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# The Anxious Child

*and the crisis  
of modern parenting*



*The Atlantic*

EST. 1857

By  
Kate Julian

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**Behind the Cover:** The cover-design process starts with anxious pangs: *What should we make? And how?* Kate Julian's cover story this month is a trenchant look at anxiety—how pervasive it is among children and how early it can take hold. Our director of photography, Luise Stauss, suggested that we use childlike drawings to visually

represent the complexity of the disorder. She and I worked closely with our associate art director Katie Martin to develop variations on this theme. We experimented with dozens of sketches and doodles, settling on a hastily drawn skein that overwhelms the cover and its small, central figure.

— Oliver Munday, *Senior Art Director*

## The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake

*The family structure we've held up as the cultural ideal for the past half century has been a catastrophe for many, David Brooks wrote in March. It's time to figure out better ways to live together.*

### Letters

house. When we bought the place, a law-school student was living in a tiny house in the backyard. Soon she graduated and we bought that house too. My father-in-law was declining into dementia, so he and my mother-in-law moved in there. We helped her with his care, which wasn't easy, because he had a tendency to wander. (Since then, he's passed away, but my mother-in-law still lives in our backyard.)

Then, a few years later, the house next door came on the market. My own parents were also having health problems but lived in a remote mountain community without a hospital. My brother bought the house for them, and now they live there part-time. During the summer,

my brother, who is not married, lives there as well. We knocked down the fence between our homes and put down a path. This has been great for us as parents, because we always have a family member to help with child care.

Our forged family includes "orphaned" seniors who have moved to town to enjoy this community, old friends cut off from their own families, a homeless woman who for a time slept on my mother-in-law's tiny kitchen floor, a former nun, a recent widower, and anyone else who doesn't have a place to go on a holiday. My daughters grew up thinking this is normal, and in my family it is.

Melodie Edwards  
Laramie, Wyo.

I like to call what my extended family lives in a commune. My husband, teenage daughters, and I live in a ramshackle old

# THE

David Brooks writes that in primitive societies, people who migrated together formed a band. That is still true today in the U.S. I grew up in two extended families. The first was purely familial: three generations of grandparents, parents, and children plus assorted uncles all living together. But there was another extended family as well: the White Russian émigrés who fled communism. The members of that large extended family did not share a house, except in some cases, but lived close to one another and joined forces to raise children, start businesses, refer one another to jobs, build churches, and care for the elderly. The article mentions that recent immigrants to the U.S. are more likely to live in extended-kinship families; nonbiological kinship gives extra resilience to these communities.

Lena S. Zezulin  
Takoma Park, Md.

I enjoyed David Brooks's informative and insightful article on the American nuclear family, but I think he is seriously misguided by the notion that progressives lack an understanding of and commitment to conventional family structures. He writes, "Progressives have no philosophy of family life at all." This is simply not true. That progressives are tolerant of unconventional domestic arrangements does not mean they are oblivious or indifferent to the great personal and social rewards of conventional family life.

Gordon Harrison  
Juneau, Alaska

# COMMONS



DISCUSSION  
&  
DEBATE

Brooks provides an accurate picture of how the family once was and how it has disintegrated. However, he leaves out the exciting formation of other kinds of ties that stretch kinship in unprecedented ways.

In my own research on donor-sibling networks, I have found that parents and their donor-conceived children are voluntarily taking unique steps to counter the shrinking family by finding other families who happened to have purchased the same donor's gametes.

Suddenly, a child who had no siblings has a dozen. Moreover, these genetic relatives (who start out as strangers) are exploring what it means to be related and connected to one another. They say they feel naturally comfortable together because they share genes—and they look for resemblances and similarities that reinforce belonging to the same kinship group. As siblings, they feel a moral responsibility to one another even if they have not grown up in the same household.

Rosanna Hertz  
Professor of Sociology and  
Women's and Gender Studies  
at Wellesley College  
*Brookline, Mass.*

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com). Include your full name, city, and state.

## THE FACTS

### *What we learned fact-checking our new podcast*

In our new podcast

*Floodlines*, Vann R. Newkirk II revisits one of the biggest questions of Hurricane Katrina: Why did the levees fail?

After 80 percent of New Orleans flooded in 2005, blame fell on the Army Corps of Engineers, which built

the breached levees near Lake Pontchartrain. Numerous studies—including the Corps's own 6,000-page report—detailed the many mistakes. One conclusion, not mentioned in *Floodlines* but uncovered while fact-checking the show, sticks out.

The steel sheet piles used to anchor the New Orleans floodwalls against a potential hurricane surge

were driven about half as deep into the ground as they should have been. This construction error was the result of an oversight in 1985: Corps researchers had made recommendations about the sheet piles' ideal depth based on a study in which the view of a test floodwall was partially obscured. Experts now speculate that the test floodwall—like the actual floodwalls—was slightly tilted, allowing

water to seep beneath and destabilize it. What blocked their view? A tarp that had been draped over the wall and was concealing its base—and the gap that had likely formed there.

The shorter, shallower sheet piles reduced the price of the floodwalls by approximately \$100 million—but cost hundreds of lives.

— William Brennan,  
*Floodlines* fact-checker



*David Brooks answers questions from readers about his March cover story on the nuclear family.*

**Q:** I am curious about the choice of 1965 as the end date for the nuclear family. Can you comment more on the reason(s) for that selection?

— Nancy Barba, Portland, Maine

**A:** I chose 1965 because that's about the moment when divorce rates began to spike and more unmarried people started having children.

**Q:** Is the nuclear family the problem, or is it how we've changed our lifestyles—or how our world has forced us to change our lifestyles?

— Ted David, Hyattsville, Md.

**A:** Family structures change, along with lifestyle and all sorts of other social arrangements, because of an underlying shift in consciousness. Around 1965,

a communal "we first" consciousness was replaced by an individualistic "me first" consciousness. That produced a range of other changes across sectors. The evidence clearly indicates, to me at least, that culture drives history even more than economics and technology do. When you get a shift in values, everything else follows.

**Q:** How can one write an article of this sort and fail to acknowledge the role that religious belief and communities have had in mitigating the fallout from family breakdown by acting as the chosen community/family?

— Alisha Ruiss, Montreal, Quebec

**A:** You are right to point to the importance of religion. I've received a lot of responses from clergy members to this article. None said they were motivated to urge their flock to return to bigger extended families. All of them said they were motivated to make their own congregation into more of a forged family. Perhaps the only way to get young people back to church is to make it the place where family happens.



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# DISPATCHES

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OPENING ARGUMENT

## THE NEVER TRUMPERS' NEXT MOVE

*They failed to stop the president's 2016 ascent, but they may yet save the GOP.*

BY ROBERT P. SALDIN  
AND STEVEN M. TELES

A

As the first nominating contests of the 2016 election approached, Republican elites were mortified that a casually cruel man with decidedly unconservative views seemed to be hijacking their party. Yet for all their professed horror, many GOP insiders seemed frozen in place as Donald Trump consolidated support—unable or unwilling to do anything to stop their party from being captured by a vulgar demagogue.

One of the few party faithful who leapt into action was Joel Searby, a political operative in Florida. Searby worked a couple of rungs below celebrity consultants such as

Mike Murphy and Stuart Stevens, focusing mostly on local and state legislative races, plus a smattering of congressional campaigns. By early 2016, Searby had come to believe that American voters would be faced with a choice between two terrible presidential candidates. Despite his distance from the party's power centers, he took it upon himself to do something.

Searby started researching what, exactly, would be necessary to run an independent candidate. The most obvious challenge was getting the candidate's name on ballots. There was no single formula; each state has its own rules. Before long, Searby found himself immersed in what he describes as "a Ph.D.-level ballot-access course."

The hurdles, he concluded, were not insurmountable. The late start was far from ideal—deadlines were rapidly approaching in some states. Yet Searby calculated that, with something in the neighborhood of \$6 million and court challenges in a few states that were particularly hostile to independent candidates, he could get someone on the ballot in nearly every state.

At roughly the same time, Searby commissioned a poll about potential contenders. "One of the names we put on there was Condoleezza Rice, and she polled astronomically well. And I thought, *Hmm, that's interesting. I wonder if I could get in touch with her.*" But Searby did not have the professional network to facilitate an introduction with the former secretary of state, nor did he know anyone at the Hoover Institution, the Stanford-based think tank where Rice works.

On Google, he located contact information for Rice's chief of staff, whom he emailed and called. A couple of weeks went

by with no response. Eventually, he received "a rather frustrated response from her chief stating in no uncertain terms that Dr. Rice would not be running for president and I should leave them alone."

Not quite ready to give up, Searby attempted to stoke interest by emailing Rice a memo summarizing his research and offering a rationale for her candidacy. He acknowledged his previous attempts to contact Rice and generously characterized her thoughts on the matter as "reluctant." The memo asserted: "There is only one viable independent candidate: Condoleezza Rice ... The reality of the matter is that we will have President Trump or President Clinton—if we do not have President Rice."

Searby then followed up with two more requests by phone that Rice run for president. These elicited a definitive reply: in Searby's paraphrase, "Hell no."

**D**ESPITE HIS FAILURE to recruit Rice, Searby had helped kick-start a political movement that may yet shape the future of the Republican Party. By late February 2016, he was far from the only member of his party trying desperately to rescue it from the Trump insurgency. A small network of political operatives and Capitol Hill staffers led by Mindy Finn, a digital-media expert who had worked on three presidential campaigns, began a concerted effort. They started a super PAC to support their movement, and promoted it with a soon-ubiquitous Twitter hashtag: #NeverTrump.

Although politicians including Lindsey Graham, Ted Cruz, and Nikki Haley initially denounced Trump, they turned

out to be, at least in the minds of Never Trumpers, summer soldiers and sunshine patriots. The core of the movement was made up of the public intellectuals, political operatives, and once and future political appointees whom the party depends on to run campaigns and to govern after successful ones. Eliot A. Cohen (now an *Atlantic* contributing writer), Bryan McGrath, and John Bellinger were among the ringleaders of the nearly unanimous resistance by the GOP's foreign-policy establishment. Another strong constellation of Never Trumpism was made up of writers such as the venerable columnist George Will and Bill Kristol, a co-founder of *The Weekly Standard*. A small but vocal contingent within the Republican political-operative class also joined the effort.

The leaders of the nascent movement published open letters declaring their opposition to Trump. They tried and failed to coalesce behind a single primary challenger (and later schemed to deny Trump the party's nomination at the Republican National Convention). Searby teamed up with Kristol, and together they continued trying to recruit a spoiler. They courted General James Mattis, Senator Ben Sasse, and Mitt Romney. Each took a meeting with the search team and several days to mull things over before declining. Looking back, Kristol still bristles at the notion that the mission to land a marquee name was hopeless. Some thought, "'Oh, Kristol's going around on some pathetic Don Quixote kind of thing, tilting at windmills,'" he said in an interview. But "we had three serious people, as far as I could tell, seriously considering it."

When none of the party elders would bite, the effort degenerated into a series of flailing overtures to second and third-tier options, including Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Eventually, the recruitment effort settled on Evan McMullin, an obscure ex-CIA agent and House staffer. After a campaign consisting largely of earnest tweets, McMullin placed fifth in the general election, behind the Libertarian and Green Party candidates in the popular-vote tally.

In some ways, it's hard not to see the Never Trump movement as having comprehensively failed, even as the costs of Trump's brand of populism—demagogic, conspiracy-minded, anti-science, scorched-earth—have been brought into sharp focus. In some circles, Never Trump is looked at as little more than the pitiful last gasp of a decadent, exhausted, and now vanquished elite. Despite the ongoing public-health crisis caused by the coronavirus, Trump remains, as of this writing, popular with Republican voters. The party's core coalition partners—from the National Rifle Association to anti-abortion activists—have, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, stuck by him. The Never Trump ranks, meanwhile, have seen considerable attrition: Some foot soldiers slunk into the Trumpian fold while others defected to the Democrats or simply resigned themselves to being politically homeless.

Nonetheless, a dedicated remnant has kept the candle burning. Kristol has nurtured several organizations committed to traditional conservative values, including Republicans for the Rule of Law and Defending Democracy Together. McMullin and Finn

launched Stand Up Republic, an organization dedicated to strengthening American democracy that now has chapters in 18 states. And many of the intellectuals and writers linked to Never Trump continue their work at think tanks, universities, newspapers, and magazines. New publications have also sprouted up, including *The Bulwark*, the go-to source for anti-Trump commentary on the center-right, and *The Dispatch*, founded by two leading conservative journalists, Jonah Goldberg and Stephen Hayes. These stalwarts have kept up rearguard efforts to expose the perfidy of the current administration and to wrest their former allies away from Trumpian populism.

They may yet provide the foundation for the triumphant return of traditional conservatism. More likely, however, Never Trumpers will play a different but still vital role in American politics. It could fall to them to prevent Trumpism from dominating the Republican Party—and the country—for years to come.

**SINCE TRUMP'S** takeover, political observers have envisioned two futures for the party of Lincoln. In one view, the GOP will become permanently subsumed by populism. If Trump wins a second term and can maintain his vindictive cult of personality, successful challenges to his style of politics do seem improbable. The conversion of onetime Never Trump favorites like Graham and Representative Elise Stefanik into shameless sycophants bears this out, as does the demonizing of critics such as former Senator Jeff Flake, former Representative Mark Sanford, and

Representative Justin Amash, who left the party and now identifies as an independent. If Trump can withstand the bungling of the COVID-19 response and an economic downturn, that does not bode well for Never Trumpers hoping to free the party from his brand of populism.

overwhelmingly white and is becoming more working-class, less formally educated, and older—will lead the party to go where its voters are, even in the absence of Trump.

But there may yet be a more hopeful story to tell about the Republican Party and the civic future of America. This story

ideological and coalitional diversity that in other countries is processed through multiple parties has typically been institutionalized in the United States as durable factions within the two dominant parties. As recently as the 1970s, the Democrats had a powerful faction of conservative southerners, and



Others cling to the view that if the president is repudiated at the ballot box this fall, the Trumpist fever will break and the party will be restored to something like its former self. This outcome seems unlikely. Deep sociological factors—in particular, a GOP base that is

begins with the observation that, historically, American parties have rarely been homogeneous. While our institutions push strongly in the direction of two parties, our vast geography and demographic heterogeneity make it hard for those parties to be internally coherent. The

the GOP had a liberal wing based in the Northeast.

Over the past couple of decades, however, factional divisions within both parties declined. The Republicans in particular have not had organized groups with significantly different ideas, institutions,

funders, and geographic bases. There is the Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives, but it has dissented from party leaders less about first principles than on tactics. Former Speaker Paul Ryan and the caucus's previous chairman, Mark Meadows, basically agreed on where the ship should sail; the only question was whether it needed to tack to get there.

That kind of internal coherence remains a historical anomaly and is unlikely to persist in either party. For the foreseeable future, the dominant faction of the GOP may be populist and nationalist. But the populists will not have the party all to themselves. They will be forced to share it with what we will call a liberal-conservative faction, in recognition of their grounding in classical liberal principles of pluralism, constitutionalism, and free trade. That faction, in other words, is the Never Trumpers and their fellow travelers: the educated middle class, business interests, and the more upwardly mobile parts of minority groups.

This wing of the party may be small, but it will enjoy some impressive advantages. It will find significant financial support in the technology and finance sectors and thus will have more than adequate resources to build institutions, fund candidates, and engage in intraparty warfare for control of state parties. Because it will be especially attractive to the kinds of experts and thinkers who played such a key role in the Never Trump movement, it will not lack for well-developed policies and philosophies. In the midst of a pandemic, expertise might even regain some of its appeal.

A Never Trump faction within the Republican Party

might also benefit from a similar evolution within the Democratic Party. The Democrats are already seeing signs of factional division emerging in their ranks, as moderates do ideological battle with a left wing whose members openly call themselves socialists. The left wing of the party has quickly grown from a small band of disgruntled partisans to a powerful political force with its own think tanks and fundraising strategies, and a large membership organization, the Democratic Socialists of America, which has doubled in size over the past two years.

Notably, the parts of the country where populist Republicans are least competitive are also the parts where the left wing of the Democrats will be the strongest—possibly even dominant. That dominance would make the Democrats beatable, especially in state and local races, by liberal-conservative Republicans who embrace racial and ethnic diversity and are in favor of economic competition, market mechanisms to protect the environment, internationalism, and aggressive measures to fight poverty. The competitiveness of this part of the Republican Party in the bluer corners of the country can already be seen in the reelection of the popular Republican governors of Maryland and Massachusetts, who have embraced something like this liberal-conservative approach.

At the national level, a Congress with durable, organized factions would look far different from the one we've become accustomed to. For decades, we've seen the linked trends of homogenizing parties and growing polarization create one of the most toxic problems the nation faces: partisanship so paralyzing that it all but

eliminates the possibility of compromise. Yet as the parties become less unified, legislators have an opening for a revival of bipartisanship. If these factions develop into genuinely distinctive, independent brands, they could become powerful enough that the majority faction is forced to negotiate with them. And on a host of

MODERATE  
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key issues—national security, trade, and immigration, for example—the Democrats' moderate wing and the Republicans' liberal-conservative faction may find that they have more in common with each other than with other members of their respective parties. The more populist elements of both parties might find affinity on precisely the same issues.

Such cooperation can be seen as another legacy of the Never Trump movement, a natural outgrowth of the personal connections that many Never Trumpers forged with erstwhile political opponents who became allies in their resistance to the president. Kristol's rehabilitated moral status among some progressives—once unthinkable—is a prominent example. The Republican

and Democratic donors who now meet regularly with various centrist activists through a network called Patriots and Pragmatists is another. These ties will only become stronger as donors in both parties shift their support to their respective factions and away from the party as a whole. Billionaire donors such as Kathryn Murdoch and Seth Klarman are already starting to target their giving so as to build up political infrastructure for the parts of the major parties that are neither populist nor socialist.

This scenario will continue to rely heavily on the devotion of the Never Trump faithful. Kristol, for his part, is pleased with the work he's done to date, though he is uncertain about the future. "Most of my efforts were based on the premise that it was worth trying to stay in the Republican Party—which I think was right—but that it was also doable, which may not have turned out to be right, at least in the short term," he said. "Let's say Trump loses. I find it hard to believe I'm going to just be getting together with Mitch McConnell and John Cornyn and Kevin McCarthy and yukking it up." Kristol may be right that he's unlikely to be welcomed back with open arms by party leadership. But the future of the GOP may depend less on a détente between Never Trumpers and Trump loyalists than on a revived tradition of spirited intraparty antagonism. *A*

*Robert P. Saldin and Steven M. Teles are the authors of Never Trump: The Revolt of the Conservative Elites, from which this article is adapted.*

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SKETCH



## THE BRAINIEST HITTER

*Can Joey Votto outsmart age?*

BY SRIDHAR PAPPU

Last April, on a gorgeously sunny, relatively cool afternoon at Dodger Stadium, in Los Angeles, the Cincinnati Reds' Joey Votto popped out to first base. Ahead in the count, he'd lunged at the ball, sending it high into foul territory, before it landed in the mitt of the first baseman. Infield flies are the

lamest thing a batter can do apart from striking out, but the crowd went wild—or rather, the baseball commentators and Twitter masses did. ("This has to be a sign of the zombie apocalypse." "The world is ending.") Because, over the course of his 13-year Major League career, in 6,827 trips to the plate, Votto had never popped out to first. Think of a veteran opera singer

who never hit a wrong note onstage, or an actor who never flubbed a line. Equally astounding, Votto had flied out to the infield—right, left, or center—only seven times since 2010, while any other Major Leaguer with the same number of trips to the plate would have done so 137 times.

Votto is considered one of the smartest hitters in baseball

history, mentioned in the same breath as Ted Williams and Tony Gwynn. But Votto is now 36, and last year was his annus horribilis—his batting average was undistinguished and he had little power. Now, at an age when many athletes grudgingly accept diminishing skills, he is seeking not only to recover from his worst season ever but to answer a larger question: Can one of the great thinkers of the game out-think time? "It's weird not playing well," Votto told me when I visited him in February at the team's player-development complex in Goodyear, Arizona. "It bothers me."

