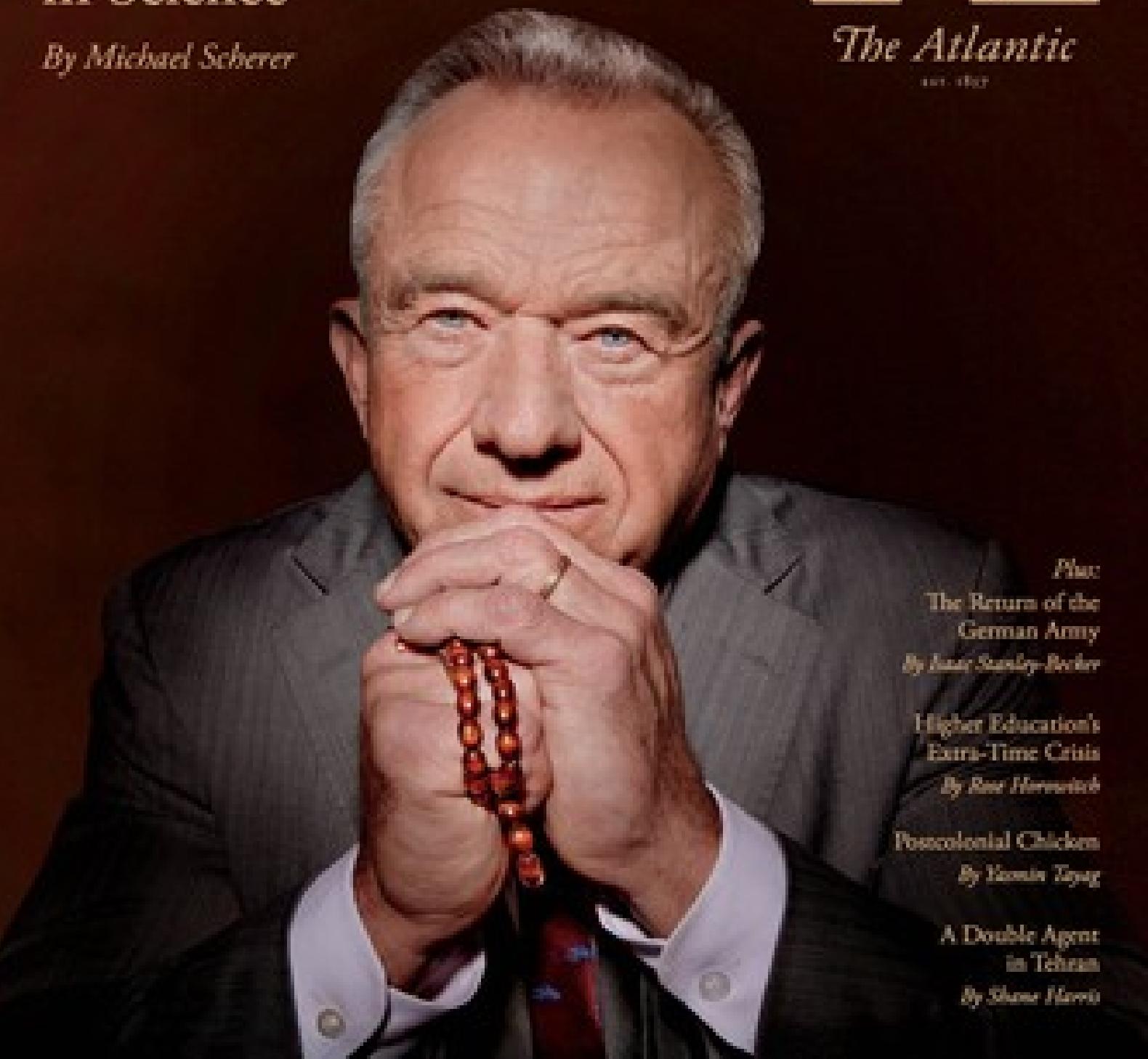


The Most Powerful Man in Science

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The Atlantic
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They Killed My Source

A man claiming to be an Iranian intelligence officer promised me he would reveal his country's secrets. Then he disappeared.

by Shane Harris





In December 2011, the CIA lost control of a stealth drone near the Iranian city of Kashmar, about 140 miles from the Afghanistan border, and it wound up in the regime's possession. On state television, the Iranian military displayed the boomerang-shaped craft like a trophy. Triumphant banners beneath its 30-foot wings said, in Farsi, THE US CAN'T MESS WITH US and WE'LL CRUSH AMERICA UNDERFOOT.

The cause of the crash was a mystery. Had the Lockheed Martin drone—a multimillion-dollar RQ-170 Sentinel—simply gone off course? Or had Iranian hackers commandeered the aircraft, demonstrating the prowess of a growing cyberarmy that had already alarmed U.S. officials?

Just over four years later, in April 2016, a known Iranian hacker group named Parastoo—the Farsi word for “swallow,” the small bird—posted its email address to a cybersecurity message board, inviting journalists to ask it about what had happened to the drone. In my experience covering national security, people who claim to have “the real story” are usually quacks or kooks. Still, I figured it was worth an email.

“I understand you want to discuss the CIA’s RQ-170 drone,” I wrote to parastoo@unseen.is on April 12, 2016. “Want to talk?”

Thirty-six hours later, someone calling himself “P” responded, in clumsy but mostly legible English. “Yes, i want my identity protected and in series of either live interviews or chat-based conversations i would like to reveal all behind that story.”

Reveal all. Sounded kooky.

P said he was part of Parastoo, which had once broken into a server of the United Nations’ International Atomic Energy Agency and claimed to have hacked the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration. The group had also bragged that it could take over U.S. military drones, even once suggesting that it could send one to attack then-Vice President Joe Biden.

P said he would communicate initially via an encrypted text-messaging app called Cryptocat, but coordinating our schedules wasn’t easy. P said he was in Tehran, which was seven and a half hours ahead of Washington, D.C. We settled on Monday, May 2, 2016, for our first conversation.

P asked me questions designed to confirm that I was the person he had corresponded with over email. Where did I work? (*The Daily Beast*, at the time.) Did I have a phone number tied to a specific location? He also asked me a series of biographical questions, such as where I went to college, that he could easily corroborate online. My answers, P said, “helped my investigations on you.”

No source had ever interrogated me like this before. P didn’t talk like a hacker. He was acting like a spy.

P said he was an officer in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, Iran’s CIA. And not just any officer. He said he was in charge of an elite cyber-warfare unit—the kind of group that might have been tasked with taking down an American drone.

P described how his colleagues had captured the Sentinel. His unit obtained satellite and radio information about how the drone communicated with its base, as well as technical information about its stealth capabilities, which he claimed Iran had received from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Iran then located the drone mid-flight and prevented it from returning to Afghanistan. The drone wandered aimlessly until gravity took over.

"She ran outa gas and had to emergency landing by parachute," P typed.

By May 11, he trusted me enough to identify himself. "My name is Mohammad Hossein Tajik," he wrote. "I am 35 but very older like 999 years older in the heart and in the ass!" I didn't quite get the joke, but it seemed that life had taken a toll on him.

A "huge number" of Iranian cyber operations "had my signature on the paperwork or I designed it altogether," Mohammad claimed. At the time, Iran had been credibly linked to disruptions of the global financial system and to the penetration of computers that run crucial infrastructure, such as electrical grids and dams, including one in New York State. Was I now talking to the guy who oversaw those covert operations? And if so, why was he talking to me?

The more we communicated, the less kooky he sounded. Mohammad didn't try to confuse me with technical jargon or wow me with heroics—which made him more credible. Then he said that he didn't actually want to talk about the drone. The Sentinel had been a lure to get my attention.

Mohammad said he wanted my help with a plan. Part one of it: revenge. He wanted to leak information about Iranian intelligence operations in order to hurt and humiliate Iran's leaders, who had profoundly upset him, though he didn't tell me how. In his plan, I would vet Mohammad's claims with my intelligence sources and publish the information if it checked out.

This idea suited me fine. An aggrieved government employee is often a journalist's best source.

Part two of Mohammad's plan was, frankly, insane. He told me he was once an asset for the CIA, and had worked on "big ops." He wanted to rekindle

his relationship with the agency. He was hoping I would connect with his former CIA handler using my contacts within the agency, and convey that Mohammad was still a valuable asset, as evidenced by my eventual news articles sourced to him. If the CIA didn't welcome Mohammad back in from the cold, he would expose how the CIA operated inside Iran.

Arash Azizi and Graeme Wood: Anything could happen in Iran

"Using this model," he texted, "i can work with you and get what i want in return."

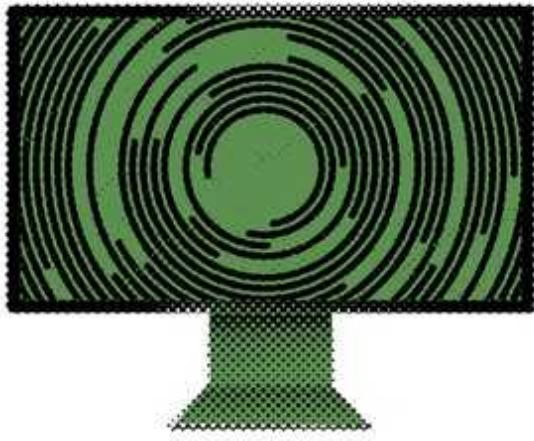
In blunt fashion, he was expressing how both our businesses work. Mine eschews deception, but journalists collect sources, then assess and second-guess them, just as spies do. A journalist and an intelligence officer are both trying to piece together a coherent story from confusing fragments of reality. And very few journalists, if any, could count a senior Iranian intelligence officer turned American spy as a source.

"Are you in?" Mohammad asked me.

I did not commit to part two of the plan—journalists don't negotiate on our sources' behalf, or involve ourselves in intelligence operations—but was happy to proceed with part one: leaking secrets to me.

"I'm in," I typed.

"Alright—let the game begin."



I had never spoken with an Iranian intelligence officer before, so I had no baseline to assess whether Mohammad fit the profile. I pictured some version of Shaun Toub, the actor who had played an Iranian spy chief turned CIA asset in the third season of *Homeland*. Restrained. Unhurried. Elegant.

That was not Mohammad. His patience was short. He tried a little too hard to be funny. He was cocky but vulnerable, and sometimes goofy. I remember thinking, *He's a nerd.*

He had never married, which was unusual for someone in his position of responsibility, he told me. For several years he'd had an online relationship with a woman, but they had not met in person. He never mentioned friends in Tehran.

"I got not much social life outside work," he said.

He loved Western culture, especially American movies. He quoted a scene from *The Shawshank Redemption* in which Morgan Freeman's character, released from prison into an unfriendly world, narrates: "No way I'm gonna make it on the outside." We discovered that we were both fans of *All the President's Men*. Perhaps Mohammad fancied himself as Deep Throat, meeting me in a virtual parking garage and hinting at greater revelations to come. Our weekly encrypted conversations—over Cryptocat, Skype, and Proton Mail—had a cinematic thrill. But unlike in *All the President's Men*, I was learning as much about the source himself as the regime he claimed to be undermining.

Mohammad told me he was born into a religious and politically active family. In 1979, his father joined fellow revolutionaries in storming the headquarters of the Shah’s secret police force, and interrogating and torturing officers; then he helped found Iran’s intelligence service. “I hate this whole SHIT immeasurably,” Mohammad told me about the family business. But he was a math prodigy and computer whiz, and at age 18, he started working for the intelligence ministry. Within a decade, he said, he was playing a central role in Iran’s aggressive expansion into cyber warfare.

[From the December 2004 issue: Mark Bowden on the Iranian hostage-takers](#)

Over several conversations, Mohammad gave me a detailed overview of Iran’s cyber battlefield: the countries it was targeting in the Middle East, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the alliances it had formed with Russia and China. He explained how the intelligence ministry concealed its hand by hiring contractors—specifically tech companies run by young men who, like Mohammad, had graduated from computer-science and engineering programs at Iranian universities. Two of Mohammad’s contractor friends were indicted in a U.S. district court in March 2016 for cyberattacks against dozens of U.S. financial institutions. Like Mohammad, his friends were the children of military or political officials “who got into business based on their fathers reputation,” he said. One of their fellow hackers was also indicted for breaking into the control systems of the dam in New York.

If he was telling the truth, Mohammad was taking me deeper into the regime’s cyberworld than any of my sources had ever done. He said he’d been involved in [an audacious 2012 attack on Saudi Aramco](#), the kingdom’s oil company, that wiped out information on three-quarters of its office computers. In 2015, Mohammad claimed, his team penetrated a commercial satellite network called iDirect to take control of U.S. drones. I’ve seen no evidence that Iran was able to use a drone in an attack, though Mohammad described to me how Iran could commandeer one. (“There is no record, evidence, or indication of any such incident” like what Mohammad described, an iDirect spokesperson told me, noting that the company doesn’t own or operate drones, nor does it operate any satellite networks.)

Mohammad said his colleagues shared techniques with Russia's military-intelligence service, the GRU, and were behind the 2015 attacks on the electrical system in Turkey, a NATO member.

In his most astonishing claim, Mohammad told me that Iran was responsible for [a major cyberattack on the central bank of Bangladesh](#), from which hackers stole \$81 million in February 2016, sowing panic throughout the global financial system. The U.S. Justice Department indicted three hackers from North Korea. Mohammad said that Iran had played a secret role. It had given technical instructions to Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based militia, about how to manipulate a communications network known as SWIFT, which connects financial institutions. The group then traded the information, for missiles, to North Korea.

Mohammad said Iran gave permission for Hezbollah to attack. "Our assumption was they'd do the hack," he said. "But they did something smarter."

If it was revealed that Iran and North Korea were covertly collaborating, the United States' retaliation would presumably be severe. To test Mohammad's claims, I spoke with half a dozen researchers who'd studied the Bangladesh Bank robbery. None had found any indication that Iran had participated. But they thought Mohammad's description of events sounded plausible.

[From the October 2025 issue: Graeme Wood on Iran, the neighbor from hell](#)

My notebook was filling up with plausibilities. Was Mohammad giving me major scoops, or tall tales? If he was being honest, then he was putting his life at great risk. How badly had the regime wronged him that he would tell these secrets to a journalist? And, before that, to the CIA?

Mohammad said he had been an American intelligence asset for about five years, but indicated that the relationship had ended on bad terms. He told me that the CIA would now engage with him for only one reason: to exfiltrate him from Iran. All he had to do was get to a U.S. consulate or embassy in another country and say an agreed-upon passcode at the front desk. Then he would be protected and free. If that was true, why hadn't he accepted the offer?



There's an old saw in the intelligence profession about what motivates someone to betray their country and spy for another: MICE.

Money: They need it, and will sell information for it.

Ideology: They want to help a cause, or tear one down.

Coercion: They're being blackmailed.

Ego: They have a big one, and it needs feeding.

Mohammad lightly checked the "I" box. Service to the Islamic Republic was Mohammad's "family legacy," he told me, but he'd begun to view the regime as corrupt, hypocritical, and out of touch. The intelligence ministry spied on Iranians with professional ties overseas and accused some of plotting revolution. Iran was cutting itself off from the rest of the world and dismantling recent reforms just as Mohammad was going online and imagining a life beyond the one he knew.

"Through the years specially after internet i get to read and see very much, previously hidden from me and i started to change," Mohammad told me in

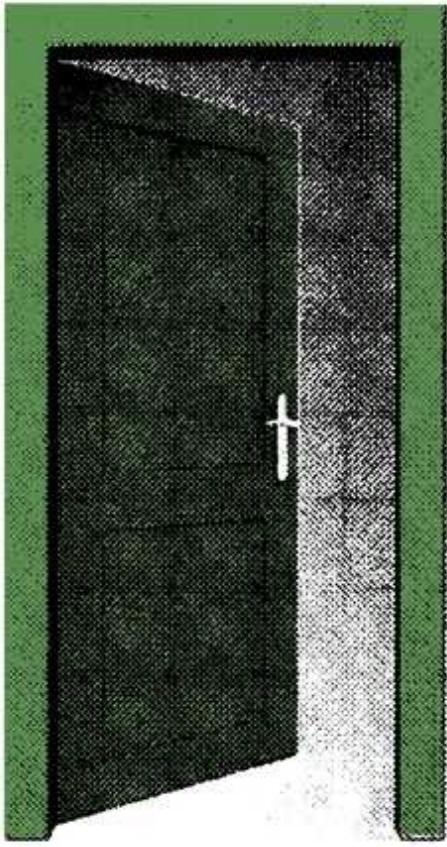
May 2016, adding: “Eventually i turned into a TRUE ENEMY of this whole shitty regime and all that relates to it from every aspect.”

But what really motivated Mohammad was the “E” box: ego. He believed he was smarter than most people, including his contacts at the CIA. He relished playing two roles—trusted by Iran, engaged by the United States. But that took a toll.

Mohammad worked hard to keep up his outward persona of a fervent supporter of the regime and the Islamic Revolution. A member of “God’s party/army in all aspects,” as he put it. “I live a complicated double life, and it’s hurting me as a human inside,” he told me. At one point, he described his life as a CIA asset: “Being still a double—turning into a triple and later to a nothing/everything/ticking-bomb.” I didn’t understand what he meant, but I had the sense that I didn’t know the real Mohammad.

As he rose in the intelligence ministry’s ranks, he told me, he took several trips to Lebanon and grew close to top Hezbollah leaders, including Imad Mughniyah, who’d plotted the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut. Mohammad’s friendships with some of the world’s most notorious terrorists—who had American blood on their hands—would have made him a prized CIA asset. He told me that he’d shared information about Hezbollah’s organizational structure with the CIA, and told the agency how Hezbollah units interacted with the Iranian intelligence ministry.

The CIA had hunted Mughniyah for decades and finally killed him in a joint operation with Israel in February 2008, the same year that Mohammad said he began working for the agency. In our conversations, Mohammad never claimed direct credit for American operations—that was another sign of his credibility, in my book—but his time with the CIA coincides with other notable U.S.-intelligence successes in Iran. In September 2009, for example, Western leaders announced the discovery of Fordow, an underground uranium-enrichment plant (which [the Trump administration would bomb](#) in 2025). Given his position, Mohammad could have known about the site. If he had wanted to “hurt the regime,” as he said, he was well placed to do so.



For two months in the late spring and early summer of 2016, Mohammad told me stories about his family, his cyber exploits, his work with the Americans, his plans to settle scores with the regime. I liked him. He made me laugh. I wouldn't call him a friend, but we were friendly.

Vetting Mohammad's more sensational claims took a back seat as I tried to keep pace with a furious news cycle. In one week during July 2016, I juggled stories about the FBI's decision not to recommend prosecution of Hillary Clinton for using a private email server, the Russian government's hacking of the Democratic National Committee's computer network, and the Republican National Convention in Cleveland.

When Mohammad and I spoke on July 2, 2016, he was anticipating a new round of cyberattacks, this time on Saudi Arabian banks. He told me more about how Hezbollah had assisted North Korea with cyber tactics, and I wanted to devote our next conversation to the subject. We agreed to speak three days later.

Mohammad didn't show up online at our designated time. He had never missed an appointment, though he was often preoccupied with work. A few days later, I got a text from a well-known journalist named Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian dissident living in exile in Paris. Mohammad had been sharing information with him, too, and had introduced us weeks earlier. Zam sounded panicked.

"Have you heard what happened?" he asked.

Mohammad was dead.

I felt sick—not just at the news, but out of fear that I might have done something to get Mohammad killed. Had Iranian counterintelligence officers been monitoring us? I spent the next two weeks reviewing our security protocols, agonizing over whether we could have been safer.

Zam forwarded me a text exchange with a member of Mohammad's family that suggested that Mohammad had been murdered by the regime. Zam also sent me Mohammad's death certificate, showing that he had died on July 5, the day we were supposed to speak. His body had since been buried in Behesht-e Zahra, Tehran's main cemetery.

Using Google Translate, I made sense of Zam's subsequent messages. Amir, Mohammad's youngest brother, had found the body. There had been no autopsy. Zam alleged that Mohammad's father, who was known by the honorific Hajji Vali, had killed his own son in an act of loyalty to country over family.

Then, on July 18, I got a call from the FBI. An agent from the Washington field office said he needed to discuss something sensitive.

The agent came to my house two days later. We sat in the living room. He told me that he specialized in notifying victims of computer hacking. People—presumably unfriendly ones—were chattering about me overseas, and the FBI wasn't sure why. The agent asked: Had anyone sent me strange messages recently?

You don't know the half of it, I thought. "It's Iran, isn't it?" I asked.

The agent nodded. He asked why I thought so.

Without revealing Mohammad's name or that he'd claimed to work for the CIA, I told the agent that I had developed an Iranian source and that we had communicated over the previous two months.

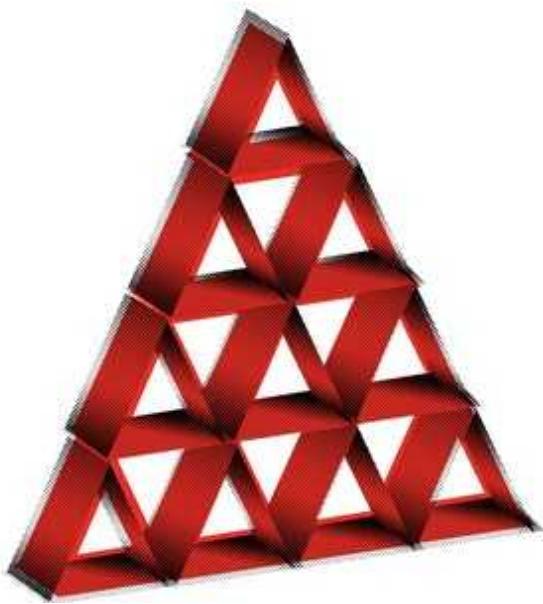
The agent asked for his whereabouts.

He was killed two weeks ago, I said.

The agent sat in silence for a moment. He appeared to choose his next words carefully. A group of Iranians—he didn't say whom they worked for—was discussing me by name, and clearly wanted to know more about me. Now he understood why.

Were my husband and I in danger? The agent said he didn't think so. One of our cats strolled into the living room and sniffed at the agent's pants. "My security detail," I said.

The agent doubted that I was to blame for the killing. Mohammad had indeed been playing a game. And now I was left with a puzzle.



First, I wanted to finally answer the big question: Was Mohammad really a spy for the CIA?

One of my intelligence sources gasped when I mentioned Mohammad's name over lunch, and described him as "a brilliant hacker." Another smiled nervously and called him "the person you're talking about," as if saying Mohammad's name would reveal classified information. Yet another confirmed that, earlier in the Obama administration, a prized Iranian asset had made it possible for the United States to confidently and publicly blame Iran for the cyberattack on Saudi Aramco. Mohammad had told me that he participated in that operation; apparently, he also told the CIA about it.

Mohammad was indeed among the CIA's most well-placed assets, as he had claimed.

The other pieces of the puzzle—who had killed Mohammad, and what had led him to that fate—were harder to assemble.

When Mohammad and the CIA parted ways, in 2013, it was a bad time for spies. Iran had breached the CIA's internet-based system for covertly communicating with its agents in the field. Mohammad told me that he'd never trusted Langley's communications procedures. When he communicated with his handlers, he said, he used his own private network to connect with the Sony laptop the agency had given him.

The laptop prevented Mohammad from taking screenshots, so he used his personal phone to photograph his communications and made copies of information he gave the CIA. "For insurance," he told me. He had broken protocol because he thought he was smarter than the Americans. This was a profound mistake.

After Mohammad's death, I tracked down people who knew him, including friends and Iranian activists living abroad. I learned that he had been arrested by Iran a few months after the CIA cut ties with him, three years before he connected with me. Those phone photos easily could have tipped off the regime. In August 2013, he was taken to a detention center on the eastern outskirts of Tehran. A month later, Mohammad was transferred to

Evin Prison, a notorious facility designed to isolate detainees and break them.

Mohammad endured months of torture, he would later tell friends. Interrogators poured boiling water on his penis. They forced him to curl up in a pit shaped like a grave, with a light shining on him at all hours. Mohammad was charged with spying for Iran's adversaries.

