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Donald Trump Wants You To Forget This Happened

January 6, Five Years Later By Jamie Thompson

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An Act of Cosmic Sabotage

How Donald Trump tried to ground NASA's science missions

by Ross Andersen



A test model of the Perseverance rover, designed to explore the surface of Mars, sits in a garage at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, near Pasadena, California, in October.

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On Mars, in the belly of a rover named Perseverance, a titanium tube holds a stone more precious than any diamond or ruby on Earth. The robot spotted it in 2024 along the banks of a Martian riverbed and zapped it with an ultraviolet laser. It contained ancient layers of mud, compressed into shale in the 3.5 billion years since the river last coursed across the red planet. Inside those layers, the rover found organic compounds. Its camera zoomed in and noticed leopard-like spots. Scientists had previously observed similar spotting patterns, but not on Mars. They'd seen them on Earth, in muds that once teemed with microbes.

The rover tucked a core sample about the size of a piece of chalk into a treasure chest in its chassis. There the rock will remain until a future robot parachutes down onto the Martian surface, grabs the chest, and launches it back to Earth. If scientists are able to inspect it in person, and they find that Mars was indeed once alive with microbes, we would know that life on our planet is no cosmic one-off. We would have reason to believe that it has emerged on many of the hundreds of billions of planets that exist in our galaxy alone. The cosmos that we look up into at night would no longer seem a cold void. It would shimmer with a new vitality.

Perseverance is among the latest in a lineage of interplanetary robotic explorers that NASA has built across almost 60 years, for about \$60 billion. That's less than what Mark Zuckerberg spent on his struggling metaverse. At NASA, it paid for hundreds of spacecraft that have flown past all of the solar system's planets, dropped into orbit around most of them, and decelerated from flight speed to reach the surface of a few. These missions have disclosed the scientific qualities of other worlds, as well as the look and feel of them, to all humanity, and for posterity too.

Most of these missions, including nine of the 11 that have landed on Mars, were run out of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, near Pasadena, California. The mission to retrieve the chest inside Perseverance was, until recently, the largest, most important project at JPL. About 1,000 people there were working on it. But it's no longer moving forward, and may never happen.

Last spring, President Donald Trump bluntly expressed his [vision for science at NASA](#) in his first budget request. Along with extensive layoffs, he called

for 40 of the agency's 124 science missions, including Mars Sample Return, to be defunded, and for the surviving missions to make do with less. Among NASA scientists, the request was demoralizing; within months, its major science centers lost thousands of staffers to buyouts and cutbacks.

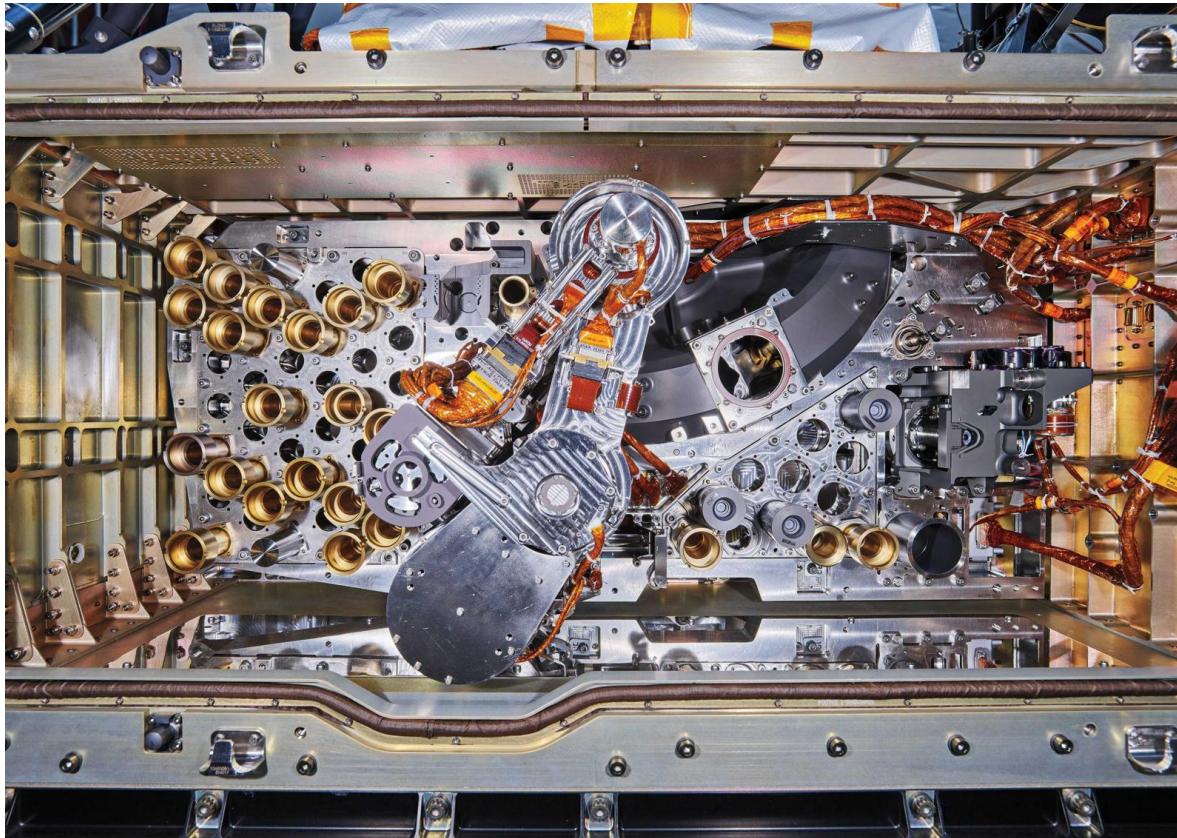
On a hot day in late October, I visited JPL's Mars Yard, an outdoor sandbox where rovers practice their off-world skills. The lab had just let 550 staffers go, its fourth force reduction in two years. One of Perseverance's test models sat back in the garage, resting in the shade, while its more nimble successor—a rover prototype with a llama-like neck—army-crawled over some boulders in the morning glare. A senior scientist at JPL had told me that he'd never seen the place so empty and lifeless, so drained of enthusiasm. But I was a guest in the Mars Yard, and my hosts were dutifully chipper, even when the little autonomous rover got stuck on a sand dune, even when they explained that it isn't currently slated to visit any other worlds.

Only the governments of rich countries send robotic explorers to other planets. And only the United States has sent them past the asteroid belt to Jupiter and beyond. For decades, this has been a part of America's global cultural role: to fling the most distant probes into the solar system, and to build the space telescopes that see the farthest into the cosmos. The U.S. has led an unprecedented age of cosmic discovery. Now Trump is trying to bring that age to an end, and right at the moment when answers to our most profound existential questions finally seem to be within reach.

The way David Grinspoon remembers it, the attack on NASA headquarters began with the plants. In February, a few weeks after Trump took office, Grinspoon, who was then a senior scientist at the agency, walked into a newly barren common area at headquarters in Washington, D.C. On the windowsill, the potted plants that had previously sat between models of NASA's signature spacecraft had been removed; he was told that the order to remove them had come down from the new administration. (A spokesperson from NASA said the plants were removed after the agency terminated a plant-watering contract "to save American taxpayers money.")

Grinspoon could live without the office greenery. Its confiscation was trivial, comic even. He'd been hired by NASA to lead strategy for the agency's astrobiology missions. He tried to stay focused on that, but he grew more

alarmed a few weeks later, when the administration disbanded NASA's Office of the Chief Scientist, a team of six that advises agency leaders on scientific matters. DOGE officials started walking the halls. They snapped pictures of empty offices, as evidence that people weren't working. "That was infantilizing," Grinspoon told me. His colleagues put Post-it notes on their doors to let their new minders know when they went to a meeting, or to get coffee.



The interior of a chest designed to hold rock-core samples, similar to the one carried by Perseverance as it searches for signs of ancient life on Mars
(Christopher Payne for *The Atlantic*)

Many NASA staffers rank among the most talented people in their fields. At JPL, I met Håvard Fjær Grip, an engineer who helped develop a [small helicopter](#) that stowed away on the Perseverance rover. After the hawk-size chopper plopped out onto the Martian surface in 2021, Grip, who was also its chief pilot, got it airborne. It was built for only five flights but managed 72, and it flew all of them with a tiny swatch of fabric from the Wright

brothers' Flyer 1 tucked under its solar panel. Grip led me to an 85-foot-tall steel cylinder, a simulator capable of generating harsh Martian conditions. Through its porthole window, I saw where he'd placed a new carbon-fiber rotor. He wanted to get it spinning at nearly the speed of sound. He hoped that it could power a larger chopper up and down the cliff faces of Mars.

Work like this requires world-class scientific infrastructure and skill. By April, Trump appeared to be trying to rid NASA of both. The White House had already offered government workers a blanket buyout. Janet Petro, whom Trump had appointed acting administrator of NASA, was openly encouraging staffers to take it. She began sending emails warning of impending layoffs.

Trump's budget request, released in May, called for a 47 percent cut in funding for the agency's science missions and deep reductions in staff at its major science centers, JPL and Goddard Space Flight Center. Congress hasn't passed this request, and as of this writing it seems likely to reject Trump's severe cuts. But during the crucial window when NASA's staff was considering buyouts, Petro indicated that the president's request would guide policy.

Every NASA science unit was told to draw up a new budget, Grinspoon said. It was like planning a strike on the fleet of spacecraft that the agency has spread across the solar system. If the cuts in the request were implemented, satellites that monitor the advance and retreat of Earth's glaciers, clouds, and forests would splash down into an undersea graveyard for spacecraft in the remote Pacific Ocean. A robot that is on its way to study a gigantic Earth-menacing asteroid would be abandoned mid-flight, as would other probes that have already arrived at the sun, Mars, and Jupiter. The first spacecraft to fly by Pluto is still sending data back from the Kuiper Belt's unexplored ice fields. It took almost 20 years to get out there, and the small team that runs it costs NASA almost nothing. It would be disbanded nonetheless, and contact with the probe would be forever lost. Future missions to Venus, Mars, and Uranus would also be scrapped.

A whole national endowment, funded by American taxpayers and built over decades, was at risk of being vaporized, with consequences that could linger for a generation or more. Among the "many levels of pain" that Grinspoon

experienced, he found it hardest to cut back the programs that train young scientists to do the hyper-technical work of searching for life among the stars. “It’s like eating your seed corn,” he said.



The Mount Wilson Observatory, in Southern California, where Edwin Hubble first discovered galaxies beyond our own early in the 20th century. It

is still in use by academic astronomers today. (Christopher Payne for *The Atlantic*)

Trump seems to see NASA primarily as a means of ferrying astronauts to and from space. He made this view explicit in July when he asked Sean Duffy, his secretary of transportation, to succeed Petro as the agency's acting administrator. Human-spaceflight missions are useful to the president as nationalistic spectacles; he [worries that the Chinese will land on the moon](#) before Americans return there. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act increased funding for NASA's human-spaceflight centers (which, unlike the major science centers, are all in red states). But although crewed missions can inspire awe and are worth supporting, they provide far less scientific return than robotic probes or space telescopes, which are purpose-built to disclose new laws of the cosmos.

[From the January/February 2015 issue: Charles Fishman on 5,200 days in space](#)

By early summer, the people who work on NASA's science missions were decamping to private-sector jobs that pay more, but are perhaps less inspiring. Email send-offs for longtime employees dominated Grinspoon's inbox. He didn't blame his departing colleagues for taking the buyouts. The missions that they'd looked forward to working on were likely to be scratched. And they knew that they might not get the same severance if layoffs came. Grinspoon himself stayed until September, when his position was eliminated.

The eight-story clean room at Goddard Space Flight Center, in Greenbelt, Maryland, is a hallowed space. It was the main attraction on the tour that the center's most recent director, Makenzie Lystrup, used to give to visiting members of Congress, foreign heads of state, and other VIPs, before she abruptly resigned in July. In this enormous bay, NASA built the Hubble Space Telescope and the other orbital observatories that have brought the deep universe into the everyman's ken, revealing its endless fields of galaxies, its exploding stars, its black holes. No other kind of science mission can match the power of these space telescopes to unveil the universe.

The clean room's current resident, the [Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope](#), is currently scheduled to launch in late 2026. At regular intervals until then, vents will pump in blasts of pure nitrogen and compressed air, purging the bay of dust that might otherwise trickle into the telescope's exquisite cosmic eye. Scientists and engineers will file in, wearing white bunny suits and booties, to tend to America's next great observatory up close. Like Lystrup, some of them worry that it will be the country's last.

Americans have spent the past century and change building a series of colossal telescopes, each peering more deeply into the universe than the one before. Astronomers in London, Paris, and Berlin had surveyed large portions of the Milky Way during the 19th century, but they couldn't be sure that anything existed outside it until an American astronomer named Edwin Hubble came along. In 1919, Hubble, then 29 years old, began using a new telescope, financed by a robber baron and constructed on Mount Wilson, a pine-studded peak just east of Los Angeles. Its 9,000-pound mirror was larger than any in Europe, and Hubble used it to look closer at the blurry blobs of light that his peers were then seeing all across the sky. Many believed that these mysterious "nebulae" were small clouds of stars nested inside our galaxy. Hubble pointed the telescope at the largest of them, and for 45 minutes, he let its light pile up on a glass plate coated in a photosensitive emulsion.

Today, it is the most cherished plate in a collection of more than 250,000 kept in a vault guarded by thick steel doors at the Carnegie Observatories, in Pasadena. I recently watched a latex-gloved Carnegie staffer tremble as he removed it from an envelope. In the image of the nebula on its surface, Hubble had marked a star that he had never seen before. He would later notice it flashing repeatedly, like a firefly, in super-slow motion.

This rhythmic flashing allowed Hubble to calculate the star's distance from Earth, and he was jolted to find that it was not in our galaxy at all. The nebula hung in space an awesome distance beyond the Milky Way's far edge, a galaxy unto itself. We now call it Andromeda, and we know that it contains more than a trillion stars. In the years to come, Hubble would find evidence of a dozen other galaxies that surround us. He discovered the universe beyond the Milky Way.

But only its local regions. In 1998, more than 25 years before Lystrup became the director of Goddard, she visited its campus as an undergrad. She remembers touring the control room for the first major telescope that NASA had placed outside the distortion of Earth's atmosphere. By that time, the Hubble Space Telescope had been in orbit for less than a decade, yet it had already profoundly enlarged human vision. Like its namesake, the Hubble had run some long exposures in order to look deeper into our universe. During one 10-day stretch, it had stared directly at a single tiny pinhole of black sky and revealed it to be packed with *thousands* of galaxies. This image soon [imprinted itself on the global collective consciousness](#). Ordinary people from nearly every country on Earth saw it, and came to understand something about the nature of existence at the largest scale.

In 2021, the James Webb Space Telescope launched, and once in space, it unfolded a gold-coated primary mirror nearly three times as large as the Hubble's. Astronomers have since used the Webb to see clear back to the beginning of time. They have watched the first galaxies forming. The Webb cost nearly \$10 billion and took more than a decade to build. But once in orbit, telescopes are relatively cheap to maintain. After 36 years, the Hubble is still doing science. And if the Webb is allowed to continue operating, it, too, will be able to keep straining to see the first stars that flared into being after the Big Bang, until its fuel runs out around 2045.

When Lystrup received the first leaked version of Trump's budget request in April, she was shocked to see that he had zeroed out funding for the Roman. It was almost fully assembled in Goddard's clean room, nearly ready to launch. In Trump's final budget request, in June, the Roman was spared, but funding for the Webb was cut back severely, even though the telescope has a different function; the Roman's shallow widescreen vistas are meant to complement the Webb's deeper, narrow stares into the universe. According to a senior scientist who was closely involved with the Webb, the cut would put it on "life support." Without enough staff to help keep it stable and to calibrate its data, the vision of the world's most powerful telescope would be effectively blurred. And its lifespan would be shortened, perhaps by as much as a decade.

Trump took aim at another telescope too, perhaps the most ambitious in history. For decades, NASA has been working toward a giant instrument

custom-made to look for life around the 100 nearest sunlike stars, including many that we could one day reach with a probe. The [Habitable Worlds Observatory](#) (HWO) would zoom in on the most Earthlike planets that orbit them. In their atmospheres, the telescope would look for the gas combinations that appear only when life has taken hold, be it microbial slime or coral reefs and rainforests, or something far stranger. To do all of this, in orbit, the HWO will need to achieve an unprecedented state of Zen stillness. NASA had hoped to get it into space in the late 2030s, but Trump's budget request called for an 81 percent reduction in its funding. That cut could push its launch, and any discoveries it makes, beyond the lifetimes of many people alive today.

[Read: America is killing its chance to find alien life](#)

As Lystrup looked over these and other budget details, she got a sense of what the administration wanted for Goddard. Among other things, its workforce was to be halved. After the request leaked, people there were openly crying in the halls. Lystrup was asked whether NASA was even going to do science anymore.



The control room at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, where staffers exchange messages with every American spacecraft beyond the moon

(Christopher Payne for *The Atlantic*)

On June 16, Lystrup held an emotional town hall. She explained that the budget request had called for Goddard to become much smaller, almost immediately, with deeper cuts in the years to follow. “I think it is very clear that this administration is looking to significantly shrink the science organization at NASA,” she said. The next day, she heard that leaders at NASA headquarters believed that she hadn’t been sufficiently supportive of the president’s budget. She heard that there was talk of retribution, and worried that she might be fired. An official in NASA leadership called and asked her to reflect on whether she’d spoken too frankly, in a way that might be interpreted as unaligned with the administration’s goals. Lystrup did that, and concluded that Goddard’s staff had deserved a frank account of what was happening. She decided to resign.

At the start of Lystrup’s tenure, Goddard’s workforce had been approximately 10,000. When she left, it was just 6,500. Most of the losses had come in the first seven months of Trump’s second term. The teams of scientists and engineers that built America’s great space telescopes were being scattered. Staffers were told not to hold farewell gatherings during work hours, because they had become too numerous.

A full accounting of Trump’s assault on American science will have to wait for historians, and we cannot yet say what the worst of it will be. His appointment of a charlatan to lead the country’s largest public-health agency may well prove more detrimental to Americans’ daily lives than anything he does to NASA. But his attempt to ground the agency’s science missions suggests a fundamental change in the country’s character, a turning inward. America’s space telescopes and probe missions have not only torn the veil from nature. They’ve had an ennobling effect on American culture; to the world, they’ve projected an elevated idea of Americans as competent, forward-looking adventurers, forever in search of new wonders.

NASA is as prone to bloat as any other government agency, and previous presidents from both parties have tried to trim its science budget. But never so severely. They understood that although private companies can do some of the things that NASA does, they don’t fund ambitious missions that have

no purpose apart from answering our most profound cosmic questions. Neither SpaceX nor Blue Origin has done so once.

Trump still has another three years to shape NASA in his unscientific image. Rank-and-file scientists at the agency aren't sure what to make of his November renomination of [Jared Isaacman](#) as administrator. When the president first tapped the billionaire astronaut during his transition period, they felt cautiously hopeful. Isaacman has claimed to support science missions, and once even offered to personally fund and fly a mission to try to extend the Hubble Space Telescope's lifespan. But after Trump withdrew his initial nomination, it's unclear how much groveling Isaacman had to do to regain it. When Isaacman was asked about NASA's funding of science at his second confirmation hearing, in December, he did not distance himself from Trump's priorities. He said that he supported the president's efforts to reduce the deficit.

Congress will have the last word on NASA's budget, if its members are able to pass one. A proposed budget from the House of Representatives had called for an 18 percent cut to NASA's science missions, but the Senate's much smaller cuts look likely to prevail. In the meantime, NASA staffers are still in a terrorized state. Existing missions have been destabilized by the mass departures. Planning remains difficult, if not impossible. Whatever Congress passes, Trump could repeat his budget-request shenanigans in February, and every year of his term thereafter. He could keep the agency in a state of dysfunction until he leaves office.

NASA's most ambitious science missions are particularly vulnerable to this kind of sabotage. They have to be planned on time horizons that transcend a single presidential term. They require intergenerational vision.



The clean room at Goddard Space Flight Center, in Greenbelt, Maryland, where America's space telescopes are constructed and readied for launch (Christopher Payne for *The Atlantic*)

Before I left JPL, I visited its Mission Control center, the darkened, glass-walled room where NASA staffers exchange messages with every American spacecraft that has flown past the moon. Inside, rows of workstations were lit up by blue neon. They faced two large monitors displaying the status of telescopes and robotic probes all across the solar system. Near the back, Nshan Kazaryan, a 24-year-old engineer, sat in a swivel chair under a sign that said Voyager Ace.

The Voyagers, 1 and 2, were launched in 1977, before either of Kazaryan's parents were born. By 2018, both probes had left the solar system. If you picture the sun traveling around the Milky Way's center, in its stately 230-million-year orbit, Voyager 1 and 2 are out ahead of it, the most distant

human-made objects from Earth. On his screen, Kazaryan pointed to data that he had just begun receiving from Voyager 1, the farther of the two. To reach us, the data had traveled at light speed across a 16-billion-mile abyss for nearly a day.

A 64-year-old woman named Suzy Dodd quietly appeared behind me, wearing a button-down shirt patterned with spacecraft. In 1984, Dodd landed her first job out of college at JPL, helping the Voyager team prepare for an encounter with Uranus. Now, more than four decades later, she's spending the final years of her career leading the mission as its project manager. Dodd thinks of the Voyagers as twins that are slowly dying as they press on into the unknown. "They were identical at launch; they are not identical now," she told me. Each has seven of its 10 scientific instruments turned off, but not the same seven. It's as though one has lost its hearing and the other, its eyesight.