It must bother him, too, that he now doesn't know when he'll get a chance to improve on last year's performance, though when we caught up in mid-March, he told me this wasn't the main thing on his mind. "I'm not thinking about baseball right now, if I'm honest," he told me a few days after MLB suspended its season indefinitely because of the coronavirus pandemic. He'd gone home to his native Toronto. "I'm just trying to take it moment by moment and look after the people closest to me."

What does it mean to be considered the most intelligent hitter in baseball during an era when sabermetrics—popularized by *Moneyball*, the book and the Brad Pitt movie—dominate? With team analytics departments constantly feeding players data, today's hitter, even one who's not aided by stolen signs and banging trash cans, knows more about what to expect from a pitcher than ever before. "Joey reads the research himself, which is why it feels like he anticipates your questions," offers the baseball-analytics writer Eno Sarris, who's had a number of intricate

conversations with Votto about the game they both love—and love to study. “He’s not willing to talk out of his butt.”

Since high school in Toronto, where he grew up the son of a sommelier mother and chef father, Votto has been a student of Ted Williams. He still takes Williams’s treatise, *The Science of Hitting*, on the road with him, and in an American Masters documentary about the man, Votto was the lone active player featured, shown holding the book lovingly and extolling its greatness.

When Votto tries to capture his own genius, though he’d never use that word, he speaks of having a “plan.” “Coming up with a simple answer to a complicated event—that’s my goal at every at-bat,” he said. “To have simple ideas and repeat them over and over. I’ve got my swing built, I’ve got the plan laid out, and now let’s be natural.”

That description may sound as boilerplate as the advice in a CEO’s memoir, or like the makings of a Buddhist koan (my favorite Joey-ism in the latter category: “The swing should be built around you, not you built around the swing”). But in practice, it means figuring out what kind of pitch—fastball, curveball, slider—is coming next, based on what pitches came before, and who’s throwing. It means avoiding balls out of the strike zone and also avoiding balls *in* the strike zone that he really can’t connect with. It means a million other small things. Teams these days will move three players to the right side of the infield to handicap left-handed hitters like Votto. In 2017, the Chicago Cubs not only shifted the infield but used a four-man outfield to try to stop him. Votto recalculated, not by going to the left, but with

a hard shot so tightly tracing the right-field line that it eluded the extra manpower stacked on that side of the field. “Joey Votto right now is ungodly,” Joe Maddon, then the Cubs’ manager, marveled after the game.

Notwithstanding last season’s dismal performance, what Votto’s meticulous approach has yielded is, simply, very few outs. For seven of the 10 seasons from 2010 to 2019, he led the National League in on-base percentage. In 2017, he nearly won his second National League MVP. That year, he walked almost twice as many times as he struck out, remarkable in an era when strikeouts are blooming like kudzu, and hit 36 home runs.

Votto’s wily reputation has led to farcical moments. In 2018, the Cleveland Indians’ Trevor Bauer—now on the Reds himself—shook off his catcher eight times before throwing a single pitch to Votto. Knowing how obsessively his adversary prepared for each and every pitch, Bauer thought, *I’ve got to do something brand-new, something I’ve never done in an MLB game.* His answer was a “backdoor” slider. It missed the strike zone, but when Votto flied out a few pitches later, Bauer was ecstatic: *It was a mental battle, and I beat you, Votto.* By the ninth inning, however, Bauer had been replaced by a reliever, and Votto smashed a three-run double to put the trailing Reds ahead, 6–4.

**B E F O R E I S P O K E** with Votto, who’s carried the Reds for nearly a decade, I rewatched the moment I remembered best from his early days with the team. It was a 10-pitch at-bat in 2010. He’d become a full-time player two years earlier, after six seasons in the minors.

With the clubhouse then full of aging stars, Ken Griffey Jr. chief among them, Votto had been easy to overlook during his premier season, but nonetheless finished second in the National League Rookie of the Year balloting. He’d managed this feat despite the fact that his father, a massive baseball fan in a country of hockey freaks, had suddenly died in August, at age 52. In 2009, the loss caught up to Votto. He suffered panic attacks that several times forced him from the field, and he went on the disabled list for a while to get treatment for anxiety and depression, a fact he didn’t hide. “The stuff I was dealing with off the field finally seeped its way into the game,” Votto said at the time. “I just had to put an end to it, because I physically couldn’t do my job.”

Then came 2010, and the at-bat I remember, against the Dodgers pitcher Jonathan Broxton. It’s natural to hold a long-ago sporting event in one’s mind, only to come back to it and find it wholly different. But this was of another order altogether. Looking at the clip, I thought, *Is this Joey Votto?*

Expectedly, Votto is thinner, with his baggy pants falling off him, and clean-shaven. But he is also standing up straight in the box, in the traditional pose, his stroke long and fluid, giving little indication of the radical change he’d soon make. Granted, he said, he was “really feeling myself, confident, cocky, strutting.” At one point in the sequence, Votto told me, he muttered to the catcher, A. J. Ellis, “[Broxton] throws that again, and you’re not getting it back.” Votto proceeded to nail a two-run single. Ellis ripped off his mask, stared at Votto on first base, and mouthed, *Fuck you.*

Votto was named the National League’s MVP that year, the Reds won their first division title in 15 seasons, and it became clear that whatever future the team had would be built around him. The very next season, however, at the tender age of 27, the franchise player sensed that he was beginning to, well, lose it. He noticed that his bat speed wasn’t *quite* as fast, or as powerful. “It’s hard to explain. It’s a really, really subtle feel. In 2011, I was stuck on trying to do things like I did in 2010. Eventually acceptance kicked in.” He began to remake his swing, and his whole approach to batting—essentially anticipating the twilight of his career at its height. Or in his words, he was endeavoring to avoid his “least favorite feeling,” which is being out of control.

Today he crouches down in his stance and chokes up on the bat, which he says reduces his raw power but emphasizes quickness and efficiency. People often speak of the natural beauty of a swing. No one would ever say that of Votto’s.

“You want to look sexy up there,” Votto acknowledged. “You see the very best guys in the game have this swagger, hitting taller, with flashy, finishing moments. My style comes across like, ‘Oh, he’s really working hard.’” But Votto is willing to trade optics for success. His reconstructed swing, “direct, short, compact,” allows him to decide how to hit the ball even as it’s whizzing toward him. “That’s what really helped me, and that’s what I try to repeat,” he said.

Speaking with Votto about hitting, one is reminded of the lonely place the batter occupies in all of sports. Despite the presence of teammates on the bases and in the dugouts,

of thousands of people wearing *your* name on jerseys and T-shirts, it is you and you alone left to face a man throwing a tiny ball at incredible speeds. To do well in this moment is to isolate yourself from the rest of the world.

There are those who attempt to leave this chamber, to lead what people call a normal life. Votto cannot. The activities that he enjoys during the off-season—like spending time with family and friends—he will not allow himself during the spring and summer. He is still single, living with his dog, Maris, whom he's called his best friend, and everything is set from the moment he wakes up. First off, he goes straight outside, doing yoga in the grass to connect with nature. He will not drink caffeine. He will not go for a walk in the middle of the day or to a local store where he'd be required to interact with people. Though he gets *The New York Times*, he cannot handle the stimuli of the news before a game, putting the front sections aside for an off day. He takes solace in the Science section and in the crossword. "It's ridiculously sheltered," Votto admitted. "It's so ridiculous."

Which isn't to say he lacks a sense of humor, or stands aloof from his teammates. He has trolled fans in Philadelphia and Chicago, and impersonated Borat on TV. When the Reds signed the Japanese outfielder Shogo Akiyama this winter, Votto hired a Japanese tutor to help him communicate with him, just as he'd once learned Spanish. He told his former teammate, the shortstop Zack Cozart, that if Cozart ever made the All-Star team, he'd buy him a donkey. Both of those things came true.

Votto has expressed a desire to drive a school bus after he retires. "I'd really like to have a job that gives back, keeps me out of the spotlight, allows me to do something on a daily basis that connects me with kids and families," he told me. "That's all I was trying to say. I was just trying to have fun with it."

But Votto's focus and sustained solitude can make reporters who approach him—myself included—uneasy. During the season, he rarely talks to the press after games. When *The Athletic*'s C. Trent Rosecrans, one of the few journalists Votto communicates with regularly, speaks with players on other teams, they often quiz him about Votto. "I can't tell you why Joey talks to me," Rosecrans says. "I don't know. Trying to get me to explain anything about Votto is going to be very difficult, because I don't have any fucking clue."

**L**AST YEAR, in the season's first days, Votto knew. He knew. He dropped a pop fly on April 1 against the Milwaukee Brewers and felt things slipping away from him. He had turf toe early and suffered back issues as the year progressed, and his slide continued. "It's just not fun, by the way, when you're used to a certain high and all of a sudden you have to play amongst the peasants." He paused. "I'm kidding."

Of course, Votto tried to right things. But he wasn't true to himself. The terrible start crushed his spirit, and by his own measure, he just made things worse. He set aside nearly every adjustment he'd made over the years. He changed his stance. At one point late in the year, he spoke about the need to hit like a "dumb-dumb" or a "Neanderthal." The game's most

cerebral player was at his wits' end. "I felt mentally burned out," Votto said. "I didn't feel as motivated to work on the littlest of things. That's a lot to share right there, but I just felt genuinely burned out."

VOTTO'S  
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had a rough year. I have to show again. I have to perform."

The day before we met in person, Votto decided to have a coffee at Starbucks, his last one, he figured at the time, for months. Then, while at Whole Foods in the afternoon, he went even further. He stopped at the bar set amid overpriced produce and organic beauty supplies to have a beer. A single beer at a grocery store to revel in the task in front of him: the comeback season. "Let's celebrate," he recalled thinking. "Let's get ready for a great year. Let's go to Whole Foods and get a beer at 3 o'clock!"

Almost two weeks later, I returned to Goodyear to see him in a spring-training game against the Dodgers, not as a journalist but as a fan. Votto was already tied for the most walks in the Cactus League but had yet to get his first hit. As I sat there, I heard people around me express doubt about his ability to come back; someone grumbled that he was taking too many pitches. A Los Angeles fan laughed at Votto's home-run total from last year.

His first two appearances did little to inspire confidence. He struck out badly the first time, and lined out the second. Then came his third chance. For this at-bat, Votto had chosen Lizzo's "Truth Hurts" as his walk-up music. After taking the first pitch to evaluate the pitcher's release point, Votto smacked the ball to center field for a single. For the moment, at least, Joey Votto was in control. *A*

Sridhar Pappu is the author of *The Year of the Pitcher: Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball's Golden Age*.

# KILL THE OFFICE DRESS CODE

*What-to-wear-to-work confusion may soon be a distant memory.*

BY AMANDA MULL

**B**eing online has many rules. Some of the more exciting or distressing ones have names—Godwin’s Law, about the inevitability of someone invoking Hitler during an internet argument; Rule 34, which guarantees the thematic completeness of the web’s pornography. But mostly, the internet’s rules are just de facto guidelines for what to expect in this or that circumstance—observations rather than codifications. Among the most reliable and least frequently noted of these is that wherever people gather to chat about anything, the conversation will eventually turn to the problem of what to wear to work.

In subreddits dedicated to accounting, engineering, and New York City, people ask to see others’ work outfits or for descriptions of their employee dress code. In Facebook groups about weight loss or motherhood, inquiries abound on where to get an inexpensive black blazer, and who makes the best office-appropriate cropped pants. On Hacker News, a message board for Silicon Valley tech workers, a man in his late

30s recalled being humiliated by the CEO at his new job for daring to wear a button-down shirt among his cargo-shorts-clad co-workers. On Yahoo Answers, the world’s least qualified people have been meting out bad advice on twinsets and shin-length skirts to confused 23-year-olds since 2005.

In theory, the question of what to wear to work shouldn’t pose an unanswerable dilemma. Most workplaces have at least some kind of dress code, and for many of those who greet customers and perform service jobs, a specific uniform is required. Even in the most ambiguous situations, context clues abound on the bodies of colleagues: If no one ever wears jeans, you probably shouldn’t either. But the agita over how to groom yourself for work—hair straight or curly? cover your tattoos or live in the year of our Lord 2020? leggings as pants?—appears to afflict baristas, lawyers, cops, and the denizens of suburban office parks in roughly equal measure.

**MUCH OF THAT CONFUSION** is the result of rapid change. Millennials, notorious murderers of American institutions

and social norms, are now the largest generation in the country’s workforce. As the oldest members of that group, people in their late 30s, accrue power in their organizations, they’ve started to reshape the meaning of “work clothes” in their image—upending the very idea of a dress code as a single standard to which all should aspire. When they’re done, work clothes might be dead for good. Whether that future looks like a descent into midriff-baring anarchy or a sweet reprieve from the tyranny of binding waistbands probably depends on whether you’re a person who makes rules or one who is subject to them.

In the American imagination, the standard for professional work wear has long been a suit or a conservatively tailored dress, even for workers who don’t go into an office. That’s largely held true despite the successful invasion of “business casual,” jump-started by Dockers as a marketing gambit in 1992. That many of the world’s most profitable companies—Google, Facebook, and Apple among them—allow employees to come to work in jeans and sweatshirts all week has yet to meaningfully destabilize that perception. With that in mind, at the beginning of every new term, Regan Gurung shows up to teach his psychology students at Oregon State University in a full suit and tie. Gurung is also taking a cue from his own work. According to two studies he conducted, women, at least, are rated by others as more competent when they wear formal attire. And we actually act as though dress influences our abilities: Subjects clad in white lab coats perform better on tests than those without them (though the experiments were conducted with undergrads who didn’t wear lab coats regularly, so it’s hard to tell how enduring the effect would be once the novelty fades). The gap between our internalized notions about professionalism and what a company’s dress code says is why going to work in shorts still causes anxiety that pushes some people onto Reddit and Facebook with their skittish inquiries about what to wear. If a polo shirt is fine, wouldn’t a button-down be even better? If everyone around you

at a start-up is wearing ripped jeans, wouldn't a dress from Ann Taylor stand out in a good way? Is your company's dress code just a secret test of high-level reasoning skills designed by fiendish bosses?

The association between competence and traditional dress is so durable, in part,

because for years mass media have told us that machers wear well-cut suits or prim sheath dresses in neutral tones. Had our first glimpses of *Mad Men*'s Don Draper or *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope caught them in cutoffs and a raggedy souvenir T-shirt from spring break, their world-beating

dominance might not have been as evident. In a twist in the we-are-what-we-wear story, researchers at Harvard identified what they called the red-sneakers effect. It posits that as long as the person ignoring workplace guidelines is perceived to be doing it purposefully, evaluations of that person

improve—think Mark Zuckerberg and his “fuck you” hoodies in early Facebook business meetings. After all, there's no greater power than being exempt from the rules that govern everyone else.

For the people roaming the internet second-guessing how comfortable they can really



get at work, Gurung has good news, in the form of another psychological bias—toward the persistence of first impressions. “If your first impression is a good one and shows you’re taking the job seriously, the association between being dressed well and credibility and knowledge is strong enough that what you do later doesn’t matter as much,” he explains. As long as you don’t draw too much attention to yourself by being bad at your job or making your co-workers miserable, you can safely start wearing that one sweater you love that’s sort of like a fancy bathrobe. Most studies on clothing perception, after all, deal with snap judgments about strangers. Gurung’s first-day suit? It’s just for show. “Literally by week two, I no longer wear a jacket,” he says. By the end of the term, he’s tie-free, shirtsleeves rolled up.

It’s no secret that there’s a rising premium on “being yourself, being an individual, bringing your full self to work, broader expression of who you are,” says Scott Cawood, the CEO of WorldatWork, a global association for human-resources professionals. (WorldatWork, he notes, doesn’t have a dress code.) He traces the codes’ modern existence back to the Industrial Revolution, when standardized, indoor workplaces became the new normal. Before that, laborers were freer to dress in ways that suited their duties, often on family farms, and had smaller wardrobes to begin with. No one had to consider whether yoga pants were appropriate for gathering the day’s eggs.

As the norms we know now were developed, the people in power made them in accordance with their own preferences.

“You traditionally had men in the C-suite, and they had certain conceptions of how men and women should look. That’s why there was so much concern about can you wear skirts, can you wear pants,” Cawood says. Some of those rules are still enforced in workplaces that prize formality—fine-dining establishments, white-shoe law firms, Congress—including guidelines about hosiery, makeup, and women’s hairstyles. Doing away with these standards is a question not just of gender, but of class: The more comprehensive the expectations for presentation, the more resources required to meet them, and buying a closetful of work wear is a lot more expensive than just using what you already own.

Racial bias, or at least blind spots, has also been embedded in dress codes, perhaps most notably in prohibitions on hairstyles popular among black people, such as braids and afros. “It’s a lack of perspective or empathy,” says Angela Hall, an associate professor at the Michigan State University School of Human Resources and Labor Relations—a thoughtlessness about what might make someone else’s life more complicated. But of course, the impact can be far less benign: Employment law is riddled with cases like that of a black woman who in 2010 had a job offer rescinded because she refused to cut her dreadlocks; the company’s dress code stipulated only that hairstyles be businesslike, professional, and not “excessive.”

Hall notes that changes to work itself have spurred a reconsideration of what constitutes “work clothes.” On the day we spoke, schools in East Lansing were closed for a snowstorm, so she was working

and parenting simultaneously. And the more that work leaves the office—an evolution that may well be accelerated by the coronavirus—the harder it becomes to associate work with a particular mode of dress. The growing pains of that process have already created an icon of the contemporary workplace,

WORKERS ARE ADULTS, NOT BABIES AT PRODUCTIVITY DAY CARE.

however aesthetically unfortunate: the Patagonia power vest.

The seepage of work beyond the office is one of the defining experiences of modern employment—and from one perspective, the erasure of dress codes isn’t helping. In the past, you could come home and take off your uniform or office attire with the knowledge that you were totally free until the next day, mentally and physically. Now many people wear the same jeans they wore to work to cook dinner, cellphone and laptop never too far from reach, the mind and body never totally disconnected from labor.

Even the mass entertainments that have made the suit-and-tie look such an enduring shorthand for professionalism are beginning to fade, no doubt because the same young Americans who now constitute the majority of the broader labor pool have real influence in shaping what ends up on your screens. TV series such as *Silicon Valley* and *Superstore* depict occupational

aesthetics as something closer to what they’ve been for millions of Americans for the past decade: people wearing the same clothes to their job that they’d wear to the movies or to lunch with a friend, sometimes complemented by a company-issued jacket or an ID-carrying lanyard.

Gurung, Cawood, and Hall all agree that the mandate for greater fairness in the workplace—spurred by non-discrimination laws and the need to retain workers in a tight labor market—will likely spell the end of the dress code as we know it, sooner rather than later. For traditionalists, this might sound like an abandonment of pride and professionalism, but in reality, Cawood says, companies that overhaul, simplify, or drop their dress code rarely do anything but make their employees happier. Regulating bad behavior—everything from being a smelly desk neighbor to sexual harassment—doesn’t require rules about pantyhose or facial hair. Cawood points to General Motors as a model for policing how employees adorn themselves, even if it means managers actually have to *manage*. The entire dress code is two words: Dress appropriately.

Ultimately, what such simple dictates acknowledge is that workers are adults, not babies at productivity day care. “People just generally know how to self-govern, and I don’t think you need these archaic rules to punish that outlier that may or may not occur,” Hall said. “Just cover the things you want covered and call it a day.” *A*

*Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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## EXILE IN THE AGE OF MODI

*How Hindu nationalism has trampled the founding idea of my country*

BY AATISH TASEER

“You realize,” a friend wrote to me from Kolkata earlier this year, “that, without the exalted secular ‘idea’ of India … the whole place falls apart.”