All the President's Men had been a touchstone for our relationship. But, with the revelation of his imprisonment, I thought about that other favorite movie of ours. Mohammad had ended up in *Shawshank*—a prisoner in the torture chambers at Evin, but also a lifelong captive of the regime itself.

After spending half a year in jail, Mohammad was released to await trial. This is highly unusual in Iran. But Mohammad was bailed out, according to his friend, by a powerful ally in the security establishment: his father, Hajji Vali.

Mohammad spent six months in a hospital recovering from his injuries. His dark beard turned white. For a year, he couldn't sit straight. Then, in January 2015, Mohammad sent an email to Zam, who had also been tortured in Evin, after he participated in the political protests in 2009. Mohammad told Zam that he had spied for the CIA and that he didn't trust his father. He couldn't talk to his brothers; two also worked for the intelligence service, and the other, Amir, was too young to comprehend the mess Mohammad had made. But he could talk to journalists and dissidents.

Zam told me that he and Mohammad spoke nearly every night for a year. Zam wanted political change. Mohammad wanted payback through political change. He became a valuable anonymous source within the regime for Zam's independent news organization, which had a following in the Iranian diaspora and among foreign journalists. If he ever did leave the country, Mohammad said, he wanted to be known as "Iran's Snowden": a former insider who became a symbol of resistance.

Ego, indeed. Mohammad was engaged in the very behavior for which he was awaiting trial. As if that wasn't crazy enough, he soon started talking to me.



Mohammad never told me about his time in prison, or that he had been charged with espionage. Now I understood why he wanted to hurt the regime: It had hurt him.

But I also questioned how truthful Mohammad had been with me. In 2011, *The Christian Science Monitor* had [published some of the details](#) of the Sentinel-drone takedown, though not nearly as precise as Mohammad's version. Perhaps he was just parroting that report back to me, with his own embellishments. Mohammad also had been in custody during some of the exploits that he'd claimed his team carried out. How did he know about them? And had he gone back to work for the regime after he was released and was awaiting trial? That seems implausible. More likely, I have concluded, is that Mohammad remained in touch with colleagues and was aware of what they were up to. In hindsight, he was more reckless than I knew.

Even as he stared down a court date, he was trying to use me to rekindle his relationship with the CIA. And the whole time, he was leaking to me and Zam. He took yet another risk introducing the two of us, a month before he died, because the Iranians were almost certainly trying to penetrate Zam's communications, given his prominence in the dissident community. Zam urged Mohammad to leave Iran. Mohammad said he wasn't ready. He worried about leaving behind Amir.



Mohammad Tajik (*left*) and his youngest brother, Amir (*The Atlantic*)

And, of course, Mohammad had unfinished business with the regime. That's where I came in, as his desired broker with the CIA.

But here's what Mohammad probably never knew, or didn't want to admit: The CIA had cut ties because the risk of working with him became greater than the value of his information. My sources told me he didn't follow instructions. One day he'd be clearheaded; the next he'd be acting paranoid, imagining conspiracies. Some officers wondered if he was taking drugs that impaired his judgment. It's a handler's job to manage sources. And Mohammad, one U.S. official told me, had become "unmanageable."

Something else gave CIA officers pause. No one had ever met Mohammad in the flesh. He was a "walk-in": a volunteer spy rather than a recruit. Mohammad's handlers knew he was special—a senior intelligence officer

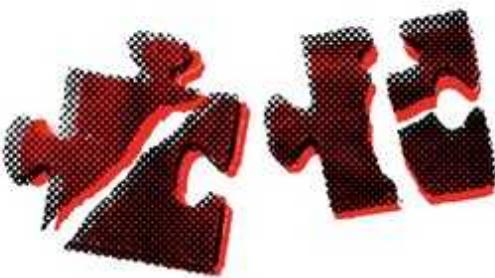
from a prominent family with access to extraordinary information—but the CIA never seemed fully comfortable with him.

And the CIA had good reasons to suspect that Mohammad may have been compromised. He had been thrown in prison for espionage shortly after the agency cut ties. Then, months after his arrest, he was suddenly set free and wanted to reestablish his relationship with the agency. Perhaps the Iranians had coerced him into working against the Americans, in exchange for his freedom.

I thought about the cryptic message he'd sent me about his life at that time: "Being still a double—turning into a triple and later to a nothing/everything/ticking-bomb."

When Mohammad was trying to reconnect with the Americans, was he actually working for Iran? And by asking for my help, had Mohammad been using me to entrap the CIA?

A nothing/everything/ticking-bomb. That's a man who had come to the end of his rope. Who thought he was dangerous, to others and maybe himself. Now I know that while he was talking with me, Mohammad was about to take the biggest—and final—risk of his life.



In July 2016, two months into our communications, Mohammad planned to fly to Turkey and give regime documents to Zam. He spent days scanning them. He converted Iranian currency into U.S. dollars. His suitcase was packed.

According to Zam, Mohammad's next leak was supposed to involve Iran's efforts to acquire a nuclear weapon from another country. I have only Zam's word on this. Mohammad never told me about any such operation; my other sources have never even suggested that Iran attempted to procure a nuke. I can't say if Zam was exaggerating, or if Mohammad had led him on.

Amir, who was perhaps the main reason his brother had stayed in Iran, saw the suitcase and asked where Mohammad was going.

To Turkey to meet a friend, Mohammad replied. You should come with me.

Amir refused. He left the house and told their father that Mohammad was leaving, according to information Zam pieced together from conversations with his own sources and text messages with Amir.

At 3 p.m. on July 5, the day Mohammad and I were supposed to next meet online, his father, Hajji Vali, and another official from the intelligence ministry came to his house, Zam told me. Amir returned home that evening and found his brother's body. A few days later, the home was raided. The authorities took Mohammad's possessions, including his computer.

Rumors have circulated for years in the diaspora about how Mohammad died. His burial certificate lists no cause of death. I've read claims on Iranian blogs that he had a heart attack, but friends told me he was in relatively good health, save for a reliance on painkillers (torture has a long tail).

The most widely shared story among regime critics in exile is that Hajji Vali killed him—if not with his own hands, then by his orders. Zam was certain of this, but he, too, had come from a prominent family that he left behind in Iran. Maybe Mohammad's father was merely a convenient villain for the story Zam was trying to tell.

Hajji Vali kept away from his son's grave at the burial service and watched from under the shade of a nearby tree, Zam later recounted in a lengthy interview with Voice of America's Persian News Network. Mohammad's death was an assassination, Zam said, "one of those ideological murders, where a father, in order to stick to his beliefs, is content with the death of his

son.” Avoiding a trial would also have saved the Iranian intelligence service and his father from significant embarrassment.

Could Hajji Vali have murdered his own son? In our many conversations, Mohammad neither excoriated nor extolled his father. He understood Hajji Vali as a product of revolutionary circumstances. Men like him probably wanted Mohammad dead. I can’t speak for Hajji Vali, and I couldn’t locate him for comment. (Iran’s mission to the United Nations declined to comment.)

Iranian intelligence surely found my conversations with Mohammad in his computer hardware. I think what sent the FBI to my door was U.S. surveillance of Mohammad’s colleagues as they discussed whether to hack me.

In 2021, five years after Mohammad died, I wanted to check in with Zam to compare notes, to finally start putting together the puzzle after years of professional distraction. I discovered that a year earlier, Zam had been [lured to Iraq](#) with the promise of interviewing a prominent cleric—and then apprehended, taken to Iran, and hanged.

You can find only traces of Mohammad today. Search his name online, and you’ll see some court documents, a few blog posts about his death, and a short Wikipedia entry. Activist bloggers briefly celebrated Mohammad as a martyr, but he was not, in the end, “Iran’s Snowden.”

I won’t pretend that I really knew Mohammad. Maybe I knew one version of him—the version in a selfie I obtained. With his thick black glasses and rumpled shirt, he looked like the intense nerd I’d always envisioned. I suspect he never told me about his prison time and torture because he considered them detours from his objectives.

Sometimes I think about how Mohammad first introduced himself to me: “I am 35 but very older.” I understand now. He was traumatized. He was tired. And he was trapped in a fantasy of revenge. “But there is another thing named life,” Mohammad told me, “and i strongly miss it.”

This article appears in the [January 2026](#) print edition with the headline “The Mystery of Mohammad Tajik.”

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The New German War Machine

After World War II, Germany embraced pacifism as a form of atonement. Now the country is arming itself again.

by Isaac Stanley-Becker



Updated at 8:59 p.m. ET on December 9, 2025

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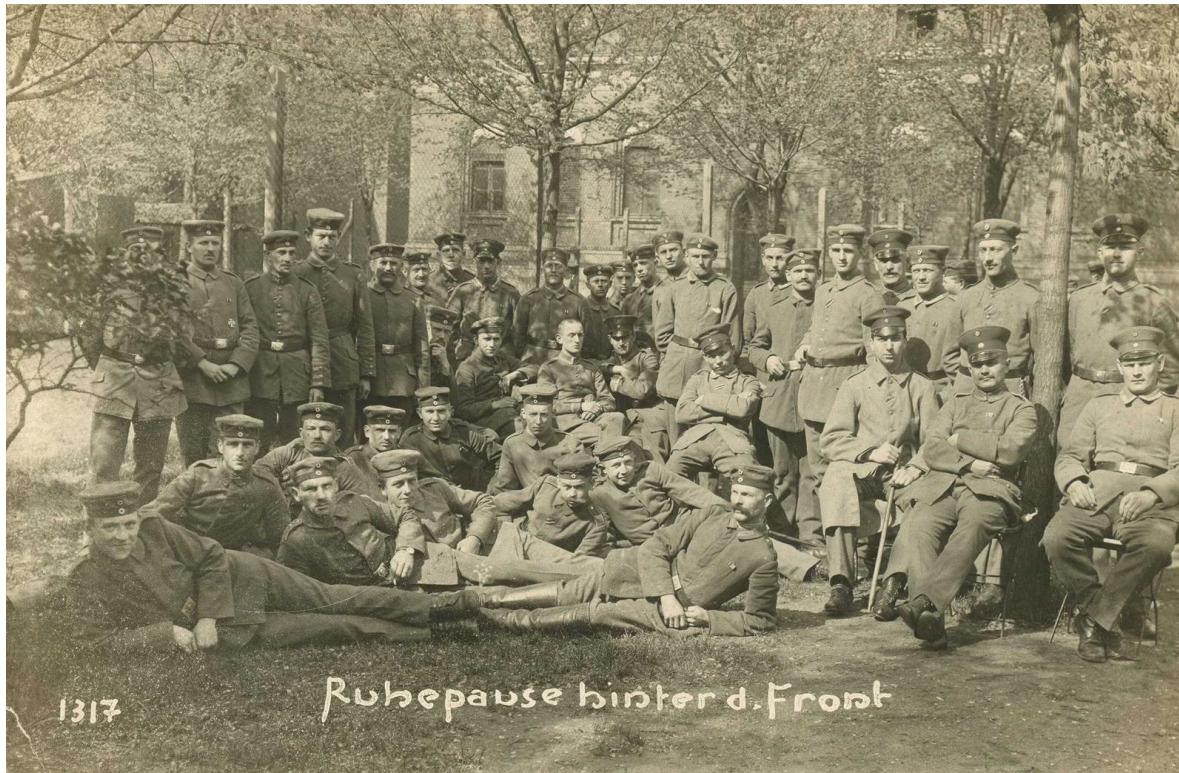
The Bendlerblock is an imposing neoclassical building near the center of Berlin—severe and symmetrical, with a red-tile roof. Parts of the German military were based there in World War II, and it's where officers who plotted to kill Hitler in 1944 were executed by firing squad. Now the complex houses Germany's defense ministry, which oversees the armed forces.

I went to the Bendlerblock this past summer to meet with German military officials and see how they're responding to an aggressive Russia and a mercurial America. Two sergeants escorted me to the office of Lieutenant General Christian Freuding.

At the time of our meeting, Freuding was in charge of the ministry's Ukraine unit, but he had just been named the next chief of the army, a role he assumed in October. His actual, ambivalent-sounding title is inspector of the army. Freuding is gaunt and soft-spoken, with something of an aristocratic bearing. He doesn't come from a long line of military officers, he told me, but his grandfather served in both world wars and was imprisoned by Allied forces in 1945.

I told him about my own German family. A century ago, my great-grandfather Hans Salzmann was a soldier in the German army. He fought in the First World War and was wounded near Verdun and awarded the Iron Cross before returning home to practice medicine. But then his country turned on him. When the Nazis stripped him of his citizenship, he fled, sailing from Hamburg to Cuba and then to New York City, with a red J stamped on his passport.

Freuding nodded. "So you have a very personal relationship to this topic as well," he said.



The author's great-grandfather fought for Germany in World War I; his unit is pictured here taking a break from fighting at the front. (Ruth Salzmann Becker Papers / Iowa Women's Archives / University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City)



The topic in question was the past and future of German militarism and its meaning for German society—a topic about which my great-grandfather thought deeply. He clung to the belief that his homeland would one day be redeemed—that the nation of “*Dichter und Denker*,” of poets and thinkers, had not “disappeared entirely beneath the dirt and mud of the Third Reich.” He wrote these words soon after the Nazi surrender, as the Allies destroyed what was left of Germany’s war machine and put its leaders on trial for crimes against humanity.

At first, disarmament was imposed on Germany. American and Russian forces seized weapons depots, sealed off factories, and sent trainloads of military equipment out of the country. During the Cold War, countering the Soviet threat required a new West German military, rebuilt from the ranks of former Nazis, but always under Washington’s supervision.

[From the December 2022 issue: Clint Smith on how Germany remembers the Holocaust](#)

Germany eventually embraced its own relative powerlessness as a symbol of atonement, and of human progress. After the Cold War, the country’s pacifism became a mark of its faith in a global system of rules and treaties. Germany, the thinking went, could relinquish its own self-defense because brutal competition for continental dominance was over.

What made this possible was U.S. power, and in Germany, signs of it were everywhere—on bases where American troops were deployed and American nuclear weapons were stored, in cafés where Radio Free Europe broadcast American news and music, in schools and hospitals rebuilt under the Marshall Plan. Freuding said that he spent time as a teenager in the 1980s at American bars in Grafenwöhr, a town near a U.S. Army garrison that serves as one of NATO’s most important training bases. American soldiers were a constant presence, and he liked them. To Germans, Freuding said, the soldiers seemed steady, dependable—an embodiment of the American-led order.

But now that order is vanishing, Freuding said. My presence seemed to offer him something he’d been missing: an interested American audience for his worries about European security. Freuding had once been able to text

American defense officials “day and night,” he said, but lately communication with his counterparts in Washington had been “cut off, really cut off.” The Trump administration had offered no warning, for instance, about its move to suspend certain weapons shipments to Ukraine. For information about American policy, Freudung has looked to the German embassy in Washington, where “there is somebody who tries to find somebody in the Pentagon.”



Lieutenant General Christian Freudung, chief of the German army (Hannes Jung for *The Atlantic*)

The faltering of American support couldn’t come at a worse time. The German officials I met, a sober group of military planners, spend their days watching Moscow’s troop mobilizations, trying to determine if Vladimir

[Putin will order an attack on a NATO country](#) by the end of the decade and whether the American president would, in such a case, come to Europe's defense. "You not only have an enemy knocking at the door," Freudig said, "but you also are in the process of losing a true ally and friend."

So Germany has recognized that it needs to rearm. It's spending billions on weapons and repurposing civilian industries for arms production. It's even debating whether to reintroduce conscription. The government has promised to transform the army into the strongest in Europe. For the first time since the Second World War, Germany is permanently stationing troops beyond its borders.

Not long ago, these plans would have set off international alarms. But as the United States upends the global order it created, Germany may have no other choice.

Boris Pistorius, the German defense minister, couldn't believe what J. D. Vance was saying. On the main stage of the Munich Security Conference last February, the vice president was attacking America's NATO partners, comparing European democracies to authoritarian regimes and accusing Europe's leaders of stifling free speech and suppressing support for far-right parties. The targets of his criticism sat before him: the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council; heads of government from countries including Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and Latvia. A stunned silence fell over the grand hall of the Hotel Bayerischer Hof.

The annual security conference is traditionally a chummy event, sometimes described as a "transatlantic family meeting." It's not always harmonious; in 2003, Germany aired doubts about American plans for the war in Iraq. But criticism of the host country is considered uncouth. And in recent years, the meeting in Munich has represented a show of Western solidarity with Ukraine. But Vance used the conference as a platform for MAGA grievances. "The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia; it's not China," he said. "What I worry about is the threat from within."

Pistorius couldn't let the vice president's comments pass without rebuke. "That is unacceptable," [he shouted in English](#) from the second row. Vance

continued, unfazed. Later, at the lectern, Pistorius declared that he must “explicitly contradict and oppose” Vance’s claims before turning to the focus of the conference: European and international security. Because the White House was pressing for a quick settlement to Russia’s war in Ukraine, and signaling that Europe would have to enforce the terms, Pistorius warned, “The choices we make now will determine whether we live in peace or in crisis.”

[From the October 2022 issue: Ukrainians are defending the values Americans claim to hold](#)

Pistorius has a restless air about him; his gait is hurried, his gestures emphatic. When I met with him at the Bendlerblock, he told me he’d never imagined that he would lead his country’s rearmament. His father was a pacifist who didn’t allow toy guns in the house. During the Cold War, Pistorius joined the Social Democratic Party, which had made *Ostpolitik*, aimed at easing relations with Moscow, the center of its foreign policy. “America is indispensable,” went the credo, but “Russia is immovable.” But after the Iron Curtain fell, Pistorius recalled, Germans thought they were living in a world without threats.



Boris Pistorius, the German defense minister (Hannes Jung for *The Atlantic*)

After Russia's annexation of Crimea, in 2014, Germany agreed to work toward spending 2 percent of its economic output on defense within a decade. But its progress was slow in the years that followed, and Donald Trump complained in his first term that Germany and other NATO members weren't paying their share. German soldiers told me it was common then for members of the officer corps to purchase their own gear: boots, pants, field jackets.

Then, in 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the outset of the war, Europe's largest since World War II, Germany's army chief [admitted in a public post](#) that the forces under his command were "more or less bare." The German government declared a *Zeitenwende*, or "turning of the times." It promised a burst of cash for the Bundeswehr—the armed forces—that would finally bring the country, which has Europe's biggest economy, in line with NATO targets. A second shock came not long after the Munich Security Conference, when German officials watched in disbelief as Trump, in a televised Oval Office meeting, reprimanded Volodymyr Zelensky for refusing peace on terms dictated by the White House. Freudling said that he had never sent as many texts in a single night as he did on that occasion, to his friends and colleagues in Ukraine.

[Read: The beginning of the end of NATO](#)

For Friedrich Merz, then the chancellor-in-waiting, the confrontation made clear that Europe could [no longer rely](#) on the United States. A senior German official who spoke on the condition of anonymity told me that Merz, a member of the center-right Christian Democratic Union, is haunted by the question "Will America serve its allies to the dogs?" After the spectacle in the Oval Office, he became convinced of the need to amend Germany's constitution to authorize unlimited government borrowing for defense. Within a month, [the Bundestag approved the reform](#).

Görlitz is Germany's easternmost city, adjacent to the Polish border. It was spared Allied bombing during World War II, and its old town bears the imprint of centuries of European history. Now Görlitz offers a glimpse of the future: At a ceremony there last February, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz

heralded the city as a hub of rearmament. Production lines once used for double-decker train cars are being altered to make parts for Leopard 2 battle tanks, Puma infantry fighting vehicles, and Boxer armored vehicles. The defense firm KNDS is taking over a factory from the rail company Alstom. The transition will be complete in 2027.

I asked Pistorius why manufacturers can't move faster, noting that Germany has been adept at making tanks when it puts its mind to it. He said the companies, like the rest of German society, had grown accustomed to peacetime. When the Cold War ended, and a reunified Germany reduced its military, tanks were sold abroad or scrapped for metal and parts. [By one estimate](#), Germany had only about 340 tanks by 2021.

[According to Bruegel](#), a Brussels-based think tank, effective European deterrence—averting a Russian invasion of the Baltics, for example—would require 1,400 tanks and 2,000 infantry fighting vehicles, more than the combined capabilities of Germany, France, Britain, and Italy. Although all four countries are spending more on their armed forces to close the gap, no other Western European country matches Germany, which [will devote more than 460 billion euros](#), or \$538 billion, to the Bundeswehr over the next four years.

But in Görlitz, the shift to weapons manufacturing has run up against the growing power of political extremes. The far-right Alternative for Germany is the largest opposition bloc in the Bundestag, controlling nearly a quarter of the seats. The party's base of support is in the former Communist East, where economic hardship fuels nostalgia for the world before German reunification, and sympathy for Moscow endures. The AfD's national co-leader Tino Chrupalla, who represents Görlitz in the Bundestag, is scornful of the need to deter Russia. In 2023, he wore a tie with the Russian tricolor to an event at the Russian embassy in Berlin. And in a recent interview with a German broadcaster, he asked, "Do we really believe that we can defeat the world's greatest nuclear power and win this war that isn't even ours?" Sebastian Wippel, the AfD candidate who narrowly lost Görlitz's mayoral race in 2019, told me that weapons made in the city must be used only to defend Germany, not to arm Ukraine. Deterrence, he said, can't mean "threatening Russia."

Some on the left are also skeptical of rearmament. Environmental and social activists protested in the spring against the planned assembly of weapons in Görlitz. NEVER AGAIN WAR! reads graffiti on a factory wall. Outside the plant that will soon manufacture tanks, I met an expert in the technical preparation of train parts who has worked in the rail industry for 16 years. He told me he would transfer to a factory in a nearby city to avoid making weaponry. “I want no part in it,” he said.

Across the Spree River from the Bundestag is an office building occupied by a start-up that makes suicide drones. On the ground floor is a showroom with an elegant minimalist aesthetic, a space so airy and bright that it could be an art gallery—except that military payloads fill the glass display cases. In one corner stands a drone. It’s tall, like a Giacometti sculpture.

The drone is named Virtus. It takes off vertically and tilts in the air to fly like a plane, a loitering munition with four rectangular wings. Guided by artificial intelligence, it circles a target area, identifies an enemy asset, and slams into it with an explosive warhead. The start-up, called Stark, has begun supplying the German armed forces with weapons for testing and certification, and the government plans to purchase a large stock of such drones next year.

Stark was founded in Berlin in 2024, and now has outposts in both England and Ukraine. It works only with NATO and allied militaries. The company’s drones are easy to assemble, a Stark spokesperson told me. This is important because armies differ in their techniques; the Ukrainians, for instance, use Velcro to strap the warhead in place.

The company’s pitch is that a drone is cheaper, and more cost-effective, than a tank. Powered by a battery, Virtus can fly for about 60 minutes at a cruising speed of 75 miles an hour, and dive at up to twice that velocity. The aim was “to make this kind of equipment a commodity, to make it easy to order it, easy to produce it, and easy to pay for it,” Johannes Arlt, a former air-force officer and Social Democratic Party politician who is now a Stark executive, told me. On his phone, he showed me a video of the drone landing deftly on a piece of printer paper.



Johannes Arlt, an executive at the defense start-up Stark, in Berlin, with a Virtus drone (Hannes Jung for *The Atlantic*)

Germany has long been inhospitable to defense start-ups because of too little demand and too much political opposition. But the country's venture-capital firms have lately been flooded with proposals from such start-ups, according to Jack Wang, who leads investments in defense technology at a firm called Project A. The proposals cite Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference and Trump's Oval Office confrontation with Zelensky, appealing to investors who see opportunities in the White House's animus toward Europe. One is Peter Thiel, a Vance mentor who has invested in Stark. Another is the American venture-capital firm Sequoia Capital, whose most outspoken partner, Shaun Maguire, is a prominent Trump supporter.

As the Germans ramp up their own arms production, they still need to import weapons from abroad. I met with Colonel Dennis Krüger at the General Steinhoff Barracks. The facility was built by the Third Reich on the outskirts of Berlin, and later became a site of the Berlin Airlift, receiving the supplies that sustained the city during the Soviet blockade. Now the barracks are home to Germany's air force. In the courtyard, Krüger showed me a

retired Patriot launcher. Made in the United States, the anti-ballistic-missile system is a pillar of NATO air defense, able to neutralize drones, cruise missiles, and tactical ballistic missiles.