The nuclear-powered hearts that sit inside the Voyagers are decaying. They spend most of their energy on their transmitters, which must keep an invisible thread of connection with Earth intact across an ever-widening expanse. The remaining juice on Voyager 1 is only enough to charge up a tablet, but it has to suffice for a 12-foot-long spacecraft that needs heat to function in the interstellar chill. Dodd and her team will sometimes turn off its main heater so that the gyros can barrel-roll the spacecraft, to calibrate an instrument. They have to turn it right back on, or its propellant lines will freeze.

The Voyagers' onboard computers have been continuously operating longer than any others in existence. There is always a little suspense when the Mission Control crew is expecting data, a fear that the long-dreaded day has come when none will come in. Kazaryan pointed at rows of values on his blue screen that were constantly updating. All of them were in white, he noted. "That's what we'd like to see."

One day in 2023, the values flashed yellow and red. There was a problem aboard Voyager 1, and no obvious fix. Only four full-timers are staffed on the Voyager mission now, but thousands of people have worked on it previously. "Many of them are no longer with us," Dodd said. But the living alumni are a rich repository of mission lore: They went into their garages or

storage units and rummaged through old boxes of Voyager paperwork. The archival memos that they dug up helped the team fix the anomaly. Voyager 1 was able to keep describing the alien properties of the interstellar realm. It can keep counting the charged particles that fly in from exploding stars on the other side of the galaxy. It can continue to give us a sense of the magnetic fields out there.



JPL, which has lost more than 1,000 scientists, engineers, and other staff members in the past two years

Even before the Voyagers left the solar system, they had blessed us with a fresh vision of our immediate cosmic environment. They discovered Jupiter's rings and hundreds of erupting volcanoes on its moon Io. They revealed the cracking patterns that cover icy Europa, another moon, hinting at its ocean. They caught Saturn's moons creating braiding patterns in its rings. Their close-ups of Uranus and Neptune were beamed to screens all around the world. Before crossing the barrier that divides the sun's sphere of influence and the rest of the galaxy, Voyager 1 turned its camera back toward us and snapped a picture of Earth suspended in a sunbeam.

Then it went rushing away. An astrophysicist recently used a computer simulation to calculate its future trajectory, and determined that it has some chance of being ejected into intergalactic space when the Milky Way and Andromeda merge, billions of years from now. It could be the final surviving artifact of human existence. Even if the Voyagers go dark tomorrow, they will long testify to the reach of America's scientific imagination, and the daring of its engineers. NASA's exploration of the solar system may be what most recommends our civilization to the future.

Dodd told me about a letter she'd received from a 4-year-old girl. Inside the envelope, the girl had tucked a drawing of a new mission, Voyager 3, with several instruments bolted onto the probe, including a vacuum for retrieving interstellar dust. I asked Dodd why there hasn't yet been a Voyager 3. She disputed the premise. The more recent probes that NASA has sent to Jupiter and Saturn are the Voyager mission's children, she said. The spacecraft that is now on its way to look closer at Europa's ocean is its grandchild. That lineage is now endangered. But Dodd hopes that it will continue. She hopes that the Voyagers' great-grandchildren will fly faster, and one day streak by their ancestors out in interstellar space, on their way to other stars.

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I Tried to Be the Government. It Did Not Go Well.

My five-month quest to monitor the weather, track inflation, and inspect milk for harmful microorganisms

by Alexandra Petri



People look at you differently when you carry a Geiger counter. Or, at least, when you carry a Geiger counter and exclaim things like “Much less radiation here than you might expect!” But how else are you to know that the radiation in your food is at acceptable levels?

They have government inspectors for this, you might say. It is their job.

That was before Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency started hacking away at our bureaucracy. Before the federal government was shut down for much of the fall. And before I bought a Geiger counter to do my own food inspections.

For a while—maybe since 1883, when the Pendleton Act created a merit-based civil service of experts—we, as a nation, thought to ourselves: *Life is too short for everyone to inspect their own food. Let the government handle this.* But then along came the Trump administration to wonder: *What if we didn’t?*

FDA inspections at foreign food manufacturers are at [historic lows because of staffing cuts](#), according to ProPublica. My Geiger counter cost \$22.79. I thought it would give me a sense of agency and reassurance in this era of dismantlement. Instead, buying the Geiger counter was the first step toward losing my mind.

While the Trump administration conducted a sweeping experiment in government erosion, I started an experiment of my own. As each government function was targeted for cuts—or an official suggested that it was standing between me and my freedom—I put it on my to-do list, as a way to feel like I was doing something other than fretting about what was not being done.

About 300,000 civil servants—roughly 10 percent of the federal workforce—[left their job between January and late November last year](#), according to the Office of Personnel Management. In February 2025, hundreds of weather forecasters and other employees of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were canned. In June, the National Science Foundation was told it had to leave its headquarters. In the fall, during the shutdown, about 1,400 nuclear-security employees were furloughed, and the ranks of air-traffic controllers continued to dwindle.

There is a concept called “mental load”—the weight of knowing all the Things That Need to Get Done Around the House. Someone has to know when to do laundry, take out the trash, buy groceries, locate the winter

clothes, cook dinner, set a budget, vacuum, etc. This is the kind of labor that, if not properly divided, [ruins marriages and drives people to the brink](#).

Now multiply that mental load by 343 million. That's the number of people in the house of America. You can't worry only about buying the groceries; you must also worry about whether those groceries are radioactive. You don't just have to make sure the kids are dressed for the weather; you must also forecast the weather. It's not enough to merely buy eggs; you must also know how much eggs should cost, and what they cost last week, because the economy sort of depends on it.

What became a five-month quest to assume government responsibilities took me from the overgrown fields of Antietam to the cramped basket of a hot-air balloon about 1,400 feet over Ohio; from a biology lab at Johns Hopkins University, where I beheaded flies, to a farmstead in Maryland, where I inspected the fly-bothered udder of a cow named Melissa.

And the potential duties kept piling up as I learned about each round of cuts. Since I started typing this paragraph, Donald Trump has fired many of the people who surveil infectious diseases; before I finish typing this paragraph, he may have hired them back. I hope so! I would do almost anything for a good story, but perhaps I should draw the line at "monitor Ebola."

John F. Kennedy famously implored us: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Well, I asked! And the answer is: lots of things. If you don't mind doing them wrong.

1. I FORECAST THE WEATHER

I have just driven six and a half hours to Ohio in order to forecast my own weather. From a hot-air balloon.

"Anyone that tells you they're not afraid of heights is either lying or insane," Tim the balloon pilot is telling me. It is 5 p.m. on a clear Tuesday in September, and we are getting ready, in a field outside Columbus, to go up and find weather. Tim has a trim white beard and a confident demeanor that I find reassuring. There are two kinds of balloonists, Tim tells me: old ones and bold ones. He is the former.

Weather forecasting is among the legion of chores that the government does, or used to do more thoroughly, through NOAA, whose budget the Trump administration attempted to slash—a scenario that would “[stop all progress](#)” in U.S. forecasting, as James Franklin, a former branch chief at the National Hurricane Center, told *USA Today*.

In the founding days of the country, individuals collected weather data alone, without the aid of computers, weather balloons, or modeling. George Washington kept a fairly detailed weather diary. Behold his entry for April 14, 1787: “Mercury at 62 in the Morning—74 at Noon and 68 at Night. Cloudy in the Morning with a few drops of rain.” But while journaling is fine if you want to know what the weather *was*, most people want to know what the weather *will be*. For that, you need other people.

The advent of the telegraph allowed weather watchers to share observations and data across great distances, in almost real time. This launched the era of forecasts—or, as the pioneering meteorologist Cleveland Abbe called them, “probabilities.” Cleveland left his home base of Cincinnati (just to confuse you!) to work for an arm of the federal government that would later become the National Weather Service.

“The nation has had few more useful servants than Cleveland Abbe,” the meteorologist Thomas Corwin Mendenhall wrote around 1919, [praising his storm warnings](#), which saved millions of dollars’ worth of property every year.

Human observation and telegraph chitchat were eventually supplanted by radiosondes, which are sensor packages launched by balloon twice a day, all across the country, to determine wind direction, temperature, pressure, and so on. After DOGE cuts in February, several sites pared back to one launch a day; the Alaskan cities of Kotzebue (along the western coast) and St. Paul (out in the Bering Sea) stopped launches altogether.

I had asked Keith Seitter, a senior policy fellow at the American Meteorological Society, how I could forecast weather myself, without using government models. He made the mistake of suggesting that weather generally travels west to east at a rate of 20 to 30 miles an hour. I latched on

to this. Could I simply find a city that is about 500 miles west and drive there to get tomorrow's weather today?

Well, sure, Keith said, *but that seems like a big waste of time.*

Please! I have two children under the age of 4. I have nothing but time.

I Googled my way to Tim and his hot-air-balloon company in Columbus. It had a single review on Yelp, from 2012, but that review was five stars: "Tim is a great pilot." Good enough for me!

I meet Tim and his crew in a parking lot near a golf course. We pile into his balloon van, with the balloon basket attached to the back, and drive to our takeoff point. The basket is stunningly small—more like a double-wide grocery cart. We arrive at 5:37 p.m., just as the sun is starting to slide toward the horizon.

The Geiger count in Ohio is a tiny bit lower than in Washington, D.C., if you were wondering. But my instrument now is a combination thermometer-barometer-anemometer that I bought for \$22.89.

Tim reassures me that "the vast majority of people in a balloon don't realize any sensation of height issues," because "balloons use natural forces." I thought gravity was a natural force? I am becoming agitated. Tim, in our initial call, described some balloon landings as "sporty," an adjective I do not like having applied to my physical safety.

Listen. I am actually very afraid of heights. I always forget this until I am irretrievably committed to a course of action that will take me to the top of a height, and then, as I am borne ineluctably to the top of that height, I think, *Oh, right. I am terrified of these.*

I hoist myself over the edge of the basket. My palms are sweating. Suddenly everything around us becomes very small. There is a miniature tractor doing neat laps around a miniature field. A hawk is ... below us?

"Very high was a mistake" is what my notes say at this point.



The author goes to Ohio to look for tomorrow's weather today. (Maddie McGarvey for *The Atlantic*)

My phone has acquired a thin film of sweat, maybe from condensation? *29.06 on the barometer. 85.3 degrees Fahrenheit.* It is eerily quiet except for the periodic firing of the propane tank, which sounds like someone is grilling very urgently right in my ear. *28.26, 87.3 F.* The temperature is suddenly much cooler: 47.3 degrees, although it doesn't feel like that at all.

Then I realize that I have been reading the dew point instead of the temperature.

When I switch to the actual temperature, I realize a second problem: Whenever Tim fires the burner, the basket of the balloon becomes hot. It is like being aloft with a small campfire. Now, instead of telling me that it is 52.9 degrees, my thermometer informs me that it is 91.2 degrees! It is a beautiful, still, cloudless evening. If only Cleveland Abbe could see me now! He would probably say something like "What a senseless waste of astonishingly futuristic equipment."



We drift over more fields and hummers, which is what some balloonists call power lines. Below us: trees, fields, houses, old junked cars, the occasional dog.

Our descent is not at all sporty, although I hold my breath as we approach the hummers. Tim has done this 1,600 times, and thus we do not fly into a power line, or you would not be reading this. It turns out that in this business, you just sort of ... land in people's yards? Members of the balloon crew have had guns pulled on them before, and dogs unleashed.

Improbably, the yard we land in belongs to a proud *Atlantic* subscriber named Deborah, who is apparently a competitive pinball player. I try to explain why we landed in her yard, making Deborah the first of many strangers to be confused by my project. Deborah is nonetheless so excited by my affiliation with *The Atlantic* that she asks for a hug. For a subscriber, anything!

On the ground it is 7:18 p.m., somewhere between 78.3 and 80.8 degrees. I cannot stress enough how lovely this weather is. Clear and crisp and the perfect temperature, the kind of fall day you order from an L.L. Bean catalog.

The next day, I begin my easy, convenient, six-plus-hour drive home to see my weather.

I close in on D.C. and notice it is raining. The sky is gray. Gray gray gray.

This is not my weather! I did not drive all the way from Ohio to bring this! I DON'T KNOW THIS WEATHER!

A friend whose hobby is meteorology informs me that current pressure systems are making the weather travel from east to west today. Whoops.

There is a certain indignity in having done this astoundingly inefficient thing and not even gotten the weather right at the end of it. So for my next government function, I will try something that involves no data collection. The only thing at stake? The safety of myself and my family.

2. I INSPECT MY OWN MILK

We currently do not have a Senate-confirmed surgeon general, who is supposed to be the "nation's doctor." But the president's nominee for the role, Casey Means, has offered food-related advice for cutting the

government out of your life. She is more of a doctor than I am (in that she finished medical school) but less of a doctor than you might want the nation’s doctor to be (in that she didn’t complete her residency and decided to get really into “good energy”). The week after the 2024 election, Means said something interesting about raw milk, in the context of burdensome government regulation, on *Real Time With Bill Maher*.

“I want to be able to form a relationship with a local farmer,” Means said, “understand his integrity, look him in the eyes, pet his cow, and then understand if I can drink his milk.”

Thus, I am at a farm in southern Maryland to do just that. The difficulty with raw milk is that it isn’t always legal to sell for human consumption. Fortunately, this farm sells allegedly delicious “pet milk” (wink, wink). It also gives its cows operatic names, such as Tosca, Traviata, and Renee Fleming. I have asked for permission to put Casey Means’s vision into practice here.

A farmer named Brian takes me to the cows, past the egg layers and the meat chickens, bivouacked in what he tells me are excellent conditions in a nearby field. (“Raise me this way and you can slaughter me too!” Farmer Brian says.)

In preparation for this visit, I spoke with a veterinarian, who told me how to assess the health of a cow. The vet said that I should be able to see some of the cow’s 13 sets of ribs, but not too many. The cow should not be oddly hunched. Its udder should be long and pendulous.

Brian introduces me to Melissa, who is named for a singer.

“Etheridge?” I ask.

Brian laughs. No further information on Melissa’s surname is forthcoming.

Melissa just stands there, covered in flies.

“Flies help clean them up,” Farmer Brian tells me. Is this true? I add it to a growing list of Things I Am Not Sure Are Facts.

It used to be that milk only came raw, and everyone had to decide for themselves whether to drink it. The penalty for drinking subpar milk was that you died. In the 19th century, this happened fairly often, especially to American children. Then we discovered that diseases were caused by microorganisms. Tuberculosis, scarlet and typhoid fevers, diphtheria, brucellosis—all of these could be transmitted by milk.

At the urging of President Theodore Roosevelt, fresh off the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, a commission of public-health officers put out a 751-page report tracing recent outbreaks to contaminated milk. Milk was a wonderful environment for germs to grow in. Some of them could join your gut microbiome as helpful allies; others could give you deadly diarrhea. Instead of rolling the dice, the report made the case for pasteurizing milk—that is, heating it—to kill harmful microorganisms.

Making milk safe to drink was one of the [greatest public-health breakthroughs in history](#). “For every 2 billion servings of pasteurized milk or milk products consumed in the U.S., only about one person gets sick,” the FDA reports.

I’ve been especially leery of diseases lately. FoodNet—the CDC’s Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network—is scaling back the germs it tracks, from eight to two (salmonella and one type of *E. coli*). I guess we want listeria to come as more of a surprise. And now followers of the “Make America Healthy Again” movement are encouraging us to drink the kind of milk that we stopped drinking around 1924 because it was too risky.

Anyway, back to Melissa. She has horns. This is good, Farmer Brian says, because “horns are the antennae, and all the cosmic energy comes down in through the horns.” I add this to my list of Things I Am Not Sure Are Facts.





The author acquaints herself with farm life in Maryland. (Jason Andrew for *The Atlantic*)

How long does this milk keep? “It doesn’t go bad,” Farmer Brian says. This feels famously untrue of milk. “If you’re on the standard American diet, it will give you the runs,” Farmer Brian admits.

I tentatively ask why this milk seems so much more shelf-stable than the milk I myself have been producing for my infant, which can last in the refrigerator for only four days. Brian seems puzzled by this, and hands me 13 pamphlets, including “Cod Liver Oil: Our Number One Superfood” and “After Raw Breast Milk, What’s Best?” They do not answer my question.

I pause in the farm’s gift shop, which has folk-music CDs, hats made out of alpaca wool, and books explaining why COVID was not caused by a virus (“are electro-smog, toxic living conditions, and 5G actually to blame?”). I had better buy some milk, I guess.

I bring the milk home and stare at it. It is in a plastic jug, with a label that says NOT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION. I am starting to miss the government. It used to be that when I brought milk home, I could drink it. Now I have to do all of this research.

I leave the milk on the counter overnight. My husband wants to throw it out, on the grounds that it is confusing and growing stinky, but I explain that I am writing about it, and that we do not throw out the U.S. economy and politics (what he writes about) because they are confusing and growing stinky.

To make myself more comfortable with the milk on my counter, I read studies. The more I read, the more I am discouraged. A [study from 2017](#) says that 96 percent of illnesses caused by contaminated dairy came from raw milk and cheese. I don't like those odds.

I enjoyed petting Melissa and looking Farmer Brian in the eyes. But I don't think that gave me the information I needed to understand whether I could drink the milk. What I should have done was scan the milk for microorganisms or simply boil it. In the time it has taken to figure this out, the milk has turned a cloudy yellow and formed three distinct strata.

Months later, I still have not thrown it away, or opened it. I am hoping that if I procrastinate long enough, it will simply become cheese.

3. I COLLECT CONSUMER PRICES

I'm darting through grocery stores across D.C., trying to get someone to help me nail down the price of eggs over time. I have to get better at economic-data collection quickly, because the Trump administration is targeting the Bureau of Labor Statistics. You might wail something like: *Who cares about the most bureaucratic-sounding bureau, at a time like this?*

I do. I am becoming more of the government, every day, and it is going great.

The BLS is an attempt, through relentless data collection, to get everyone a nice set of shared facts about the economy and the workforce. Are there

enough jobs to go around? The BLS puts out a monthly jobs report (though it missed October because of the shutdown). How far does your paycheck go? The BLS tabulates the Consumer Price Index, which identifies All the Things That People Buy and then figures out if they cost more or less than they used to. In essence—since 1884, when it was the Bureau of Labor—the BLS takes pictures of the economy for us.

But the pictures have not been very flattering lately, and so the Trump administration has responded by trying to smash the camera. After the July jobs report did not have enough jobs, the president fired the BLS commissioner. Trump's 2026 budget proposes an 8 percent cut to the BLS budget. And DOGE's hacking at the BLS may have contributed to a suspension of data collection in three cities: Buffalo, New York; Provo, Utah; and Lincoln, Nebraska.

To collect my own economic data, I need to become a “first-rate noticer,” says Jay Mousa, a former associate commissioner for the BLS office of field operations. That is part of what BLS field economists do. They are an army of perceptive extroverts who go from place to place, look around, talk with people, and find out what they are paying or charging for goods and services.

Mousa suggests that I go from store to store and find out the price of an item, now and in the past. Finding out the current price seems doable. But the past price? I could ask employees, he suggests. Perfect! I will use my thing-noticing, people-coaxing skills, just like a real BLS field economist.

Glancing at the dozens of items priced by the BLS in its list of average retail prices, I select eggs (one dozen, large, grade A). Eggs feel very present. They were the thing, during the 2024 election cycle, that people said cost too much, and now look where the country is.

I begin at a Safeway, asking a cashier what eggs cost now and what they cost earlier in the month. The clerk reports that eggs cost \$4.99 a dozen, and remembers that they used to be a lot more expensive, like nine-something dollars. I feel awkward enough about this exchange that I buy the eggs. Did I collect data, or did I just go grocery shopping?

At Trader Joe's, I stare at a sample cup of butternut-squash mac and cheese before knocking it back like a shot. Then I notice that I am being offered a fork. First-rate noticing! A cardboard gargoyle peers down at me from the corner of the store. "That is a gargoyle," I say, trying to ease myself into conversation with the employee who offered me the mac and cheese.

"It's cardboard," the employee says. "It has been there five years."

I ask him about the historic price of eggs and he says that the cost has gone down—eggs that are \$2.99 were \$3.99 a mere two days ago! A secret weekend egg deal? Like a real field economist might find? He doesn't know. I leave the store with two specific numbers and without buying anything, which I consider a double win. Plus, I have data on the longevity of the cardboard gargoyle, just in case.

"I can't help but notice we are in a Whole Foods," I tell a Whole Foods employee who—perhaps having noticed me walking around with no shopping cart and a Geiger counter—has asked if I need help. "Is there any way of finding out what eggs used to cost in the past?"

He tells me that they have roughly doubled in price—eggs that are now \$9 a carton were once \$5; those that are now \$4 were once \$2.

These are the peaks of my data collection. At Giant, I am informed that eggs used to cost triple what they cost now. At Rodman's, when I ask what eggs used to cost, all I get is the assurance that eggs are expensive everywhere. At Target, an employee responds to my inquiry about the historic price of eggs by asking if I want to go to the egg aisle and see for myself. "No," I say, "I meant in the past." I complete the rest of my self-checkout in silence.

I need something to show for this effort. So I make a table using the data that I collected for a dozen large eggs, grade A.