India had been on the boil for weeks. On December 11, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu-nationalist government had passed its Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which gave immigrants from three neighboring countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) a path to citizenship on one condition: that they were not Muslim. For the first time in India’s long history of secularism, a religious test had been enacted. If some commentators described the CAA as “India’s first Nuremberg Law,” it was because the law did not stand alone. It worked in tandem, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah menacingly implied—in remarks he has recently tried to walk back—with a slew of other new laws that cast the citizenship of many of India’s own people into doubt. Shah, who has referred to Muslim immigrants as “termites,” spoke of a process by which the government would survey India’s large agrarian population, a significant portion of which is undocumented, and designate the status of millions as “doubtful.” The CAA would then kick into action, providing non-Muslims with relief and leaving Indian Muslims in a position where they could face disenfranchisement, statelessness, or internment. India’s Muslim population of almost 200 million, which had been provoked

by Modi's government for six years, finally erupted in protest. They were joined by many non-Muslims, who were appalled by so brazen an attack on the Indian ethos. The constitutional expert Madhav Khosla recently described the effect of the new laws as a swift movement toward "an arrangement where citizenship is centered on the idea of blood and soil, rather than on the idea of birth." In short, an arrangement in which being Indian meant accepting Hindu dominance and actively eschewing Indian Muslims.

India was seething, but I could not go back to the country where I had grown up. I was deep in my own citizenship drama. On November 7, the Indian government had stripped me of my Overseas Citizenship of India and blacklisted me from the country where my mother and grandmother live. The pretext the government used was that I had concealed the Pakistani origins of my father, from whom I had been estranged for most of my life, and whom I had not met until the age of 21. It was an odd accusation. I had written a book, *Stranger to History*, and published many articles about my absent father. The story of our relationship was well known because my father, Salmaan Taseer, had been the governor of Punjab, in Pakistan, and had been assassinated by his bodyguard in 2011 for daring to defend a Christian woman accused of blasphemy.

None of this had affected my status in India, where I had lived for 30 of my 40 years. I became "Pakistani" in the eyes of Modi's government—and, more important, "Muslim," because religious identity in India is mostly patrilineal and

more a matter of blood than faith—only after I wrote a story for *Time* titled "India's Divider in Chief." The article enraged the prime minister. "*Time* magazine is foreign," he responded. "The writer has also said he comes from a Pakistani political family. That is enough for his credibility." From that moment on, my days as an Indian citizen were numbered.

In August, I received a letter from the Home Ministry threatening me with the cancellation of my citizenship status. Then, in November, an Indian news site leaked what the government was planning to do. Within hours, the Home Ministry's spokesperson was on Twitter, canceling my citizenship before I had been officially informed. In one stroke, Modi's government cut me off from the country I had written and thought about my whole life, and where all the people I had grown up with still lived.

**T**O LOSE one's country is to know a feeling akin to shame, almost as if one has been disowned by a parent, or turned out of one's home. Your country is so intimately bound up with your sense of self that you do not realize what a ballast it has been until it is gone. The relationship is fundamental. It is one of the few things we are allowed to take for granted, and it is the basis of our curiosity about other places. Without a country we are adrift, like people whose inability to love another is linked to an inability to love themselves.

For me, the loss was literal—I could not go back to India—but also abstract: the loss of an idea, that "exalted" idea of a secular India. India, as its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, vowed, was not

meant to be a "Hindu Pakistan." Rather, it was to be a place that cherished the array of religions, languages, ethnicities, and cultures that had taken root over 50 centuries.

Nehru's idea of India as a palimpsest, where "layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer has completely hidden or erased what has been written previously," served as the foundation for the modern republic, born of British colonial rule in 1947. The new country gave secularism a distinctly Indian meaning. As the parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor told me recently, "*Secular* in India merely meant the existence of a profusion of religions, all of which were allowed and encouraged by the state to flourish." The idea of India was a historical recognition that over time—and not always peacefully—a great diversity had collected on the Indian subcontinent. The modern republic, as a reflection of that history, would belong not to any one group, but to all groups in equal measure.

But beneath the topsoil of this modern country, a mere seven decades old, lies an older reality, embodied in the word *Bharat*, which can evoke the idea of India as the holy land, specifically of the Hindus. *India* and *Bharat*—these two words for the same place represent a central tension within the nation, the most dangerous and urgent one of our time. *Bharat* is Sanskrit, and the name by which India knows herself in her own languages, free of the gaze of outsiders. *India* is Latin, and its etymology alone—the Sanskrit *sindhu* for "river," turning into *hind* in Persian, and then into *indos* in Greek, meaning the Indus—reveals

a long history of being under Western eyes. India is a land; Bharat is a people—the Hindus. India is historical; Bharat is mythical. India is an overarching and inclusionary idea; Bharat is atavistic, emotional, exclusionary.

It was this tension between two distinct ways of looking at the same place—modern country or holy land—that the founder of Hindu nationalism, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, took aim at in the early 20th century. As he wrote in his 1923 book, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, "To be a Hindu means a person who sees this land, from the Indus River to the sea, as his country but also as his Holy Land." This Hindu person was, in Savarkar's view, the paramount Indian citizen. Everyone else was at best a guest, and at worst the bastard child of foreign invasion. Savarkar was, as Octavio Paz writes in *In Light of India*, "intellectually responsible for the assassination of Gandhi," in 1948, at the hands of Nathuram Godse, now a hero of the Hindu right. Modern Hindu nationalism is represented by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the cultural organization in which Narendra Modi was reared, and of which his party—the Bharatiya Janata Party—is the political face.

As much as people in India bridle against the binary distinction of India and Bharat, it recurs again and again in the country's discourse—Bharat as a pure, timeless country, unassailable and authentic; India as the embodiment of modernity and all its ills and dislocations. When a medical student was raped and murdered in Delhi in 2012, the head of the RSS had this to

say: "Such crimes hardly take place in Bharat, but they occur frequently in India ... Where 'Bharat' becomes 'India,' with the influence of Western culture, these types of incidents happen."

GROWING UP in 1980s India, in a Westernized enclave where, to quote Edward Said, the "main tenet" of my world "was that everything of consequence either had happened or would happen in the West," I had no idea of this other wholeness called Bharat. That ignorance of Hindu ways and beliefs was not mine alone, but symptomatic of the English-speaking elite, which, in imitation of the British colonial classes, lived in isolation from the country around them. Mohandas Gandhi, at the 1916 opening of Banaras Hindu University, a project that was designed to bridge the distance between Hindu tradition and Western-style modernity, worried that India's "educated men" were becoming "foreigners in their own land," unable to speak to the "heart of the nation." Working closely with Nehru, Gandhi had been a great explainer, continually translating what came from outside into Indian idiom and tradition.

By the time I was an adult, the urban elites and the "heart of the nation" had lost the means to communicate. The elites lived in a state of gated comfort, oblivious to the hard realities of Indian life—poverty and unemployment, of course, but also urban ruin and environmental degradation. The schools their children went to set them at a great remove from India, on the levels of language, religion, and culture. Every feature of their life

was designed, to quote Robert Byron on the English in India, to blunt their "natural interest in the country and sympathy with its people." Their life was, culturally speaking, an adjunct to Western Europe and America; their values were a hybrid, in which India was served nominally while the West was reduced to a source of permissiveness and materialism. They thought they lived in a world where the "idea of India" reigned supreme—but all the while, the constituency for this idea was being steadily eroded. It was Bharat that was ascendant. India's leaders today speak with contempt of the principles on which this young nation was founded. They look back instead to the timeless glories of the Hindu past. They scorn the "Khan Market gang"—a reference to a fashionable market near where I grew up that has become a metonym for the Indian elite. Hindu nationalists trace a direct line between the foreign occupiers who destroyed the Hindu past—first Muslims, then the British—and India's Westernized elite (and India's Muslims), whom they see as heirs to foreign occupation, still enjoying the privileges of plunder.

Almost 30 years ago, in the preface to his book *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie, fearful of the "religious militancy" threatening "the foundations of the secular state," had expressed alarm that "there is no commonly used Hindustani word for 'secularism'; the importance of the secular ideal in India has simply been assumed, in a rather unexamined way." As it happens, the exalted idea of India has no commonly used translation either. Rushdie was saying that this is not merely a failure of

language, but an expression of the isolation of an elite that thought its power was inviolable. "And yet," Rushdie wrote, "if the secularist principle were abandoned, India could simply explode."

India is now exploding. Even the visit of an American president in February was not enough to contain the rage. As

INDIA'S  
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Modi and Donald Trump bear-hugged each other, Hindu-nationalist mobs roamed the streets of New Delhi a few miles away, murdering Muslims and attacking their businesses and places of worship. The two leaders did not acknowledge these events, in which Hindus and Muslims alike were killed. India is approaching an especially dangerous point: the right quantity of unemployed young men, the right kind of populist strongman, and the right level of ignorance and heightened expectations, emanating from an imaginary past. Who knows what elements of modern nation-building and democracy might conveniently be sacrificed on the altar of a vengeful and revivalist politics?

I was not Muslim, and not Pakistani, but, as the writer Saadat Hasan Manto once noted, I

was Muslim enough to risk getting killed. It was game over for my sort of person in India. We had been so blithe, so unknowing, so insulated from a wider Indian reality that it was as if we had prepared the conditions for our own destruction. If I became attuned to the danger, it was because I had seen what had happened to my father in Pakistan, where the shape of society is identical to that of India. He had died like a dog in the street for his high Western ideals. They mourned him in the drawing rooms of Lahore, and in the universities, think tanks, and newsrooms of the West. But in Pakistan, his killer was showered with rose petals; his killer's funeral drew more than 100,000 mourners into the streets.

All over the old non-West, as well as in Western Europe and America, the symbols of belonging—race, religion, language—are being repurposed for a confrontation between what David Goodhart has referred to as the "somewheres" and the "anywheres," the rooted and the rootless. I, with no tribe or caste, no religion or country, have had nowhere to go but to the cities of the West, where I hoped to wait out the storm. But, as my break with India acquired a cold new finality, exile turning into asylum, I could not help but ask whether any harbor would survive the destructive wrath of what may be coming for us all. *A*

*Aatish Taseer's most recent book, The Twice-Born: Life and Death on the Ganges, is now out in paperback. His documentary In Search of India's Soul was released earlier this year.*



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VIEWFINDER

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## Social Distance

*Photographs by Camille Picquot*

Around the time she completed her photographic series *Total Ground*, shot on the Paris Métro from 2016 to 2018, Camille Picquot created a character named Nelson, a “complete stranger to our society.” “The most common aspects of life appear to me as potential dramas,” a fictional letter from Nelson reads. “What is normal, around here?”

The common and the normal in *Total Ground* are, in fact, sly deceptions, filled with drama. Some of Picquot’s photographs are documentary, while others are staged, lightly fictionalized renderings of reality. Actors and strangers often stand side by side in a single frame. Some of the more peculiar images in the collection, she says, are purely documentary: She prefers not to invent unrealistic scenarios.

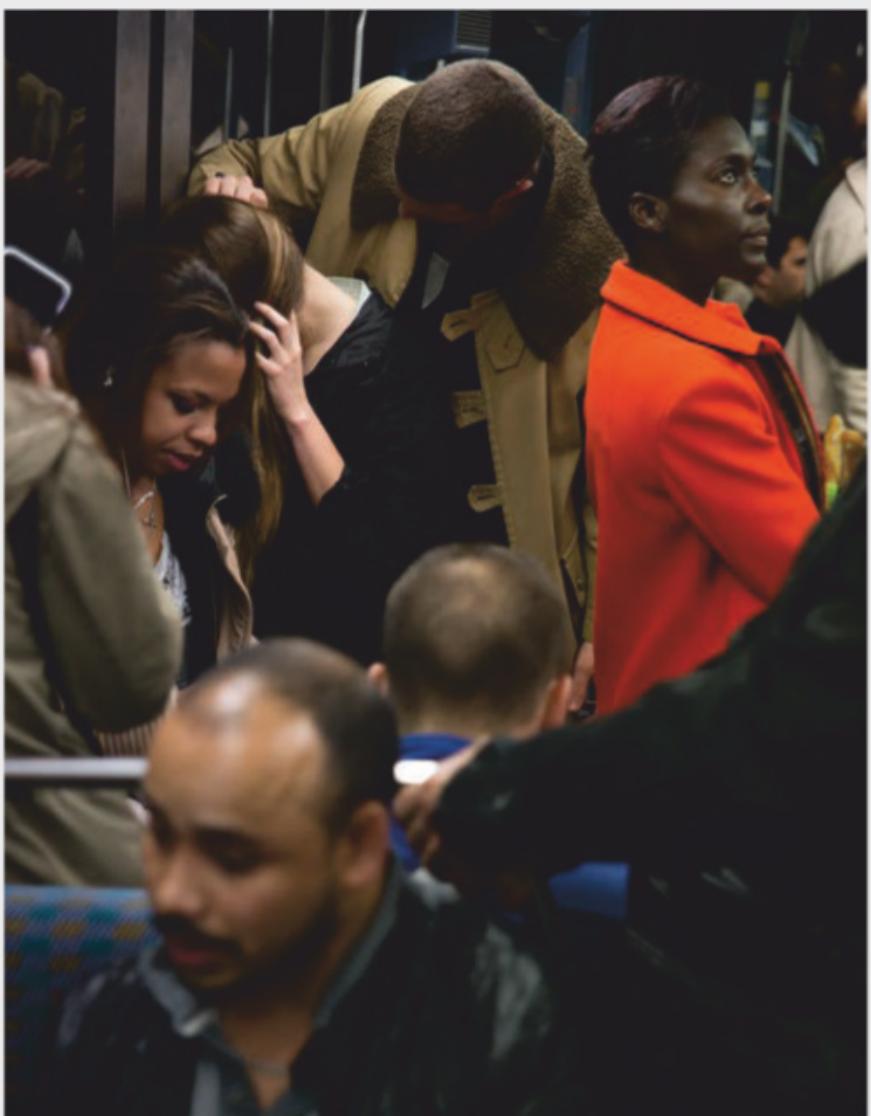
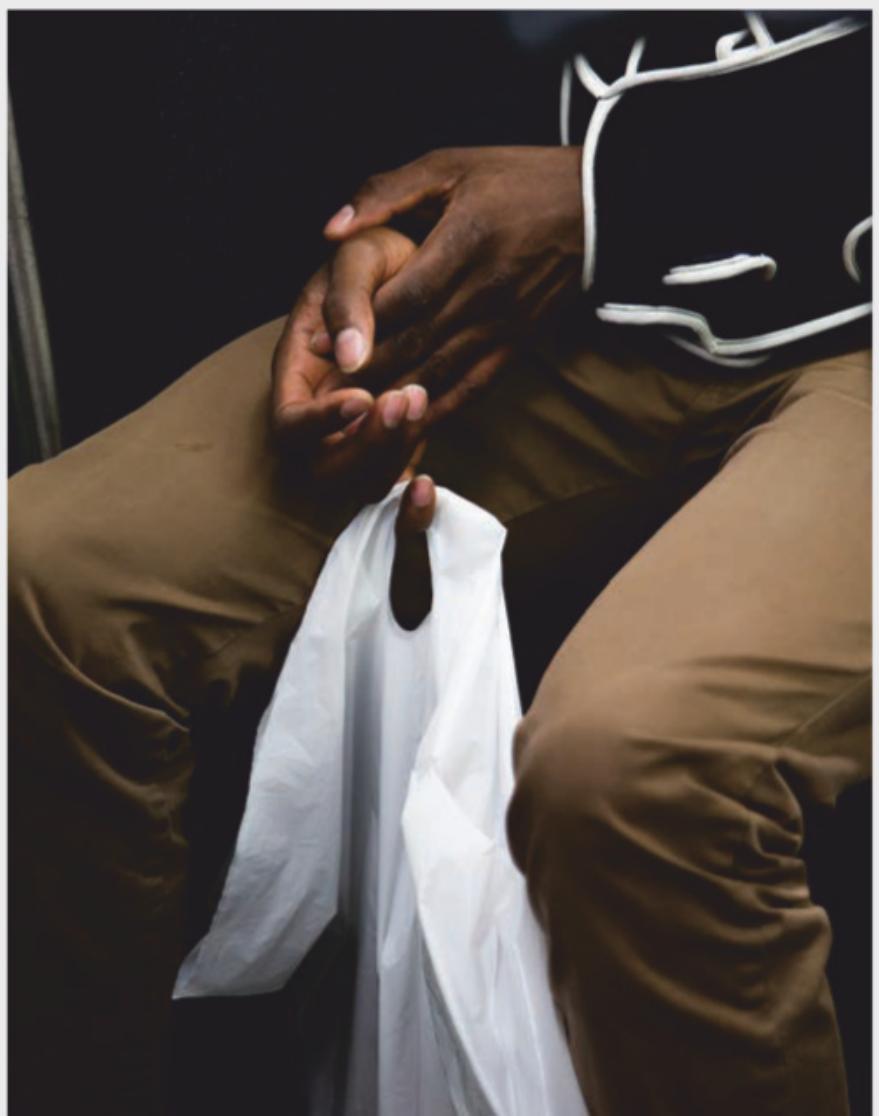
Picquot’s work—in particular, her insistence that close observation can make strange that which most of us take for granted—gains new meaning in this time of global pandemic. “People are standing in big hermetic boxes that move very fast,” she has written of the subway, a mode of transportation that until recently seemed mundane. “Sometimes they stand so close [to] each other that they can touch and smell each other’s skin … They mostly pretend to ignore each other.”

That paradox of “group solitude” is Picquot’s primary subject in *Total Ground*. She is drawn to “intimate gestures in a public space”—the way people grip a subway pole or adjust their hair. These “microevents,” as she calls them, help shape a larger narrative. What *is* normal about our interconnected, impersonal existence? Picquot’s photos ask. What lessons would a stranger to our society draw from a look around today?

—Amy Weiss-Meyer



VIEWFINDER







# childhood in an anxious age *and the crisis of modern parenting*

By Kate Julian

year shot up from 8 percent to 13 percent—meaning that, in the span of a decade, the number of severely depressed teenagers went from 2 million to 3.2 million. Among girls, the rate was even higher; in 2017, one in five reported experiencing major depression.

An even more wrenching manifestation of this trend can be seen in the suicide numbers. From 2007 to 2017, suicides among 10-to-24-year-olds rose 56 percent, overtaking homicide as the second leading cause of death in this age group (after accidents). The increase among preadolescents and younger teens is particularly startling. Suicides by children ages 5 to 11 have almost doubled in recent years. Children's emergency-room visits for suicide attempts or suicidal ideation rose from 580,000 in 2007 to 1.1 million in 2015; 43 percent of those visits were by children younger than 11. Trying to understand why the sort of emotional distress that once started in adolescence now seems to be leaching into younger age groups, I called Laura Prager, a child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and a co-author of *Suicide by Security Blanket, and Other Stories From the Child Psychiatry Emergency Service*. Could she explain what was going on? “There are many theories, but I don’t understand it fully,” she replied. “I don’t know that anyone does.”

One possible contributing factor is that, in 2004, the FDA put a warning on antidepressants, noting a possible association between antidepressant use and suicidal thinking in some young people. Prescriptions of antidepressants to children fell off sharply—leading experts to debate whether the warning resulted in more deaths than it prevented. The opioid epidemic also appears to be playing a role: One study suggests that a sixth of the increase in teen suicides can be linked to parental opioid addiction. Some experts have suggested that rising distress among preteen and adolescent girls might be linked to the fact that girls are getting their period earlier and earlier (a trend that has itself been linked to various factors, including obesity and chemical exposure).

