, Köhntarkösz*). Again, very creative. But run, oh run, from the music.

If Weigel were David Foster Wallace, he would have written his entire book from inside that cruise ship, possibly never leaving his cabin, eavesdropping on snatches of music and chitchat and sending out his imagination in heavy spirals of paranoia and insight. But Weigel is a political reporter for *The Washington Post*, so he climbs off that wiggly, proggly boat and treads onto the dry land of chronology. “We’re a European group,” declared the lead singer of proto-proggers The Nice in 1969, “so we’re improvising on European structures ... We’re not American Negros, so we can’t really improvise and feel the way they can.” Indeed. Thus did prog divorce itself from the blues, take flight into the neoclassical, and become the whitest music ever.

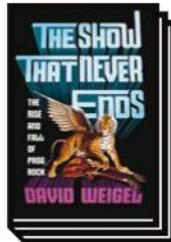
Procol Harum fiddled around with Bach’s *Air on a G String* and came up with “A Whiter Shade of Pale.” More vandalistically, the super-keyboardist Keith Emerson, of The Nice and then Emerson, Lake & Palmer, unleashed himself upon the works of Modest Mussorgsky (*Pictures at an Exhibition*), Alberto Ginastera (“Toccata”), and Aaron Copland (“Fanfare for the Common Man”). You’ve got to love Emerson. He would wrench, upend, and literally stab his instrument—rather in the manner in which Hunter S. Thompson used to shoot his typewriter—jamming down keys with daggers, the better to produce his trademark squelching stun-chords. Fiending for technology, vivid with turbulence, he went from the Hammond organ to the freshly developed Moog synthesizer. (The proper pronunciation of *Moog*, I recently discovered, is “Mogue,” like “vogue.” Perhaps *prog* should be pronounced “progue.”)

Money rained down upon the proggers. Bands went on tour with orchestras in tow; Emerson,

▼
The Culture File

THE OMNIVORE

The relative crudity of punk rock was simply a biological corrective—a healing, if you like.



THE SHOW THAT NEVER ENDS: THE RISE AND FALL OF PROG ROCK
DAVID WEIGEL
W. W. Norton

Lake & Palmer’s Greg Lake stood onstage on his own private patch of Persian rug. But prog’s doom was built in. It had to die. As a breed, the proggers were hook-averse, earworm-allergic; they disdained the tune, which is the infinitely precious sound of the universe rhyming with one’s own brain. What’s more, they showed no reverence before the sacred mystery of repetition, before its power as what the music critic Ben Ratliff called “the expansion of an idea.” Instead, like mad professors, they threw everything in there: the ideas, the complexity, the guitars with two necks, the groove-bedecking tempo shifts. To all this, the relative crudity of punk rock was simply a biological corrective—a healing, if you like. Also, economics intervened. In 1979, as Weigel explains, record sales declined 20 percent in Britain and 11 percent in the United States, and there was a corresponding crash in the inclination of labels to indulge their proggled-out artistes. No more disappearing into the countryside for two years to make an album. Now you had to compete in the singles market.

Some startling adaptations did occur. King Crimson’s Robert Fripp achieved a furious pop relevance by, as he described it, “spraying burning guitar all over David Bowie’s album”—the album in question being 1980’s *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)*. Yes hit big in 1983 with the genderless cocaine-frost of “Owner of a Lonely Heart.” And Genesis, having lost ultra-arty front man Peter Gabriel, turned out to have been incubating behind the drum kit an enormous pop star: the keening everyman Phil Collins.

These, though, were the exceptions. The labels wanted punk, or punky pop, or new wave—anything but prog. “None of those genres,” grumbled Greg Lake, retrospectively, “had any musical or cultural or intellectual foundation ... They were invented by music magazines and record companies talking together.” Fake news! But the change was irreversible: The proggers were, at a stroke, outmoded. Which is how, to a remarkable degree, their music still sounds—noodling and time-bound, a failed mutation, an evolutionary red herring. (Bebop doesn’t sound like that. Speed metal doesn’t sound like that.)

I feel you out there, prog-lovers, burning at my glibness. And who knows? If the great texts of prog had inscribed themselves, like *The Lord of the Rings*, upon my frontal lobes when they were teenage and putty-soft, I might be writing a different column altogether. But they didn’t, and I’m not. The proggers got away with murder, artistically speaking. And then, like justice, came the Ramones. □

James Parker is a contributing editor at The Atlantic.



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The Historian of the Soul

The Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich extracts the human truth about life under Soviet rule.

BY NINA KHRUSHCHEVA

BEFORE STEPPING ONTO the stage, Svetlana Alexievich left me with her grayish-beige leather coat, as unfashionable as the rest of her. We had met by chance in March at a literary festival in Austria where the 2015 Nobel Prize winner in literature—a stocky woman in her late 60s, barely 5 feet tall—was being honored. “Hold it for me,” she said, and there was something touchingly Soviet in the gesture: You trust your own to keep an eye out for you. I, too, am a former Soviet citizen; we share the experience of surviving in a world that was “making war all the time, or preparing for war,” to quote from *The Unwomanly Face of War*. One of the saddest books you may ever read, it was the work that launched Alexievich’s 30-plus-year career of “polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time,” as the Nobel citation put it.

“Historian of the soul” is the way Alexievich, writing in her journal, described her vocation as she worked on the collage of Soviet women’s memories of World War II that first won her an audience, in 1985. “Listen,” begins a former sniper (one of roughly 1 million women who served in the Soviet army, in every capacity). Alexievich does just that, and then records the tale, strewn with ellipses and distilled to its haunting essence—one fragment of testimony among many:

How long was the war? Four years. Very long ... I don’t remember any birds or flowers. They were there, of course, but I don’t remember them.

Yes, yes ... Strange, isn’t it? Can they make a color film about war? Everything was black. Only the blood was another color, the blood was red ...

Published at the dawn of perestroika, *The Unwomanly Face of War* was read by millions in the U.S.S.R.; an English-language version was issued in 1988 by the Moscow-based Progress Publishers (and recently could be found on Amazon for \$400 and up). Now a wider non-Russian-speaking readership can welcome a timely new English translation by Richard

Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. They artfully render the slow flow of first-person narratives that fill the book, and that became Alexievich’s signature approach in her accounts of the Russian Communist experience—a series that she calls “Voices From Big Utopia.” (These books include *Last Witnesses*, stories of those who were children during the war—published the same year as *The Unwomanly Face of War*—and extend to *Voices From Chernobyl* in 1997 and *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* in 2013.) Weaving an introductory section out of the author’s journal excerpts and other material, this new edition also provides a chance to eavesdrop on Alexievich discovering her path.

BORN IN 1948 in Soviet Ukraine to a Belarusian Ukrainian family, Alexievich was one of what she called “the children of Victory,” the generation that missed the horrors of the 1930s and ’40s. Her family soon moved to



Theatrical productions of The Unwomanly Face of War marked the 40th anniversary of World War II. Alexievich (center) joined the actors who performed in one of them.

Soviet southern Belarus. She grew up hearing local tales about the Great Patriotic War (in villages like hers, where every fourth person perished in the fight, it was impossible not to). But “military books ... the favorite reading of everybody,” she recalled, held little interest for her. She worked for a newspaper in a formerly Polish region of southern Belarus and then went to Minsk, the

capital, to study journalism. She resumed her journalistic writing during the '70s and early '80s, a period when "official Soviet nostalgia ... slowly replaced Marxist ideology," as the historian Timothy Snyder wrote in a tribute to Alexievich in 2015 in *The New York Review of Books*. For her generation, he explained, that meant being "nourished on the quasi-Marxist idea that all the suffering had a purpose, and the neo-provincial idea that this purpose was the continuation of the exemplary Soviet state in which they happened to have been born."

Yet for Alexievich, there is nothing provincial about suffering. In March, after she had fielded questions from the audience (and reclaimed her coat), she told me, "No book about Soviet sacrifice was as strong as the women's stories I heard as a child." Her journal entries show her intent on continuing to avoid the prolific patriotic canon she had always skirted—"men writing about men ... Everything we know about war we know with 'a man's voice.'" Still, she was "a bookish person, both frightened and attracted by reality," and it was a book, by men, that inspired her mission, or perhaps more accurately, her method. The two are inseparable. In *I Am From a Burning Village*, an account of the Nazis' path of destruction through Belarus, written by the Belarusian Ales Adamovich, along with his compatriots Yanka Bryl and Vladimir Kolesnik, she found a "novel ... composed from the voices of life itself, from what I had heard in childhood, from what can be heard now in the street, at home, in a café, on a bus."

Alexievich had known since she was a girl, questioning her grandmother, that "women's stories are different," as she wrote in her journal. "There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things." She also knew the obstacles before her. Her first collection of essays, about people's difficult journeys from the village to the city in the increasingly industrialized U.S.S.R., was pulled from the printing press by Communist Party officials. Today she is eager to put that unpublished volume behind her. "I was just trying to find myself, just like those who got resettled," she told me. Undaunted and barely 30, she then set off to "discover for myself the world of war." Alexievich took dozens of trips, recording hundreds of cassettes as she spoke with more than 500 women; she received letters from scores more. Her goal was not modest: to listen to "specific human beings, living in a specific time and taking part in specific events," while remaining ever alert to "the eternally human in them. The tremor of eternity. That which is in human beings at all times."

▼
**The
Culture File**

**Alexievich
had known
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different."**



THE UNWOMANLY
FACE OF WAR:
AN ORAL HISTORY
OF WOMEN IN
WORLD WAR II
SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH,
TRANSLATED BY
RICHARD PEVEAR AND
LARISSA
VOLOKHONSKY
Random House

HER ENTERPRISE, Alexievich has emphasized, shouldn't be confused with journalism, or considered a fictional hybrid of some sort. When she attempted to rework her material as fiction, the stories came out flat. Winnowed from hours of conversation, the accounts belong to an evolving form of literary nonfiction that allows her to showcase figures quite different from developed characters. Her pages, as Alexievich put it to me, present witnesses whose testimony conveys the truth that "war is a curse on everyone," even as their stories also affirm that, in the words of one section heading, "a human being is greater than war."

Women eagerly seized the chance to talk to her. "There were quite a few girl tankmen of medium size tanks," a former first lieutenant explained, "but I was the only one who worked on a heavy tank. I sometimes think it would be good if some writer wrote about my life. I do not know how to do it myself." A telephone operator got in touch by letter to say, "I have no big declarations, only medals. I don't know whether you would be interested in my life, but I would like to tell it to somebody."

Yet telling—and having told—was a struggle for women warriors who, back home after heroic service, found themselves viewed as "frontline girls" defiled by grim years among men. While male former comrades were celebrated for their battle scars, the women were supposed to bake and sew, and forget harrowing things. A former sniper covered her face with her hands and said to Alexievich, "Do you really want to know that? I ask you like a daughter." And then the woman proceeded, pulled onward by an attentive listener: "I need your eyes in order to tell about it." Alexievich heard things that had never before been aired. "The baby cried," recounted another woman, remembering a radio operator in her unit who was forced to silence her hungry newborn as they hid from the Germans. "If the dogs heard it, we'd all be killed ... She lowers the swaddled baby into the water and holds it there for a long time ... The baby doesn't cry anymore ... And we can't raise our eyes. Neither to the mother nor to each other." A sergeant major, on receiving the transcript of her interview, decided that Alexievich's ears had heard too much as she spoke "from the heart." "What is he going to think of me after this?" she asked, thinking of her son, who considered her "a deity." She crossed out most of her own vivid words about being a small, untrained girl boldly serving as a medical assistant to a tank battalion, sending back official clippings instead.

"Two truths," Alexievich came to see, "live in the same human being: one's own truth driven

To Pledge Allegiance

An activist. A prisoner of war. A journalist. A lawyer. All touched by a war that changed the way the country spoke to itself, each with personal definitions of what it means to be a patriot.



Patriotism isn't a singular idea.

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More than four decades after the Vietnam War ended, its effects, both political and personal, still remain. For many people old enough to remember, the war changed the way they thought and felt about their country. In each of their individual accounts, we can hear a firm sense of patriotism, even if they interpret or act on it in different ways.

To veteran and former POW Everett Alvarez Jr., patriotism means honor and solidarity; for Vietnamese American writer Andrew Lam, his definition includes the freedom to create. For writer and journalist Laura

From participating in anti-war protests to enlisting in the armed forces, patriotism can take on a myriad of meanings.

Illustration by Greg Betza

Palmer, compassion is inextricably tied to patriotism, and for civil-rights lawyer Eva Jefferson Paterson, loving her country now goes hand in hand with questioning it.

Prior to the September release of *The Vietnam War*, the new 10-part PBS documentary from Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, meet the people who lived through one of the defining conflicts of contemporary history and see how its events shaped their sense of patriotism. ☀

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underground, and the common one, filled with the spirit of the time. The smell of the newspapers. The first was rarely able to resist the massive onslaught of the second.” Indeed, while glasnost had made public a lot of information about the tragic Soviet past, not all readers in the U.S.S.R., women or men, were ready for the revelations of unheroic humanity in pages that transcribed memories of everyday concerns (periods, hairstyles) alongside wartime horrors:

We didn’t shoot [prisoners], that was too easy a death for them; we struck them with ramrods like pigs, we cut them to pieces. I went to look at it ... I waited for a long time for the moment when their eyes would begin to burst from pain.

I admitted to Alexievich that I, too—just entering my 20s when her book came out—had found the record of our gruesome survival too hard to bear. I read through to its end only as a graduate student in the gender-conscious 1990s, after I had moved to the United States. “I myself didn’t always believe that I was strong enough for this path,” Alexievich told me. She had faced outraged censors. “Who will go fight after such books?” they demanded, as she duly noted down after her encounter with them. “You humiliate women with a primitive naturalism ... You make our Victory terrible.” Her book “might never have gotten published if it weren’t for one man,” she said to me, and paused—“Gorbachev.”

Alexievich does not consider herself a dissident, despite her years of exile (she tried out Italy, Germany, France, and Sweden before returning to Minsk six years ago) and her testy relationship with power. (As a human-rights activist since the collapse of the Soviet Union, she has often been at odds with the autocratic Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenka, who has never personally congratulated her on her Nobel. Neither has Russian President Vladimir Putin; though he allegedly liked the book, he must have been annoyed by her repeated references to the war in eastern Ukraine as an occupation by Russian-affiliated forces.) Nor does she think of herself as a feminist.

Instead, Alexievich has forged her own distinctive identity: as a witness to witnesses who usually go unheard. Her quest to write “a history of feelings,” as she put it in her first book—“of small human beings, thrown out of ordinary life into the epic depths of an enormous event”—has proved to have lasting power. “After Nikita Khrushchev’s post-Stalin opening in the 1950s and ’60s,” she explained to me, “we in the Soviet Union wanted to explore humanity, and not just Soviet humanity. When I spoke to women, the heroic clichés and the

▼
The Culture File

BOOKS

Putin’s nationalistic politics made me cry over Alexievich’s first book.

state-propaganda banalities about the great nation went away.” She kept on seeking out more voices, with more to lay bare—among them, Soviet veterans of the war in Afghanistan—in her subsequent books.

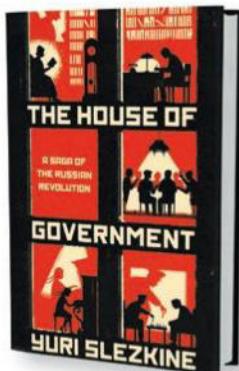
IT WAS PUTIN’S nationalistic politics, beginning with his expansionist advances in Georgia in 2008, that finally made me cry over Alexievich’s first book. I could no longer keep her work at arm’s length, but was inspired to undertake my own exploration of war-ravaged Soviet political life and its toll—on my family. I wanted to know why, when, and how a public story had come to be spread about my grandfather, Nikita Khrushchev’s son, a fighter pilot who had been shot down and decorated. After he then went missing in 1943, accusations of treason were leveled against him. My search for answers taught me lessons that would not surprise Alexievich: Tales of wartime heroism, or ignominy, have a way of serving some interest other than truth. And women who revisit the fraught past should expect to have their authority challenged. My grandmother, my mother, and I were repeatedly told, *You weren’t there, you weren’t involved, you don’t understand, you can’t remember.*

In a “post-truth” era when journalism is under pressure—susceptible to propaganda, sensationalism, and “alternative facts”—the power of documentary literature stands out more clearly than ever. An “autopsy on the revolutionary century that turned a country into a graveyard, yet didn’t destroy our soul, is important to all because communism isn’t dead,” Alexievich said in Austria. “It will come back in some form.” *The Unwomanly Face of War* won’t stop people from fighting wars, but with the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution in view, this book, along with its *sui generis* successors, is a reminder of a higher purpose that suffering can serve. Rather than propping up an inhuman system, it can goad us to continue holding one another’s coats and carrying on. Listen to Alexievich as she absorbs the wisdom of keeping her ears out for her own:

Sometimes I come home after these meetings with the thought that suffering is solitude. Total isolation. At other times it seems to me that suffering is a special kind of knowledge. There is something in human life that it is impossible to convey and preserve in any other way, especially among us. That is how the world is made; that is how we are made. □

Nina Khrushcheva is a professor of international affairs at the New School. Her latest book is *The Lost Khrushchev: A Journey Into the Gulag of the Russian Mind*.

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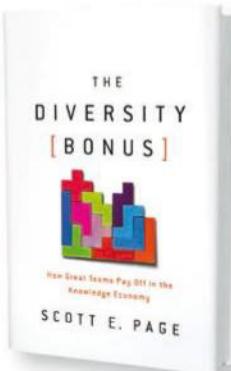
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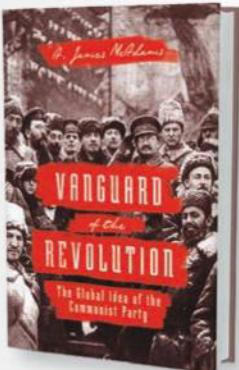
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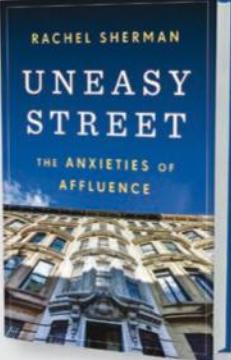
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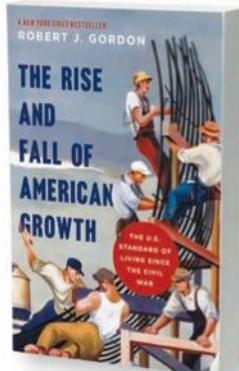
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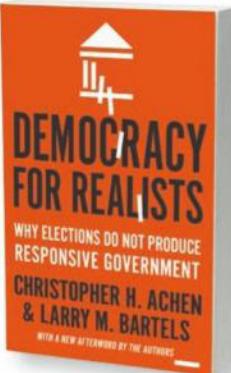
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BOOKS

Le Carré Goes Back Into the Cold

In the author's latest, spies gain nobility.

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

JOHN LE CARRÉ'S triumph (and consequent burden) is that he created characters and language so evocative of the spy world that they became more real in readers' minds than real people or events. This happens occasionally with books or movies: Our images of the old South are inseparable from the way it was portrayed in *Gone With the Wind*. It's said that even real-life members of the Mafia learn how mobsters are supposed to talk by watching *The Godfather*.

So, too, with le Carré's books. Intelligence officers nowadays speak of "moles," the word le Carré popularized for what used to be known as "penetration agents" or "sleepers." Every reader knows the basics of surveillance tradecraft, thanks to le Carré's evocation of the "pavement artists" who work for the "Lamplighters" division of the "Circus." And George Smiley is surely more vivid than any actual senior officer of MI6 ever was. Pity the real-life "C," who had to compete with Alec Guinness's

portrayal of Smiley in the BBC serializations of le Carré's books.

The challenge for le Carré is that these celebrated characters now belong as much to readers as to the author. When he writes in his new book that Smiley is "owlish," some readers may roll their eyes—please, we know what Smiley looks like. I suspect that's one reason le Carré, after writing *Smiley's People*, mostly walked away from his original characters and created new ones for the second half of his career. Many of le Carré's later books weren't as good, in my judgment, but he had some unencumbered space in which to write.

Le Carré's challenge is the sort that other writers dream about. Three of his books defined the spy-fiction genre: *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963), *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), and *Smiley's People* (1979). (I'm leaving out *The Honourable Schoolboy* of 1977, which I think is a lesser work.) How do you improve on perfection?

Le Carré has found a clever solution to this problem in *A Legacy of Spies*. He has written a kind of prequel to the book that made him famous, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. And he has chosen as his protagonist not George Smiley (who



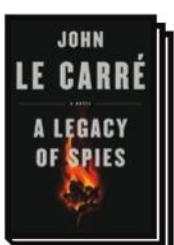
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Culture File**

Le Carré's celebrated characters now belong as much to readers as to the author.

is a Yoda-like presence offstage for most of the book) but his chief lieutenant, Peter Guillam. Fans will recall that Guillam was Smiley's most trusted colleague, the man who helped Smiley recruit Alec Leamas for a diabolical operation across the Berlin Wall; then root out the treacherous Bill Haydon, the mole who had penetrated the Circus; and finally trap the cunning Karla, Smiley's arch-nemesis at Moscow Centre.

But who was Guillam? We remember from earlier books that he was a hard man, a field agent who headed the "Scalphunters" unit, which carried out especially violent or dangerous operations. Like Toby Esterhase, another beloved secondary character, he had suspect foreign blood: Guillam was half-French. He was a womanizer and a drinker, too, but he left the brooding and the guilt to his mentor, Smiley. Now, in *A Legacy of Spies*, we see the inner Scalphunter.

AS THE BOOK OPENS, an aging Guillam's retirement in Brittany is interrupted by a missive from his former colleagues at the Circus: "A matter in which you appear to have played a significant role some years back has unexpectedly raised its head."



A LEGACY OF SPIES
JOHN LE CARRÉ
Viking

His presence is urgently required in London. The "matter," rooted in the plot machinations of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, is believable in this litigious, rearview-mirror age. The children of Alec Leamas and Liz Gold, who were used by Smiley in his long-ago operation to protect the Circus's mole in East Germany, are seeking vengeance (or, if you prefer, justice). What reader can forget Gold's death as she tried to climb the Berlin Wall at the end of the book, and the despairing Leamas's decision to die with her? That last scene, two trusting people crushed in the service of a higher cause, set the gray tone of moral ambiguity that colored le Carré's subsequent work.

The deaths of Leamas and Gold may have been a Cold War tragedy. But to the younger generation, it's a potential lawsuit. A pastiche of meddlesome characters with names like Bunny and Tabitha begin quizzing Guillam about wrongful deaths caused by lawless spies, and demanding that secret records be unearthed and exhibited in court.

This current-day legal jeopardy is the engine that drives the excavation of the past. The device is not entirely satisfying. The genius of le Carré's early novels lies in plots that move forward as inexorably as slow-rolling waves. Overreliance on flashbacks is never a satisfying way to tell a story, especially when, as here, many of them take the form of snippets of documents and tape recordings supposedly composed long ago. Punctuating Guillam's recollection, they interrupt the momentum of the story, and the voices of the characters begin to blur a bit.

But this is a modest criticism. I read most of the book in one pleasurable sitting. Le Carré is such a gifted storyteller that he interlaces the cards in his deck so they fit not simply with this book, but with the earlier ones as well. Devotees who want to understand the arcana of Hans-Dieter Mundt's relationship with the Circus, or the blown network of Dr. Karl Riemeck in East Berlin, or the schemes of Inspector Mendel of the Special Branch, won't be disappointed.

A *LEGACY OF SPIES* may be the capstone to the Smiley novels. I hope not. I'd love to see this addictive author, even at 85, explore other prequels and sequels. But if it's a summing-up, two points are noteworthy. First, le Carré seems to me to be rooting for the spies in this book—yes, with ambiguities and meditations on whether the mission was really worth it. Yet this time around, they're unquestionably the good guys. The younger folks who are chasing them down are score-settlers whose cynicism about life is unearned.

"You're all sick. All you spies," screams one of the would-be avengers. "You're not the cure, you're the fucking disease ... You live in the fucking dark because you can't handle the fucking daylight." Not a very convincing speech, profanity aside, and then the avenger loses his nerve to boot, and crumples before Guillam.

The quality of le Carré's writing is a kind of tip-off as to where his sympathies lie. He is at his worst describing characters he doesn't like (in his recent books, many of the heavy-handed, unconvincing figures are American intelligence officers), and these litigious upstarts don't quite ring true. Meanwhile, le Carré has doubled down on the old boys: Guillam is entirely admirable, even as he lies to shield the past.

Guillam graduates at the end of the book to a Smiley-esque, world-weary angst. "How much of our human feeling can we dispense with in the name of freedom, would you say, before we cease to feel either human or free?" he muses on his way to a final encounter with Smiley. This idea, that spies under every flag have been degraded by their profession, is a signature le Carré sentiment, but in Guillam's mouth it sounds forced. Up to this point, he has seemed a creature more of the Richard Helms "Let's get on with it" school of espionage. The martyred Alec Leamas, as we rediscover him in these pages, isn't burdened by such big thoughts. We learn more about the dogged loyalty that drove him to sacrifice himself on the Cold War altar.

The tough field agents like Leamas and Guillam achieve a nobility in this book that eclipses even that of our oft-betrayed hero, the reflective, German-monograph-reading Smiley. These days we clap for servicemen and women at airports and athletic events, regardless of how we feel about

The Culture File

BOOKS

The reader half-suspects that Smiley doesn't really know why he did what he did.

the wars in which they fought, and there's a touch of that deference in *A Legacy of Spies*. The world of the on-the-ground operators may be gray, but we pay tribute to their steadfastness and valor.

Finally, what does this book tell us about George Smiley? For most of the novel, he is *Deus absconditus*. People keep asking for him, but he's ... not available. You think maybe the old boy has died or, like so many former MI6 officers, gone to work consulting for investment bankers. But no. I don't think I'm giving anything away when I say that at the close, we encounter Smiley in a library near the Swiss-German border, reading obscure books just as he used to on Bywater Street.

There's a wink of the eye from le Carré in choosing this setting: He told us in his fine memoir, *The Pigeon Tunnel*, that the Swiss Alps are his favorite place. He built a little chalet there with the money he earned from *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, and the terrain was also special for his Oxford mentor, Vivian Green, "who gave me by his example the inner life of George Smiley."

Smiley offers some bland comments at the very end of the novel about the meaning of his long battle into the Cold War twilight, but the reader half-suspects that it's all hooey—that Smiley doesn't really know why he did what he did. He wouldn't tell us in any case, nor would he consider breaking faith with the people, like Peter Guillam, who served under his command. Less is more with Smiley, as with any great enigmatic character, and I am glad le Carré has left the spaces between the words for us all to fill in. **A**

David Ignatius is a columnist for The Washington Post. His tenth novel, *The Quantum Spy*, will be published in November.



COVER TO COVER

Notes on a Foreign Country: An American Abroad in a Post-American World

SUZY HANSEN
FSG

A "TWENTY-something life crisis," and a writing fellowship, sent the journalist Suzy Hansen from New York to Istanbul in 2007. There she got

swept up in a bigger crisis, one likely to sound familiar these days. It "was about my American identity," she writes. "Confusion over the meaning of

one's country, and over that country's place in the world, for anyone, but especially for Americans, might be the most foundational identity crisis of all."

Hansen turns a coming-of-age travelogue into a geopolitical memoir of sorts, without sacrificing personal urgency in the process. She frankly confronts her ignorance about Turkey, long the West's go-to model

for modernizing the Middle East. And she wrestles with her assumptions about American beneficence abroad. As she travels and reads—learning about U.S. meddling not just in Turkey but in Greece, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, the Arab world—her confidence is shaken.