Location	Price	Historic Price
Safeway	\$4.99	\$9ish
Trader Joe's	\$2.99	\$3.99
Whole Foods	\$9.00	\$5.00
Also Whole Foods	\$4.00	\$2?? Where did he see these?
Rodman's	\$3.99	Eggs are expensive everywhere
Target	\$2.49	Do you want to check
Giant	\$4.29	A whole bunch! Triple that?
Average	\$4.01	When I tried to divide these things by 7 Excel got mad because some were words and not numbers

This takes me only three hours. Should I be averaging the variables? That feels like a thing I can do. Can you average a number ending in *ish*?

Maybe it's better not to collect too much economic data. Maybe doing so would frighten the economy. Maybe I'd better do something that can only help the economy: basic scientific research, which can ripple into world-changing breakthroughs. Did you know that studying the venom of gila monsters—decades ago, at a Veterans Affairs medical center—yielded a treatment for type 2 diabetes that, in the past few years, has spawned a weight-loss revolution?

And so I drive to Johns Hopkins University, where I hear they do a lot of science.

4. I DO MY OWN RESEARCH

I have just destroyed eight human retinal organoids with my subpar pipetting.

Allie—a grad student in Professor Bob's biology lab here at Johns Hopkins—is being very nice about it, but I feel terrible. She needs these retinas so

she can study how different photoreceptors are made.

Johns Hopkins, “America’s first research university,” receives a lot of government funding. Or, at least, it used to. Something like \$3 billion in grants were cut last year across the National Science Foundation and the NIH. When USAID was dismantled, Johns Hopkins [lost \\$800 million in grants](#), leading to the elimination of more than 2,200 jobs around the world.

In Professor Bob’s lab, grad students are trying to figure out how genes are expressed and how that affects an organism’s physiology. Flies are helping them understand this by dying in large quantities. These are special flies whose genotype we know a lot about, and they live in jars full of a special sugary food, which they consume contentedly for their entire life (about 45 days).

They (the researchers, not the flies) suggest that I start small. My task will be to help flip the flies—move them from one jar full of a dense sugary substance to another jar—without releasing too many. Then I get to sex the flies, and then, with a microscope and forceps, I get to behead them. This is the closest I will ever get to being a praying mantis. The grad students report that informing people of the sex of nearby flies is a fun trick they perform at parties. (Gen Z needs to drink more.)

The percentage of the federal budget that goes to general science and basic research is not huge—about 0.2 percent—unless you consider the F-35 fighter jet a form of science. But the return is astounding. Google’s beginnings can be traced to a federal grant for digital libraries. Now look at the company, helping to keep the entire economy afloat—and leading me to Tim the balloon pilot!

“Without scientific progress,” the eminent engineer Vannevar Bush (also an [eminent Atlantic writer](#)) once wrote, “no amount of achievement in other directions can insure our health, prosperity, and security as a nation in the modern world.” He submitted a report to Harry Truman in 1945 to argue for creating an agency that could support and fund basic research around the country. His brainchild, the National Science Foundation, was born in 1950. Dedicated support for scientific research has given us GPS (where would we be without it?), cancer-research funding that’s helped save millions of lives

(something we used to agree was an obvious good), and the atomic bomb (a parenthetical aside is the wrong venue to sum up my feelings about the atomic bomb).

So those are the stakes. Just millions of lives, the entire economy, and, of course, our health, prosperity, and security as a nation in the modern world.

I have to focus! My next task is to help grow human retinal organoids, for study. Grad Student Allie does this by starting out with a set of stem cells and then using chemicals to insist that those cells become retinas. She shows me the ones she has been working on, all in various stages of development. The newest ones resemble leaves with little nibbles around the edges; the more mature ones have become blobs with little meatballs attached; later, she removes the meatballs and, presto, a retina. To me, this is functionally witchcraft.



At Johns Hopkins, the author does not really know what she's looking at.
(Jason Andrew for *The Atlantic*)



I do my best to help her in the earlier stages of retina development, by extracting waste from vials with growing retinas and then pipetting in pink

liquid (food? Do baby retinas eat?).

I extract something that I hope is waste and gently squirt it into a waste container. Whatever it is, I guess it's waste now. Then I use the pipette to draw up a quantity of pink liquid and squirt it into the tube. I do this slowly and carefully, in the same way that I drive slowly and carefully: in little, jagged bursts of speed, interrupted by long pauses. This is not ideal pipetting. Bubbles form. Retinas are destroyed.

Allie is very kind, despite the devastation I have wrought. I won't be able to replicate this at home, anyway. I don't have any stem cells—unless some are growing between the yellow strata in my jug of raw milk that might soon become cheese?

5. I BEGIN TO LOSE MY MIND

I am starting to unravel a little bit. Becoming aware of all of these things I did not formerly think about has only made me aware of even more things.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting took a hit—perhaps I should make children's programming?

Cuts to the IRS? I've got to audit things! Does anyone know a billionaire willing to share his tax records with me?

The U.S. Geological Survey's budget might be cut by almost 40 percent.
WHERE IS THE OCEAN? GET ME A MEASURING TAPE!

Did I mention that the first hot-air-balloon ride I booked—before I found Tim in Columbus—charged my credit card twice and sent me to a Cincinnati rendezvous point where no one showed up? No balloon, no balloon pilot, nothing! Does the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau investigate balloon fraud? If it does, it probably won't for much longer. Trump is trying to shut down the bureau.

Bridge inspectors at the Department of Transportation are still on the job, but maybe I should familiarize myself with the varieties of truss.

Who's watching all of the airplanes? I play the simple games for aspiring air-traffic controllers that NASA (not the FAA, curiously) hosts on its website. These games offer all the fun of basic trigonometry, plus an ominous announcement, if you get the math wrong, reading, "SEPARATION LOST"—an aviation reference for occasioning a mid-air collision.

All the while, I have my Geiger counter, which is now a dear old friend, having stuck with me through it all. But what happens if I find actual radioactive material? My knowledgeable friends suggest vitrification, which can turn liquid waste into solid waste, because solid waste is much easier to deal with than liquid waste (as a parent of two young children, I can confirm). Unfortunately I do not have good vitrifying equipment in my kitchen.

I catch my husband Googling *what price divorce*, but he assures me it is just to help with my BLS research. Also, I made the mistake of telling my 3-year-old that I stepped in cow dung at the farm, and now every time she gets into the car, she claims that it "smells poopy."

I'm tired of asking what I can do for my country! I'll just go for a soothing walk.

But taking a soothing walk reminds me that the National Park Service, too, is suffering cuts; 24 percent of its permanent workforce is gone. But I don't know how to help. I thought that maybe I could clean toilets on the National Mall; an internal NPS spreadsheet listed Areas Where It Was Stretched Thin, including bathroom maintenance. But when I poke my head in the stalls, the bathrooms around the Washington Monument seem just fine. Maybe everything's just fine!

I think about offering my interpretive services at the World War I Memorial, but the plaques there imply that every day at 5 p.m., the actor Gary Sinise sends a bugler to play taps, and I don't want to compete with Gary Sinise's bugler.

I read in the same NPS spreadsheet that the Antietam battlefield has curbed its mowing and is "less-than-manicured," which "may be viewed negatively

by visitors.” Perhaps this is how I can help. I will go to the place that saw the bloodiest day of the Civil War and see what needs doing. Maybe I can tidy up? And maybe I can finally feel like I’m doing something for my country.

6. I DO YARD WORK AT ANTIETAM

I am scrabbling in the dirt with my bare hands in Antietam National Battlefield, trying to clear a walking path around a felled tree. “I don’t think I’m helping!” I say, for the fifth or sixth time, to the photographer who is documenting my civic-minded humiliation. I am sweating. There is dirt under my nails and dirt in my boots. I have moved what feels like a lot of dirt around, but also I have not moved enough dirt around. The path is still blocked.

It is October. It is lovely in the autumn way of clear water moving over rocks as leaves fall. Antietam is the name of a creek, and something about the creek’s scale feels wrong, given what happened here 164 years ago. Too small, somehow. Suspiciously still.

I don’t know what else to do, in this current chapter of American turmoil, so I am doing this: clearing a path, because there ought to be a path here.

This task would be easy for a person with the right equipment. It would take an hour for someone with a chainsaw. But I am trying my best, and my best is no good at all.

“You have perhaps believed Government jobs to be ‘soft’ and ‘easy,’” Horace M. Albright, the superintendent of Yellowstone, wrote to park-ranger applicants in the summer of 1926. “Most of them are not, and certainly there are no such jobs in the National Park Service.”

The hard work of the park rangers at Antietam is to protect this place of history for visitors in the future. Antietam was brutal, with thousands of casualties—among them, arguably, slavery. After the battle, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the end of slavery in the Confederate states. The bloodshed at Antietam helped extend the promises of the Declaration of Independence to more people.

The site needs to be preserved. It needs to be kept sightly. It needs ... to be mowed.

I see some unkempt grass near a few cannons and get my friend Dave's hand mower out of my trunk. The moment when you push a hand mower around Antietam is a moment when you must ask yourself questions, such as: *How did I get here? How did we get here?*



The author, at Antietam National Battlefield, thinks big thoughts while doing small things. (Jason Andrew for *The Atlantic*)

How I got here: a five-month experiment in self-government as an individual.

How we got here: a 250-year experiment in self-government as a group.

I push the mower forward, and think about truths that are self-evident. The world is full of threats to life and liberty, before you even start thinking

about the pursuit of happiness. If you want to have life, that means you want to be able to buy a sandwich, take a bite out of it, and not die. You want your children to drink milk and not die. If a big storm is coming, you want to know about it so you can evacuate if you need to. Where there is nuclear waste, you want it put away properly. You want to increase your sum total of knowledge about the human body and the world, so that you can prevent disease, or cure it. And, ideally, you want passionate citizens to handle the specialized stuff—people who love flies, or dew points, or the price of eggs, or making sure airplanes don’t hit each other.

If there were a big button that said, “Hey, push this button and somebody else will handle all the hard, technical stuff, and in exchange you will pay a percentage of your annual income, but don’t worry: We will have a team of people to make sure that you pay the right amount; also, there will be large, beautiful places where you can go for walks and learn about nature and history. And all the time you save will be your own!,” I would absolutely push that button.

But for now, I push the mower.

People have tried to walk away from the federal government before. To break it up. And on this hill that I am mowing, some men died saying, “No. You don’t get to do that. You’re in this with us.”

When I think of civil servants in this current uncivil moment—the air-traffic controllers who worked during the shutdown; the NOAA weather chasers flying into a hurricane to measure it, paycheck or no paycheck; the Park Service employees scrambling to keep bathrooms clean despite the cuts to their ranks—I will now think of Antietam.

I asked what I could do for my country and the answer was: alone, not much. Indeed, many things are weird at best, or destructive at worst, when you try to do them yourself. But if enough people get together and commit to doing them, you’ve got yourself a government.

Together, it’s doable.

Alone, I give up!

Time to drive home from Antietam. Having mowed slightly, and been humbled greatly, I declare my experiment in self-government to be over. Save for one final task.

I've got a glass of cheese to drink.

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Who Gets to Be Indian—And Who Decides?

The very American story of Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance

by David Treuer



A studio portrait of Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, circa 1908. In the background are a Blackfeet family traveling on horseback, Native American students at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and a Blackfeet tribesman

on the Glacier National Park reservation in Montana. (Illustration by Paul Spella*)

In 1928, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance published a memoir that caused a sensation in the literary world. It opened with his earliest memory: Barely a year old, he was riding in a moss baby carrier on his mother's back, surrounded by women and horses. His mother's hand was bleeding, and she was crying. Long Lance wrote that when he'd recounted this memory to his aunt years later, he'd been told that he was remembering the "exciting aftermath of an Indian fight" in which his uncle Iron Blanket had just been killed by the Blackfeet Tribe's traditional enemies, the Crow. His mother's hand was bleeding because she had amputated her own finger in mourning.

His next memory was of falling off a horse at age 4. "From this incident on," he wrote, "I remember things distinctly. I remember moving about over the prairies from camp to camp." Born to a Blackfeet warrior in the late 19th century, during the final days of the "free" Blackfeet in northern Montana and southern Alberta, Long Lance wrote that his father's generation was facing "the mystery of the future in relation to the coming of the White Man."

Long Lance attended the infamous Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, and received a presidential appointment to West Point. Eager to fight in the Great War even before America entered the conflict, he traveled to Montreal in 1916 to enlist in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, fought at Vimy Ridge, and was twice wounded. The second wound knocked him out of combat, but not—he would later boast—before he'd risen to the rank of captain and was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

By the time his memoir came out, Long Lance had traveled a great distance—from the High Plains to New York high society. One night in the winter of 1928, he spotted [Natacha Rambova](#), the ex-wife of the silent-film star Rudolph Valentino, in the Crystal Room of the Ritz-Carlton. According to his biographer, Donald B. Smith, Long Lance approached Rambova and asked her to dance. They began an affair, but she wasn't the only woman in his life: Long Lance was also linked to the actor Mildred McCoy, the singer Vivian Hart, and Princess Alexandra Victoria of the House of Glücksburg.

Long Lance was shockingly handsome, broad-shouldered and wasp-waisted, with smooth, coppery skin and thick black hair. He did calisthenics and gymnastics every morning and wrestling when he could find partners. He had boxed with the world heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey and been a training partner for the legendary Olympian Jim Thorpe, a member of the Sac and Fox and Potawatomi Nations.

When Long Lance's memoir was published, the planned initial run of 3,000 copies was bumped to 10,000 on the strength of early reads and the endorsement of *The Saturday Evening Post*'s Irvin S. Cobb, [then one of the most influential journalists in the world](#). (Cobb also wrote the book's foreword.) Reviews of the memoir were fulsome. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* declared it "the most important Americana offered this year." The Philadelphia *Public Ledger* averred that Long Lance had written "a gorgeous saga of the Indian Race." In the *New York Herald Tribune*, an anthropologist called the book an "unusually faithful account" of a Native American's childhood and early manhood. Across the Atlantic, *The New Statesman* declared that the memoir "rings true; no outsider could explain so clearly how the Indians felt."

By 1930, Long Lance's celebrity extended far beyond New York ballrooms and newspaper book reviews: He starred in a feature film, [The Silent Enemy](#), about a famine that strikes a fictionalized version of the Ojibwe Tribe. The B. F. Goodrich Company planned to produce an experimental canvas running shoe modeled after a Plains Indian moccasin like those Long Lance had worn.

But just two years later, he would be [found dead](#) on a rich white woman's estate in California, killed by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. By this point he was nearly penniless, exiled from high society, and besieged by accusations that he wasn't who he said he was—that he'd leveraged a bogus identity to rise in the world.

Before I left the Leech Lake Ojibwe reservation in northern Minnesota, I didn't really think or talk much about being Native. My "Indianness" wasn't important to me. When I was growing up, my Ojibwe mother—and also my Austrian Jewish father—made sure that I harvested wild rice in the fall, hunted in the winter, tapped maple trees for sugar in the spring, and fished

and picked berries in the summer. I hated all that stuff, which I experienced as opportunities for my parents to comment incessantly on my laziness, my poor work ethic, my dearth of skill when jigging rice or boiling down maple sap or sitting stand for deer.

Only after I moved away did questions about being Indian begin to preoccupy me. When I started at Princeton in 1988, I was surprised by how few people had heard of my tribe, let alone my reservation. And as a light-skinned nerd who loved Dungeons & Dragons, grew up middle-class, and didn't "look" Indian, I failed to scan as Native to most people. I began to feel that a battle was being waged between how I was seen from the outside and what I felt myself to be on the inside—even as I wasn't yet sure who I felt myself to be on the inside. It became clear to me that, as long as you look iconographically Native—copper skin, black hair, a thousand-yard stare aimed at the past—white people will invariably believe any damn thing you have to say.

[From the September 2022 issue: David Treuer on how *Reservation Dogs* exploded the myths of Native American life](#)

So I tried to build a Native identity from the outside in. I got the belt buckle, wore the bolo tie, grew my hair long, listened to R. Carlos Nakai's flute recordings and John Trudell's spoken-word CDs. I began to cultivate "life on the rez" stories that I shared with anyone who would listen. I found myself becoming outspoken—and vicious—about what was Indian and what was not; who was "legit" and who was "fake"; what was "Ojibwe" and what was "not Ojibwe." I realize now that all of this frenzy around identity was less a politics than a pathology.

But for Native Americans, race is not merely a social construct. It is a legal category from which rights and monetary benefits flow. Whether or not you are enrolled in a federally recognized tribe determines where and how you can hunt, whether you qualify for certain scholarships, where you can live (and whether you get housing subsidies), whether you get a share of tribal profits, and in some cases which academic or government jobs you're given special consideration for. But to be an enrolled member of a tribe is almost entirely contingent on "blood quantum"—the percentage of one's lineage that can be traced to tribal ancestors.

I don't qualify for enrollment in my tribe. To be enrolled in the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, you need a quantum of one-quarter Minnesota Chippewa Tribe blood, as well as one parent who is an enrolled member. (*Chippewa* is a French corruption of the original *Ojibwe*.) Even though my mother grew up on Leech Lake and devoted her life to the tribe, first as a nurse and then as a lawyer and tribal-court judge, her official blood quantum is only one-quarter. Her grandmother was recorded as half Ojibwe, even though she was full, and her father was on the rolls as a quarter when he was really half. I *should* be enrolled. The fact that I should be but am not turned the idea of Native blood into an obsession for me, at least for a while, because it was a measure of my Indianness that I couldn't change.

Within my lifetime, the question of what constitutes Native identity and qualifies one for enrollment has only grown more fraught. For much of U.S. history, being Indian was not a helpful thing; the opposite, in fact, was true. But in the 1970s, new federal laws changed the experience of Indianness for many Native people. So much so that by the time I was a teenager, having Indian identity was no longer necessarily something that would hold you back, but a material benefit. It might help you find a job, win an arts grant, or entitle you to substantial income from casino profits.

Inevitably, this led to outsiders—verifiably non-Indian folks—trying to claim Indian identity. Jobs, especially in academia, have gone to people feigning Native identity, such as Andrea Smith (who claims to be Cherokee despite no credible evidence that she is) at UC Riverside and [Elizabeth Hoover](#) (who claimed to be Mohawk and Mi'kmaq, and later apologized when she discovered she was not) at UC Berkeley. The same is true in publishing: [Margaret Seltzer sold her memoir, *Love and Consequences*](#), on the basis of its details about her grisly childhood as a Native kid in foster care in Los Angeles—but Seltzer was not Native and grew up with a loving family in Sherman Oaks. Nativeness presented as trauma porn (but with the potential for a hopeful outcome!) can be lucrative.

For Natives, it is enraging that, now that being Indian finally has significant, remunerative opportunities attached to it, imposters have swooped in to take what is—by blood, history, and suffering—rightfully ours. By about 2010, these imposters had come to be known as [Pretendians](#), and they sparked a countermovement of Pretendian-hunting. A coterie of self-styled guardians

of Indian identity arose, largely on social media, to call out interlopers. I understood the impulse. I'd done my share of such policing as a young man before I realized that it was the product of insecurity about my own Indian identity, and grew out of it.

The Pretendian hunters were not always interested in a full accounting of the facts before pronouncing a person legitimately Native or a fraud. Many quite authentic Natives were targeted for banishment, and the ugly infighting their work inspired was covered widely—by the standards of Indian affairs—in the American media, which saw the battles as part of the larger identity wars raging across the nation in the new millennium.

For now, the Pretendian hunts have quieted a little, the hunters having lost credibility because of their overzealousness, and the country having grown weary of identity politics. But it's not just the Pretendian hunters who have culled the rolls. Some small tribes, finding themselves suddenly rich from casino revenue, have been disenrolling members, so as to ensure more money for those who remain. Other tribes—typically large ones with substantial diasporas—have also been cleaning their enrollment records, less to hoard money than to mitigate tribal anxieties about acculturation. One way to feel more “Indian” is by performing a racial alchemy that effectively turns liminal folks into white people. All of this has given new urgency to old and confounding questions: Who gets to be Indian, and who decides?

For a long time, the federal government wasn't much interested in defining who was and wasn't Indian. From the country's birth, Native people were largely outside its embrace. In 1787, the Founders explicitly excluded Native people from the U.S. Constitution. “Congress shall have Power,” Article I declares, to “regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.” We were understood to belong to our own sovereign tribal nations (then numbering well over 750), many of which were geographically inside yet civically separate from the growing American republic. We had our own laws, systems of government, and criteria for citizenship.

The government began bearing down harder on who was or wasn't Native after the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which resulted in the Trail of Tears and the forced displacement of about 100,000 Indians from

east of the Mississippi to the Indian territories from 1830 to 1850. By 1887, the U.S. government cared a great deal about who belonged to those tribal nations. That year, Congress passed the Dawes Act, otherwise known as the General Allotment Act. It was, even for that time, a remarkably cynical piece of legislation. To solve what the government persisted in calling “the Indian problem,” the president was given permission to break up communally held tribal land into smaller parcels that would be “allotted” to individual Indians and heads of households. The stated reason for the law was that private ownership and farming would induce Indians to give up the tribal cultures and practices that—in the legislators’ thinking—were holding back Native people and the country as a whole, keeping both Indian and white Americans from their full economic potential. In other words, the official rationale for the Dawes Act was economic salvation through assimilation.

But the true intent of the legislation was to [allow the state to steal Indian land](#) and escape treaty obligations. At the time, Native nations held roughly 150 million acres in aggregate, but the number of individuals who would receive allotments (generally set at 160 acres each) was so small that millions of acres of “surplus” land would be left open to white settlement. And once all of the Indians became farmers and stopped being Indian, the lawmakers’ thinking went, the tribes would disintegrate. The government would at last be free of its treaty obligations to sovereign Indian nations—because there would be no nations left.