Even taken together, though, these explanations don’t totally account for what’s going on. Nor can they account for the fragility that now seems to accompany so many kids out of adolescence and into their young-adult years. The closest thing to a unified theory of the case—one put forth in *The Atlantic* three years ago by the psychologist Jean M. Twenge and in many other places by many other people—is that smartphones and social media are to blame. But that can’t explain the distress we see in kids too young to have phones. And the more the relationship between phones and mental health is studied, the less straightforward it seems. For one thing, kids the world over have smartphones, but most other countries aren’t experiencing similar rises in suicides. For another, meta-analyses of recent research have found that the overall associations between screen time and adolescent well-being range from relatively small to nonexistent. (Some studies have even found positive effects: When adolescents text more in a given day, for example, they report feeling less depressed and anxious, probably because they feel greater social connection and support.)

A stronger case can be made that social media is potentially hazardous for people who are already at risk of anxiety and

Imagine for a moment that the future is going to be even more stressful than the present. Maybe we don’t need to imagine this. You probably believe it. According to a survey from the Pew Research Center last year, 60 percent of American adults think that three decades from now, the U.S. will be less powerful than it is today. Almost two-thirds say it will be even more divided politically. Fifty-nine percent think the environment will be degraded. Nearly three-quarters say that the gap between the haves and have-nots will be wider. A plurality expect the average family’s standard of living to have declined. Most of us, presumably, have recently become acutely aware of the danger of global plagues.

Suppose, too, that you are brave or crazy enough to have brought a child into this world, or rather this mess. If ever there were a moment for fortifying the psyche and girding the soul, surely this is it. But how do you prepare a child for life in an uncertain time—one far more psychologically taxing than the late-20th-century world into which you were born?

To protect children from physical harm, we buy car seats, we childproof, we teach them to swim, we hover. How, though, do you inoculate a child against future anguish? For that matter, what do you do if your child seems overwhelmed by life in the here and now?

You may already know that an increasing number of our kids are not all right. But to recap: After remaining more or less flat in the 1970s and ’80s, rates of adolescent depression declined slightly from the early ’90s through the mid-aughts. Shortly thereafter, though, they started climbing, and they haven’t stopped. Many studies, drawing on multiple data sources, confirm this; one of the more recent analyses, by Pew, shows that from 2007 to 2017, the percentage of 12-to-17-year-olds who had experienced a major depressive episode in the previous

depression. “What we are seeing now,” writes Candice Odgers, a professor at UC Irvine who has reviewed the literature closely, “might be the emergence of a new kind of digital divide, in which differences in online experiences are amplifying risks among [the] already-vulnerable.” For instance, kids who are anxious are more likely than other kids to be bullied—and kids who are cyberbullied are much more likely to consider suicide. And for young people who are already struggling, online distractions can make retreating from offline life all too tempting, which can lead to deepening isolation and depression.

This more or less brings us back to where we started: Some of the kids aren’t all right, and certain aspects of contemporary American life are making them less all right, at younger and younger ages. But none of this suggests much in the way of solutions. Taking phones away from miserable kids seems like a bad idea; as long as that’s where much of teenagers’ social lives are transacted, you’ll only isolate them. Do we campaign to take away the happy kids’ phones too? Wage a war on early puberty? What?

I HAVE BEEN THINKING about these questions a lot lately, for journalistic reasons as well as personal ones. I am the mother of two children, 6 and 10, whose lineage includes more than its share of mental illness. Having lost one family member to suicide and watched another ravaged by addiction and psychiatric disability, I have no deeper wish for my kids than that they not be similarly afflicted. And yet, given the apparent direction of our country and our world, not to mention the ordeal that is late-stage meritocracy, I haven’t been feeling optimistic about the conditions for future sanity—theirs, mine, or anyone’s.

To my surprise, as I began interviewing experts in children’s mental health—clinicians, neuroscientists doing cutting-edge research, parents who’d achieved this unofficial status as a result of their kids’ difficulties—an unusually unified chorus emerged. For all the brain’s mysteries, for everything we still don’t know about genetics and epigenetics, the people I spoke with emphasized what we do know about when emotional disorders start and how we might head more of them off at the pass. The when: childhood—very often early childhood. The how: treatment of anxiety, which was repeatedly described as a gateway to other mental disorders, or, in one mother’s vivid phrasing, “the road to hell.”

Actually, the focus on anxiety wasn’t so surprising. Of course anxiety. Anxiety is, in 2020, ubiquitous, inescapable, an ambient condition. More than a quarter of all doctor visits in America now end with a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication

such as Xanax or Valium. As for the kids: A study published in 2018, the most recent effort at such a tabulation, found that in just five years, anxiety-disorder diagnoses among young people had increased 17 percent. Anxiety is the topic of pop music (Ariana Grande’s “Breathin,” Julia Michaels and Selena Gomez’s “Anxiety”), the country’s best-selling graphic novel (Raina Telgemeier’s *Guts*), and a whole cohort’s sense of humor (see Generation Z’s seemingly bottomless appetite for anxiety memes). *The New York Times* has even published a roundup of anxiety-themed books for little ones. “Anxiety is on the rise in all age groups,” it explained, “and toddlers are not immune.”

The good news is that new forms of treatment for children’s anxiety disorders are emerging—and, as we’ll see, that treatment can forestall a host of later problems. Even so, there is a problem with much of the anxiety about children’s anxiety, and it brings us closer to the heart of the matter. Anxiety *disorders* are well worth preventing, but anxiety itself is not something to be warded off. It is a universal and necessary response to stress and uncertainty. I heard repeatedly from therapists and researchers while reporting this piece that anxiety is uncomfortable but, as with most discomfort, we can learn to tolerate it.

Yet we are doing the opposite: Far too often, we insulate our children from distress and discomfort entirely. And children who don’t learn to cope with distress face a rough path to adulthood. A growing number of middle- and high-school students appear to be avoiding school due to anxiety or depression; some

have stopped attending entirely. As a symptom of deteriorating mental health, experts say, “school refusal” is the equivalent of a four-alarm fire, both because it signals profound distress and because it can lead to so-called failure to launch—seen in the rising share of young adults who don’t work or attend school and who are dependent on their parents.

Lynn Lyons, a therapist and co-author of *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents*, told me that the childhood mental-health crisis risks becoming self-perpetuating: “The worse that the numbers get about our kids’ mental health—the more anxiety, depression, and suicide increase—the more fearful parents become. The more fearful parents become, the more they continue to do the things that are inadvertently contributing to these problems.”

This is the essence of our moment. The problem with kids today is also a crisis of parenting today, which is itself growing worse as parental stress rises, for a variety of reasons. And so we have a vicious cycle in which adult stress leads to child stress, which leads to more adult stress, which leads to an epidemic of anxiety at all ages.

## I. THE SEEDS OF ANXIETY

Over the past two or three decades, epidemiologists have conducted large, nationally representative studies screening children for psychiatric disorders, then following those children into adulthood. As a result, we now know that anxiety disorders are by far the most common psychiatric condition in children, and are far more common than we thought 20 or 30 years ago. We know they affect nearly a third of adolescents ages 13 to 18, and that their median age of onset is 11, although some anxiety disorders start much earlier (the median age for a phobia to start is 7).

Many cases of childhood anxiety go away on their own—and if you don't have an anxiety disorder in childhood, you're unlikely to develop one as an adult. Less happily, the cases that don't resolve tend to get more severe and to lead to further problems—first additional anxiety disorders, then mood and substance-abuse disorders. “Age 4 might be specific phobia. Age 7 is going to be separation anxiety plus the specific phobia,” says Anne Marie Albano, the director of the Columbia University Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders. “Age 12 is going to be separation anxiety, social anxiety, and the specific phobia. Anxiety picks its own friends up first before it branches into the other disorders.” And the earlier it starts, the more likely depression is to follow.

All of which means we can no longer assume that childhood distress is a phase to be grown out of. “The group of kids whose problems *don't* go away account for most adults who have problems,” says the National Institute of Mental Health’s Daniel Pine, a leading authority on how anxiety develops in children. “People go on to develop a whole host of other problems that aren’t anxiety.” Ronald C. Kessler, a professor of health-care policy at Harvard, once made this point especially vividly: “Fear of dogs at age 5 or 10 is important not because fear of dogs impairs the quality of your life,” he said. “Fear of dogs is important because it makes you four times more likely to end up a 25-year-old, depressed, high-school-dropout single mother who is drug-dependent.”

Compounding this, the young kids with mental-health problems today may have worse long-term prospects than did similar kids in decades past. That is the conclusion drawn by Ruth Sellers, a University of Sussex research psychologist who examined three longitudinal studies of British youth. Sellers found that youth with mental-health problems at age 7 are more likely to be socially isolated and victimized by peers later in childhood, and to have mental-health and academic difficulties at age 16. Concerningly, despite decreased stigma

and increases in mental-health-care spending, these associations have been growing stronger over time.

Big societal shifts such as the ones we’ve undergone in recent years can hit people with particular traits particularly hard. A recent example comes from China, where shy, quiet children used to be well liked and tended to thrive. Following rapid social and economic change in urban areas, values have changed, and these children now tend to be rejected by their peers—and, surely no coincidence, are more prone to depressive symptoms. I thought of this when I met recently with the leaders of a support group for parents of struggling young adults in the Washington, D.C., area, most of whom still live at home. Some of these grown children have psychiatric diagnoses; all have had difficulty with the hurdles and humiliations of life in a deeply competitive culture, one with a narrowing definition of success and a rising cost of living.

The hope of early treatment is that by getting to a child when she’s 7, we may be able to stop or at least slow the distressing trajectory charted by Sellers and other researchers. And cognitive behavioral therapy, the most empirically supported therapy for anxiety, is often sufficient to do just that. In the case of anxiety, CBT typically involves a combination of what’s known as “cognitive restructuring”—learning to spot maladaptive beliefs and challenge them—and exposure to the very things that cause you anxiety. The goal of exposure is to desensitize you to these things and also to give you practice riding out your anxious feelings, rather than avoiding them.

Most of the time, according to the largest and most authoritative study to date, CBT works: After a 12-week course, 60 percent of children with anxiety disorders were “very much improved” or “much improved.” But it isn’t a permanent cure—its results tend to fade over time, and people whose anxiety resurges may need follow-up courses.

A bigger problem is that cognitive behavioral therapy can only work if the patient is motivated, and many anxious children have approximately zero interest in battling their fears. And CBT focuses on the child’s role in his or her anxiety disorder, while neglecting the parents’ responses to that anxiety. (Even when a parent participates in the therapy, the emphasis typically remains on what the child, not the parent, is doing.)

A highly promising new treatment out of Yale University’s Child Study Center called SPACE (Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions) takes a different approach. SPACE treats kids without directly treating kids, and by instead treating their parents. It is as effective as CBT, according to a widely noted study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* earlier this year, and reaches even those kids who refuse help. Not surprisingly, it has provoked a tremendous amount of excitement in the children’s-mental-health world—so much so that when I began reporting this piece, I quickly lost track of the number of people who asked whether I’d read about it yet, or talked with Eli Lebowitz, the psychology professor who created it.

In working directly with parents, Lebowitz’s approach aims to provide not a temporary solution, but a foundation for a lifetime of successful coping. SPACE is also, I have come to



believe, much more than a way of treating childhood anxiety—it is an important keyhole to the broken way American adults now approach parenting.

**WHEN LEBOWITZ TEACHES** other clinicians how to do SPACE, he starts by telling them, several times, that he's not blaming parents for their kids' pathologies.

"Because we represent a field with a very rich history of blaming parents for pretty much everything—autism, schizophrenia, eating disorders—this is a *really* important point," he said one Sunday morning in January, as he and his collaborator Yaara Shimshoni kicked off a two-day training for therapists. A few dozen were in attendance, having traveled to Yale from across the country so that they might learn to help parents reduce what Lebowitz calls "accommodating" behaviors and what the rest of us may call "behaviors typical of a 21st-century parent."

"There really isn't evidence to demonstrate that parents *cause* children's anxiety disorders in the vast majority of cases," Lebowitz said. But—and this is a big *but*—there is research establishing

a *correlation* between children's anxiety and parents' behavior. SPACE, he continued, is predicated on the simple idea that you can combat a kid's anxiety disorder by reducing parental accommodation—basically, those things a parent does to alleviate a child's anxious feelings. If a child is afraid of dogs, an accommodation might be walking her across the street so as to avoid one. If a child is scared of the dark, it might be letting him sleep in your bed.

Lebowitz borrowed the concept about a decade ago from the literature on how obsessive-compulsive disorder affects a patient's family members and vice versa. (As he put it to me, family members end up living as though they, too, have OCD: "*Everybody's* washing their hands. *Everybody's* changing their clothes. *Nobody's* saying this word or that word.") In the years since, accommodation has become a focus of anxiety research. We now know that about 95 percent of parents of anxious children engage in accommodation. We also know that higher degrees of accommodation are associated with more severe anxiety symptoms, more severe impairment, and worse treatment outcomes. These findings have potential implications even for children who are not (yet) clinically anxious: The everyday efforts we make to prevent kids' distress—minimizing things that worry them or scare them, assisting with difficult tasks rather than letting them struggle—may not help them manage it in the long term. When my daughter is in tears because she hasn't finished a school project that's due the next morning, I sometimes stop her crying by

coaching her through the rest of it. But when I do, she doesn't learn to handle deadline jitters. When she asks me whether anyone in our family will die of COVID-19, an unequivocal "No, don't worry" may reassure her now, but a longer, harder conversation about life's uncertainties might do more to help her in the future.

Parents know they aren't helping their kids by accommodating their fears; they tell Lebowitz as much. But they also say they don't know how to stop. They fear that day-to-day life will become unmanageable.

Here are some things that, over the course of the SPACE training, I heard of parents doing to avoid setting off their anxious children:

Going upstairs to get a child's backpack before school because the child is scared to be alone in any area of the house and the parent doesn't have time to argue about it. Driving a child to school because the child is frightened of the bus, with the result that the mother is late to work every single day.

Tying and retying a child's shoes until they feel *just right*.

Spending 30 minutes a day, on average, checking and rechecking a child's homework.

Announcing one's presence as one moves around the house, so that a child will at all times know where to find a parent ("I'm going to the kitchen, Oliver"). Accompanying a 9-year-old child to the toilet because he is afraid to be alone. Allowing a 9-year-old to accompany a *parent* to the toilet because he is afraid to be alone. Peeing in a bucket—a mother, not a child—because the basement playroom has no bathroom, and the child is afraid to be alone.

Allowing a child to sleep in the parents' bed. Sitting or lying with a child while he falls asleep.

Always carrying a plastic bag because a child is afraid she'll vomit.

Cutting a 13-year-old's food because she's afraid of knives.

Ceasing to have visitors because a child is intensely shy. Speaking for a child in restaurants. Asking a child's teacher not to call on her in class.

Installing the Find My Friends app on a child's phone so that the child can track the *parents'* whereabouts.

Preparing different foods for a child because she won't eat what everyone else eats.

Buying a new burglar alarm. Buying a new car. Seriously contemplating buying a new house.

The list went on and on. The most disorienting thing about it was not its length, but the way it merged stories that seemed to me bizarre but turned out to be commonplace with stories that sounded familiar but upon further consideration seemed unhealthy. Many of us think nothing of preparing different meals for different family members. Bedtime has become such a protracted affair that parents may now do the work a stuffed animal once did.

I barely suppressed a laugh at the idea of a kid tracking his parents, rather than vice versa, but murmurs of recognition sounded around the room. "That's *common*," one therapist said. The idea of buying a new house must have made my eyebrows go up, because another woman leaned over and whispered: "I have a family that moved to a split-level because the daughter didn't like to be out of earshot."

Over the course of 12 sessions, SPACE helps parents figure out how to start reducing their accommodations, while also expressing empathy for their child's suffering and confidence in her capabilities. If it works, and usually it does, it sets in motion a virtuous cycle: As parent behavior changes, kids will start coping for themselves. As they cope, they'll come to feel more capable, and they will be treated as such by their parents, who will further reduce accommodation. In turn, the entire family's well-being will improve.

## II. THE ANXIOUS PARENT

Most critiques of this century's child-rearing practices have treated parents as rational actors, however extreme some of our actions might be. If we hover above our children (or lawn-mower or bulldoze or snowplow a path for them), we are said to do so in reaction to the surrounding conditions—media coverage of kidnappings, for example, or plummeting college-admission rates. In other words, modern parents, or at least the upper-middle-class ones who populate most articles about parenting trends, are widely perceived not as flailing but as the opposite: too hyper, too competent, too vigilant. And yet, despite more than a decade's evidence that helicopter parenting is counterproductive—see, among other widely read takedowns, the *Atlantic* articles "How to Land Your Kid in Therapy," by Lori Gottlieb, and "The Overprotected Kid," by Hanna Rosin, and such books as Julie Lythcott-Haims's *How to Raise an Adult*—kids today are perhaps *more* overprotected, *more* leery of adulthood, *more* in need of therapy.

Which raises a question: If modern parents are so unrelentingly on top of things, why have we not corrected course? Could it be that we are not at all on top of things? Might our children's faltering mental health be related less to our hard-driving style than to our exhaustion and guilt and failure to put our foot down? We complain about kids being thin-skinned and susceptible to peer pressure, but maybe we're the ones who are hypersensitive, to the judgment of our peers and, especially, of our children. And the harder we try to do the right thing—the more we nurture them, the more quickly we respond to their needs—the more we tie ourselves in knots.

Recently, several longtime commentators on the parenting scene have begun to sound similar notes. Take the evolution of Madeline Levine, the Bay Area psychologist whose 2006 best seller, *The Price of Privilege*, (reasonably) chastised parents for imposing their own

ambitions on their children. Her new book, *Ready or Not*, offers a darker if also more sympathetic take on what it's like to rear children in a world that appears to be unraveling, noting "the damage [that] unchecked anxiety does to parents' decision-making."

Consider, too, the 2018 book *The Self-Driven Child*, by William Stixrud, a clinical neuropsychologist, and Ned Johnson, who runs a successful Washington, D.C., tutoring business (as close as one gets to a ringside seat at the meritocratic circus). They argue that today's parents deprive children of meaningful control over their own lives, putting them at heightened risk of anxiety and depression. And they devote a whole chapter to how parents' mental health is harming that of their children. "Children don't need perfect parents, but they do benefit greatly from parents who can serve as a non-anxious presence," they write.

The book has struck such a chord among parents that, two years after its publication, Stixrud and Johnson are still on the national speaking circuit. In their hundreds of appearances and thousands of conversations with parents, they have come to believe that parents' anxiety about their kids is even greater than they had realized, and more concerning. Watching them do a Q&A with private-school parents in December, I could see why. The audience was vibrating with self-doubt, asking fumbling questions about everything from academic pressure to sleep.

When I had coffee with Johnson the next day and later emailed with him, he told me that, since writing the book, he has concluded that parents' overprotection of kids includes an

under-recognized element of self-protection. When we shelter kids from difficulty or challenge, he says, we are not merely shielding them from distress; we are warding off the distress that their distress causes us. Moreover, when school and family systems both have a baseline level of stress—when adults are always on high alert—kids don't get a chance to rebound, and so they resist taking on the sorts of natural and healthy risks that will help them grow. "*Et voilà*," he said, "a generation of anxious kids, looking fearfully at the world around them, who become anxious adults."

"What happened to us adults that made *us* the helicopter parents we too often are?"

**ANXIETY TRAVELS IN FAMILIES.** It travels in families partly because it has a hereditary component: Studies of twins suggest that about 30 to 40 percent of a person's risk for an anxiety disorder is genetic (versus 60 percent or more for bipolar disorder, autism, and schizophrenia). To an even greater extent, anxiety travels in families because it is contagious—from spouse to spouse, from child to parent, and especially from parent to child. More than half of children who live with an anxious parent end up meeting the criteria for an anxiety disorder themselves.

Recognizing the relationship between parental and child anxiety suggests an important means of prevention and intervention: Because anxiety is only partially genetic, a change in parenting style may well help spare a child's mental health.