Hansen's disillusionment with the U.S. is so deep that it can sometimes feel doctrinaire. Yet her long

stay in Istanbul (she's still there) gives her an outsider's vantage on myopic American arrogance that is bracing. And her fascinating insider's view of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rise upends Western simplicities. "I had the space to look at everything so differently that I actually felt as if my brain were breathing," she writes. The experience is contagious.

— Ann Hulbert

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BOOKS

Why Liberalism Disappoints

Walter Lippmann, Randolph Bourne, and the enduring debate over the power of idealism

BY FRANKLIN FOER

IN THE SUMMER OF 1917, Walter Lippmann strutted into Washington as it prepared for war. Both he and his young country were ready to prove their worth as superpowers. He was 27 and newly married, recruited to whisper into the ear of Newton Baker, the secretary of war. Lippmann's reputation already prefigured the heights to which it would ultimately ascend. None other than Teddy Roosevelt had anointed him "the most brilliant young man of his age."

Following the timeless capital tradition of communal living, the Lippmanns moved into a group house just off Dupont Circle. Their residence—which they shared with a coterie of other fast-talking, quick-thinking, precociously influential 20-somethings—instantly became the stuff of legend, the wonkish frat house of American liberalism. Denizens included Felix Frankfurter, the Harvard Law professor who went on to make his mark with forceful crusades on behalf of unpopular causes, and then with Supreme Court opinions and a wide array of well-placed protégés.

Dinner conversations at the rowhouse extended late into the night. Older minds gravitated to these meals, eager to watch a new vision of government being hammered out. Among the eminent guests who welcomed a respite from stuffy, self-important Washington were Herbert Hoover, Louis Brandeis,

and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. It was Holmes, a regular and enthusiastic presence at the table, who gave the place a name—the House of Truth.

The legal historian Brad Snyder has reconstructed the glories of this group house in a bulging, careful study of its inhabitants. Though *The House of Truth* drowns in detail, Snyder's account usefully maps a hinge moment in American political history. Progressivism, that amorphous explosion of reformism in the early years of the century, had come and gone. Thinkers like Lippmann and Frankfurter increasingly referred to themselves as "liberals," by which they didn't mean advocates of laissez-faire governance. Their use of the label connoted something closer to its present-day meaning, and their faith in government's capacity to improve the world was boosted by the war. Liberals believed that America's entry into the global conflagration would transform their country. The experience, they hoped, would rouse a new spirit of solidarity. It would corrode the ingrained Jeffersonian hostility to the state, and would permit America to exert a beneficent influence beyond its borders.

These messianic hopes were quickly shredded by brutal realities: the savage nature of martial nationalism, the suppression of dissenting opinions, the way their hero Woodrow Wilson permitted the imposition of vindictive terms on vanquished Germany. The pessimism acquired during those harsh years became foundational to liberalism, too, endowing it with a newfound passion for civil liberties and the rights of minorities. Liberalism's enthusiasm for the state was painfully tempered.

ONE OF THE essential qualities of liberalism is that it always disappoints. To its champions, this is among its greatest virtues. It embraces a realistic sense of human limits and an unillusioned view of political constraints. It shies away from utopian schemes and imprudent idealism. To its critics, this modesty and meliorism represent cowardice. Every generation of leftists angrily vents about liberalism's slim ambitions and its paucity of pugilism. Bernie Sanders and his followers join a long line of predecessors in wanting liberalism to be something that it most distinctly is not: radical.

Liberalism's enemies on the right cultivate precisely this confusion. They have always tried to smudge liberalism's identity, to insinuate that it exists on the same continuum as communism and other terrifying ideologies. And, in truth, liberalism wasn't always entirely clear about the gap that separated it from the left. Before the disappointments of World War I, many of the

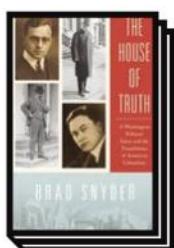
earliest liberals styled themselves as radicals. They shared the primary concerns of the activist left (women's suffrage, the labor movement) and championed the same assault on the repressive mores of Victorian culture. For a brief, Edenic moment, liberals and radicals carried an almost identical sense of possibility about the world.

In *Young Radicals*, Jeremy McCarter (with whom I briefly worked at the *New Republic*, the magazine Lippmann helped establish in 1914) has written an extremely readable, theatrically narrated group biography of the men and women swept up in the optimistic prewar spirit. It's a romantic account of a romantic period. Among McCarter's subjects is a young Lippmann, back before his Washington group-house days. Fresh from Harvard, he went to work for the socialist mayor of Schenectady, New York, and mingled with poets and revolutionaries in Greenwich Village. He became a favorite of the heiress Mabel Dodge, who presided over bohemia's preeminent salon in her lower-Fifth Avenue apartment.

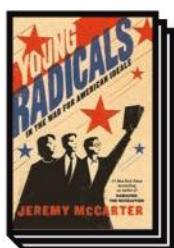
Young Radicals isn't intended as an intellectual history—it's a study of the politically engaged life. McCarter sets out to answer the urgent questions that preoccupy critics of liberal expediency: "Where do idealists come by their galvanizing visions of a better world? Why do they give up health, safety, comfort, status to see those visions made real?" In the process, his book helps chart the emergence of a sharp divide between staunch radicals and ambitious liberals, as Walter Lippmann and his old comrades go their separate ways. Over the course of McCarter's narrative, Lippmann assumes his role as the archetypal liberal thinker—or, from the perspective of his leftist former friends, the epitome of the self-satisfied establishment.

THE HERO OF McCarter's cast of radicals (which also includes Alice Paul, John Reed, and Max Eastman) is the most formidable of Lippmann's critics, and in almost every way his antithesis. While Lippmann exuded the suavity of his Upper East Side breeding, Randolph Bourne was rough-hewn, emotive, and winningly vulnerable. He described himself as a "puny, timid, lazy, hypochondriacal wretch." An obstetrician's forceps deformed his face at birth; a childhood bout with tuberculosis twisted his spine and wrecked his gait. When Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of *The Atlantic*, invited Bourne to lunch at the Century Club, he canceled upon Bourne's arrival, terrified at the prospect of being seen with him. (That didn't stop Sedgwick from assigning Bourne pieces.) A self-styled outsider, Bourne wrote beautifully about the comforts of friendship and the value of marginalized opinion.

▼
**The
Culture File**



THE HOUSE
OF TRUTH: A
WASHINGTON
POLITICAL
SALON AND THE
FOUNDATIONS
OF AMERICAN
LIBERALISM
BRAD SNYDER
Oxford



YOUNG RADICALS:
IN THE WAR FOR
AMERICAN IDEALS
JEREMY McCARTER
Random House

Overcoming abandonment by his alcoholic father, Bourne studied at Columbia with John Dewey and imbibed his mentor's ecstatic faith in democracy. His most lasting essay, "Trans-national America," was published in this magazine in 1916. It poetically celebrated what we now call "identity politics." Bourne shunned the idea of the melting pot. Instead, he imagined a cosmopolitan nation in which new arrivals would resist assimilation and inhabit their ancestral traditions. "America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and color." Freed of the pressure to fit into a monolithic American mold, immigrants would help create a new national culture. Bourne dreamed that it would be more creative, more tightly bound by mutual understanding. A "beloved community" was the phrase he borrowed (from the philosopher Josiah Royce) to describe his vision.

Bourne and Lippmann, nearly exact contemporaries, were never close friends. But Lippmann encouraged Bourne to write for the *New Republic*. And Bourne looked at Lippmann's intellectual ease and sweep with admiration bordering on envy, even if his own thinking propelled him in quite a different direction. He called Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery*, his 1914 case for imposing scientific order on society, "a book one would have given one's soul to have written."

War brought an end to Bourne's idolization. Although he never publicly attacked Lippmann by name, he hurled spears at him, excoriating liberal intellectuals for dragging America into the conflict. It was "a war made deliberately by intellectuals," Bourne fumed, arguing that they championed the war only so they could exploit the mobilization efforts in order to build the national government of their dreams. ("War is the health of the state," Bourne aphoristically argued in a manuscript found after his death.) In the proximity of power, the intellectuals felt the thrill of being "on the craft, in the stream," even though they didn't fully believe in the war's underlying justifications.

When Bourne denounced Lippmann and his ilk, he leveled a charge that has dogged liberal elites ever since. He skewered them as disingenuous and greedy for power. They supported immoral policies for their own purposes—which they considered lofty—when they should have known better. Decades later, the broadsides against the liberal hawks who lent their imprimatur to the Iraq War echoed this sentiment. And Bourne's indictment anticipated the accusation of callous cynicism directed at Bill Clinton's criminal-justice policy, seen as a ploy to win back white working-class

voters. Barack Obama's response to the financial crisis, which let bankers slip away unpunished for their misdeeds, roused similar ire.

Over his career, Lippmann provided plenty of examples that validated the core of Bourne's critique. As Snyder tells the story, Felix Frankfurter turned on his roommate from the House of Truth for similar reasons. Frankfurter worked tirelessly to save the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti from the accusations that sent them to death row. He eloquently transformed their fate into the quintessential liberal crusade of the '20s—and was apoplectic that when he tried to enlist Lippmann in his effort, he struggled to rouse him from his icy evenhandedness.

Yet however valid Bourne's reasons for scything Lippmann and the liberal intellectuals were, there was also something juvenile about his attack. Indeed, Bourne himself might have described his defiance that way. His earliest essays advocated youthful rebellion—and denounced the oppressive hold that the middle-aged exerted over society. "Youth is the incarnation of reason pitted against the rigidity of tradition," he wrote. His beef with his seniors had some of the glibness of a teenage tantrum, and so did his attack on the liberal intellectuals. He simply couldn't countenance the notion that Lippmann might want to lead American policy in a more humane, internationalist direction out of motives that were public-minded as well as vainglorious. It's true that Lippmann took smug satisfaction in his audiences with the president and in the attentions of Wilson's most trusted adviser, Colonel Edward House. Yet he didn't hesitate to brutally—and influentially—turn against Wilson for botching the aftermath of the war.

Bourne will always make a readier hero than Lippmann. In the last days of 1918, as the war drew to a close, he died of the Spanish flu—a tragic end that had nothing to do with the intellectual exile he endured during the war, but that added to his aura of martyrdom. Bourne spent the last year of his life pushed out of magazines that had once welcomed him, with hardly any outlets for his thunderous denunciations. His death froze him in the fresh-faced state of youthful rebelliousness that he celebrated.

THE RADICALS of the prewar years are good grist for inspiring yarns. But to what end? Many of the protests of these years were aesthetic gestures, statements of nonconformity rather than expressions of a political program. John Reed, Lippmann's Harvard classmate and another of McCarter's protagonists, was a burly adventurer who went

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The Culture File

BOOKS

Liberalism shies away from utopian schemes.

off to chronicle the Russian Revolution. The thrilling firsthand account he produced, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, was romantic and admiring. Lenin, who blurbed the book, rewarded Reed for his powerful propaganda by burying him in the wall of the Kremlin. Though you would hardly guess it from McCarter's tender treatment, Reed's career is a cautionary tale of the reasons to fear idealism and high-profile protest merely for the sake of rebellion.

What makes Lippmann unappealing is his detachment, the cool logic that prevented him from shaking his fist at the status quo with Reed-esque fury. (Lippmann mocked Reed in a witty hatchet job in the *New Republic*, "Legendary John Reed.") At the same time, that detachment produced enduring results. His hastily written books might not always thrill like a Bourne essay, but to watch him wrestle with the deepest questions about mass psychology, the behavior of corporations, and the value of tradition is to discover punditry as a philosophical discipline capable of lasting value.

Take the essays that Lippmann published in *The Atlantic* just after the war, collected in the slim book *Liberty and the News*. Lippmann wrote anxiously about the rise of what we have come to call "fake news." He drew attention to the way the media spread rumors and deliberate lies, and he sounded the alarm about a public ill-equipped to sort through conflicting "facts." He was concerned about filter bubbles and the power of gatekeepers. He tried to rally journalists to rise to the challenge, exhorting them toward greater professionalism and a higher sense of purpose. Preserving liberty, he argued, required redefining the concept. Liberty is "the name we give to measures by which we protect and increase the veracity of the information upon which we act."

In the midst of our current convulsions, Lippmann has returned as an object of disdain. Not Lippmann the man, of course, but the technocratic spirit he once championed and embodied. To counter the rising authoritarian tide, the temptation is to run far away from that spirit. Indeed, protest and anger are essential bulwarks of democracy. And there's no doubting the moral blind spots of the reigning elite. But a truly radical solution to our crisis is actually the old liberal one, to reestablish the legitimacy of disinterested experts, to restore the institutions that provide a basis for common conversation. The path to Bourne's beloved community now runs through Lippmann. ▀

Franklin Foer is a national correspondent for The Atlantic.

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Researchers have long tried to understand why certain women cut down other women at work. Their findings suggest that it has less to do with gender than with conditions in the workplace.

By Olga Khazan

The

QUEEN

BEE

in the

CORNER

OFFICE

The bitches, as Shannon saw it, came in three varieties. She categorized them on her personal blog, in a post titled “Beware the Female BigLaw Partner.”

First was the “aggressive bitch”—a certain kind of high-ranking woman at the firm where she worked who didn’t think twice about “verbally assaulting anyone.” When one such partner’s name appeared on caller ID, Shannon told me, “we would just freak out.”

Next was the two-faced “passive-aggressive bitch,” whose “subtle, semi-rude emails” hinted that “you really shouldn’t leave before 6:30.” She was arguably worse than the aggressive bitch, because you might never know where you stand.

Last but not least, the “tuned-out, indifferent bitch,” Shannon wrote, “is so busy, both with work and family, that they don’t have time for anything ... This partner is not trying to be mean, but hey, they got assignments at midnight when they were associates. So you will too.”

“There obviously are exceptions,” she added. “But there aren’t many.”

You would expect someone like Shannon, who asked that I use only her first name, to thrive in an elite law firm. When she graduated in the mid-2000s from the University of Pennsylvania Law School—having helped edit the

constitutional-law journal and interned for a district-court judge—she had her pick of job offers. She knew that by going to a big firm she was signing on for punishing hours, but she had six-figure student loans to pay off and hoped her outgoing personality would win over bosses and potential mentors.

It didn’t quite work out that way.

The firm’s pace was as frenzied as she’d feared. Partners would assign projects late in the day, she said, sometimes forcing associates to work through the night only to announce in the morning that the assignment wasn’t needed after all. When Shannon wanted to leave at the early hour of 7 p.m., she would sneak out of her office, creep past the elevators, and take the stairs down to evade her bosses. She took up smoking to deal with the stress.

Early on, Shannon noticed a striking dynamic. Though her law-school class had been roughly split between the genders, the firm had very few female partners. This wasn’t unusual: At the time, just 17 percent of all law partners in the country were women, and they’ve only notched up a few percentage points since then. And, at least at her firm, no one seemed to like the handful of female partners. “They were known as bitchy, bossy, didn’t want to hear excuses,” Shannon told me.

She once spotted a female partner screaming at the employees at a taxi stand because the cars weren't coming fast enough. Another would praise Shannon to her face, then dispatch a senior associate to tell her she was working too slowly. One time, Shannon emailed a female partner—one of the passive-aggressive variety—saying, “Attached is a revised list of issues and documents we need from the client. Let me know of anything I may have left off.”

“Here's another example” of you not being confident, the partner responded, according to Shannon. “The ‘I may have left off’ language is not as much being solicitous of my ideas as it is suggesting a lack of confidence in the completeness of your list.”

Shannon admits that she can be a little sensitive, but she wasn't the only one who noticed. “Almost every girl cried at some point,” she says. Some of the male partners could be curt, she said, but others were nice. Almost all of the female partners, on the other hand, were very tough.

Still, the senior women's behavior made sense to her. They were slavishly devoted to their jobs, regularly working until nine or 10 at night. Making partner meant either not having children or hiring both day- and nighttime nannies to care for them. “There's hostility among the women who have made it,” she said. “It's like, ‘I gave this up. You're going to have to give it up too.’”

After 16 months, Shannon decided she'd had enough. She left for a firm with gentler hours, and later took time off to be with her young children. She now says that if she were to return to a big firm, she'd be wary of working for a woman. A woman would judge her for stepping back from the workforce, she thinks: “Women seem to cut down women.”

Her screed against the female partners surprised me, since people don't usually rail against historically marginalized groups on the record. When I reached out to other women to ask whether they'd had similar experiences, some were appalled by the question, as though I were Phyllis Schlafly calling from beyond the grave. But then they would say things like “Well, there was this one time ...” and tales of female sabotage would spill forth. As I went about my dozens of interviews, I began to feel like a priest to whom women were confessing their sins against feminism.

Their stories formed a pattern of wanton meanness. Serena Palumbo, another lawyer, told me about the time she went home to Italy to renew her visa and returned to find that a female co-worker had told their boss “that my performance had been lackluster and that I was not focused.” Katrin Park, a communications director, told me that a female former manager reacted to a minor infraction by screaming, “How can I work when you're so incompetent!?” A friend of mine, whom I'll call Catherine, had a boss whose tone grew witheringly harsh just a few months into her job at a nonprofit. “This is a perfect example of how you run forward thoughtlessly, with no regard to anything I am saying,” the woman said in one email, before exploding at Catherine in all caps. Many women told me that men had undermined them as well, but it somehow felt different—worse—when it happened at the hands of a woman, a supposed ally.

Even a woman who had given my own career a boost joined the chorus. Susannah Breslin, a writer based in Florida, yanked

me out of obscurity years ago by promoting my work on her blog. So I was a bit stunned when, for this story, she told me that she divides her past female managers into “Dragon Ladies” and “Softies Who Nice Their Way Upwards.” She'd rather work for men because, she says, they're more forthright. “With women, I'm partly being judged on my abilities and partly being judged on whether or not I'm ‘a friend,’ or ‘nice,’ or ‘fun,’” she told me. “That's some playground BS.”

Other women I interviewed, meanwhile, admitted that they had been tempted to snatch the Aeron chair out from under a female colleague. At a women's networking happy hour, I met Abigail, a young financial controller at a consulting company who once caught herself resenting a co-worker for taking six weeks of maternity leave. “I consider myself very pro-woman and feminist,” Abigail said. Nevertheless, she confessed, “if I wasn't so mindful of my reaction, I could have been like, ‘Maybe we should try to find a way to fire her.’”

Of course, these are just anecdotes. I also heard positive stories about female co-workers, including from prominent women in fields like foreign policy and journalism who described how other women had mentored them or acted as unofficial support groups. (I've been fortunate to have both of those experiences myself.) What's more, research suggests that women actually make better managers than men, by certain measures.

Yet, fairly or not, many women seem to share Shannon's fear that members of their gender tend to cut one another down. Large surveys by Pew and Gallup as well as several academic studies

show that when women have a preference as to the gender of their bosses and colleagues, that preference is largely for men. A 2009 study published in the journal *Gender in Management* found, for example, that although women believe other women make good managers, “the female workers did not actually want to work for them.” The longer a woman had been in the workforce, the less likely she was to want a female boss.

In 2011, Kim Elsesser, a lecturer at UCLA, analyzed responses from more than 60,000 people and found that women—even those who were managers themselves—were more likely to want a male boss than a female one. The participants explained that female bosses are “emotional,” “catty,” or “bitchy.” (Men preferred male bosses too, but by a smaller margin than the female participants did.)

In a smaller survey of 142 law-firm secretaries—nearly all of whom were women—not one said she or he preferred working for a female partner, and only 3 percent indicated that they liked reporting to a female associate. (Nearly half had no preference.) “I avoid working for women because [they are] such a pain in the ass!” one woman said. In yet another study, women who reported to a female boss had more symptoms of distress, such as trouble sleeping and headaches, than those who worked for a man.

Some people find these studies literally incredible. (When the *ABA Journal* published an article about the legal-secretary

Study participants said female bosses are “emotional,” “catty,” or “bitchy.”

survey, angry readers demanded a retraction. The journal wrote a follow-up piece about the controversy and issued a mild apology for the hurt feelings.) And indeed, it is hard to believe that women would hold a fierce bias against members of their own gender. Perhaps in part because it's such a thorny topic, this phenomenon tends to be either dismissed (nothing to see here) or written off as inevitable (women are inherently catty). But in fact, psychologists have been attempting to explain it for decades—and the sum of their findings suggests that women aren't the villains of this story.

I **wasn't looking** for bitchy behavior when I walked into an upscale restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., one night last fall, but it found me. I was there for a small get-together of female executives. Several of the women grimaced when I introduced myself as a journalist, so when I approached a cluster of them, I opened by saying that they didn't have to be interviewed if they didn't want to be.

At that, a middle-aged blonde in a leopard-print jacket looked at me and said, "When you go to your shrink, do you say, 'Nobody likes me! Nobody wants to talk to me'?"

I blinked in disbelief, then asked her whether she had ever gotten pushback for her communication style.

The woman, Susan, said her brusqueness is actually an advantage at the financial-services firm where she works as an adviser, a very *Mad Men*-esque environment, as she described it. "I have a different way of communicating that's more like a guy," she said. "I played a lot of sports, and I expect us to knock around a bit and still be friends at the end of the game. Guys like me."

The fratty environment doesn't seem that great for other women in her office, though. Most of the financial advisers at her firm are men, but most of the assistants are women—a situation Susan called "a hotbed of badness." "There's a finite amount of space that these women get," she said. "They're in their little prison and they're all eating each other up."

As it turns out, researchers have competing theories as to why this happens—why women sometimes find themselves trapped and sniping at one another.

One psychologist, Joyce Benenson, thinks women are evolutionarily predestined not to collaborate with women they are not related to. Her research suggests that women and girls are less willing than men and boys to cooperate with lower-status individuals of the same gender; more likely to dissolve same-gender friendships; and more willing to socially exclude one another. She points to a similar pattern in apes. Male chimpanzees groom one another more than females do, and frequently work together to hunt or patrol borders. Female chimps are much less likely to form coalitions, and have even been spotted forcing themselves between a female rival and her mate in the throes of copulation.

Benenson believes that women undermine one another because they have always had to compete for mates and for resources for their offspring. Helping another woman might give that woman an edge in the hot-Neanderthal dating market, or might give her children an advantage over your own, so you frostily snub her. Women "can gather around smiling and laughing, exchanging polite, intimate, and even warm conversation, while simultaneously destroying one another's careers," Benenson told me. "The contrast is jarring."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Benenson's theory is controversial—so much so that she says she feels sidelined and "very isolated" in academia. She thinks that may be why she wound up teaching at a small Catholic institution—Emmanuel College, in Boston—instead of at a better-known university.

If Benenson is right, women would have to struggle mightily to repair their poisonous dynamic, since it is biologically ingrained. But many other researchers think women aren't hardwired to behave this way. Instead, they argue, bitchiness is a by-product of the modern workplace.

In the late 1980s, Robin Ely, then a graduate student in the Yale School of Management, set about trying to understand why women's office interactions sometimes turn toxic. "My most difficult relationship at work had been with a woman," Ely told me, "but women had also given me the most amazing support." She didn't buy either of the prevailing stereotypes about women—that they are nurturing earth mothers or manipulative traitors. Instead, her hypothesis was simply that "women, like all human beings, respond to the situation they're in."

To test this idea, Ely cracked open a law-firm directory and picked some male-dominated firms, where no more than 5 percent of partners were female, and some other firms where women were slightly better represented in the top ranks. Then she asked the female lawyers at both types of firms how they felt about their female colleagues.

No matter where they were, the attorneys endured a grueling work environment. But in the overwhelmingly male firms, competition between women was "acute, troubling, and personal," Ely said. Compared with the women in firms where they were better represented, women in the male-dominated settings thought less of one another and offered weak support, if any. Female partners in those firms were "almost universally reviled," Ely said. One young lawyer described her boss as "a manipulative bitch who has no legal talent."

Perhaps the most enduring takeaway was this: Women in the male-dominated firms believed that only so many of them would make it into the senior ranks, and that they were vying with one another for those spots. Ely, who is now a business professor at Harvard, had hit upon a dynamic known as tokenism. When there appear to be few opportunities for women, research shows, women begin to view their gender as an impediment; they avoid joining forces, and sometimes turn on one another.

Think of the "cool girl" who casually notes, "All my friends are guys"—as though it just naturally happened that way. Or the overachiever who saves her harshest feedback for her female colleagues, while the men in the office get sports talk and fist bumps. Women like Susan, the financial adviser I met in Washington, "get along with men better," as she put it, because it pays to get along with whoever's at the top.

Around the same time Ely conducted her tokenism study, a Dutch psychologist named Naomi Ellemers was working as an assistant professor in Amsterdam and trying to understand the near-total absence of senior women in academia. Women then made up just 4 percent of all full professors in the Netherlands. Ellemers thought perhaps biased men were keeping women from advancing.

Ellemers put together a list of all the female professors in the country and mailed them (as well as a sample of male

professors) a survey about their relationships with their colleagues. Her findings suggested that women were actually part of the problem. The female professors described themselves as just as “aggressive” and “dominant” as the men did; they felt unsupported by their female colleagues, and didn’t want to work with other women.

Eleven years later, Ellemers surveyed doctoral students and university faculty members in Amsterdam and Italy and found similar results. Although the junior men and women were in fact equally committed to their work, the female professors thought the younger women were less dedicated. Ellemers called these senior women—who coped with gender discrimination by emphasizing how different they were from other women—“queen bees,” repurposing a term first coined in the 1970s by researchers at the University of Michigan.

After these studies were published, Ellemers was disheartened to read news articles trumpeting them as proof that women are nasty by nature. “Some journalists are very happy to make headlines that women are catty to each other,” she told me ruefully. She thought about giving up on this line of research, but a student of hers, Belle Derks, persuaded her to keep probing.

Along with some of their other colleagues, Ellemers and Derks conducted a small study in 2011 for which they asked 63 Dutch policewomen—who are far outnumbered by their male colleagues—to recall a time they had experienced sexism at work. That reminder prompted many of the officers to emphasize the ways they’re not like other women and to downplay the prevalence of sexism. In other words, thinking about how bad it is to be a woman made certain officers not want to be seen as women. And it wasn’t just something women did: In another small study, when Derks and other researchers prompted Surinamese immigrants in the Netherlands to recall an instance of discrimination against their group, many expressed lower opinions of one another and behaved more stereotypically Dutch.

With that, Ellemers and Derks believed they had pinpointed the conditions in which queen bees emerge: when women are a marginalized group in the workplace, have made big sacrifices for their career, or are already predisposed to show little “gender identification”—camaraderie with other women. (Think of former Yahoo chief Marissa Mayer’s quote about another of her old jobs: “I’m not really a woman at Google; I’m a geek at Google.”) Women like this, Ellemers says, “learned the hard way that the way to succeed in the workplace is to make sure that people realize they are not like other women. It’s not something about these women. It is the way they have learned to survive in the organization.”

It’s worth noting that some of Ellemers and Derks’s findings are not very robust. But other researchers have since published work that echoes theirs. Michelle Duguid, a Cornell University management professor, has explored something called “favoritism threat,” or women’s concern that they’ll seem biased if they help one another. In a working paper, Duguid

showed that “token” women who had helped other women in the past avoided doing so again when given the chance. In a separate study, she found that token women in “high prestige” settings were more reluctant to recruit female candidates to join their team than were women who worked in less prestigious settings or had more female colleagues.

As Joan C. Williams, a distinguished professor at the UC Hastings College of the Law, put it to me: “Women are people. If the only way to get ahead is to run like hell away from other women, some women are going to do that.” And research suggests that this kind of distancing occurs in minority groups as well, which means these dynamics may be doubly hard on women of color, since they face both gender and racial bias.