[From the May 2021 issue: National parks should belong to Native Americans](#)

To figure out who got an allotment, the government had to determine who was actually Indian. So the government began enrolling Indians in tribes, using blood (gleaned via census data) as a metric.

In 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, also known as the Snyder Act, which turned all noncitizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States into “citizens of the United States,” but without affecting “the right of any Indian to tribal or other property.”

That final clause of the act was crucial and hard-won. It meant that even after having the mantle of American citizenship thrown over us, whether we wanted it or not, we didn't have to fully give up being legally Indian. We effectively had dual citizenship: Indians were, finally, American en masse, and yet we remained members of our sovereign Indian nations.

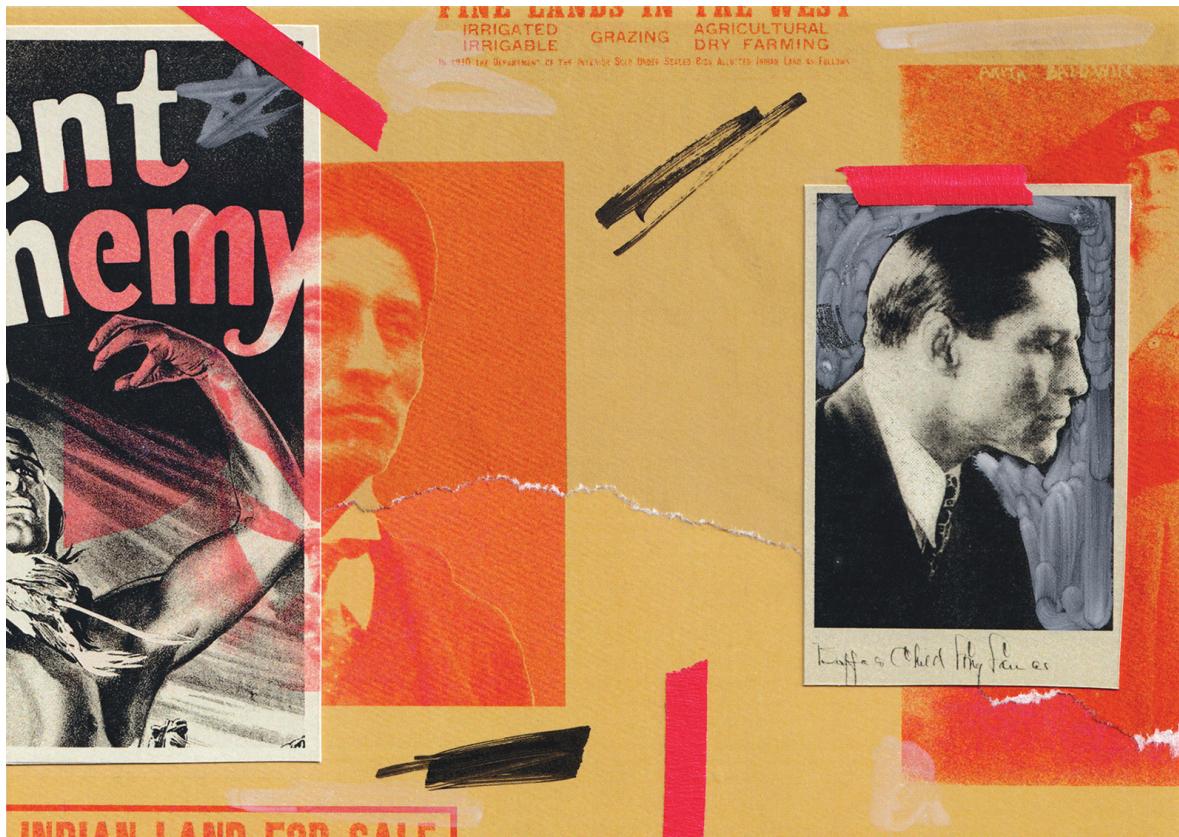
The legislation was controversial among some Native nations. The Onondaga, members of the Iroquois Confederacy, wrote a letter to President Calvin Coolidge declaring that the Snyder Act was treasonous because it compelled their citizens to become American without their consent. For nearly 150 years, Indians had been barred from being part of the American franchise; now we were forced to be American.

In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon announced a new shift toward tribal self-determination. In theory, this policy meant that tribes could decide for themselves whom to enroll. In practice, this has only complicated matters: Although tribes now have more autonomy to tend to their own collective futures, they must do so in ways that don't threaten federal recognition. Navigating between autonomy and nonexistence is not straightforward. In 1994, when the Blackfeet Nation in Montana toyed with ending blood quantum as a metric for enrollment, an official from the Bureau of Indian Affairs warned that if the tribe "diluted" its membership, it might discover that it had "'self-determined' its sovereignty away."

In November 1928, Long Lance arrived in Ontario to begin shooting *The Silent Enemy*, a part-talkie film that follows a band of Indians in Canada as they struggle against starvation. During filming, according to Donald Smith's biography, Long Lance entertained the Ojibwe actors and crew with war dances and traditional storytelling, often accompanied by an assistant director—Ilya Tolstoy, the Russian novelist's grandson.

One of his co-stars was Chauncey Yellow Robe. Yellow Robe had been born into the Sichán̄gu Oyáte in 1867, and had been 9 years old at the time of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. His maternal great-uncle was none other than Sitting Bull. In 1883, at age 15 or 16, he, too, had been taken to the [Carlisle Indian boarding school](#). That's where he was when roughly 300 of his relatives, mostly women and children, were [gunned down at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890](#). Now, as Yellow Robe watched Long Lance, he was

disturbed: Something about the Blackfeet chief seemed off. Long Lance's dancing didn't look at all to him like the dancing of Plains tribes.



Far left: A movie poster for *The Silent Enemy*. *Center left:* Long Lance's co-star Chauncey Yellow Robe, whose great-uncle was Sitting Bull. *Center right:* The author photo accompanying an article Long Lance wrote for *Maclean's* in 1929. *Far right:* Anita Baldwin, the eccentric heiress who hired him before his death. (Illustration by Paul Spella¹)

When Yellow Robe returned to New York, he contacted the Bureau of Indian Affairs and told them of his suspicions. It turned out that the office was already investigating questions about Long Lance's origins.

When Long Lance's memoir was published, the Cosmopolitan Book Corporation sent a copy to Charles Burke, the U.S. commissioner of Indian affairs. "The emotional reaction of those who have read it is enthusiastically favorable," the cover letter read. "It would interest us very much to know what you think of 'Long Lance.'"

Intrigued by the book but skeptical about its author, Burke started writing letters. First, he contacted the U.S. Department of War, asking about Long Lance's career at West Point. Two days later, he heard back that Long Lance had failed the West Point entrance exams, and never attended. Burke wrote more letters. From an Indigenous commissioner in Canada, Burke learned that Long Lance was a Blackfeet chief only in an "honorary capacity."

Was he Blackfeet at all? Burke received a letter from Percy Little Dog, the interpreter for one of the tribes that make up the Blackfoot Confederacy. "We never saw or heard a thing about 'Buffalo Child Long Lance' until the winter of 1922," Little Dog wrote. "He is not a Blood Indian, and has no tribal rights on the Reserve. We have heard he was a Cherokee Indian, but do not know definitely who he is or where he came from." The former superintendent of the Carlisle Indian boarding school wrote as well, providing Long Lance's real name, Sylvester Long, and saying that he had attended the school—but as a Cherokee, not a Blackfeet.

In November 1929, Long Lance gave a talk at the American Museum of Natural History titled "An Indian's Story of His People." Two months later, on January 28, 1930, he attended a banquet for the Poetry Society of America at the Biltmore Hotel. After dinner, he regaled America's literary elite with a performance of Plains Indian sign language, and in front of hundreds, he recited his own Blackfeet death song, which went, in part: "The Outward Trail is no longer dark, / I see—I understand: / There is no life, there is no death; / I shall walk on a trail of stars."

A week after that, he was at the Mutual Life Building at the corner of Broadway and Liberty, where he had been summoned to meet with William Chanler, a producer and the legal counsel for *The Silent Enemy*. When Long Lance opened the door to the office, Chanler greeted him by saying "Hello, Sylvester." Long Lance looked at Chanler steadily. "Sylvester? Who's Sylvester?" Chanler was enraged: "You're Sylvester—Sylvester Long. You come from North Carolina, and you're not a blood Indian."

The charade was exposed. Long Lance was not Blackfeet. He was not even a full-blooded Indian. He had not grown up on the Plains. He had not hunted bison with his people. He had not been a captain in the Canadian army. He had not won the Croix de Guerre.

As Donald Smith recounts in *Long Lance: The True Story of an Imposter*, Sylvester Long was born on December 1, 1890, in Winston (today Winston-Salem), North Carolina. In the city registry, his family was listed as Black. His father, Joe Long, a janitor at the West End School, had been born into slavery in 1853. His mother, Sallie Long, had been born into slavery as well. His brother Abe Long was the manager of the all-Black balcony at the local theater. Beginning at age 6, Sylvester had walked two miles each way to the Depot Street School for Negroes. And although it was true that he had attended the Carlisle Indian boarding school, his application said that he was half Cherokee, not Blackfeet.

After that February day in 1930, Long Lance's life fell apart, at first gradually and then suddenly. He was invited to fewer and fewer society functions and received a lot less attention from princesses and starlets; there would be no more lectures, no more movies, and no more books. Public reaction to his fraudulence was ferocious. When Irvin Cobb, the *Saturday Evening Post* writer who'd touted his book, got the news, he was incensed. "To think that we had him here in the house," he said, ever the son of Paducah, Kentucky. "We're so ashamed! We entertained a nigger."

As he retreated from public life, Long Lance eked out a quiet existence in New York until the early spring of 1931, when Anita Baldwin, an eccentric millionaire heiress, offered him a job as her secretary and bodyguard on an extended trip to Europe in the fall. Baldwin would later say publicly that while in Europe, Long Lance showed himself to be "a man of estimable character and gentlemanly in all respects."

But in her private journals and correspondence, she recorded that he drank heavily and made several suicide attempts. When the trip ended, Baldwin left him in New York and continued on to California, where she lived. He wrote pleading letters asking to be rehired. She promised that if he stopped drinking and chasing women, she would pay for flying lessons and give him a plane. He traveled to California, where he rented a hotel room in Glendale and visited Baldwin's estate often, but he sensed that she was wary of him. He wasn't wrong: According to Smith, she was having Long Lance followed by a private detective, because he was drinking and womanizing again, and spending time with an unsavory crowd.

On March 19, 1932, after going to a movie, Long Lance told a taxi driver to take him to Baldwin's estate. He sat with Baldwin in the library. According to her, he seemed "abrupt, very depressed and non-communicative." Not long after she retired to bed, she heard a gunshot. Baldwin's watchman ran to the library, where according to Smith's biography he found Long Lance "slumped on a leather settee," his legs straight out in front of him, his head flung back, and a Colt .45 revolver in his right hand.

In May 2024, I traveled to East Glacier, Montana, on the western edge of the Blackfeet Nation, for lunch at the Two Medicine Grill. I was there to meet a Blackfeet named Robert Hall. When he arrived, it took him a few minutes to get from the door to where I was sitting because so many people in the restaurant seemed to be a friend or a relative—the server, the cook, a couple of diners.

I wanted to talk with Hall about the scourge of Pretendians. In 2020, Hall had waded into an online trolling battle with anti-Pretendians, concerned that in their zealotry for rooting out fake Indians, these crusaders had become "toxic." Pretendian-hunting, in his view, "had become this thing where if you don't agree with the hunters, you're not Indian anymore." All of which, in Hall's view, just deepens Indian wounds regarding identity and tribal belonging.

When Hall got to my table and we started talking, I noted that he spoke in that clipped, laconic way I'd come to recognize as very Blackfeet. He has spent almost his whole life on the reservation. "I'll die here, I hope," he said. "My whole paradigm is 'Blackfeet rez.'"

But he dislikes the anti-Pretendian crusading because it deepens the focus on blood quantum. And he has a number of objections to the blood quantum: It's a colonial system whose purpose was to disappear us, it's divisive and destructive for the Indian community, and its use erodes tribal sovereignty. Reliance on blood quantum forces us to fight one another, and count our fractions, when we should be fighting together for a healthier future. The issue is also deeply personal for Hall—his tribal council has granted and rescinded his own enrollment, all based on evolving interpretations of old documents about an ancestor. That ancestor, his great-great-grandmother Mary Ground, was originally put down in the rolls as full-blooded Blackfeet.

But, according to Hall, the rolls burned in a fire, and when the tribe composed them again, Mary Ground was put down as quarter-blooded. So Hall was deemed unqualified. Not long after that, though, his family found additional documents, and he was finally enrolled.

And then, in January 2024—as it happened, the day after Lily Gladstone, the actor of mixed Blackfeet descent who [won a Golden Globe for her role in Killers of the Flower Moon](#), publicly thanked Hall for the Blackfoot-language instruction he'd given her—the council rescinded his enrollment. After that, Hall obtained still more information and documentation, including an affidavit from his paternal grandfather, whose blood had never been accounted for. “We take that back to the council,” he recalled, “and it passed. And we’re back on.”

“I spent 37 years not enrolled,” Hall told me. “Man, being enrolled was like finally regaining a limb you’d never had. And then the council comes along and chops it off. And they say, ‘Oh, it’s nothing personal.’ But it’s all personal.”

The vagaries of blood quantum mean that it’s possible to be a “card carrying” Indian without ever having lived on a reservation or knowing any other Indians. It’s possible to be an enrolled Indian and have absolutely no knowledge of your culture. It’s possible to be 100 percent Native by blood and not be enrolled. And it’s possible to grow up Indian—steeped in your tribal ways, a speaker of your language, a keeper of cultural knowledge—and yet still be, in the eyes of the government, white.

Hall understands that Pretendianism isn’t some imaginary problem; it’s a real issue. “It’s like, to be in our special-hat club, you need this special hat. And then someone from fucking Pennsylvania finds a hat in their basement and puts it on and is like, ‘Oh, hey, look at me—I’m you!’ and you’re like, ‘Ummmm, are you?’” This is the trap we find ourselves in: “Blood matters, even as a spiritual connection to our ancestors.”

As we talked, I felt an old sadness well up in me. By 1900, only a precious few Blackfeet had made it through the gantlet of smallpox, warfare, starvation, and Christianization. Closer to home, my mother’s family survived the effects of Indian boarding schools, abuse, neglect, violence, and

crushing poverty. We Natives, collectively, have survived a tremendous amount. Across the nation, many of us won the survival lottery, in some cases with our traditions and our kin in place, and here we are in the 2020s, wasting those winnings measuring one another's blood quantum and fighting with one another in pointless internecine cultural battles.

After college, I moved back home to Leech Lake. I realized that I had missed harvesting wild rice, and fishing, and tapping maple trees. I learned how to trap beaver and pine marten. I had missed my family, my tribe, the land, all of which meant more to me than the thin regard of white people. My older brother, Anton, who had been a history professor in Wisconsin, moved home as well. He fell in love with, and was quickly dedicated to, our Ojibwe cultural practices, attending Big Drum ceremonies and medicine dances. Both of us started studying the Ojibwe language. Both of us realized, for different reasons and in different ways, that we liked our people, and that we liked being Indian as much as or more than we liked being anything else. And I discovered that [the more immersed I felt in Indianness](#), as a way of life lived in community rather than an imagined construct, the less I worried about what other people thought of how I looked, or whether I was enrolled.

For some—like Robert Hall and my brother and me—the question of whether we are properly Indian or not, tribally enrolled or not, is principally a matter of identity and belonging, of being allowed to be who we really are by dint of our histories and our attachment to the community and our affinity for tribal folkways and culture, as well as our blood. Enrollment status doesn't directly affect our ability to feed our families, or get medical care, or have a roof over our head in our own community. For others, however, being disenrolled has consequences more tangible than the loss of belonging.

Consider Sally Brownfield, who lived for years as a member of the Squaxin Island Tribe west of Tacoma, Washington, working as a teacher who specialized in Indigenous education. Her mother, Sally Selvidge, spent decades working to ensure access to good health care for the tribe; the tribe's health clinic is named for Selvidge, who died in 1994. But Brownfield herself, who served on the tribe's enrollment committee until last year, can no longer get subsidized care at her mother's clinic, as [The Seattle Times reported last spring](#), because she and dozens of other tribe members were

recently disenrolled. In her case, the tribe says that, although she possesses Indigenous blood via her mother, they don't descend from a select list of Squaxin ancestors, and so never should have been enrolled in the first place. Nor can Brownfield vote in Squaxin elections, or harvest clams on the Salish Sea beaches where her ancestors did so for generations. Others who were disenrolled alongside her lost their subsidized tribal housing.

Something similar unfolded not far away about a decade ago, in Washington's Cascade Mountains, near the Canadian border, where the Nooksack Tribe disenrolled 306 members. Tribal officials say "the 306" (as they came to be called) were mostly descended from a different tribe, and didn't meet the one-quarter blood quantum required for enrollment. All 306 lost their official Nooksack enrollment for want of sufficient documentation, even though many had lived in the community for decades, if not their whole life. At least 20 were evicted from their family homes on tribal property.

The irony is that we Natives—who can lay authentic claim to being the first Americans, and who were then deemed officially not American by the Constitution before being forced to be American by American law—are now at the mercy of our own tribal nations when it comes to whether we can be considered truly Indian, with all the psychological and practical benefits that identity confers. We've suffered enough over the centuries, at the hands of European powers and then the federal government of the United States. To now endure censure by overzealous anti-Pretendian crusaders, and banishment by bureaucratic tribal decrees and reactionary blood-quantum rules, feels particularly bitter.

I first wrote about Long Lance [nearly 20 years ago](#). I ended that story by revealing his fraudulent Blackfeet identity. In my account, he was Black, not Native. Case closed.

But the case turned out not to be closed. He was Indian after all. The evidence was there, but I'd blinded myself to it because I still saw identity in black and white—or Black and Red.

As Smith detailed in *Long Lance: The True Story of an Imposter*, Long Lance's mother, Sallie, had been born into slavery. Her grandfather Robert

Carson was “a small-time slave owner.” Carson had been wild in his youth, but evidently “settled down after he bought a handsome Indian woman” at an auction.

Among the 20 children that Indian woman gave birth to was Long Lance’s grandmother Adeline, born in 1848. Long Lance’s maternal grandfather was a North Carolina state senator who visited Carson’s plantation often and fathered Sallie and another child with Adeline.

It turns out that Long Lance’s father, too, had Indian blood. He was born into slavery in 1853 and early on in life was separated from his mother. When Joe Long finally found his mother in Alabama, some 40 years later, she told him that his father was white—and that she herself was Cherokee. When Joe died, his obituary stated that he was “a member of the Catawba tribe of Indians.” In 1887, Joe and Sallie Long moved to Winston, North Carolina, where the racial codes were much more rigid: The only two categories for human beings were “white” and “colored.” The Longs fell squarely into the “colored” category. Were they Native? Yes. Were they Black? Also yes. Were they white? Yes again.

Long Lance elided the Black in favor of the Native. When he entered Carlisle, he was listed as half Cherokee and half Croatan. Over time, he slid away from his “mixed” identity; when he received a West Point appointment from President Woodrow Wilson, he claimed to be full-blooded Cherokee. After settling in Canada following World War I—he genuinely was wounded in battle—he began sliding away from his Cherokee-ness, too, eventually giving it up in favor of being Blackfeet.

I think I can understand the slide, and the lies it entailed. One identity, perhaps the most “authentic” one, is a story of enslavement and rape and subjugation, the details of which would relegate Long Lance to life as a second-class citizen. Another, almost entirely fictive identity would afford him freedom and adulation.

It’s no wonder that Long Lance wanted to be a kind of Indian that didn’t exist—except in dime-store novels and, later, movies—and probably never had; that he mined the mineral of racial nostalgia for a past that never was. He mined it until it was played out for him, and he died alone, unemployed,

bereft, and heartbroken. Not as Cherokee or Blackfeet or Black or even white—but as perhaps one of the most American identities of all: self-made.

**Lead image*: Illustration by Paul Spella. Sources: *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* / AP; Hulton Archive / Getty; Frances Benjamin Johnston / Library of Congress / Corbis / VCG / Getty.

¹*Second image*: Illustration by Paul Spella. Sources: LMPC / Getty; Wikimedia; *Maclean's*; Sepia Times / Universal Images Group / Getty.