In one famous study of how changes to parental health affect a child's health, Myrna Weissman, a professor at Columbia University, established that treating a depressed mother with antidepressants quickly reduced depressive symptoms in her child; other researchers have since found that treating a mother with psychotherapy (such as CBT) has the same indirect benefit for her kids. In 2015, Golda S. Ginsburg of the University of Connecticut published the results of the first American study specifically focused on preventing anxiety disorders in children of anxious parents. The intervention, which involved giving anxious parents and their children eight weekly sessions with a therapist who taught them about anxiety, had dramatic effects: Within a year, only 5 percent of the children whose families had received the intervention met the criteria for an anxiety disorder, compared with 31 percent of children in a control group.

Another hint as to how parenting can affect childhood anxiety comes from the research on what's known as behavioral inhibition—a shy, sensitive temperament that's found in about 15 percent of 3-year-olds and that constitutes one of the strongest known risk factors for the development of anxiety disorders. Nathan Fox of the





University of Maryland has spent the past few decades conducting longitudinal studies that explore how this temperament predicts experiences later in life. About 20 years ago, as Fox and his colleague Kenneth Rubin combed through the data from the first of these studies, trying to figure out what differentiated the kids who overcame their inhibition from the ones who didn't, they came across an unexpected clue: Those who went to day care for their first two years were far more likely to be spared anxiety down the line than those who stayed home.

"On one level, it's intuitive," Fox says. "You put them into an environment with other kids; they're desensitized to novelty or unfamiliarity; they get to interact at a very early age with other kids." Fox and Rubin suspected that day care was also giving some behaviorally inhibited kids a much-needed break from their parents, who were likely to have an anxious parenting style—again, anxiety runs in families. Day care wasn't the key factor; parenting was. Fox and Rubin found, and other researchers have since confirmed, that parenting style at age 2 predicts continuing behavioral inhibition at age 4—and, in turn, later risk of psychological problems. As Rubin put it to me: "The kids who maintain reticent behavior are the kids whose parents bubble-wrap them."

### III. SHORT-TERM GAIN, LONG-TERM PAIN

We all have dreams, and Angela and Seth's was to stop making turkey loaf.

By the time they sought help from the SPACE program's Yaara Shimshoni last year, they had served it to their then-6-year-old son, Owen, some 3,000 times. (I have changed parents' and children's names.) Put another way, virtually every day for four years—two-thirds of his life—Owen had eaten turkey loaf for both lunch and dinner. For breakfast, he favored dry Cheerios.

Calling Owen a picky eater wouldn't have captured the extent of the problem. He was terrified of most foods. On those rare occasions when he tasted something new, he would gag. Going out together as a family was a minor ordeal: Either they packed turkey loaf to take with them, or they hurried home before the next meal. Mostly, the family just stayed in. "If we ran out of it, Owen would have an absolute fit," Seth said when he and Angela spoke with me in February. Once, after a supermarket strike disrupted the local turkey supply, he spent the night driving from store to store, searching for enough meat to get through the week.

Trying to understand how two down-to-earth-sounding people had found themselves in this predicament, I asked Angela and Seth whether they had been fans of turkey loaf to begin with. Was the recipe an old family favorite? "Oh God, no," Seth

said, horrified, explaining that they'd found it on a kids'-food blog when Owen was a toddler. "Disgusting," Angela said with conviction. "It looks like prison food," Seth added. They were very clear about another thing, too: They hadn't simply found themselves in this predicament; over the course of their 12-week program with Shimshoni, they'd concluded that they'd helped create it. "Owen started off with eating issues"—he had been born prematurely and stayed in the NICU for a month because he refused to feed—"and we started getting our own anxieties" is how Seth put it. "I thought that I was doing the right thing by just keeping him happy and making him comfortable," Angela said.

As ready as Owen's parents were to take responsibility for his issues, I couldn't help but notice the role played by something else: time, and the juggling acts parents develop to compensate for the lack of it. Owen wouldn't have been fed turkey loaf 3,000 times had he and his parents been sharing meals; they wouldn't have stood for it. But, like many parents, they staggered their work schedules. Seth picked Owen up at day care and fed him dinner. He and Angela ate later, after Owen was asleep. One of the first changes Shimshoni recommended was that they begin having dinner as a family. Owen didn't have to eat everything his parents ate, but he could choose only from among the foods on the table—no substitutions. After dinner, the kitchen closed for the night. Shimshoni says her goal is not to turn a picky eater into an omnivore, but to get a kid like Owen to the point where he can find something to eat in most situations. When I spoke with Angela and Seth, Owen was several months into his post-SPACE life. He isn't an adventurous eater, but he now gets by without bringing turkey loaf everywhere.

If the instinct to protect a child leads many of us into the trap of overparenting, I've come to believe that time pressures keep us there. In conversation after conversation with parents who were struggling to reduce a child's dependency and fearfulness, rushed weekday mornings and evenings emerged as the crucible in which bad habits had formed. Eli Lebowitz makes much the same point. "One of the reasons parents accommodate is a child in distress, but another big reason is *I want to get my child to school*. That is a powerful driver too," he said: "*I have to get to work after I drop you at school*."

Ruthie Arbit, a therapist who specializes in maternal and pediatric mental health, observes that for mothers, especially, time pressure can be compounded by guilt. "When there's all the guilt that, as a working parent, I missed X, Y, Z," she told me, "it's a lot harder to follow through with an unpleasant behavioral intervention." And if you have only an hour with your child at night, you'd like it to be a pleasant one. A parent's own underlying anxiety may also come to the fore. More than once in my interviews with SPACE parents and clinicians, I found myself thinking of the program as a form of exposure therapy not just for kids but for parents: If we learn to tolerate our children's discomfort, we can stop getting in the way of their efforts to cope with it.

**THERAPISTS WHO TREAT ANXIETY** like to talk about how short-term pain leads to long-term gain—how enduring discomfort now can make you more resilient later. In recent

decades, however, the opposite principle has guided many American parents, and not only when it comes to the parenting of anxious children: On everything from toilet training to eating and sleeping habits, many of our parenting strategies trade short-term gain (a few minutes saved here, a conflict averted there) for long-term pain.

That we would cut corners in this way is maybe inevitable in a country that lacks adequate parental leave or quality, affordable child care; one in which school and employment schedules are misaligned, and in which our work culture expects employees to always be on. Add to the mix a permissive streak in American child-rearing, one that has simultaneously indulged children and encouraged their independence, and you have an extremely labor-intensive recipe for parental misery. “The accusation that American mothers coddle their children is not new,” writes the historian Paula S. Fass in her 2016 book, *The End of American Childhood*—but its recent combination with maternal employment has made for especially overburdened lives. By way of illustrating the point, she relates the contrast that Sara Harkness and Charles Super, two ethnographers, have drawn between American and Dutch parents:

American parents much more frequently emphasize individual attention, active interaction, and the developmental needs of the child ... Dutch parents put their faith in regularity of habits (rest, quiet, and cleanliness) and family time together, especially around meals ... One result of these different goals in households equally devoted to children’s welfare was that American parents were often tired and appeared frazzled. They tended to complain about their children’s sleeping habits and gave in to their demands because they were too exhausted to fight in the middle of the night.

The problem isn’t that American parents aren’t trying; if anything we’re trying *too* hard, but in ways that backfire, leaving us less time for the things that matter most. At a lab I visited at the University of Maryland, I learned about the Turtle Program, an intervention that, among other things, directs parents to set aside five minutes of “special time” each day with their behaviorally inhibited preschoolers, to be spent doing whatever the child chooses, with no directions or corrections given by parents. Parents told me how thirstily their children had drunk up this modest amount of time, so I tried it on my (non-anxious) 6-year-old. He was at first incredulous and then overjoyed. I realized, in dismay, just how divided my attention is most of the time, and how many of our interactions are dominated by my telling him to do this or not to do that, especially when I am rushing.

Changes in the way we’ve approached toilet training are a particularly dramatic example of how something that seems child-friendly can turn out to be parent-unfriendly and therefore everyone-unfriendly. As the early-childhood expert Erika Christakis notes in *The Importance of Being Little*, the age at which children are toilet trained has crept up over time. Several decades ago, 60 percent of 18-month-olds were fully trained. Studies earlier this century show only about half of American children being toilet trained by age 3, and today it’s not uncommon to

see 4-year-olds wearing Pull-Ups. Some people have attributed this to a move away from harsh, old-school training methods, but I wonder whether an equal problem isn’t parents’ lack of time. Around my daughter’s second birthday, I saw a copy of *Potty Training for Dummies* by the register at Buy Buy Baby and impulsively bought it. I might not have, had I realized that it prescribed a festive three-day boot camp mortifyingly called “Potty Mambo Weekend.” In any case, the approach worked—but in conversations, I noticed how overwhelmed some friends seemed by the idea. Who had three days to spare? And yet, as Christakis notes, “time spent changing diapers is surely worth something, too.” (Delayed potty training makes for a strange contrast with the fact that many preschools have recently become more academic. The split screen between the two things—learning to read and write, still in diapers—foreshadows the situation later on, when high-school kids shoulder intense academic pressure even as many are behind in developing life skills.)

Or consider sleep. Whichever side one takes in the wars over infant sleep-training and bed-sharing, as children grow older, it can be easy to fall into the trap of privileging one night’s sleep over long-term sleep skills. Among parents I surveyed, certain refrains emerged. “I often let my 9 year old fall asleep w/us b/c she has anxiety at night,” one mother wrote me. “The sleeping in our bed is just us wanting to go to sleep as well.” Others mentioned how different their approach was from that of their parents. “As a kid, I was terrified of the dark. I had a night-light, and that was it,” another mother observed. “I don’t think it even occurred to me to ask my parents to stay with me while I fell asleep, nor can I imagine they would have entertained it if asked.”

Of course, the more we parent this way day to day, the more time parenting consumes over the years. Understanding this cycle sheds light on a widely remarked-upon and baffling statistic: Time-use studies tell us that parents today spend significantly more hours caring for children than parents did 50 years ago, despite the fact that we work more hours outside the home. One explanation for this strange fact, as has been widely noted, is that kids today spend less time on their own. But a second, as we’ve just seen, is that parents really are doing more for their kids—and many kids are doing less for themselves.

#### IV. FAILURE TO LAUNCH

For one hint of just how much parenting style may influence a child’s anxiety level, consider the diverging paths of boys and girls.

“There is no greater risk factor for anxiety disorders than being born female,” Andrea Petersen writes in *On Edge*, her exploration of anxiety. “Women are about twice as likely as men to develop one, and women’s illnesses generally last longer, have more severe

symptoms, and are more disabling." Weirdly enough, females start off the less anxious sex; male newborns are the fussy, irritable ones. Various theories have been advanced as to why women end up more fearful and inhibited than men, but to my mind the most convincing is that, when we were kids, adults responded disparately to our fears. "When girls are anxious, adults are more likely to be protective and allow them to avoid scary situations. Boys are told to suck it up ... It is as if boys are engaged in continual exposure therapy," Petersen writes, going on to detail a damning body of research showing how parents have, through the decades, encouraged bravery and independence in boys while discouraging those traits in girls.

Maybe the way to think about recent parenting is this: All kids today are being overprotected the way only girls used to be. Except the changes in childhood are far broader than that. Even girls, after all, used to get themselves around the neighborhood and have summer jobs and chores. Today, only 10 percent of kids walk or bicycle to school, a steep decline from decades past. Forty years ago, 58 percent of teenagers got summer jobs; today, 35 percent do, and the after-school job is an even rarer species. When Braun Research surveyed more than 1,000 American adults, 82 percent said that as children they'd had regular chores—but only 28 percent said their own children did.

The problem with these declines is not that the activities in question are inherently virtuous, but that they provide children with two very important things, the first of which is experience tolerating discomfort. When I began interviewing clinicians, I was struck by how many of them talked about the importance of learning to endure emotional upset as well as physical distress and even pain. (Elisa Nebolsine, a child therapist who specializes in CBT, told me that when she meets parents, one of her first questions is: "How does your kid do being uncomfortable, being tired, being hot, being hungry?") This message was so consistent, in fact, that some of the therapists started to sound like members of a cult with a sadistic bent. But I came to understand their concern. The more I thought about it, the more I saw myself shielding my kids from even the mild discomforts of my own childhood. Unless I had a high fever as a child, I was never given an analgesic. Why was I so ready to dole out liquid Tylenol, and in a choice of flavors? Speaking of flavors, why was I buying Crest Kid's Sparkle Fun Toothpaste at a 50 percent markup over regular, I mean "spicy," toothpaste (the only kind I knew as a child)? And why was I vetting my kids' movie selections on Common Sense Media, a website that exhaustively catalogs frightening or otherwise objectionable content in children's entertainment?

Doing chores and getting oneself where one needs to go also provide another, more obvious benefit: a sense of personal competence. This may be why doing chores from age 3 or 4 onward has been found to be a very strong predictor of academic, professional, and relational success in young adulthood. Obviously many people do just fine in life without ever having a summer job or walking themselves to school. But these developments combine with the recent changes in child-rearing and technology to create a particularly toxic combination: teenagers with a deficit of life skills, a lack of practice weathering the frustrations to which that deficit may lead, and the means to retreat and distract themselves from those frustrations.

**OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS**, the age at which most kids get a smartphone has continued to tick downward. In 2015, according to a study by Common Sense Media, 32 percent of 11-year-

olds had one; last year, 53 percent did. Several factors appear to be driving this and related trends. For kids of all ages, screens are cheap and reliable babysitters (see: time famine). Some parents embrace phones because they enable tracking of kids (see: parental anxiety). Others surrender to demands for technology because they can't tolerate either their own kids' anger or peer pressure from other kids' parents. Finally, many parents have difficulty limiting their own device use, which may weaken their feeling of authority on the matter.

Again, technology is not necessarily bad for mental health, especially as kids get older; for many teens, it can be a conduit

for social support. But if you have an anxiety disorder and want to avoid things—other people, say, or the outside world—various aspects of digital life are ideally (meaning disastrously) suited to that goal. This appears to be especially true for two groups in particular. The first is young adults experiencing failure to launch—not working or attending school, and dependent on their parents. The second is those teenagers practicing "school refusal." Lebowitz's approach to both groups is multifaceted, as it must be—by the time young people get to this point, their problems tend to be pretty complicated. One key tactic is to strategically limit internet access when it seems to be making avoidance of something too comfortable—much the way he tries to limit parental accommodation. In school-refusal cases, for example, he counsels that if a kid is home during the school day, she shouldn't have access to things she wouldn't have if she were at school: TVs, phones, tablets, video games, parental attention, even recreational reading. "Books are highly entertaining, and boredom is our *ally* in this particular struggle," Lebowitz explained during the SPACE training I attended.

This was the only moment in the two-day workshop when I heard participants express skepticism—our lives were too enmeshed with tech, they suggested, and kids were too tech savvy; removing internet access, even for a school day, was a lost cause. Lebowitz held firm. If you want to, you can. TV connected to the wall? Take the cord and the remote to work. Too many devices to keep track of? Get Circle, an access controller that attaches to your router. He is hair-on-fire about this point: For vulnerable kids, on-demand internet access makes hiding out much too comfortable. “It’s almost like the internet is devised to enable these problems, because you’re not naturally bored,” he said. “You can have social stimulation without the social stress of actual people.”

Lebowitz published a small study in 2012 on his work with parents of failure-to-launch young adults and has since treated a few dozen more families, with promising results. He says one of the most gratifying parts of his work is when, years later, he gets letters from parents with updates on a son or daughter who has finally gone to college or gotten married or otherwise picked up a life that was on hold. In February, I talked with the parents of one such young adult, Andy, who is in his early 20s. When Clive and Nora started working with Lebowitz, early last year, Andy hadn’t attended school regularly in several years, due to a stew of learning issues, depression, and anxiety. He was enrolled in a private high school, though he essentially never went. They had tried, with mixed success, different therapies, but eventually he refused help. Most of the time, he stayed in his room.

Lebowitz encouraged Clive and Nora to pick a single goal—Andy finishing high school—and to focus on how their accommodations (housing Andy, feeding him, giving him a car and a phone and Wi-Fi) were helping him avoid it. Jumping back into school overnight was unrealistic, so Lebowitz advised breaking the goal into achievable steps. The first, which lasted for a few weeks, was for Andy to get himself to school every day. He didn’t have to go to class, but he did need to send his parents a selfie proving that he’d been there; if he didn’t, they would withhold internet access for 24 hours.

When Clive and Nora announced this plan, Andy said it was really stupid. But within a day or two, he was complying, and he took more small steps in the months that followed. He started dating, and even had a girlfriend for several months; today, he’s almost finished with high school. Clive and Nora’s own thinking and behavior have also shifted radically. Nora says that if she had known sooner what she knows now, she would have reacted far less to Andy’s anxiety from the beginning. “Even when he was 4 or 5, he would ask me to stay home from school, and I often accommodated that,” she said. Clive now realizes that the more he helped Andy solve problems over the years, the worse Andy’s own problem-solving skills got.

This isn’t to say that the past year has been entirely smooth; along the way Nora and Clive have repeatedly been tempted to swoop in and help. One example of this has stuck with me. When Andy skipped school for a few days, they turned off the internet, so he began using his phone’s data and soon ran out. He wanted to go see his girlfriend, but he didn’t know how to get to her house without Waze, so he started sending his parents panicked texts, asking what they expected him to do. In turn they had a crisis of

confidence. They wanted him out of the house and seeing people. Should they buy him more data? They called Lebowitz. “It’s not your problem,” he told them. “Just say, ‘We trust that you will find your way.’”

And he did.

## V. “DRAW THE EARTHQUAKE”



Parenting style is not the only thing that can fortify our kids. Sleep, exercise, and friendship all confer tremendous psychological benefits, and are within our powers to promote, both individually and societally. A morally more urgent task is to reduce poverty, instability, and deep trauma (as opposed to ordinary stress) in children’s lives; research on these adverse childhood experiences demonstrates the overwhelming risk they pose to psychological functioning. The lack of children’s mental-health care is another pressing problem: Most children who need it don’t get it, and what they do get tends not to be evidence-based care (such as CBT). Finally, if we want to create the conditions for children’s mental health, we must first create the conditions for adult sanity, in the form of more support for families. It’s been said that a society that cares about children must also care about parents. That’s undoubtedly true. It’s also been said that a parent is only as happy as her unhappiest child. That’s true too, though, again, the relationship runs both ways. The more our unhappy children worry, the more we worry about them, and the more we worry about them, the more we do the very things that lead their worries to flourish.

Of the many cutting portrayals of modern motherhood offered up by HBO’s *Big Little Lies*, the most evocative may be the episode in which Amabella, the second-grade daughter of Renata (played by Laura Dern), has a panic attack at school and passes out. A child therapist is dispatched, and reports that young Amabella is worried about the planet. “Her class is evidently talking about climate change,” the therapist explains. “She’s gotten the message that we’re doomed.” Renata is livid at the school for spilling the beans, as are other parents; a meeting is convened with the principal, who limply declares anxiety “an epidemic in our schools.” Because it is *Big Little Lies*, the particulars are over the top (Renata promises, or threatens, to “buy a fucking polar bear” for each kid), but the angst is recognizable.

When I spoke with Kathryn L. Humphreys, a psychology professor at Vanderbilt University who specializes in the effects of caregiving in early life, she observed a widespread hesitancy to talk about depressing concepts with kids. Parents seem to feel that doing so is “developmentally inappropriate,” she mused, though this strikes her as exactly backwards given what we know about the benefits of graduated exposure to things that frighten us. Humphreys listens to the news after work, and her 4-year-old daughter will often ask tough questions. She told me she understands why



people are concerned about having difficult conversations with kids, and yet, she asked, “At what age is it that you think kids *are* capable of that?” Scary things are happening all the time, and avoiding them—“We’re just gonna turn off the news!” as she put it—won’t change that. “Sometimes it’s the avoidance that makes it harder for kids who are anxious,” she added.