Even levelheaded, feminist women can exhibit elements of queen-bee behavior at times, and they don’t have to be in senior positions. The biggest issue I heard about is what’s known as “competitive threat,” which is when a woman fears that a female newcomer will outshine her. She might try to undermine her rival preemptively—as happened to one woman I interviewed, whose work friend spread rumors that she was promiscuous and unqualified. Or she might slam her rival with demeaning comments, as has happened to seven in 10 respondents to a 2016 survey of women working in the tech industry. “I had two female colleagues who suggested I try to look ‘less pretty’ to be taken more seriously,” a respondent wrote. “One suggested a breast reduction.”

This kind of behavior can take a toll. My friend Catherine had always been the most unflappable and cheerful in our group, but about six months into her stint with a queen bee, she began feeling like “a terrified puddle of a human being,” she said. She felt sick to her stomach and had trouble eating her lunch at work. “Whenever the phone rang, my legs would shake,” she said. “Anytime we were on a call and her voice came on, I shuddered.”

About 15 years ago, Margarita Rozenfeld, who is now a leadership coach in Washington, D.C., found herself reporting to a queen bee. Rozenfeld’s boss was just in her early 30s, but her clothes and demeanor made her seem much older. She had high expectations for everyone on the team, including Rozenfeld, and she would grumble when her subordinates didn’t exhibit the same relentless ambition she had.

One day on her way to work, Rozenfeld tripped on the parking-garage steps and twisted her ankle. It swelled as the day wore on, and she worried that it would get even worse. She wasn’t particularly busy, so she knocked on her boss’s door and asked whether she could leave early to see a doctor. Her boss asked Rozenfeld to come in and close the door.

“You know, I had high hopes for you,” Rozenfeld remembers her saying. Her boss questioned why “you feel like you can leave” when “things like this happen.”

“But I feel like I’m not going to be able to walk,” Rozenfeld said.

“I will tell you something about my career and how I got to be where I am today,” her boss continued. “Do you know how many times I worked with men who basically sexually harassed me? Did you know that man over there missed his kid’s

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high-school graduation because he was working on a proposal? And you have a sprained ankle and you think it's okay to leave?"

As tears welled in her eyes, Rozenfeld realized that she was never going to be the kind of worker her boss wanted. Six months later, she quit.

C

Omplicating all of this is that, well, bitchiness is in the eye of the beholder, and the term *queen bee* sometimes gets flung at women who are just trying to do their job. You could call it managing while female: Many studies have shown that people—men and women alike—can't tolerate so much as a hint of toughness coming from a woman, even when she's in charge.

The most notorious double standard is that women can't break into important jobs unless they advocate for themselves and command respect. But they're also reviled unless they act like chipper and self-deprecating team players, forever passing the credit along to others. Laurie Rudman, a social psychologist at Rutgers University, said the "poster woman" for this predicament is Hillary Clinton, who, according to surveys, was more popular when in office than when she was vying for office. Writing in *The Boston Globe* last summer, former Vermont Governor Madeleine May Kunin noted the dramatically lower behavior bar set for Donald Trump than for Clinton: "Boys will be boys," but girls must be goddesses."

Rudman first witnessed this tendency when she was a grad student at the University of Minnesota, where she sat on a hiring committee for an open professor position. The female candidates touted their records by saying things like "I'm so

fortunate I found so-and-so for my mentor," Rudman told me. One male candidate, meanwhile, waltzed in, folded his arms, and declared, "I'm going to change the face of psychology within the next five years." The committee picked the man.

"It's very difficult for women to ask for power," Rudman said. "If you stick your neck out and say 'I'd like to be considered for this promotion,' somebody's revving up a chain saw in the background."

After Rudman earned her doctorate, she began researching why women can't get away with behaving the way men do. Her work helps explain why male bosses can be frank, while female managers are stuck serving up compliment sandwiches to soften their criticism. In one of her experiments, women who doled out honest feedback were liked less and considered less hirable than similarly candid men. Other academics have argued that workers just don't respect female bosses as much as male ones—which prompts the bosses to treat the workers worse, which causes the workers to think less of their bosses, and so forth.

Rudman found that some women's disparagement of other women can be explained by what's called "system justification," a psychological concept in which long-oppressed groups, struggling to make sense of an unfair world, internalize negative stereotypes. Women simply don't have the same status in American life that men do. So when people think, *Who do I want to work with?*, they subconsciously leap to the default, the historically revered—the man. Some women look around, see few women running things, and assume that there must be something wrong with women themselves.

Indeed, Kim Elsesser, the UCLA lecturer whose study unearthed a preference for male bosses, pointed out another interesting wrinkle in that study: Participants were biased against women only when they were asked about the gender they preferred to work for in general. "When participants were asked about their current bosses, the bias disappeared," Elsesser said.

When women do slip outside the lines and behave assertively, other women are sometimes the ones who blast them for it. In one series of studies, Rudman asked participants to pick teammates for a round of computerized *Jeopardy*. They could choose among insecure and confident men and women. A cash prize was offered, so it behooved the participants to pick someone competent. But while the confident contestants of both genders were seen as more capable than the insecure ones, the female participants were nonetheless torn between the insecure woman and the confident one.

Rudman says that in general, research shows men are more biased against women at work than women themselves are. But in this case at least, the male participants didn't hesitate to pick the confident woman over the insecure one, and had no preference between the confident man and the confident woman. Not a single female participant, on the other hand, chose the confident woman over the confident man. "I could not believe it!" Rudman exclaimed, letting out a long "Wooooow."

She saw this as a sign of what psychologists call the black-sheep effect, in which people are harder on rule-breaking members of their own group than they are on the deviants of

other tribes. As Rudman told me this, I played a mental highlight reel of the various times in my life when a man had completely dropped the ball on a team project, and I'd excused him as either a nutty professor or a devilish rogue who couldn't be bothered with tedious details. He was the mischievous Peter Pan to my businesslike Wendy: *I'll handle it myself, you scamp!* If a woman behaved this way, though, I'd be more likely to draft a dozen never-sent emails asking her what her problem was.

Some writers and researchers argue that true queen bees are extremely rare, and that the concept has been co-opted by misogynists to show how awful women supposedly are. Even

Carol Tavris, one of the social psychologists credited with coining the term *queen bee*, has been quoted rejecting the concept. "I hate it," she told the *Today* show in 2013.

In 1974, Tavris had published an article in *Psychology Today* in which she and two colleagues, Graham Staines and Toby Epstein Jayaratne, wrote:

There is a group of antifeminist women who exemplify what we call the Queen Bee syndrome ... The true Queen Bee has made it in the "man's world" of work, while running a house and family with her left hand. "If I can do it without a whole movement to help me," runs her attitude, "so can all those other women."

When I called her at her home in Los Angeles, Tavris said that her theory had since been misinterpreted, carved into a cudgel for bashing women. If women are their own worst enemies, after all, why should people push for women's workplace advancement? She regrets that giving "a catchy name" to a complex pattern of behavior helped launch queen-bee-ism as "a thing"—one that has endured despite all the gains working women have made since the 1970s. After publishing that paper, she moved on to examine other topics in psychology.

I could understand why Tavris would want to distance herself from this research—who wants to throw more chum to the internet's sexist trolls? And given the complexity of the queen-bee phenomenon, its prevalence is impossible to determine. Still, queen bees are clearly a real thing, and ignoring the problem won't make it go away. Maybe by understanding its causes, we can finally start to address them.

The key point to remember, according to Naomi Ellemers and other researchers, is that queen-bee behavior arises under certain circumstances—like when a woman believes that the path to success is so narrow, she can barely squeeze through herself, let alone try to bring others along with her.

When I'd initially emailed Tavris for an interview, she had written back, "Your request makes me sad." But as I described the experiences of the women I had interviewed, she acknowledged that in some contexts, women do sometimes bully one another—just as members of other discriminated-against groups would.

Toward the end of our conversation, Tavris complimented Ellemers's research. How we behave at work depends on "how safe we feel at work," she said. "Does our work give us a chance to thrive? Or are we feeling thwarted at every step?"

Ionce worked with a queen bee—a woman a couple of decades my senior. (She outranked me but wasn't my supervisor.) Soon after I started, she and I were alone in our shared workspace. It was a busy day, but I needed to ask her a question about an internal process. I waited until late afternoon, then asked.

She glared at me and turned bright red. Then she screamed at me like I had never been screamed at before by someone I'm not related to. (Later, when I complained about her, my boss said, by way of explanation, that the office was a family-like environment.)

That was probably our worst encounter, but it wasn't the only bad one. She would seethe at me for things beyond my control and complain about me to my boss. Once, I let out a sigh after a frustrating phone call, and she lambasted me for seeming entitled. Another co-worker overheard and told her to cool it.

"I'm sorry, but she had a tone!" she responded, like a baroness exasperated by the impertinent help.

I began to have stomachaches and cold sweats when I walked into work. Still, I couldn't quite hate the woman. She was obviously miserable in her job, and every time I looked in her stress-deadened eyes, I saw a little of myself.

Is this the ghost of future Olga? I sometimes wondered. Is this what happens when the totally normal, societally sanctioned choices you've made—work hard; have children; slave away for a promotion; go on a little vacation, not too long!; come back and

work even harder—don't add up to the life you envisioned? You said the right thing at the meeting, didn't you? You helped on the important project. Why *not* you, then? It would be enraged.

The truth is, I too sometimes feel like the day is just too exhausting, that I cannot possibly handle one more thing with grace. I like to think I haven't taken it out on my colleagues. But my queen bee had a rougher go of it than I did, climbing her way up before *Lean In*, before '90s-style sensitivity training.

She probably experienced the kind of sexism that doesn't take a Sarah Lawrence degree to sniff out, the kind where your male equals call you "sweetie" or tell you, up front, that you don't belong. I had to ask myself, *How many years of treatment like that would it take for me to become mean like her?* Ten years? Twenty? Or would it require only the right opportunity—like an unusually bad day, when no one else is around?

Curious to know what career gurus have to say about dealing with queen bees, I took a spin through some of the top-selling "getting ahead" books aimed at women. What I found was eye-opening, but not in the way I'd hoped.

For example, the 2014 "revised and updated" version of *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*, which was originally

published in 2004, notes that women “often wind up making mountains out of molehills, much to the consternation of their male colleagues.” The authors of the 2006 book *The Girl’s Guide to Being a Boss (Without Being a Bitch)* offer a long tale of woe from a woman with a bitchy boss, then write simply that if you (the boss) feel that you are a bitch, you should take an anger-management course. Problem solved.

In *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*, former CNN Vice President Gail Evans recommends avoiding workplace tension by not having any contact with colleagues outside the office. If an emotion somehow surfaces during work hours, a true executive-track gal stuffs it back down. “If you can’t help but become angry with a female co-worker,” Evans writes, “for the sake of the rest of us, keep it to yourself.”

Even when workplace bullying becomes severe, employment lawyers told me, women are less likely to sue for gender discrimination if their tormentor is another woman, since people tend to assume that women look out for one another. (One lawyer said that this is why companies often appoint members of “protected classes,” such as minorities and women, to human-resources roles. Having someone from one of these groups handle a firing can make it harder to sue for wrongful termination.)

Still, the answer can’t be to simply capitulate to queen bees, as some of the women I interviewed suggested. Even if you later quit, you only foist your awful boss on the next underling. At another women’s networking happy hour, I met a woman named Marie, who, when I asked whether she had ever clashed with a female boss, burst into knowing laughter. At a previous job as a defense-industry analyst, Marie had had two bosses, a man and a woman. She was assigned to cover Haiti when the 2010 earthquake struck, forcing her to work long, difficult hours. The male manager praised her, but the woman made her a target. When Marie forgot to close a quotation mark in a report, her female boss denounced her as a plagiarist and eventually pushed her out. Marie’s takeaway: “You should not outshine the boss.”

Nurses might have a better solution. Their profession is rife with female bullying, but a group of nurses has floated an idea in which hospitals would have financial incentives to eliminate staff infighting. According to this plan, levels of bullying would be measured, publicly reported, and factored into the payments hospitals get from the federal government for providing quality care.

Better support for working moms could help, too. From my reporting, it seemed that while having family-friendly policies was important, having a boss who bought into those policies mattered just as much. One woman I spoke with, for example, was technically allowed to work from home when her kids were sick, but her older female manager would make her feel bad about it every time, thus negating the point of the policy.

Employers could also make more of an effort to show talented women that they’re valued, since women who feel optimistic about their career prospects are less likely to tear one another down. “We need to change our society so that it becomes normative for women to see other women succeeding in all kinds of roles,” Laurie Rudman says. Indeed, industries that are new and therefore lack entrenched social roles tend to be where this type of change takes place.

Toward the end of our conversation, Rudman emphasized how important it is for high-achieving women to own their success rather than chalking it all up to mentors and luck, even

EARTHWORM

They face in opposite directions to reproduce.

What a miner, pistonning in slow motion through the underworld of the earth, engineering vents, channels, water flow,

converting death and dearth, day in, night out. Each eyeless body digesting the soil, nursing birth.

Cut in two, they double, breathe via marly skin, a must for farm and garden: alfalfa, spuds, spinach, carrots, cabbage, barley,

wasabi, wheat, gourds, rutabaga, papaya, endive. You name it. Build them a shrine. May these lowly laborers of Gaia

multiply, flourish, never decline, stick with worm love, position 69.

— Greg Delanty

Greg Delanty teaches at Saint Michael’s College, in Vermont. Selected Delanty comes out this fall.

if doing so comes with a price. Stereotypes about how female leaders should behave, Rudman said, will only change when enough of us defeat them. I felt like I was talking with the hip, feminist aunt I never had.

“Have you felt resistance to your success?” she asked me.

Occasionally, I said, thinking of a handful of times people had wondered, a little too pointedly, how I’d scored one career win or another.

And what, she asked, did I do about it?

“I said I just got lucky,” I replied, “or came up with some excuses.”

“YAAAAA!” she cried. “See? See? So do you think women should rethink that strategy? Should maybe women start being stronger in our confidence?”

I admitted that it was a good idea, but that “something is keeping me from acting in a more confident way, even though that would be good for women in general.”

“It would be good for women as a whole,” Rudman said. “But individual women have to be shot down first. And you don’t want to be one of those. And I don’t blame you.”

Someone has to be the first, though—to behave confidently, to risk knee-jerk bitterness from our colleagues as a result, and to not hold it against them. But it would be easier if we could do it as a hive. **A**

Olga Khazan is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



HAS THE SMARTPHONE DESTROYED A GENERATION?

The post-Millennials were raised on the iPhone—and the effects have been seismic. More comfortable online than out partying, they are safer, physically, than adolescents have ever been. But they're on the brink of a mental-health crisis.

BY JEAN M. TWENGE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASU HU

ONE DAY last summer, around noon, I called Athena, a 13-year-old who lives in Houston, Texas. She answered her phone—she's had an iPhone since she was 11—sounding as if she'd just woken up. We chatted about her favorite songs and TV shows, and I asked her what she likes to do with her friends. “We go to the mall,” she said. “Do your parents drop you off?” I asked, recalling my own middle-school days, in the 1980s, when I’d enjoy a few parent-free hours shopping with my friends. “No—I go with my family,” she replied. “We’ll go with my mom and brothers and walk a little behind them. I just have to tell my mom where we’re going. I have to check in every hour or every 30 minutes.”

Those mall trips are infrequent—about once a month. More often, Athena and her friends spend time together on their phones, unchaperoned. Unlike the teens of my generation, who might have spent an evening tying up the family landline with gossip, they talk on Snapchat, the smartphone app that allows users to send pictures and videos that quickly disappear. They make sure to keep up their Snapstreaks, which show how many days in a row they have Snapchatted with each other. Sometimes they save screenshots of particularly ridiculous pictures of friends. “It’s good blackmail,” Athena said. (Because she’s a minor, I’m not using her real name.) She told me she’d spent most of the summer hanging out alone in her room with her phone. That’s just the way her generation is, she said. “We didn’t have a choice to know any life without iPads or iPhones. I think we like our phones more than we like actual people.”

I’ve been researching generational differences for 25 years, starting when I was a 22-year-old doctoral student in psychology. Typically, the characteristics that come to define a generation appear gradually, and along a continuum. Beliefs and behaviors that were already rising simply continue to do so. Millennials, for instance, are a highly individualistic generation, but individualism had been increasing since the Baby Boomers turned on, tuned in, and dropped out. I had grown accustomed to line graphs of trends that looked like

modest hills and valleys. Then I began studying Athena’s generation.

Around 2012, I noticed abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional states. The gentle slopes of the line graphs became steep mountains and sheer cliffs, and many of the distinctive characteristics of the Millennial generation began to disappear. In all my analyses of generational data—some reaching back to the 1930s—I had never seen anything like it.

At first I presumed these might be blips, but the trends persisted, across several years and a series of national surveys. The changes weren’t just in degree, but in kind. The biggest difference between the Millennials and their predecessors was in how they viewed the world; teens today differ from the Millennials not just in their views but in how they spend their time. The experiences they have every day are radically different from those of the generation that came of age just a few years before them.

What happened in 2012 to cause such dramatic shifts in behavior? It was after the Great Recession, which officially lasted from 2007 to 2009 and had a starker effect on Millennials trying to find a place in a sputtering economy. But it was exactly the moment when the proportion of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent.

THE MORE I pored over yearly surveys of teen attitudes and behaviors, and the more I talked with young people like Athena, the clearer it became that theirs is a generation shaped by the smartphone and by the concomitant rise of social media. I call them iGen. Born between 1995 and 2012, members of this generation are growing up with smartphones, have an Instagram account before they start high school, and do not remember a time before the internet. The Millennials grew up with the web as well, but it wasn’t ever-present in their lives, at hand at all times, day and night. iGen’s oldest members were early adolescents when the iPhone was introduced, in 2007, and high-school students when the iPad entered the scene, in 2010. A 2017 survey of more than 5,000 American teens found that three out of four owned an iPhone.



The advent of the smartphone and its cousin the tablet was followed quickly by hand-wringing about the deleterious effects of “screen time.” But the impact of these devices has not been fully appreciated, and goes far beyond the usual concerns about curtailed attention spans. The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers’ lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health. These changes have affected young people in every corner of the nation and in every type of household. The trends appear among teens poor and rich; of every ethnic background; in cities, suburbs, and small towns. Where there are cell towers, there are teens living their lives on their smartphone.

To those of us who fondly recall a more analog adolescence, this may seem foreign and troubling. The aim of generational study, however, is not to succumb to nostalgia for the way things used to be; it’s to understand how they are now. Some generational changes are positive, some are negative, and many are both. More comfortable in their bedrooms than in a car or at a party, today’s teens are physically safer than teens have ever been. They’re markedly less likely to get into a car accident and, having less of a taste for alcohol than their predecessors, are less susceptible to drinking’s attendant ills.

Psychologically, however, they are more vulnerable than Millennials were: Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.

Even when a seismic event—a war, a technological leap, a free concert in the mud—plays an outsize role in shaping a group of young people, no single factor ever defines a generation. Parenting styles continue to change, as do school curricula and culture, and these things matter. But the twin rise of the smartphone and social media has caused an earthquake of a magnitude we’ve not seen in a very long time, if ever. There is compelling evidence that the devices we’ve placed in young people’s hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy.

In the early 1970s, the photographer Bill Yates shot a series of portraits at the Sweetheart Roller Skating Rink in Tampa, Florida. In one, a shirtless teen stands with a large bottle of peppermint schnapps stuck in the waistband of his jeans. In another, a boy who looks no older than 12 poses with a cigarette in his mouth. The rink was a place where kids could get away from their parents and inhabit a world of their own, a world where they could drink, smoke, and make out in the backs of their cars. In stark black-and-white, the adolescent Boomers gaze at Yates’s camera with the self-confidence born of making your own choices—even if, perhaps especially if, your parents wouldn’t think they were the right ones.

Fifteen years later, during my own teenage years as a member of Generation X, smoking had lost some of its romance, but independence was definitely still in. My friends and I plotted to get our driver’s license as soon as we could, making DMV appointments for the day we turned 16 and using our newfound freedom to escape the confines of our suburban neighborhood. Asked by our parents, “When will you be home?,” we replied, “When do I have to be?”

But the allure of independence, so powerful to previous generations, holds less sway over today’s teens, who are less likely to leave the house without their parents. The shift is stunning: 12th-graders in 2015 were going out less often than eighth-graders did as recently as 2009.

Today’s teens are also less likely to date. The initial stage of courtship, which Gen Xers called “liking” (as in “Ooh, he likes you!”), kids now call “talking”—an ironic choice for a generation that prefers texting to actual conversation. After two teens have “talked” for a while, they might start dating. But only about 56 percent of high-school seniors in 2015 went out on dates; for Boomers and Gen Xers, the number was about 85 percent.

The decline in dating tracks with a decline in sexual activity. The drop is the sharpest for ninth-graders, among whom the number of sexually active teens has been cut by almost 40 percent since 1991. The average teen now has had sex for the first time by the spring of 11th grade, a full year later than the average Gen Xer. Fewer teens having sex has contributed to what many see as one of the most positive youth trends in recent years: The teen birth rate hit an all-time low in 2016, down 67 percent since its modern peak, in 1991.

Even driving, a symbol of adolescent freedom inscribed in American popular culture, from *Rebel Without a Cause* to *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, has lost its appeal for today’s teens.

Nearly all Boomer high-school students had their driver’s license by the spring of their senior year; more than one in four teens today still lack one at the end of high school. For some, Mom and Dad are such good chauffeurs that there’s no urgent need to drive. “My parents drove me everywhere and never complained, so I always had rides,” a 21-year-old student in San Diego told me. “I didn’t get my license until my mom told me I had to because she could not keep driving me to school.” She finally got her license six months after her 18th birthday. In conversation after conversation, teens described getting their license as something to be nagged into by their parents—a notion that would have been unthinkable to previous generations.

Independence isn’t free—you need some money in your pocket to pay for gas, or for that bottle of schnapps. In earlier eras, kids worked in great numbers, eager to finance their freedom or prodded by their parents to learn the value of a dollar. But iGen teens aren’t working (or managing their own money) as much. In the late 1970s, 77 percent of high-school seniors

THE ALLURE OF INDEPENDENCE, SO POWERFUL TO PREVIOUS GENERATIONS, HOLDS LESS SWAY OVER TODAY’S TEENS.

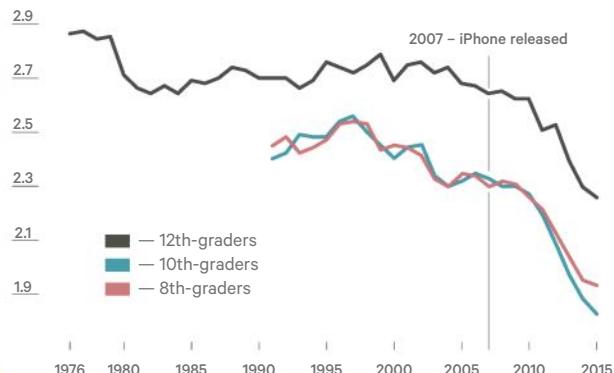
THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

The constant presence of the internet, particularly social media, is changing the behavior and attitudes of today's teens.

1

Not Hanging Out With Friends

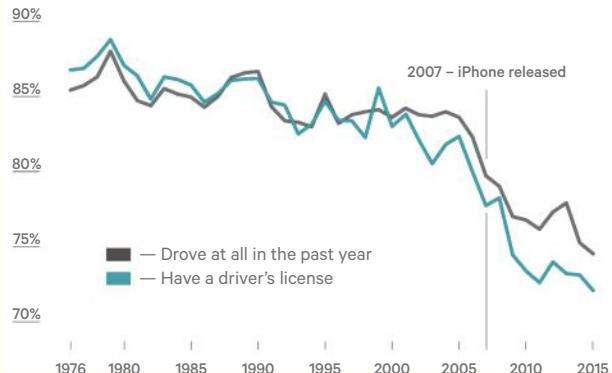
Times per week teenagers go out without their parents



2

In No Rush to Drive

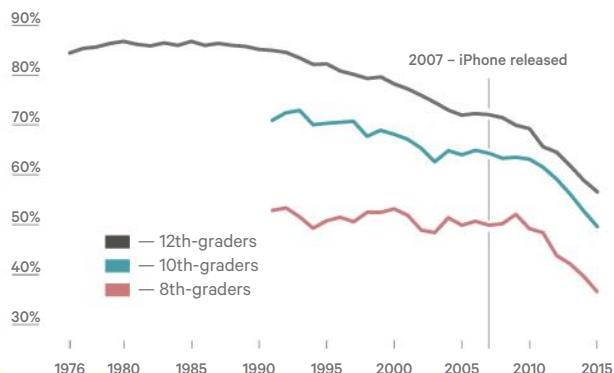
Percentage of 12th-graders who drive



3

Less Dating ...

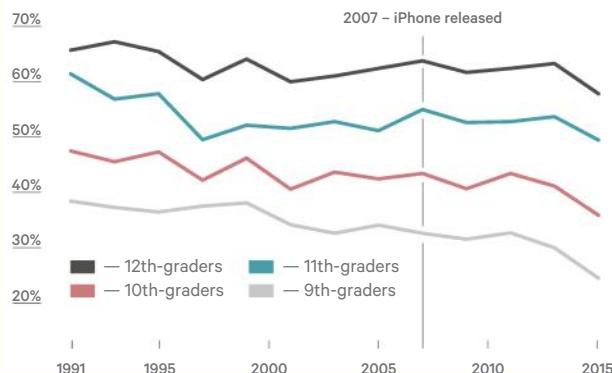
Percentage of teenagers who ever go out on dates



4

... And Less Sex

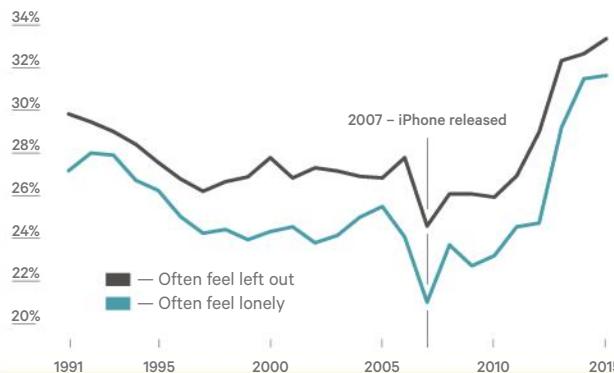
Percentage of high-school students who have ever had sex



5

More Likely to Feel Lonely

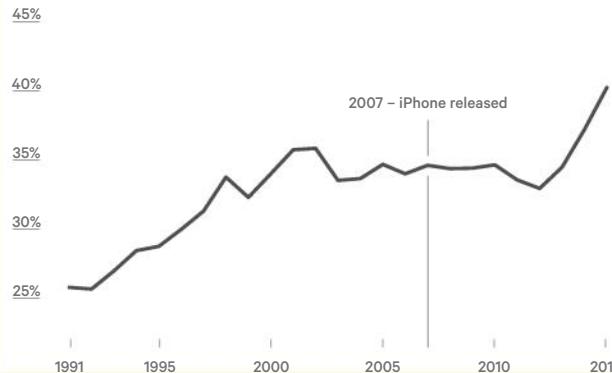
Percentage of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders who agree or mostly agree with the statement "I often feel left out of things" or "A lot of times I feel lonely"



6

Less Likely to Get Enough Sleep

Percentage of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders who get less than seven hours of sleep most nights



worked for pay during the school year; by the mid-2010s, only 55 percent did. The number of eighth-graders who work for pay has been cut in half. These declines accelerated during the Great Recession, but teen employment has not bounced back, even though job availability has.

Of course, putting off the responsibilities of adulthood is not an iGen innovation. Gen Xers, in the 1990s, were the first to postpone the traditional markers of adulthood. Young Gen Xers were just about as likely to drive, drink alcohol, and date as young Boomers had been, and more likely to have sex and get pregnant as teens. But as they left their teenage years behind, Gen Xers married and started careers later than their Boomer predecessors had.