Recently, though, Germany has begun to look beyond the U.S. for air-defense weaponry. Krüger told me about traveling to Tel Aviv to fine-tune a missile-defense system purchased from the Israelis that can intercept and destroy long-range ballistic missiles in space. On the sleeve of his military shirt, below a decal of the German flag, is another with Hebrew lettering, the logo of the weapons project: Arrow 3. For decades, Germany has been a top exporter of arms to Israel, its commitment to the security of the Jewish state a legacy of the Holocaust. Arrow 3, [the largest defense deal in Israeli history](#), reverses that logic by making Israel a guarantor of German safety.

Krüger said that work on the weapons system turned representatives from the two militaries into a “family,” and that they built camaraderie when his staff waited out missile attacks in Tel Aviv’s belowground shelters with their Israeli counterparts. The weapons acquisition from Israel is “one next step,” Krüger said, “in overcoming our history.”

Weapons—even unmanned drones—need soldiers to operate them. On the sidewalk outside a Berlin military-recruitment office, I met a young German named Julian Boy. At the time, the Bundeswehr was advertising an open house on its website: “Do you know exactly what you want? Then join the Bundeswehr now.” Boy, who is 24, fit and broad-shouldered with close-cropped hair, looked like an ideal recruit. Boy did know exactly what he wanted, and it was not to join the military.

He told me that he believes Germany should have more weapons and troops. “I don’t know if America will be there to support Europe,” he said. “So we need to do it ourselves.” But he has never considered enlisting. He already has a job, as a metalworker. Besides, the Bundeswehr’s deficiencies were legendary. Stories of scarcity and incompetence—that’s what his generation knows of the army. “It’s a meme,” he said. “Munitions being used up in two minutes.”

Changing this perception is the defense ministry’s hardest task. NATO targets call for a German fighting force of 260,000, far more than the

country's current roster of about 182,000 active-duty soldiers. Thomas Röwekamp, who chairs the Bundestag's defense committee, told me that the government needs to convince a generation raised in peacetime that they can't take their safety for granted anymore.

Germany is [set to begin compulsory military screening in 2026](#), but won't yet resume conscription, which was suspended more than a decade ago. All 18-year-olds will receive a questionnaire assessing their willingness to join the armed forces; men must respond, and women will have the option to do so. The hesitation about a draft—which Röwekamp argued will eventually be necessary—struck me as evidence of Germany's abiding unease about preparing for war. Pistorius still hopes that a voluntary model can work.

Recruitment advertising is everywhere. A [TikTok series offers a “road trip”](#) through the Bundeswehr—the chance to follow four influencers on military missions. Calls to enlist adorn train stations and buses, even fast-food packaging. DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES? asks text printed on pizza boxes.



A Puma infantry fighting vehicle on military training grounds in Bavaria
(Hannes Jung for *The Atlantic*)

In the decades since World War II, Germans have developed a deep aversion to anything that resembles the Nazi veneration of the soldier. They've been outraged by recent scandals that seem to reflect the Third Reich's lasting imprint on some corners of the military. In the special forces, a sergeant major [placed under investigation in 2017](#) was alleged to have stockpiled stolen ammunition and explosives alongside Nazi memorabilia; at a party, soldiers were said to have performed the Nazi salute, which is banned in Germany. One special-forces unit was so rife with right-wing fanaticism that the [defense ministry disbanded it in 2020](#). Today, screening for extremism is a Bundeswehr priority.

The last time Germany had a permanent armed presence in Lithuania was during the Nazi occupation, when the Wehrmacht swept east, invading the Soviet Union. By the end of the war, the Jewish population of Lithuania had been slaughtered. Near Vilnius, the capital, killing squads dumped corpses into trenches dug in the forest.

Now Germans carrying guns are back in Lithuania. They're stationed in Vilnius, in an office building in the city's business district, where the seventh floor is [reserved for Panzerbrigade 45](#), the first permanent foreign deployment of German troops since the Second World War. When I visited the brigade, groups of soldiers were hanging out on the sidewalk, smoking cigarettes.

The German soldiers' mission is to help fend off a Russian attack. Vilnius is their temporary home; a permanent base for the brigade, projected to number about 5,000 by 2027, will lie near the border with Belarus, the Russian client state that serves as a depot for dozens of Moscow's nuclear weapons. Lithuania, a NATO member since 2004, is particularly vulnerable because it's located along the Suwałki Gap, the 60-mile expanse separating the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad from Belarus. That strip of land is NATO's only overland route connecting Western Europe to the Baltic states, and the alliance's leaders worry that Putin could try to seal it off.

Brigadier General Christoph Huber, who leads the German soldiers in Lithuania, showed me a 3-D model of the barracks, which will include training fields, sports grounds, and housing. “We are here to defend every inch of NATO territory,” he told me. “To put on the fight against”—he paused, correcting himself—“the *possible* fight against Russia.”

The strategic logic is clear. Still, I wondered how Lithuanians felt about the sight of German soldiers. Across the street from the brigade’s headquarters is the old Jewish cemetery of Vilnius, a city once called the Jerusalem of the North. PLEASE RESPECT THIS PLACE FOR THE ETERNAL REST OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE states a plaque bearing a Star of David. It stands as a reminder of the Nazi past. But for the people I met in the residential neighborhoods of Vilnius, memories of Soviet terror are fresher, and fears of Russian aggression are ever present. A young mother told me that her family had suffered under Soviet collectivization policies, and that she feels safer with German soldiers around. I approached another resident, a scriptwriter who said only, “We live next to a shit country.”

I got the sense that the German military is more popular in Vilnius than in Görlitz. Huber told stories of being stopped on the street and thanked for defending Lithuania. We sat in his office, where German, Lithuanian, and NATO flags hung. He described ceremonies held in the spring to inaugurate the brigade, festivities that brought the chancellor and defense minister from Germany. In Vilnius cafés, Lithuanians insisted on buying coffee for his troops. The display panel on the front of city buses announced LTU♥DEU. Lithuania loves Germany.

The defense ministry points to the welcoming of German troops as proof of Europe’s support for its military buildup. “The fear of a weak and indecisive Germany is bigger than the fear of a strong Germany,” Pistorius said.

Huber said that his troops are receiving Germany’s most advanced military equipment, including the newest Leopard tanks. They are training on territory where they might go to war, crossing anti-tank ditches, dodging mine obstacles, and navigating rivers. Huber is studying Russia’s tactics in Ukraine, anticipating the “war of the future.” His battalions will become experts in electronic and drone warfare. “The Panzerbrigade 45 has the top priority within the German army,” he said.

The general has a paperweight on his desk quoting Winston Churchill: ACTION THIS DAY. I asked him about another Churchill maxim, delivered in an address to the U.S. Congress in 1943. The Germans, according to the British prime minister, are “always either at your throat or your feet.”

“Much has changed,” Huber said without emotion. There is nothing distinctive, he added, about the German capacity for evil. “We have to be aware of human beings, in general, having a dark side.”

In June, as part of a “Day of Values” observed within the German army, [members of the Panzerbrigade cleaned up graves at a Jewish cemetery](#) in Merkinė, a Lithuanian town where hundreds of Jews were shot by Nazi forces and local collaborators in 1941. Some of the tombstones are more than a century old. The soldiers wiped away the dirt that had collected from decades of neglect. The Jews who might have tended the graves of their ancestors are dead, Huber said. “Germans killed them.”

A bronze statue of a naked man with bound wrists stands in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock. It honors the army officers who tried to assassinate Hitler, and who were shot in the courtyard on a summer day in 1944. Toward the end of my interview with Pistorius, after we had discussed tanks and soldiers, I asked him if he finds the statue at all incongruous.

Germany must be the only country in the world, I said, to place a memorial to an attempted coup within its defense ministry. Pistorius said that he appreciates the statue as a reminder of the democratic sources of his country’s military power. “No oath is ever taken again on a leader, but on a constitution.”



A statue at the Bendlerblock honors the army officers who plotted to kill Hitler, and who were shot in the courtyard in 1944. (Hannes Jung for *The Atlantic*)

But constitutions can be amended. And the oaths of soldiers can change as well, depending on shifting political tides. If the AfD continues its march to power, an illiberal German government could reverse the country's international allegiances—the tanks and drones now equipping the Ukrainian resistance instead advancing Russian interests, the army-building set in motion for the defense of liberal democracy exploited by a resurgent German militarism. Listening to plans for rearmament in the old Wehrmacht headquarters, I wondered whether Germany could get power right this time.

Of course, militarism can serve illiberal ends anywhere, if democracy becomes fragile. The Trump administration has shown an early willingness to deploy the National Guard, and even regular Army units, to American cities. “I could send the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines—I could send anybody I wanted,” Trump has said. Such rhetoric shocks Germans because it’s reminiscent of their own country’s past.

After the war, my great-grandfather remembered acts of resistance. He knew a professor in Berlin who read poetry to the Brownshirts in his class, explaining, “That’s from the Jew Heinrich Heine”; a taxi driver who took a hunted Polish Jew to the Czechoslovakian border to escape; a father who brought his young daughter to see a burning synagogue, telling her, “Never forget those misdeeds of the Nazis.”

Where were “the ‘good’ Germans?” my great-grandfather asked. In jails and concentration camps, he answered, and buried in the earth. But as a refugee, “rescued here on the foot of the Statue of Liberty,” he believed American influence would help secure peace and purge Europe of fascism.

For a time, it did. But that world is disappearing, and Germany’s pacifism belongs to another age.

This article 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. The article appears in the [January 2026 print edition](#) with the headline “The New German War Machine.”

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What if Our Ancestors Didn't Feel Anything Like We Do?

The historians who want to know how our ancestors experienced love, anger, fear, and sorrow

by Gal Beckerman



Updated at 8:17 p.m. ET on December 15, 2025

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

The historian Rob Boddice sat cross-legged on his couch in Montreal on a frigid day last winter and conjured for me the image of a medieval carpenter, hammering away in his workshop. “Imagine this guy; he’s building a table,” he said. Suddenly the carpenter misses the nail and bangs his thumb instead. “What did that feel like for him?” Boddice asked. I stared for a few seconds while Boddice smiled encouragingly, as if he’d just asked me to solve a quadratic equation in my head. “I guess it probably stung, and then his thumb throbbed?” I ventured, remembering actually banging my own thumb a few weeks back while assembling an IKEA desk. Boddice nodded, then said, “Let me ask you again. What did it feel like for *him*? ”

Boddice is an energetic 48-year-old academic who has stormed the field of the history of emotions and senses, a specialized branch that has grown significantly over the past two decades even as most others (such as military and medieval history) have been pruned. Working for the past few years out of an institute he helped found—the Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences, colloquially known as HEX, housed at Tampere University, in Finland—Boddice has tried to steer this area of study in a radical direction. “Emotions and senses” refers to history focused less on the facts of the past than on its more ineffable qualities, such as the smells of a 19th-century city filled with thousands of horses, and the quality of grief expressed in the letters of widows during World War I. Boddice is interested in a deeper, more expansive concept that encompasses everything about how reality is perceived, melding together emotions and senses and much else into an engagement with “experience.”

For starters, he has little patience for the standard (and impoverished, if you ask him) assumptions about feelings, such as the idea that they come in six basic universal flavors—happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. In the 1960s and ’70s, the psychologist Paul Ekman identified these six emotions, which he thought were hardwired into every human. This perception is still fairly embedded in our culture. Just consider the success of Pixar’s *Inside Out*, Boddice suggests, which anthropomorphized some of these distinct sentiments as cartoon characters (anger, for example, is squat and red, and has a head that ignites like a furnace) pulling levers behind a console inside our minds. Much of the social-skills curricula for elementary-school children are built around the same idea: choose from a list of prepackaged emoji ranging from smiley to frowny. There is nothing unusual

about a desire to distill and name emotions in this way. For one thing, it might be the source of empathy. Having a shared “happy” that refers to what you are feeling and what I am feeling seems essential to relationships, and probably also to building any kind of human society.

David Brooks: The benefits of emodiversity

But as a historian trying to comprehend feelings, Boddice can’t stand those cute *Inside Out* characters. Because not only do we imagine other people to have the exact same set of emotions that we have, but we project this thought backwards through time. Love for us can’t be that different from what it meant to Heloise and Abelard writing letters to each other in the 12th century. The laborers who hauled stones to build the pyramids in Giza felt anger that is our anger. We perform this projection on any number of human experiences: losing a child, falling ill, being bored at work. We assume that emotions in the past are accessible because we assume that at their core, people in the past were just like us, with slight tweaks for their choice of hats and standards of personal hygiene.

Boddice starts with the opposite premise, that we are not the same—that the experience of being human in another era, with all of its component feelings and perceptions, even including something as elemental as pain, is so foreign to us as to live inside a kind of sealed vault. “There is nothing about my humanness that affords me insight into humanity,” [Boddice has said](#). Rather than being a constant—extending across space and time—human nature for Boddice is a variable and unstable category, one with infinite possible shades.

“Down with empathy,” Boddice said when we met in Montreal, the snow falling outside the window in Mount Royal Park. “I want a T-shirt with that on it.” Boddice has a slim build and a rangy restlessness. His face is boyish despite the crow’s-feet beginning to splay out from the corners of his eyes. He’s eager to show that he has a life beyond writing books—a guitar collection (including a Fender Telecaster and a Gibson Les Paul) rested on stands in an otherwise spare living room, and he wore a marathoner’s bulky running watch. When he is not in Finland, he lives in Montreal with his wife, Stephanie Olsen, also a researcher at HEX (she [has studied children’s dream narratives](#)), and their 8-year-old son.

The idea of “experiential relativity,” as Boddice calls it—a recent paper also referred to his approach as “historical neurodiversity”—might seem squishy and postmodern. It’s a kind of thinking that questions whether anything is real—the sort of speculation that might emerge from a dorm room late at night. The reaction is understandable. But Boddice is interested in some very real things: the brain and the body, and the way they interact with culture to produce experience. His approach reminded me of [the philosopher William James](#), who also didn’t believe that human emotions are “sacramental or eternally fixed,” as he wrote in his 1890 book, [The Principles of Psychology](#). Whereas the prevailing thought was that an internal feeling generates outward response—*I’m sad, therefore I cry*—James thought the causality was all wrong. In his schema, what happens first is an external stimulus. This triggers a bodily response, and only then does an internal process of interpretation assign meaning to that response. I might see a sunset and find tears springing to my eyes, and then my mind will interpret this as missing my father, with whom I last witnessed a sunset. Because of this variability of response and interpretation, James wrote, “there is no limit to the number of possible different emotions which may exist, and why the emotions of different individuals may vary indefinitely.”

[Read: Science’s struggle to define emotions](#)

Unlike James, who was simply intuiting what happens inside our heads, Boddice is layering his own thinking on top of the most recent advances in neuroscience, which have proved just how plastic our minds really are, in much the way James assumed. How a particular brain assigns meaning has to do with a person’s prior experiences—what [Lisa Feldman Barrett](#), the director of the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory at Northeastern University and the author of [How Emotions Are Made](#), calls its “concepts and categories.” The brain, Barrett told me, is trapped in the skull, “a dark, silent box,” so it has to make predictions by drawing on those concepts and categories, which are “very, very different by culture—even the concept of what an emotion is varies by culture.” This helps the brain predict and hone its perceptions, and these are very much related to concepts tied to a time and place. The process all leads to what the behavioral neurologist Marsel Mesulam [has called our](#) “highly edited subjective version of the world.” In other words, there is no spot in our heads where a Platonic (or emoji) version of sadness or happiness resides. Feelings are not

determined; they are created. And this is true for even something as seemingly universal as pain.

Let's return to that medieval carpenter. He has banged his thumb, triggering his nociceptors, or pain receptors—which should really be called “harm receptors,” Boddice said, because all they do is send a signal up to the brain that damage has occurred. They don't themselves cause pain. To understand what the carpenter experiences, then, we need to begin with a series of questions that might help us reconstruct the meaning produced once the signal reaches its destination. Does this happen a lot? Is the sensation of hitting his thumb a daily or weekly occurrence—something that goes with the job? And then, if religion infused every second of his life, as might very well be true for a medieval carpenter, where would his concept of suffering come from? Does he think about Christ and perhaps feel purified? If suffering, sin, and love are conjoined in an idea of the divine in the carpenter's brain, and these are “lived connections,” Boddice said, “and you're surrounded by them,” how might he feel when that hammer hits his thumb?

It no longer seems so simple as just saying “pain.” We cannot put the carpenter in an MRI machine—we will never have total access to his feelings—but by building out his world in all of its dimensions, Boddice believes, we can get closer to appreciating the specificity of those feelings. This points to another radical element of Boddice's thinking: To re-create an experience, you need to know all of the conditions that may have led the brain to originally create it, and this means bringing dozens of different academic disciplines to bear on the task, getting fields that don't usually mingle to interact with one another.

Art history might give insight into what visual representations a person might have been surrounded by; the study of theology might help establish an ideological framework for how they understood their place in the universe; archaeology might reveal what their relationship was like to their material environment. This is the kind of imaginative work that historical novelists usually do, except Boddice wants to scrape the archives to build out a 360-degree understanding based on historical fact. If you know anything about how narrow the categories of academia can be, you can probably see why this is a little dreamy on his part, but it's also how, he

thinks, we can fully unlock the great diversity of ways in which people once moved through reality.

Pain has a particular interest for Boddice, and was the subject of his 2023 book, [*Knowing Pain*](#), which he opened with his own experience of having a herniated disc when he was 17 (and his encounter with a physical therapist who kept pressing her thumbs into his neck and demanding, “Is *that* your pain?”). At first, it seems counterintuitive to think of pain as anything other than universal—the same everywhere, and at all times. Yet anyone who has ever been asked to describe their pain to a doctor knows that we are at the mercy of language. Is it sharp or dull? Does it pound or burn? These are metaphors, and ones that culture gives us.

There was a time in the Western world, just a few hundred years ago, when if you weren’t feeling well, you assumed that [one of the four humors](#) in your body—blood, yellow bile, black bile, or phlegm—was out of whack. You might then say, as the [18th-century poet Thomas Gray did](#), that your pains were “wandering” throughout your “constitution” until “they may fix into the Gout.” One of Boddice’s HEX colleagues, Jenni Kuuliala, wrote about a Tuscan friar, Giovanni Bronsius, who in the fall of 1597 ate a plate of macaroni, soon felt sick, and knew that a witch had poisoned him. When it came to witchcraft, Kuuliala told me, people described a bubbling sensation in the body, a certain restlessness. The friar used these words too, adding other details. (His teeth felt “empty.”) Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century German Benedictine abbess, talked of the intense divine visions she was having. They appeared to her as blinding auras—a “reflection of the living Light,” she called them, something “far, far brighter than a cloud which carries the sun.” Modern scholars have assumed she was having migraines. But Boddice doesn’t accept this reasoning. “I don’t want to explain religious visions away.”

We could translate each of these experiences into the word *pain*. But that would conflate what Boddice insists are the unique feelings that the brain in each of these historical moments produced. In a manifesto of sorts—*Emotion, Sense, Experience*, co-written in 2020 with Mark Smith, a University of South Carolina historian—Boddice makes his claim with the gusto and certainty of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur: “What we propose is a disruption of what it is and means to be human.”

This is the kind of provocative statement to which Boddice is prone, and his work can induce a sense of vertigo. To unmoor people from any sense of common humanity means undermining most of the political philosophies and laws that govern our world. If we abandon our sense of shared humanness with people who lived in the past, what does that mean for other people who live in different cultural contexts today—in a village in China, or just on the other side of the same city?

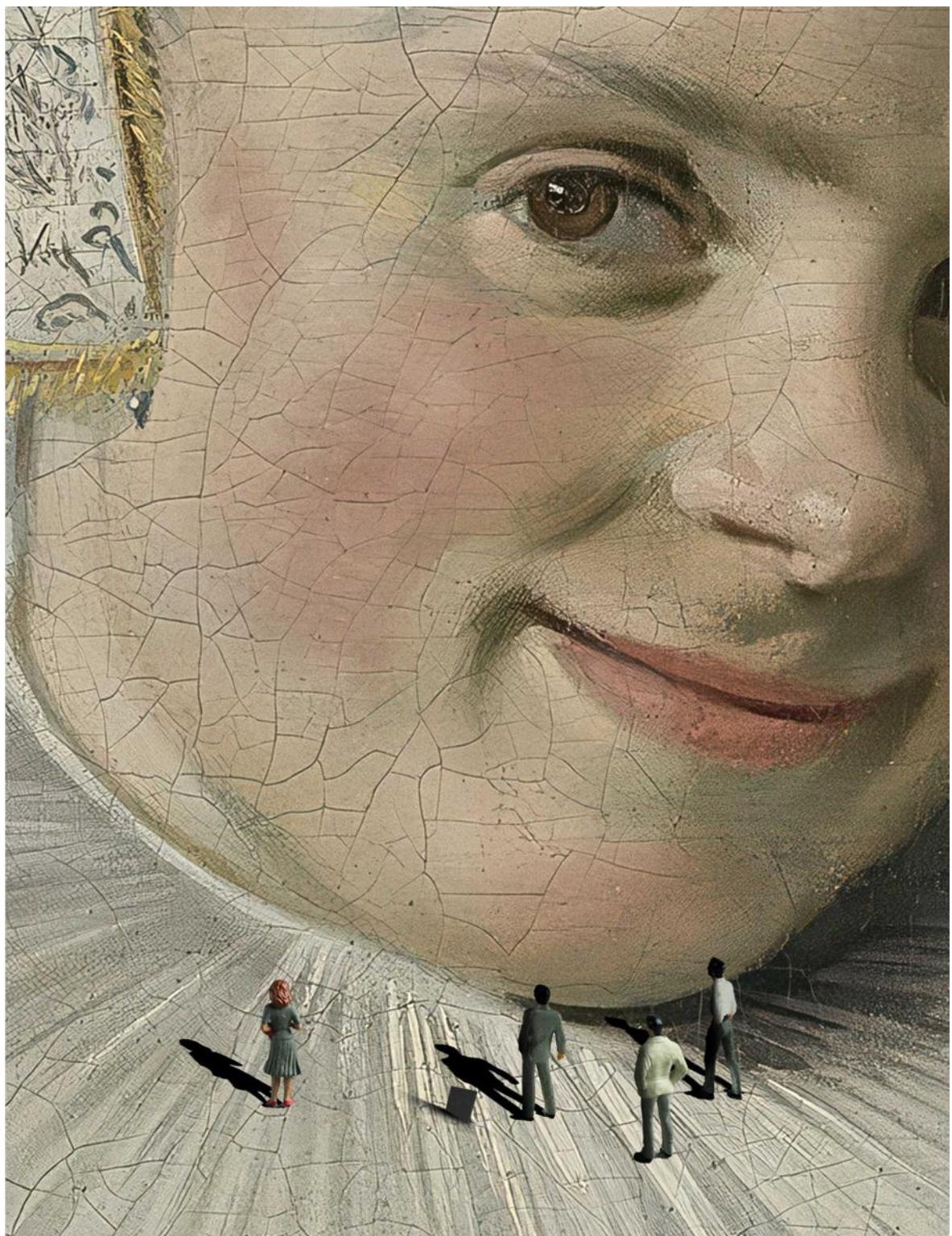


Illustration by Nicolás Ortega. Source: *Portrait of a Married Couple*, Frans Hals, circa 1622.

And yet the notion that the same inputs may create divergent experiences has some gut-level validity to it—think of how the feeling of being an American changes today whether you are wearing blue or red lenses. And then there are the dizzying advances in AI, which make Boddice’s question —what does it even mean to be human?—one that we all face as never before.

Rob Boddice was born in 1977 in a mining community near the bleak industrial English town of Burton-on-Trent. From his home, he could see a deep coal mine, Cadley Hill, which was shut down in the late ’80s. When he was a boy, everyone’s father seemed to be unemployed. “I grew up wanting to escape; it’s that simple,” Boddice said.