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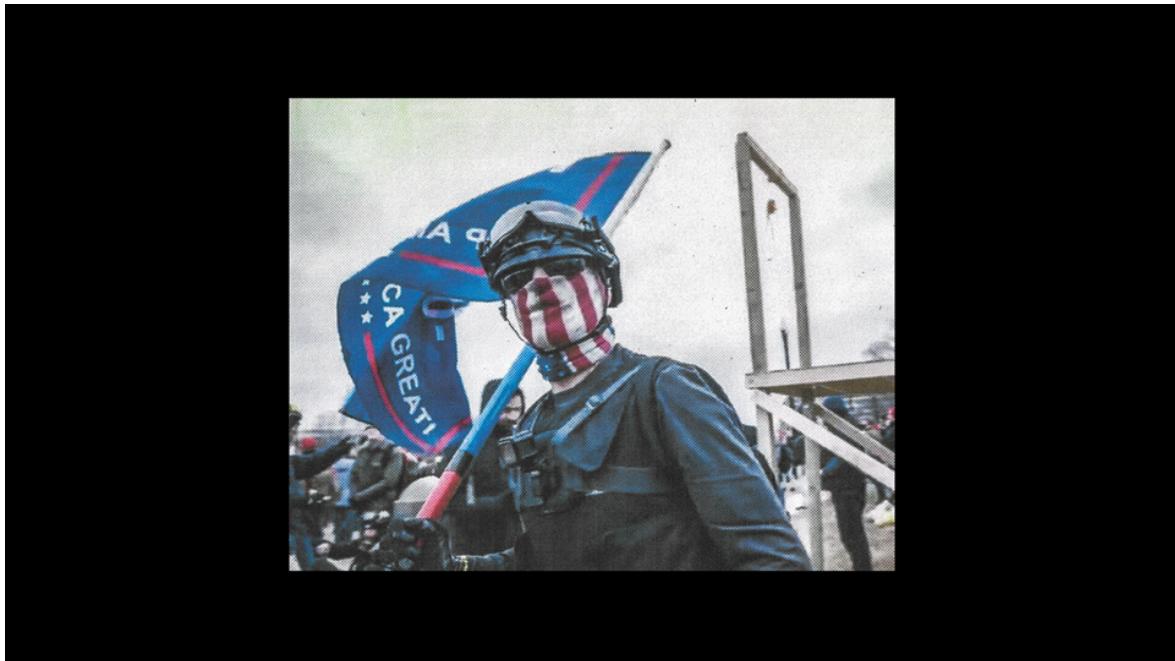
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MAGA's Foundational Lie

The movement claims to stand with the police. Trump's decision to pardon the cop-beaters of January 6 exposed his movement for what it is.

by Jeffrey Goldberg



David Nicholas Dempsey, January 6, 2021 (United States District Court for the District of Columbia)

At 1:42 a.m. on December 19, 2020, Donald Trump—disturbed, humiliated, livid—posted the following message on Twitter: “Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”

In California, David Nicholas Dempsey, a 33-year-old man-child with multiple felony convictions and a profound affection for the president, answered the call. On January 6, wearing a tactical vest and an American-flag gaiter, Dempsey came to the Capitol. Shortly before he assaulted several police officers, he shared his perspectives in an interview given while standing near a gallows. The gallows had been erected as a reminder to Vice President Mike Pence to do, in Trump’s words, “the right thing.”

“Them worthless fucking shitholes like fucking Jerry Nadler, fucking Pelosi, Clapper, Comey, fucking all those pieces of garbage, you know, Obama, all these dudes, Clinton, fuck all these pieces of shit,” Dempsey said. “They don’t need a jail cell. They need to hang from these motherfuckers while everybody videotapes it and fucking spreads it on YouTube.”

Dempsey was not an organizer of the siege, but he was [one of its most energetic participants](#). He assaulted Metropolitan Police Detective Phuson Nguyen with pepper spray. Nguyen was certain in that moment that he was [“going to die”](#), he later testified. Dempsey assaulted another police officer with a metal crutch, cracking his protective shield and cutting his head. Dempsey, who was heard yelling “Fuck you, bitch-ass cops!,” assaulted other officers with broken pieces of furniture, crutches, and a flagpole. Prosecutors would later argue that “Dempsey’s violence reached such extremes that, at one point, he attacked a fellow rioter who was trying to disarm him.” All told, more than 140 police officers were injured in the riot, many seriously.

I [attended the January 6 rally on the Ellipse](#), at which Trump told his supporters, “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” Then I walked with the crowd to the Capitol. One woman, a QAnon adherent dressed in a cat costume, told me, “We’re going to stop the steal. If Pence isn’t going to stop it, we have to.”

[Read: Mass delusion in America](#)

What I remember very well about that day was my own failure of imagination. I did not, to my knowledge, see Dempsey—he had positioned himself at the vanguard of the assault, and I had stayed near the White House to listen to Trump—but I did come across at least a dozen or more protesters dressed in similar tactical gear or wearing body armor, many of them carrying flex-cuffs. I particularly remember those plastic cuffs, but I understood them only as a performance of zealous commitment. Later we would learn that these men—some of whom were Proud Boys—believed that they would actually be arresting members of Congress in defense of the Constitution. I interviewed one of them. “It’s all in the Bible,” he said. “Everything is predicted. Donald Trump is in the Bible.” Grifters could not exist, of course, without a population primed to be grifted.

After the riot, Dempsey returned to California, where he was eventually arrested. In early 2024, he pleaded guilty to two felony counts of assaulting an officer with a dangerous weapon. He was [sentenced to 20 years in prison](#).

Six months later, in the summer of 2024, Trump, who would come to describe the January 6 insurrection as a “day of love,” said that, if reelected, he would pardon rioters, but only “if they’re innocent.” Dempsey was not innocent, but on January 20, 2025, shortly after being inaugurated, Trump pardoned him and roughly 1,500 others charged with or convicted of offenses related to the Capitol insurrection. (Fourteen people, mainly senior figures in the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys movements, saw their sentences commuted but did not receive pardons.)

Of the 1,500 or so offenders who received pardons, roughly 600 had been charged with assaulting or obstructing police officers, and 170 had been accused of using deadly weapons in the siege. Among those pardoned were Peter Schwartz, who had received a 14-year sentence for throwing a chair at police officers and repeatedly attacking them with pepper spray; Daniel Joseph Rodriguez, who was sentenced to 12.5 years for conspiracy and assaulting an officer with a stun gun (he sent a text message to a friend, “Tazzzzed the fuck out of the blue”); and Andrew Taake, who received a six-year sentence for attacking officers with bear spray and a metal whip.

A day after the pardons were announced, Trump said in a press conference, “I am a friend of police, more than any president who’s been in office.” He

went on to describe the rioters. “These were people that actually love our country, so we thought a pardon would be appropriate.”

Trump had something else to say during that first press conference of his new term: “I think we’re going to do things that people will be shocked at.” This would turn out to be true, but unfortunately, shock does not last. Here is the emblematic inner struggle of our age: to preserve the ability to be shocked. “Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!” Dostoyevsky wrote. A blessing that is also a curse.

I understand that a review—even a short and partial review—of the past year might seem dismally repetitive. But repetition ensures that we remember, and perhaps even experience shock anew.

So, in brief: Trump has dismantled America’s foreign-aid infrastructure and gutted a program, built by an earlier Republican president, that saved the lives of Africans infected with HIV; he has encouraged the United States military to commit war crimes; he has instituted radical cuts to U.S. science and medical funding and abetted a crusade against vaccines; he has appointed conspiracists, alcoholics, and idiots to key positions in his administration; he has destroyed the independence of the Justice Department; he has waged pitiless war on prosecutors, FBI agents, and others who previously investigated him, his family, and his friends; he has cast near-fatal doubt on America’s willingness to fulfill its treaty obligations to its democratic allies; he has applauded Vladimir Putin for his barbarism and castigated Ukraine for its unwillingness to commit suicide; he has led racist attacks on various groups of immigrants; he has employed unusually cruel tactics in pursuit of undocumented immigrants, most of whom have committed only one crime—illegally seeking refuge in a country that they believed represented the dream of a better life. Those are some of the actions Trump has taken. Here are a few of the things he has said since returning to office: He has referred to immigrants as “garbage”; he has called a female reporter “piggy” and other reporters “ugly,” “stupid,” “terrible,” and “nasty”; he has suggested that the murder of a Saudi journalist by his country’s government was justified; he has labeled a sitting governor “seriously retarded”; he has blamed the murder of Rob Reiner on the director’s anti-Trump politics; he has called the Democrats the party of “evil.”

Yet, even when weighed against this stunning record of degeneracy, the pardoning by Trump of his cop-beating foot soldiers represents the lowest moment of this presidency so far, because it was an act not only of naked despotism but also of outlandish hypocrisy. By pardoning these criminals, he exposed a foundational lie of MAGA ideology: that it stands with the police and as a guarantor of law and order. The truth is the opposite.

The power to pardon is a vestige of America's pre-independence past. It is an unchecked monarchical power, an awesome power, and therefore it should be bestowed only on leaders blessed with self-restraint, civic-mindedness, and, most important, basic decency.

[Liz Oyer: Trump is using a sacred power for depraved purposes](#)

We have been watching indecency triumph in the public sphere on and off for more than 10 years now, since the moment Trump insulted John McCain's war record. For reasons that are quite possibly too unbearable to contemplate, a large group of American voters was not repulsed by such slander—they were actually aroused by it—and our politics have not been the same. Much has been said, including by me, about Trump's narcissism, his autocratic inclinations, his disconnection from reality, but not nearly enough has been said about his fundamental indecency, the characteristic that undergirds everything he says and does.

In an important essay, Andrew Sullivan noted this past fall that [Trump's indecency is comprehensive in style and substance](#). "It is one thing to be a realist in foreign policy, to accept the morally ambiguous in an immoral world; it is simply indecent to treat a country, Ukraine, invaded by another, Russia, as the actual aggressor and force it to accept a settlement on the invader's terms," Sullivan wrote. "It is one thing to find and arrest illegal immigrants; it is indecent to mock and ridicule them, and send them with no due process to a foreign gulag where torture is routine. It is one thing to enforce immigration laws; it is another to use masked, anonymous men to do it. It is one thing to cut foreign aid; it is simply indecent to do so abruptly and irrationally so that tens of thousands of children will needlessly die. We have slowly adjusted to this entirely new culture from the top, perhaps in the hope that it will somehow be sated soon—but then new indecencies happen."

The subject of Trump's indecency came up in a conversation I had with Barack Obama in 2017. I asked him to name the most norm-defying act of his successor to date. Somewhat to my surprise, Obama mentioned [Trump's speech at the Boy Scouts' National Jamboree](#) earlier that year. This appearance has been largely forgotten, but it was a festival of indecency. At one point, Trump told the scouts about a wealthy friend of his who, he suggested, did unmentionable things on his yacht.

Obama, a model of dignified presidential behavior (just like nearly all of his predecessors, Democratic and Republican), understood viscerally the importance of self-restraint and adherence to long-established norms. Which is why he was so troubled by Trump's decadent performance. "You can stand in front of tens of thousands of teenage boys and encourage them to be good citizens and be helpful to their mothers," Obama said, "or you can go Lord of the Flies. He went Lord of the Flies."

We are in a long Lord of the Flies moment, led by a man who, to borrow from Psalm 10, possesses a mouth "full of cursing and deceit and fraud." For many people—government scientists seeking cures for diseases; FBI agents investigating corruption and terrorism; military leaders trying to preserve respect for the rules of warfare; and, in particular, police officers who were brutalized by Trump's army of deluded followers—these days can seem infernal. Trump's term is one-quarter over; a piece of advice often attributed to Churchill has it best: When you're going through hell, keep going.

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‘You Are Now a King, Under a Different Name’

America went to extraordinary lengths to throw off the rituals and titles of monarchy. Why would we fall for royal trappings today?

by Jake Lundberg



As president, George Washington received visitors once a week, for exactly half an hour. These “levees,” as they were called, were not loose occasions. Washington stood by the fireplace in a dining room cleared of its chairs.

Dressed in a black velvet suit, hair powdered, hat in hand, he greeted guests with a formal bow. Handshakes, familiar and egalitarian, were prohibited. Conversation was sparse. The president, per Alexander Hamilton's instructions, might talk "cursorily on indifferent subjects," but nothing more. Then, after having been seen by the guests, he was to promptly "disappear."

If little was said at Washington's levees, much was said *about* them, beginning with the fact that the entire practice was imported from the royal courts of Europe. For Hamilton and others close to Washington, this was precisely the point. The public needed to appreciate the full "dignity of the office," a goal best accomplished by setting a "high tone in the demeanour of the Executive."

For those opposed to Washington's administration, the tone was entirely too high. The president's bows were aloof and stiff. The guests were sycophantic, exhibiting the "cringing servility" of courtiers. All of it reeked of royalty. After attending a levee in December 1790, Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania confessed to his diary the hope that Washington might just die. "If there is treason in the wish, I retract it," he wrote. But if the president "were in Heaven," he continued, "we would not then have him brought forward as the constant cover to every unconstitutional and irrepublican act."

A senator in 1790 would seem to have had larger worries than the choreography of presidential receptions. The United States was deeply in debt, vulnerable on the international stage, and operating under [a new, controversial Constitution](#). But to Maclay and his opponents alike, great problems of policy were inseparable from small matters of ritual. Some, like Hamilton, strained for legitimacy in the rites and practices of monarchy. Others feared the dire effects of what Maclay derided as "all the fooleries, fopperies, fineries, and pomp of royal etiquette."

From the October 2015 issue: America's fragile Constitution

Washington, of course, would come to be remembered for his restraint—his reluctance to take power, his keen awareness of his own stature, and his willingness to step away after two terms. Yet in the moment, none of that felt assured, and his presidency was marked by a fierce struggle over

symbols and ceremonies—over how nearly a republic should allow its first president to resemble the monarch it had only recently cast off.

It was not hard to imagine Washington as a king. Many Americans already did, if not exactly in title. Going back to the early years of the Revolution, Washington occupied the position left vacant by the English monarch, one George succeeding another. In October 1775, [the poet Phillis Wheatley](#) concluded an ode she sent him, “A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine, / With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine.” Wheatley made her offer before he’d even succeeded in expelling the British from Boston. The triumph of the War of Independence would only affirm his elevation; Americans adapted monarchical practices such as celebrating the leader’s birthday and singing “God Save Great Washington.”

Still, some worried that the indispensable man was too indispensable. The people, John Adams noted during the war, had come to “idolize an image which their own hands have molten.” When Washington famously refused the power that could have come with such popular esteem, the move only elevated that esteem. In the 1780s, one Mary Meanwell told a Philadelphia newspaper, “I respect our great general, but let us not make a GOD of him.”

The ambiguities surrounding Washington haunted the Constitution’s definition of the presidency. At the Convention in 1787, during which Benjamin Franklin noted “a natural inclination in mankind to kingly government,” the very suggestion of an executive seemed a provocation in light of the Revolution. Washington’s presence there, however, gave the delegates confidence to endow the presidency with vague and expansive powers. As one wrote, the Constitution would not have bestowed such great authority on the executive “had not many of the members cast their eyes toward General Washington, and shaped their ideas of the powers to be given a President by their opinions of his virtue.”

The ratification of the Constitution in 1788 and Washington’s unanimous election the following year did little to resolve the tensions around the man and the office. As he prepared to leave for New York City, then the capital, following his election, his former aide James McHenry told him, “You are now a king, under a different name.” Washington’s journey to New York affirmed the sentiment. He was greeted everywhere with the peals of church

bells, the firing of cannons, and cheers of “Long live George Washington,” a royalist acclamation repeated by the official who administered the oath of office to him. Washington was sensitive enough to the implications of such fanfare that he included (and later cut, at James Madison’s suggestion) an assurance in his inaugural address that, because he was childless, he could have no heirs to his power.

If the public seemed ready to crown him, Congress was forced to confront what that might mean in practice. After the inauguration, the Senate was snarled for nearly a month on the mere question of what to call the president. Whatever misgivings Adams may have previously entertained about Washington’s lofty status, he told his colleagues that “a royal or at least princely title will be found indispensably necessary to maintain the reputation, authority, and dignity of the President.” Human minds, Adams said, simply could not recognize authority “without a Splendor and Majesty, in some degree.” Adams argued for “His Highness” or “His Most Benign Highness” at the minimum; others suggested possibilities including “His Majesty” and “His Elective Highness.”

From the November 2025 issue: What the Founders would say now

Similar anxieties surfaced in 1792, as the House considered what symbols should represent the new government on its coins. When Hamilton moved to create the United States Mint, he argued that coins were “vehicles of useful impressions” and that they ought to be “emblematical” in their use of symbols. The implication was hardly in doubt. Washington, the most powerful national emblem, had already appeared on privately issued coins and would of course grace the first national coins under the new Constitution. When the matter came before the House of Representatives, a fierce opposition noted that putting living people on coins was the stuff of flattery and the “idolatrous practice of monarchies,” or, perhaps worse, the tyrants of ancient Rome. One congressman suggested that Washington should sooner cut off his own hand than sign a bill that would see his likeness on a coin, a move that would put him in the company of Nero and Caligula.

As it happened, Washington didn’t have to choose between signing the bill and cutting off his hand. The House defeated the measure, and the now-

familiar female figure of liberty found her way onto American coins. Nor was Washington ever addressed as “His Highness” or, as he reportedly preferred, “His High Mightiness, the President of the United States and Protector of Their Liberties.” Despite the wishes of Adams (whom opponents came to call “His Rotundity” during the debate), the Senate ultimately settled on the spare and republican address that we still use: “Mr. President.”

The fights over who and what Washington was continued to define his presidency, and many in the public still celebrated him as something like a king. But determined opposition, combined with Washington’s own restraint, tamed the presidency’s regal inheritance. Adams, Washington’s successor, possessed monarchical impulses, but not a monarchical aura. His pretensions—riding around in a grand coach and continuing the weekly levees—as well as his administration’s notorious effort to enforce deference in the 1798 Sedition Act, fell flat. His failure cleared the way for Thomas Jefferson, who [rejected royal trappings altogether](#). He walked to his inauguration, abandoned formal receptions, and favored plain dress.

[From the October 1996 issue: Thomas Jefferson, radical and racist](#)

Jefferson’s triumph was so complete that the conflict over Washington’s image and authority is largely forgotten. Although Americans continue to debate the extent of presidential authority, they take for granted the unassuming republican rituals of power. Now, though levees may not exactly be back, royal affectations and the disputes that go with them are. The Oval Office has been [got up in Louis Quatorze decor](#). Meetings there unfold with throne-room theater—Donald Trump seated at his desk, with visitors made to stand beside him in supplication. At Trump’s orders, [the East Wing is giving way to a massive ballroom](#), funded through courtly patronage, while the mint contemplates a \$1 coin with his likeness.

When the House debated putting Washington’s visage on a coin in 1792, Representative John Page of Virginia called for “republican cautions” against such kingly notions. Members of Congress had a duty, he said, to “keep the eyes of their constituents open, and to watch over their liberties” before they were lost. Such vigilance has mostly been absent from the current Congress. The deference with which that body has bowed to

presidential fiat would make Page and William Maclay shudder. We unlearned the habits of monarchy once; we may need to do it again.

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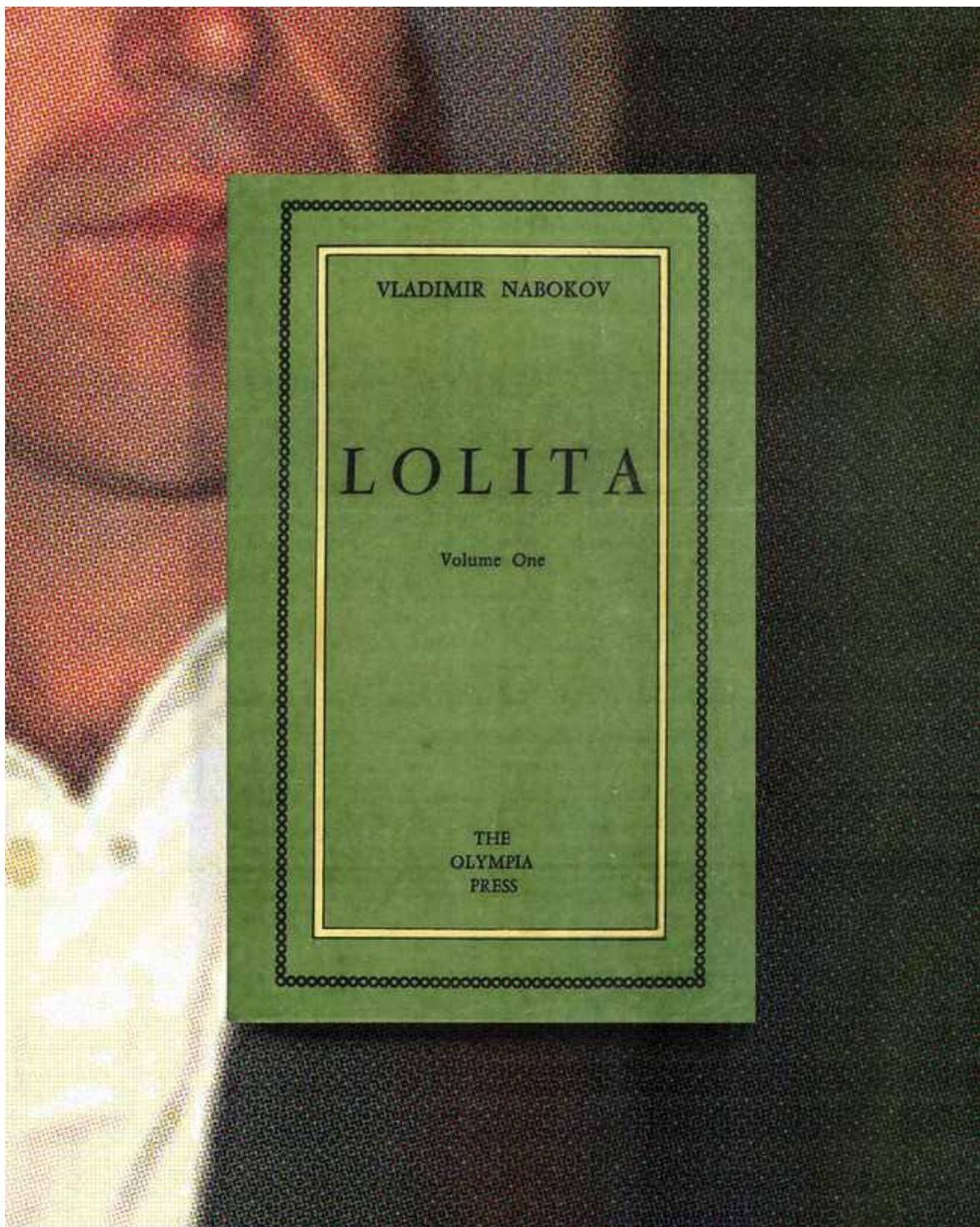
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What Jeffrey Epstein Didn't Understand About Lolita

Everything.

by Graeme Wood



One of the minor annoyances of being an incorrigible pervert is that you risk having your own bookshelf testify against you. Some spines are better turned inward. A pederast might hide away Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, in which a middle-aged German author ogles a lithe young Polish

boy. A hyper-literate rapist should camouflage his copy of *A Clockwork Orange* with a more consensual dust jacket. It is therefore curious that the late financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein—who died in jail in 2019 while awaiting trial on charges of trafficking minors—flaunted his supposed love of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. The book, first published in France in 1955, is so closely identified with pedophilia that it spawned not one but two words, *Lolita* and *nymphet*, for girls whom grown men find sexually tempting. Rather than take the obvious advice—*Under no circumstances advertise your obsession with Lolita*—Epstein apparently did the opposite.