Gen X managed to stretch adolescence beyond all previous limits: Its members started becoming adults earlier and finished becoming adults later. Beginning with Millennials and continuing with iGen, adolescence is contracting again—but only because its onset is being delayed. Across a range of behaviors—drinking, dating, spending time unsupervised—18-year-olds now act more like 15-year-olds used to, and 15-year-olds more like 13-year-olds. Childhood now stretches well into high school.

Why are today's teens waiting longer to take on both the responsibilities and the pleasures of adulthood? Shifts in the economy, and parenting, certainly play a role. In an information economy that rewards higher education more than early work history, parents may be inclined to encourage their kids to stay home and study rather than to get a part-time job. Teens, in turn, seem to be content with this homebody arrangement—not because they're so studious, but because their social life is lived on their phone. They don't need to leave home to spend time with their friends.

If today's teens were a generation of grinds, we'd see that in the data. But eighth-, 10th-, and 12th-graders in the 2010s actually spend less time on homework than Gen X teens did in the early 1990s. (High-school seniors headed for four-year colleges spend about the same amount of time on homework as their predecessors did.) The time that seniors spend on activities such as student clubs and sports and exercise has changed little in recent years. Combined with the decline in working for pay, this means iGen teens have more leisure time than Gen X teens did, not less.

So what are they doing with all that time? They are on their phone, in their room, alone and often distressed.

ONE OF THE IRONIES of iGen life is that despite spending far more time under the same roof as their parents, today's teens can hardly be said to be closer to their mothers and fathers than their predecessors were. "I've seen my friends with their families—they don't talk to them," Athena told me. "They just say 'Okay,

okay, whatever' while they're on their phones. They don't pay attention to their family." Like her peers, Athena is an expert at tuning out her parents so she can focus on her phone. She spent much of her summer keeping up with friends, but nearly all of it was over text or Snapchat. "I've been on my phone more than I've been with actual people," she said. "My bed has, like, an imprint of my body."

In this, too, she is typical. The number of teens who get together with their friends nearly every day dropped by more than 40 percent from 2000 to 2015; the decline has been especially steep recently. It's not only a matter of fewer kids partying; fewer kids are spending time simply hanging out. That's something most teens used to do: nerds and jocks, poor kids and rich kids, C students and A students. The roller rink, the basketball court, the town pool, the local necking spot—they've all been replaced by virtual spaces accessed through apps and the web.

You might expect that teens spend so much time in these new spaces because it makes them happy, but most data suggest that it does not. The Monitoring the Future survey, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and designed to be nationally representative, has asked 12th-graders more than 1,000 questions every year since 1975 and queried eighth- and 10th-graders since 1991. The survey asks teens how happy they are and also how much of their leisure time they spend on various activities, including non-screen activities such as in-person social interaction and exercise, and, in recent years, screen activities such as using social media, texting, and browsing the web. The results could not be clearer: Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.

There's not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less

happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness. Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they're unhappy than those who devote less time to social media. Admittedly, 10 hours a week is a lot. But those who spend six to nine hours a week on social media are still 47 percent more likely to say they are unhappy than those who use social media even less. The opposite is true of in-person interactions. Those who spend an above-average amount of time with their friends in person are 20 percent less likely to say they're unhappy than those who hang out for a below-average amount of time.

If you were going to give advice for a happy adolescence based on this survey, it would be straightforward: Put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen. Of course, these analyses don't unequivocally prove that screen time *causes* unhappiness; it's possible that unhappy teens spend more time online. But recent research suggests that screen time, in particular social-media

use, does indeed cause unhappiness. One study asked college students with a Facebook page to complete short surveys on their phone over the course of two weeks. They'd get a text message with a link five times a day, and report on their mood and how much they'd used Facebook. The more they'd used Facebook, the unhappier they felt, but feeling unhappy did not subsequently lead to more Facebook use.

Social-networking sites like Facebook promise to connect us to friends. But the portrait of iGen teens emerging from the data is one of a lonely, dislocated generation. Teens who visit social-networking sites every day but see their friends in person less frequently are the most likely to agree with the statements "A lot of times I feel lonely," "I often feel left out of things," and "I often wish I had more good friends." Teens' feelings of loneliness spiked in 2013 and have remained high since.

This doesn't always mean that, on an individual level, kids who spend more time online are lonelier than kids who spend less time online. Teens who spend more time on social media also spend more time with their friends in person, on average—highly social teens are more social in both venues, and less social teens are less so. But at the generational level, when teens spend more time on smartphones and less time on in-person social interactions, loneliness is more common.

So is depression. Once again, the effect of screen activities is unmistakable: The more time teens spend looking at screens, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression. Eighth-graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27 percent, while those who play sports, go to religious services, or even do homework more than the average teen cut their risk significantly.

Teens who spend three hours a day or more on electronic devices are 35 percent more likely to have a risk factor for suicide, such as making a suicide plan. (That's much more than the risk related to, say, watching TV.) One piece of data that indirectly but stunningly captures kids' growing isolation, for good and for bad: Since 2007, the homicide rate among teens has declined, but the suicide rate has increased. As teens have started spending less time together, they have become less likely to kill one another, and more likely to kill themselves. In 2011, for the first time in 24 years, the teen suicide rate was higher than the teen homicide rate.

Depression and suicide have many causes; too much technology is clearly not the only one. And the teen suicide rate was even higher in the 1990s, long before smartphones existed. Then again, about four times as many Americans now take antidepressants, which are often effective in treating severe depression, the type most strongly linked to suicide.

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION between smartphones and the apparent psychological distress this generation is experiencing? For all their power to link kids day and night, social media also exacerbate the age-old teen concern about being left out. Today's teens may go to fewer parties and spend less time together in person, but when they do congregate, they document their hangouts relentlessly—on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook. Those not invited to come along are keenly aware of it. Accordingly, the number of teens who feel left out has reached all-time highs across age groups. Like the increase in loneliness, the upswing in feeling left out has been swift and significant.

This trend has been especially steep among girls. Forty-eight percent more girls said they often felt left out in 2015 than in 2010, compared with 27 percent more boys. Girls use social media more often, giving them additional opportunities to feel excluded and lonely when they see their friends or classmates getting together without them. Social media levy a psychic tax on the teen doing the posting as well, as she anxiously awaits the affirmation of comments and likes. When Athena posts pictures to Instagram, she told me, "I'm nervous about what people think and are going to say. It sometimes bugs me when I don't get a certain amount of likes on a picture."

Girls have also borne the brunt of the rise in depressive symptoms among today's teens. Boys' depressive symptoms increased by 21 percent from 2012 to 2015, while girls' increased by 50 percent—more than twice as much. The rise in suicide, too, is more pronounced among girls. Although the rate increased for both sexes, three times as many 12-to-14-year-old girls killed themselves in 2015 as in 2007, compared with twice as many boys. The suicide rate is still higher for boys, in part because they use more-lethal methods, but girls are beginning to close the gap.

These more dire consequences for teenage girls could also be rooted in the fact that they're more likely to experience cyberbullying. Boys tend to bully one another physically, while girls are more likely to do so by undermining a victim's social status or relationships. Social media give middle- and high-school girls a platform on which to carry out the style of aggression they favor, ostracizing and excluding other girls around the clock.

Social-media companies are of course aware of these problems, and to one degree or another have endeavored to prevent cyberbullying. But their various motivations are, to say the least, complex. A recently leaked Facebook document indicated that the company had been touting to advertisers its ability to determine teens' emotional state based on their on-site behavior, and even to pinpoint "moments when young people need a confidence boost." Facebook acknowledged that the document was real, but denied that it offers "tools to target people based on their emotional state."

IN JULY 2014, a 13-year-old girl in North Texas woke to the smell of something burning. Her phone had overheated and melted into the sheets. National news outlets picked up the story, stoking readers' fears that their cellphone might spontaneously combust. To me, however, the flaming cellphone wasn't the only surprising aspect of the story. *Why, I wondered, would anyone sleep with her phone beside her in bed?* It's not as though you can surf the web while you're sleeping. And who could slumber deeply inches from a buzzing phone?

Curious, I asked my undergraduate students at San Diego State University what they do with their phone while they sleep. Their answers were a profile in obsession. Nearly all slept with their phone, putting it under their pillow, on the mattress, or at the very least within arm's reach of the bed. They checked social media right before they went to sleep, and reached for their phone as soon as they woke up in the morning (they had to—all of them used it as their alarm clock). Their phone was the last thing they saw before they went to sleep and the first thing they saw when they woke up. If they woke in the middle of the night, they often ended up looking at their phone. Some used the

language of addiction. “I know I shouldn’t, but I just can’t help it,” one said about looking at her phone while in bed. Others saw their phone as an extension of their body—or even like a lover: “Having my phone closer to me while I’m sleeping is a comfort.”

It may be a comfort, but the smartphone is cutting into teens’ sleep: Many now sleep less than seven hours most nights. Sleep experts say that teens should get about nine hours of sleep a night; a teen who is getting less than seven hours a night is significantly sleep deprived. Fifty-seven percent more teens were sleep deprived in 2015 than in 1991. In just the four years from 2012 to 2015, 22 percent more teens failed to get seven hours of sleep.

The increase is suspiciously timed, once again starting around when most teens got a smartphone. Two national surveys show that teens who spend three or more hours a day on electronic devices are 28 percent more likely to get less than seven hours of sleep than those who spend fewer than three hours, and teens who visit social-media sites every day are 19 percent more likely to be sleep deprived. A meta-analysis of studies on electronic-device use among children found similar results: Children who use a media device right before bed are more likely to sleep less than they should, more likely to sleep poorly, and more than twice as likely to be sleepy during the day.

Electronic devices and social media seem to have an especially strong ability to disrupt sleep. Teens who read books and magazines more often than the average are actually slightly less likely to be sleep deprived—either reading lulls them to sleep, or they can put the book down at bedtime. Watching TV for several hours a day is only weakly linked to sleeping less. But the allure of the smartphone is often too much to resist.

Sleep deprivation is linked to myriad issues, including compromised thinking and reasoning, susceptibility to illness, weight gain, and high blood pressure. It also affects mood: People who don’t sleep enough are prone to depression and anxiety. Again, it’s difficult to trace the precise paths of causation. Smartphones could be causing lack of sleep, which leads to depression, or the phones could be causing depression, which leads to lack of sleep. Or some other factor could be causing both depression and sleep deprivation to rise. But the smartphone, its blue light glowing in the dark, is likely playing a nefarious role.

THE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN depression and smartphone use are strong enough to suggest that more parents should be telling their kids to put down their phone. As the technology writer Nick Bilton has reported, it’s a policy some Silicon Valley executives follow. Even Steve Jobs limited his kids’ use of the devices he brought into the world.

What’s at stake isn’t just how kids experience adolescence. The constant presence of smartphones is likely to affect them

well into adulthood. Among people who suffer an episode of depression, at least half become depressed again later in life. Adolescence is a key time for developing social skills; as teens spend less time with their friends face-to-face, they have fewer opportunities to practice them. In the next decade, we may see more adults who know just the right emoji for a situation, but not the right facial expression.

I realize that restricting technology might be an unrealistic demand to impose on a generation of kids so accustomed to being wired at all times. My three daughters were born in 2006, 2009, and 2012. They’re not yet old enough to display the traits of iGen teens, but I have already witnessed firsthand just how ingrained new media are in their young lives. I’ve observed my toddler, barely old enough to walk, confidently swiping her way through an iPad. I’ve experienced my 6-year-old asking for her own cellphone. I’ve overheard my 9-year-old discussing the latest app to sweep the fourth grade. Prying the phone out of our kids’ hands will be difficult, even more so than the quixotic efforts of my parents’ generation to get their kids to turn off MTV and get some fresh air. But more seems to be at stake in urging teens to use their phone responsibly, and there are benefits to be gained even if all we instill in our children is the importance of moderation. Significant effects on both mental health and sleep time appear after two or more hours a day on electronic devices. The average teen spends about two and a half hours a day on electronic devices. Some mild boundary-setting could keep kids from falling into harmful habits.

In my conversations with teens, I saw hopeful signs that kids themselves are beginning to link some of their troubles to their ever-present phone. Athena told me that when she does spend time with her friends in person, they are often looking at their device instead of at her. “I’m trying to talk to them about something, and they don’t actually look at my face,” she said.

“They’re looking at their phone, or they’re looking at their Apple Watch.” “What does that feel like, when you’re trying to talk to somebody face-to-face and they’re not looking at you?” I asked. “It kind of hurts,” she said. “It hurts. I know my parents’ generation didn’t do that. I could be talking about something super important to me, and they wouldn’t even be listening.”

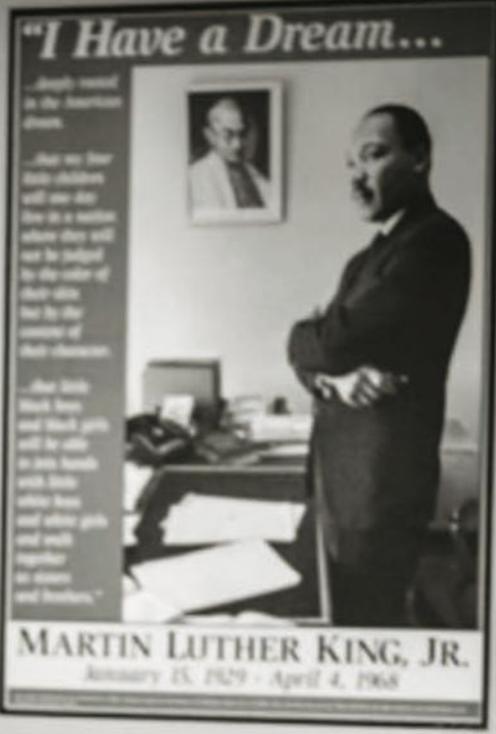
Once, she told me, she was hanging out with a friend who was texting her boyfriend. “I was trying to talk to her about my family, and what was going on, and she was like, ‘Uh-huh, yeah, whatever.’ So I took her phone out of her hands and I threw it at my wall.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “You play volleyball,” I said. “Do you have a pretty good arm?” “Yep,” she replied. □

Jean M. Twenge is a professor of psychology at San Diego State University. This article has been adapted from her book iGen, published by Atria Books in August.

Shanta Sweatt (left) and her attorney,
the public defender Ember Eyster,
in Eyster's Nashville office





For most of its history,
the United States relied
on the trial system to
administer criminal justice.

Not anymore.
We live in the age of the
plea bargain—and millions
of Americans are suffering
the consequences.

INNOCENCE *Is* IRRELEVANT

By
Emily Yoffe

Photographs by
Nina Robinson

IT HAD BEEN A LONG NIGHT FOR SHANTA SWEATT.

After working a 16-hour shift cleaning the Tennessee Performing Arts Center, in Nashville, and then catching the 11:15 bus to her apartment, she just wanted to take a shower and go to sleep. Instead, she wound up having a fight with the man she refers to as her “so-called boyfriend.” He was a high-school classmate who had recently ended up on the street, so Sweatt had let him move in, under the proviso that he not do drugs in the apartment. Sweatt has a soft spot for people in trouble. Over the years, she had taken in many of her two sons’ friends, one of whom who had been living with them since his early teens.

When Sweatt got home that night, early in November of last year, she realized that her boyfriend had been smoking marijuana, probably in front of the kids. She was furious, words were exchanged, and he left. Sweatt finally crawled into bed after midnight, only to be awakened at about 8:30 in the morning by an insistent knock at the door. She assumed that her boyfriend was coming to get his stuff and get out of her life.

When she opened the door, police officers filled the frame, and more were waiting at her back door. She could see that squad cars were swarming the parking lot. “There were 12 to 15 cars,” she told me. “For us.” An officer asked whether they could enter. As a

resident of public housing, she wasn’t sure whether she had the right to say no. (She did.) But she was certain that if she refused them, they would come back. She had nothing to hide, so she let them in. “I didn’t get smart or give them a rough time,” she said. “I cooperated.”

Sweatt, who is black, didn’t know what had led the police to her door. Their report says a complaint had been made about drug dealing from the apartment. After entering, they began systematically searching her apartment. One officer yanked open a junk drawer in her bedroom dresser, and inside he found small baggies of marijuana, containing a total of about 25 grams—a weight equivalent to about six packets of sugar. There was also marijuana paraphernalia in the apartment. When the officer showed the baggies to her, Sweatt immediately knew they had to belong to her boyfriend, who—in addition to having just been smoking in her home—had past drug convictions.

Sweatt, 36 years old, left high school in 11th grade, but she has the kind of knowledge of the law that accrues to observant residents of James A. Cayce Homes, a housing project in East Nashville. “I’m the lease owner,” she told me. “Whatever was there, I would get blamed.” It seemed useless to her to say that the drugs must have belonged to her absent boyfriend, who had a common name and no fixed address. She believed that this would result in the police pinning the crime on her sons. Her 17-year-old was at school, but her 18-year-old, who worked on the cleaning crew with her, was home, along with the friend of his who lived with them. Sweatt told me, “I’ve seen that where I lived: The parents said no, so everyone in the house gets charged. I’m not going to let my children go down for someone else’s mistake. A parent should take ownership of what happens in the house.” So she made a quick and consequential decision. To protect her sons, she told the police that the marijuana belonged

to her. “I said it was mine, and me and my homegirls were going on vacation to California. I said we were going to take the marijuana with us—I heard it was legal there—and we were going to smoke for a week or two, then come back to normal life.”

Sweatt told me this two months after her arrest. She and I were sitting in a conference room at the Metropolitan Public Defender’s Office, in downtown Nashville. She was dressed for work in a black sweatshirt, sweatpants, and sneakers. A large ring of keys attached to her belt bespoke her responsibilities as a janitorial supervisor at the arts center, just a few blocks away. I asked how she had come up with such a specific story on the spot. “It’s a dream,” she said. “I heard California is more lively, more fun, than Nashville. The beaches are pretty. The palm trees.” For a moment she looked as if she could actually see the surf. She was born and raised in East Nashville and has spent almost her entire life within the same few square miles. She had no plans to vacation in California, or anywhere else. “All I do is work and take care of my sons,” she said.

The police seemed to believe her story (the arrest warrant noted her upcoming trip) and drove her downtown, where they put her in a holding room. By 1 o’clock that afternoon, her bail had been set at \$11,500. To be released, she needed to get \$1,150 to a bail bondsman. She contacted a friend, and they each paid half. (“That’s gone,” she says.) She assumed she’d be out in time to get to work that evening, but the money didn’t clear until almost nine, minutes before

she was to be sent to jail in shackles. A court date was set for January. Sweatt was facing serious charges with serious consequences, and she was advised to get an attorney.

The fallout began even before the court rendered judgment in her case. Under the rules of the housing agency, her arrest prompted her eviction, which scattered her family. Sweatt moved into

*Sweatt
embraced
her attorney
and wept with
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not commit.*



a cheap motel, and her sons moved in with her mother, although she still managed to see them every day. She tried to get enough money together to hire what she calls “a regular lawyer,” meaning a private attorney, but failed. So in January she turned to the public defender’s office—a choice that many people in her situation make reluctantly. That’s because of the common misperception, I was told by Dawn Deaner, the head of the office, that public defenders are nothing more than “public pretenders” who are “paid to plead [their clients] guilty.”

Sweatt’s case was assigned to a lawyer named Ember Eyster. At their first meeting, Sweatt felt reassured. As she put it to me, “Ember wears a dress that says, *I’m going to take you down!*” During their 75-minute discussion, Eyster asked Sweatt what her goals were, and Sweatt responded with a big one: no incarceration. She couldn’t bear the idea of being away from her boys. At Eyster’s request, Sweatt gathered her time sheets from work and

dropped them off at Eyster’s office. Eyster planned to use them as evidence that Sweatt was too busy mopping the floors at the arts center day and night to be a drug trafficker.

The next time Eyster and Sweatt saw each other was two weeks later, in court. Sweatt had been charged with a Class D felony, which carried a two-to-12-year prison sentence, and a misdemeanor related to the paraphernalia. Exactly what punishment she would face depended largely on how the district attorney’s office weighed several factors. First, there was her confession. Second, there was the police account of the circumstances of the arrest. Third, there was the fact that she lived within 1,000 feet of an elementary school, which meant it was possible that the charges against her would be “enhanced.” Finally, there was the fact that she already had a criminal history. In years

past, she had pleaded guilty to several minor misdemeanors (most for driving with a suspended license) and one felony. The felony conviction resulted from her involvement in a 2001 robbery at a Jack in the Box. As Sweatt tells it, friends had discussed committing a robbery at the restaurant, where she worked, and then surprised her by actually carrying one out. She was arrested and pleaded guilty to a charge of “facilitation,” and in exchange got three years of probation. “I have never gotten into trouble since,” she told me, “except for driving without a license.” She now relies on the bus.

Eyster believed that Sweatt was innocent of the drug charges against her. “This is a hardworking woman who lived in a heavily policed community for 10 years,” she told me. “If she were a drug dealer, she would have already been evicted. She doesn’t have a history of drug use.” But the idea of taking this case to trial was a nonstarter. The best path forward, Eyster decided, was to humanize Sweatt to the prosecutor—hence those time sheets—and then try to negotiate a plea bargain. In exchange for a guilty plea, the prosecutor might not recommend a prison sentence.

The strategy worked. The prosecutor reduced the charge from a felony to a Class A misdemeanor and offered

X
Shanta Sweatt and her two sons in front of the James A. Cayce Homes, where she was arrested

Sweatt a six-month suspended sentence (meaning she wouldn’t have to serve any of it) with no probation. Her paraphernalia charge was dismissed, and her conviction would result in a fine and fees that totaled \$1,396.15.

Upon hearing the news, Sweatt embraced Eyster and wept with joy. Then she stood before the judge and pleaded guilty to a crime she says she did not commit.

THIS IS THE AGE of the plea bargain. Most people adjudicated in the criminal-justice system today waive the right to a trial and the host of protections that go along with one, including the right to appeal. Instead, they plead guilty. The vast majority of felony convictions are now the result of plea bargains—some 94 percent at the state level, and some 97 percent at the federal level. Estimates for misdemeanor convictions run even higher. These are

astonishing statistics, and they reveal a stark new truth about the American criminal-justice system: Very few cases go to trial. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy acknowledged this reality in 2012, writing for the majority in *Missouri v. Frye*, a case that helped establish

lith the right to competent counsel for defendants who are offered a plea bargain. Quoting a law-review article, Kennedy wrote, “Horse trading [between prosecutor and defense counsel] determines who goes to jail and for how long. That is what plea bargaining is. It is not some adjunct to the criminal justice system; it is the criminal justice system.”

Ideally, plea bargains work like this: Defendants for whom there is clear evidence of guilt accept responsibility for their actions; in exchange, they get leniency. A time-consuming and costly trial is avoided, and everybody benefits. But in recent decades, American legislators have criminalized so many behaviors that police are arresting millions of people annually—almost 11 million in 2015, the most recent year for which figures are available. Taking to trial even a significant proportion of those who are charged would grind proceedings to a halt. According to Stephanos Bibas, a professor of law and criminology at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, the criminal-justice system has become a “capacious, onerous machinery that sweeps everyone in,” and plea bargains, with their swift finality, are what keep that machinery running smoothly.

Because of plea bargains, the system can quickly handle the criminal cases of millions of Americans each year, involving everything from petty violations to violent crimes. But plea bargains make it easy for prosecutors to convict defendants who may not be guilty, who don’t present a danger to society, or whose “crime” may primarily be a matter of suffering from poverty, mental illness, or addiction. And plea bargains are intrinsically tied up with race, of course, especially in our era of mass incarceration.

**Some
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As prosecutors have accumulated power in recent decades, judges and public defenders have lost it. To induce defendants to plead, prosecutors often threaten “the trial penalty”: They make it known that defendants will face more serious charges and harsher sentences if they take their

case to court and are convicted. About 80 percent of defendants are eligible for court-appointed attorneys, including overworked public defenders who don’t have the time or resources to even consider bringing more than a tiny fraction of these cases to trial. The result, one frustrated Missouri public defender complained a decade ago, is a style of defense that is nothing more than “meet ‘em and greet ‘em and plead ‘em.”

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, 630,000 people are in jail on any given day, and 443,000 of them—70 percent—are in pretrial detention. Many of these defendants are facing minor charges that would not mandate further incarceration, but they lack the resources to make bail and secure their freedom. Some therefore feel compelled to take whatever deal the prosecutor offers, even if they are innocent.

Writing in 2016 in the *William & Mary Law Review*, Donald Dripps, a professor at the University of San Diego School of Law, illustrated the capricious and coercive nature of plea bargains. Dripps cited the case of Terrance Graham, a black 16-year-old who, in 2003, attempted to rob a restaurant with some friends. The prosecutor charged Graham as an adult, and he faced a life

sentence without the possibility of parole at trial. The prosecutor offered Graham a great deal in exchange for a guilty plea: one year in jail and two more years of probation. Graham took the deal. But he was later accused of participating in another robbery and violated his probation—at which point the judge imposed the life sentence.

What’s startling about this case, Dripps noted, is that Graham faced two radically different punishments for the same crime: either be put away for life or spend minimal time behind bars in exchange for a guilty plea. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled, in *Graham v. Florida*, that the punishment Graham faced at trial was so cruel and unusual as to be unconstitutional. The Court found that a juvenile who did not commit homicide cannot face life without parole.

Thanks in part to plea bargains, millions of Americans have a criminal record; in 2011, the National Employment Law Project estimated that figure at 65 million. It is a mark that can carry lifetime consequences for education, employment, and housing. Having a record, even for a violation that is trivial or specious, means a person can face tougher charges and punishment if he or she again encounters the criminal-justice system. Plea bargaining has become so coercive that many innocent people feel they have no option but to plead guilty.



"Our system makes it a rational choice to plead guilty to something you didn't do," Maddy deLone, the executive director of the Innocence Project, told me. The result, according to the late Harvard law professor William J. Stuntz, who wrote extensively about the history of plea bargains in *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice* (2011), is a system that has become "the harshest in the history of democratic government."

TO LEARN MORE about how plea bargaining works in America today, I went to Nashville, where Shanta Sweatt entered her plea. A blue county in a red state, Davidson County, which includes Nashville, has a population of about 680,000. According to District Attorney Glenn Funk, Nashville-Davidson County handles about 100,000 criminal cases a year, 70 percent of which are misdemeanors, 30 percent felonies. Last year, attorneys in the public defender's office dealt with 20,000 misdemeanors and 4,900 felony cases. Of all the defendants processed in Nashville-Davidson County last year, only 86 had their cases resolved at trial.

During my week in Nashville, I attended hearings at the courthouse on a full range of cases. I sat in on the plea discussions

Nashville-Davidson
County's
courthouse, in down-
town Nashville

between an assistant district attorney and two public defenders. I observed a public defender in conversation with jailed defendants facing felony charges. I saw justice meted out courtroom by courtroom, often determined in part by the attitude, even the mood, of the prosecutor. My experience may not have been representative, but over the course of five days, I saw few defendants who had harmed someone else. Those who were facing felony charges had been arrested for drug offenses; some were clearly addicts with mental-health problems.

I started with the misdemeanor citation docket, which covers the lowest-level offenses. The defendants on the courtroom benches were white, black, and Latino. Sartorial guidelines were posted on the doors: no "see-through blouses," no "exposed underwear," no "sagging pants." Ember Eyster, Shanta Sweatt's attorney, was at the courthouse, but very few of the defendants in court that day had requested the services of a public defender or were accompanied by a lawyer.

Misdemeanors are lesser offenses than felonies and are supposed to result in limited penalties. In Tennessee, Class A misdemeanors are sometimes referred

to as 1129s: convictions that carry a maximum sentence of 11 months and 29 days. Many people convicted of misdemeanors are given probation or a suspended sentence or simply "time served"—that is, the amount of time they spent waiting in jail for their case to be heard because they couldn't make bond. The most-minor offenses can result in being required to take a class or do community service. Getting put through the system often also means accruing fines, fees, and court costs, which in a single case can run to more than \$1,000. The punishments are not designed to be severe, or to create long-lasting consequences. But for many people they do.