As he made his way into and through academia—he received all of his degrees, up to and including his Ph.D., from the University of York—Boddice tried to lose the biggest marker of class identity in England, becoming “an accent chameleon,” as he put it. He was so successful that during his postdoc years, in the early 2000s, he gave a lecture one day in London in such a flawlessly scrubbed-down, international version of English that a British woman in the audience complimented him on his mastery of the language, assuming, because he was with the Freie Universität in Berlin, that he was German. “The only accent I cannot do now is my own, really,” he told me.

It’s not surprising that someone who has had to cycle through so many versions of himself would be attuned to the way an environment can mold how you talk or walk, which can in turn change the way you think and maybe who you are. Already as a graduate student, he was drawn to the work of anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz, who appreciated and wrote about their own distance from the lived experience of their subjects, shaped by unspannable chasms of culture. In his dissertation, Boddice stared across this divide, asking why practices such as cockfighting and bullbaiting, now considered brutal and uncivilized, once appeared totally ordinary to British minds, and why this changed in the 19th century. These were the seeds of his fascination with how variable the human experience can be. His research showed that the same kind of activity that once caused delight, or at least did not cause alarm, could elicit revulsion just a few decades later. He wanted to know how this is possible.

Before the establishment of HEX, in 2018, Boddice struggled to find his place among the stiflingly confined categories of academia. He wanted to ask “the *Bill & Ted* question of history—what is the meaning of life?,” and this was not the standard way for a young researcher to begin to make his career. In the history of emotions and senses, Boddice finally found a receptive field, with well-funded new institutes in Berlin and Australia, that appealed to him for its more foundational approach to the human condition. But he also saw its limitations. Researchers were jumping into the archives with their own preconceptions; they were looking, say, for love in the 16th century by highlighting the word in various texts, but taking for granted a 21st-century sense of what love meant.

In *The History of Emotions* (2017) and then *A History of Feelings* (2019), Boddice wrote of the need to “surrender,” to let go of the very human impulse to empathize with the dead, as if their feelings and perceptions had been more or less like ours. He also suggested an interdisciplinary approach that is still unusual in most of academia—the attitude is generally one of “I’m a political historian, I’m an art historian, I’m a religious historian, I’m a material historian, I’m a historian of language,” he told me. Whereas if you want to summon back to life a world in which people lived and moved—and thereby isolate and characterize specific experiences—you need all of those disciplines together.

A History of Feelings opens by looking at the first word in the Western canon, which happens to refer to an emotion. At the start of *The Iliad*, Achilles is described as having *mēnis*, which is usually rendered simply as “wrath” or “anger” or “rage” by English translators. Boddice didn’t think this made sense, because, first of all, Achilles doesn’t really act enraged; he just kind of broods. It isn’t until his friend Patroclus is killed, much later in the story, that he enters battle. This might seem like pedantic textual analysis, but for Boddice it is an opening to an emotion from deep antiquity that has been lost to time. Through a close reading of ancient-Greek usages of *mēnis*, the feeling revealed itself to Boddice as something closer to unease at cosmic disorder (or, as Boddice put it to me, a “cosmic sulk”) than anything we’d associate today with anger. If *mēnis* wasn’t motivating Achilles after Patroclus’s death, then what was? After examining images of Achilles on Greek pottery and reading accounts of ancient funeral rites,

Boddice discerned what seemed like yet another form of grief, more violent in nature, which also has no real analogue today.

A [2020 paper by the German historian Bettina Hitzer](#) shows how this approach to history can undermine what we often take for granted—for instance, that a bad smell is always and forever a bad smell. Hitzer looked at the way Nazi politics affected how the odors of cancer patients and their advanced tumors were perceived. Whereas in the 19th century these smells were mainly described as useful for aiding in diagnosis, in the Germany of the 1920s and '30s, they elicited extreme disgust and were characterized as repellent in the medical literature of the time. Hitzer concludes that this has to do with the Nazis' focus on purity and use of disease metaphors and imagery (describing Jews as "cancerous tumors" and having a distinct stench); this association altered what happened after the smell of the patients reached people's noses, with the result that those odors created a feeling of moral disgust. It is impossible to understand sense and emotion—experience—without taking in the overwhelming politics of that era. As she notes, after 1945, "references to smell and disgust disappeared almost completely" from writing about cancer.

If the history of experience, as practiced and preached by Boddice, has a godmother, it is the celebrated New Zealand-born historian Joanna Bourke, now a professor emerita at Birkbeck, at the University of London, and a fellow of the British Academy. She has never deployed *experience* as an overarching term for describing her focus, but it captures well her approach to understanding the past, particularly in her work on how violence is felt. Her award-winning 1999 book, [*An Intimate History of Killing*](#), considers how soldiers responded to violence in 20th-century warfare, including through what might seem like unexpected emotions, such as joy and catharsis. When I asked her if she'd gotten pushback earlier in her career from other historians for her focus on experience, she let out a big laugh. Recovering the feelings of historical actors was simply not done, she explained. If you wanted to understand people in the past, she said, "the emphasis was much more on what they did and what that tells us about the ways they are thinking, as opposed to what they were feeling and therefore what they did."

I was curious specifically about Bourke's work on the history of rape. The subject is inherently disturbing, and her treatment is itself unsettling. If we are to take seriously the idea that we cannot simply project backwards, then even those acts considered to be the gravest violations of bodily autonomy need to be understood for how they were felt in their time. How might rape have been experienced differently when it carried a societal stigma of "ruining" the woman who was attacked? And, even harder to grasp, what about what we now call marital rape? "Bodily autonomy is not what a woman in the 17th or 18th century is experiencing," Bourke said. "She's experiencing submission to the will of God, submission to the will of the husband." But would the act feel different to her because the notion of bodily autonomy wasn't part of her conceptual vocabulary, which is what I take Boddice and Bourke to be saying? She might feel a physical sensation of hurt, Bourke told me, but that is different from violence, which is the meaning one makes of hurt. At a time when there was not "any sort of idea of an emotional soul or self, or certainly not psychological self, that is being harmed," the act would be perceived in a totally different way than in a world, like ours, with a concept like trauma, which can be physical or psychic. As strange and troubling as it may be to put aside our own moral precepts when looking at the past, this is the work of the historian, Bourke said: "to unpick the universal experience." When she says *unpick*—a word Boddice also uses—I imagine the historian delicately tugging at the threads of what appears to be a smooth fabric and loosening it into a messy collection of misshapen emotions. Some will repel us, some will enlighten us, and some will remain forever impossible to grasp.



Rob Boddice, a 48-year-old academic, has transformed the field known as the history of emotions and senses, and co-founded the discipline's leading research institute, in Tampere, Finland. (Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for *The Atlantic*)

Boddice's hope was for HEX to be a center of research that would take what he saw as the incredible heterogeneity of human experience as its starting point. The institute was funded in 2018 for a period of eight years with a 10-million-euro grant from the Finnish government. A few months before the funding ran out, Boddice moved to the University of Helsinki to begin what he called "a new, multidisciplinary project on panic." (He remains affiliated with HEX as a researcher.) In 2023, I went to Tampere for HEX's annual conference, hoping to get a sense of how widely shared Boddice's approach is. The town is sometimes referred to as the Manchester of Finland, a 19th-century industrial hub whose skyline is still punctuated by puffing smokestacks (and where reindeer meat appears on every menu). Even in March, the ground was covered in treacherous black ice, and the sky hung heavy and gray. The university campus is a series of modernist glass-and-concrete structures in the center of the town. Boddice stood out during the three days, partly because he was wearing a three-piece pinstripe suit and a fedora most of the time, but also because he seemed to be the clear intellectual heavyweight trying to corral a scattered group of scholars and graduate students toward his vision of what the history of experience means.

Some of those present were very much aligned with the program, such as Piroska Nagy, a Hungarian-born medievalist in cat's-eye glasses who is a co-editor, together with Boddice and Mark Smith, of a Cambridge University Press [series on the history of emotions and senses](#)—a gatekeeper role where they can nudge the field in their direction. "I made my Ph.D. on weeping," Nagy told me, "a thousand years ago, when nobody worked on this kind of thing." Nagy wrote about how crying in the Middle Ages was seen as signifying closeness to God. Both men and women alike cried in public (though each had different weeping styles) as a kind of ritualized act, a way to show contrition, ecstasy, or the presence of divine love.

At the HEX conference, many of the presentations I listened to would have been at home in nearly any such gathering focused on cultural history or comparative literature, with scholars seizing on some dredged-up nugget of

esoterica from the archives without much context or sense of why it mattered. This was exactly the narrow, blinkered kind of history that Boddice was trying to break with. On a few occasions, I saw him gently take issue with a speaker for using decidedly contemporary categories to comprehend the past. One Finnish researcher, peppered by Boddice with questions about how generally he was describing emotions, answered, “But I’ve read Plato and Aristotle and those guys, and they talk about anger and fear.” I already knew enough to anticipate Boddice’s response: *How can we understand what they meant by anger and fear?*

You can’t entirely blame the other scholars; Boddice’s standards are exacting. At the same time, they lead to a place with no boundaries at all. If we concede that the meaning of experience is not necessarily the same from past to present, doesn’t the same logic make you wonder about the meaning of experience from culture to culture in the present? In fact it does, as Boddice readily admits. He is skeptical that any kind of universal baseline can be established for capturing how humans make their way through the world.

Producing history that tries to put a finger in this swiftly moving river is not easy, but when it actually happens, the results do feel revelatory and significantly different from other encounters with the past. For a good example, a few scholars at the HEX conference pointed me to [a remarkable paper by the late Jan Plamper](#), a professor at Goldsmiths, at the University of London.

Plamper chose as his topic the sensory experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution, and specifically the *change* in experience that took place between the February revolution, which led to the czar’s abdication, and the October revolution later that year, when the Bolsheviks took power. Plamper considered the sounds and smells of that period not “as spice in the narrative” but as subjects “in their own right.” Drawing on contemporaneous observations from a variety of sources, the paper is crammed with extraordinary detail—the way the smell of cigars, associated with the bourgeoisie, suddenly provoked revulsion among the revolutionaries, or how the reality of peasants and workers pouring into the cities could be felt physically because the sidewalks were covered in sunflower-seed shells, the snack of the lower classes (“Pedestrians felt like they were walking on a

cushioned carpet”). Between the disappearing sound of church bells and the increasing prevalence of the color red, the sensory environment was undergoing its own revolutionary change.

You can almost imagine the brain of a Russian that year trying to make meaning out of all the new signals. In February, when the revolution began, the new sound of occasional rapid gunfire was terrifying, but soon Petrograders could distinguish between live ammunition and blanks, and by October, when shooting started up again, they were habituated to the noise—and the particular quality of silence that followed it—as part of what marked revolutionary time.

This is history as disorientation, listening for the dissonances, when the gunfire starts and stops. The sources are the existing ones, but they are being used in new ways and in new combinations to try to answer how the Russian Revolution “became known”—in Plamper’s words—to the people who lived through it. The work pushes historians to do the uncomfortable and move outside the boxes they’ve been trained to operate within.

The universalism that Boddice mistrusts is a relatively new concept in human history. It comes to us from the Enlightenment. The presumption that all people share a common nature was dreamed up by European intellectuals sitting in their salons. Plenty of critics, starting with postcolonial thinkers, now understand this to have been an ideological attempt to exert power and order over a world that had recently become bigger and stranger. But this impulse toward uniformity is not just an 18th-century one. Freudian psychology also reduced the dynamism of the human mind to a machine powered by predictable and shared drives. By the time we get to our current globalized culture, in which a Korean thriller can win Best Picture at the Oscars and Latin pop stars dominate the U.S. charts, the notion that our emotional registers are all essentially alike feels self-evident.

And for all we know, it may be true. Even some historians who are keen, like Boddice, to reconstruct experience from scratch are reluctant to take the leap he makes when he questions whether humans have anything in common. Javier Moscoso is a professor at the Spanish National Research Council, and on its face, his methodology seems very similar to Boddice’s—the two have a lot of respect for each other. Moscoso’s most recent book,

Arc of Feeling, looks at the experience of swinging as it has shown up across a very long sweep of human history—yes, swinging, as in going up and down on a swing, as well as the disorientation, but also the pleasure and pain, this causes. His many data points include depictions of swings in cave paintings made in western India during the fifth century C.E.; the “witch’s cradle,” once a form of torture in England in which a woman was placed in a sack suspended from a tree; and a 17th-century erotic Chinese novel that featured a swing in a loss of virginity. Moscoso’s process, he told me, is to “pay attention to the very singular, to something which is in principle irrelevant,” and build from there. He spoke to me of discovering, for example, the record of a Roman coin minted in the time of Tiberius that depicted two men pushing a woman on a swing, part of a series of coins depicting sexual positions, perhaps used for entry into a brothel.

Moscoso spoke with me over Zoom from Madrid, his head barely visible over a fluffy white cat that had decided to recline on his keyboard. Unlike Boddice, he is searching for continuity, not dissonance. And he definitely finds it in the physical experience of oscillation, which, over millennia, in almost every human society, has had strong associations with either sex or death (or both)—the swing shows up in similar erotic scenes on ancient-Greek vases and in 18th-century French pornography, and likewise as a source of terror, whether it’s witches rising and falling in the art of Goya or the condemned swinging from the gallows.

There is a “political agenda”—his words—to Moscoso’s work, and it is to discover commonality precisely at a moment of growing fragmentation in the modern world. “In times in which we are so much focused on differences, and identities, and precisely this kind of a parcellation of reality, you find, as a matter of fact, certain common features,” he told me. If Boddice insists that it is a mistake to go looking for love in the archives based on our definition of what love feels like, Moscoso counters by bringing up how consistently similar love stories are in different cultures and time periods. For instance, he pointed out, many of them are about lovers who are unequal and whose love is forbidden—whether it’s Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; or the ancient-Chinese story of the butterfly lovers, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai; or Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. For Moscoso, these “structures of repetition” give you “an

account of differences, but also of similarities,” a way people relate to love in the same way despite thoroughly different circumstances.

“My research is a sort of protest,” Moscoso said. “I believe that we are connected.” What we need is a “new Enlightenment,” a reassertion of what “makes us human”: at the very least so that there is a basis for something like civil rights and all the political philosophies—such as democracy, to name a particularly endangered one—that are built on the idea that to be human is a singular thing.

Does Boddice too blithely throw out this idea? “I like the romance of it,” he said when I asked him. And for the record, he added, he is not against finding common threads that connect humanity if he happens to come across them. But that is not *his* agenda. The way he wants his work to affect how we think today—a mission he also believes to be “ethically urgent”—is to move us away from the universal and automatic understanding of what it is to be human. Boddice is concerned that we are flattening ourselves. By not appreciating the full range of feeling that people are capable of, we are foreclosing a deeper engagement with one another, an engagement on terms that don’t demand that everyone be the same but leave room for the great unknown of what happens in other people’s heads. In *A History of Feelings*, he described our diminished and too limited vocabulary for emotions as “vague, empty or else crude.” The danger is that this reduced language, this emojification of emotional life, also reduces, quite literally, how much we can feel. History, at least in the way he sees it, might help. “I was motivated to not only show the richness and the unfamiliarity of past experience, but also to try to give people the tools to interrogate the politics of feeling in their present,” Boddice told me.

There is a danger, I think, and not a small one, in letting go of the bonds that connect us—in saying “Down with empathy”—but I can’t deny that Boddice’s perspective has a strange appeal at a moment when we feel so thoroughly alienated from one another’s experience of reality. We struggle to understand how other human beings don’t feel the same things we do—and this frustration often turns into anger and resentment. Maybe we would do better to start by recognizing the mystery of other people.

Certainly when it comes to the past, Boddice is up against strong (and popular) impulses, such as the notion that by donning a Civil War uniform or throwing an ancient spear, we can know something about how our ancestors related to the world. It makes sense that he has taken a radical position, if only to loudly resist such oversimplification.

But if I can offer something of a bridge: There is a universality to the question that Boddice spends most of his waking hours posing—that is, a universality to the very act of posing it. What species besides ours demands: *What did it feel like?* What animal besides us stares into a stranger’s eyes, or into the eyes of their grandparents, and builds whole philosophies around this question? Whether we see our reflection in others—past and present—or, like Boddice, insist on difference, the compulsion to ask this question, again and again, marks us. Maybe to be human, at the most basic level, is to be curious about other humans.

A caption in this article originally misstated the location of the Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences. It is in Tampere, Finland. This article appears in the [January 2026](#) print edition with the headline “You Had to Be There.” 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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Accommodation Nation

America's colleges have an extra-time-on-tests problem.

by Rose Horowitch



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Administering an exam used to be straightforward: All a college professor needed was an open room and a stack of blue books. At many American universities, this is no longer true. Professors now struggle to accommodate the many students with an official disability designation, which may entitle them to extra time, a distraction-free environment, or the use of otherwise-prohibited technology. The University of Michigan has two centers where students with disabilities can take exams, but they frequently fill to capacity,

leaving professors scrambling to find more desks and proctors. Juan Collar, a physicist at the University of Chicago, told me that so many students now take their exams in the school's low-distraction testing outposts that they have become more distracting than the main classrooms.

Accommodations in higher education were supposed to help disabled Americans enjoy the same opportunities as everyone else. No one should be kept from taking a class, for example, because they are physically unable to enter the building where it's taught. Over the past decade and a half, however, the share of students at selective universities who qualify for accommodations—often, extra time on tests—has grown at a breathtaking pace. At the University of Chicago, the number has more than tripled over the past eight years; at UC Berkeley, it has nearly quintupled over the past 15 years.

The increase is driven by more young people getting diagnosed with conditions such as [ADHD](#), [anxiety](#), and [depression](#), and by universities making the process of getting accommodations easier. The change has occurred disproportionately at the most prestigious and expensive institutions. At Brown and Harvard, more than 20 percent of undergraduates are registered as disabled. At Amherst, that figure is 34 percent. Not all of those students receive accommodations, but researchers told me that most do. The schools that enroll the most academically successful students, in other words, also have the largest share of students with a disability that could prevent them from succeeding academically.

“You hear ‘students with disabilities’ and it’s not kids in wheelchairs,” one professor at a selective university, who requested anonymity because he doesn’t have tenure, told me. “It’s just not. It’s rich kids getting extra time on tests.” Even as poor students with disabilities still struggle to get necessary provisions, elite universities have entered an age of accommodation. Instead of leveling the playing field, the system has put the entire idea of fairness at risk.

Forty years ago, students with disabilities could count on few protections in higher education. Federal law prohibited discrimination against disabled students, but in practice schools did little to address their needs. Michael Ashley Stein, a disability-rights expert who teaches at Harvard Law, recalled

the [challenges of attending law school as a student using a wheelchair in the 1980s](#). “I sat in the back of the classroom, could not enter certain buildings in a normal way, became the first person on the law review with a disability, and dragged myself up the stairs,” he told me.

The Americans With Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, was meant to make life fairer for people like Stein. The law required public and private institutions to provide reasonable accommodations to individuals with “a physical or mental impairment” that “substantially limits one or more major life activities.”

Change was slow at first, in part because Supreme Court rulings narrowed the scope of the law. Professors I spoke with told me that, even in the early 2000s, they taught only a handful of students with disabilities. Then, in 2008, Congress amended the ADA to restore the law’s original intent. The government broadened the definition of *disability*, effectively expanding the number of people the law covered. It also included a list of major life activities that could be disrupted by a disability (“learning, reading, concentrating, thinking,” among others) and clarified that individuals were protected under the ADA even if their impairment didn’t severely restrict their daily life.

[Read: The slow death of special education](#)

In response to the 2008 amendments, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), an organization of disability-services staff, released guidance urging universities to give greater weight to students’ own accounts of how their disability affected them, rather than relying solely on a medical diagnosis. “Requiring extensive medical and scientific evidence perpetuates a deviance model of disability, undervalues the individual’s history and experience with disability and is inappropriate and burdensome under the revised statute and regulations,” AHEAD wrote.

Schools began relaxing their requirements. A 2013 analysis of disability offices at 200 postsecondary institutions found that most “required little” from a student besides a doctor’s note in order to grant accommodations for ADHD. At the same time, getting such a note became easier. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association expanded the definition of ADHD.

Previously, the threshold for diagnosis had been “clear evidence of clinically significant impairment.” After the release of the *DSM-5*, the symptoms needed only to “interfere with, or reduce the quality” of, academic functioning.

Recently, mental-health issues have joined ADHD as a primary driver of the accommodations boom. Over the past decade, the number of young people diagnosed with depression or anxiety has exploded. L. Scott Lissner, the ADA coordinator at Ohio State University, told me that 36 percent of the students registered with OSU’s disability office have accommodations for mental-health issues, making them the largest group of students his office serves. Many receive testing accommodations, extensions on take-home assignments, or permission to miss class. Students at Carnegie Mellon University whose severe anxiety makes concentration difficult might get extra time on tests or permission to record class sessions, Catherine Samuel, the school’s director of disability resources, told me. Students with social-anxiety disorder can get a note so the professor doesn’t call on them without warning.

The types of accommodations vary widely. Some are uncontroversial, such as universities outfitting buildings with ramps and providing course materials in braille. These allow disabled students to access the same opportunities as their classmates. Some students get approved for housing accommodations, including single rooms and emotional-support animals.

Other accommodations risk putting the needs of one student over the experience of their peers. One administrator told me that a student at a public college in California had permission to bring their mother to class. This became a problem, because the mom turned out to be an enthusiastic class participant.

Professors told me that the most common—and most contentious—accommodation is the granting of extra time on exams. For students with learning disabilities, the extra time may be necessary to complete the test. But unlike a wheelchair ramp, this kind of accommodation can be exploited. Research confirms what intuition suggests: Extra time can confer an advantage to students who don’t have a disability.

[Read: The time crunch on standardized tests is unnecessary.](#)

Complicating matters is the fact that the line between having a learning or psychological disability and struggling with challenging coursework is not always clearly defined. Having ADHD or anxiety, for example, might make it difficult to focus. But focusing is a skill that the educational system is designed to test. Some professors see the current accommodations regime as propping up students who shouldn't have perfect scores. "If we want our grades to be meaningful, they should reflect what the student is capable of," Steven Sloman, a cognitive-science professor at Brown, told me. "Once they're past Brown and off in the real world, that's going to affect their performance."

No one is more skeptical of the accommodations system than the academics who study it. Robert Weis, a psychology professor at Denison University, pointed me to a Department of Education study that found that middle and high schoolers with disabilities tend to have below-average reading and math skills. These students are half as likely to enroll in a four-year institution as students without disabilities and twice as likely to attend a two-year or community college. If the rise in accommodations were purely a result of more disabled students making it to college, the increase should be more pronounced at less selective institutions than at so called Ivy Plus schools.

In fact, the opposite appears to be true. According to Weis's research, only 3 to 4 percent of students at public two-year colleges receive accommodations, a proportion that has stayed relatively stable over the past 10 to 15 years. He and his co-authors found that students with learning disabilities who request accommodations at community colleges "tend to have histories of academic problems beginning in childhood" and evidence of ongoing impairment. At four-year institutions, by contrast, about half of these students "have no record of a diagnosis or disability classification prior to beginning college."

No one can say precisely how many students should qualify for accommodations. The higher prevalence at more selective institutions could reflect the fact that wealthy families and well-resourced schools are better positioned to get students with disabilities the help they need. Even with the lowered bar for a diagnosis, obtaining one can cost thousands of dollars.

And as more students with disabilities get help in middle and high school, that could at least partially explain their enrollment at top colleges.

Still, some students are clearly taking advantage of an easily gamed system. The [Varsity Blues college-admissions scandal](#) showed that there are wealthy parents who are willing to pay unscrupulous doctors to provide disability diagnoses to their nondisabled children, securing them extra time on standardized tests. Studies have found that a significant share of students exaggerate symptoms or don't put in enough effort to get valid results on diagnostic tests. When Weis and his colleagues looked at how students receiving accommodations for learning disabilities at a selective liberal-arts school performed on reading, math, and IQ tests, most had above-average cognitive abilities and no evidence of impairment.