The Epstein files released by Congress yesterday include photos of a young woman or girl, with *Lolita*’s horny opening lines clumsily inscribed on her skin in fine black ink. *Lolita* crops up here and there in the [documents](#) released in November, too. The journalist Michael Wolff, who was working on a profile of Epstein, wrote that he kept a copy of *Lolita*, and no other book, on his bedside table. Wolff added that Epstein “is, beyond the joke, a great Nobokov [sic] fan.” When a fact-checker wrote to Epstein to confirm these details, Epstein forwarded the message to Wolff, with a note suggesting that he would not cooperate with the checking process: “nfw,” as in *no fucking way*. In the end, the profile was never published.

Whether or not he kept a copy by his bed, we know that Epstein owned a first edition and ordered [The Annotated Lolita](#) for his Kindle in 2019, 43 days before he was arrested. As to the claim that Epstein was a “great Nobokov fan,” the only possible response is: nfw. He may have wanted others to believe he was, and he may also have tried to impress certain people with polite conversation about the book—maybe the kind of people who do not know how to spell *Nabokov*, or who wanted his money too much to call out his superficiality. The novel makes a cameo in his 2018 correspondence with the Harvard English professor Elisa New, wife of the [hapless Larry Summers](#), whose poetry project he funded. “I’m going upstairs to hunt for my copy of *Lolita*,” New says in an email, seemingly at Epstein’s urging. She then suggests that Epstein read Willa Cather’s [My Antonia](#), writing that Cather’s novel has “similar themes to *Lolita* in that it’s about a man whose whole life is stamped forever by his impression of a young girl.” The titular girl in *Lolita* is a 12-year-old who is kidnapped and serially raped

by a much older man. To compare *Lolita* to *My Ántonia* in this way is a bit like saying *Moby-Dick* and *Deliverance* are both about fishing trips.

Read: The Ghislaine Maxwell emails

Still, I doubt that Epstein ever read *Lolita*, or that he understood it if he did. The book's pleasures are intense but not erotic, and not congruent with Epstein's essentially philistine taste. Like Nabokov's great novel *Pale Fire*, *Lolita* is about an intelligent writerly type who is not intelligent enough to realize that he is also completely nuts. It accesses levels of pathos that a psycho like Epstein would struggle to appreciate.

We know from his emails that Epstein purchased an eclectic array of nonfiction, including books on finance, power, and sex, plus random books that might endear him to the powerful men in his orbit. These orders were not all lowbrow. He bought Norman Mailer's fiery but cerebral anti-feminist polemic *The Prisoner of Sex* and a Don DeLillo novel, *Zero K*. Among the down-market acquisitions were installments of the *Flashman* series—think James Bond, but more bumbling and Victorian—and of *The Man From O.R.G.Y.*, a pulpy 1960s spy-sex romp for readers who considered Pussy Galore too subtle. I found excerpts online: They were so lame and dated that, may God forgive me, I actually felt bad for Epstein. A mega-millionaire is spoiled for company, with outstanding people and experiences available for purchase or rent. To prefer the solitary consumption of a novel with lines like “I was strumming her little passion switch like a banjo player mad with palsy” is beyond pitiful. It shows a simultaneous unfamiliarity with both human sexual response and bluegrass music.

Reading escapist crap now and then does not preclude reading great prose at more serious moments. But if your literary tastes favor the dashing heroism of a spy, a lover, a man of mystery and intrigue—and I suspect that Epstein could read fiction only in this vicarious way—then *Lolita* is a comically bad choice. Humbert Humbert, the narrator, is unhinged and obtuse. The novel is a joke on him. The actors cast by Hollywood to play Humbert in the two movie adaptations of the novel, James Mason and Jeremy Irons, give a sense of the type: Both are known for playing reptilian creeps, even more grotesquely mismatched for an American tween than the average adult man would be.

Humbert is one of the most odious and self-absorbed creations in all of literature. He is a rapist, a murderer, a world-class deflector of blame (“It was she who seduced me”), and a pompous piece of child-molesting Eurotrash. It is a scandal that he can express himself so well—with the linguistic ingenuity, come to think of it, of Vladimir Nabokov. Much of the plot follows this continental sophisticate and Lolita as they drive across America in a “jalopy,” shacking up in motels and passing vulgar roadside attractions. (Epstein, by contrast, was too much of a snob to debase himself with terrestrial travel. He flew private, in a 727 known unofficially as the “Lolita Express.”)

[From the September 2018 issue: Caitlin Flanagan on how *Lolita* seduces us all](#)

The end of the novel, however, is even more hateful to someone with Epstein’s predilections. Humbert meets his ex-nymphet again when she’s 17. Lolita has grown distant—which is to say, she has grown up—and has sexually emancipated herself from Humbert, though she still wants his money. Now married and pregnant, Lolita has become unattractive to Humbert, and to some extent Humbert has become unattractive to himself, even remorseful about his crimes against her.

To these indignities (the aging of his lover, the seedy motels, the discovery that he is a worm), Humbert adds one more, perhaps the only one with which Epstein could sympathize. At the novel’s end, he refers back to the reason for his writing all of this down in the first place: He is in jail awaiting trial, and these are his notes. Before he can face justice, he will be dead of a heart attack, and Lolita herself will die in childbirth. Note the irony in the plot (a childhood stolen by an adult, and an adulthood lost to a child) and also in the parallel to Epstein, who, like Humbert, cheated justice through an early demise.

Epstein could, I suppose, have seen himself in Humbert, understood Humbert all too well, and simply not regarded him as loathsome. Epstein was, after all, Epstein, and did not inhabit the same moral universe as you and I do. It is a dark thought: Epstein curled up alone under the covers, studying his nightly installment of the novel because he recognized the lust and moral frailty and could not get enough of it. *This Humbert fellow—so*

relatable. A pompous lecher just like me! For that to be the case, Epstein would have needed a capacity for self-deprecation and insight into his own perversity. No evidence for these traits exists.

More likely, Epstein confused *Lolita* for some kind of Booker Prize–level version of *Penthouse Forum*, which is a stupid error. The opening lines, the ones written on a female body in the Epstein-file photo, are more autoerotic than erotic, with Humbert self-pleasuring at the thought of his own mouth (“Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth”).

Reading *Lolita* as erotica would be a further irony, because in making that category error, he would have been aligning himself with the book’s early moralist critics. “Highbrow pornography,” *The New York Times’* Orville Prescott wrote when the book came out in America, [noting that even the French had banned it](#). I suppose it would be unfair to ding a reviewer in 1958, when smut was scarcer, for seeing pornography in all the wrong places, and mistaking this very unsexy book for titillation.

But just as the notion that Epstein read and understood *Lolita* is implausible, the alternative—that he read the novel and got off on it—is almost too gross to contemplate. To find *Lolita* sexy would not only mean finding child-rape sexy. It would also mean finding Humbert Humbert sexy. And that is a level of perversion probably beyond even Jeffrey Epstein.

This article appears in the [February 2026](#) print edition with the headline “What Jeffrey Epstein Didn’t Understand About Lolita.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Culture & Critics

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- [**Julian Barnes Says Goodbye to the Novel**](#)
- [**The New History of Fighting Slavery**](#)
- [**What Dante Is Trying to Tell Us**](#)

How Bad Bunny Did It

The Super Bowl headliner doesn't care if you understand his lyrics.

by Spencer Kornhaber



A few years ago, I visited my childhood home and heard a surprising sound: the bright and bouncy music of the Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny. My parents are white Baby Boomers who speak no Spanish and have never shown a taste for hip-hop, but they'd somehow gotten into Benito Antonio

Martínez Ocasio, whose sex-and-rum-drenched lyrics they couldn't begin to decipher. The vector of transmission appeared to be the streaming service hooked to their smart speakers. When in need of a pick-me-up, Mom would shout, "Alexa, play Bad Bunny," and make her Southern California kitchen sound like a San Juan nightclub.

Stories like this help explain how Bad Bunny has reached across language barriers to dominate pop domestically and abroad. Since uploading his first single in 2016, he's broken U.S. sales records and claimed the title of the most streamed artist on Spotify in four separate years. His popularity, high standing with critics, and duration of success make him a peer—and sometimes a better-selling one—of such contemporary titans as Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar. Like them, he's figured out that 21st-century-pop success is achieved by assembling excitingly hybrid sounds around an [iron core of identity](#). In his case, that means performing almost exclusively in Spanish.

Many Latin American singers have enjoyed cross-over fame before, but none has done it in the way Bad Bunny has, or at the same scale. Before streaming, they couldn't: Major-market radio DJs, record-label execs, and the media still decided what constituted the American mainstream, and conventional wisdom said that audiences preferred music whose lyrics they could understand. Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias, and Shakira cracked U.S. markets only after they started singing in English. Rare exceptions, such as "Macarena," by [Los del Río](#), didn't even confer name recognition upon their creators.

But the internet has revealed popular desires that last century's gatekeepers didn't know how to exploit. Bad Bunny arose from a transnational scene—widely called [música urbana](#)—whose primary audience is Spanish speakers, including the 44 million who live in the United States. Streaming has also helped English-only audiences connect with his music, just as it has for [K-pop](#) and Afrobeat. This month, Bad Bunny will occupy a cultural stage once reserved for America's classic-rock gods and pop goddesses: the Super Bowl halftime show.

Bad Bunny has touted his game-day gig as a triumph for Latino—particularly Puerto Rican—representation. And in plain ways, his

ascendance contradicts Donald Trump's decree, made last March, that English is the sole national language. MAGA voices attacked the "crazy" decision by the "woke" NFL to book someone who's not "a unifying entertainer." They cited Bad Bunny's political stances (he doesn't want ICE outside his concerts) and gender-bending fashion (his biceps look great in a minidress). But they also tend to express the view that he, though an American citizen, is somehow un-American. The conservative activist group Turning Point USA is [planning an alternative halftime show](#); in a poll sent to its supporters about what they'd like to see, the first option was "anything in English."

The truth is that Bad Bunny's rise is plenty American, and not simply because it reinforces the pluralistic ideals that Trump's movement seeks to diminish. Bad Bunny's music has reached all corners of the planet because it is a state-of-the-art product; he is a victor in the ever more crowded race for the freshest and most broadly appealing sound. Language barriers have turned out to be yet another bit of old friction that the internet has sanded down to create a cosmopolitan, commercialized middle ground. Does what's lost in translation matter?

[From the November 2022 issue: Jaquira Díaz on the case for Puerto Rican independence](#)

At the center of Bad Bunny's sound is the rhythm that has ruled Latin American pop for decades: reggaeton, which marries dancehall and rap in crisp, minimalist fashion. Inspiring partying often with just a drum machine and a vocalist, reggaeton first flourished as the sound of working-class urban life in Puerto Rico. "This is where I was born, and so was reggaeton, just so you know," Bad Bunny boasts in Spanish in one song.

He also grew up as a highly online Millennial at a time when American pop culture was ruled by Fall Out Boy's pop punk, Lady Gaga's synth pop, and Drake's rap blues. All of those touchstones now inform his maximalist take on reggaeton. In any given Bad Bunny song, the melodies roll and sway between emo dejection and childlike glee, the electronic beats call to mind Nintendo games, and the low end churns as ominously as a lava pit. Bad Bunny's vocal tone is unique: husky and flat, peppered with gasps and grunts, and shimmering with digital effects. He sounds like a ringmaster in a

futuristic circus, and you don't need to know Spanish to feel that a thrilling story is unfolding.

Indeed, Bad Bunny's success with English-speaking audiences might seem to answer the perennial music-fan debate about how important lyrics really are. Any Rolling Stones listener oblivious to what Mick Jagger is yowling about knows that the art form's pleasures don't require intelligibility. And the ideals of enlightened music appreciation dictate that listening to music you don't understand can be a mind-expanding exercise. As David Byrne [once put it](#), "To restrict your listening to English-language pop is like deciding to eat the same meal for the rest of your life."

Music, however, is also a form of communication. That's especially the case in the tradition Bad Bunny builds on: hip-hop, in which narrative, persona, and wordplay are crucial. He raps with intoxicating fluidity, stringing syllables together in a steady murmur that encourages close listening. Translations get you only part of the way to comprehending this aspect of his appeal. His themes are largely the same as those of English-language pop rappers—success, partying, and girls. (Lots of girls: "*Me gustan mucho las Gabriela, las Patricia, las Nicole, las Sofia,*" goes his smash "Titi Me Preguntó," a little black book in song form.) But as I read along, I can sense all the things I'm missing: puns, connotations, references.

Even some fluent Spanish speakers may feel similarly. He raps in a Caribbean dialect that is "full of so many skipped consonants, Spanglish, neologisms, and argot that it borders on Creole," the Puerto Rican anthropology professor Yarimar Bonilla [wrote in *The New York Times*](#). Bad Bunny's success proves the cliché that music is a universal language, but it also highlights how universality can shear art from its social context—of which, in this artist's case, there is a lot.

Bad Bunny has taken care to make his most important messages clear through not only lyrics but also videos, album art, and interviews. He's more than a Puerto Rican Casanova with an ear for appealing musical pastiche. He's also a protest artist, and part of what he's protesting is the very process by which he has become so famous.

The title of his latest album, *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS* (or “I Should Have Taken More Photos”), expresses a sense of loss about the culture he grew up in. The cover image is of two empty chairs against a backdrop of banana trees. The songs long for friends and neighbors who have emigrated. A short film released with the album portrays an old man visiting a San Juan coffee shop only to find that it has been gentrified beyond recognition—filled with tourists and digital nomads scarfing overpriced vegan *quesitos*. (The video also features a talking toad belonging to an endangered local species.)

Bad Bunny is articulating the surreal and sad feeling of seeing his homeland transformed by internet-supercharged globalization. The U.S. territory’s economy has long relied on tourism, but in recent years, a wave of laptop-toting mainlanders lured by the balmy climate and notoriously loose tax laws has driven rent increases and threatened to wash out the local identity. Bad Bunny’s new album, Bonilla wrote, is a “lament for a Puerto Rico slipping through our fingers: betrayed by its leaders; its neighborhoods displaced for luxury developments; its land sold to outsiders, subdivided by Airbnb and crypto schemes and repackaged as paradise for others.”

[Read: The Bad Bunny video that captures the cost of gentrification](#)

Bad Bunny seeks not just to point out the problem of displacement, but also to do something about it. He’s portrayed his refusal to sing in English as a proactive maneuver against the pressures of Anglo-assimilation. On his latest tour, he skipped the continental U.S. entirely, citing fears that ICE agents would target his concerts. Instead, he hosted a 31-show residency in San Juan, the title of which, *No me quiero ir de aquí*, means “I Don’t Want to Leave Here.” He has campaigned for the island’s independence and against its potential statehood. One song on the new album spotlights Hawaii—a tourist playground whose natives have been utterly marginalized—as an example of the fate that could befall Puerto Rico if its residents do not resist the influence from their north.

Yet, inevitably, Bad Bunny’s worldwide fame is bound up in the same cycle he bemoans. Though many tickets for his concert residency were set aside for locals, the gambit of course attracted outsiders to the island. Some made a pilgrimage to the supermarket where he once worked in his hometown of Vega Baja. One was shot and killed in La Perla, a poor San Juan

neighborhood that began to attract tourists only after being featured in the video for Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee's 2017 reggaeton smash, "Despacito."

In this context, Bad Bunny's Super Bowl booking represents an uneasy trade. He gets to perform on America's most watched stage—expressing his vision on a grand scale in ways that could energize his fans and expand his audience. The NFL not only gets a popular performer to juice ratings; it gets to advertise itself to the Spanish-speaking world at a time when professional football is eyeing the global market share of soccer and other sports, eager to carve out a niche. Some might say that the NFL is a mainland-American institution with colonial ambitions, and that Bad Bunny is now part of that effort.

Exports, imports, migration, melding—the costs of these historical engines of change and progress are now the preoccupation of popular art and politics. In a strange way, MAGA and Bad Bunny are each responding to versions of the same 21st-century phenomenon: the decoupling of culture and geography, which has left so many people—wherever they were born—feeling strangely placeless and adrift. But the cruel absurdities and dark historical parallels of Trump's nationalist agenda reflect how perverse, and ultimately futile, strident identity protectionism is in 2026. American country music has been catching on abroad; American listeners have *KPop Demon Hunters* fever. And the Super Bowl will be headlined by an artist who seems sure he can create something meaningful out of interconnectivity—something that's his own, no matter how much it's shared.

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Julian Barnes Says Goodbye to the Novel

His fiction has found meaning in life's gaps and love's absence.

by Adam Begley



Julian Barnes in 2004 (Karen Robinson / Camera Press / Redux)

“Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story,” E. M. Forster wrote. “I wish that it was not so.” Julian Barnes has confessed that as a young man reading

Aspects of the Novel, he found this sentiment “feeble” and responded impatiently, “If you aren’t up to telling a story, why write a novel?” Barnes, who turned 80 in January, now sings a different tune, and anyway, Forster’s wish was long ago granted. The literary novel of today is quite free from conventional storytelling, and ironically (irony is one of his specialties), Barnes got busy loosening the bonds early in his career. He’s still at it: His brief new novel, *Departure(s)*, offers only a sketchy storyline, mixed with memoir and thoughts on memory. An extended farewell, an author’s valedictory flourish, the whole package is a culmination of sorts, shimmering with his silky, erudite prose; beneath the suave surface is an earnest investigation into the mysterious ways of the human heart.

The scant plot in *Departure(s)*—a “true story” the narrator swore he wouldn’t tell—tracks the two-part romance of Stephen and Jean, friends of his at university who fell in love, broke up when they graduated, then connected again in late middle age after Stephen asked Julian to reach out to Jean. Like many of Barnes’s 14 previous novels—including his most famous, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), and the Man Booker Prize winner, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011)—*Departure(s)* tells a love story filtered through the consciousness of a ruminative, stand-offish man preoccupied with something other than the love at stake.

In the earlier novels, Barnes is given a fictional identity; in the new one, the author speaks to us directly, blithely confident that a skeptical realist with a restless mind probing familiar yet essential experiences—how the brain works, what happens as we age—is all the entertainment we require. He shrugs off the romance: “Couple fail to make one another happy, well, turn the page.” But one should never disregard the way love works (or doesn’t) in his books. In the words of Philip Larkin (a Barnes favorite), love is the “element / That spreads through other lives like a tree / And sways them on in a sort of sense.”

When love is absent, bottled up, interrupted, or misdirected, Barnes is at his best. One-tenth of *Flaubert’s Parrot* is heartache, but it’s buried under the other nine-tenths, a [rambling miscellany of Flaubert factoids](#). The novel reads at times like an eccentric biographical essay, at times like a cranky compendium of pet peeves. Yet the reader is peripherally aware that the narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, indulges his literary obsession so as to

distract himself (and us) from the tragedy of his wife's death. After dragging his feet for most of the book, he at last addresses his loss, his despair, in a short chapter called "Pure Story." A melancholy emotional logic holds *Flaubert's Parrot* together, not least the parallels between the unfaithful Ellen Braithwaite and Emma Bovary, whose name is synonymous with adulterous passion.

Geoffrey warns against the smug certainty of those who think that by trawling for facts they can catch the essence of a life, whether Flaubert's or Ellen's. ("My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years.") In an oft-quoted passage, he considers a fishing net with Olympian detachment:

You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string.

He adds, "You can do the same with a biography." You can do the same with a novel.

Once you start looking for holes in Barnes's books, they open up everywhere: what's unknown, withheld, or willfully ignored. Absence itself—absence of love, absence of the beloved—becomes a crucial locus of meaning. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, for instance, the longer Geoffrey delays telling us about Ellen, the more we sense how much she meant to him. In *Departure(s)*, there's a 40-year gap between the first time Stephen and Jean try to love each other (which a young, love-starved Barnes experienced as "romanticism-by-proxy") and the second, "rekindled" attempt, reluctantly facilitated by Barnes. Both Stephen and Jean tell him, "This will be my last chance of happiness." They marry—a church wedding!—and then break up for good. A decade or so later, they're both dead. Breaking his vow, Barnes writes about them, exposing Stephen as a spurned romantic and Jean as incapable of accepting or returning his love. Barnes says it's what he's been after "all my writing life: the whole story."