Millions of people each year are now processed for misdemeanors. In a 2009 report titled "Minor Crimes, Massive Waste," the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers described a system characterized by "the ardent enforcement of crimes that were once

simply deemed undesirable behavior and punished by societal means or a civil infraction punishable by a fine."

In Nashville, I was struck by how many people were in court because they had been picked up for driving with a suspended license. It's a common practice, I learned, for states to suspend the licenses of people who have failed to pay court costs, traffic fines, or child support. In 2011, for example, Tennessee passed a law requiring the suspension of licenses for nonpayment of certain financial obligations. Both Glenn Funk, who must enforce this law, and Dawn Deane, the head of the public defender's office, agree that it's absurd, in part because the scheme is almost perfectly designed to prevent the outcome it seeks. If people stop driving when their licenses are suspended, they may no longer be able to reliably get to work, which means they risk losing their jobs and going deeper into debt. As a result, many people whose licenses have been suspended drive anyway, putting themselves in constant jeopardy of racking up misdemeanor convictions. It is common for defendants charged with such minor infractions to represent themselves, even if they don't understand the consequences of pleading guilty, and even if there might be some mitigating circumstances that an attorney could argue on their behalf. Plead guilty to enough suspended-license misdemeanors, and a subsequent charge can be a felony.

Funk, who was elected in 2014, has stopped routinely jailing defendants arrested for driving with a suspended license. "Most of the time, driver's licenses are revoked because of poverty," he told me. "I want people to have a license. It gives them ownership in society." Deane told me that about two-thirds of the people listed on the citation docket are on there because of a driver's license violation. And once their names are on the docket, the system strongly encourages them to plead guilty. "It's a hamster wheel of bureaucracy," she said, "that does no one any good."

PLEA BARGAINS DIDN'T exist in colonial America. Law books, lawyers, and prosecutors were rare. Most judges had little or no legal training, and victims ran their own cases (with the self-evident exception of homicides). Trials were brief, and people generally



knew one another. By the 19th century, however, our modern criminal-justice system was coming into its own: Professional prosecutors emerged, more defendants hired lawyers to represent them, and the courts developed more-formal rules for evidence. Trials went from taking minutes or hours to lasting days. Calendars became clogged, which gave judges an incentive to start accepting pleas. “Suddenly, everybody operating inside the system is better off if you have these pleas,” Penn’s Stephanos Bibas told me.

The advantages of plea bargains became even clearer in the latter part of the 20th century, after the Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Earl Warren, issued a series of decisions, between 1953 and 1969, that established robust protections for criminal defendants. These included the landmark *Gideon v. Wainwright* and *Miranda v. Arizona* decisions, the former of which guaranteed the Sixth Amendment right to counsel in felony cases (since expanded to some misdemeanor cases), and the latter of which required that police inform those in their custody of the right to counsel and against self-incrimination. The Court’s rulings had the inevitable effect of making trials lengthier and more burdensome, so prosecutors began turning more frequently to plea bargains. Before the 1960s, according to William J. Stuntz, between one-fourth and one-third of state felony charges led to a trial. Today the figure is one-twentieth.

The legal system provides few rules and protections for those who take a deal. In what has been described as one of the Court’s earliest plea-bargain decisions, *Brady v. United States* (1970), the justices found that guilty pleas were acceptable as long as certain conditions were met, among them the following: Defendants had to have competent counsel; they had to face no threats, misrepresentations, or improper promises; and they had to be able to make their plea “intelligently.”

For many of the cases, the assistant D.A. was making her decision in less than a minute. It was justice dispensed at the pace of speed dating.

This seemed eminently fair. But crime had already started to increase sharply. The rise provoked a get-tough response from police, prosecutors, and legislators. As the rate of violent crime continued to accelerate, fueled in part by the crack epidemic that started in the ’80s, the response got even tougher. By the 1990s, the U.S. had entered what Donald Dripps calls “a steroid era in criminal justice,” which continued even though violent crime peaked by 1992 and began its now-historic decline. In the late 20th century, legislators passed mandatory-minimum-sentence and “three strikes” laws, which gave prosecutors an effective bludgeon they could use to induce plea bargains. (Some “three strikes” laws result in life imprisonment for a third felony; hundreds of people in California received this punishment for shoplifting. California reformed its three-strikes legislation in 2012 to impose such punishments only for serious or violent felonies.)

The growth of the system took on a life of its own. “No one sets out to create bloated criminal codes,” I was told by David Carroll, the executive director of the Sixth Amendment Center, which protects the right to counsel. “But once they exist, vast resources are spent to justify them.” In response to the crime wave, the United States significantly expanded police forces to catch criminals, prosecutor’s offices to charge them, and the correctional system to incarcerate them. Legislators have added so many acts to criminal codes that in 2013, Neil Gorsuch—now on

the Supreme Court, but then an appellate judge—publicly raised concerns. In a speech sponsored by the Federalist Society, he asked, “What happens to individual freedom and equality—and to our very conception of law itself—when the criminal code comes to cover so many facets of daily life that prosecutors can almost choose their targets with impunity?”

ONE MORNING IN NASHVILLE.

I sat at the prosecutor’s table with Emily Todoran, an assistant district attorney, and Ryann Casey and Megan Geer, two young public defenders. (Geer has since left for a private criminal-defense firm.) Before us was a two-inch stack of paperwork that included police reports on everyone who had been picked up the night before, for a variety of misdemeanor violations. None of those arrested had made bond (“Basically, it’s all homeless offenses,” Geer said), so everyone whose case was being assessed was waiting in jail.

Police officers have wide discretion in deciding whether a person is breaking the law, and they sometimes arrest people for such offenses as sleeping in public and sitting too long on a bench. One case involved a woman whose crime seemed to have been, in the words of the officer who filed the report, “walking down the road around 1:30 a.m.” with “no legitimate reason.” Casey told me before this meeting that she hoped to get all such cases dismissed. “Walking down the street!” she said. “Imagine if it was you.”

Ember Eyster told me it’s sometimes possible to get misdemeanor cases dismissed with a bit of investigation. Maybe a trespassing charge doesn’t hold up, for example, because the property owner hadn’t posted a NO TRESPASSING sign. But this takes time, and clients who can’t make bond have to sit in jail until the job is done. It’s a choice few are willing to make for the small chance of avoiding a conviction. Many clients tell Eyster as soon as they meet her that they want to plead guilty and get time served.

The choice makes sense under the circumstances. But anybody who makes it is incurring a debt to society that’s hard, sometimes impossible, to repay. Those with a conviction in the United States can be denied public housing, professional licenses, and student loans. Many employers ask whether job applicants have been convicted of a crime, and in our zero-tolerance, zero-risk society, it’s rational to avoid those who have.

People with a misdemeanor conviction who get picked up for another minor offense are more likely to face subsequent conviction—and that, according to Issa Kohler-Hausmann, an associate professor of law and sociology at



Yale, is part of a deliberate strategy. Kohler-Hausmann made this case in a provocative 2014 *Stanford Law Review* article, “Managerial Justice and Mass Misdemeanors,” about the rise of misdemeanor arrests in New York City, which occurred even as felony arrests fell. Authorities, she argued, tend to pay “little attention” to assessing “guilt in individual cases.” Instead, they use a policy of “mass misdemeanors” to manage people who live in “neighborhoods with high crime rates and high minority populations.” These defendants, she wrote, are moved through the criminal-justice system with little opportunity to make a case for themselves. They are simply being processed, and the “mode of processing cases” is plea bargaining. (This year, New York City settled a federal class-action lawsuit against it for issuing hundreds of thousands of unjustified criminal summonses.)

Sitting at the prosecutor’s table that morning, I watched Todoran, Casey, and Geer read from the police reports and make deals. Such a ritual takes place, in one form or another, in the courts of each of the country’s more than 3,000 counties, which make up what the Fordham University law professor John Pfaff has described in his book *Locked In* as “a vast patchwork of systems that vary in almost every conceivable way.” We know little about what happens in these negotiations. Trials leave copious records, but many

plea bargains leave little written trace. Instead, they are sometimes worked out in hurried hallway conversations—or, as I witnessed, in brief courtroom conferences.

CASEY: He was lying across a sidewalk over a vent, because it was cold.

TODORAN: Dismiss it. You’ve got to sleep somewhere.

CASEY: This one is for standing in front of a liquor store.

TODORAN: Dismiss. For so many of these things, a few hours in jail is punishment enough.

GEER: This defendant was found in a car with marijuana and 0.7 grams of crack.

TODORAN: I guess we’ll do time served.

CASEY: This man was at Tiger Mart. He was warned to leave earlier, and then came back.

TODORAN: Thirty days suspended and stay away from Tiger Mart.

CASEY: This case, an officer heard him yelling and cussing and arrested him by the rescue mission.

TODORAN: Dismiss.

GEER: This is my favorite—the woman who was walking down the road.

TODORAN: Dismiss.

For many of the cases, Todoran was making her decision in less than a minute. I felt I was watching justice dispensed at the pace of speed dating.

CRITICS ON THE left and the right are coming to agree that our criminal-justice system, now so reliant on plea bargaining, is broken. Among them is Jed S. Rakoff, a United States district judge for the Southern District of New York, who wrote about the abuses of plea bargains in 2014, in *The New York Review of Books*. “A criminal justice system that is secret and government-dictated,” he wrote, “ultimately invites abuse and even tyranny.” Some critics even argue that the practice should be abolished. That’s what Tim Lynch, the former director of the Project on Criminal Justice at the libertarian Cato Institute, believes. The Framers adopted trials for a reason, he has argued, and replacing them with

plea bargains—for convenience, no less—is unconstitutional.

But plea bargains aren’t going away, so reformers have practical suggestions for improving them. Bibas wants a “consumer-protection model.” Shoppers, he told me,

have more safeguards when making a credit-card purchase than defendants do when pleading guilty. He wants pleas to clearly explain several things: exactly what defendants are pleading to, what obligations (classes, probation) defendants are incurring, what the consequences of their failing to follow through would be, and what potential effects a guilty plea could have on their lives. He has also suggested a “cooling off” period before a defendant takes a plea in serious cases. Stuntz suggested giving those who plead guilty the same protections that are offered in the military system of justice. Before accepting a plea, military judges conduct inquiries to ensure that pleas were not made under duress, and that the facts support them. This, Stuntz argued, would shift some power from prosecutors back to judges and make pleas more legitimate, which in turn would produce “a large social gain.”

No amount of tinkering, however, will matter much unless Americans stop trying to use the criminal-justice system



Ember Eyster believed that Shanta Sweatt was innocent, but the idea of taking her case to trial was a nonstarter.



as a tool for managing social ills. “Why are these cases being pumped into the system in the first place?” Bibas said to me. He’s not alone in asking. Across the country, in red states and blue states, reformist state and district attorneys have recently been elected on platforms of rolling back harsh sentencing, reducing the enforcement of marijuana laws, and knocking down crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. And change is happening. Last year, for example, the New York City Council passed legislation that made offenses such as public drinking and urination civil rather than criminal violations, and thus subject largely to tickets and fines.

Paring back our criminal code and eliminating many mandatory minimum sentences will be crucial to reform. In the long-running War on Drugs, the government has regularly prosecuted people for possessing small amounts of illegal substances, or for merely possessing drug paraphernalia. Often, on the basis of no evidence beyond a police officer’s assertion, officials have charged and prosecuted defendants for the more serious crime of “intent to sell.” But during Prohibition, when the manufacture, transport, and sale of alcohol were federal crimes, Americans were not arrested by the millions and incarcerated for drinking. And they certainly didn’t plead guilty to possessing martini glasses and other drinking paraphernalia.

To break the cycle, the United States will need to address the disparity in funding for the two sides of its legal system. According to Fordham’s John Pfaff,

of the \$200 billion spent on all criminal-justice activities by state and local governments in 2008, only 2 percent went to indigent defense. But the system needs more than just money, says Jonathan Rapping, who in 2014 won a MacArthur genius grant for his work as the founder of Gideon’s Promise, which trains and supports public defenders around the country—including those in Nashville. What’s necessary, Rapping argues, is a new mindset. Defenders need to push back against the assumption that they will instantly plead out virtually every client, rubber-stamping the prosecutor’s offer. Ember Eyster did ultimately negotiate a plea bargain for Shanta Sweatt, but in doing so she pushed back, using all the tools at her disposal to ensure that Sweatt was not incarcerated.

The U.S. should also reform the bail system. We are holding people in jail simply because they lack the funds to secure their own release.

Making these sorts of changes would allow authorities at the federal, state, and local levels to allocate more resources to the underlying social problems that drive so many arrests. But reform will not be easy. Even though crime rates remain near historic lows nationally, Donald Trump’s administration has professed a desire to return to the days of “law and order.” U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has announced, for instance,

that he wants federal prosecutors to use maximum possible charges for crimes and to enforce mandatory minimums, which would result in harsh plea bargains. Almost all crime is handled not by the federal government but by the states, but with both the president and the country’s highest law-enforcement official inflaming public fears, advocates for change worry about the fate of the reform efforts set in motion during Barack Obama’s administration.

The United States is experiencing a criminal-justice crisis, just not the one the Trump administration talks about. By accepting the criminalization of everything, the bloat of the criminal-justice system, and the rise of the plea bargain, the country has guaranteed that millions of citizens will not have a fair shot at leading ordinary lives.

BEFORE I LEFT

Nashville, I visited Shanta Sweatt at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center. It’s an enormous build-

ing of glass and concrete with multiple stages. Sweatt gave me a tour that started in the basement. As we made our way to the upper floors and the theaters, she gestured toward the banks of restrooms that she has to keep sparkling. “Thirty-eight stalls for women,” she said. “Thirty-eight stalls for men.”

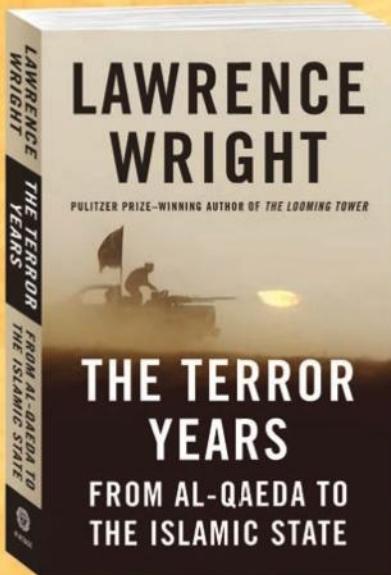
Sweatt is still struggling with the consequences of her arrest. “If it weren’t for my boys,” she told me, “I would have given up a long time ago.” At the time of her arrest, she told her employers about her situation, and they rallied to support her. “They stood behind me. They said, ‘I got prayers for you.’” Because she wasn’t incarcerated, Sweatt was able to keep her job, and her dream is that one day she might be able to buy a house, which would allow her to live together again with her sons. In her mind’s eye, the house has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a yard, and it promises her and her family privacy and freedom. “Police mess with you in the projects,” she said. “You get off the bus, they follow you. They don’t mess with you in a house. I want to live like an average Joe.” **A**

X
The public-housing complex from which Shanta Sweatt was evicted after her arrest.

She now lives in a motel, apart from her sons.

Emily Yoffe is a contributing editor at The Atlantic.

Riveting Fall Reading

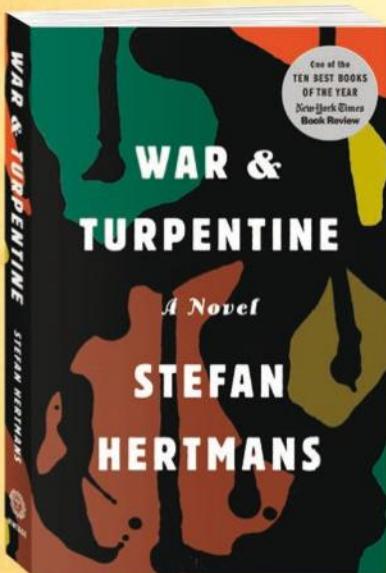


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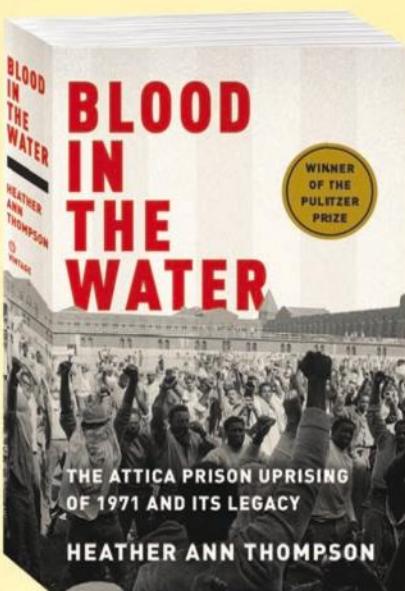


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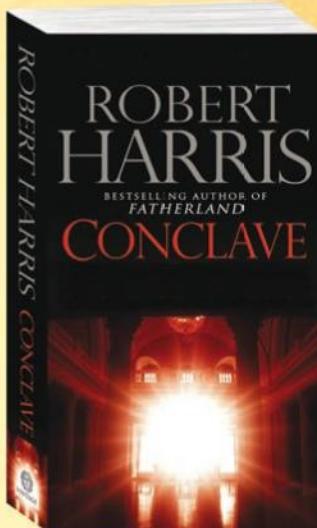
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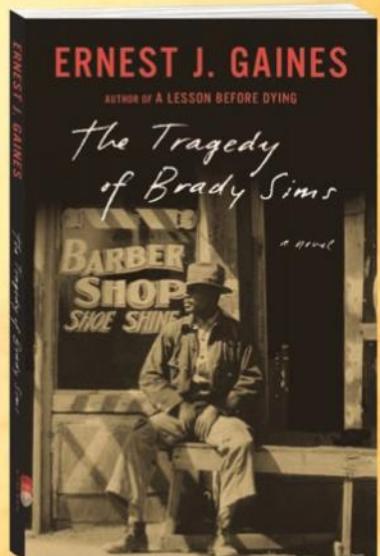
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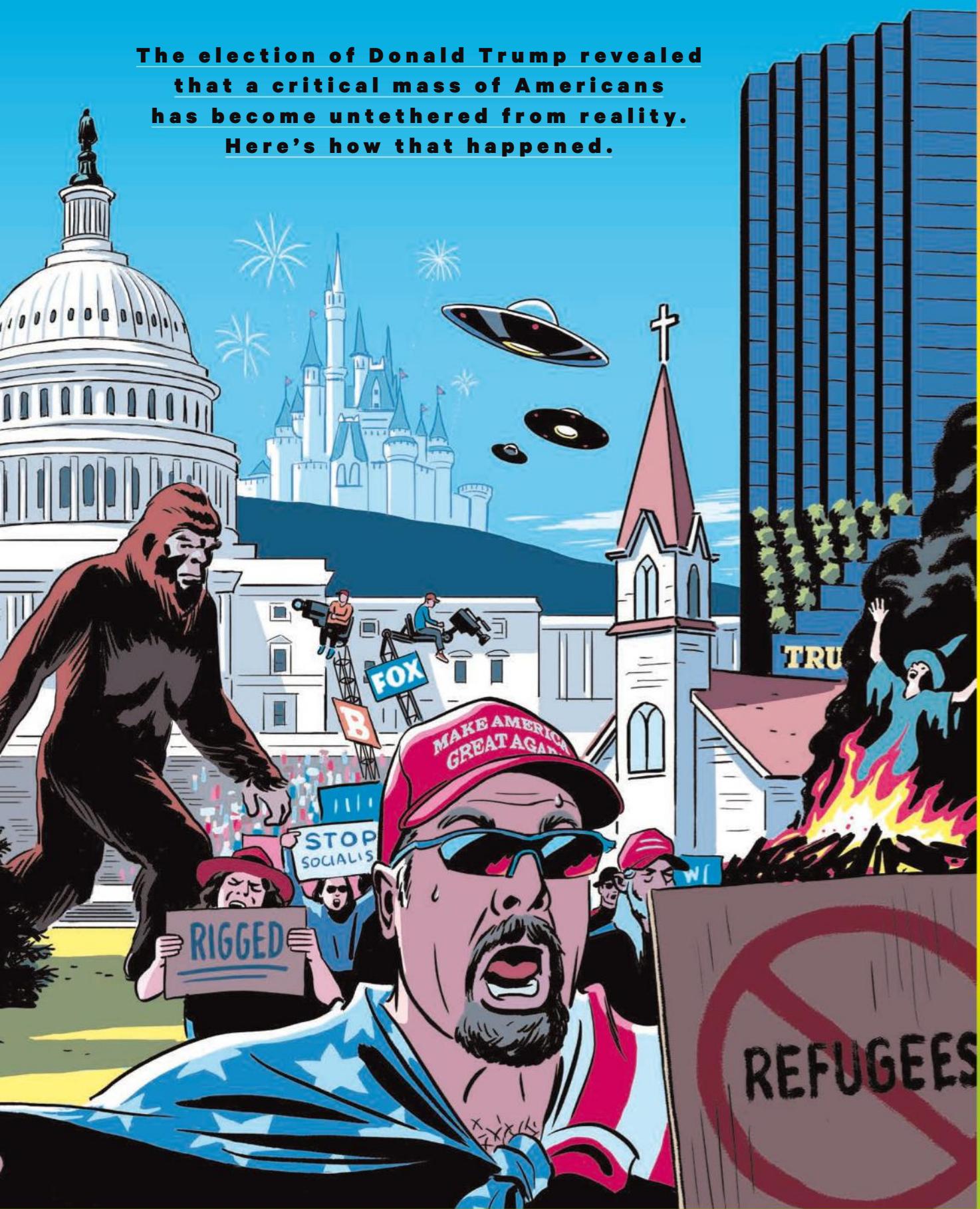
HOW AMERICA LOST ITS MIND

BY
**KURT
ANDERSEN**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
**R. KIKUO
JOHNSON**



**The election of Donald Trump revealed
that a critical mass of Americans
has become untethered from reality.
Here's how that happened.**



*"You are entitled to your own opinion,
but you are not entitled to your own facts."*
—Daniel Patrick Moynihan

*"We risk being the first people in history to have been
able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive,
so 'realistic' that they can live in them."*
—Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to
Pseudo-Events in America* (1961)



hen did America become untethered from reality?

I first noticed our national lurch toward fantasy in 2004, after President George W. Bush's political mastermind, Karl Rove, came up with the remarkable phrase *reality-based community*. People in "the reality-based community," he told a reporter, "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality ... That's not the way the world really works anymore." A year later, *The Colbert Report* went on the air. In the first few minutes of the first episode, Stephen Colbert, playing his right-wing-populist commentator character, performed a feature called "The Word." His first selection: *truthiness*. "Now, I'm sure some of the 'word police,' the 'wordinistas' over at Webster's, are gonna say, 'Hey, that's not a word!' Well, anybody who knows me knows that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn't true. Or what did or didn't happen. Who's *Britannica* to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I wanna say it happened in 1941, that's my right. I don't trust books—they're all fact, no heart ... Face it, folks, we are a divided nation ... divided between those who think with their

head and those who know with their heart ... Because that's where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen—the gut."

Whoa, yes, I thought: *exactly.* America had changed since I was young, when *truthiness* and *reality-based community* wouldn't have made any sense as jokes. For all the fun, and all the many salutary effects of the 1960s—the main decade of my childhood—I saw that those years had also been the big-bang moment for *truthiness*. And if the '60s amounted to a national nervous breakdown, we are probably mistaken to consider ourselves over it.

Each of us is on a spectrum somewhere between the poles of rational and irrational. We all have hunches we can't prove and superstitions that make no sense. Some of my best friends are very religious, and others believe in dubious conspiracy theories. What's problematic is going overboard—letting the subjective entirely override the objective; thinking and acting as if opinions and feelings are just as true as facts. The American experiment, the original embodiment of the great Enlightenment idea of intellectual freedom, whereby every individual is welcome to believe anything she wishes, has metastasized out of control. From the start, our ultra-individualism was attached to epic dreams, sometimes epic fantasies—every American one of God's chosen people building a custom-made utopia, all of us free to reinvent ourselves by imagination and will. In America nowadays, those more exciting parts of the Enlightenment idea have swamped the sober, rational, empirical parts. Little by little for centuries, then more and more and faster and faster during the past half century, we Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything-goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanation—small and large fantasies that console or thrill or terrify us. And most of us haven't realized how far-reaching our strange new normal has become.

Much more than the other billion or so people in the developed world, we Americans believe—*really believe*—in the supernatural and the miraculous, in Satan on Earth, in reports of recent trips to and from heaven, and in a story of life's instantaneous creation several thousand years ago.

We believe that the government and its co-conspirators are hiding all sorts of monstrous and shocking truths from us, concerning assassinations, extraterrestrials, the genesis of AIDS, the 9/11 attacks, the dangers of vaccines, and so much more.

And this was all true before we became familiar with the terms *post-factual* and *post-truth*, before we elected a president with an astoundingly open mind about conspiracy theories, what's true and what's false, the nature of reality.

We have passed through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole. America has mutated into Fantasyland.

How widespread is this promiscuous devotion to the untrue? How many Americans now inhabit alternate realities? Any given survey of beliefs is only a sketch of what people in general really think. But reams of survey research from the past 20 years reveal a rough, useful census of American credulity and delusion. By my reckoning, the solidly reality-based are a minority, maybe a third of us but almost certainly fewer than half. Only a third of us, for instance, don't believe that the tale of creation in Genesis is the word of God. Only a

third strongly disbelieve in telepathy and ghosts. Two-thirds of Americans believe that “angels and demons are active in the world.” More than half say they’re absolutely certain heaven exists, and just as many are sure of the existence of a personal God—not a vague force or universal spirit or higher power, but some guy. A third of us believe not only that global warming is no big deal but that it’s a hoax perpetrated by scientists, the government, and journalists. A third believe that our earliest ancestors were humans just like us; that the government has, in league with the pharmaceutical industry, hidden evidence of natural cancer cures; that extraterrestrials have visited or are visiting Earth. Almost a quarter believe that vaccines cause autism, and that Donald Trump won the popular vote in 2016. A quarter believe that our previous president maybe or definitely was (or is?) the anti-Christ. According to a survey by Public Policy Polling, 15 percent believe that the “media or the government adds secret mind-controlling technology to television broadcast signals,” and another 15 percent think that’s possible. A quarter of Americans believe in witches. Remarkably, the same fraction, or maybe less, believes that the Bible consists mainly of legends and fables—the same proportion that believes U.S. officials were complicit in the 9/11 attacks.

When I say that a third believe X and a quarter believe Y, it’s important to understand that those are different thirds and quarters of the population. Of course, various fantasy constituencies overlap and feed one another—for instance, belief in extraterrestrial visitation and abduction can lead to belief in vast government cover-ups, which can lead to belief in still more wide-ranging plots and cabals, which can jibe with a belief in an impending Armageddon.

Why are we like this?

The short answer is because we’re Americans—because being American means we can believe anything we want; that our beliefs are equal or superior to anyone else’s, experts be damned. Once people commit to that approach, the world turns inside out, and no cause-and-effect connection is fixed. The credible becomes incredible and the incredible credible.

If the 1960s amounted to a national nervous breakdown, we are probably mistaken to consider ourselves over it.

The word *mainstream* has recently become a pejorative, shorthand for bias, lies, oppression by the elites. Yet the institutions and forces that once kept us from indulging the flagrantly untrue or absurd—media, academia, government, corporate America, professional associations, respectable opinion in the aggregate—have enabled and encouraged every species of fantasy over the past few decades.