A parent in Scarsdale, New York, who works in special education told me that it's become common for parents of honors students to get their kids evaluated so they can have extra time on tests. The process usually starts when kids see that their peers have accommodations—or when they bring home their first B. "It feels in some ways like a badge of honor," she said. "People are all talking about getting their children evaluated now." In 2019, a *Wall Street Journal* analysis found that [one in five Scarsdale High School students was considered disabled and eligible for accommodations on college entrance exams](#)—a rate more than seven times higher than the national average.

Several of the college students I spoke with for this story said they knew someone who had obtained a dubious diagnosis. Hailey Strickler, a senior at the University of Richmond, was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia when she was 7 years old. She was embarrassed about her disabilities and wary of getting accommodations, until her sophomore year of college. She was speaking with a friend, who didn't have a disability but had received extra time anyway. "They were like, 'If I'm doing that, you should definitely have the disability accommodations,'" Strickler told me.

"We know that people will act as they are incentivized to act," Brian Scholl, a Yale psychology and cognitive-science professor, told me. "And the students are absolutely incentivized to have as much extra accommodations

as they can under any circumstances.” Students who receive extra time on the LSAT, for example, earn higher average scores than students who don’t.

Even if students aren’t consciously trying to gain an unfair edge, some seem to have convinced themselves that they need extra help. Will Lindstrom, the director of the Regents’ Center for Learning Disorders at the University of Georgia, told me that the fastest-growing group of students who come to him seems to be those who have done their own research and believe that a disability is the source of their academic or emotional challenges. “It’s almost like it’s part of their identity,” Lindstrom said. “By the time we see them, they’re convinced they have a neurodevelopmental disorder.”

Lindstrom worries that the system encourages students to see themselves as less capable than they actually are. By attributing all of their difficulties to a disability, they are pathologizing normal challenges. “When it comes to a disorder like ADHD, we all have those symptoms sometimes,” Lindstrom told me. “But most of us aren’t impaired by them.”

One recent Stanford graduate told me that when she got mononucleosis as a freshman, she turned to the disability office: Because she couldn’t exercise, she was struggling to focus in class. Though she’d always been fidgety, she’d never had academic issues in high school—but high school had been easier than Stanford. The office suggested that she might have ADHD, and encouraged her to seek a diagnosis. A psychiatrist and her pediatrician diagnosed her with ADHD and dyslexia, and Stanford granted her extra time on tests, among other accommodations.

Collar, the University of Chicago physics professor, said that part of what his exams are designed to assess is the ability to solve problems in a certain amount of time. But now many of his students are in a separate room, with time and a half or even double the allotted time to complete the test. “I feel for the students who are not taking advantage of this,” he told me. “We have a two-speed student population.”

Most of the disability advocates I spoke with are more troubled by the students who are still not getting the accommodations they need than by the risk of people exploiting the system. They argue that fraud is rare, and stress that some universities maintain stringent documentation requirements. “I

would rather open up access to the five kids who need accommodations but can't afford documentation, and maybe there's one person who has paid for an evaluation and they really don't need it," Emily Tarconish, a special-education teaching assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, told me. "That's worth it to me."

Tarconish sees the growing number of students receiving accommodations as evidence that the system is working. Ella Callow, the assistant vice chancellor of disability rights at Berkeley, had a similar perspective. "I don't think of it as a downside, no matter how many students with disabilities show up," she told me. "Disabled people still are deeply underemployed in this country and too often live in poverty. The key to addressing that is in large part through institutions like Berkeley that make it part of our mission to lift people into security." (One-third of the students registered with Berkeley's disability office are from low-income families.) At the University of Chicago, members of a committee to address the surge in accommodations don't even agree on whether a problem exists, Collar told me.

The surge itself is undeniable. Soon, some schools may have more students receiving accommodations than not, a scenario that would have seemed absurd just a decade ago. Already, at one law school, 45 percent of students receive academic accommodations. Paul Graham Fisher, a Stanford professor who served as co-chair of the university's disability task force, told me, "I have had conversations with people in the Stanford administration. They've talked about *at what point can we say no?* What if it hits 50 or 60 percent? At what point do you just say 'We can't do this'?" This year, 38 percent of Stanford undergraduates are registered as having a disability; in the fall quarter, 24 percent of undergraduates were receiving academic or housing accommodations.

Mark Schneider, the former head of the educational-research arm of the Department of Education, told me that three of his four grandkids have "individualized education programs," the term of art for accommodations at the K-12 level. "The reward for saying that you have a disability, versus the stigma—the balance between those two things has so radically changed," he said. Were it not for that shift, he added, his grandchildren may not be receiving benefits and services they need. But at the very least, the rewards

are not evenly distributed. As more elite students get accommodations, the system worsens the problem it was designed to solve. The ADA was supposed to make college more equitable. Instead, accommodations have become another way for the most privileged students to press their advantage.

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The Neocons Were Right

**Not about Iraq. But the moral tenor
of their political writings could be
an antidote to Trumpism.**

by David Brooks



What comes after Donald Trump? What compelling social vision can replace MAGA's offerings and reverse the tide of global populism? In considering these questions, I find myself returning to an unlikely group of 20th-century thinkers: the neoconservatives.

These days, when people hear the word *neocons*, they tend to think of Republicans who supported the Iraq War. But the notoriety the neocons attained for supporting that war has obscured their origins as a dissident faction within the American left, one that was staunchly anti-communist but mostly preoccupied with domestic policy.

Here's why the original neocon thinkers—people such as Irving Kristol, James Q. Wilson, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan—can be so helpful right now: They focused their attention on the bloody crossroads where morality and politics intersect. They saw politics through the lens of not only polling and social-science data, but also literature, philosophy, psychology, and theology. They asked the big questions—not just *How can we win the next election?* but *How can we create a civilization to be proud of?* The moral and spiritual tenor of their political writings could be a tonic for a society in moral and spiritual crisis.

Neoconservatism coalesced into a movement in the 1970s, but it has its roots in the cafeteria of the [City College of New York in the late 1930s](#). The poor immigrant kids who would go on to found the movement were the Trotskyists who sat in one alcove of that dining hall. They spent their days arguing with one another and with the Stalinists who sat in the neighboring alcove. In those days, Kristol, Irving Howe, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer, and others were convinced that communism was the future, and so it mattered what kind prevailed.

[From the May 2025 issue: I should have seen MAGA coming](#)

The neoconservatives all broke with Marxism during the Stalin era, and most of them became Franklin D. Roosevelt-style Democrats. Kristol fought the Nazis in Europe and realized that if communism ever came to America, it would turn into a massively corrupt criminal enterprise, which is what eventually happened in the Soviet Union. After the war, many of the neocons went on to become social scientists at places such as Harvard, Princeton, and UC Berkeley. Others became journalists or editors of magazines such as *Commentary* and *Encounter*.

Their second big shift occurred during the 1960s and '70s. Glazer went to work in the Kennedy administration, at the Housing and Home Finance

Agency (the predecessor to the Department of Housing and Urban Development). In 1965, Kristol and Daniel Bell founded a magazine called *The Public Interest*. Swept up in the intoxicating social-science confidence of the era, they believed that we now had the knowledge to settle old ideological feuds and solve social problems scientifically. “Men are learning how to make an industrial economy work,” Moynihan wrote in the magazine’s first issue.

That confidence underlaid the explosion of social-policy making that helped define the ’60s. Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society brought a raft of new programs that aimed to eliminate poverty and inequality. The Nixon administration followed with more in the same vein—the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, along with a 20 percent increase in Social Security benefits and proposals for both a national health-insurance system and a universal basic income for households with children.

From 1960 to 1980, federal spending increased from about \$91 billion to about \$584 billion. In 1960, defense spending made up about half of the federal budget. By 1980, it was down to less than a quarter. At the start of 1960, approximately 250,000 people were on welfare in New York City. At the beginning of 1969, about 900,000 were.

The new programs did not produce the intended results. By the 1970s, the economy was in terrible shape, pushed into a recession by the Vietnam War, an oil embargo, and the high cost of Johnson’s Great Society. In May 1975, the unemployment rate hit 9 percent. A few years later, the inflation rate neared 15 percent. The productivity rate started to decline in 1973—and the poverty rate ticked upward.

Social measures, too, painted a grim picture. From 1960 to 1980, divorce rates more than doubled. The share of children born out of wedlock more than tripled. Violent-crime rates also more than tripled. Drug use exploded. The public-housing projects that had been built with such promise turned into hellscapes. As someone who grew up in New York City in the ’70s, I’m astounded by the level of social disorder we all learned to live with. Pretty much everyone I knew got mugged. In 1972 and 1973, there was a serial castrator and killer in Manhattan nicknamed Charlie Chop-Off. He was

never caught, and such was the general chaos that it wasn't even that big of a story.

The neocons were mostly immigrant kids who'd grown up in places like Brooklyn, when the borough was still a haven for working-class New Yorkers. They had seen their families rise out of poverty by embracing the common bourgeois virtues: hard work, thrift, self-reliance, self-discipline, respect for tradition, and an intense focus on education. When the counterculture arose in the '60s, the neocons were dismayed to see affluent kids at Berkeley, Harvard, and Columbia dropping out, doing acid, denouncing the industrious and traditional culture of their parents, and embracing the social anarchy resulting from that culture's erosion.

The disillusionment of the '60s made neoconservatism bipartisan. Some neocons—such as Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Midge Decter—became Republicans. Others—such as Moynihan and Glazer—stuck with the Democrats. But they remained a coherent and ever more influential intellectual force in American life.

The events of the '60s and '70s taught the men and women who would become neocons two big lessons. The first was that society is a lot more complicated than it looks, and that many attempts to reengineer it end up producing no benefits at all—or worse. A 1971 essay by Glazer in *Commentary*, “[The Limits of Social Policy](#),” captured the chastened mood. So did Kristol’s famous definition of a neoconservative: “a liberal who has been mugged by reality.” In 1973, [in another essay for Commentary](#), the neoconservative political scientist Aaron Wildavsky observed that experts had a lot of information about society’s problems, but nobody knew how to fix them. Consequently, “vast amounts of money and even vaster amounts of enthusiasm were poured into various programs that ultimately ended in failure and bewilderment.”

Those commonly associated with the neoconservative crew were not against trying to use government to relieve poverty or inequality—Moynihan, Glazer, and Bell were not libertarians or even small-government conservatives. But their insight was that if you’re going to launch a big federal program, you had better acknowledge that most programs—whether job training, education reform, or efforts to reduce juvenile delinquency—

fail. You had better have a lot of evidence that your idea will work, and you had better proceed cautiously, experimentally, and without building big bureaucracies.

Given this hard-earned skepticism and epistemological modesty, it is ironic that many later conservatives—including me—who had supped at the neocon table would come to embrace a grand project to create democracy in Iraq. In fact, the single most famous neoconservative essay on foreign policy is Jeane Kirkpatrick's 1979 article "[Dictatorships & Double Standards](#)," also in *Commentary*, in which she explains that laying the groundwork for a democracy where one does not yet exist requires decades of civil-society work. "It seems clear that the architects of contemporary American foreign policy have little idea of how to go about encouraging the liberalization of an autocracy," she wrote. Somehow, 24 years later, that lesson was forgotten on the way to Iraq.

Another important truth the neocons learned from the '60s is that you can't separate policy making from moral character. The political scientist James Q. Wilson put it this way in *The Public Interest* in 1985: "The most important change in how one defines the public interest that I have witnessed—and experienced—over the last twenty years has been a deepening concern for the development of character in the citizenry."

[From the September 2023 issue: David Brooks on why Americans are so awful to one another](#)

When trying to effect social change, Wilson continued, "the essential first step is to acknowledge that at root, in almost every area of important public concern, we are seeking to induce persons to act virtuously, whether as school children, applicants for public assistance, would-be lawbreakers, or voters and public officials. Not only is such conduct desirable in its own right, it appears now to be necessary if large improvements are to be made in those matters we consider problems: schooling, welfare, crime, and public finance."

When neocons evaluated any policy proposal, the core questions they asked were: Does this moralize or demoralize the people it touches? Does this induce them to behave more responsibly or less? By *morality*, they didn't

mean the kind of fancy notions explored by Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. They just meant the basics: Does this policy encourage people to work hard, be good parents and neighbors, delay gratification, and recognize not just their rights but their responsibilities?

Neocons like Kristol had no problem with Social Security, which reduced poverty among seniors. Giving seniors money doesn't give them a greater incentive to grow old. But neoconservatives noticed that the number of single-parent families surged following the War on Poverty's expansion of welfare. A guaranteed income, they argued, reduced labor-force participation and the desire to work. They noticed that when you give a country permission to rack up a huge federal deficit, you are giving people permission to behave more and more selfishly toward future generations. So the neocons put virtue at the center of their public-policy thinking; they were not afraid to be moralistic.

They rejected the privatization of morality, which they saw happening around them, especially in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. During that hyper-individualistic moment, many Americans valorized the idea that a person's values, tastes, and cultural attitudes are a private affair. Because everybody's moral standards are different, no one should try to impose their morality on someone else. Live and let live. That idea is still with us.

The neocons, by contrast, believed that humans are social and spiritual creatures whose souls are either ennobled or degraded by the systems, cultures, and behaviors in which we are enmeshed. We're constantly influencing and being influenced by one another. We're all reliant on a shared pool of moral capital—the values, norms, behaviors, and institutions that make it easier for people to be good. When you privatize morality, you drain the pool of shared moral capital.

The neocons inspected each of society's systems, trying to identify ways they ennobled or degraded people. For example, their support for capitalism was ambivalent because, although capitalism encourages risk taking and industriousness (good for the economy), it also tends to inflame greed and philistinism (bad for the soul). Bell's 1976 book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, noted that although capitalism relies on farsighted, self-disciplined people to create value and grow the economy, the

advertising and the consumerist mentality that capitalism generates encourage shortsightedness and self-indulgence.

The neoconservatives also paid enormous attention to the mediating institutions of society, those entities that successfully transmit values from one generation to the next—families, neighborhoods, congregations, civic organizations. The neocons argued that the left, seeing society almost exclusively in terms of the individual and the state, gave short shrift to these valuable institutions. Because neocons saw them as seedbeds of character and as cultural shock absorbers for when times get hard, they were concerned that the expansion of the state seemed to be weakening and displacing these institutions. Though many neocons were not religious themselves, they were alarmed by the decline of religion and of congregational life. They were alarmed, too, by the policy of deinstitutionalization, which took mentally ill people out of mental-health facilities, put them on the street, and called it freedom. This kind of approach, neocons argued, was hopelessly hyper-individualized, placing the “freedom” of the individual before the safety of the community.

The neocons also paid enormous attention to the prevailing ethos of their time—what we might call the spirit of the age. They believed that this ethos was not driven primarily by economic and political forces, but shaped by shifts in culture and ideas. “Individuals, families, churches, and communities cannot operate in isolation, cannot long maintain values at odds with those legitimated by the state and popularized by the culture,” Gertrude Himmelfarb, a neoconservative historian, wrote in *The Public Interest* in 1994. So if the wider assumptions of society are shaped by hyper-individualism, antinomianism, and (as Christopher Lasch put it) a culture of narcissism, then society is likely to deteriorate. One of Moynihan’s famous essays, published in *The American Scholar* in 1993, was “Defining Deviancy Down,” which theorized that as the amount of deviant behavior in a community rises, people tend to define behavior that was once considered deviant as normal and acceptable.

While old-fashioned conservatives cited Edmund Burke and libertarians cited Adam Smith, neocons never tired of quoting Alexis de Tocqueville. He shaped how they saw society—as a single civilization in which politics and culture, economics and morality, democracy and spirituality were all

fundamentally inseparable. The spirit of civilization shapes who people are, how they perceive reality, and what they think is right and wrong. In every endeavor, the crucial question is: What sort of people are we nurturing into being?

The neoconservatives believed that they were living amid a crisis of values. Not a clash between two different value systems but a crisis in the very idea of value. Seduced by social-science rationalism, moral relativism, or political partisanship, people had trouble thinking clearly about what separates a morally healthy society from a morally unhealthy one. This created a void in the soul of society and engendered a sense of alienation. “Secular rationalism has been unable to produce a compelling, self-justifying moral code,” [Kristol said in 1991](#). The result is nihilism—an amoral culture in which people grow up without coherent values.

So how can neoconservative thinking help us today? The first big lesson of neoconservatism is that character is destiny. That lesson applies whether you’re talking about the character of a leader, an organization, or a nation. If you disregard truth—as many Republicans plainly do these days—you will wind up in some pretty ugly places.

From the November 2025 issue: America needs a mass movement—now

If you want to improve the character of a nation or an organization, you have to change its culture so that it nurtures basic decency. Which leads to the second lesson of neoconservatism: The most important values in a democratic society are the pedestrian bourgeois virtues. Aristocratic societies may do better at inspiring heroism, genius, love of honor. But democratic societies rely on showing up on time, working hard, being there for your neighbor, listening with curiosity, respecting traditions.

The third crucial insight from the neoconservatives is that culture drives history. The assumptions people rely on, the mental categories in their heads, the things they admire and disdain, the way they process the world, their norms and habits—all of this will determine how they behave.

But perhaps the most important belief that the neoconservatives can impart to us is that the American dream is real. The original neocons, the sons and

daughters of immigrants, aspired to make it in America and contribute to their adopted home. If libertarians oriented their politics around freedom, and progressives oriented their politics around equality, the neocons tended to orient theirs around social mobility. They wanted to create a world in which poor boys and girls like themselves could rise and succeed. They understood that this ascent required not just economic opportunity, but also the right values.

Today, roughly 70 percent of Americans say they don't believe in the American dream. That loss of faith is like a giant bomb detonated in the middle of our society, robbing us of our central, unifying vision. Absent that shared vision of possibility, people revert to a tribal, us-versus-them morality. If the ghosts of the original neocons have anything to tell us about specific policy choices, it's that we need to do what we can to expand social mobility and restore faith in the American dream.

The other thing the ghosts of the neocons would tell us is that the fight for the American dream is as much moral as political or economic. When he was running for president in 2020, Joe Biden was right to say that the election was a struggle for the soul of America. The problem was that neither he nor the people in his administration knew how to wage a moral and cultural battle. Trump, in contrast, is a genius at cultural warfare. Because of their history going back to the New Deal, Democrats are more comfortable talking about expanding health insurance, investing in infrastructure, and reducing prescription-drug prices. All of that is important. But they will continually lose to MAGA's cultural warriors unless they can connect those policies to a story about reversing America's moral decline. This is where a new and repurposed neoconservatism can help them.

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By the Horns

Miriam Cabas is one of Spain's few female bullfighters. What does her success mean for bullfighting, and for Spain?

by Begoña Gómez Urzaiz

The week before the biggest bullfight of her career, in Cádiz, Spain, this past July, 24-year-old Miriam Cabas [posted a carefully produced video on Instagram](#). Cabas appears not in a traditional matador costume but in a cream pantsuit, watching a little girl—4, maybe 5—wave a red muleta at an imaginary bull. “Dreams come true,” she wrote in the caption. “The little girl I used to be still guides me.”



Cabas triumphed that day, [killing two bulls](#) and receiving three of their ears as trophies. It was the first time she had fought animals antagonized by picadors, men on horseback who stab the bulls with lances, testing their aggression and forcing them to lower their heads on their subsequent charges at the bullfighters. For the uninitiated, this was a big deal: Cabas had reached the final stage of her training to become a professional matador, one of vanishingly few women to compete in the intensely traditional field.

The British photographer Owen Harvey was there to document her victory. Harvey has followed Cabas's career for more than a year as part of a series on young matadors. He could feel the crowd rooting for her, he told me. Cabas is a local talent, born in Los Barrios, a small town on Spain's southern tip where bullfighting is still very much alive. She was introduced to the activity by her grandfather, who signed her up for after-school lessons when she was just 5. There were other girls, though not many, and only she persevered to become a professional.



The crowd waved white handkerchiefs to signal its satisfaction with her performance. (Owen Harvey)

Effectively banned in certain regions and vilified by some members of Spain's left-wing coalition government, bullfighting has become a potent political symbol for the country's resurgent far right. The populist Vox party has made a point of celebrating it as an essential Spanish tradition—and of trolling those concerned about animal cruelty. Cabas, for her part, prefers not to be explicit about her politics. She appreciates those who have protected bullfighting and does consider it an important aspect of Spanish identity, but, unlike some of her peers, she doesn't post photos with far-right politicians. (Though Vox supports the way Cabas makes a living, its [leaders are unequivocally anti-feminist](#).) Cabas doesn't linger on her role as a barrier breaker, either. "You risk your life before a *toro bravo*, and that's equally hard for men or women," she told me.



These days, she balances an intense training regimen with her college courses. She's studying to become a veterinarian. "Nobody loves bulls like us," she said. "We devote our lives to them—if that's not love, then what is?"

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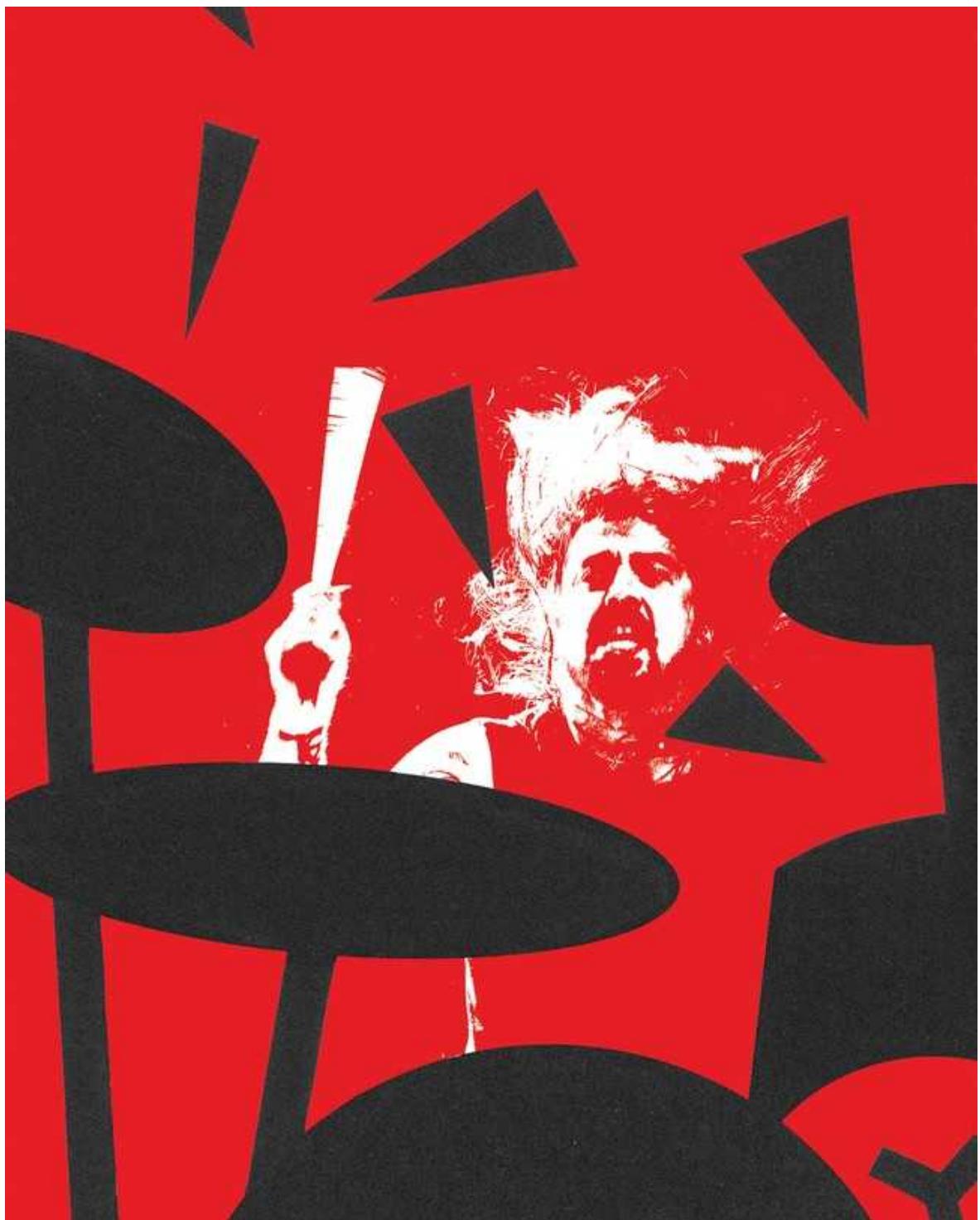
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The Great Mystery of Drumming

**It's about the flow of Time, not just
keeping the beat.**

by James Parker



Dave Grohl of Nirvana and Foo Fighters, one of the few drummers to become a real rock star (Illustration by Liz Hart*)

Full disclosure: I play the drums. I play them every chance I get. Although my drumming career has served mainly as a steady education in my own shining mediocrity as a drummer, a reminder that I was put on this Earth for other things, I love hitting the goddamn drums. Left foot on the hi-hat pedal, right foot on the kick-drum pedal, left hand on the snare, right hand on the ride cymbal. When it starts to flow, you’re like da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*: You’re in a holy circle of equilibrium, blissfully distributed, with consciousness diffused to your extremities.