The *whole/hole* pun is surely intended. The brief, truncated narrative leaves Barnes space to ruminate on the blanks in our memory. He glides past a truism (“As we age, forgotten memories of childhood often return to us”) and delivers a startling prognosis: “At the same time, our grasp of the middle years decays. This hasn’t happened to me yet, but I can imagine how it might develop as senescence takes hold.” In other words, he adds, if we live long enough, our lives—his, mine, yours—may be reduced (like Stephen’s and Jean’s) “to a story with a large hole in the middle.” Meanwhile, scattered references point to the defining event of those four missing decades, at least in Barnes’s own life: In 1979, he married [Pat Kavanagh](#), a literary agent six years his senior; three decades later she died, just weeks after being diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor.

In 2013, he published [*Levels of Life*](#), a celebration of his love for her and an anatomy of his mourning. “I was thirty-two when we met, sixty-two when she died. The heart of my life; the life of my heart.” An essay, a short story, and a memoir squeezed together in one slim volume, the book defies formal categorization, but the sum of those disparate parts is an achingly honest dirge:

It’s true that some of my grief is self-directed—look what I have lost, look how my life has been diminished—but it is more, much more, and has been from the beginning, about her: look what *she* has lost, now that she has lost life.

Her absence imposes a very specific form of loneliness—“not so much loneliness as her-lessness.”

He broods about memory and aging in *Departure(s)*, of course he does: He has a new partner, Rachel, who’s 18 years his junior. He reveals as well that he was diagnosed in 2020 with a rare blood cancer that can be managed with a daily dose of chemo, but not cured. Before he knew his cancer wouldn’t kill him, he began making notes for what he thought would be his final book, to which he gave a provisional, “archly self-pitying” title: *Jules Was*. He is “heavily afraid,” according to one note, of the grief his demise will “impose on R”—a replay, perhaps, of what he himself experienced.

Read: It's hard to change your mind. Julian Barnes's new book asks if you should even try.

Setting aside the pain of Kavanagh's death, almost 20 years ago now, Barnes acknowledges the luck of his life, particularly his professional success. The oldest in the all-male scrum of his generation's celebrated British novelists (Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie), he has enjoyed a prize-strewn career. And he has had happy second chances, unlike the unfortunate Stephen and Jean, and unlike Tony Webster, the narrator of *The Sense of an Ending*, the [first book Barnes published after Kavanagh died.](#)

Tony, too, is offered the opportunity to rekindle an old flame. Again, there's a 40-year gap. A solitary divorced retiree who puzzles over familiar Barnesian preoccupations (time, memory, aging), Tony comes into contact with an ex-girlfriend, Veronica. He can't let go of their backstory. Soon after they split, she took up with one of his close friends—who shortly thereafter killed himself. Now Tony tries to make sense of two endings: the breakup and the friend's suicide. But instead of a rekindling, or even a moment of clarity, he's left with a muddle. "You just don't get it," Veronica tells him. "But then you never did."

"Our life is not our life," Tony tells himself, "merely the story we have told about our life." He acknowledges that his own is utterly bland: his career, unspecified; his marriage, tepid; his daughter, emotionally distant. "What did I know of life," he asks, "I who had lived so carefully? Who had neither won nor lost, but just let life happen to him?" The romance, the life-and-death passion in this sad, sad novel, takes place out of sight, its contours unknown—except that, of course, none of it involves poor Tony, who gradually then suddenly becomes aware of what's missing. Barnes wrings emotion—sharp, sustained anguish—from remorse at love's absence.

Even in his nonfiction, Barnes points to the holes all around us. In [Nothing to Be Frightened Of](#) (2008), a sophisticated, meandering meditation on mortality and his own *timor mortis* (published, coincidentally, a few months before Kavanagh's death), he keeps the "nothing" of death front and center. And in [The Man in the Red Coat](#) (2019), a boldly unconventional biography of Samuel Pozzi, a pioneering French gynecologist who was a lifelong

friend and sometime lover of the immortal Sarah Bernhardt, Barnes repeatedly taunts us with the limits of our knowledge: “We cannot know.”

What is the string that binds the holes in a biography or a novel? Memory, yes: “We all know that memory is identity,” Barnes writes in *Departure(s)*; “take away memory and what do we have?” Yet he also reminds us that memory is the “place where degradation and embellishment overlap.” To compensate for degradation and to make embellishment pleasing, we call upon imagination and style (that erudite prose), and the comforting continuities of narrative. Add to all of that a kind of attentive engagement—Barnes prefers a more active word, “attending,” a knack for noticing details that beg to be preserved—and you might manage to knit together a coherent pattern of events and images, a history. You might even give shape to a love story. “Writers believe in the patterns their words make,” he tells us in *Levels of Life*. “We cannot, I think, survive without such belief.”

The big-picture pattern that emerges from Barnes’s shelf of books is the mystery of love, which he addresses directly in 20-odd pages of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), an early book of linked stories. The half chapter, aptly named “Parenthesis,” has achieved a modest cult following, undoubtedly because of passages as clever and un-saccharine as this one:

“I love you.” Subject, verb, object: the unadorned, impregnable sentence. The subject is a short word, implying the self-effacement of the lover. The verb is longer but unambiguous, a demonstrative moment as the tongue flicks anxiously away from the palate to release the vowel. The object, like the subject, has no consonants, and is attained by pushing the lips forward as if for a kiss.

In the same unsentimental vein, he insists that we must be “precise” about love, by which he means, “attending to the heart, its pulses, its certainties, its truth, its power—and its imperfections.” That’s a good description of the task that Barnes has taken on as a writer. A final admonition: “We must believe in love, just as we must believe in free will and objective truth.”

At the beginning of *Departure(s)*, Barnes tries out a new perspective. He’s fascinated by an extreme form of what’s known as involuntary autobiographical memory (IAM), in which a particular action triggers a

cascade of memories of all the times that action has been performed in the past. Here's an example: What if saying "I love you," whether you meant it or not, triggered an IAM? He asks, "How would you face the record—the chronological record—of all your lies, hypocrisies, cruelties?" What if one sexual fantasy triggered an IAM onslaught, including all the "inadmissible, sluttish adulteries of the heart which we have chosen to suppress"?

There are memories we suppress and then there's the echoing emptiness of everything we've simply forgotten, a vanished immensity, the selves we've left behind, the many millions of skin cells our body sloughs off every day. Faced with the choice of string or hole—a relentless deluge of recovered memory or the pathos of forgetting, of shedding thoughts that seemed momentous a moment ago—which would you choose?

At the end of *Departure(s)*, Barnes announces, "This will definitely be my last book—my official departure," and he imagines a "final conversation," conjuring the image of

writer and reader on a cafe pavement in some unidentified town in some unidentified country. Warm weather and a cool drink in front of us. Side by side, we look out at the many and varied expressions of life that pass in front of us. We watch and muse.

"What do you make of that couple," he asks us: "married, or having an affair?" Spotting an old couple holding hands, he says, "that always gets to me." He offers other observations, "ordinary, conversational mutterings." He sees, out of the corner of his eye, that we share his "attendingness." He rests his hand on our forearm—a brief touch—and slips away. His parting injunction: "No, don't stop looking."

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The New History of Fighting Slavery

What we learn by tracing rebellions from Africa to the Americas

by Laurent Dubois



In 1812, Spanish officials in Havana, searching the house of a man named José Antonio Aponte, discovered a wooden box hidden in a clothing trunk, opened it, and were stunned by what they found inside. “It was unlike any book they had ever seen,” Carrie Gibson writes in *The Great Resistance*:

The 400-Year Fight to End Slavery in the Americas, “filled with Biblical and historical images, with many black faces, as well as cut-out bits of paper and handwritten words.” Aponte, a freeman who had once served in the local militia, was part of a group that had sought to launch an uprising among the enslaved. The goal was to overthrow slavery and make Cuba independent, but the rebellion had been quickly suppressed.

Put on trial, Aponte was questioned for three days about what his interrogators called his “book of paintings.” In *Daring to Be Free: Rebellion and Resistance of the Enslaved in the Atlantic World*, Sudhir Hazareesingh emphasizes the global sweep of Aponte’s portraits, among them versions of Abyssinian royalty and, as Gibson notes, the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic, believed to have once been a slave himself. One element particularly alarmed the Spanish: scenes of Black soldiers vanquishing white troops, evoking the victories of Haitian revolutionaries against the French a decade earlier. During meetings at his house, Aponte had shown them to fellow insurrectionists as proof that they, too, could win a war against slavery.

When he was asked to explain why he had chosen to include what he did, his answer was simple: “For reasons of history.” Aponte was executed after his trial, and his book disappeared. All that is left are [Aponte’s descriptions of the work, page by page](#), at his trial. But that testimony has allowed contemporary historians and artists to reconstruct his visionary awareness that, in seeking to change his world, he first had to compile his own history of what had come before.

In their ambitious histories of slave resistance, Gibson and Hazareesingh are working in the tradition of Aponte, offering a new intellectual and political perspective on the emergence of freedom in the modern world. A generation ago, foundational works on the history of antislavery movements tended to focus on political thinkers and prominent abolitionists, figures who left ample written records behind. But over the past several decades, scholars have made headway in piecing together the ideas and actions of resistance leaders such as Aponte, as well as of the enslaved themselves. This is challenging work: The system of slavery frequently barred access to literacy, and most accounts of enslaved resistance come from people who were not just hostile to the venture but actively seeking to suppress it. By gathering

second- and thirdhand traces and elusive sources and data, historians have illuminated communities in the forests of the Kongo region, the deltas of West Africa, the mangroves of Cuba, and the swamps of the Carolinas.

From the November 2025 issue: The Black loyalists of the American Revolution

The Great Resistance and *Daring to Be Free* synthesize this growing body of scholarship to offer detailed accounts that stretch from the 15th century, when enslaved people from West Africa were first imported to Iberia, through the abolition of slavery in the United States, Cuba, and Brazil in the late 19th century. Gibson builds on her own earlier wide-ranging history of the Caribbean, *Empire's Crossroads* (2014), and Hazareesingh branches out from *Black Spartacus* (2020), his biography of Toussaint Louverture, a leader of the Haitian Revolution.

The story of resistance begins in Africa, where the slave trade itself originates. There, Hazareesingh argues, lie the foundations of a long and influential tradition of antislavery activity that continued into resistance efforts throughout the Americas. He assembles evidence of what he calls an “African fugitive politics”: people on the continent threatened by enslavement taking concerted action in collective ways, intent on self-determination. In many different regions, groups seeking sanctuary from raids by slavers created new settlements during the 17th and 18th centuries. Many of them exist to this day, their founding histories preserved and celebrated in oral traditions.

The Tofinu took refuge in the lagoons along the Bight of Benin, a core area of the slave trade, venturing forth in canoes with harpoons, javelins, and swords to fight off raiders from powerful nearby kingdoms. In present-day central Nigeria, the Eggon created fortified positions in the hills from which they launched stones, spears, and even beehives against would-be enslavers. The focus on living in freedom nurtured a nonhierarchical approach to politics, Hazareesingh writes, and he describes an ethos rooted in honor and consensus. Settlements were named to convey their fugitive origins. “Here where no one can reach them anymore,” one was called; another was “the village of free people.”

Millions couldn't escape the raiders on the continent. But [the remarkable Slave Voyages database](#)—which both Gibson and Hazareesingh draw on—has transformed our knowledge of resistance at sea. An open-access digital project, it has documented the scale of the slave trade originating on the continent, compiling data on roughly 35,000 voyages that carried at least 10 million people across the Atlantic from Africa. It has also found references to 465 shipboard revolts. Using the database, one study suggests that [open resistance may have occurred in as many as 10 percent of slave voyages](#). The majority of the revolts date back to well before Joseph Cinqué's carefully plotted rebellion on the Amistad in 1839, the most famous of them and one of a small number that succeeded in securing freedom for those aboard.

Historians are also indebted to written documents left behind by Islamic and Catholic thinkers in Africa who developed religious critiques of slavery. Both Gibson and Hazareesingh single out [a Kongoese man named Lourenço da Silva Mendonça](#), who in the 17th century articulated a particularly powerful attack. He was born into the Ndongo royal lineage in the Kingdom of Kongo, where many had adopted Catholicism. In 1671, he and his family were forced out of the kingdom by the Portuguese and sent to the colony of Brazil. Having seen the ravages of slave-raiding in his homeland, he now witnessed the system of slavery into which many of his people had been sold. He then traveled to Portugal and took up residence in a monastery where several others from the Kongo, as well as Indigenous Brazilians, lived and studied.

Convinced that slavery went against the teachings of Catholicism, he wrote a brief denouncing the institution, which he brought to the Vatican in 1684. “Humanity is infused with the spirit of God,” he argued, and racial differences, an “accident of nature,” are in no way grounds for enslavement. As he pressed his case at the Vatican, Mendonça gathered a dossier that included firsthand accounts from Africans in Portugal.

Along with his own experiences, that evidence fueled his eloquent denunciation of “the unjustified methods used to enslave” people in Africa, “from which results the loss of countless Souls,” as well as the “cruelties” practiced against the enslaved in the Americas. Torture with hot wax and tree sap appalled Mendonça; some of the torments, he observed, were worse

than those visited on the early Christian martyrs, and all the more shocking because they were meted out by Christians against other Christians.

Mendonça also advocated on behalf of the “New Christians,” among them Jews who had converted to Catholicism but were often still pursued by the Inquisition.

Pope Innocent XI responded by calling on Spain and Portugal to at least curtail the cruelty of slavery. But the profitable slave trade continued, crucial to the colonial order that the leaders of these and other European kingdoms had decided to build. Mendonça’s singular legal case lay buried in the Vatican archives for centuries. Now recovered, his story is an example of the constant cross-Atlantic transmission of information and ideas that Gibson and Hazareesingh highlight as integral to the far-reaching struggle for abolition.

During his time in Brazil, Mendonça had contact with the residents of Palmares, a network of nine jointly governed maroon communities, many of whose members were formerly enslaved refugees from the Kongo. (In the 16th century, the Spanish used the term *cimarrones*—originally applied to untamed animals—to describe people who escaped from plantations; other colonial powers adopted versions of it, including the English term *maroon*.) Probably the largest of all such settlements in the Americas, Palmares thrived through much of the 17th century, its population numbering as many as 10,000 or perhaps even 20,000 residents at one point, and it wielded clout on a different scale than smaller fugitive communities in Africa did.

Under a leader named Gana Zumba, Palmares signed a peace treaty with the Portuguese guaranteeing its freedom. It established alliances with Indigenous Brazilians in the area, and its inclusivity extended to people who weren’t enslaved but were fleeing colonial society, including Jews persecuted for their religious beliefs. African culture, language, and religious practices undergirded community life, but a Catholic priest performed baptisms in a church in Palmares adorned with statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Blaise, an Armenian martyr whose story of taking refuge from persecution in the Cappadocian mountains resonated with the maroons.

Gibson recounts the trajectory of Palmares as just one part of a much longer history of people seeking freedom and sanctuary in the midst of colonial

societies. In Spanish Santo Domingo, the first slave society in the Americas, Africans on a sugar plantation owned by Christopher Columbus's son rebelled on Christmas Day 1521. They escaped into the hills and allied with an Indigenous group fleeing Spanish control, led by a man named Enriquillo. After 15 years, Spanish troops dispersed the settlement—which had grown to 4,000, and had its own cavalry—but subsequent maroon groups forced colonizers to sign treaties with them.

As the plantation colonies of the British and French Caribbean grew in the late 17th and 18th centuries, escapees formed maroon enclaves there as well. The region also saw a series of mass revolts against slavery. In the 1760s, enslaved organizers in Jamaica launched an uprising that was later known as Tacky's Revolt. It was, as Gibson writes, "not a small, local eruption, easily snuffed out. Rather, this resistance was akin to a multisite, decentralized guerrilla war, not against a particular king or ruler, but against a social and economic system."

And then in 1791, the largest such uprising in history took shape in the nearby French colony of Saint-Domingue. It led to the abolition of slavery by France in 1794 and, when Napoleon Bonaparte sought to reenslave the population, to Haiti's independence from France on January 1, 1804, when the island was rechristened with the original Indigenous name for the territory. Hazareesingh and Gibson emphasize the revolution's role in articulating [a radical idea of universal rights](#) and cultivating new forms of democratic participation. (As the notes in *The Great Resistance* and *Daring to Be Free* indicate, the close-knit field relies on scholarly interchange; both authors draw on my work on Haiti, and I gave Hazareesingh feedback, reading suggestions, and a blurb.)

The Haitian Revolution's success in overthrowing slavery and then establishing a new nation gave rise to a very different archive, including writings by and about its most recognized leader, Louverture, and Haiti's founder, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. These offer us a personal understanding of the influences that shaped their lives and ideas. Dessalines, for instance, acknowledged his deep debt to the woman he considered his "second mother," Toya Montou, one of a number of women who participated directly in combat. She taught him about his African roots and during the revolution led her own unit of insurgents.

Read: The island nation whose history reflects America's

The dramatic victory in Haiti nourished the imaginations of enslaved people across the hemisphere, helping create what Hazareesingh describes as a “popular encyclopaedia” that was “embedded in songs, music, images, and artefacts, and stories, tales, and myths about the revolution’s heroic leaders and the achievements of the Haitian people.” Brazilian authorities were alarmed in 1805 when they found Black officers in the local militia wearing “miniature portraits of Dessalines around their necks.” Parishioners in Black churches in Philadelphia celebrated the anniversary of Haitian independence, if quietly. In Louisiana, a man named [Charles Deslondes led a two-day revolt in 1811](#), the largest in U.S. history, and almost certainly inspired by the Haitian Revolution. Two decades later, [Nat Turner planned his \(ultimately thwarted\) 1831 rebellion](#) in Southampton County, Virginia, to begin on the 40th anniversary of the Haitian Revolution’s start.

From the August 1861 issue: Nat Turner’s Insurrection

The events of the Haitian Revolution reshaped the history of North America: Napoleon’s defeat there prompted him to sell Louisiana—which he had reacquired from Spain as part of his plan to build a French empire in the Americas—to the United States in 1803. The purchase doubled the country’s size, enabling the U.S. to become a bleak outlier: During the next decades, while slavery was being abolished in newly independent Latin American republics and in the British Caribbean, the U.S. expanded slavery into the recently acquired territory.

With the Louisiana Purchase, a huge domestic slave trade got under way, supplying labor to cotton and sugar plantations. Though only roughly 5 percent of the total number of enslaved Africans brought to the New World from the 16th century through the start of the 19th ended up in North America, by the time of the Civil War, the enslaved population had grown to approximately 4 million, mostly native-born. All of their efforts at rebellion in the 19th century were swiftly and brutally suppressed.

Still, other powerful forms of resistance surfaced. Escapes to the North were organized by figures such as Harriet Tubman. Some who had won their freedom, [among them Frederick Douglass](#), wrote powerful autobiographies

that were also devastating critiques of slavery. And abolitionist materials produced in the North traveled south. A Mississippi plantation manager complained in 1847 about an enslaved woman named California who had “an idea that she is free” and was passing that idea on to her children. In an echo of Aponte, she had decorated the walls of her cabin with antislavery prints, which were often circulated along with pamphlets.

From the December 1866 issue: Frederick Douglass’s ‘Reconstruction’

When the Civil War began, as many as 500,000 enslaved men and women escaped toward Union lines. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the involvement of 200,000 Black soldiers in the war proved crucial in the Union victory. Some African American recruiters invoked the earlier history of the Haitian Revolution in their pitch, recalling how Black troops in Haiti had secured and protected abolition: Like those forebears, new “black Toussaints” could strike “blow after blow for freedom,” and bring liberation to all of those still enslaved in the South.

As Aponte knew, the way you look at the past shapes your hopes about the present and future. In the U.S., debates about how to understand our experience of slavery and its ultimate demise are as intense as ever, and will continue to be at the core of broader questions about how to narrate our national story. But Hazareesingh and Gibson invite us to see ourselves as inheritors of something much broader too: a powerful history of political thought and on-the-ground resistance—in many forms, always against seemingly insurmountable odds—that stretched across continents and centuries.

This article appears in the [February 2026](#) print edition with the headline “The New History of Fighting Slavery.”

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What Dante Is Trying to Tell Us

A colloquial translation of
Paradiso might make
people actually read it.

by Eric Bulson



The *Divine Comedy* is more than 14,000 lines long and is divided into three parts, but it's the first part, the *Inferno*, that gets all the attention. For centuries, readers have preferred the horrors of hell to the perfection of heaven. Gustave Doré, the celebrated French illustrator, did [elaborate](#)

[engravings for the three canticles](#) in the mid-19th century and devoted 99 out of 135 of them to Dante Alighieri's darkest scenes.

Who can blame Dante's admirers when hell is filled with so many beautifully flawed characters: Francesca da Rimini, the eloquent adulteress; Farinata, the proud heretic; Ulysses, the defiant king; Ugolino, the father turned cannibal who ate his own sons? And then there are the infernal workers who make sure that Lucifer's realm runs smoothly, among them farting devils, giants in chains, and a flying monster with the body of a serpent and the face of an honest man. Most readers see little reason to continue with the poem once Dante, guided by Virgil, has safely exited "to once again catch sight of the stars."

But Dante's journey has just begun. In *Purgatorio*, he must summit a massive mountain. Success in that struggle leaves him facing, along with other sinners, a wall of flames that inflict purifying pain but not death. Only then does Paradise await—and it's not just around the corner. He must travel past the planets and fixed stars to a rose-shaped empyrean. Tackling this culminating challenge in the company of his beloved Beatrice, who inspired the poem, Dante must *trasumanar*, a magnificent word that he invents to describe the experience of passing beyond what's human.