In my experience, this cloistering extends to everything from the Holocaust to sex. I’m surprised by how many of my friends think their fourth and fifth graders don’t know how babies are made. Meanwhile, the efforts parents make to promote belief in, for example, Santa Claus seem more fervent than ever, via tools like Elf on the Shelf and apps that supposedly show Santa’s visit to your home. One of the more revealing mommy-board threads I’ve encountered began with an irate warning titled “Super Fudge book outs Santa as fake.” More than 100 people jumped into the outraged fray that followed, all over a revelation in a classic Judy Blume novel that’s aimed at third-to-sixth graders and that came out *four decades ago*. So we find ourselves with a bizarre mishmash: Some adults think their fourth graders believe in Santa Claus and don’t know how babies are made while other adults—or maybe

some of the same adults—think fourth graders should have smartphones. In another era, the desire to keep kids in the dark might not be a problem, but it’s a strange combination with the easy access many of them now have to Pornhub and viral videos of real-life violence.

As I contemplate the likelihood that my kids’ lives will be more stressful than mine, my mind keeps wandering to two children’s drawings reproduced in the pediatrician W. Thomas Boyce’s book *The Orchid and the Dandelion: Why Some Children Struggle and How All Can Thrive*. Both depict California’s 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which killed dozens of people—and also, as chance would have it, occurred midway through a study Boyce was conducting of whether stress increased local children’s susceptibility to illness. Naturally, he and his team expanded the study to incorporate their reactions to the disaster, and they asked each child to “draw the earthquake.” The kids’ responses varied dramatically. Some produced cheerful pictures—“homes with minor damage, happy families, and smiling yellow suns”—while others generated scenes of destruction and injury, fear and sadness. To Boyce’s fascination, children who drew darker scenes tended to stay healthy in the weeks that followed, while those who drew sunny pictures were more likely to come down with infections and illnesses.

Boyce now believes it was protective for children to create “honest, even brutal depictions of a no-doubt-about-it disaster.” We talk about things that scare us, he ventures, “because it makes them gradually less scary; about sadness, because it makes the sadness diminish a little each time we do.” I am drawn to this story in part because in 1989 I was 11 years old, I lived in the Bay Area, and I was deeply, morbidly fascinated by the earthquake and its human toll. But I am also attracted to it because its moral is at odds with the way adults so often try to shield children from difficult topics. In fact, it sometimes seems that the more overwhelming the world gets, the more adults try to blindfold children.

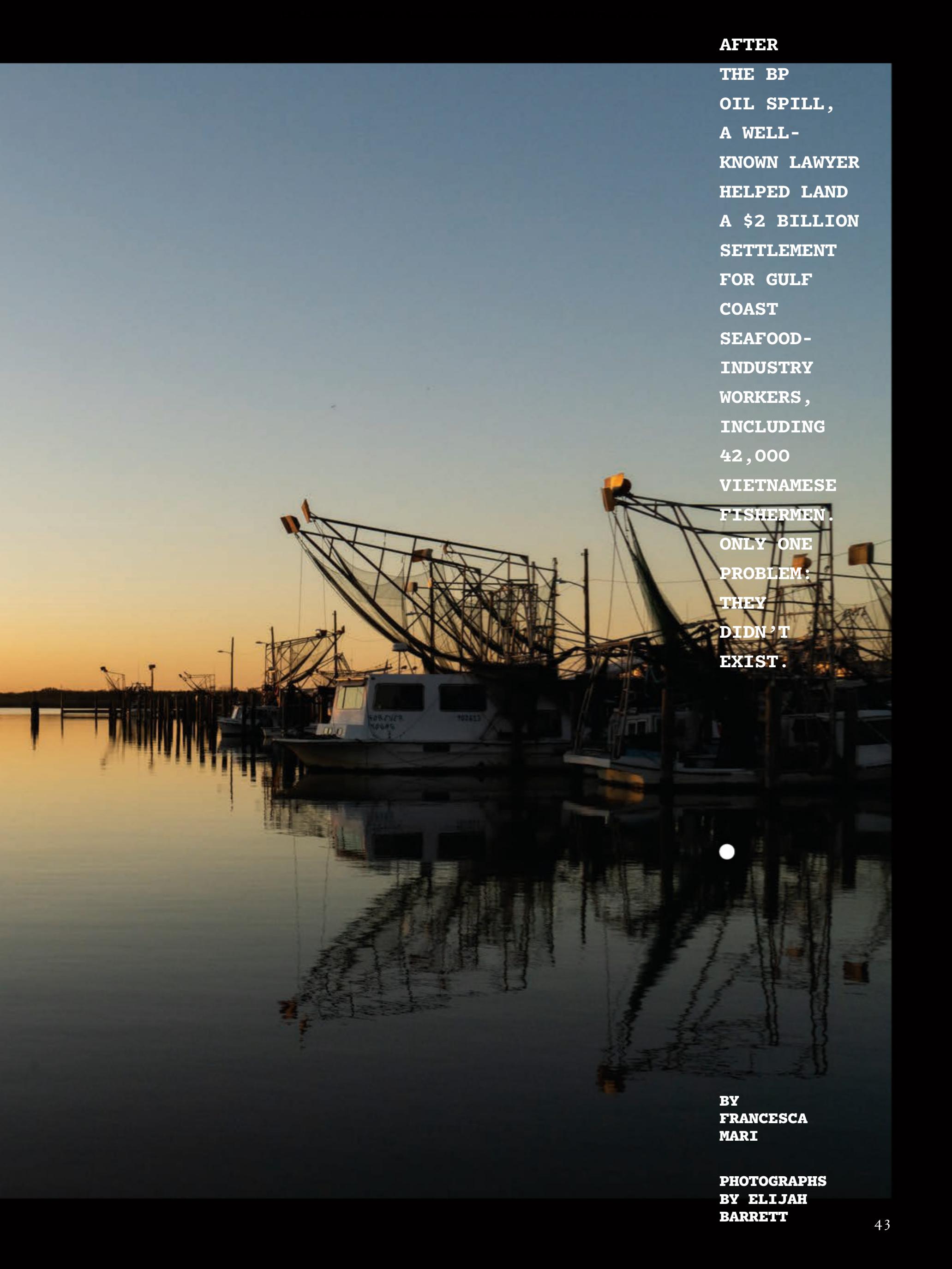
In the end, one lesson we might derive from everything scientists and clinicians have learned about anxiety is this: If we want to prepare our kids for difficult times, we should let them fail at things now, and allow them to encounter obstacles and to talk candidly about worrisome topics. To be very clear, this is not a cure-all for mental illness. What we need to recognize, though, is that our current approach to childhood doesn’t reduce basic human vulnerabilities. It exacerbates them. *A*

*Kate Julian is a senior editor at The Atlantic.*

# THE SHARK



# AND THE SHRIMPERS



AFTER  
THE BP  
OIL SPILL,  
A WELL-  
KNOWN LAWYER  
HELPED LAND  
A \$2 BILLION  
SETTLEMENT  
FOR GULF  
COAST  
SEAFOOD-  
INDUSTRY  
WORKERS,  
INCLUDING  
42,000  
VIETNAMESE  
FISHERMEN.  
ONLY ONE  
PROBLEM:  
THEY  
DIDN'T  
EXIST.

BY  
FRANCESCA  
MARI

PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY ELIJAH  
BARRETT





In 2010, Dung Nguyen, a 39-year-old Vietnamese fisherman living in Dickinson, Texas, decided to take his boat out early in the season. Peak shrimping in Texas's Galveston Bay wouldn't begin until mid-August, but Nguyen was saving to send his three children to college, so in April, he began heading out for four or five days at a time. Nguyen was accustomed to long days; he had come to America as a refugee in 1992 and had saved for years to buy his first boat. That season, the waters were calm and the catch was good; when he wasn't harvesting shrimp, Nguyen lay on his cot watching Vietnamese soap operas. Then, on April 20, a friend radioed him: The Coast Guard was calling everyone back to shore. Deepwater Horizon, a BP oil rig 40 miles off the coast of Louisiana, had exploded. Nguyen was far from the flames and the oil. As he traveled home, he saw only an endless expanse of night and a sliver of moon. But when he reached the dock at three in the morning, the Coast Guard forced him to dump his catch. The three evenings he'd spent at sea, and the thousands of dollars he'd laid out for diesel, had been a waste.

In the days that followed, Nguyen watched the news anxiously. He saw aerial shots of crude oil coating the waters and heard one ominous number after another: the days the well had been hemorrhaging oil, the gallons that had bled into the Gulf of Mexico. On day 13, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration closed 6,814 square miles of the Gulf's water to fishing (and would eventually shut down 73,000 more). On day 60, Nguyen knew that the season, and probably the industry, was ruined. The spill was a major story across the country, and even if Nguyen could catch shrimp that passed safety inspections, no one would buy it.

The Deepwater Horizon well spewed oil for 87 days; it was one of the largest environmental disasters in American history. The Gulf's oyster beds were wiped out, as were 100,000 birds, many of whom died from consuming oil as they fed or preened.

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**Opening spread:** Buras Boat Harbor, in Buras, Louisiana. **Opposite page, top right:** Dung Nguyen on his boat in San Leon, Texas. His fellow shrimpers work out of harbors in Buras and Venice, Louisiana.

The region was already one of the nation's poorest, and its three major industries—seafood, tourism, and oil and gas—were ravaged. Scientists were uncertain how long the environment would need to recover, and residents didn't know what to expect or how to cope—whether to wait for the cleanup or find another job; whether to eat their catch or throw it out; whether to teach their children to fish or sell their boats. Many of the unemployed, unable to qualify for loans, turned to payday lenders. Tensions festered and flared. That spring and summer, calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline from Louisiana rose by 21 percent.

In the seafood industry, no one was hit harder than the Vietnamese, who account for up to half of its workforce on the Gulf Coast. Many had come to America as refugees after the fall of Saigon. Shrimpers in their homeland, they sought the familiar climate of the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Within weeks of the Deepwater explosion, the community got good news: Mikal Watts, a powerful plaintiff's attorney known for electrifying juries on behalf of the “little guy,” decided to represent the Vietnamese fishermen against BP. A high-school debate-team wunderkind, he had graduated from the University of Texas School of Law at 21 and started his own firm by the time he was 30. He'd become a multimillionaire, winning high-profile cases against Ford and Firestone for manufacturing defects that led to exploding tires, and against the makers of a diabetes drug that destroyed the liver.

A sturdy egg of a man in his early 40s with a hawkish nose and a shiny dome, Watts considered the suit against BP clear-cut. “BP was a three-time felon,” he told me. “It pled guilty to a felony in 1999 from a spill in Alaska. It pled guilty to killing 15 people in Texas City in 2005. It was still on probation for that.” Many plaintiff's attorneys believed that a settlement over the explosion could rival the landmark \$246 billion paid out by tobacco companies to state governments in the late '90s.

Watts hooked up with a South Texan named Eloy Guerra, who made a living pitching potential mass torts to lawyers, as well as recruiting plaintiffs for the cases. Several years earlier, Watts had worked with Guerra (who declined to comment for this story) to go after the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the formaldehyde in the trailers used as housing after Hurricane Katrina. “People were gassed, in effect, with the high humidity of the Gulf Coast,” Watts said of the case, which was settled for \$42.6 million.

It was Guerra's idea, according to Watts, to seek out seafood workers harmed by the oil. “We are going to get you 5,000 to 7,000 clients,” Guerra emailed Watts in May 2010. “We are going to need \$900,000.” Later Guerra emailed, “I will get you 20,000 claims if you want them.” Watts did. He upped his investment to \$5 million for 20,000 plaintiffs, then \$10 million for 40,000. And in August, Watts announced the haul. He was representing 40,000 fishermen, nearly all of them Vietnamese. More than 300 legal actions were already pending against BP and other companies implicated in the spill: fines for environmental destruction; claims for lost income and property damage filed by tour-guide operators, hotel workers, and coastal homeowners. As has been the practice since the '70s and '80s, when asbestos and breast-implant mass-injury torts were inundating the courts, nearly all civil matters related to Deepwater Horizon were consolidated into one giant proceeding,

called a multidistrict litigation. MDL 2179 was assigned to a federal district judge named Carl Barbier, in New Orleans.

One of Barbier's first tasks was to appoint a small cadre of lawyers to the Plaintiffs' Steering Committee to litigate on behalf of all the claimants. These were coveted slots, conferring prestige, influence, and almost certainly extra money. While Watts and the other plaintiffs' attorneys were poised to rake in substantial sums in contingency fees if their cases succeeded, steering-committee members could also bill for their work establishing BP and its subcontractors' culpability for the whole mess. More than 100 lawyers applied for the committee; Watts, who had more clients than any other attorney, was one of the 15 selected.

Nearly two years later, in March 2012, the Plaintiffs' Steering Committee settled with the oil company and created a \$2.3 billion fund solely for seafood workers, including oyster shuckers, crab pickers, and Watts's captains and deckhands—who accounted for three-quarters of all the seafood claimants. That meant something like \$1.3 billion was headed to Watts's clients—an average of \$32,000 per person, if the money was divided equally, which wasn't likely—and \$400 million in contingency fees for him and his investors.

There was one problem, however: His fishermen didn't exist.

A STRANGE INDUSTRY has grown up around mass torts, consisting of middlemen who bring potential suits to big-deal lawyers, contractors who do the legwork of finding clients, and investors who help pay the expenses in return for a portion of the award from any victory. This last element—a form of legal financing called third-party litigation funding—proliferated during the 2008

one or, as in the arrangement Watts and his partners put together, take a cut of the contingency fee for an individual matter. Third-party litigation funding levels the playing field for people who can't afford to sue on their own—and thus is a tool to help hold corporations accountable. But the imperative to keep investors happy can prompt decisions that have little to do with "making whole" those who have been harmed.

Among Watts's investors was his friend and fellow plaintiff's attorney Robert Hilliard, who brought in a wealthy Corpus Christi businessman named Max Duncan to cover his approximately \$6 million stake. John Cracken, a Dallas plaintiff's lawyer who'd won numerous hefty settlements (such as \$8.2 million from Taco Bell for the families of four people killed during a restaurant robbery), kicked in another \$2 million. And Watts made his own \$3 million contribution.

One of the surest paths to a handsome profit for a mass tort is for it to be, well, massive. Which is why, these days, after disasters like Deepwater Horizon and the California wildfires, lawyers and their recruitment troops descend en masse, vying for clients. One by one, injured parties have to be found and educated about the lawsuit, and proof of their damages established through tax forms and other documents.

To represent as many clients as possible, as quickly as possible, Watts and his fellow investors relied on an army of field-workers who spread out along the coast—and it was in this messy and time-consuming process that the case went awry. According to Watts's version of events, by the time he began to realize the scope of the problem, he was in too deep to get out.

**RIGHT AFTER THE SPILL**, the BP-funded Gulf Coast Claims Facility opened 36 offices that initially issued small emergency payments to seafood workers and others harmed by the oil. Nguyen got one check for \$5,000 and another for about double that. At that point, in exchange for agreeing never to sue BP, he was eligible for a final check based on two years' estimated earnings. Or he could forgo the quick cash and join the mass tort in hopes of eventually getting more. (BP declined to comment on any aspect of this story.)

Nguyen decided to go with the sure money—he was his family's sole breadwinner and had virtually no savings. To file the paperwork, he hired a lawyer from Houston who 10 years earlier had helped him and his fellow fishermen protest state wildlife regulations that threatened to put them out of business. Tammy Tran, or "Auntie Tammy," had fled Vietnam with her infant son during the fall of Saigon, and her family's U.S. citizenship had been sponsored by a military captain who lived in San Antonio, Texas. Inspired by reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tran told me she enrolled in the University of Texas School of Law in 1982 and became the first Vietnamese American to graduate. In class, she was scared to ask questions, until her professor—future Senator Elizabeth Warren—encouraged her. "If you don't understand, trust me, 80 percent of them don't understand," Tran recalls Warren telling her.

After graduation, Tran was hired by the premier law firm Fulbright & Jaworski. "Every night, I carried my son to the office," Tran

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recession, in part because lawsuits are somewhat insulated from the vicissitudes of the market. Investors might spread their money across a portfolio of cases to limit their vulnerability on any single



Mikal Watts in his office  
in San Antonio, Texas

told me. “A normal lawyer writes, like, five drafts. I have to write a hundred drafts to make it good.” In 1997, she opened her own firm to represent Vietnamese Americans, who, Tran told me, are reluctant to speak up for themselves. “My people are very sweet,” she said. “We’re so polite.”

When Tran filed for the third payment for Nguyen, in September 2011, a claims administrator told her that he wasn’t eligible: He was already a client of Mikal Watts. This came as a surprise to Nguyen, who’d never heard of Watts, but not to Tran. Dozens of others had already come to her in a similar predicament; eventually, she would represent 439 people who’d been claimed as clients of Watts’s without their knowledge. She was convinced that the wealthy lawyers were targeting her clients because they were Vietnamese. “They think we are stupid,” she said. “They think we don’t fight!” Determined to disprove this, Tran began building a class-action suit against Watts for identity theft. Eighteen parties, including Nguyen, signed on.

**WATTS LIKES TO TELL A STORY** about the moment he realized his mass tort might be in serious trouble. It was October 2010, and he was drinking with his buddy and idol Joe Jamail, once the wealthiest plaintiff’s lawyer in the country, known as the “King of Torts.” Unprompted, Jamail brought up Deepwater Horizon. “And I’m all excited,” Watts told me, “thinking I’m sitting on the next billion-dollar thing. And Jamail says, ‘Oh, I’d never represent them damn shrimpers. Not a one of ’em got a tax return!’

I said, ‘What do you mean, Joe?’” Jamail asked Watts if he remembered a Gulf oil spill in 1979. Indeed he did. Watts had been a kid then, and “literally every day, we’d go out swimming and come back with tar on our feet. Mom would get ticked off because we hadn’t brushed ’em off with the scrubber and the gasoline.” “Somebody tried to give me 2,000 of those cases back in the ’80s,” Jamail said, “and there wasn’t no proof of damage, ’cause none of ’em paid taxes!” *Oh shit*, Watts thought, as an “incredible sinking feeling” came over him.

In reality, Watts already knew by then that he had a big problem, and not because of anybody’s taxpaying behavior. To lead the client-conscription effort, Eloy Guerra had enlisted his partner, Greg Warren, who in turn tapped Kristy Le, a young woman who spoke Vietnamese and had worked with him on the FEMA case. The team traveled the Gulf Coast, tasked with hosting town halls for Vietnamese fishermen where they’d tout Watts’s record and explain the mechanics of joining the mass tort. Le, who had once run a Vietnamese-language video store, hired more than 100 field-workers to gather questionnaires from prospective clients, for \$10 to \$50 each. They knocked on doors and hung out at the docks; they scouted Catholic churches, grocery stores, and other places where Vietnamese people congregated. To compile their information for the law firm, Le hired another half-dozen people, who worked around the clock in an office in D’Iberville, Mississippi.

Despite all the frenzied activity, Watts discovered a month before his conversation with Jamail that the field-workers had barely any documentation of damages for the people they’d entered into the database. To address the issue, he invited some 20 people involved in the case—among them Hilliard, Warren, and Le—to convene for a meeting at a fancy New Orleans hotel. Le told the group that her crew was overwhelmed with data entry and that locating the fishermen who’d filled out initial client forms had been difficult, because so many of them spent the off-season in Vietnam. Watts didn’t doubt the explanation, because in the FEMA case almost all of the 30,000 clients Warren and Le had procured had been the real thing. At night’s end, Watts decided to send the office more computers and to outfit the field-workers with cameras and scanners to make record collection easier: The workers could photograph fishing licenses, ID cards, and tax returns, then just hit Send.

By November, however, there hadn’t been much progress, and Watts and company weren’t the only ones who knew it. The lawyer the Obama administration named as BP’s claims point person, Kenneth Feinberg—who, starting after 9/11, has carved out a niche for himself as the czar of high-profile victims’ funds—let it be known that he seriously doubted there were 40,000 Vietnamese fishermen living on the Gulf Coast, never mind 40,000 harmed by the spill. He requested “confirmation and authorization” from each client who’d retained Watts.