How do you get better as a drummer? Well, you practice: You do the same thing over and over, slowly building muscle fiber while also experiencing, in your brain, the painless, clueless ache of a synapse trying to form. You get better by being in a band, by entering music as part of a volatile, multi-person, multi-addiction organism. And you get better, lastly, via the drummer’s version of the grace of God—which is the jolt, the volt, the heavenly bolt, the electromotive impulse that flashes out from the playing of another, much greater drummer, and claims you.

John Lingan’s superb *[Backbeats: A History of Rock and Roll in Fifteen Drummers](#)* is full of such moments. Moments of transmission—often via vinyl, occasionally in performance—when the creative spark zips and snaps across the pre-artistic darkness and some young drummer somewhere realizes that he’s going to have to change his life. Dave Lombardo, pre-Slayer, listening in awe to Phil “Philthy Animal” Taylor pummeling through a relentless double-kick-drum pattern on the title track of Motörhead’s *Overkill*. Jody Stephens, pre-Big Star, in the 17th row at a Led Zeppelin show in Memphis: John Bonham was “like a rocket, everyone else was just holding on.” Tony Thompson, pre-Chic, watching the Mahavishnu Orchestra: “I saw Billy Cobham for the first time—and saw God ... It’s still embedded in my soul seeing him play like that.”

The drummer James Osterberg, before he became Iggy Pop, was infatuated with the bluesy playing of Sam Lay. (You can hear Lay’s ghostly snare taps on Howlin’ Wolf’s “Little Red Rooster”; you can also hear him, four years later, tearing through the anarchic-ironic shuffle of Bob Dylan’s “Highway 61 Revisited.”) Osterberg made a young man’s picaresque pilgrimage from Ann Arbor to Lay’s house in Chicago. “His wife was very surprised that I was looking for him,” he tells Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain in *[Please](#)*

Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk. “She said, ‘Well, he’s not here, but would you like some fried chicken?’”

My own little drum crisis/awakening came at the hands (and feet) of Dave Grohl, pre-Nirvana, when I saw him playing with the Washington, D.C., hardcore-punk band Scream. Grohl—skinny, 19 years old—was all attack, all emphasis. He drummed in italics. Simultaneously, there was something subliminal and almost unspeakable about his playing; as devastatingly correct as it was, he also seemed to be pulling information from a rhythmic grid more profound, more capacious, than the mere ticktocking of accurate time.

Because this is the great mystery of drumming: Time. Not just tempo, not just keeping the beat—the guitarist and the bassist can do that—but the drummer’s musical relationship to the flow of Time itself. To the passing of all things, to the universe’s rumble toward infinity. John Bonham’s left foot on the hi-hat pedal—*shick-shick-shick*—has the cadence of Deep Time. It’s Bonham’s neurological signature: a lilt, an inflection, a swing that microscopically delays or distends the beat while also fulfilling it. Listen to “Whole Lotta Love,” around 1:18, the start of the freak-out section. Listen to that hi-hat going up and down, up and down. Bonham, steady as he is, is not keeping time. He’s releasing it.



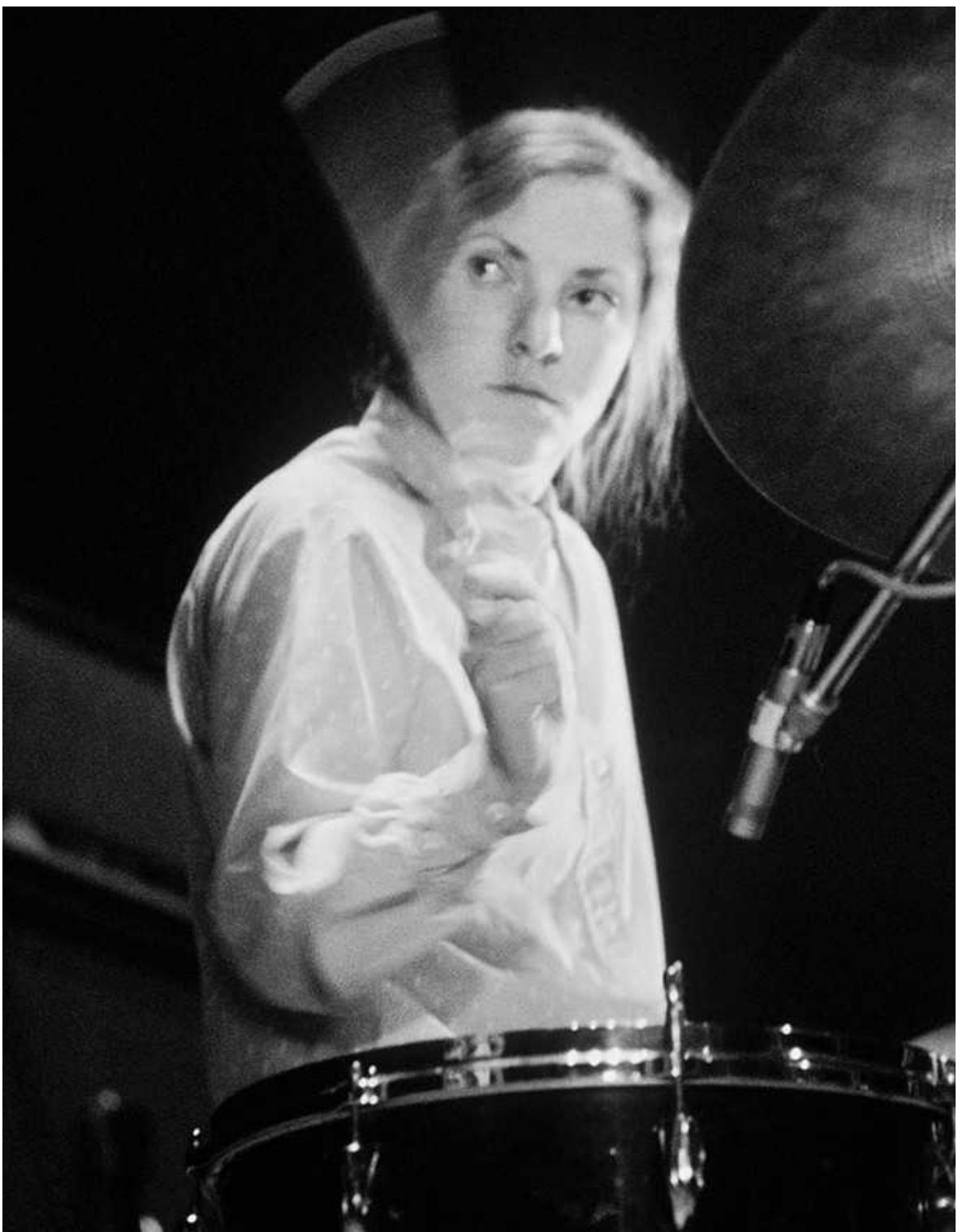
John Bonham and Jimmy Page of the New Yardbirds perform in Denmark in September 1968, a month before the group was reborn as Led Zeppelin.
(Jorgen Angel / Redferns)

His own rumble toward infinity was brief, fiery, and pocked with shadow. Lingan pairs him with the Who's Keith Moon: "Their drumming was an accurate reflection of each of their personalities—they were loud, they were destructive, they hurt and endangered people, and they both died young and violently from self-abuse." Here I think I might respectfully disagree. In both cases, the drumming, the art, transcended the personality.

Grohl and Bonham get a chapter each in *Backbeats*, as does—to my great delight—Earl Hudson from Bad Brains, a low-key powerhouse whose playing steered the shamanic flights of his brother, the band's front man, H.R., through the ether. The great session man Hal Blaine is also featured, and Clyde Stubblefield from James Brown's the J.B.'s, the author of the "Funky Drummer" beat that's since been looped through a thousand hip-hop tracks.

To nondrummers, many of these figures will be obscure. (One main counterexample is Grohl, who made himself a real rock star as the guitarist-vocalist of Foo Fighters.) This is largely the drummer's fate: to be felt but not seen. And this is the ambition of Lingan's book—to tell a story of rock-and-roll evolution from the back, from the bowels, from the under-realm of the creator-drummers. How have drummers responded to the increasing power and complexity of the music? How have they themselves increased that power and complexity? By the time we get to Dave Lombardo and Slayer's *Reign in Blood*, we are in a zone of Darwinian mutation, as Lombardo pulls off feats of speed and dexterity unimaginable—and probably terrifying—to his drumming forebears.

The sole female among Lingan's 15 selected drummers is Moe Tucker, of the Velvet Underground. Self-taught, self-willed—"I consciously, purposely, didn't learn more about drums because I didn't want to sound like anybody else"—Tucker fused steely minimalism with raw, repetitive impact. If any rock-and-roll drummer could be said to have made their drums drone, it's her. No crashing cymbals for Moe Tucker: not for her, the big-top vulgarity of those metallic exclamation points. And sometimes no downbeat—the ferocious shuffle she plays on "Run Run Run" is on the snare alone, its clattering, unmoored momentum working like a propellant on Lou Reed's storytelling. *Ka-chunk-a-CHUNK-a-chunk-a-CHUNK* ... The addicts are fiending around New York City, looking for a fix, a drag, a taste, anything. Maybe this was Tucker's special compact with Time—Time as narrative; Time as unfolding drama.



Moe Tucker of the Velvet Underground, known for fusing steely minimalism with raw impact to produce her signature drone (Gijsbert Hanekroot / Redferns)

And one last thing about Time: Of all the members of the band, it comes for the drummer first. Guitars get heavier as you get older, high notes harder to hit, but the drummer pays a private tax to mortality. The drummer's strength goes faster. Exactly how fast depends, to a degree, on the music. Metal drumming is famously punishing, and high-speed punk rock, as Lingan writes, "has always survived on heroic drumming. Someone has to sustain that pulse." But even the mid-tempo drummer will have their moments of naked endurance. A 2008 study of Blondie's Clem Burke revealed that, during live sets, he played with the stamina of an athlete, burning about 600 calories over the course of an 82-minute show. Many bands, when they reform for their [20th- or 30th-anniversary tours](#), have a new man, younger and stronger, on drums.

[From the November 2015 issue: James Parker on the twilight of the headbangers](#)

So what's a jowly old superannuated drummer to do? How do you stay on that drum stool and keep playing that funky/punky/heavy/wicky-wacky whatever-it-is? Well, you stop thrashing. You move more precisely; you breathe more deeply; you manage your force more shrewdly. You measure the dosage of power in every stroke. You use, in a word, technique. It's like life.

* Lead-image source: Kevin Nixon / Classic Rock Magazine / Future Publishing / Getty

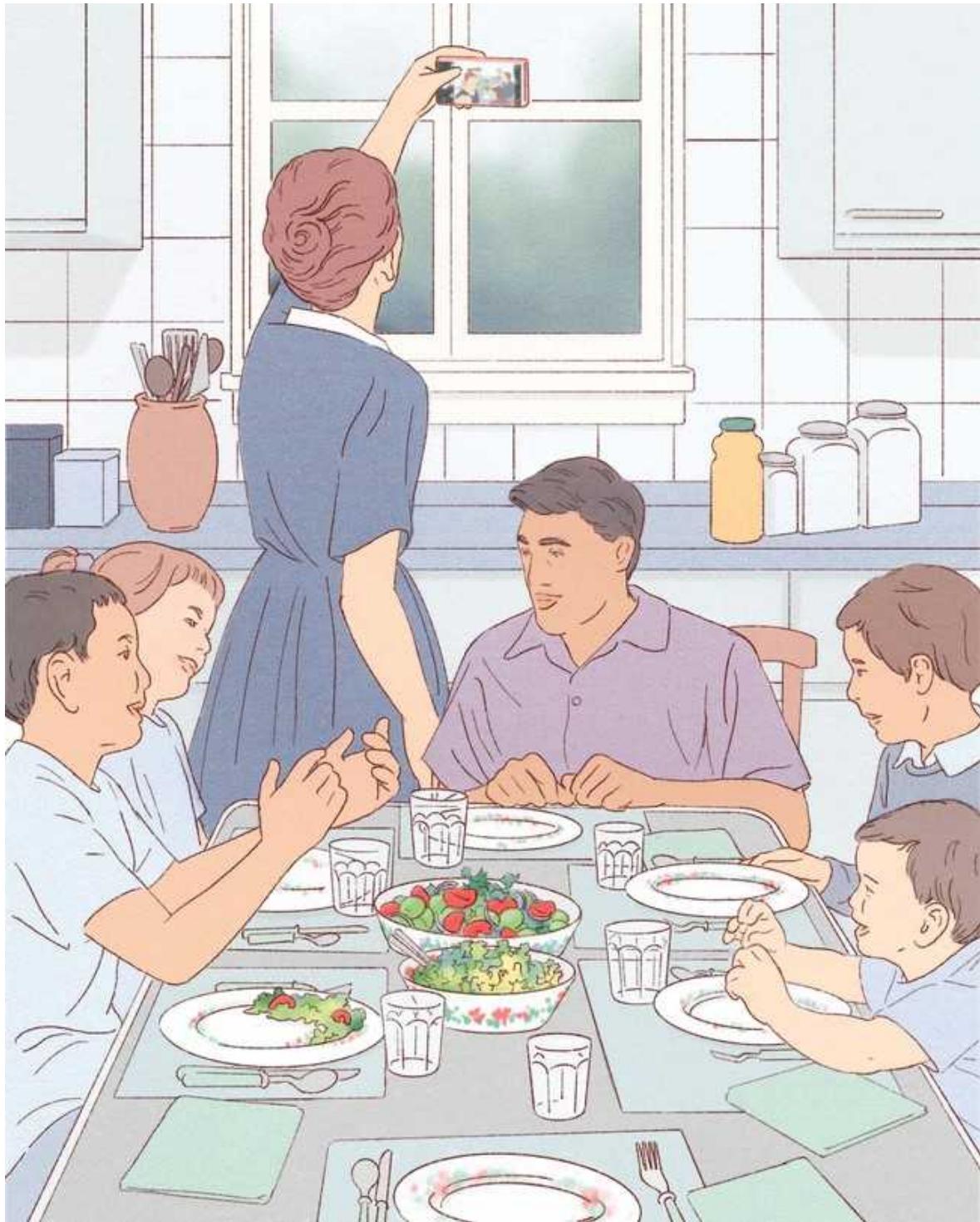
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The Culture War Comes to the Kitchen

How the politics of food brought together the crunchy left and the trad right

by Sophie Gilbert



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

Sometimes I think I became a mother not in a hospital room but in a Trader Joe's in New York City. It was May 2020. A masked but smizing employee took one look at my stomach and handed me a packet of dark-chocolate

peanut-butter cups. “Happy Mother’s Day!” she said. I was [pregnant](#), with twins, during the early months of the pandemic, and all I could think about was food—what to eat and how to acquire it. Once a week I dashed clumsily through the store’s aisles, grabbing cans of beans and bags of apples while trying not to breathe, like a contestant on a postapocalyptic episode of *Supermarket Sweep*.

Food then was interlaced with a sense of danger, the coronavirus potentially spreading (we worried, absurdly it turned out) even by way of reusable totes. Meanwhile, I knew from my relentless pregnancy apps that what I ate could have monumental implications for my future children’s eating habits. I was scared, and I felt powerless, and food seemed like one of the few things I could control, or at least try to.

[Read: Becoming a parent during the pandemic was the hardest thing I’ve ever done](#)

What I didn’t yet know was that I was tapping into a deep-rooted tradition—or that, even as I panic-shopped, it was evolving. Mothers are our first food influencers, and for most of history, they have been our primary ones. The process starts even before we’re born, we now know: The tastes we’re exposed to in utero inform the preferences we’ll have much later in life. Culture, “at least when it comes to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother,” Michael Pollan wrote in his best-selling 2008 book, [In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto](#). Up until the mid-20th century or so, we humans ate much as our parents did, and their parents before them, and so on: food cooked at home, from fresh ingredients, made predominantly by women.

But [a flurry of destabilizing changes](#) followed the Second World War, which had accustomed Americans to mass-produced boxed meals via rations issued to the military. Technological developments on multiple fronts brought prepackaged meals, frozen food, industrialized agriculture, the microwave oven. Marketers were learning how to subliminally manipulate shoppers. Perhaps most significant of all was a shift taking place at home: Women were joining the workforce, happily ceding the task of dinner to Big Food.

[Read: Avoiding ultra-processed foods is completely unrealistic](#)

By the 2000s, the consequences of all these changes were becoming calamitous. In the 1960s, 13 percent of American adults and about 5 percent of children were obese; by 2005, the number had risen to 35 percent of adults and more than 15 percent of children. Food companies had long since mastered the art of engineering products to encourage mindless overconsumption with every lab-perfected crunch, crisp, and snap. They'd also figured out how to maximize their sway over U.S. food policy, [donating to politicians and directly funding scientists](#). And they did so while decrying as intrusive any efforts to rein in the ruthless lobbying tactics laid bare by the nutritionist and advocate Marion Nestle in her 2002 book, [*Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health.*](#)

Nestle, whom *The New York Times* [has called](#) “one of the most influential framers of the modern food movement,” has spent the two decades since then trying to help Americans understand the extent to which the systems that feed them are implicated in sickening them for profit. Big Food, she was among the first to highlight, often [bypasses parents to target kids directly](#), using cartoon mascots and promotional collaborations with toy companies. (One of the prized possessions in her archive is [an Oreo-themed Barbie doll](#).) Until recently, Nestle’s war against the Pillsbury Doughboy and Tony the Tiger looked unwinnable, as she observes in her new book, [*What to Eat Now: The Indispensable Guide to Good Food, How to Find It, and Why It Matters*](#). An update of her 2006 field guide for supermarket shoppers, it demonstrates how lamentably little progress has been made since then.

[Supermarkets and supply chains are even more consolidated](#) than they were 20 years ago, and corporations are more empowered, as Nestle writes, “to sell food products no matter what they do to or for your health.” Nearly three-quarters of American adults are now overweight or obese. An array of new products since 2006—oat milk and [gluten-free pasta](#), more global ingredients (gochujang, sumac), [plant-based “meats,”](#) CBD-infused everything—has added variety, but also confusion. What counts as healthy? The influx certainly hasn’t halted a rise in consumption of ultra-processed foods (those heavily reliant on industrial ingredients and methods far removed from anything you’d cook at home). They now [make up more than half of the average American adult’s diet](#) and two-thirds of what children eat. The food system in America, Nestle explains, produces twice the amount of calories we actually need, while ravaging the environment we

can't survive without. (Industrialized farming results in water and air pollution, soil degradation, deforestation, and a loss of biodiversity.)

But something perplexing has also been happening for half a decade or so now: Once again, patterns of influence over what we eat are being upended. Enabled by social media, certain mothers have been mobilizing, intent on reasserting their authority over mealtime. I wasn't the only one obsessed with food during the pandemic; something about the confluence of fear, frustration, and way too much time online ignited an impassioned, women-led, influencer-stoked, food-centered movement. A lot of the focus on fresh, homemade meals that this missionary crew has been advocating for has felt familiar—and sensible—to parents like me, dealing with uneaten strips of bell pepper and endless requests for snacks heavy in high-fructose corn syrup. Much has also felt wholly reactionary, rooted not just in the dietary and agricultural traditions of bygone days, but also in old-style gender politics.

The past few years have seen a glut of wellness content about the dangers of seed oils and chemicals, as well as nostalgic imagery disseminated over social media by women labeled “tradwives”: freshly baked bread emerging from a weathered Dutch oven in a lovely country kitchen, cows being milked in bucolic bliss, chubby-cheeked toddlers waddling through vegetable patches. And then “Make America Healthy Again,” a slogan that began life as a [winking provocation in a 2016 Sweetgreen ad](#), morphed into a more politicized mantra among an improbable coalition of personalities who also want milk unpasteurized, food dyes banned, vaccines eliminated—and who also seem to want women re-enshrined in their rightful place in the kitchen.

“Who isn’t a food person these days?” the chef Ruby Tandoh asks in her new essay collection, [*All Consuming: Why We Eat the Way We Eat Now*](#), surveying a culture in which everybody seems to be “talking about almost nothing else.” What’s striking is that these days, most of us recognize that America’s diet needs an intervention that goes beyond talk—and medication: GLP-1 drugs, however remarkable their effects may be, can’t feed kids. Yet the dramatic showdown between profit-greedy Big Food and proselytizing Big Family is eclipsing a middle ground of parenting pragmatists. Contradictory nutrition advice online drowns out a basic

consensus: Experts overwhelmingly agree that a healthy diet still aligns with the same boring guidelines we grew up hearing—eat your fruits and vegetables, avoid ultra-processed (formerly “junk”) foods, limit sugar. How has the discussion become so polarized? And what might it take to actually fix dinner?

We’ve seen politicized food fights before. In the mid-2000s, a harried mother in Chicago, navigating a fast-track, dual-career schedule with her partner, began to rely on quick fixes when feeding her kids: takeout, ready meals, prepackaged snacks. One day, at a routine doctor appointment, she learned that both of her daughters were on the path to becoming overweight, a warning that spurred her to overhaul the way her family was eating. “I was grateful for the time and the effort that I saved with these kinds of products,” Michelle Obama told a gathering of food-business executives in 2010, after she became first lady of the United States. “But I was also completely unaware that all that extra convenience sometimes made it just a little too easy for me to eat too much, for my kids to eat too much, and to eat too often.” She was unprepared, too, for the partisan ruckus that was about to begin.

The chef, advocate, and policy adviser Sam Kass recounts this story in his wide-ranging and pragmatic new book about America’s food failings, [The Last Supper: How to Overcome the Coming Food Crisis](#). Kass was just a few years out of college when he was hired by Obama in 2007 to help improve what and how her family ate at home. He then moved to Washington to work with the first lady on expanding her healthy-eating revolution from a personal goal into a political project. At the time, Kass notes, he’d been radicalized by Pollan and Nestle, who were giving shape to an intellectual, leftish, Berkeley-centric movement advocating for sustainable food production and more health-oriented food policies: “I shopped at farmers markets. I ate organic. My beef was grass fed. I thought that everyone should eat that way.” He arrived in the capital, he writes, “ready to decisively take on Big Ag—until reality reared its ugly head.”

In February 2010, Obama announced her first major initiative as first lady: Let’s Move, a public-health campaign aimed at lowering childhood-obesity rates in the U.S. Improving the nutritional quality of school meals nationwide was a centerpiece; for children living in poverty, those breakfasts

and lunches could be their main source of sustenance. Conservatives [instantly caught the scent of a culture war](#). Figures such as Sarah Palin and Fox News's Glenn Beck regularly fulminated against nanny statism and accused the Obamas of trying to overrule the sacred rights of American parents.