A senior physician at one of America’s most prestigious university hospitals promotes “miracle cures” on his daily TV show. Cable channels air documentaries treating mermaids,

monsters, ghosts, and angels as real. When a political-science professor attacks the idea “that there is some ‘public’ that shares a notion of reality, a concept of reason, and a set of criteria by which claims to reason and rationality are judged,” colleagues just nod and grant tenure. The old fringes have been folded into the new center. The irrational has become respectable and often unstoppable.

Our whole social environment and each of its overlapping parts—cultural, religious, political, intellectual, psychological—have become conducive to spectacular fallacy and truthiness and make-believe. There are many slippery slopes, leading in various directions to other exciting nonsense. During the past several decades, those naturally slippery slopes have been turned into a colossal and permanent complex of interconnected, crisscrossing bobsled tracks, which Donald Trump slid down right into the White House.

American moxie has always come in two types. We have our wilder, faster, looser side: We’re overexcited gamblers with a weakness for stories too good to be true. But we also have the virtues embodied by the Puritans and their secular descendants: steadiness, hard work, frugality, sobriety, and common sense. A propensity to dream impossible dreams is like other powerful tendencies—okay when kept in check. For most of our history, the impulses existed in a rough balance, a dynamic equilibrium between fantasy and reality, mania and moderation, credulity and skepticism.

The great unbalancing and descent into full Fantasyland was the product of two momentous changes. The first was a profound shift in thinking that swelled up in the ’60s; since then, Americans have had a new rule written into their mental operating systems: *Do your own thing, find your own reality, it’s all relative.*

The second change was the onset of the new era of information. Digital technology empowers real-seeming fictions of the ideological and religious and scientific kinds. Among the web’s 1 billion sites, believers in anything and everything can find thousands of fellow fantasists, with collages of facts and “facts”

to support them. Before the internet, crackpots were mostly isolated, and surely had a harder time remaining convinced of their alternate realities. Now their devoutly believed opinions are all over the airwaves and the web, just like actual news. Now all of the fantasies look real.

Today, each of us is freer than ever to custom-make reality, to believe whatever and pretend to be whoever we wish. Which makes all the lines between *actual* and *fictional* blur and disappear more easily. Truth in general becomes flexible, personal, subjective. And we like this new ultra-freedom, insist on it, even as we fear and loathe the ways so many of our wrongheaded fellow Americans use it.

Treating real life as fantasy and vice versa, and taking preposterous ideas seriously, is not unique to Americans. But we are the global crucible and epicenter. We invented the fantasy-industrial complex; almost nowhere outside poor or otherwise miserable countries are flamboyant supernatural

beliefs so central to the identities of so many people. This is American exceptionalism in the 21st century. The country has always been a one-of-a-kind place. But our singularity is different now. We're still rich and free, still more influential and powerful than any other nation, practically a synonym for *developed country*. But our drift toward credulity, toward doing our own thing, toward denying facts and having an altogether uncertain grip on reality, has overwhelmed our other exceptional national traits and turned us into a less developed country.

People see our shocking Trump moment—this post-truth, “alternative facts” moment—as some inexplicable and crazy new American phenomenon. But what’s happening is just the ultimate extrapolation and expression of mind-sets that have made America exceptional for its entire history.

America was created by true believers and passionate dreamers, and by hucksters and their suckers, which made America successful—but also by a people uniquely susceptible to fantasy, as epitomized by everything from Salem’s hunting witches to Joseph Smith’s creating Mormonism, from P. T. Barnum to speaking in tongues, from Hollywood to Scientology to conspiracy theories, from Walt Disney to Billy Graham to Ronald Reagan to Oprah Winfrey to Trump. In other words: Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that ferment for a few centuries; then run it through the anything-goes ’60s and the internet age. The result is the America we inhabit today, with reality and fantasy weirdly and dangerously blurred and commingled.

THE 1960S AND THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF REASON

I don’t regret or disapprove of many of the ways the ’60s permanently reordered American society and culture. It’s just that along with the familiar benefits, there have been unreckoned costs.

In 1962, people started referring to “hippies,” the Beatles had their first hit, Ken Kesey published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and the Harvard psychology lecturer Timothy Leary was handing out psilocybin and LSD to grad students. And three hours south of San Francisco, on the heavenly stretch of coastal cliffs known as Big Sur, a pair of young Stanford psychology graduates founded a school and think tank they named after a small American Indian tribe that had lived on the grounds long before. “In 1968,” one of its founding figures recalled four decades later,

Esalen was the center of the cyclone of the youth rebellion. It was one of the central places, like Mecca for the Islamic culture. Esalen was a pilgrimage center for hundreds and thousands of youth interested in some sense of transcendence, breakthrough consciousness, LSD, the sexual revolution, encounter, being sensitive, finding your body, yoga—all of these things were at first filtered into the culture through Esalen. By 1966, ’67, and ’68, Esalen was making a world impact.

This is not overstatement. Essentially everything that became known as New Age was invented, developed, or popularized

at the Esalen Institute. Esalen is a mother church of a new American religion for people who think they don’t like churches or religions but who still want to believe in the supernatural. The institute wholly reinvented psychology, medicine, and philosophy, driven by a suspicion of science and reason and an embrace of magical thinking (also: massage, hot baths, sex, and sex in hot baths). It was a headquarters for a new religion of no religion, and for “science” containing next to no science. The idea was to be radically tolerant of therapeutic approaches and understandings of reality, especially if they came from Asian traditions or from American Indian or other shamanistic traditions. Invisible energies, past lives, astral projection, whatever—the more exotic and wondrous and unfalsifiable, the better.



Not long before Esalen was founded, one of its co-founders, Dick Price, had suffered a mental breakdown and been involuntarily committed to a private psychiatric hospital for a year. His new institute embraced the radical notion that psychosis and other mental illnesses were labels imposed by the straight world on eccentrics and visionaries, that they were primarily tools of coercion and control. This was the big idea behind *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, of course. And within the psychiatric profession itself this idea had two influential proponents, who each published unorthodox manifestos at the beginning of the decade—R. D. Laing (*The Divided Self*)

and Thomas Szasz (*The Myth of Mental Illness*). “Madness,” Laing wrote when Esalen was new, “is potentially liberation and renewal.” Esalen’s founders were big Laing fans, and the institute became a hotbed for the idea that insanity was just an alternative way of perceiving reality.

These influential critiques helped make popular and respectable the idea that much of science is a sinister scheme concocted by a despotic conspiracy to oppress people. Mental illness, both Szasz and Laing said, is “a theory not a fact.” This is now the universal bottom-line argument for anyone—from creationists to climate-change deniers to anti-vaccine hysterics—who prefers to disregard science in favor of his own beliefs.



You know how young people always think the universe revolves around them, as if they’re the only ones who really get it? And how before their frontal lobes, the neural seat of reason and rationality, are fully wired, they can be especially prone to fantasy? In the ’60s, the universe cooperated: It did seem to revolve around young people, affirming their adolescent self-regard, making their fantasies of importance feel real and their fantasies of instant transformation and revolution feel plausible. Practically overnight, America turned its full attention to the young and everything they believed and imagined and wished.

If 1962 was when the decade really got going, 1969 was the year the new doctrines and their gravity were definitively cataloged by the grown-ups. Reason and rationality were over. The countercultural effusions were freaking out the old guard, including religious people who couldn’t quite see that yet another Great Awakening was under way in America, heaving up a new religion of believers who “have no option but to follow the road until they reach the Holy City ... that lies beyond the technocracy ... the New Jerusalem.” That line is from *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, published three weeks after Woodstock, in the summer of 1969. Its author was Theodore Roszak, age 35, a Bay Area professor who thereby coined the word *counterculture*.

Roszak spends 270 pages glorying in the younger generation’s “brave” rejection of expertise and “all that our culture values as ‘reason’ and ‘reality.’” (Note the scare quotes.) So-called experts, after all, are “on the payroll of the state and/or corporate structure.” A chapter called “The Myth of Objective Consciousness” argues that science is really just a state religion. To create “a new culture in which the non-intellectual capacities ... become the arbiters of the good [and] the true,” he writes, “nothing less is required than the subversion of the scientific world view, with its entrenched commitment to an egocentric and cerebral mode of consciousness.” He welcomes the “radical rejection of science and technological values.”

Earlier that summer, a University of Chicago sociologist (and Catholic priest) named Andrew Greeley had alerted readers of *The New York Times Magazine* that beyond the familiar signifiers of youthful rebellion (long hair, sex, drugs, music, protests), the truly shocking change on campuses was the rise of anti-rationalism and a return of the sacred—“mysticism and magic,” the occult, séances, cults based on the book of Revelation. When he’d chalked a statistical table on a classroom blackboard, one of his students had reacted with horror: “Mr. Greeley, I think you’re an empiricist.”

As 1969 turned to 1970, a 41-year-old Yale Law School professor was finishing his book about the new youth counterculture. Charles Reich was a former Supreme Court clerk now tenured at one of ultra-rationalism’s American headquarters. But hanging with the young people had led him to a midlife epiphany and apostasy. In 1966, he had started teaching an undergraduate seminar called “The Individual in America,” for which he assigned fiction by Kesey and Norman Mailer. He decided to spend the next summer, the Summer of Love, in Berkeley. On the road back to New Haven, he had his Pauline conversion to the kids’ values. His class at Yale became hugely popular; at its peak, 600 students were enrolled. In 1970, *The Greening of America* became *The New York Times*’ best-selling book (as well as a much-read 70-page *New Yorker* excerpt), and remained on the list for most of a year.

At 16, I bought and read one of the 2 million copies sold. Re-reading it today and recalling how much I loved it was a stark reminder of the follies of youth. Reich was shamelessly, uncritically swooning for kids like me. *The Greening of America* may have been the mainstream’s single greatest act of pandering to the vanity and self-righteousness of the new youth.

Its underlying theoretical scheme was simple and perfectly pitched to flatter young readers: There are three types of American “consciousness,” each of which “makes up an individual’s perception of reality ... his ‘head,’ his way of life.” *Consciousness I* people were old-fashioned, self-reliant individualists rendered obsolete by the new “Corporate State”—essentially, your grandparents. *Consciousness IIs* were the fearful and conformist organization men and women whose rationalism was a tyrannizing trap laid by the Corporate State—your parents.

And then there was *Consciousness III*, which had “made its first appearance among the youth of America,” “spreading rapidly among wider and wider segments of youth, and by degrees to older people.” If you opposed the Vietnam War and dressed down and smoked pot, you were almost certainly a III. Simply by being young and casual and undisciplined, you were ushering in a new utopia.

Reich praises the “gaiety and humor” of the new Consciousness III wardrobe, but his book is absolutely humorless—because it’s a response to “this moment of utmost sterility, darkest night and most extreme peril.” Conspiracism was flourishing, and Reich bought in. Now that “the Corporate State has added depersonalization and repression” to its other injustices, “it has threatened to destroy all meaning and suck all joy from life.” Reich’s magical thinking mainly concerned how the revolution would turn out. “The American Corporate State,” having produced this new generation of longhaired hyper-individualists who insist on trusting their gut and finding their own truth, “is now accomplishing what no revolutionaries could accomplish by themselves. The machine has begun to destroy itself.” Once everyone wears Levi’s and gets high, the old ways “will simply be swept away in the flood.”

The inevitable/imminent happy-cataclysm part of the dream didn’t happen, of course. The machine did not destroy itself. But Reich was half-right. An epochal change in American thinking was under way and “not, as far as anybody knows, reversible ... There is no returning to an earlier consciousness.” His wishful error was believing that once the tidal surge of new sensibility brought down the flood walls, the waters would flow in only one direction, carving out a peaceful, cooperative, groovy new continental utopia, hearts and minds changed like his, all of America Berkeleyized and Vermontified. Instead, Consciousness III was just one early iteration of the anything-goes, post-reason, post-factual America enabled by the tsunami. Reich’s faith was the converse of the Enlightenment rationalists’ hopeful fallacy 200 years earlier. Granted complete freedom of thought, Thomas Jefferson and company assumed, most people would follow the path of reason. Wasn’t it pretty to think so.

remember when fantastical beliefs went fully mainstream, in the 1970s. My irreligious mother bought and read *The Secret Life of Plants*, a big best seller arguing that plants were sentient and would “be the bridesmaids at a marriage of physics and metaphysics.” The amazing truth about plants, the book claimed, had been suppressed by the FDA and agribusiness. My mom didn’t believe in the

conspiracy, but she did start talking to her ficuses as if they were pets. In a review, *The New York Times* registered the book as another data point in how “the incredible is losing its pariah status.” Indeed, mainstream publishers and media organizations were falling over themselves to promote and sell fantasies as nonfiction. In 1975 came a sensational autobiography by the young spoon bender and mind reader Uri Geller as well as *Life After Life*, by Raymond Moody, a philosophy Ph.D. who presented the anecdotes of several dozen people who’d nearly died as evidence of an afterlife. The book sold many millions of copies; before long the International Association for Near Death Studies formed and held its first conference, at Yale.

During the ’60s, large swaths of academia made a turn away from reason and rationalism as they’d been understood. Many

The American experiment has metastasized out of control. Being American now means we can believe anything we want.

of the pioneers were thoughtful, their work fine antidotes to postwar complacency. The problem was the nature and extent of their influence at that particular time, when all premises and paradigms seemed up for grabs. That is, they inspired half-baked and perverse followers in the academy, whose arguments filtered out into the world at large: All approximations of truth, science as much as any fable or religion, are mere stories devised to serve people’s needs or interests. Reality itself is a purely social construction, a tableau of useful or wishful myths that members of a society or tribe have been persuaded to believe. The borders between fiction and nonfiction are permeable, maybe nonexistent. The delusions of the insane, superstitions, and magical thinking? Any of those may be as legitimate as the supposed truths contrived by Western reason and science. The takeaway: Believe whatever you want, because pretty much everything is equally true and false.

These ideas percolated across multiple academic fields. In 1965, the French philosopher Michel Foucault published *Madness and Civilization* in America, echoing Laing’s skepticism of the concept of mental illness; by the 1970s, he was arguing that rationality itself is a coercive “regime of truth”—oppression by other means. Foucault’s suspicion of reason became deeply and widely embedded in American academia.

Meanwhile, over in sociology, in 1966 a pair of professors published *The Social Construction of Reality*, one of the most influential works in their field. Not only were sanity and insanity and scientific truth somewhat dubious concoctions by elites, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explained—so was everything else. The rulers of any tribe or society do not just dictate customs and laws; they are the masters of everyone’s perceptions, defining reality itself. To create the all-encompassing stage sets that everyone inhabits, rulers first use crude mythology, then more elaborate religion, and finally the “extreme

step” of modern science. “Reality”? “Knowledge”? “If we were going to be meticulous,” Berger and Luckmann wrote, “we would put quotation marks around the two aforementioned terms every time we used them.” “What is ‘real’ to a Tibetan monk may not be ‘real’ to an American businessman.”

When I first read that, at age 18, I loved the quotation marks. If reality is simply the result of rules written by the powers that be, then isn’t everyone able—no, isn’t everyone *obliged*—to construct their own reality? The book was timed perfectly to become a foundational text in academia and beyond.

A more extreme academic evangelist for the idea of all truths being equal was a UC Berkeley philosophy professor named Paul Feyerabend. His best-known book, published in 1975, was *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. “Rationalism,” it declared, “is a secularized form of the belief in the power of the word of God,” and science a “particular superstition.” In a later edition of the book, published when creationists were passing laws to teach Genesis in public-school biology classes, Feyerabend came out in favor of the practice, comparing creationists to Galileo. Science, he insisted, is just another form of belief. “Only one principle,” he wrote, “can be defended under *all* circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*.”

Over in anthropology, where the exotic magical beliefs of traditional cultures were a main subject, the new paradigm took over completely—*don’t judge, don’t disbelieve, don’t point your professorial finger*. This was understandable, given the times: colonialism ending, genocide of American Indians confessed, U.S. wars in the developing world. Who were we to roll our eyes or deny what these people believed? In the ’60s, anthropology decided that oracles, diviners, incantations, and magical objects should be not just respected, but considered equivalent to reason and science. If all understandings of reality are socially constructed, those of Kalabari tribesmen in Nigeria are no more arbitrary or faith-based than those of college professors.

In 1968, a UC Davis psychologist named Charles Tart conducted an experiment in which, he wrote, “a young woman who frequently had spontaneous out-of-body experiences”—didn’t “claim to have” them but “had” them—spent four nights sleeping in a lab, hooked up to an EEG machine. Her assigned task was to send her mind or soul out of her body while she was asleep and read a five-digit number Tart had written on a piece of paper placed on a shelf above the bed. He reported that she succeeded. Other scientists considered the experiments and the results bogus, but Tart proceeded to devote his academic career to proving that attempts at objectivity are a sham and magic is real. In an extraordinary paper published in 1972 in *Science*, he complained about the scientific establishment’s “almost total rejection of the knowledge gained” while high or tripping. He didn’t just want science to take seriously “experiences of ecstasy, mystical union, other ‘dimensions,’ rapture, beauty, space-and-time transcendence.” He was explicitly dedicated to *going there*. A “perfectly scientific theory may be based on data that have no physical existence,” he insisted. The rules of the scientific method had to be revised. To work as a psychologist in the new era, Tart argued, a researcher should be in the altered state of consciousness he’s studying, high or delusional “at the time of data collection” or during “data reduction and theorizing.” Tart’s new mode of research, he

admitted, posed problems of “consensual validation,” given that “only observers in the same [altered state] are able to communicate adequately with one another.” Tart popularized the term *consensus reality* for what you or I would simply call *reality*, and around 1970 that became a permanent interdisciplinary term of art in academia. Later he abandoned the pretense of neutrality and started calling it the *consensus trance*—people committed to reason and rationality were the deluded dupes, not he and his tribe.

Even the social critic Paul Goodman, beloved by young leftists in the ’60s, was flabbergasted by his own students by 1969. “There was no knowledge,” he wrote, “only the sociology of knowledge. They had so well learned that ... research is subsidized and conducted for the benefit of the ruling class that they did not believe there was such a thing as simple truth.”

Ever since, the American right has insistently decried the spread of relativism, the idea that nothing is any more correct or true than anything else. Conservatives hated how relativism undercut various venerable and comfortable ruling ideas—certain notions of entitlement (according to race and gender) and aesthetic beauty and metaphysical and moral certainty. Yet once the intellectual mainstream thoroughly accepted that there are many equally valid realities and truths, once the idea of gates and gatekeeping was discredited not just on campuses but throughout the culture, *all* American barbarians could have their claims taken seriously. Conservatives are correct that the anything-goes relativism of college campuses wasn’t sequestered there, but when it flowed out across America it helped enable extreme Christianities and lunacies on the *right*—gun-rights hysteria, black-helicopter conspiracism, climate-change denial, and more. The term *useful idiot* was originally deployed to accuse liberals of serving the interests of true believers further on the left. In this instance, however, postmodern intellectuals—post-positivists, poststructuralists, social constructivists, post-empiricists, epistemic relativists, cognitive relativists, descriptive relativists—turned out to be useful idiots most consequentially for the American right. “Reality has a well-known liberal bias,” Stephen Colbert once said, in character, mocking the beliefs-trump-facts impulse of today’s right. Neither side has noticed, but large factions of the elite left and the populist right have been on the same team.

CONSPIRACY AND PARANOIA IN THE 1970S

As the Vietnam War escalated and careened, anti-rationalism flowered. In his book about the remarkable protests in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1967, *The Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer describes chants (“Out demons, out—back to darkness, ye servants of Satan!”) and a circle of hundreds of protesters intending “to form a ring of exorcism sufficiently powerful to raise the Pentagon three hundred feet.” They were hoping the building would “turn orange and vibrate until all evil emissions had fled this levitation. At that point the war in Vietnam would end.”

By the end of the ’60s, plenty of zealots on the left were engaged in extreme magical thinking. They hadn’t started the

decade that way. In 1962, Students for a Democratic Society adopted its founding document, drafted by 22-year-old Tom Hayden. The manifesto is sweet and reasonable: decrying inequality and poverty and “the pervasiveness of racism in American life,” seeing the potential benefits as well as the downsides of industrial automation, declaring the group “in basic opposition to the communist system.”

Then, *kapoosh*, the big bang. Anything and everything became believable. Reason was chucked. Dystopian and utopian fantasies seemed plausible. In 1969, the SDS’s most apocalyptic and charismatic faction, calling itself Weatherman, split off and got all the attention. Its members believed that they and other young white Americans, aligned with black insurgents, would be the vanguard in a new civil war. They issued statements about “the need for armed struggle as the only road to revolution” and how “dope is one of our weapons ... Guns and grass are united in the youth underground.” And then factions of the new left went to work making and setting off thousands of bombs in the early 1970s.

Left-wingers weren’t the only ones who became unhinged. Officials at the FBI, the CIA, and military intelligence agencies, as well as in urban police departments, convinced themselves that peaceful antiwar protesters and campus lefties in general were dangerous militants, and expanded secret programs to spy on, infiltrate, and besmirch their organizations. Which thereby validated the preexisting paranoia on the new left and encouraged its wing nuts’ revolutionary delusions. In the ’70s, the CIA and Army intelligence set up their infamous Project Star Gate to see whether they could conduct espionage by means of ESP.

The far right had its own glorious ’60s moment, in the form of the new John Birch Society, whose founders believed that both Republican and Democratic presidential Cabinets included “conscious, deliberate, dedicated agent[s] of the Soviet conspiracy” determined to create “a world-wide police state, absolutely and brutally governed from the Kremlin,” as the society’s founder, Robert Welch, put it in a letter to friends.

This furiously, elaborately suspicious way of understanding the world started spreading across the political spectrum after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Dallas couldn’t have been the work of just one nutty loser with a mail-order rifle, could it have? Surely the Communists or the CIA or the Birchers or the Mafia or some conspiratorial combination must have arranged it all, right? The shift in thinking didn’t register immediately. In his influential book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, published two years after the president’s murder, Richard Hofstadter devoted only two sentences and a footnote to it, observing that “conspiratorial explanations of Kennedy’s assassination” don’t have much “currency ... in the United States.”

Elaborate paranoia was an established tic of the Bircherite far right, but the left needed a little time to catch up. In 1964, a left-wing American writer published the first book about a

JFK conspiracy, claiming that a Texas oilman had been the mastermind, and soon many books were arguing that the official government inquiry had ignored the hidden conspiracies. One of them, *Rush to Judgment*, by Mark Lane, a lawyer on the left, was a *New York Times* best seller for six months. Then, in 1967, New Orleans’s district attorney, Jim Garrison, indicted a local businessman for being part of a conspiracy of gay right-wingers to assassinate Kennedy—“a Nazi operation, whose sponsors include some of the oil-rich millionaires in Texas,” according to Garrison, with the CIA, FBI, and Robert F. Kennedy complicit in the cover-up. After NBC News broadcast an investigation discrediting the theory, Garrison said the TV segment was a piece of “thought control,” obviously commissioned by NBC’s parent company RCA, “one of the top 10 defense contractors” and thus “desperate because we are in the process of uncovering their hoax.”

The notion of an immense and awful JFK-assassination conspiracy became conventional wisdom in America. As a result, more Americans than ever became reflexive conspiracy theorists. Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a complicated global fantasy about the interconnections among militarists and Illuminati and stoners, and the validity of paranoid thinking, won the 1974 National Book Award. Conspiracy became the high-end Hollywood dramatic premise—*Chinatown*, *The Conversation*, *The Parallax View*, and *Three Days of the Condor* came out in the same two-year period. Of course, real life made such stories plausible. The infiltration by the FBI and intelligence agencies of left-wing groups was then being revealed, and the Watergate break-in and its cover-up were an

Our shocking Trump moment is just the ultimate expression of mind-sets that have made America exceptional for its entire history.

actual criminal conspiracy. Within a few decades, the belief that a web of villainous elites was covertly seeking to impose a malevolent global regime made its way from the lunatic right to the mainstream. Delusional conspiracism wouldn’t spread quite as widely or as deeply on the left, but more and more people on both sides would come to believe that an extraordinarily powerful cabal—international organizations and think tanks and big businesses and politicians—secretly ran America.

Each camp, conspiracists on the right and on the left, was ostensibly the enemy of the other, but they began operating as de facto allies. Relativist professors enabled science-denying Christians, and the antipsychiatry craze in the ’60s appealed simultaneously to left-wingers and libertarians (as well as to Scientologists). Conspiracy theories were more of a modern right-wing habit before people on the left signed on. However, the belief that the federal government had secret plans to open detention camps for dissidents sprouted in the ’70s on the paranoid left before it became a fixture on the right.



Americans felt newly entitled to believe absolutely anything. I'm pretty certain that the unprecedented surge of UFO reports in the '70s was not evidence of extraterrestrials' increasing presence but a symptom of Americans' credulity and magical thinking suddenly unloosed. We wanted to believe in extraterrestrials, so we did. What made the UFO mania historically significant rather than just amusing, however, was the web of elaborate stories that were now being spun: not just of sightings but of landings and abductions—and of government cover-ups and secret alliances with interplanetary beings. Those earnest beliefs planted more seeds for the extravagant American conspiracy thinking that by the turn of the century would be rampant and seriously toxic.

A single idée fixe like this often appears in both frightened and hopeful versions. That was true of the suddenly booming belief in alien visitors, which tended toward the sanguine as the '60s turned into the '70s, even in fictional depictions. Consider the extraterrestrials that Jack Nicholson's character in *Easy Rider* earnestly describes as he's getting high for the first time, and those at the center of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* eight years later. One evening in southern Georgia in 1969, the year *Easy Rider* came out, a failed gubernatorial candidate named Jimmy Carter saw a moving moon-size white light in the sky that "didn't have any solid substance to it" and "got closer and closer," stopped, turned blue, then red and back to white, and then zoomed away.

The first big nonfiction abduction tale appeared around the same time, in a best-selling book about a married couple in New Hampshire who believed that while driving their Chevy sedan late one night, they saw a bright object in the sky that the wife, a UFO buff already, figured might be a spacecraft. She began having nightmares about being abducted by aliens, and both of them underwent hypnosis. The details of the abducting aliens and their spacecraft that each described were different, and changed over time. The man's hypnotized description of the aliens bore an uncanny resemblance to the ones in an episode of *The Outer Limits* broadcast on ABC just before his hypnosis session. Thereafter, hypnosis became the standard way for people who believed that they had been abducted (or that they had past lives, or that they were the victims of satanic abuse) to recall the supposed experience. And the couple's story established the standard abduction-tale format: Humanoid creatures take you aboard a spacecraft, communicate telepathically or in spoken English, medically examine you by inserting long needles into you, then let you go.

The husband and wife were undoubtedly sincere believers. The sincerely credulous are perfect suckers, and in the late '60s, a convicted thief and embezzler named Erich von Däniken published *Chariots of the Gods?*, positing that extraterrestrials helped build the Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge, and the giant stone heads on Easter Island. That book and its many sequels sold tens of millions of copies, and the documentary based on it had a huge box-office take in 1970. Americans were ready to believe von Däniken's fantasy to a degree they simply wouldn't have been a decade earlier, before the '60s sea change. Certainly a decade earlier NBC wouldn't have aired an hour-long version of the documentary in prime time. And while I'm at it: Until we'd passed through the '60s and half of the '70s, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't have given the presidency to some dude, especially a born-again Christian, who said he'd recently seen a huge, color-shifting, luminescent UFO hovering near him.

THE 1980S AND THE SMOG OF SUBJECTIVITY

By the 1980s, things appeared to have returned more or less to normal. Civil rights seemed like a done deal, the war in Vietnam was over, young people were no longer telling grown-ups they were worthless because they were grown-ups. Revolution did not loom. Sex and drugs and rock and roll were regular parts of life. Starting in the '80s, loving America and making money and having a family were no longer unfashionable.

The sense of cultural and political upheaval and chaos dissipated—which lulled us into ignoring all the ways that everything had changed, that Fantasyland was now scaling and spreading and becoming the new normal. What had

seemed strange and amazing in 1967 or 1972 became normal and ubiquitous.