Within a week, the firm sent “fact packets” for 22,533 people. Seven weeks later, it sent 17,469 more. Watts and his investors

knew the fact packets were flimsy at best. In late December, John Cracken had traveled to Mississippi to investigate the situation, and on the way home he'd emailed his partners: "We don't have 41K 'clients'; we have a list of 41K names." (The exact number of clients cited by the investors varied, but was never less than 40,000.) Kristy Le had no more than 15 complete packets, Cracken reported. The list included unreliable birth dates and Social Security numbers; invalid telephone numbers and street addresses; and a number of names that seemed to have been copied directly from the phone book. Cracken, in collaboration with Harvard- and Wharton-educated consultants, estimated that fixing the list would cost a minimum of \$22 million, which was double what the investors had already put in. While Cracken and Watts were willing to keep the money flowing, Bob Hilliard had had it. "Clearly the 40k clients are ghosts in the wind," he wrote in an email, later following up with: "Mikal, you know I say this with love in my heart so hear me out on this, this is either a super-secret plan for a billion-dollar success ... [or] a 'king has no clothes' cluster fuck that needs to be dealt with, openly, quickly and effectively." (Neither Hilliard nor Max Duncan, his investment partner, answered questions for this story.)

In March, an employee from Watts's firm emailed him and Cracken to inform them that one of their purported clients had died prior to the spill. Watts replied, "Another fine example of the shit we paid for; dead 5 years ago." Cracken replied: "Mikal, Fraud."

Still, by April 2011, Watts had filed more than 40,000 short-form claims in the multidistrict litigation. The same month, *The New York Times* ran a story featuring two Vietnamese residents of New Orleans who were included on Watts's client list despite not having been harmed by the spill, much less agreeing to join the suit. That prompted the Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board to open an investigation into the case, but Watts pressed on. He told me he considered dropping the clients he couldn't verify, but decided it was too legally risky—for *him*. Because of legal rules, anyone he dropped would be barred from joining another settlement or mass tort and, if they did have a real claim, might sue him as a result. "I would have had 10,000 malpractice lawsuits against me," Watts said. "You've heard doctors talk about practicing defensive medicine. We were very much practicing defensive law."

Meanwhile, Watts and the steering committee were still very much playing offense with BP. He argued that BP should issue a settlement *before* he produced paperwork proving damages. Otherwise, the committee would be forced to take the company to trial, where it would be on the hook for more money than a settlement would likely cost. Getting the usual records would be largely impossible, Watts contended: These fishermen do not speak English, depend on a shadow economy, and travel back and forth to Vietnam. (Leaders of the local Vietnamese community dispute this characterization.)

When BP agreed to settle, in March 2012, creating the Seafood Compensation Fund, Watts wrote to his partners: "Importantly, BP pays the \$2.3 [billion] whether the proof supports it or not. It does not ... Hope this makes everyone feel better about our eggshell plaintiff docket. To quote Monte [sic] Python, 'It's merely a flesh wound; I'm not dead yet!'"

The next day, the effort to get documentation for their apparent clients began anew—Watts and his fellow investors seemed to believe that now that BP had committed more than \$2 billion for seafood plaintiffs, fishermen would rush to fill out paperwork. To determine how many people on the list were eligible, the firm sent out self-addressed, postage-prepaid postcards, inviting recipients to review and correct their information and drop the card back in the mail. "If a nice % send back their post card, we'll be pleasantly surprised," Cracken emailed. "We'll begin a shock and awe campaign of love and affection to keep them in fold until the claims process shakes out."

The firm sent 422,000 pieces of mail, made 58,000 phone calls, and executed 372,000 robocalls to confirm clients on their list—to less-than-resounding success. "We had an entire wall stacked with boxes of returned mail," Kayleigh Stone, then a project manager at Watts's firm, would later say. "Thousands upon thousands of pieces of mail were coming back undeliverable every week." Another employee of the firm, Crystal Cox, said that the office phone operators received numerous calls from confused people saying they hadn't signed up for the case.

Watts pushed ahead anyway. In January 2013, six days before the deadline to finalize claims for the Seafood Compensation Fund, he supplied BP with presentment forms on behalf of 42,000 people. Meanwhile, as a lawyer on the steering committee, he billed nearly \$17 million for his firm's work on the case.

A month later, scores of federal agents raided his San Antonio office, searching computers and questioning employees. He was asked to step down from the Plaintiffs' Steering Committee, and in December 2013, BP sued Watts for inflating the cost of the settlement by fraudulently claiming clients.

Nearly two years later, in September 2015, the government indicted Mikal Watts and two employees of his firm—his brother David and an office administrator named Wynter Lee—for being part of a conspiracy to submit fake names to BP. Also charged were Eloy Guerra, Greg Warren, Kristy Le, and Abbie Nguyen, Le's sister-in-law and a part-time office worker. (Conspicuously missing from the list of defendants were John Cracken and Bob Hilliard, who were cooperating with the government.) The news of the indictment made headlines, and the brazenness of the alleged scam was astonishing. Though Watts later told me he'd dropped 500 names from his client list, it still featured 7,000 made-up Social Security numbers and 15,000 stolen ones. On the roster of "deckhands," there was a casino employee, a cosmetologist, a librarian, a soldier fighting in Afghanistan, a Buddhist monk, a Catholic priest, 240 people who'd died before the spill—and one dead dog named Lucy Lu.

**DAYS BEFORE THE START** of *USA v. Watts et al.*, in July 2016, I met Tammy Tran at her Houston office, in a strip mall with blacked-out windows and American-flag bunting. Inside, row upon row of Vietnamese American lawyers and paralegals sat in leather executive chairs in front of computers. Tran told me that about a year after the federal raid, she filed the civil suit she'd been assembling against Watts based on some of the same offenses that were later included in the criminal case.

Tran led me through her offices, which might best be described as strip-mall rococo—pink walls, marble floors, gold chandeliers, and a ceiling painted with roses. “It’s a bit girly,” she said, “but I like it.” In the conference room, Dung Nguyen and another of Tran’s clients were drinking coffee and bubble tea while awaiting my arrival.

Nguyen told me that before 2010, he could catch 1,000 pounds of shrimp a day in Galveston Bay, compared with 200 to 500 pounds in 2016. After the spill, wholesalers began importing increasing quantities of shrimp from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand, some of it processed by enslaved laborers. Many in the seafood industry were hired by BP to help with the cleanup, but afterward, when fishing restrictions were lifted, consumers were scared to eat shrimp from waters so recently rich with oil and dispersant. And just when the stigma was beginning to fade, epic floods in 2016 spoiled another season. To make matters worse for Nguyen, he was still waiting for his final check from BP, six years after the explosion.

In the run-up to the criminal trial, Tran had also sued the unindicted “co-conspirators,” Cracken and Hilliard. Her complaint

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accused the two of harboring “an arrogant presumption” that the Vietnamese fishermen whose identities were allegedly stolen would be scared of challenging fancy lawyers: “Little did they know that the Vietnamese are fighters to their very bones.” Tran was asking for millions of dollars to compensate the plaintiffs for the financial harm they’d suffered while waiting for the delayed BP payments, as well as for punitive damages. She alleged that the federal agents investigating the identity theft had traumatized her clients, who had “nightmarish memories” of Vietnam’s Communist regime.

As part of the discovery for her case, Tran had received 4,000 emails exchanged by Watts and his investors. She’d read them all over a long weekend, she told me, pausing only to pray and eat; friends brought her watermelon slices and bowls of cherries. A high

point, she said, was when she found Watts’s email quoting Monty Python. “I said, ‘Oh my God, oh my God, this is better than anything else in the world.’” She slid down in her chair and let her legs dangle over the armrest. “It’s better than sex!” This is how the “big boys” work, she told me later. “That’s American justice.”

**THE CRIMINAL TRIAL** against Watts and his colleagues began on July 18, 2016, in Gulfport, Mississippi. Tran was forbidden from observing the proceedings, because the government planned to call her as a witness. She’d hoped that thousands of Vietnamese Americans would bus to the trial to lend support, but that didn’t happen. Instead, she was left standing outside the federal courtroom with a small clutch of fishermen’s wives dressed in black.

For at least eight months, 18 employees of Watts’s firm had been preparing for the case, and they’d transferred the whole operation to a hotel near the courthouse. In a conference room decorated with giant silver helium balloons spelling out INNOCENT, Watts’s trial team researched government witnesses, prepared evidence for cross-examinations, and analyzed the transcripts from the previous day. Some members stayed up after Watts went to bed at midnight and updated him when he returned at four in the morning. His private jet was on call to ferry friends, consultants, and witnesses between Texas and Mississippi. The final tab for the defense, Watts told me, was more than \$10 million.

The government’s theory was that Watts had engineered the massive client list to secure a spot on the Plaintiffs’ Steering Committee—for which his firm would pocket \$17 million—or at the very least that he’d known the list was full of falsehoods when he submitted it. The case was built on the cache of investors’ emails; on the testimony of numerous Vietnamese Americans who would tell the court that they’d had their identity stolen; and on the fact that of Watts’s clients, only 786 had provided the firm with two forms of identification and specific instructions to file—and of those, just four were eligible for compensation. An assistant U.S. attorney named John Dowdy spent two and a half years building the case, but just two months before the trial was scheduled to begin, he suddenly left his job without explanation (and later said he retired to work his farm). Dowdy’s co-counsel Jerry Rushing took over.

Watts opted to represent himself, despite never having argued a criminal case in his life—a move that shocked his colleagues. “The whole world thinks I’m being a fool, but I look at things analytically,” he told me, leaning back and cracking open a Miller Lite (which he keeps on supply in his offices and his jet, though not his 8,000-square-foot San Antonio mansion—his wife forbids it, he said). “I didn’t think it was a good visual for me to be sitting in the chair looking like a guilty man while everybody’s firing missiles at me for five weeks before I come testify for three hours and try to undo it. Now they see me arguing and fighting for myself every day.” Watts had studied this pro se strategy, even focus-grouped it, he said, to positive results. Watts thought jurors would be impressed with what a fabulous lawyer he was—so good that he would have been picked for the steering committee even *without* a raft of clients to his name.

Watts’s defense was evident as early as jury selection. “Has anyone been ripped off?” he asked each of the prospective jurors. He



**Shrimpers in Venice, Louisiana**

chatted jovially about online credit-card theft. “I’ve been at a breakfast in Texas and find out I’m buying stuff in Florida,” he joked. “Has that happened to you?”

No matter what the emails said, no matter that the firm ended up having only four actual clients, Watts and his firm had been deceived. They were the victims of Kristy Le and Greg Warren. The optics in the courtroom helped feed the narrative, with a racial twist. At the front defense table sat Mikal and David Watts; Wynter Lee, the office administrator, who is white; and the fair-skinned Guerra, represented by an all-white defense team. At the back table: Le; Abbie Nguyen; Warren, who is African American; and a trio of public defenders.

“I’m sure the front table would love to push Guerra to the back,” speculated a Mississippi attorney who told me he was being paid to observe the proceedings for Cracken. “This is Mississippi,” the lawyer continued. Without Guerra, “you’d have … the three whites at the front table and the other people at the back … At some point, the front table is gonna turn on the back table and shoot a double-barrel shotgun.” (Cracken strongly denied having

paid anyone to attend the trial, as did the lawyer himself when asked about it later.)

The lawyer’s prediction basically came true. Working in tandem, Watts and his brother’s lawyer, Michael McCrum, mounted a case against their co-defendants. They portrayed Watts as a legal warrior fighting for “real people, real lives,” while downplaying the fact that they’d noticed red flags in their client list nearly from the get-go. They regaled the jury with what they claimed were the lavish expenditures and personal dramas of the client-recruiters.

Of the more than \$10 million that Watts and his investors had fronted to collect plaintiffs, only an estimated \$2.3 million was spent on that effort, McCrum told the jury in his opening statement. For starters, Guerra took \$3.6 million, and left Warren to oversee the operations. Warren paid himself \$5.7 million, and, McCrum asserted, spent \$2,500 of it on cigars, \$3,000 at salons and spas, and \$77,000 on clothes. McCrum detailed how Warren frequented gentleman’s clubs and bought a new Audi, projecting stock photos of cars and establishments with names like Treasures on a large screen for the jury. As for Kristy Le, she shared

a \$1.4 million account with Abbie Nguyen, from which they paid themselves and the field-workers. Le made comparatively little, but McCrum nonetheless enumerated her “unauthorized” expenditures: purchases at Gucci, Burberry, and Victoria’s Secret, as well as stays at hotels like the Ritz-Carlton and the St. Regis.

The prosecution didn’t contest (or affirm) McCrum’s story about the diversion of money for personal use, because the government’s case wasn’t about that—it was about how Watts and the six other defendants together had knowingly deceived BP and the court. As the trial wore on, the parties tended to blame one another, leaving Watts at the top largely unscathed. At the bottom of the hierarchy was Kristy Le, whose lawyer laid into Warren for taking the bulk of the money and not assisting her when it was clear that the field-workers were taking advantage of her. Instead of admitting that they were coming up dry, they just kept feeding Le names for \$10, \$20, \$50 a pop.

One of the more outlandish moments of the proceeding came when the government called to the stand a New Orleans private investigator turned Kentucky real-estate agent named Ryan Willis. Visibly nervous on the stand, Willis told the court that Cracken had hired him to track down the two bad clients in New Orleans who’d triggered the Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board investigation. Unbeknownst to Willis, Cracken wanted them to sign affidavits to make the problem with the disciplinary board go away. (The Louisiana regulators didn’t take action themselves but instead, according to Watts, passed on their information to the feds.) And, Willis testified, that wasn’t the first time he’d been contacted by someone on the BP case. Le had sought his services, too: Would he find out if Warren, whom she’d been dating, was cheating on her? Willis surveilled him for a day or two but didn’t manage to find any evidence of that. (Warren, a husband and father, would later deny having a relationship with Le; Le herself also denies this, according to her lawyer.)

More germane to the criminal case, Willis provided an important clue about where the information in the fake client list had come from. He testified that Le had paid him \$480,000 to use databases available to private investigators—which can include addresses, phone numbers, Social Security numbers—to convert incomplete questionnaires into clients. Willis had agreed to testify for the government, but he told me later that before the trial he’d tried to hide out from Watts’s people, who presumably wanted to subpoena him in case the prosecutors withdrew him as a witness. Strange men stole his mother’s garbage, Willis said; strange cars trailed him for weeks. Or, as Watts bemoaned to the judge: “It took me three and a half weeks to get [Willis] served, chasing through the woods at 70 miles an hour.”

One of the government’s most eagerly awaited witnesses was John Cracken, who took the stand to flesh out the story told by the emails: how, because Watts was consumed with his work on the Plaintiffs’ Steering Committee, Cracken had taken it upon himself to investigate the list; how he’d visited Kristy Le and discovered the virtually worthless client packets; and so on.

When the prosecution wrapped, Watts got his shot with Cracken, and led his fellow investor through the defense’s version of the case. Yes, there had been a fraud, but it had been perpetrated

by Warren and Le alone. The emails that the government used to suggest that Watts and his brother were aware of the scam and nonetheless barreled on—those were taken out of context. The Monty Python quote, for example, was a metaphor for a lawyer who, despite endless obstacles, refuses to quit on his clients.

When Watts asked Cracken whether an experienced mass-tort lawyer like himself would have any financial incentive to file suit for 40,000 people he knew didn’t exist, Cracken replied, “It’s like exposing yourself to Ebola. It’s just ridiculous.”

By the end of the third week of the trial, the case was looking so good that a small posse from Watts’s legal team went to New Orleans for the weekend, celebrating with hurricanes at Pat O’Brien’s. A few days later, the prosecution rested. Tammy Tran was never called as a witness, perhaps because she wasn’t needed, or because the prosecutors never seriously considered using her in the first place and just put her on the witness list to keep her—and any distraction she might cause—out of the courtroom. Watts felt so sanguine that he called only 25 of the 165 people on his witness list and finished his case after three days.

The jury took just four hours to reach a verdict. The Watts brothers, Eloy Guerra, Wynter Lee, and Abbie Nguyen were found not guilty on each of 66 counts; Greg Warren and Kristy Le were found guilty on all of them. Le went from biting her lips to heaving as one “guilty” after another was read out. Watts “needed a scapegoat,” Le’s public defender had told the court during his closing argument. “They wanted the little girl … that rented videos so they could blame her.” She was sentenced to seven years in prison, and Warren to 17. (He is still appealing the verdict.)

A film crew Watts had hired was waiting outside the courthouse with cameras. “The jury got it right,” Watts told a small crowd. “Justice has been served.”

**“I’M REALLY DOWN,”** Tran told me after the verdict. “Everybody believes that this is the O. J. Simpson case.” In other words, Watts may not have been convicted of criminal charges, but Tran was determined to get justice in civil court. And she had a new strategy: She’d use the very argument that Watts had used to get himself acquitted. “He blamed the runners!” Tran told me. “You *cannot have* runners!” Hiring runners—*independent* field-workers who do not have a license to practice law—to solicit clients is illegal in Texas. It’s called barratry, or, colloquially, “ambulance chasing,” and each victim of the practice could recover up to \$10,000 in penalties.

After Watts’s trial, and six years after the spill, BP at last issued Dung Nguyen’s final payment. Tran counseled him not to disclose how much he received, because of her pending litigation, but from the outside at least, the money doesn’t appear to have changed his life. These days, he is still trawling the Gulf, his earnings ever fluctuating along with the price of fuel and shrimp—and currently plummeting because of the coronavirus pandemic’s impact on the economy. Nguyen had covered the cost of an associate’s degree for his eldest child, he said, but couldn’t afford to send his two younger kids to college.

Tran withdrew her federal suit against Watts for identity theft, but filed another one in state court, along with the barratry claim

against him and Hilliard, both of whom deny any wrongdoing. Those two cases were dismissed, but Tran is appealing. (She settled the barbary suit with Cracken and Max Duncan.)

After the criminal court declared him not guilty, Watts took a week off and then set about rebuilding his firm. He now represents 2,500 clients suing the electronic-cigarette maker Juul for marketing to minors, and is part of the executive committee bringing a multidistrict litigation against Purdue Pharma on behalf of several counties in Texas aiming to recover costs

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associated with the opioid crisis. In December 2019, he settled with the California power company PG&E on behalf of 4,500 victims of the 2017 Tubbs Fire and 13,500 victims of the Camp Fire a year later. And in mid-March, he sued Princess Cruise Lines for its “lackadaisical approach” toward the safety of its passengers quarantined aboard a ship off the California coast as a result of COVID-19. Watts told me he’s taking more precautions as he builds his client bases, overseeing the intake himself in weekly meetings, requiring everyone to present a photo ID, and, most important, only hiring field staff and surrogates with “honest reputations,” including one Erin Brockovich.

BP dropped its suit against him, and ultimately paid more than \$60 billion related to the Deepwater Horizon spill. As for the \$2 billion-plus Seafood Compensation Fund, it’s all been distributed, to some 5,000 parties. The largest sums, according to Sandy Nguyen, the executive director of a nonprofit group that assisted fishermen at no cost, went to people like the owners of marshland where oysters had been harvested; the smallest amounts went to people like part-time deckhands. In part because BP would not comment on anything for this story, it’s impossible to know why there wasn’t a lot of money left over from

the seafood settlement, considering that three-fourths of those for whom it was intended turned out to be imaginary. When I mentioned to Watts that somehow \$2.3 billion had ended up being the right figure, he snapped, “Of course it was. They had already discounted my clients. They didn’t believe they existed. They had a solid count of how many people were fishing in the Gulf, and it turned out they were right.”