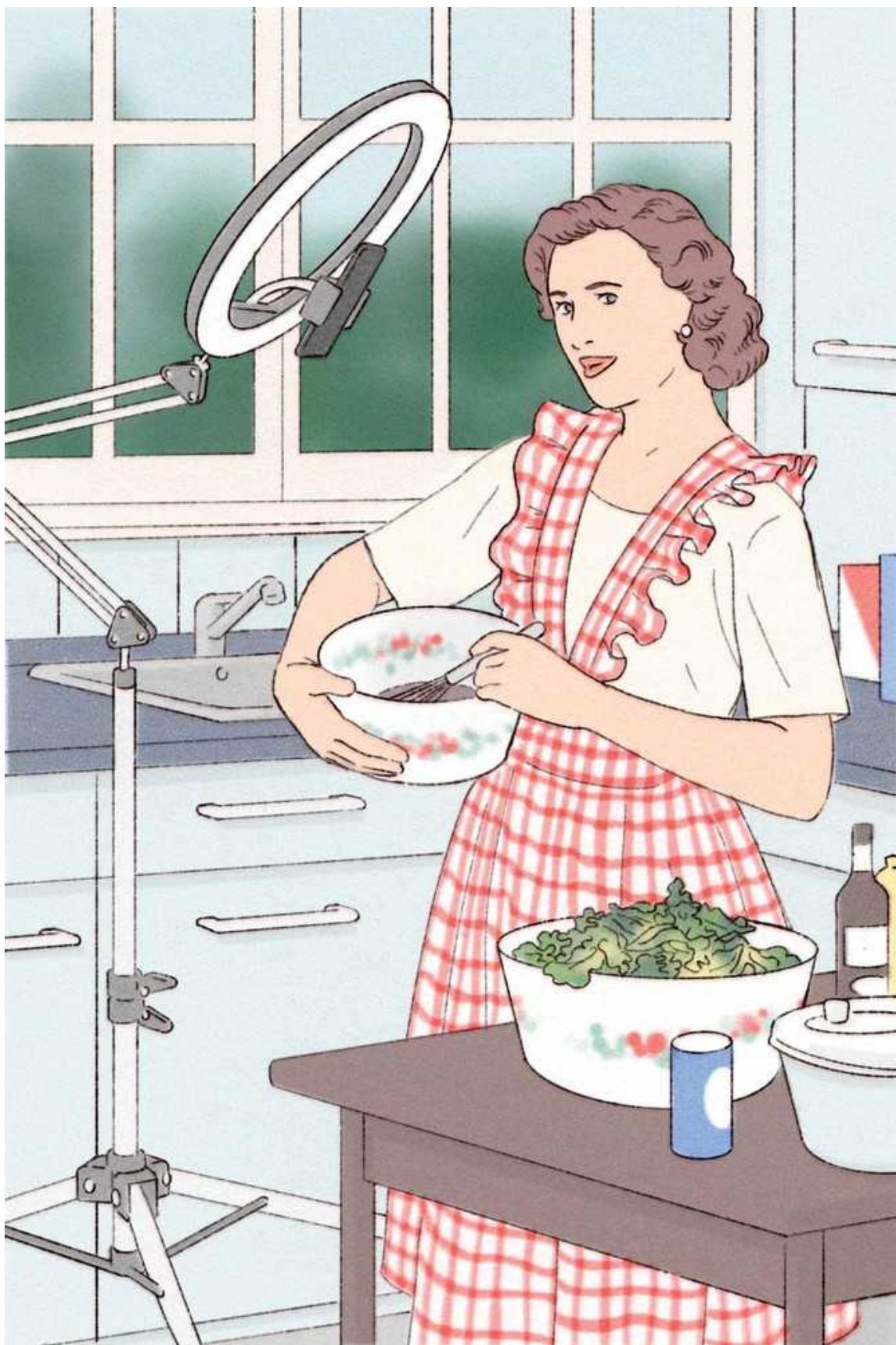
Some of the backlash was bipartisan. When Kass tried to eliminate a policy that offered White House employees free Coke—after all, the administration was trying to get the nation to drink less of it—Michelle Obama's deputy chief of staff responded, "Over my dead body." And when Kass and the first lady spearheaded a national campaign to get people to drink more water, they were criticized by some of their public-health allies—Nestle among them—for not considering the environmental impact of plastic bottles.

The uproar, in retrospect, is illuminating. Food is deeply personal. Our natural response to being told what to eat is defensive: We tend to be attached to the foods we associate with family, comfort, and care. Obama had presumed that the straightforward changes that had worked for her family might benefit the wider public—and to her credit, she aimed to provide healthier meals for all American children, through broad institutional reform. Kass cites a study showing that the odds of poor children developing obesity would have been about 50 percent higher without the school-meal interventions. Crucially, though, childhood obesity was soon rising again. And Let's Move, rather than surging in popularity, was cast as elitist coercion, and Obama as the mean mommy forcing America to finish its vegetables.

[Read: RFK Jr. is repeating Michelle Obama's mistakes](#)

In hindsight, Kass concludes, almost nothing Let's Move could have suggested would have pleased conservatives at the time. But he also infers that the biggest failure of Let's Move was one of communication. If you come across as instructing people on what to eat or, especially, what not to eat, you're more likely to prompt a raised middle finger than compliance. Slide gracefully into people's subconscious by enlisting the power of suggestion—visually presenting healthier products in a way that elicits an emotional response, say, or evokes a sense of home or prosperity—and you can help an idea take hold. There's a reason the [MAHA movement caught](#)

[fire](#) as social-media use escalated. “Marketers will tell you this,” Kass writes: “When you are trying to shift culture, seek out the influencers.”



One thing that Big Food, and now MAHA moms, understands is that what we see fundamentally affects our attitudes about what we eat. In 2010, the same year that the Obamas were hustling to pass the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, two software engineers debuted a photo-sharing app that they named Instagram, unwittingly ushering in a new hyper-visual food era of “serial virality,” as Tandoh puts it. Three years later, when the French pastry chef Dominique Ansel debuted the cronut (a hybrid of French patisserie and American deep fat frying), Instagram had 100 million users, many of whom responded to photos of his concoction with ravenous abandon. “People just shared the cronut, a platonic torus of golden dough with a sugar-salt-fat ratio to please the gods,” Tandoh writes. “Instead of spreading person to person through word of mouth, it spread exponentially, like a contagion.”

The cronut wasn’t remotely healthy, but it was totemic of food trends in the 2010s, as community bonding through photo sharing took off. While the Affordable Care Act fueled attacks on Democrats as the party of Big Health Care, an alternative subculture was gaining momentum. In September 2008, the Oscar-winning actor Gwyneth Paltrow launched Goop, a newsletter of recipes and recommendations intended to foster—and eventually monetize—a more intimate relationship with her fans.

Paltrow, who had lost her father to cancer, was now the mother of two young children, and believed passionately in the connection between food and health. “I am convinced that by eating biological foods it is possible to avoid the growth of tumors,” she told an Italian newspaper, drawing fierce pushback from doctors and dieticians—but not from her audience. Paltrow seemed to intuit the mood of many women in the aftermath of the Great Recession: their concerns, their exhaustion, their eagerness for an escape from their own cramped kitchens offered by images of delightfully wholesome domesticity. Goop gave an air of both glamour and accessibility to the kind of alternative lifestyle that had previously existed only on the crunchy fringes.

[Read: The baffling rise of Goop](#)

Since Goop’s debut, [the wellness market has ballooned](#) and is now worth more than \$6 trillion, with the U.S. making up about a third of that figure. Paltrow’s association of food with health helped instill in people’s minds a

connection between what they ate and how they felt. “I would rather smoke crack than eat cheese from a can,” she told an interviewer in 2011. And mothers were especially vulnerable to this messaging. We worry endlessly; we (traditionally) manage doctor appointments and household budgets, to the tune of an estimated \$2 trillion a year in America.

Over the course of the 2010s, even as the Alice Waters–inspired farm-to-table cause of the 1980s was enjoying a boost from Pollan and company, a different cottage industry of food and wellness advocates gained influence online. It tapped into valid concerns about health in America, while also hyping fearful ideas about a contaminated state of modernity (ridden with parasites, carcinogens, and GMOs, as well as vaccines and prescription drugs). Zen Honeycutt, a pro-organic-farming and anti-vaccine activist—now one of many mom acolytes of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—founded the pressure group Moms Across America in 2012. “We, the mothers who buy 85% of the food and we women who make 90% of household purchasing decisions, have the power to shift the marketplace and protect our people and the planet,” the group’s website proclaims.

In 2020, amid the anxiety and embattled politics of the pandemic, the 21st century’s wellness fads, paranoid tendencies, and regressive gender dynamics consolidated. The horseshoe gap between leftist naturopaths and libertarian farmsteaders began to close, enabled by health influencers, podcasters, and the cheap thrill of algorithmic engagement. Today, the people most likely to be advocating online for slow food are homesteaders and tradwives, canny content creators who post reels of themselves churning butter and pulling dirt-dusted produce out of the soil.

Yet you don’t have to be a homesteader to be anxious about the food systems and environments that your children grow up in. Many of us parents have been buying organic and baking from scratch and trying to get creamed spinach off upholstery since our kids were born. We give them whisks and make cooking time part of family time, and do our best to serve them fresh, colorful meals. Though we may rarely live up to Waters’s edict about lovely food preparation and presentation—“Beauty is a language of care,” as she writes in her new book, *A School Lunch Revolution*—there’s always the joy of messy participation.

What few of us have is the tradwife's luxury of retreating to the Instagrammed home, of opting out of an external reality where food conglomerates go unchecked and food deserts unchanged. "Don't overcomplicate it," the homesteader known online as Greenview Farms posted this summer, in text overlaying a video of a sunset. "Just marry your best friend, have his babies, spend your days on the land, plant a garden, get a few chickens and a cow, and live a simple life." (This surfaced in my feed, shared approvingly by a distant relative, a woman who—for the record—works in finance.)

[Read: The wellness women are on the march](#)

If you overlook the very real public-health ramifications of vaccine hesitancy and raw milk, the rise of the MAHA movement might offer some promise. Trump "sounds just like me when he talks!" Marion Nestle exclaimed back in February, laughing at the absurdity of a hard-core McDonald's eater railing against "the industrial food complex." RFK Jr. and his merry band of mothers have, if nothing else, made the importance of good food in encouraging good health more prominent in our culture, and more bipartisan.

But unlike, say, Michelle Obama, MAHA proselytizers simply want [moms to take on more responsibility](#), turning what should be a multifaceted effort into an atomized, individualistic one. The onus isn't on the administration to regulate food companies or restrict marketing to children. It is on mothers to obsess over what their families are eating.

[Olga Khazan: Doomed to be a tradwife](#)

The irony is that plenty of parents who don't dream of returning to the land are already on board for back-to-basics meals, made as manageable as possible. The Instagram account for [Feeding Littles](#), which gives guidance on how to raise "adventurous, intuitive eaters," has 1.9 million followers. The most popular Substack newsletter under the category of food and drink is titled "What to Cook When You Don't Feel Like Cooking"; it dishes out quick, practical recipes oriented toward exhausted parents and has more than half a million subscribers. We care not just because we're fixated on health, or on our own homes. We're also reminding ourselves, and showing our

kids, that eating is more than a solo need; it's a communal enterprise, one that thrives on dealing as carefully and fairly with food resources as we can. "You eat. Willingly or not you participate in the environment of food choice," Nestle writes toward the end of her new book. "The choices you make about food are as much about the kind of world you want to live in as they are about what to have for lunch."

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What Sam Shepard Couldn't Outrun

The actor, playwright, and self-made cowboy was also a poet of masculine angst.

by Michael O'Donnell



Sam Shepard wasn't born a cowboy. The actor and writer made himself into one. The dusty blue jeans, cattle drives, and folksy drawl suited his taciturn profile, giving Reagan-era America someone rugged to admire. Yet the people who knew Shepard best poked fun at his Western persona, which

began to emerge in the 1970s and endured for the rest of his life. The singer and poet Patti Smith, a former paramour, called him “a man playing cowboys,” and Shepard indeed acted in a number of Westerns. Late in his career, in Andrew Dominik’s movie *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, Shepard portrayed the outlaw’s prickly brother. (He’d named his first child, Jesse, after the legend.) A line of narration from the movie seemed to sum up the complicated man behind the character: “wrought up, perplexed, despondent.”

The cowboy image may have been cultivated, but it was not false. You might say it was earned, the vaquero as self-made man. Shepard—reluctant movie star, poet of masculine angst, and rock-and-roll hero of the American theater—thought Broadway and Hollywood were full of middlebrow nonsense. Born in suburban Illinois and raised in Southern California, he sought out an authentic country, far from New York City or Los Angeles, where he could hear himself think. He found it in Kentucky, New Mexico, and Texas, places where he lived or set his stories. Framing his work in elemental terms of self-sufficiency, Shepard considered his analog tools: “When you go to ride a horse, you have to saddle it. When you use a typewriter, you have to feed it paper.” Like his friend Cormac McCarthy—who grew up in a Tennessee suburb but likewise drifted west—Shepard found in open spaces a wellspring of bracing truth.

He was yesterday’s idea of a modern man: strong but vulnerable, brooding until he had something profound to say, deeply flawed but right when it counted. Shepard’s plays are full of anxiety, uncertainty, violence, and the raw friction that pushes men and women, fathers and sons, further away from each other in the grappling match of family life. How does Shepard’s version of manhood look now that he’s gone and the [era of the embittered, rage-prone MAGA male](#) has arrived? One insight comes early in a penetrating new biography, [Coyote: The Dramatic Lives of Sam Shepard](#), when the author, Robert M. Dowling, asserts, “Fear is the guiding principle of Shepard’s work”—fear of specters such as failure, heredity, and abandonment. A key difference between a man like Shepard and today’s dismal exemplars of hypermasculinity is that his currency was guilt, whereas now the watchword is *resentment*. The former internalizes blame, forging stoics, while the latter assigns it elsewhere, yielding brats. Shepard was open

about his fears and spent his life trying to understand them. He did not sharpen them into weapons to use on others.

Coyote is not the first biography of Shepard, but it is finally the one that an artist of his stature deserves. Dowling, a theater scholar who has also written a [celebrated life of Eugene O'Neill](#), treats Shepard first and foremost as a writer. “Writing centered him, and without it, he said, he was lost,” Dowling observes; he movingly ends the narrative with an ailing Shepard racing to complete his last book, [*Spy of the First Person*](#), before his death in 2017. *Coyote* also benefits from extensive access to Shepard’s intimates, who have avoided prior biographers, as well as to his journals and correspondence, which Dowling quotes to illuminating effect. “Not having a play to write,” Shepard wrote in his notebook, “is like being without a friend, homeless, in a state of wandering.”

The figure looming over Shepard from the time of childhood was his father, who flew bombing runs across Europe during World War II. An annihilating alcoholic, Sam Sr. had a violent temper and an inability to cope with the compromises and disappointments of postwar life. Shepard inherited his father’s temper and his thirst. Sam Sr. beat his son and deserted the family, eventually going on a years-long bender, spending time in prison, and dying bitter and alone. By contrast, Shepard’s mother was a steady, reassuring presence. After Sam Jr. found success as a playwright, his father wrote to him, “I don’t understand what the hell you’re writing. I can’t make hide nor hair of this shit, but I have to congratulate you nevertheless.” Sam Sr. attended only one of his son’s plays, in 1980, and had to be escorted out after drunkenly shouting at the actors from his seat. “This is not the way it was!” he cried. “He knew because he was in it,” Shepard later remarked.

Little wonder that the old man objected. Shepard wrote versions of his father into many of his dramas, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning [*Buried Child*](#) —the one Sam Sr. tried to shout down. In the play, the father figure, Tilden, is described as a man “profoundly burned out and displaced”; at one point, he impotently asks his own father for a drink of the whiskey that the old man keeps stashed under the sofa. In [*Curse of the Starving Class*](#), the character Weston rails to his son about a man who may have run off with his wife. “He’s not counting on what’s in my blood. He doesn’t realize the explosiveness.” The most haunting echo of Sam Sr. comes in a short

autofictional Shepard story that deals with a father's death. The narrator finds an unsent letter addressed to him that ends, "You may think this great calamity that happened, way back when—this so-called disaster between me and your mother—you might actually think that it had something to do with you, but you're dead wrong. Whatever took place between me and her was strictly personal. See you in my dreams."

Buried Child and *Curse of the Starving Class* arrived during Shepard's most artistically successful period, from the late '70s to the mid-'80s. During this magical stretch, he enjoyed a popular and critical glow; he co-wrote the screenplay for the Palme d'Or-winning film *Paris, Texas* and finished three of his best dramas: *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*. He also portrayed the pilot Chuck Yeager on-screen in *The Right Stuff* in 1983 and appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* in 1985, looking cool and tough in a cowboy hat and aviators—an image that caused him to wince at being presented as *the* cowboy. He simply wanted to be one.



Shepard as the pilot Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff* (Warner Bros. / Everett Collection)

True West was Shepard's favorite, and it covers the themes that preoccupied him most. A story of two brothers, a bourgeois striver and a tempestuous wanderer, who gradually trade places over two acts, *True West* explores success, failure, aggression, the empty desert, the myth of the West, the inescapability of family, and the archetypal old man somewhere offstage, ruining his life. Made famous by a 1982 production at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre starring John Malkovich and directed by Gary Sinise, the play is fierce, absurd, hilarious, and, above all, American. It splits Shepard's persona into a Jekyll-and-Hyde pair and flays masculinity for all to see. "There's nothing wrong with real *machismo*," Shepard told an interviewer a few years after the Steppenwolf production. "The original idea must have had its roots in what at one time was a sense of real courage in the face of danger; but it's been so distorted that it's now mostly externalized behavior that actually has to do with *pretending*, with *covering up*, with *fear*."

Shepard wrote some 60 plays, and he occasionally missed. His golden years were sandwiched between an early, protean period of experimental work, such as La Turista (1967) and Operation Sidewinder (1970), and a later decline in the '90s and 2000s that saw more pans and fewer raves as his work began to feel repetitive and struggled to maintain its energy and edge. One critic wrote that Shepard had returned to warring family characters so often "that they've become icons rather than people." To pay the bills, Shepard turned to film acting.

The parts that arrived—and what he did with them—embodied his unique take on the tough but thoughtful American man. In *The Right Stuff*, Shepard's Yeager keeps flying planes after his fellow test pilots go off to join the flashy space program; they drive fast cars while he rides a horse. In 2001's *Black Hawk Down*, he portrays General William Garrison, the commander of U.S. forces in Mogadishu during a fiasco that led to the deaths of 18 American soldiers and hundreds of Somalis. Instead of joining the troops in exciting battle sequences, Shepard's Garrison sits in a room and debates the morality of humanitarian intervention. When a Somali character refers to "Arkansas white boys," Shepard replies with a grin, "Well, I wouldn't know about that. I'm from Texas."

On top of his searing plays, these turns on-screen and glimpses from Shepard's private writing reveal a healthy dose of self-awareness: a surprising trait for a cowboy. He agonized over his failures as a husband and father. Joni Mitchell immortalized Shepard's wandering eye and general irresistibility in her song "Coyote," about their love affair. ("Now he's got a woman at home / He's got another woman down the hall / He seems to want me anyway.") After walking out on his wife, O-Lan Jones, and their son for a torrid love affair with Jessica Lange, he wrote in a letter, "The thing that hurts me most is knowing I abandoned everyone." But he could not do otherwise: "I feel like I've found the love of my life, which is like some kind of miracle."

The relationship with Lange lasted nearly three decades, through much passion and many fights, ending after Shepard followed his father's path into alcoholism and isolation. This was his greatest fear, and it carried the weight of inevitability. Shepard perceived that masculinity was what ultimately drove Lange away. In an unpublished essay, he imagined that when the two first met, she thought, "He drives his truck like a real man. (She's been driving with Mercedes men.) He stays at the Motel 6. (She's been staying at the Bel-Air.) He smokes and drinks like a fish. She finds that exotic." But by the end, "she can't stand him 'cause he's such a man. In her eyes he drives his truck like a macho fool."

Self-awareness will take a man a long way, offsetting his pride and blunting his tendency to become ridiculous. Yet, as Dowling's excellent biography demonstrates, self-awareness alone will not solve the underlying conundrum of modern existence. How to avoid the mistakes of one's parents, find solitude as well as human connection, survive in a violently polarized country, and deal with the absurdity and pain of life? Shepard could pose these questions in his dramas but could no more answer them than any other artist. Knowing who you are does not mean knowing what to do. As Cormac McCarthy wrote, "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting." Like his fellow first-generation westerner, Shepard answered life's mysteries with diamond-hard writing. The world is a little clearer, though no less perplexing, because of his words.

This article appears in the [January 2026](#) print edition with the headline “Yesterday’s Idea of a Modern Man.”

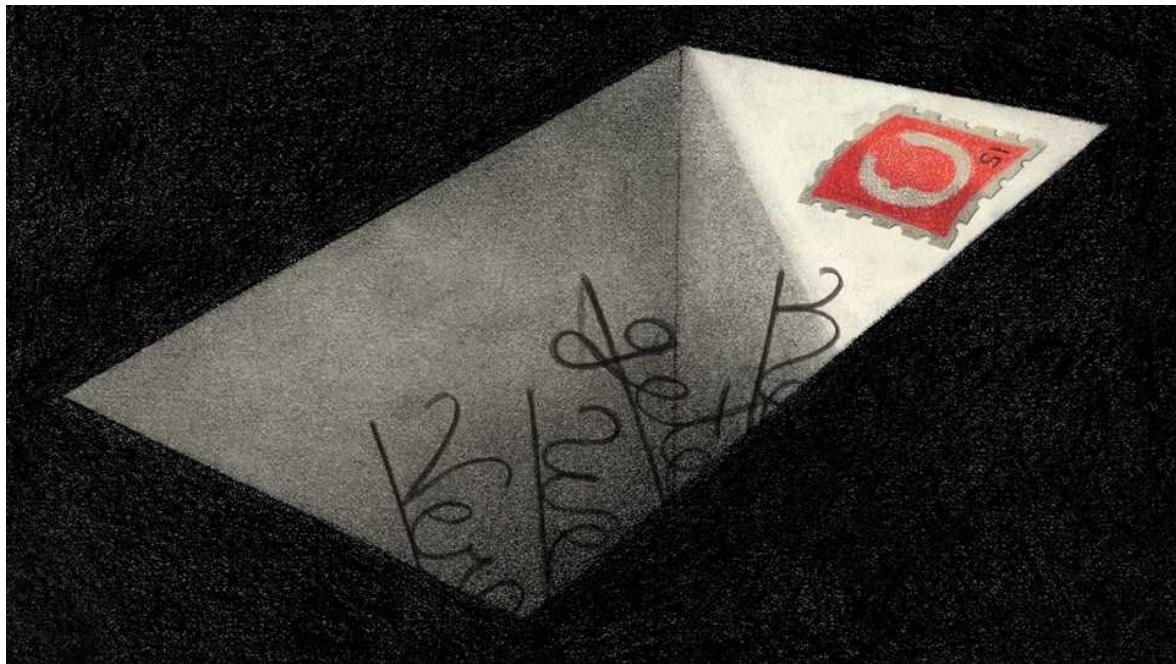
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The Germans Who Stood Up to Hitler

And the Germans who didn't

by Hillary Kelly



In 24 days during the fall of 1946, a German novelist known as Hans Fallada produced a rare, and now especially timely, literary touchstone: a humane depiction of muted resistance. *Every Man Dies Alone* was based on a Gestapo file detailing the case of a Berlin couple who had run an illicit two-year postcard-writing campaign aimed at rebutting Hitler's propaganda. The novel was published in 1947—part of a postwar effort to start de-Nazifying German literature.

Mere weeks before his book came out, Rudolf Ditzen (Fallada was a pen name) died at 53, weakened after a long struggle with alcoholism and morphine addiction. He'd faced criminal trouble too (he had shot and killed a friend in a botched suicide pact in adolescence, been twice convicted of embezzlement, and in 1944 been detained in a psychiatric hospital after pulling a gun on his wife). His literary credentials were also vexed. After winning recognition as a promising novelist in the early 1930s, Fallada was labeled an "undesirable author" by the newly installed Nazi regime. Later, in a letter to a friend, he confessed to complicity with the government, admitting that, under threat from Hitler's chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, he'd altered a novel to have a character join the Nazi Party. Unsurprisingly, Fallada was preoccupied with gray areas in his final book.