Extreme religious and quasi-religious beliefs and practices, Christian and New Age and otherwise, didn't subside, but grew and thrived—and came to seem unexceptional.

Relativism became entrenched in academia—tenured, you could say. Michel Foucault's rival Jean Baudrillard became a celebrity among American intellectuals by declaring that rationalism was a tool of oppressors that no longer worked as a way of understanding the world, pointless and doomed. In other words, as he wrote in 1986, "the secret of theory"—this whole intellectual realm now called itself simply "theory"—"is that truth does not exist."

This kind of thinking was by no means limited to the ivory tower. The intellectuals' new outlook was as much a product as a cause of the smog of subjectivity that now hung thick over the whole American landscape. After the '60s, truth was relative, criticizing was equal to victimizing, individual liberty became absolute, and everyone was permitted to believe or disbelieve whatever they wished. The distinction between opinion and fact was crumbling on many fronts.

Belief in gigantic secret conspiracies thrived, ranging from the highly improbable to the impossible, and moved from the crackpot periphery to the mainstream.

Many Americans announced that they'd experienced fantastic horrors and adventures, abuse by Satanists, and abduction by extraterrestrials, and their claims began to be taken seriously. Parts of the establishment—psychology and psychiatry, academia, religion, law enforcement—encouraged people to believe that all sorts of imaginary traumas were real.

America didn't seem as weird and crazy as it had around 1970. But that's because Americans had stopped *noticing* the weirdness and craziness. We had defined every sort of deviancy down. And as the cultural critic Neil Postman put it in his 1985 jeremiad about how TV was replacing meaningful public discourse with entertainment, we were in the process of amusing ourselves to death.

HOW THE RIGHT BECAME MORE UNHINGED THAN THE LEFT

The Reagan presidency was famously a triumph of truthiness and entertainment, and in the 1990s, as problematically batty beliefs kept going mainstream, presidential politics continued merging with the fantasy-industrial complex.

In 1998, as soon as we learned that President Bill Clinton had been fellated by an intern in the West Wing, his popularity *spiked*. Which was baffling only to those who still thought of politics as an autonomous realm, existing apart from entertainment. American politics happened on television; it was a TV series, a reality show just before TV became glutted with reality shows. A titillating new story line that goosed the ratings of an existing series was an established scripted-TV gimmick.

The audience had started getting bored with *The Clinton Administration*, but the Monica Lewinsky subplot got people interested again.

Just before the Clintons arrived in Washington, the right had managed to do away with the federal Fairness Doctrine, which had been enacted to keep radio and TV shows from being ideologically one-sided. Until then, big-time conservative opinion media had consisted of two magazines, William F. Buckley Jr.'s biweekly *National Review* and the monthly *American Spectator*, both with small circulations. But absent a Fairness Doctrine, Rush Limbaugh's national right-wing radio show, launched in 1988, was free to thrive, and others promptly appeared.

For most of the 20th century, national news media had felt obliged to pursue and present some rough approximation of *the truth* rather than to promote *a truth*, let alone fictions.

Belief in gigantic conspiracies has moved from the crackpot periphery to the mainstream. Fewer than half of all Americans inhabit fact-based reality.

With the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, a new American laissez-faire had been officially declared. If lots more incorrect and preposterous assertions circulated in our mass media, that was a price of freedom. If splenetic commentators could now, as never before, keep believers perpetually riled up and feeling the excitement of being in a mob, so be it.

Limbaugh's virtuosic three hours of daily talk started bringing a sociopolitical alternate reality to a huge national audience. Instead of relying on an occasional magazine or newsletter to confirm your gnarly view of the world, now you had talk radio drilling it into your head for hours every day. As Limbaugh's show took off, in 1992 the producer Roger Ailes created a syndicated TV show around him. Four years later, when NBC hired someone else to launch a cable news channel, Ailes, who had been working at NBC, quit and created one with Rupert Murdoch.

Fox News brought the Limbaughian talk-radio version of the world to national TV, offering viewers an unending and immersive propaganda experience of a kind that had never existed before.

For Americans, this was a new condition. Over the course of the century, electronic mass media had come to serve an important democratic function: presenting Americans with a single shared set of facts. Now TV and radio were enabling a reversion to the narrower, factional, partisan discourse that had been normal in America's earlier centuries.

And there was also the internet, which eventually would have mooted the Fairness Doctrine anyhow. In 1994, the first modern spam message was sent, visible to everyone on Usenet: GLOBAL ALERT FOR ALL: JESUS IS COMING SOON. Over the next year or two, the masses learned of the World Wide Web. The tinder had been gathered and stacked since the '60s, and now the match was lit and thrown. After the '60s and '70s

happened as they happened, the internet may have broken America's dynamic balance between rational thinking and magical thinking for good.

Before the web, cockamamy ideas and outright falsehoods could not spread nearly as fast or as widely, so it was much easier for reason and reasonableness to prevail. Before the web, institutionalizing any one alternate reality required the long, hard work of hundreds of full-time militants. In the digital age, however, every tribe and fiefdom and principality and region of Fantasyland—every screwball with a computer and an internet connection—suddenly had an unprecedented way to instruct and rile up and mobilize believers, and to recruit more. False beliefs were rendered both more real-seeming and more contagious, creating a kind of fantasy cascade in which millions of bedazzled Americans surfed and swam.

Why did Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan begin remarking frequently during the '80s and '90s that people were entitled to their own opinions but not to their own facts? Because until then, that had not been necessary to say. Our marketplace of ideas became exponentially bigger and freer than ever, it's true. Thomas Jefferson said that he'd "rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it"—because in the new United States, "reason is left free to combat" every sort of "error of opinion." However, I think if he and our other Enlightenment forefathers returned, they would see the present state of affairs as too much of a good thing. Reason remains free to combat unreason, but the internet entitles and equips all the proponents of unreason and error to a previously unimaginable degree. Particularly for a people with our history and propensities, the downside of the internet seems at least as profound as the upside.

The way internet search was designed to operate in the '90s—that is, the way information and beliefs now flow, rise, and fall—is democratic in the extreme. Internet search algorithms are an example of Gresham's law, whereby the bad drives out—or at least overruns—the good. On the internet, the prominence granted to any factual assertion or belief or theory depends on the preferences of billions of individual searchers. Each click on a link is effectively a vote pushing that version of the truth toward the top of the pile of results.

Exciting falsehoods tend to do well in the perpetual referenda, and become self-validating. A search for almost any "alternative" theory or belief seems to generate more links to true believers' pages and sites than to legitimate or skeptical ones, and those tend to dominate the first few pages of results. For instance, beginning in the '90s, conspiracists decided that contrails, the skinny clouds of water vapor that form around jet-engine exhaust, were composed of exotic chemicals, part of a secret government scheme to test weapons or poison citizens or mitigate climate change—and renamed them chem-trails. When I Googled *chemtrails proof*, the first seven results offered so-called evidence of the nonexistent conspiracy. When I searched for *government extraterrestrial cover-up*, only one result in the first three pages didn't link to an article endorsing a conspiracy theory.

Before the web, it really wasn't easy to stumble across false or crazy information convincingly passing itself off as true. Today, however, as the Syracuse University professor Michael Barkun saw back in 2003 in *A Culture of Conspiracy*, "such

subject-specific areas as crank science, conspiracist politics, and occultism are not isolated from one another," but rather

they are interconnected. Someone seeking information on UFOs, for example, can quickly find material on anti-gravity, free energy, Atlantis studies, alternative cancer cures, and conspiracy.

The consequence of such mingling is that an individual who enters the communications system pursuing one interest soon becomes aware of stigmatized material on a broad range of subjects. As a result, those who come across one form of stigmatized knowledge will learn of others, in connections that imply that stigmatized knowledge is a unified domain, an alternative worldview, rather than a collection of unrelated ideas.

Academic research shows that religious and supernatural thinking leads people to believe that almost no big life events are accidental or random. As the authors of some recent cognitive-science studies at Yale put it, "Individuals' explicit religious and paranormal beliefs" are the best predictors of their "perception of purpose in life events"—their tendency "to view the world in terms of agency, purpose, and design." Americans have believed for centuries that the country was inspired and guided by an omniscient, omnipotent planner and interventionist manager. Since the '60s, that exceptional religiosity has fed the tendency to believe in conspiracies. In a recent paper called "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," based on years of survey research, two University of Chicago political scientists, J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, confirmed this special American connection. "The likelihood of supporting conspiracy theories is strongly predicted," they found, by "a propensity to attribute the source of unexplained or extraordinary events to unseen, intentional forces" and a weakness for "melodramatic narratives as explanations for prominent events, particularly those that interpret history relative to universal struggles between good and evil." Oliver and Wood found the single strongest driver of conspiracy belief to be belief in end-times prophecies.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE FANTASY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

As a 13-year-old, I watched William F. Buckley Jr.'s *Firing Line* with my conservative dad, attended Teen Age Republicans summer camp, and, at the behest of a Nixon-campaign advance man in Omaha, ripped down Rockefeller and Reagan signs during the 1968 Nebraska primary campaign. A few years later, I was a McGovern-campaign volunteer, but I still watched and admired Buckley on PBS. Over the years, I've voted for a few Republicans for state and local office. Today I disagree about political issues with friends and relatives to my right, but we agree on the essential contours of reality.

People on the left are by no means all scrupulously reasonable. Many give themselves over to the appealingly dubious and the untrue. But fantastical politics have become highly asymmetrical. Starting in the 1990s, America's unhinged right became much larger and more influential than its unhinged left.

There is no real left-wing equivalent of Sean Hannity, let alone Alex Jones. Moreover, the far right now has unprecedented political power; it controls much of the U.S. government.

Why did the grown-ups and designated drivers on the political left manage to remain basically in charge of their followers, while the reality-based right lost out to fantasy-prone true believers?

One reason, I think, is religion. The GOP is now quite explicitly Christian. The party is *the* American coalition of white Christians, papering over doctrinal and class differences—and now led, weirdly, by one of the least religious presidents ever. If more and more of a political party's members hold more and more extreme and extravagantly supernatural beliefs, doesn't it make sense that the party will be more and more open to make-believe in its politics?

I doubt the GOP elite deliberately *engineered* the synergies between the economic and religious sides of their contemporary coalition. But as the incomes of middle- and working-class people flatlined, Republicans pooh-poohed rising economic inequality and insecurity. Economic insecurity correlates with greater religiosity, and among white Americans, greater religiosity correlates with voting Republican. For Republican politicians and their rich-getting-richer donors, that's a virtuous circle, not a vicious one.

Religion aside, America simply has many more fervid conspiracists on the right, as research about belief in particular conspiracies confirms again and again. Only the American right has had a large and organized faction *based on* paranoid conspiracism for the past six decades. As the pioneer vehicle, the John Birch Society zoomed along and then sputtered out, but its fantastical paradigm and belligerent temperament has endured in other forms and under other brand names. When Barry Goldwater was the right-wing Republican presidential nominee in 1964, he had to play down any streaks of Bircher madness, but by 1979, in his memoir *With No Apologies*, he felt free to rave on about the globalist conspiracy and its "pursuit of a new world order" and impending "period of slavery"; the Council on Foreign Relations' secret agenda for "one-world rule"; and the Trilateral Commission's plan for "seizing control of the political government of the United States." The right has had three generations to steep in this, its taboo vapors wafting more and more into the main chambers of conservatism, becoming familiar, seeming less outlandish. Do you believe that "a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government"? Yes, say 34 percent of Republican voters, according to Public Policy Polling.

In the late 1960s and '70s, the reality-based left more or less won: retreat from Vietnam, civil-rights and environmental-protection laws, increasing legal and cultural equality for women, legal abortion, Keynesian economics triumphant.

But then the right wanted its turn to win. It pretty much accepted racial and gender equality and had to live with social welfare and regulation and bigger government, but it insisted on slowing things down. The political center moved right—but in the '70s and '80s not yet *unreasonably*. Most of America decided that we were all free marketeers now, that business wasn't necessarily bad, and that government couldn't

solve all problems. We still seemed to be in the midst of the normal cyclical seesawing of American politics. In the '90s, the right achieved two of its wildest dreams: The Soviet Union and international communism collapsed; and, as violent crime radically declined, law and order was restored.

But also starting in the '90s, the farthest-right quarter of Americans, let's say, couldn't and wouldn't adjust their beliefs to comport with their side's victories and the dramatically new and improved realities. They'd made a god out of Reagan, but they ignored or didn't register that he was practical and reasonable, that he didn't completely buy his own antigovernment rhetoric. After Reagan, his hopped-up true-believer faction began insisting on total victory. But in a democracy, of course, total victory by any faction is a dangerous fantasy.

Another way the GOP got loopy was by overdoing libertarianism. I have some libertarian tendencies, but at full-strength purity it's an ideology most boys grow out of. On the American right since the '80s, however, they have not. Republicans are very selective, cherry-picking libertarians: Let business do whatever it wants and don't spoil poor people with government handouts; let individuals have gun arsenals but not abortions or recreational drugs or marriage with whomever they wish; and don't mention Ayn Rand's atheism. Libertarianism, remember, is an ideology whose most widely read and influential texts are explicitly *fiction*. "I grew up reading Ayn Rand," Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has said, "and it taught me quite a bit about who I am and what my value systems are, and what my beliefs are." It was that fiction that allowed him and so many other higher-IQ Americans to see modern America as a dystopia in which selfishness is righteous and they are the last heroes. "I think a lot of people," Ryan said in 2009, "would observe that we are right now living in an Ayn Rand novel." I'm assuming he meant *Atlas Shrugged*, the novel that Trump's secretary of state (and former CEO of ExxonMobil) has said is his favorite book. It's the story of a heroic cabal of men's-men industrialists who cause the U.S. government to collapse so they can take over, start again, and make everything right.

For a while, Republican leaders effectively encouraged and exploited the predispositions of their variously fantastical and extreme partisans. Karl Rove was stone-cold cynical, the Wizard of Oz's evil twin coming out from behind the curtain for a candid chat shortly before he won a second term for George W. Bush, about how "judicious study of discernible reality [is] ... not the way the world really works anymore." These leaders were rational people who understood that a large fraction of citizens don't bother with rationality when they vote, that a lot of voters *resent* the judicious study of discernible reality. Keeping those people angry and frightened won them elections.

But over the past few decades, a lot of the rabble they roused came to believe all the untruths. "The problem is that Republicans have purposefully torn down the validating institutions," the political journalist Josh Barro, a Republican until 2016, wrote last year. "They have convinced voters that the media cannot be trusted; they have gotten them used to ignoring inconvenient facts about policy; and they have abolished standards of discourse." The party's ideological center of gravity swerved way to the right of Rove and all the Bushes, finally knocking them and their clubmates aside. What had been the party's fantastical

fringe became its middle. Reasonable Republicanism was replaced by absolutism: *no* new taxes, virtually *no* regulation, *abolish* the EPA and the IRS and the Federal Reserve.

When I was growing up in Nebraska, my Republican parents loathed all Kennedys, distrusted unions, and complained about “confiscatory” federal income-tax rates of 91 percent. But conservatism to them also meant conserving the natural environment and allowing people to make their own choices, including about abortion. They were emphatically reasonable, disinclined to believe in secret Communist/Washington/elite plots to destroy America, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads about far-right acquaintances—such as our neighbors, the parents of the future Mrs. Clarence Thomas, who considered Richard Nixon suspiciously leftish. My parents never belonged to a church. They were godless Midwestern Republicans, born and raised—which wasn’t so odd 40 years ago. Until about 1980, *the Christian right* was not a phrase in American politics. In 2000, my widowed mom, having voted for 14 Republican presidential nominees in a row, quit a party that had become too Christian for her.

The Christian takeover happened gradually, but then quickly in the end, like a phase change from liquid to gas. In 2008, three-quarters of the major GOP presidential candidates said they believed in evolution, but in 2012 it was down to a third, and then in 2016, just one did. That one, Jeb Bush, was careful to say that evolutionary biology was only *his* truth, that “it does not need to be in the curriculum” of public schools, and that if it is, it could be accompanied by creationist teaching. A two-to-one majority of Republicans say they “support establishing Christianity as the national religion,” according to Public Policy Polling.

Although constitutionally the U.S. can have no state religion, faith of some kind has always bordered on mandatory for

I’m reminded of one of H. L. Mencken’s dispatches from the Scopes “monkey trial” in 1925. “Civilized” Tennesseans, he wrote, “had known for years what was going on in the hills. They knew what the country preachers were preaching—what degraded nonsense was being rammed and hammered into yokel skulls. But they were afraid to go out against the imposture while it was in the making.” What the contemporary right has done is worse, because it was deliberate and national, and it has had more-profound consequences.

THE RISE OF DONALD TRUMP

I have been paying close attention to Donald Trump for a long time. *Spy* magazine, which I co-founded in 1986 and edited until 1993, published three cover stories about him—and dozens of pages exposing and ridiculing his lies, brutishness, and absurdity. Now everybody knows what we knew. Donald Trump is a grifter driven by resentment of the establishment. He doesn’t like experts, because they interfere with his right as an American to believe or pretend that fictions are facts, to *feel* the truth. He sees conspiracies everywhere. He exploited the myths of white racial victimhood. His case of what I call Kids R Us syndrome—spoiled, impulsive, moody, a 71-year-old brat—is acute.

He is, first and last, a creature of the fantasy-industrial complex. “He is P. T. Barnum,” his sister, a federal judge, told his biographer Timothy O’Brien in 2005. Although the fantasy-industrial complex had been annexing presidential politics for more than half a century, from JFK through Reagan and beyond, Trump’s campaign and presidency are its ultimate expression. From 1967 through 2011, California was governed by former movie actors more than a third of the time, and one of them became president. But Trump’s need for any and all

public attention always seemed to me more ravenous and insatiable than any other public figure’s, akin to an addict’s for drugs. Unlike Reagan, Trump was always an impresario as well as a performer. Before the emergence of Fantasyland, Trump’s various enterprises would have seemed a ludicrous, embarrassing, incoherent jumble for a businessman, let alone a serious candidate for president. What connects an Islamic-mausoleum-themed casino to a short-lived, shoddy professional football league to an autobiography he didn’t write to buildings he didn’t build to a mail-order meat business to beauty pageants to an airline that lasted three years to a sham “university” to a fragrance called Success to a vodka and a board game named after himself to a reality-TV show about pretending to fire people?

What connects them all, of course, is the new, total American embrace of admixtures of reality and fiction and of fame for fame’s sake. His reality was a reality show before that genre or term existed. When he entered political show business, after threatening to do so for most of his adult life, the character he created was unprecedented—presidential candidate as

Trump doesn’t like experts, because they interfere with his right as an American to believe or pretend that fictions are facts.

politicians. Only four presidents have lacked a Christian denominational affiliation, the most recent one in the 1880s. According to Pew, two-thirds of Republicans admit that they’d be less likely to support a presidential candidate who doesn’t believe in God.

As a matter of fact, one of the Constitution’s key clauses—“no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust”—is kind of a theoretical freedom. Not only have we never had an openly unbelieving president, but of the 535 members of the current Congress, exactly one, Representative Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, lists her religion as “none.” Among all 7,383 state legislators, there is apparently only one avowed atheist: Nebraska Senator Ernie Chambers.

insult comic with an artificial tan and ridiculous hair, shamelessly unreal and whipped into shape as if by a pâtissier. He used the new and remade pieces of the fantasy-industrial complex as nobody had before. He hired actors to play enthusiastic supporters at his campaign kickoff. Twitter became his unmediated personal channel for entertaining outrage and untruth. And he was a *star*, so news shows wanted him on the air as much as possible—people at TV outlets told me during the campaign that they were expected to be careful not to make the candidate so unhappy that he might not return.

Before Trump won their nomination and the presidency, when he was still “a cancer on conservatism” that must be “discarded” (former Governor Rick Perry) and an “utterly amoral” “narcissist at a level I don’t think this country’s ever seen” (Senator Ted Cruz), Republicans hated Trump’s ideological incoherence—they didn’t yet understand that his campaign logic was a new kind, blending exciting tales with a showmanship that transcends ideology.

During the campaign, Trump repeated the falsehood that vaccines cause autism. And instead of undergoing a normal medical exam from a normal doctor and making the results public, like nominees had before, Trump went on *The Dr. Oz Show* and handed the host test results from his wacky doctor.

Did his voters know that his hogwash was hogwash? Yes and no, the way people paying to visit P. T. Barnum’s exhibitions 175 years ago didn’t much care whether the black woman on display was really George Washington’s 161-year-old former nanny or whether the stitched-together fish/ape was actually a mermaid; or the way today we immerse in the real-life fictions of Disney World. Trump

waited to run for president until he sensed that a critical mass of Americans had decided politics were *all* a show and a sham. If the whole thing is rigged, Trump’s brilliance was calling that out in the most impolitic ways possible, deriding his straight-arrow competitors as fakers and losers and liars—because *that* bullshit-calling was uniquely candid and authentic in the age of fake.

Trump took a key piece of cynical wisdom about show business—the most important thing is sincerity, and once you can fake that, you’ve got it made—to a new level: His actual thuggish sincerity is the opposite of the old-fashioned, goody-goody sanctimony that people hate in politicians.

If he were just a truth-telling wise guy, however, he wouldn’t have won. Trump’s genius was to exploit the skeptical disillusion with politics—there’s too much equivocating; democracy’s a charade—but also to pander to Americans’ magical thinking about national greatness. Extreme credulity is a fraternal twin of extreme skepticism.

“I will give you *everything*,” Trump actually promised during the campaign. Yes: “Every dream you’ve ever dreamed for your country” will come true.

Just as the internet enabled full Fantasyland, it made possible Trump as candidate and president, feeding him pseudo-news on his phone and letting him feed those untruths directly to his Twitter followers. He is the poster boy for the downside of digital life. “Forget the press,” he advised supporters—just “read the internet.” After he wrongly declared on Twitter that one anti-Trump protester “has ties to ISIS,” he was asked whether he regretted tweeting that falsehood. “What do I know about it?” he replied. “All I know is what’s on the internet.”

Trump launched his political career by embracing a brand-new conspiracy theory twisted around two American taproots—fear and loathing of foreigners and of nonwhites. In



2011, he became the chief promoter of the fantasy that Barack Obama was born in Kenya, a fringe idea that he brought into the mainstream. Only in the fall of 2016 did he grudgingly admit that the president was indeed a native-born American—at the same moment a YouGov/Huffington Post survey found that a majority of Republicans still believed Obama probably or definitely had been born in Kenya. Conspiracies, conspiracies, still more conspiracies. On *Fox & Friends* Trump discussed, as if it were fact, the *National Enquirer*’s suggestion that Ted Cruz’s father was connected to JFK’s assassination: “What was he doing with Lee Harvey Oswald shortly before the death, before the shooting? It’s horrible.” The Fox News anchors interviewing him didn’t challenge him or follow up. He revived the 1993 fantasy about the Clintons’ friend Vince Foster—his death, Trump said, was “very fishy,” because Foster “had intimate knowledge of what was going on. He knew everything that was going on, and then all of a sudden he committed suicide ... I will say there are people who continue to bring it up because they think it was absolutely a murder.” He has also promised to make sure that “you will find out who really knocked down the World Trade Center.”

And it has all worked for him, because so many Americans are eager to believe almost any conspiracy theory, no matter how implausible, as long as it jibes with their opinions and feelings.

Not all lies are fantasies and not all fantasies are lies; people who *believe* untrue things can pass lie-detector tests. For instance, Trump probably really believed that “the murder rate in our country is the highest it’s been in 47 years,” the total falsehood he told leaders of the National Sheriffs’ Association at the White House in early February. The fact-checking website PolitiFact looked at more than 400 of his statements as a candidate and as president and found that almost 50 percent were false and another 20 percent were mostly false.

He gets away with this as he wouldn’t have in the 1980s or ’90s, when he first talked about running for president, because now factual truth really is just one option. After Trump won the election, he began referring to all unflattering or inconvenient journalism as “fake news.” When his approval rating began declining, Trump simply refused to believe it: “Any negative polls” that may appear, the president tweeted at dawn one morning from Mar-a-Lago, “are fake news.”

The people who speak on Trump’s behalf to journalists and the rest of the reality-based world struggle to defend or explain his assertions. Asked about “the president’s statements that are ... demonstrably not true,” the White House counselor Kellyanne Conway asked CNN’s Jake Tapper to please remember “the many things that he says that *are* true.” According to *The New York Times*, the people around Trump say his baseless certainty “that he was bugged in some way” by Obama in Trump Tower is driven by “a sense of persecution bordering on faith.” And indeed, their most honest defense of his false statements has been to cast them practically as matters of religious conviction—he deeply *believes* them, so ... there. When White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked at a press conference about the millions of people who the president insists voted illegally, he earnestly reminded reporters that Trump “has believed that for a while” and “does believe that” and it’s “been a long-standing belief that he’s maintained” and “it’s a belief that he has maintained for a while.”

Which is why nearly half of Americans subscribe to that preposterous belief themselves. And in Trump’s view, *that* overrides any requirement for facts.

“Do you think that talking about millions of illegal votes is dangerous to this country without presenting the evidence?,” David Muir, the anchor of ABC’s *World News Tonight*, asked Trump in January.

“No,” he replied. “Not at all! Not at all—because many people feel the same way that I do.”

The idea that progress has some kind of unstoppable momentum, as if powered by a Newtonian law, was always a very American belief. However, it’s really an article of faith, the Christian fantasy about history’s happy ending reconfigured during and after the Enlightenment as a set of modern secular fantasies.

It reflects our blithe conviction that America’s visions of freedom and democracy and justice and prosperity must prevail in the end. I really can imagine, for the first time in my life, that America has permanently tipped into irreversible decline, heading deeper into Fantasyland. I wonder whether it’s

only America’s destiny, exceptional as ever, to unravel in this way. Or maybe we’re just early adopters, the canaries in the global mine, and Canada and Denmark and Japan and China and all the rest will eventually follow us down our tunnel. Why should modern civilization’s great principles—democracy, freedom, tolerance—guarantee great outcomes?

Yet because I’m an American, a fortunate American who has lived in a fortunate American century, I remain (barely) more of an optimist than a pessimist. Even as we’ve entered this long winter of foolishness and darkness, when too many Americans are losing their grip on reason and reality, it has been an epoch of astonishing hope and light as well. During these same past few decades, Americans reduced the rates of murder and violent crime by more than half. We decoded the human genome, elected an African American president, recorded the sound of two black holes colliding 1 billion years ago, and created *Beloved*, *The Simpsons*, *Goodfellas*, *Angels in America*, *The Wire*, *The Colbert Report*, *Transparent*, *Hamilton*. Since 1981, the percentage of people living in extreme poverty around the globe has plummeted from 44 percent to 10 percent. I do despair of our devolution into unreason and magical thinking, but not everything has gone wrong.

What is to be done? I don’t have an actionable agenda, Seven Ways Sensible People Can Save America From the Craziness. But I think we can slow the flood, repair the levees, and maybe stop things from getting any worse. If we’re splitting into two different cultures, we in reality-based America—whether the blue part or the smaller red part—must try to keep our zone as large and robust and attractive as possible for ourselves and for future generations. We need to firmly commit to Moynihan’s aphorism about opinions versus facts. We must call out the dangerously untrue and unreal. A grassroots movement against one kind of cultural squishiness has taken off and lately reshaped our national politics—the opposition to political correctness. I envision a comparable struggle that insists on distinguishing between the factually true and the blatantly false.

It will require a struggle to make America reality-based again. Fight the good fight in your private life. You needn’t get into an argument with the stranger at Chipotle who claims that George Soros and Uber are plotting to make his muscle car illegal—but do not give acquaintances and friends and family members free passes. If you have children or grandchildren, teach them to distinguish between true and untrue as fiercely as you do between right and wrong and between wise and foolish.