Dante volunteers to guide us on this last leg, warning in *Paradiso*'s Canto II that "if you lose sight of me, you'll be totally lost. // The waters I'm sailing have never been crossed." Many readers certainly do struggle with the epic's final part, which has its share of dense theological disquisitions. It is filled with vivid scenes, too, which stretch the human imagination about as far as it can go. At one point, Dante's ears are unable to make out divine music, because of his "mortal hearing." But later, when his ears are opened, he comes upon a legion of angels resembling a "swarm of bees," moving back and forth from flower to hive, singing "the glory" of God. Beatrice's beauty only increases as they ascend, her "holy" smile indescribable even if he had "all that eloquence" of the ancient Greek muse of poetry to assist him.

Upon witnessing the Ascension of Jesus Christ surrounded by all of the souls he has redeemed, Dante marvels at how his mind "was released from itself." Put another way, his mind was blown. After that, in a reversal of chronology signaling that we are in a place where sequential time doesn't

matter, he watches the Annunciation unfold as “a crown-shaped circular form” haloed the Virgin Mary, “then whirled around her.” As if that weren’t enough, Dante envisions an eagle in the sky made up of souls that change shape in mid-air, and he identifies a point in the universe that is both center and circumference; that’s where God resides. “Nowhere in poetry,” T. S. Eliot [wrote about this last scene](#), “has experience so remote from ordinary experience been expressed so concretely.”

The earthly experience of personal grief and privation that inspired such transcendent beauty is mind-bending in its own way. During the years that Dante worked on the *Divine Comedy*—1307 to 1321, the last decade and a half of his life—he was exiled from his faction-ridden hometown of Florence. Dante, who [vehemently opposed the papacy’s desire for secular power](#), had been charged with financial corruption, a politically motivated accusation, and the threat of being burned at the stake if he returned hung over him. A party of one, as he later called himself, he wandered from court to court, living off the generosity of a few patrons. He never set foot in Florence again.

Roughly half a millennium after Dante’s death, his poem received an ecstatic welcome in the United States, where Henry Wadsworth Longfellow embarked on the first American translation of all three parts in the early 1860s, as the Civil War raged. A poet and a retired professor of modern languages at Harvard, he made his way through *Paradiso*, [publishing three of its cantos in *The Atlantic*](#), and then turned to the *Inferno*, finishing up with a revision of *Purgatorio*.

Italian nationalists had recently laid claim to Dante’s epic as an expression of shared cultural identity for the country’s warring city-states. Longfellow was a supporter of the so-called Risorgimento and of Dante, whose optimistic message he was keen to mobilize against the tragic events in his own country. Dante’s “medieval miracle of song,” as Longfellow called it, could be reimagined as an allegory for the cleansing of the original sin of slavery and the restoration of a broken democratic union.

Thankfully, Longfellow avoided trying to reproduce Dante’s original terza-rima scheme (in which the last word in the second line of a tercet provides the first and third rhyme of the next tercet). Instead he chose the more

forgiving blank verse, which works much better in English, a rhyme-poor language without Italian's abundance of vowel sounds at the end of words. His translation, published in 1867, was wildly popular.

Since then, about 50 other American renditions of the entire poem have appeared. None is as provocative as the one that Mary Jo Bang, a poet, has been working on for the better part of two decades. And none is as attuned to Longfellow's democratic urge to spread Dante's message of unity either. Following on [her *Inferno*](#) (2012) and [Purgatorio](#) (2021), [Bang's *Paradiso*](#) has arrived at a moment of national turmoil, and sets out to make a vision of hope and humility accessible to all in an unusual way.

Bang's unconventional approach was inspired by an encounter with a medley of 47 different English translations of the *Inferno*'s famous first three lines [assembled by the poet Caroline Bergvall](#). Never having studied Italian, Bang saw a chance to try her hand by relying on those variations, along with [Charles S. Singleton's translation](#) (already on her shelf). The 47 variations mostly struck her as formal and "elevated," and she was curious to discover how contemporary English would sound. In the process, she arrived at something fresh. "Stopped mid-motion in the middle / Of what we call our life," her tercet began, conveying an abrupt jolt, as if a roller coaster was kicking into gear, and then went on: "I looked up and saw no sky— / Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost."

Her experience with these three lines was enough to convince Bang that she wanted to carry on at least with the *Inferno*. She now gathered an array of esteemed English translators to keep her company. (To Singleton and Longfellow, she added William Warren Vernon, John D. Sinclair, and Robert and Jean Hollander, among others.) Whether she would make it through *Paradiso*, which she had until now found "unreadable," was still up in the air.

Her perspective shifted mid-motion, as it were, when the pandemic hit. Colloquially rich translations of the other two canticles behind her, and with the world in lockdown, the time was right to contemplate the afterlife—and undertake the extra challenge of rescuing this last part from unreadability by making it, as she'd done with the preceding canticles, more readily intelligible to 21st-century American readers. "While translating the poem,"

she said in an interview, “I would ask myself how Dante might say something if he were speaking American English at this moment in time. And, additionally, how would he say it if he knew everything that I know.”

By deciding to use a living language, the kind that real people use, she was following Dante’s lead. He had chosen his native Tuscan dialect over literary Latin because it was sensory, ever-evolving, and intimate in the way that it could speak to readers. Phrases such as “I was a sad sack” and “love-struck” are plentiful in Bang’s *Inferno*, and when Dante meets his great-great-grandfather in *Paradiso*, they use words such as *shout-out* and *lowlife*. Dante incorporated cultural allusions familiar to his audience. So does Bang, in both her text and her notes. In the *Inferno*, you’ll even find the obese Eric Cartman, from *South Park*, substituted for Ciacco, the gluttonous Florentine whose name means “little piggy.”

In *Paradiso*, she takes fewer liberties with the text. But in her notes, instead of limiting herself to the dense scholarly glosses on obscure words and the thousands of literary and historical references that are the standard apparatus of translated editions of the *Divine Comedy*, Bang mixes in nods to the more contemporaneous references she’s used. An image of reflecting light that “bounces up, / Like a rocket man who longs to come back” is accompanied, for example, by a citation to both a 1951 Ray Bradbury short story and the Elton John song “Rocket Man.” Commenting on the line “Don’t be like a feather in each wind” as a metaphor for inconstancy, she refers to an echo not just in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* but also in Led Zeppelin’s “All My Love.” This poem, she conveys, isn’t frozen in time; even updated references will lose their cultural currency and need identifying.

To purists who fantasize about the fullest possible immersion in the original text, creative adaptation of this sort sounds like heresy. These same purists would likely be even more horrified to discover something else: By the time Bang was working on *Purgatorio*, she had begun using Google Translate to render lines in the original, getting “a basic scaffold” as she made her way along. She also sometimes consulted Wiktionary, the collaboratively edited multi-language dictionary. With her English editions of Dante still by her side, Bang was at work on an artistic venture very much of the digital age. But for her, translation remained an act of working through and against multiple interpretations and responding by reordering, amending, and

substituting, all guided by poetic decisions—weighing what struck her ear, eye, and mind as most suitable.

A great deal of Dante's remarkable repertoire of technical tricks will get lost in translation, whatever the language and whoever the translator: the chiasmuses, the neologisms, the numerical correspondences, the wordplay, all of the dazzling rhymes necessary to keep the engine of terza rima going. To appreciate just one example of Dante's feats, here is Bang's rendition of the tercet from *Paradiso*'s final canto, in which he is now face-to-face with God: “O Eternal Light, You who alone exist within / Yourself, who alone know Yourself, and self-known / And knowing, love and smile on Yourself!” It flows, but what Dante does can't be matched. The pileup of *you* and *yourself* and *alone* is meant to approximate something extraordinary that is happening in the Italian words: *Eterna, intendi, intelletta*, and *intendente* are infused with the pronoun *te*, “you,” which is directed toward God. He is everywhere, present in the very language being employed to address him at this moment.

Still, readers needn't be aware of Dante's acrobatics to discover that the poem in English provides imaginative explosions that can stun in mid-sentence. Take the moment in *Paradiso* when Dante sees the unity of the universe in an instant. It is an experience that he can never fully transcribe. Yet he tries to convey the miraculous insight by emphasizing its awesome fleetingness. “That single instant is more a blank to me,” is how Bang phrases it, “than / The twenty-five centuries since the feat that made / Neptune marvel at the shadow of the Argo.”

The contemporary ring of “a blank to me” collides with the ancient allusion that immediately follows. And then in the concrete image itself, time and space dilate and compress simultaneously: A god deep in the sea stares upward at an extraordinary event, the mythic first sea-crossing in a boat—an event that seems so small compared with what Dante has just witnessed in heaven.

Throughout the decades when he was barred from going home, and surrounded by chaotic political infighting, Dante kept his eye fixed on the sky above. He stared upward long enough, in fact, to imagine the reverse,

looking downward. In *Paradiso*, his last glimpse of Earth pays tribute to all of the wonder he sees below:

Since the time I'd looked before,
I saw that I'd moved through the entire arc
That the first zone makes from its middle to its end,

So that I could now see the mad path of Ulysses
On the far side of Cadiz, and on the near,
The shore where sweet Europa was carried off.

I would have recognized more of that
Little patch of land, except that beneath my feet
The sun was setting a sign or more away.

That last tercet, though, also conveys a different perspective: For all its marvels, Earth doesn't look like much from such an immense distance. Bang calls it "that little patch of land." Other translators have opted for the phrase "threshing floor," which has archaic biblical overtones, but Bang's choice is, I think, the best. It both captures the earthiness and emphasizes the disorienting scale of Dante's perception. Long before there was an image from outer space of our pale blue dot, he produced one of his own. Earth seems small, fragile, lonely, way out on the edge of the universe, a place populated by a species convinced that it is at the center of everything. Dante had suffered and seen enough to know that it was not.

Now is a good time to pick up *Paradiso*. Some readers might be looking for salvation along the way, but the message is even more universal than that. When the world feels out of control, you can still use your imagination to ascend above the noise, the havoc. Doing so, you might realize just how small you are: small, but far from alone. There are billions and billions of others just like you, trying to navigate "the middle of what we call our life."

Dante's *Divine Comedy* almost joined the ranks of the great unfinished poems in literary history. After his death, in 1321, from malaria contracted on the way back from a diplomatic mission to Venice, the last 13 cantos from *Paradiso* went missing. His sons Jacopo and Pietro looked everywhere but came up empty-handed. And then, so the story goes, Dante appeared to

Jacopo in a dream, and led him to his room in Ravenna. Dante pointed to a hidden recess in the wall: *Paradiso* lost was found, moldy but intact. Seven centuries later, it has been found again.

This article appears in the [February 2026](#) print edition with the headline “What Dante Is Trying to Tell Us.”

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How to Wake the Constitution’s Sleeping Giant

Readers respond to our October 2025 cover story and more.



How Originalism Killed the Constitution

In the October issue, [Jill Lepore explained](#) how a radical legal philosophy has undermined the process of constitutional evolution.

Jill Lepore’s stellar cover story rightly described the Constitution’s amendment provision as a “sleeping giant.” The process is indeed in sound slumber today, but history suggests that it will wake up. Amendments,

history shows, come in cycles. The political factors that trigger those cycles always differ. But what precedes each wave of amendments is consistent: worsening polarization that escalates to violence, butting up against conventional wisdom that insists that amendments are not a viable solution. We are sadly at such a point, much as we were a decade or more before the first amendments of the Progressive era were ratified in 1913. Just prior, at the turn of the century, then-scholar Woodrow Wilson, the editorial board of *The Washington Post*, and the award-winning historian Herman Ames all claimed that the Constitution was unamendable. They were wrong.

We should hope that the violence that finally stirs the giant will be less destructive than in cycles past. But I think we haven't yet hit the low point in our current spiral. We're getting closer: The civic pressures causing our descent are foundational, which means we must confront the Constitution as we reach the bottom. Our return ascent will include repair, correction, and hopefully some amendments.

Rick LaRue

Silver Spring, Md.

I appreciated Jill Lepore's call for overdue amendments in "How Originalism Killed the Constitution." It is clear from our imperial presidency, gridlocked Congress, and captured courts that America suffers from a deep constitutional rot. Potential amendments could include establishing equal rights for women, abolishing the Electoral College, overturning *Citizens United*, and banning gerrymandering. The United States could even attempt more dramatic revisions, such as establishing an elected attorney general, like many states, or imposing a wealth cap, as theorized by Thomas Paine and Plato.

The article describes the Constitution's amendment provision as a "sleeping giant." But how do we wake it? Voters in Missouri, a state referenced in the article for its long history of constitutional amendment, have utilized referenda and initiatives to drive constitutional change for more than a century. Most recently, in November 2024, Missouri voters chose to enshrine women's fundamental right to reproductive freedom in our state

constitution. About 25 states have one or both of these processes, which have been found to promote accountable and responsive government.

In this context, one idea suggested in the 1980s by then-Representative Dick Gephardt of Missouri should be revisited: the national advisory referendum. A proposed amendment, placed on a midterm or presidential ballot by an act of Congress, would not be binding, but the result would gauge whether the amendment has sufficient nationwide support to meet the Constitution's Article V state-ratification requirement.

Unlike most other modern democracies, America has never held a national vote on a question other than who should occupy the presidency and vice presidency. Perhaps this is one of the sources of the chief executive's extraordinary power. But what if the solution to our nation's democratic dysfunction is more democracy, not less?

Nahuel Sebastian Fefer

St. Louis, Mo.

As I read Jill Lepore's article, I kept looking for a mention of the one word consistently missed in the Constitution. For years, I have been hoping that the "originalists" would stop and read the first sentence—"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union ..." —and realize they have been overlooking the word *more*.

The Framers did not believe that America was perfect and that its Constitution ought to be cast in stone, only that America was more perfect than what had come before. They could easily have written "in Order to form a perfect Union," but they didn't. Instead, they understood that what they wrote was never going to be perfect and would need to adapt to endure. Thus, Article V.

Only by ignoring that word can originalists conclude that the Constitution is, as Justice Antonin Scalia put it, "dead, dead, dead."

Cyndy Carrington Miller

Easton, Md.

This summer, while visiting Washington, D.C., with my son, we went inside the Jefferson Memorial and read the inscriptions on the walls out loud. One quote struck me deeply: “I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”

This excerpt from a letter by Thomas Jefferson resonated with me immediately. Jefferson—the original originalist—would have been appalled at some of our recent Supreme Court decisions.

Brad Erickson

Iowa City, Iowa

Jill Lepore states that the more than 400 federal judges appointed by Ronald Reagan were “screened for their views on abortion.” I was Reagan’s last appointment to the United States Court of Appeals, but I was not asked for mine. I was warned that I would be, but the closest his staff got was the following exchange:

“Judge Nygaard, do you have a judicial philosophy?”

“Yes.”

“Would you tell us what it is?”

“I will. In criminal matters, I am basically Cartesian. And in civil and other matters, I am definitely Aristotelian.”

They asked no follow-up questions. I doubt they knew what I was talking about. In full disclosure, I am not sure even I knew!

Richard L. Nygaard
United States Circuit Judge
North East, Pa.

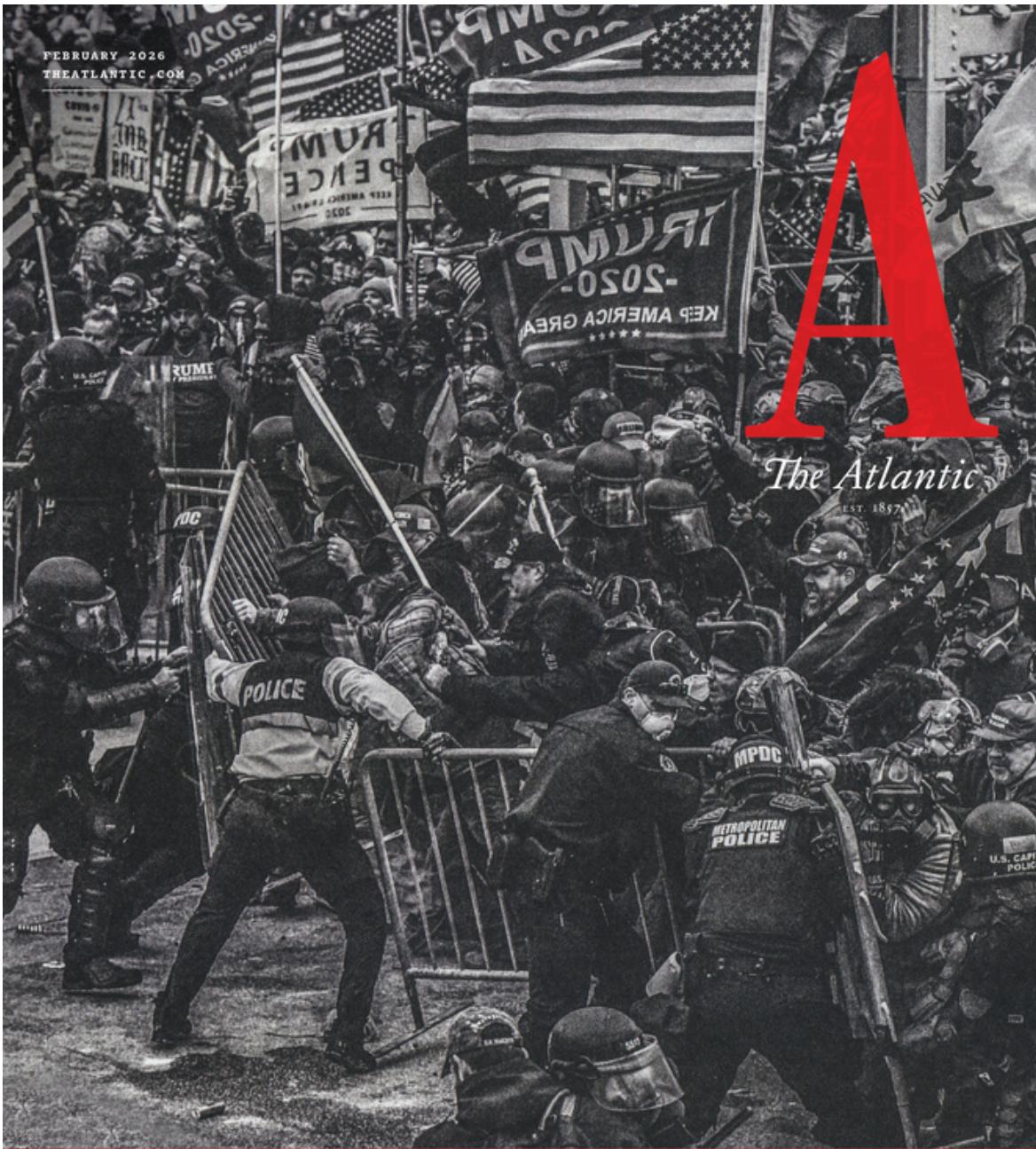
Jill Lepore replies:

In high school I had a wonderfully pudgy and eccentric tenth-grade history teacher. He taught in a second-story room with a wide plate-glass window that looked out at a mountain in the distance, whose silhouette resembled a sleeping giant. In the middle of an especially boring lesson—the accidental presidency of John Tyler, say—he'd lumber across the room and haul himself up onto the radiator beneath the window and lie down on it, exactly lining up his belly with the mountain's summit, his head and feet with its smaller peaks: he, the giant. He'd sigh, settling in, and then he'd appear to nod off. We'd wait, a little nervously. And then suddenly and in a whirl of motion you could not imagine as within the capacity of so large and old and ungainly a man, he'd roll off the radiator, leap to his feet, and cry, “The giant wakes!” And it would be very thrilling, and we'd all snap to attention, and he'd move on and—somehow, somehow—he'd make the fall of the Whig Party gripping. In short, I heartily agree with these readers, and I hereby offer my assurance that the whole point of my sleeping-giant analogy with reference to Article V of the Constitution, aside from being a nod to a beloved teacher, is that somehow, somehow, and I suspect one day soon, “the giant will wake”!

Behind the Cover

In this month’s cover story, “[Is This What Patriotism Looks Like?](#)”, Jamie Thompson tells the stories of Thomas Webster, a retired New York City policeman who attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and Noah Rathbun, a police officer whom Webster assaulted. (Webster has since been pardoned by Donald Trump.) Thompson also profiles Daniel Hodges, a police officer who was pinned against a doorway and beaten while attempting to prevent the mob from breaching the building. For our cover image, we selected a photograph of a group of officers attempting to hold back a crowd of rioters outside the Capitol.

— Paul Spella, Senior Art Director



Donald Trump Wants You To Forget This Happened

January 6, Five Years Later By Jamie Thompson

Corrections

“Just How Real Should Colonial Williamsburg Be?” (November) originally stated that Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry once lived in the Governor’s Palace in Colonial Williamsburg. In fact, the residence at Colonial Williamsburg is a reconstruction of the original building. “The New German War Machine” (January) originally stated that the Bendlerblock once served as the headquarters of the Wehrmacht. In fact, it served as the headquarters of several divisions of the German military.

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Poetry

- **First Memory**

First Memory

A poem

by Mary Jo Salter



She can hold up four fingers: she understands
that next month she'll be 4.

Already she remembers scenes, so many—
her mother walking in through the front door
with her wrapped-up baby brother;
that time the big dog gobbled up her toast
before she could take a single bite; that day
a bad man pushed her so hard on the swing
she spun out, landing face down in the dust.
Also, sometimes, some first happy thing

she barely senses anymore—
a soapy bath toy, warm in her baby hands?

All of that has made her who she is
right now, a girl with pictures in her head
from a place he called the South,
her grandfather whose house she plays outside
where there's a falling whiteness that her mouth
takes in as ice cream: of all her memories,
this is the first one she will claim
even into old age. How could she know
that everything that's happened until now
would melt away in time,
except the snow?

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