His version of the couple in the Gestapo file, whom he names Otto and Anna Quangel, draft a vivid postcard after their only son dies in combat: "Mother! The Führer has murdered my son. Mother, the Führer will murder your sons too, he will not stop till he has brought sorrow to every home in the world" is the message they leave in the stairwell of an office building across town, hoping the card will be picked up and shared. Soon, they're writing and delivering a fresh card or two every week to other addresses in Berlin.

They're well aware that their fellow Germans might be repelled by the postcards: "Everyone's frightened nowadays." Earlier, in their own apartment building, the Quangels themselves had been silent bystanders when tragedy befell an elderly Jewish neighbor, a woman who can't bear the constraints of living shut away. A jittery Frau Rosenthal flees the hiding place provided by a kind neighbor and returns to her flat, only to leap out her kitchen window to her death when she's confronted by a Gestapo agent who's been tipped off by a loathsome Nazi neighbor. "We don't know anything. We haven't seen or heard anything," Otto admonishes his wife as officials gather at the scene.

From the November 2024 issue: You are going to die

Now, after their own loss, hopes for their enterprise run high: They distribute the cards so broadly and for so long that it seems they may never get caught. "In the end," Otto exclaims, "scores of people, hundreds, will be sitting

down and writing cards like us. We will inundate Berlin with postcards, we will slow the machines, we will depose the Führer, end the war.”

The Quangels’ dream of overthrowing the regime from within gives *Every Man Dies Alone* an inspirational core. Praised for its portrayal of defiance—Primo Levi called it “the greatest book ever written about German resistance to the Nazis”—it was celebrated anew in 2009 with the arrival, finally, of an English translation by Michael Hofmann, accompanied by biographical and critical commentary in an afterword by the scholar Geoff Wilkes. Fallada’s examination of a social microcosm—one apartment building’s residents in 1940s Berlin—spreads out to encompass the whole city. Capturing both the upright and the compromised, the forceful and the reluctant, the novel becomes a nuanced portrait of the sometimes corrosive, sometimes energizing nature of fear. As Wilkes underscores, *Every Man Dies Alone* excels at describing something far subtler and harder to discern than staunch resistance: the plight of ordinary Germans at the moment of their greatest moral trial. How, in a climate of absolute fear, do people weigh the decision between rebellion and accommodation? How do they hold on to a sense of decency but also stay alive?

Featuring a cross section of citizenry—pet-shop owners and postal workers, petty criminals and recalcitrant resisters, Gestapo inspectors and persecuted Jews—the novel operates in a haze of daily, lingering dread. The major consequences of relatively minor offenses loom large, as Fallada understood firsthand. By 1940, the year the novel begins, Nazi Party machinery was omnipresent in civilian life. All Germans—not just Jews or Communists or political radicals—were one conversation away from turning informant or resister. Donations to organizations such as the Winter Relief Fund (a charitable front for Nazi fundraising, and one of Otto’s favorite targets in his postcards) were viewed as barometers of one’s fealty. Membership in the Deutsche Arbeitsfront, ostensibly a nationwide union but really a mechanism for keeping a close eye on workers, was practically mandatory for a factory foreman like Otto. A refusal to join the party landed you in its crosshairs, and potentially a labor camp. As Fallada writes, “You could see it with your eyes closed, the way they were making separations between ordinary citizens and party members. Even the worst party member was worth more to them than the best ordinary citizen.”

Agencies such as the Gestapo and the SS (Schutzstaffel, a onetime paramilitary group that became responsible for security and surveillance) overtly monitor and menace Fallada's Germans. One woman being grilled by a gleeful Nazi is told to leave her husband a note reading, "I've popped out to the Gestapo. Don't know when I'll be back." She promptly agrees to become "an eager, unpaid, and invaluable spy." Others, such as a bartender who ignores a directive to inform on a patron, quietly balk. "On the one hand you were afraid of the Gestapo and lived in constant fear of them," the narrator observes, "but it was something else to do their dirty work for them." Civil disobedience is muffled, but gut feelings can prompt small acts of resistance.

The Quangels' own act of resistance, they realize, could get them killed. But Fallada does not endow them with purely heroic, self-sacrificial fiber. Neither husband nor wife has joined the Nazi Party, though until their son is killed at the front, Otto "has been a believer in the Führer's honest intentions. One just had to strip away the corrupt hangers-on and the parasites, who were just out for themselves, and everything would get better." (Fallada himself didn't become a party member, although he enrolled his son in the Hitler Youth.)

Self-interest sways the Quangels too: Both credit the Führer with having helped them manage financially in the mid-1930s, when Otto was out of work. A chapter that was removed from the novel before its publication (but restored after Fallada's German publishing house rediscovered it in 2011) reveals Anna's record as a "completely reliable woman" and one of the "hardest workers" in the National Socialist Women's Organization—before she wrangles her way out of her membership. Fallada highlights the sudden shift in the Quangels' perspective after their son's death. The more invested they became in their writing campaign, he explains,

the more mistakes by the Führer and his Party they discovered. Things that when they first had happened had struck them as barely censurable, such as the suppression of all other political parties, or things that they had condemned as merely excessive in degree or too vigorously carried out, like the persecution of the Jews.

One of Fallada's characters is implausibly angelic, but he isn't interested in static good or evil. In his pages, righteousness alone rarely motivates opposition to the Nazis. Like the Quangels, some in the novel have become disenchanted with the government after facing personal loss. For others, such as an acclaimed actor who has a trivial disagreement with his friend Goebbels about their opinion of a film and subsequently gets blacklisted, outrage isn't so much principled as entitled; he's now "over, chum, finished," his formerly glamorous life gone. Still others simply think they are canny enough to avoid the brunt of the party's wrath.

No one who resists, as Wilkes notes in his afterword, leaves a lasting mark. A postal carrier who quits the Nazi Party escapes punishment—but her act of defiance makes no meaningful difference. A low-level con artist who is wrongly accused of distributing the postcards will not concede his guilt; he ends up dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound after being given the choice between that and drowning. The members of a small, rebellious cell who begin the novel with grand plans to take down the government end up ineffective and disbanded. And like their real-life counterparts, Otto and Anna are caught, convicted in a sham trial, and sentenced to death by guillotine; their postcards also have none of their intended impact. As treasonous objects, they stir resentment and undermine solidarity. Of the 276 cards the Quangels write, 259 are immediately handed over to the Gestapo. A doctor, after finding one in the hall by his office, thinks, "What a selfish and unscrupulous fellow, this postcard writer, plunging people into such difficulties! Didn't he think of the trouble he would cause with those confounded cards!"

The trouble, of course, is the point. What makes *Every Man Dies Alone* so compelling, and unsettling, is its demonstration that an oppressive political sphere works in deeply personal ways. Interactions with the state do not have foregone conclusions—citizens still operate as individuals and make impulsive, sometimes self-sabotaging decisions. Nowhere is that more evident than in the case of Inspector Escherich, the Gestapo agent tasked with finding the writer of the postcards. A former police detective who carries on with his work for the German state simply because he is "a lover of the chase," he comes to life more fully than any other character in the novel.

Escherich believes himself different from ordinary Nazis—he disdains their midday drinking and derides their lack of intelligence. But as the Javert to the Quangels’ Jean Valjean, he is on the hunt for the perpetrators of a relatively petty crime. And like Javert, he falls victim to his overconfidence. Even after he has failed for months to apprehend the postcard writer, he insolently shrugs off his superiors’ reproaches (*Go find another man for the job*, he taunts them). In response, his supervisor orders him confined to one of the Gestapo’s infamous basement cells, where he “became so thoroughly acquainted with fear that now there is no chance of him forgetting it for as long as he lives.” Escherich is later released and put back on the case, but his ordeal leaves him bitter toward his overlords and newly respectful of the Quangels’ fervor and determination. He cannot bring himself to actually resist, but he also cannot fully comply. He is, like many Germans, stuck between two impossible options.

The German authorities relied on terror, even toward party members, to keep their citizenry in line. But where they erred, as Fallada writes, was in “the assumption that all Germans were cowards.” No German freedom fighters brought down the government, no anti-propaganda mission persuaded the people to rise up en masse against their tyrants; it took a world war to knock Hitler from his perch. Yet some Germans, Fallada shows, found ways to surmount their fear and assert their moral integrity in acts of dissidence, even if they could not topple the regime.

Every Man Dies Alone is more than an engrossing cat-and-mouse tale. Tracking the interior dodging and weaving of his characters too, Fallada delivers valuable insight into the varieties of mental resistance to autocracy. The quietest kinds of opposition—what we read, what we think, what we believe—can keep autocrats paranoid, distrustful, ill at ease. Rising above cowardice can inoculate us against complicity, as some German citizens showed. And speaking out, even surreptitiously and unsuccessfully, stands in stark contrast to remaining silent. As a young woman explains to Otto before he begins his postcard counterattack, “The main thing is that we remain different from them, that we never allow ourselves to be made into them, or start thinking as they do. Even if they conquer the whole world, we must refuse to become Nazis.”

This article appears in the [January 2026](#) print edition with the headline “How Terror Works.”

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‘Sudan Is a Good Place to Wage Peace’

Readers respond to our September 2025 cover story and more.



This Is What the End of the Liberal World Order Looks Like

In the September issue, [Anne Applebaum documented](#) the anarchy and greed of Sudan’s devastating civil war.

I have studied Sudan all of my adult life. I lived there in 1980 and wrote my doctoral dissertation on Sudanese foreign policy. It’s a country, I learned, that breaks the heart of anyone who loves it.

In the years since, I have not found a single American article or book on Sudan that did not get some detail wrong. But Anne Applebaum's "This Is What the End of the Liberal World Order Looks Like," deeply depressing though it is, gets everything right. It even conveys, somehow, the *feeling* of Sudan.

I had thought that I should write something about the utter depravity of the current civil war, but now I don't have to. The absence of any coverage was horrifying. The scale of the tragedy in Sudan has to be described before anyone will try to do anything about it.

Sally Ann Baynard

Alexandria, Va.

In "This Is What the End of the Liberal World Order Looks Like," Anne Applebaum writes that "Sudan is a good place to fight." But we should also remember that Sudan is a good place to wage peace.

Beginning in 1989, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter made Sudan a primary focus of their peace-building efforts. During the Second Sudanese Civil War, President Carter negotiated a six-month humanitarian cease-fire—during which international health workers were able to enter the country to support more than 2,000 Guinea-worm-endemic villages and distribute more than 200,000 cloth filters for drinking water. Now, less than 40 years later, we have forgotten the success of that effort.

The Sudanese people, too, have proved their skill as peace builders. In 2018 and 2019, young people—undeterred by decades of war and authoritarian rule—demonstrated nonviolently, culminating in the removal of the dictator Omar al-Bashir. After war broke out again in April 2023, ordinary citizens negotiated local peace deals. Today, Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms, volunteer-led initiatives providing humanitarian aid to civilians, exemplify the resilience of the country's citizens.

The Trump administration has taken important steps toward an agreement, but Congress and the White House must escalate their advocacy with Sudan's warring parties and regional backers. Sudan's fighters must allow

humanitarian access everywhere it is needed, especially al-Fashir. And the global community must support negotiations for a cease-fire.

If there is nihilism in Sudan, let us acknowledge that it belongs not to the Sudanese people, but to the rest of the world. The Sudanese remain committed to conflict resolution. We must join them in the fight for peace.

Benjamin Spears

Atlanta, Ga.

As a long-ago newspaper correspondent in West Africa, I greatly admire Anne Applebaum's intrepid reporting on Sudan. Her judgment that the "liberal world order has already ended" there, leaving nothing "to replace it," is hard to dispute. It does, though, presuppose that such an order ever carried political weight in Sudan or sub-Saharan Africa more broadly.

True, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other multilateral development and disaster-relief institutions labor in the field. So, as Applebaum movingly showed, do a number of extraordinary humanitarian NGOs. What has long been missing, however, is any coherent or consistent undertaking by the former colonial rulers and the United States to deter disorder and promote democratic stability.

The liberal world order failed a significant test on January 13, 1963, when Togo's then-president, Sylvanus Olympio, was assassinated. That evening, the American, British, and French ambassadors to neighboring Dahomey (now Benin) and its president, Hubert Maga, considered whether and how to respond.

They concluded that no effective redress was feasible. The ambassadors' governments were unprepared to act, and at the time, Dahomey's military forces moved mostly on bicycles. Thus, until he died in office in 2005, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, the former French-army sergeant who masterminded Olympio's murder, ruled Togo. His son succeeded him as president. Even without the title, he holds power there today.

Dahomey's army chief of staff deposed Maga less than a year after Olympio's death. Similar coups toppled leaders in Nigeria (six times), Ghana, Liberia, and other countries. Over the subsequent decades throughout much of Africa—not just in Sudan—the phrase *liberal world order* has carried the oxymoronic ring of *the Holy Roman Empire*.

Alfred Friendly Jr.

Washington, D.C.

The Man Who Ate NASA

The agency once projected America's loftiest ideals, [Franklin Foer wrote](#) in the September issue. Then it ceded its ambitions to Elon Musk.

Franklin Foer's article “The Man Who Ate NASA” mentions only in passing NASA's greatest achievement to date: the James Webb Space Telescope. The telescope is an unrivaled accomplishment. Its design, construction, and flawless deployment came about through international cooperation spearheaded by NASA. Such a project requires visionary, sophisticated leadership that respects all collaborators. A leader who lacks humility and demands obedience is unlikely to bring about a similar success, no matter his level of wealth and power. This is the great tragedy of Elon Musk's ascendency within the space industry. This may be tragic for Musk, but if left uncorrected, it will be a still-greater misfortune for the United States and the international community.

Kathleen Early

Campbell, Calif.

My Father's Work

When the greatest musicians of the 1970s needed an instrument—or a friend—Nancy Walecki's dad, Fred, was there, [she wrote](#) in the September issue.

I'm not a person of any fame, so it was a new feeling to see the face of someone I know when I opened the September issue. Fred Walecki and I were friends during our days together at the Vineyard Church in Los Angeles. In the early 1980s, we met for breakfast every Wednesday at Mary & Robbs, a diner up the street from Westwood Music. We'd discuss spirituality, sin, music, social issues—just about everything.

I was in my early 20s when I first met Fred, and in the first of the many crummy bands I'd end up in during that period. He was 10 years older and a kind of mentor to me. In her article, Nancy Walecki describes her father's tireless joy for helping addicts of all stripes toward sobriety. One of the people Fred helped was a family member of mine. He had a way of making even something as serious as addiction feel lighter—and beatable.

Even though Fred knew many of my rock heroes personally, he never name-dropped. He was always just happy, warm, joyful Fred. The smile was real, and he was generous with his time with everyone, including me.

A few months ago, I returned to Westwood and found it to be a shadow of its former self. It's a lot of empty storefronts now. Tragically, Westwood Music is one of them. Peering through the window, I wished that I'd kept some small memento from the place, which housed so many warm memories for me. Westwood Music was where virtually anyone could walk in, sit down on the couch with a cup of coffee, and have Fred treat you the same as he would Joe Walsh. And then Joe Walsh would walk in.

Mark Wagner
Camarillo, Calif.

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[The Most Powerful Man in Science](#)," Michael Scherer profiles Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Kennedy has broken with his family and his former political party, and has attacked the scientific establishment. For this month's cover image, the photographer Elinor Carucci—known for her intimate explorations of family

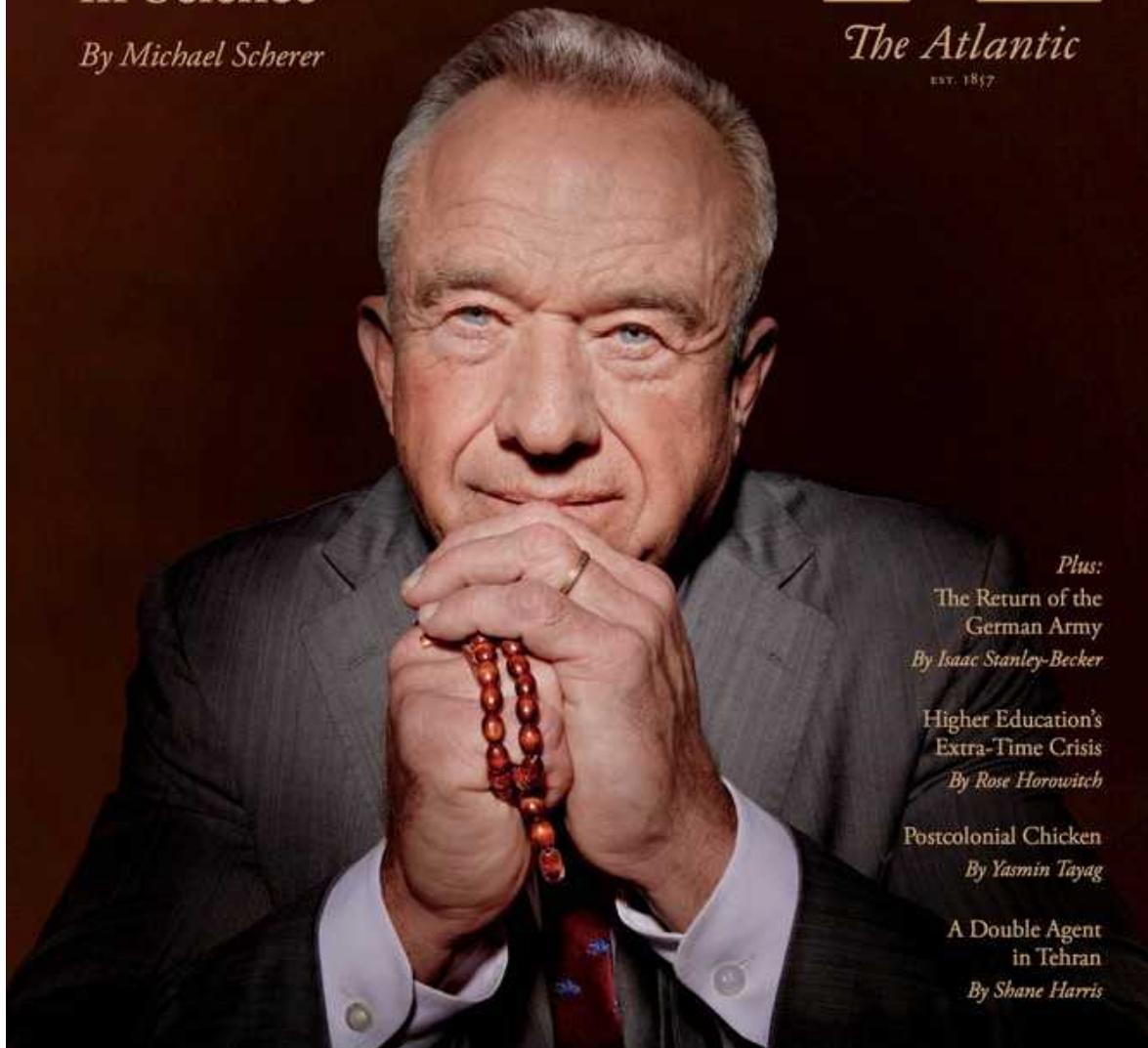
and identity—captured Kennedy in his HHS office. Kennedy suggested that she shoot a portrait with him holding his rosary.

— **Bifen Xu**, *Senior Photo Editor*

JANUARY 2026
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The Most Powerful Man in Science

By Michael Scherer



Plus:

The Return of the German Army
By Isaac Stanley-Becker

Higher Education's Extra-Time Crisis
By Rose Horowitch

Postcolonial Chicken
By Yasmin Tayag

A Double Agent in Tehran
By Shane Harris

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Poetry

- [The Eloquence](#)

The Eloquence

A poem

by Jorie Graham



The prime minister was watching a disaster movie
when we found him. We are the
media we cried. Run.
The insiders ran around wildly looking for the exits.

On the face of the deep the ghosts of civilization wailed.
The shadow of a doubt dissolved,
everyone just trying to understand how what happened
happened. Figuring out *how* became the choicest
profession. Don't misunderstand us—
we always obeyed the unwritten rules, we always respected
the number of minutes
allotted for the interview—always believed in the existence of
the singular reason
for the world's incomprehensible
demise. It was not our job
to notice the rain
no longer fell,
we were busy tracking who was logging in and logging out
of the current war
while new faces of God made their appearances
behind our backs
as always.
We checked on our stringers.
We called in to get a reading on the deathwatch.
You're breaking up.
Can you give me 50 words
The calendar lit up
with the dates when each thing of value would
no longer exist.
We reported it
exactly,
the idea was to leave no trace in our language
of grief, regret,
despair. Not a trace of us
must remain.
But where can our lives be hidden we thought
as we hurried from telling to telling,
permeated with absence.
Then it began to close in all round us, the dry weather of
information.
Once I looked up at the clouds as if I'd never felt wind before—

no it did not rain, but I
almost remembered the smell—
whose list are *our* names on—
we who have passes with access to *all* the realities—
when will the bullets cross through *us*—
we who mistake narrative
for history ...

If there is peace we are less busy so not to be trusted.
Those of us whose wounds are still healing
will tell u that story
again & again.

The smell of a newborn escapes us.
The ozone approaching escapes us.
We are part of an occupation whose aims
escape us.

We do not write in order to remember.
Language flows through us—no angles, no corners, no
bends—never an
impasse. As for the past
that is not our business. The prime minister
is now hanging from his rope.

We must report the cries and the laughter, the mood of
the crowd. We never ask
about the strangeness.

But the strangeness is starting to stare at us.
It seems to seethe. We hurry to get it down.
And now it is eloquence which stares at us furiously.
Its gaze reminds us of something—
the scent of ozone rises—
there is thunder is there not—
it's hard to know. We are on deadline.

The killing spree began one day in the suburbs.
It was the first day of its life so at first it cried out.
It tried to move swiftly into the past—but we
got its essence down before it slipped away
into the here-to-stay
where it could hide,

where it could become perpetual.

We didn't report how the trees were bleeding,
how people's pockets filled up with ash,
how strangers' organs ended up on our doorsteps
in baskets, like fish from the market,
slippery & gleaming.

We were becoming watchmen, awake in our sleep.
As the killing developed it needed a sense of direction.
We listened for where the cries were coming from,
the north wind became a stringer,
the south wind brought us the death rattles,
bullets whirred like hummingbirds when there were hummingbirds,
the gold & green ones,
sometimes the ruby-throated ...

You'd find traces that made for good copy—
once broken teeth—many handfuls—in the grassblades in the alley,
sometimes severed fingers, sometimes a whole hand,
you could become emotional if you weren't careful,
but we were careful,
the feeling of living—had we ever had it—
it has been so long now & we are exhausted—
souls like froth in the shorebreak—
movements of men in mud.

Once I heard clapping behind a wall,
but for whom or what.

I know it is my job
but the seasons have blurred.

What I wouldn't give for a single voice
telling a story to a child,
& knowing the story to be true,
for the look on the face of that listener
hearing it all for the first time—
who we were once, how we slowly lost our
way—but told as a fable,
with lists of the creatures which had lived in forests, in
oceans, & with slow description,
eloquent & calm, of what oceans were

& what rivers were, & forests, & dream ...
I am listening & hiding & my heart is outstretched
as the news of the battle arrives & I must rise to report it,
to card out the rumors,
how much land gained,
how much land lost,
my voice must reach you with this report,
the story of how it all will have been worth it
to create our new world
where we will rebuild the cities
where we will drain the blood from the fields
where grasses will once again grow into wind.
I know I speak of suffering I am supposed to speak of suffering.
And how this is the threshold,
it is always the threshold ...

Sometimes in the evening the twilight sinks so low as if to
lie in ambush
& its long golden body enters our houses
where we are bent over our notes,
cleaning up our drafts ...
As it sinks below the clouds the light slides in even further.
I do not dare turn around to see it.
I think I feel it touching my neck,
tapping my shoulder.
I almost hear its voice
moving too easily through the empty branches.
And I envy the poets who are free to cry out
as I turn in my copy, the day's final report,
unless one more incendiary device goes off
and I have to revise again how many managed to get out in time.
It is never many.
It is meant to be none.

This poem appears in the [January 2026 print edition](#).

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