We need to adopt new protocols for information-media hygiene. Would you feed your kids a half-eaten casserole a stranger handed you on the bus, or give them medicine you got from some lady at the gym?

And fight the good fight in the public sphere. One main task, of course, is to contain the worst tendencies of Trumpism, and cut off its political-economic fuel supply, so that fantasy and lies don’t turn it into something much worse than just nasty, oafish, reality-show pseudo-conservatism. Progress is not inevitable, but it’s not impossible, either. □

Kurt Andersen is the host of the public-radio show Studio 360. This article has been adapted from his book Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire—A 500-Year History, to be published this month by Random House.

Jane Austen *Is* Everything

As beloved as Shakespeare, she shaped a vision of personal flourishing that still feels thoroughly modern.

By NICHOLAS DAMES
Illustration by Jordan Andrew Carter

ON THE BICENTENARY of her death, Jane Austen is still everywhere, often where one least expects to find her. Most of her devotees will have their own story; mine occurred in a Manhattan courthouse, with its stale-coffee smell and atmosphere of anxious boredom, in the midst of jury selection for a criminal trial involving a double homicide. Upon learning that I taught British literature, the defendant's attorney—a woman who spoke with intimidating speed and streetwise bluntness—skipped

the usual questions (how much did I trust police testimony, had I ever been a victim of a violent crime) and asked instead whether I taught Jane Austen. Puzzled by her indirection, I answered yes. A theatrical flash of disgust crossed her face: I was, evidently, one of *those* people. At which point the presiding judge interrupted to say: "Careful, counsel. Some of us here like Jane Austen."

As Austen's own Emma Woodhouse put it to her querulous father, "One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other." But in the case of Austen, that misunderstanding seems to have an urgency that isn't attached to any other



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canonized, pre-20th-century literary figure. The disagreement has been amplified as her fame has grown, and her fame may never have been greater. This year sees her unveiling by the Bank of England on a new £10 note, replacing Charles Darwin (and before him, Charles Dickens); she is the first female writer to be so honored. Meanwhile, the scholar Nicole Wright's revelation that Austen was appearing as an avatar of sexual propriety and racial purity on white-supremacist websites made national news on both sides of the Atlantic. A few years back, her 235th birthday was commemorated with the honor of our times, a Google doodle. The wave of film adaptations that began in the 1990s may have receded, but it left in its wake a truth as peculiar as it seems to be, well, universally acknowledged: Austen has firmly joined Shakespeare not just as a canonical figure but as a symbol of Literature itself, the hazel-eyed woman in the mobcap as iconic now as the balding man in the doublet.

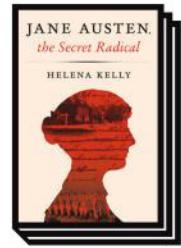
The Shakespeare-Austen comparison is in fact an old one—first mooted by the academic and theologian Richard Whately, in 1821, and echoed later by Tennyson and Kipling—yet it's inexact. Iconic as she's become, the reasons for her status often stir up zealous dispute. Is Austen the purveyor of comforting fantasies of gentility and propriety, the nostalgist's favorite? Or is she the female rebel, the mocking modern spirit, the writer whose wit skewers any misguided or—usually male—pompous way of reading her? (For her supremacist fans, Elizabeth Bennet would have a retort at the ready: "There are such people, but I hope I am not one of *them*.") Any hint of taking Austen out of her Regency bubble brings attacks. When the literary theorist Eve Sedgwick delivered a talk in 1989 called "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," some male social critics brandished the popular term *politically correct* to denounce Sedgwick and her profession. Six years later, when Terry Castle suggested a homoerotic dimension to the closeness between Austen and her sister, Cassandra, the letters page of the *London Review of Books* erupted. In other precincts, business gurus can be found online touting "what Jane Austen can teach us about risk management." Not only is my Austen unlikely to be yours;

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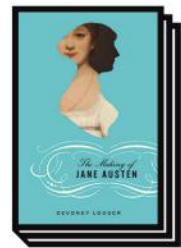
it seems that anyone's Austen is very likely to be hostile to everyone else's.

Such is the nature of possessive love. Austen's proudly defensive comment about her Emma—"a heroine whom no one but myself will much like"—has become the signature attitude of her critics, who tend to be obsessed with protecting Austen from her admirers and enumerating the bad reasons to like her. Both E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, when they reviewed the famous 1923 R. W. Chapman edition of her novels, were able to admit to their admiration only after taking swipes at a different kind of fan. "Like all regular church-goers," Forster said of the usual Austen reader, "he scarcely notices what is being said." For her part, Woolf smirked at the notion of "25 elderly gentlemen living in the neighborhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult offered to the chastity of their aunts." Club, meet the members who don't want to join.

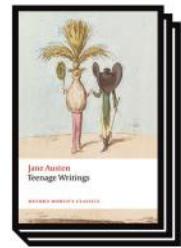
Their asperity suggests a question, one that grows more apparent, and more profound, as we enter the third century After Austen: How modern is Austen—and are we still modern in the same way? Is it a fantasy of escape that draws readers to her fables of courtship among the precariously genteel, or is it the pleasure of recognition, the sense that she is describing our world? Other classics either have become antiques in need of explanation, or are obviously in a world—a world of technology and money and big, alien institutions—that feels familiar. Austen, with her 18th-century diction, village settings, and archaic social codes that somehow survive all manner of contemporary avatars and retellings, is strangely both.



JANE AUSTEN, THE
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HELENA KELLY
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THE MAKING OF
JANE AUSTEN
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Two centuries is a long time to be contemporary, long enough for us to wonder what exactly keeps her so. It's the oldest and most perplexing of her critical challenges, and the question her close readers are least able to resist pondering. In an article left unpublished at his death in 1975—the bicentenary of Austen's birth—the critic Lionel Trilling wondered, with considerable suspicion, why students still turned out in droves for classes devoted to her. His answer was their yearning to escape their modernity: Austen, he observed, is "congenial to the modern person who feels himself ill-accommodated by his own time." What Trilling didn't mention is that slightly more than two decades earlier, he had famously argued the opposite: that her novels "are, in essential ways, of our modern time." Austen has that trick of slipping out of focus, of seeming to be vanishing into the historical background even as she's coming closer to us. That felt like a problem in the age of cold war, and the puzzle of her relevance is unavoidable in this doom-haunted,

angry, febrile moment 200 years after her death: Do we read Austen to flee modernity, or to see it clearly? Why would we need to do either?

THERE ARE a few ways to address this puzzle, and in the interval between Austen bicentenaries, two ways in particular have become influential among scholars who make Austen their subject. The first would have us explore the context of Austen's own moment, and read her as her contemporaries might have—to depretify her novels and show her immersion in the world, with all its political messiness and social friction. The second takes the pretifications at face value

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and asks how they happened. Its interest is in the history of Austen after Austen, in how she's been understood, manipulated, adapted to speak to different times. Both are historical endeavors, but one pulls us back to Austen while the other pulls Austen toward us; the former tends toward metaphors of archeology or espionage—unearthing, decoding, uncovering—while the latter is a more garrulous activity, interested in unexpected meetings and expanding connections.

This bicentenary gives us readable examples of each. Helena Kelly's *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical* pulls no punches in its insistence that Austen's readers have forgotten, or don't know, the conditions that gave the novels their shape and significance: property and inheritance laws that kept women in perpetual dependence on male relations; enclosure acts that remade, and privatized, the British landscape; economic dependence on commodities produced by slave labor in Britain's colonies; and, above all, the militarized and paranoid environment in Britain after the French Revolution, with its suspension of habeas corpus, its polic-

ing of political expression, its quartering of troops on potentially restive subjects. Taken as a whole, these conditions made Austen, in Kelly's account, a revolutionary like Thomas Paine or Mary Wollstonecraft. But she was a revolutionary writing in code, for readers who would know "how to read between the lines, how to mine her books for meaning, just as readers in Communist states

The hazel-eyed woman in the mobcap is not just an iconic figure but a symbol of Literature itself.

learned how to read what writers had to learn how to write," according to Kelly, who teaches at Oxford. "Jane's novels were produced in a state that was, essentially, totalitarian."

This analysis is meant to be bracing. It derives from a diverse tradition of scholarship, by critics such as Marilyn Butler and Claudia L. Johnson, that attempts to place Austen in the politics of her day. It is also riven by a paradox.

The closer Kelly gets to the historical particularities of Austen's time, the more she reaches for anachronistic comparisons to a time nearer to ours. The idea of Austen writing in a "totalitarian" regime, producing something like samizdat, is deliberately provocative, but it's a provocation that clouds historical precision even as it tries to make vivid her historical moment. Impatient with 200 years of sentimentalizing—some of it, Kelly argues, intentional, on the part of Austen's family—Kelly gives us what turns out to be a distinctively modern Austen, someone who is always on the right historical side (that is to say, ours), with an unerring moral compass that flatters our sensibilities. Behind a spoonful of sugar, Austen wants us to see the violence of the colonial plantation, abetted by Anglican apologists. Behind the joining of estates in *Emma*, Austen wants us to see the exclusion of itinerant populations from sustenance. Behind the flirtatious soldiers quartered in Meryton in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen wants us to hear the fall of the guillotine.

To get to this Austen, Kelly takes the liberty of imagining. Each chapter



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starts with a fantasia based on a surviving letter of Austen's, in which "Jane" (Kelly's preferred name, to suggest the then-unknown young woman rather than the canonical author) reacts with moral sensitivity to a small scene. Writing on *Northanger Abbey*, Kelly begins by evoking the disgust a 24-year-old Jane would have felt at witnessing the violent morning sickness of her sister-in-law Elizabeth, newly pregnant almost immediately after the birth of her first child. The scene is plausible and vivid; it leads to an illuminating discussion of the perils of 18th- and early-19th-century obstetrics, and the shadow of female mortality hovering over sex in Austen's time. It is helpful to remember that beyond the happy couplings of Austen's endings there lurked the lying-in, the dangerous ravages of delivery, the fears of post-partum complications and infection.

Helpful because, as Kelly knows, concerns like the ones she invokes—the blithe male brutality of sex itself, the greed of landowners dispossessing their localities of the commons, the bayonets glinting on the rifles carried by the visiting militia—are actually marginal in Austen, silenced by the novels' decorum. To see them requires a kind of paranoid gaze, looking for clues and hidden signs, and a willingness to imagine Austen as a dissident as much as a novelist. To be sure, the text does send out some signals. Kelly is particularly deft with names: the Frenchness of Darcy—a thinly disguised D'Arcy—with its tang of aristocrats fac- ing bloody revolution; the metallic sur- names of *Sense and Sensibility* (Steele, Ferrars) evoking the clink of money; the recurrence of famous names from the history of abolition (Mansfield, Norris) in *Mansfield Park*.

There is a satisfaction in conceiving oneself to be in possession of the code-book. Yet Austen's own plots—with their caddish suitors hiding unsuitable pasts, covert engagements that give rise to social chaos, ciphers and riddles that lead to misunderstanding—figure secrecy as a moral flaw, which might give a sleuthing critic pause. ("Oh!" says Emma, "if you knew how much I love every thing that is decided and open!") There is also, finally, a letdown in learning that the encoded message is actually by now accepted wisdom: against money-worship, against the trafficking of women, against

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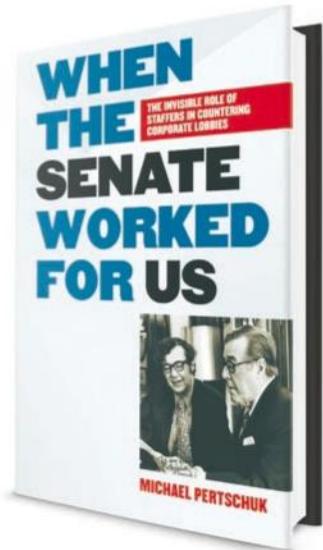
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exploitation. Radical once, perhaps, but commonsense now; gritty and serious, but disappointingly familiar.

Austen's appeal has always, instead, been a matter of surfaces, of a style to be admired rather than of a cipher to be cracked. Her sentences can leave readers in a swoon, with their controlled wit, their many-edged irony, their evident pleasure in their own mastery—and in the masterful way they negotiate or transform less graceful realities. ("You must learn some of my philosophy," Elizabeth Bennet tells Darcy: "Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.") Such deft playfulness gets eclipsed in reading these surfaces as a layer to be dug under for a more subversive depth. "Forget the Jane Austen you think you know," Kelly insists. Kelly may depict a politically and ethically congenial Austen, but forgetting the Austen we know turns out to mean forgetting the allure of an art that seems more mysterious than any particular critique it might be hiding.

DEVENY LOOSER, on the other hand, wants to write the forgotten history of that allure. *The Making of Jane Austen* is more entertaining than any reception history has a right to be, simply because of the oddities that Looser, an English professor at Arizona State University, restores to view. Divided into four overlooked cultural zones where Austen was reimagined in the 19th and 20th centuries—illustrations; theatrical and early film adaptations; political appropriations; and school texts—her book relishes its most piquant juxtapositions. Looser highlights the Italian-born Rosina Filippi, whose 1895 adaptation of Austen's dialogues for amateur theatricals stressed the feisty independence of her heroines. She exhibits a Marathi-language version of *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1913, written in the hopes that India might one day adopt British Regency social codes. She pauses over the 1932 stage play *Dear Jane*, about Austen's life, whose co-stars Eva Le Gallienne (as Cassandra Austen) and Josephine Hutchinson (as Jane) were known to be offstage lovers. In each case, as Looser shows, Austen is slow to enter a different medium, but once introduced into it, she quickly dominates.

As a corrective to so much existing work on Austen's reception, which has featured the opinions of critics and

writers, this is brilliant stuff. Turning to Trilling's austere, regretful 1975 essay, Looser reads it as a typical example of a literary scholar bewildered by a popularity whose impetus derives from outside the purely literary. What if Trilling had realized that his students had likely been raised on school viewings and televised reruns of the Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier *Pride and Prejudice*? Compared with Trilling's airless pondering, Looser's sensitivity to changes in the cultural atmosphere around Austen is refreshing.

The point is that a school of Austen criticism willfully ignorant of her many cultural manifestations is likely to be, to use a phrase of Emma's, solemn nonsense. But what do those manifestations prove about Austen? Here Looser is as wisely reticent as Austen herself. They prove no one thing, Looser admits, either aesthetically or politically. Two centuries of Austen's legacy reveal her to be "all over the political map": She is brandished as an icon on suffragette banners in 1908, and used at the same time as a badge of affiliation by male club members anxious to preserve gendered social barriers. In Looser's history, she is potentially anything to anyone. Aesthetically, she can look neoclassical or romantic, gentle or acerbic. Like a canny or lucky organism, Austen has thrived in any number of ecological niches, and Looser refuses to judge the extent to which those niches have done violence to her novels in order to make them fit. Far more generous and circumspect in its account than Kelly's, Looser's book might inspire us, like *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price when struck by the growth of a hedgerow, simply to wonder at change and adaptation itself: "How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!"

Where do these books leave us? One critic reads the novels; one reads anything but. One presents a single, but secret, Austen, rooted in the rough soil of her time; one gives us a volatile, protean Austen, amenable to any condition or climate. As histories of Austen they could not be more different, but neither, it seems, can address the question of Austen's perennial and stubbornly perplexing appeal: What is it about her art that still inspires argument, retelling,



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adulation, commercialization, when other big worthies of the past slowly vanish? Is there something like an Austen Effect, obvious and yet also obscure, long-lasting and yet adaptable to new media and historical situations, that speaks to our sense of our modernity? Where might we look to find it?

ANOTHER OF THIS YEAR'S Austen books suggests an answer: the new Oxford World's Classics *Teenage Writings*, a collection of three notebooks of her adolescent writings, co-edited by Kathryn Sutherland, one of a handful of true experts in Austen's manuscripts. Novel-writing is an adult-only game, rarely amenable to youthful prodigies like an Ingres, a Mozart, or a Keats. But if anyone in the form's history comes close, it is Austen. From the age of 11 she showed a fantastically precocious understanding of the novel's usual rules, because already by then she was parodying them. Her earliest juvenilia are insouciant send-ups, each of a slightly different aspect of the fictional form of her time. Various kinds of prose technique (long, descriptive passages, novels in letters) and assorted kinds of stories (foundling plots, mystery plots, tales of star-crossed lovers) are rendered ridiculous in what is already her recognizably exact voice. On the period's stereotypically virtuous suffering heroines, she offers this, likely written in her early teens:

Beloved by Lady Harcourt, adored by Sir George & admired by all the world, she lived in a continued course of uninterrupted Happiness, till she had attained her eighteenth year, when happening one day to be detected in stealing a bank-note of 50£, she was turned out of doors by her inhuman Benefactors.

Or this, possibly written as early as age 11, on the cousin-lovers familiar from sentimental fiction:

They were exceedingly handsome and so much alike, that it was not every one who knew them apart.—Nay even their most intimate freinds [sic] had nothing to distinguish them by, but the shape of the face, the colour of the Eye, the length of the Nose & the difference of the complexion.

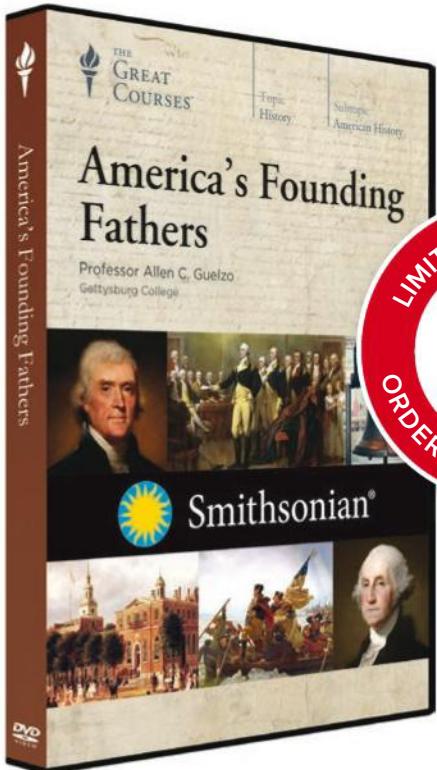
Laugh lines like these exploit the comedy of precision, a riposte to the windy generalities of fictional clichés; and from the beginning virtually everything about fiction for Austen was a cliché, or a genre, a kind of unconscious expectation that she could expose or pierce. The insight and skill are remarkable, but even more so is the absence of any self-revelation. Austen seems to have had none of the usual adolescent impulse toward autobiography. Instead she displays a preternatural self-possession. Nothing is too giddy, or too self-important; no dreaminess or yearning or complaint intrudes. What personality makes itself felt is composed of intellectual delight—the pleasure of the mind's exertion, directed toward a family audience.

In her published novels—she wrote a first draft of *Pride and Prejudice* in her early 20s, and her last novel, *Persuasion*, as she turned 40 (a year before she died)—that avoidance of the personal

Do we read Austen to flee modernity, or to see it clearly? Why would we need to do either?

was refined into a method capable of more than parody. It is a recurrent problem for biographical criticism of Austen's novels that Jane Austen, the unmarried woman who spent much of her adulthood living on the not particularly lavish charity or hospitality of male relations, is nowhere present in them. You will find no wittily sardonic yet sympathetic aunts who happen to write fiction in the interstices of the day's other duties, no talented and unmarried daughters of deceased clergymen negotiating with London publishers from a Hampshire cottage. Instead, her pages present young women destined, with various degrees of initial willingness, for the marriages they eventually deserve.

Which is to say that the exuberance of her juvenile parodies, a way of turning the self's delight in its own powers outward, is in the novels given to Austen's extraordinarily vibrant protagonists. They share nothing of Austen but their enjoyment of their own powers, particularly their intellectual powers. They are, to use a word of Austen's, spirited. That has always been their appeal.



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Spiritedness has its many moods, but it is never just physical, nor is it resentful, brooding, interiorized. It is vibrant, quick, sensitive, willing to collide with the world yet also self-sufficient. Take Elizabeth Bennet, when she overhears Darcy telling Bingley that she is "not handsome enough to tempt me":

Mr. Darcy walked off; and Elizabeth remained with no very cordial feelings towards him. She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous.

Elizabeth, the young parodist. No wonder that Darcy later admits to first admiring her for "the liveliness of your mind," or that we see his sister, Georgiana, feeling "an astonishment bordering on alarm at her lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother."

The pleasure that spiritedness provides, as everyone who reads Austen discovers, tends to feel self-evident; her spirited characters stand out because they enchant us. But all pleasures have their politics, even the seemingly personal pleasure of watching her lively heroines assert themselves. There is something pagan about spiritedness as a virtue; it is the usual translation of the Greek term *thumos*, which for Aristotle meant the energetic defense of one's personal dignity—quick to feel injury, quick to respond, courageous about one's principles, active in the expression of one's self-respect. (It is no coincidence that many of Austen's most devoted readers, such as Gilbert Ryle and Alasdair MacIntyre, have been philosophers steeped in Greek thought.) Even Austen's less witty protagonists, like *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price and *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot, carry a sense of self-sufficiency and a devotion to their self-conception that make them more than just models of rectitude. As for Elizabeth and Emma, they exude a kind of self-generated joy. Flawed and blinkered, their spiritedness is still a form of personal flourishing—an energetic defense of the very idea of having a self. It qualifies them for that most clichéd, and yet most profound, of Austen's words: happiness.

This is in fact the ethic, painted in many different period-appropriate colors, that saturates the examples of

Austen adaptation in Loosier's book, from the declamations of late-19th-century elocution handbooks to the many Elizabeths of stage and screen. But it is also crucially, as Kelly would no doubt insist, embedded in the history of Austen's own moment. Spiritedness is a way of understanding oneself as having *rights*. It experiences those rights as a joy, as a sense of blossoming, of freedom; but also as something often in need of quickly roused defense. It is the style of the revolutions—American, French—encroaching on Austen's Britain, put in the mouths of intelligent young women

Austen's comic ideal is of spirited, rights-holding individuals living in social concord.

who know their own worth. "I am only resolved to act in that manner," Elizabeth tells her aristocratic antagonist Lady Catherine de Bourgh, "which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me."

Elizabeth's is a declaration of rights; she demands the pursuit of happiness. The echoes of famous documents of the late 18th century are there, but harmonized by a personal style one might love and not just admire: The spirited self, joyous even in the act of refusal, is a pleasure to watch in action. The radical formal twist in Austen, however, is that these spirited characters are monitored with steely objectivity, inside and out, by her impersonal omniscient voice, one that never explicitly judges but that still exposes their misapprehensions and solipsisms. Someone is always watching, and that someone is the Austen voice itself, detached from any merely personal Jane Austen. There is the characters' self-assertion, brilliant and

enjoyable; and there is observation and implied assessment, keeping that self-assertion balanced with an objective world of shared values.

No one has made spiritedness more compelling, and no one has taken more care to hedge it with such perfect control. At different historical moments, one side or the other of that equation has been emphasized—sometimes the ironic wit keeping characters under surveillance, sometimes the spirited relish with which those characters defend their rights—but the equipoise has demonstrated remarkable durability. The balance between self and society is the core dream of a liberal world: a place where individuals might be both sufficient unto themselves and possessed of rights accordingly, but also bound to one another in a pact of mutual correction. Call it civil society, as both a joy and a duty. Austen is, as Kelly would put it, a fantasist about her moment—but that fantasy is also still ours.

For how much longer? Is it possible to imagine a world that no longer finds such a fantasy gratifying or necessary, a world that no longer reads and reimagines Jane Austen? If and when that time arrives, we will know that her comic ideal, of spirited, rights-holding individuals living in social concord, no longer seems appealing, or viable, and that her idea of what it means to be an individual is no longer recognizable. In this 200th year After Austen, there are plenty of signs, none of them a pleasure to consider, that such a day may not be far off. For the moment, we're left in relation to Austen where Mr. Knightley started with Emma, looking on anxiously and thinking: "I wonder what will become of her!" A

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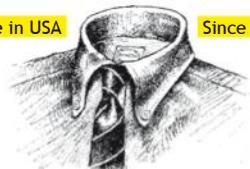
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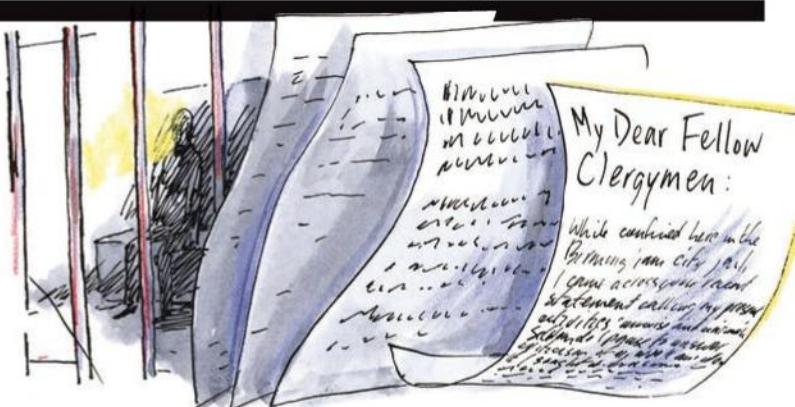
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THE BIG QUESTION



What was the most important letter in history?



Clayborne Carson, founding director, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" was little-noticed in April 1963, when his colleagues in the civil-rights movement stitched it together from the fragments he'd drafted in his cell. Major civil-rights legislation was not then on President John F. Kennedy's agenda. Yet the letter has gained recognition as the 20th century's most influential essay on civil disobedience.

Nicholas Sparks, author, *The Notebook*

It's difficult to imagine Christianity without the letters of Saint Paul, which continue to inform and influence pastoral traditions throughout the world, nearly 2,000 years after they were written.

Bríd McGrath, professor of history and humanities, Trinity College Dublin

The first letter, reportedly from Queen Atossa around 500 B.C., established the genre and made letters the

most normal, effective form of long-distance communication for millennia. It also created whole industries of makers of writing materials, secretaries, and postal workers still flourishing today.

Winifred Gallagher, author, *How the Post Office Created America*

The inaugural letter posted with the "Penny Black," the world's first cheap, adhesive, prepaid stamp, enabled average folks to correspond with unprecedented abandon. Named for its price and its sober depiction of a 15-year-old Queen Victoria, the Penny Black was issued by Great Britain in May 1840. Other nations soon followed suit, including the United States in 1847.



Joseph Janes, author, *Documents That Changed the Way We Live*

A message unlikely ever to be answered, the Golden

Record accompanying the Voyager spacecraft, which launched in 1977, springs from the same human impulse that perhaps gave rise to Paleolithic cave paintings and handprints: to record our memories, our questions, and ourselves.



Michael Burlingame, historian and Lincoln scholar

Abraham Lincoln wrote five public letters that, by bolstering Northern morale, helped the Union win the Civil War, thus outlawing slavery, preserving national unity, and vindicating the idea of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Arguably the best one was addressed to Albert Hodges, dated April 4, 1864, in which he said: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."

Stephen Jarvis, author, *Death and Mr. Pickwick*
The "Groans of the Britons" letter, sent circa

450 A.D. by ancient Britons appealing for Roman help in resisting invaders. When no help came, the Britons asked Germanic mercenaries to come to their assistance—leading to the Germanic takeover of Britain. This was effectively the start of the English language.

READER RESPONSES

Lynn Morse, Stratham, N.H. The intercepted Zimmermann telegram, in which Germany proposed a military alliance with Mexico against the U.S., precipitated America's entry into World War I and its subsequent ascension as a world superpower.

Michael Peskin, Sunnyvale, Calif.

In August 1939, Albert Einstein sent a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggesting that an atomic bomb was possible and that Germany might be trying to build one. This was the first step in moving nuclear energy from esoteric science to the front of public consciousness. □

Want to see your name on this page? Email bigquestion@theatlantic.com with your response to the question for our November issue: What was the most influential power couple in history?

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