It’s hard to escape the suspicion that this was all a big game in which powerful entities moved money around and ended up enriching themselves, or at least not losing too much. That doesn’t surprise the Yale Law School professor emeritus Peter Schuck, the author of *Agent Orange on Trial: Mass Toxic Disasters in the Courts*. While they can empower the so-called little guy to go after corporate wrongdoers, mass torts are vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation, he argues. Even when everything’s on the up-and-up, they’re “an extremely inefficient way of compensating victims,” Schuck told me. They take a long time to litigate, have high transaction costs (up to 40 percent of the total outlay, according to Schuck), and can lead to unpredictable rewards. “Where liability is clear and can be established without a lengthy trial, there is no question in my mind that administrative compensation is a better way to go,” he said. That’s what the Gulf Coast Claims Facility was set up to deliver, and I asked Schuck whether there was any reason to pursue a mass tort in a case like this. His answer: The lawyers want the big payouts.

Watts has become an advocate of legal reform, though not tort reform. After watching *Making a Murderer*, the Netflix documentary about a Wisconsin man who spent 18 years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of rape, Watts hired a producer to turn his own story into a documentary series. The crew that filmed his victory celebration outside the courthouse had also shot footage in the hotel war room during the trial.

In a talk before the Texas Criminal Defense Lawyers Association, Watts, despite his exoneration and despite never having spent a moment behind bars, likened himself to Michael Morton, who was wrongfully convicted of killing his wife and served 24 years in prison, and Hannah Overton, who served seven years before being exonerated for the murder of her 4-year-old foster son. “I didn’t give two shits about the criminal-justice system before this happened,” Watts told me. “But I am morally outraged by what I’ve learned.”

“There’s a 92 percent conviction rate in federal criminal trials,” Watts went on, attributing the high figure not to defendants’ guilt but to the fact that most of them “don’t have a pot to piss in from the standpoint of hiring a lawyer, getting an investigator, having three copiers back there to crank out all the exhibits. When you look at the United States attorneys’ win-loss rates, their losses are all against rich guys.” Like him, of course—a guy who could afford to spend \$10 million defending himself. “It’s not because rich guys are more or less innocent than other guys. It’s because they’ve got the resources for more of a fair fight.” *A*

*Francesca Mari is a freelance writer who completed this story as a 2019 Calderwood journalism fellow at the MacDowell Colony.*



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**“AT 14, I COULD’VE  
POINTED OUT EVERYBODY  
WHO WOULD BE DEAD”**

NIKKI KING GREW UP SURROUNDED BY THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC. NOW SHE’S LEADING A NOVEL AND PROMISING PROGRAM TO HELP PEOPLE IN REMOTE AREAS.

BY BETH MACY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT EICH

NIKKI KING WAS  
17 YEARS OLD  
**WHEN SHE LEFT**  
THE MOUNTAIN  
HOLLOW WHERE  
SHE WAS RAISED

by her grandparents and sneaked off to the University of Kentucky under cover of darkness. It was 2009, and the advice of her late grandmother Sue King echoed in her head as she drove: *Leave. Go to college. And do not let anybody from the bigger, wider world think they're better than you.*

Sue died of a heart attack in 2000, when Nikki was 9. The opioid epidemic had already begun to infiltrate eastern Kentucky by then, and in Nikki's mind the drug problem turned into a drug crisis shortly after Sue's death, when her family went from sleeping with the screen door unlocked to buying new doors—without glass panes, which could be knocked out by burglars. Around that time, Nikki went to a birthday party where her friend's mom stumbled and smashed the cake into the kitchen counter. Nikki later found her passed out on the toilet, surrounded by vomit and pill bottles.

By high school, Nikki had just one friend who lived with both parents. She remembers a teacher asking her classmates what they wanted to be when they grew up.

"A drawer," one boy said.

"You mean an artist?"

"No, a *draw-er*"—someone who draws disability checks and doctor-shops for OxyContin prescriptions. The pills could be had for next to nothing through Medicaid and then resold on the black market for \$1 a milligram. It was the only future he could imagine for himself.

Nikki knew by then that both her safety and her economic fortunes lay far from Letcher County. But her widowed papaw, Curt King, wanted her to stay home. He thought that Nikki should become a nurse, and that the community college would suffice. It didn't matter that she had a 4.0 GPA, and he had no reference point for her high ACT score. "He didn't understand AP classes," she told me. "He thought that meant I was slow."

The night she ran away, Nikki stopped at an Arby's halfway to Lexington because she was shaking too hard to drive. She'd been planning the move her entire senior year, covertly applying for scholarships and saving up \$800 by working at a comic-book store. But she hadn't ever set foot on campus, and she worried about Papaw, who was 72 and had never lived alone. She'd waited for him to fall asleep before tiptoeing out the door, and when she imagined him waking to an empty house the next morning, her shaking turned to deep, heaving sobs. Ugly crying, she calls it.

Nikki thought about going back. But then she remembered one of her last conversations with her grandmother. She had forbidden Nikki from going to a certain friend's house. They'd both heard that the friend's mom had become addicted to OxyContin prescribed for a back injury, and had started buying pills from a dealer when her prescription ran out. She was arrested for illegal possession, then released on probation without any treatment. When she relapsed, she feared she'd lose custody of her kids for failing a drug test. Her dealer told her she could erase the OxyContin from her system by drinking Clorox. So she did, and it killed her.

That was a turning point for Sue. She'd always urged Nikki to go away to college so she could return and use what she'd learned to help people in Appalachia. But after this mother's death, she changed her mind. "Just go," she told Nikki. "And don't come back."

In the car that night, Nikki cried so hard that she vomited. Then she wiped herself off and drove down the mountain to college.

A decade later, Nikki, now 28, has become one of the leading voices on the opioid crisis in rural America—where, some 20 years into the disaster, treatment options remain scarce even as overdose deaths continue to climb. In many rural places, neighbors turn on one another rather than placing the blame higher up—on the pharmaceutical companies that created the epidemic and the impotent regulators and bought-off politicians who enabled it. (In my reporting on the crisis, I've seen this attitude over and over. At a recent meeting in rural North Carolina, for instance, the head of the local Kiwanis Club objected to a plan to give people rides to treatment facilities, saying: "I think when they relapse, we should let them die and take their organs.")

The drug-overdose epidemic has already killed over 800,000 Americans—more than have died from AIDS—but the federal government has yet to provide adequate solutions, let alone a level of funding that could stem the crisis. In the absence of help from above, Nikki has figured out a way to get treatment to people in remote, underfunded areas. The program she's developed is still small and new, but its results are promising, and it appears to be replicable in states that have expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Perhaps most important, it bridges the gulf between a medical culture that too often abandons people the moment they become addicted, and a legal system that incarcerates them when they can't recover on their own. Her aim is to help people with opioid addiction, rather than just locking them up.

I FIRST MET NIKKI in early 2017, after hearing about her work as a National Rural Health Association fellow at Margaret Mary Health, a community hospital in Batesville, Indiana. She was the lead data cruncher on a hospital-wide task force that had achieved a 60 percent reduction in opioid prescribing. I was writing my book *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America* in Roanoke, Virginia, my reporting base for 30 years. When I asked Nikki to help me understand the genesis of the crisis, she suggested that we meet at Papaw's body shop, in eastern Kentucky, not far from "Wattsburg," as I wrote in my notes. Officially known as Whitesburg.



Nikki King was raised by her grandparents in Letcher County, Kentucky. Her grandfather, Curt King, is shown at left.

Whitesburg, Kentucky, was one of the first areas hit by the opioid crisis before it spread to the rest of the U.S.



Donald Trump had just been elected president, and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* had topped the *New York Times* best-seller list. When I brought up either of those things, Nikki's demeanor hardened, her accent thickened, and she spoke at a rapid-fire pace that most non-Appalachians would find hard to process. (Tim Putnam, the CEO of the hospital where she works, admiringly refers to these semi-rants as "going all holler.") Nikki hated *Hillbilly Elegy*, she said, because Vance treated Appalachian culture as if it were his cross to bear, then turned around and used stereotypes to sell his book—"blaming the region's problems on things like lack of thrift and a crisis of masculinity" and ignoring "the role of bigger forces in creating this miry pit of social problems."

Nikki had been out of high school for only seven years, but already she could tick off the names of more than 20 former classmates who were dead from what the economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton have called "deaths of despair": suicide, overdose, or alcohol-related illness. In the previous year alone, six friends and relatives had died of drug-related causes. "I'm having to ration my vacation time for funerals," Nikki told me. Her long-term goal was to return home to work on the opioid crisis in Kentucky, but she was still too young and too female to get anything done in Appalachia, she said. In Indiana she had the ear of politicians, and she spoke so often at national conferences that Putnam, her boss, had gotten used to people coming up to him and saying, "You're the guy who works with Nikki King!" But in Kentucky, no one would return her calls.

Curt King had long ago forgiven Nikki for running away to college, and had even helped her pay tuition. He drove us around the county in his rusty Ford F-150 pickup while narrating a landscape that existed only in his memory. I was supposed to imagine schools that weren't shuttered, movie theaters that weren't caved in, and once-booming coal towns with names like Elkhorn City and Uz (pronounced "you-zee") and Seco, short for South East Coal Company, where his own father had been a supervisor before the mine closed in the late 1950s. "We would've never won World War II if not for the coal that made the steel," he said. But none of that is here anymore, Nikki kept gently pointing out. We drove through a town called Neon where all the neon signs were burned out. "It's like growing up in a skeleton," Nikki said. "You look around and see the bones of when Papaw was little, but I never saw any of it."

We went to the town of Jenkins so I could meet former Mayor G. C. Kincer, who'd lost reelection and was now living in a self-storage facility. He told me that his most memorable day as mayor was when he went to pick up his blood-pressure medication and found the town pharmacist spread-eagle on the floor, passed out from opioids he'd stolen. Nearly a third of the county reported having a disability, and the workforce-participation rate was down to 43 percent. "If you took 100 job applications right now, you might get 10 people who could pass a drug test," Kincer said. "I don't see any hope."

Nikki didn't want to hear that. "I think we can beat it," she said. "I just need somebody to start listening to me." She's been saying some version of that ever since.

**F**ROM HIS PERCH at King's Body Shop, where locals gather most mornings to share fast-food biscuits and talk through the problems of the world, Curt King spots trends before the social scientists do. "A lot of the drug problem here in Letcher is only slowing up now because so many people have already died off," he told me. Indeed, in recent years, the number of overdose deaths has dropped in a handful of eastern-Kentucky counties, including Letcher and neighboring Clay. Experts aren't sure whether the

deaths have reached saturation or whether fewer among the addicted are dying because they've switched over to methamphetamine, which is less likely than opioids to result in an overdose.

Nikki favors the saturation theory, noting that the opioid crisis exploded in eastern Kentucky before spreading to the rest of Appalachia. The first national story about the nascent crisis appeared in *The New York Times* in 2001 and focused on nearby Hazard, Kentucky, the center of the largest drug bust in state history. The federal prosecutor counted 59 deaths related to OxyContin overdoses in the area in the preceding year. The drugmaker Purdue Pharma had sent an army of sales reps into eastern Kentucky and other regions with high disability rates to promote the idea that pain was vastly undertreated, and that its new drug was virtually nonaddictive. In places where people historically had legitimate workplace injuries, the desperate and jobless were soon pilfering lawn mowers and copper wiring to fund their next OxyContin fix.

When stories started to come out about escalating Oxy-fueled crime, Purdue blamed the people it had helped addict. "We have to hammer on abusers in every way possible," Richard Sackler, Purdue's president, wrote in an internal email only recently made public. "They are the culprits and the problem." (Purdue did not comment on its responsibility for the epidemic, but said, "The causes of opioid addiction are multifaceted and complex.")

Sackler was hardly the only one to blame users. America's long history of treating substance abuse

WE WENT TO  
THE TOWN OF  
JENKINS SO I  
COULD MEET THE  
**FORMER MAYOR**,  
WHO WAS NOW  
LIVING IN A  
SELF-STORAGE  
FACILITY .

THE MEDICATIONS TO TREAT OPIOID-USE DISORDER ARE FAR MORE TIGHTLY REGULATED THAN THE PAINKILLERS THAT HAVE GOTTEN PEOPLE HOOKED IN THE FIRST PLACE.

as a crime, rather than a disease, dates to the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914, which outlawed the use of narcotics in treatment at a time when about 250,000 people had an addiction.

A century later, we remain more likely to punish a person struggling with a substance-use disorder than to provide help. Only one in five addicted people in the U.S. receives treatment. Still fewer get what doctors consider the gold standard of care: a combination of counseling and medication-assisted treatment, which uses weaker opioids (methadone or buprenorphine, often sold under the brand name Suboxone) to reduce cravings and ease withdrawal, or an opioid blocker called naltrexone. These drugs cut mortality in half compared with abstinence-based treatment programs, and the medical consensus is clear that getting off opioids without them is nearly impossible. Once the brain's dopamine receptors have been distorted by opioids, every waking thought is overtaken by cravings and a fear of withdrawal—of becoming dopesick, with painful diarrhea, vomiting, fevers, and crushing anxiety.

But the use of medication-assisted treatment, or MAT, has faced enormous resistance in the U.S., where many judges, police officers, and even people in recovery view it as a crutch—merely substituting one drug for another—or focus on its potential for misuse. In fact, the medications for opioid-use disorder are far more tightly regulated than the painkillers that have gotten people hooked in the first place. Health-care providers must receive at least eight hours of training before they can prescribe

buprenorphine, and then they're limited in the number of patients they can treat—part of the reason only about 5 percent of physicians are licensed to prescribe the drug.

The result of this thinking was visible everywhere as Nikki showed me around. I asked whether it embarrassed her, letting me see where she grew up. She slammed her fist on the steering wheel and shouted, “Yes!” She wasn’t embarrassed to be Appalachian; she was embarrassed by how desperate things now felt here. “But I’ve gone through the five stages of grief. I’ve been pissed at Big Pharma, pissed at the government. I’ve been pissed at everyone.”

“At 14, I could’ve pointed out everybody who would be dead of overdose today, and I would’ve been right. If I can do that at 14, how are we letting them fall through the cracks?”

**ON THE WALL** of his body shop, Curt King displays a framed black-and-white photograph of miners from the Elkhorn Coal Corporation labeled MINE #4 NIGHT SHIFT. The men wear overalls and hard hats with headlamps. They smile, their arms crossed, with nary a thought of global warming or a future in which people would learn to pair OxyContin with Xanax for a so-called Cadillac high.

A group portrait from the same era—the 1930s—hangs in the Indiana hospital where Nikki works, but in this one men and women are dressed in fur coats and three-piece suits. At least 1,000 of them pose in front of the just-opened Margaret Mary Hospital, named for the two women who donated the money to found it. The civic boosters in the photo couldn’t have envisioned a proposed baby-cuddling program in their hospital for soothing infants born opioid-dependent. Or that drug-involved child-protection cases in their county would escalate 400 percent in the course of four years. Not in a region founded by German farmers and furniture makers, in a setting so quiet and bucolic that the basketball movie *Hoosiers* was set there.

Nikki has worked for five years to improve access to addiction treatment in Ripley County. Rampant overprescribing of OxyContin and other opioids was happening here in the late 1990s and early aughts, just as it was in Appalachia, but the crisis didn’t make itself as immediately or as loudly known. In places like Batesville, where jobs were still plentiful, the addicted weren’t accidentally burning down abandoned factories or cutting telephone poles down in broad daylight to steal copper wiring.

No, the epidemic rolled into Ripley County more like fog than fire—harder to discern and easier to dismiss. It began showing up in the crime rosters in the mid-aughts, when teenagers and 20-somethings started making the 45-minute drive east to Cincinnati to buy heroin. “By 2008, we were tracking track marks, taking pictures of everybody’s arms,” Shannon Schmaltz, who oversees the county’s probation program, told me. He got to know the names of Cincinnati dealers—“Big Tom” was popular—and started calling Cincinnati police to find out which of the probationers on his caseload had been spotted buying heroin in the city, sometimes trading their shoes or their kids’ baby clothes for it, hiding syringes in the diaper bag.

Circuit Court Judge Ryan King’s docket was overwhelmed not just by drug crime but also by drug-related child neglect. “I’ve seen the placement with the foster parent, and then the foster turns out to be using drugs too,” King (no relation to Nikki) told me. “After hearings like that, you just want to quit. You think, *My goodness, what are we ever gonna do? What are we doing?*”

Nikki and Judge King both attended a countywide opioid forum in 2018, a year after a local woman overdosed in a Chuck E. Cheese bathroom

in Cincinnati, as her 5- and 7-year-old children played in the restaurant. Nikki had worked her way up from graduate fellow to manager of the hospital's mental-health and addiction services, and she was trying to ensure that patients who overdosed and ended up in Margaret Mary's emergency department got referrals for follow-up care, including MAT. But MAT drugs are nearly impossible to get in rural America, where more than half of counties don't have a single buprenorphine provider, and methadone is even less available. Counseling services, too, are in extremely short supply—the ratio of residents to mental-health providers in Ripley County is 2,200 to 1. More often than not, patients who overdosed and wound up in Margaret Mary's ER were treated with Narcan, the overdose antidote, and released. If hospital staff ever saw them again, it was usually for another overdose, sometimes a fatal one.

Elsewhere in the U.S., drug courts—which allow addicted offenders to enter a treatment program instead of going to jail—have been shown to reduce recidivism. But drug courts are expensive to operate and tend to be concentrated in cities and suburbs. Many leave treatment decisions to local judges, prosecutors, and probation supervisors—who may or may not understand addiction medicine. About half of drug courts prohibit the use of MAT; some funnel probationers into abstinence-only 12-step programs, despite overwhelming evidence that they're less effective for opioid addiction.

Ripley County has never had the resources for a drug court anyway. Two years ago, the county's probation program for drug offenders required drug testing, but offered only two hours of group therapy a week and no MAT. At the opioid forum, when Nikki heard Judge King describe that as the county's "drug treatment," she challenged him. "I think we can do a lot better," she said. The program she eventually created, with the county judges' blessing, provides *nine* hours of group therapy and a variety of social supports, plus MAT. Three nights a week, probationers in the new Courts Addiction & Drug Services, or CADS, program receive cognitive behavioral therapy, job coaching, meditation training, and other services.

Nikki talked one of the hospital's nurse practitioners, Jeff Coy, a former detective, into becoming the group's first MAT provider. After taking the training course to prescribe buprenorphine, Coy went from thinking of the addicted as "druggies" to seeing them as people with a legitimate disease, not unlike diabetics who struggle to keep their blood sugar under control. "He's also a preacher, and he cusses," Nikki said, as if that were everything I needed to know about him. Next she recruited Lindsey Gessendorf, a therapist who'd been running a program for men in jail.



*Top:* A speaker shares his story with a group from the CADS program. *Bottom:* Judge Ryan King saw his docket overrun by drug crime and drug-related child neglect.



*This page:* Nikki King and Lindsey Gessendorf at the Ripley County courthouse, where they run the CADS program.  
*Opposite page:* Shannon Schmaltz, who oversees probation, attends a meeting for the program.





FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SOME PEOPLE'S LIVES, THE CYCLE OF JAIL TO PROBATION TO RELAPSE AND BACK WAS COMING TO A CLOSE.

Nikki knew that marshaling funds for a new program would be tough; the hospital was already \$3 million in the red. But her goal was for the program to be cost-neutral within six months, through Indiana's Medicaid expansion. The federal program covers addiction treatment, but health-care providers at Margaret Mary and elsewhere had found that high no-show rates for patients with an opioid dependency meant they couldn't bill the government enough to break even. Nikki's program promised to solve this problem: By coordinating with the judges, she could use the threat of jail time to ensure that patients showed up. If the group could achieve a nearly perfect attendance record, the program would essentially pay for itself.

Nikki and her staff of hospital employees set up a drug-treatment center in a conference room inside the courthouse. They brought in snacks and covered the walls in homemade signs with inspirational messages. More than half the participants were given some form of medication-assisted treatment.

For the first time in Ripley County's circuit court—and quite possibly for the first time in rural America—judges were turning probationers over to health-care providers just down the hall. "I've never heard of that," Brock Slabach, a senior vice president of the National Rural Health Association, told me. "This is pioneering. Most people don't see what's possible until they've seen real innovations taking place somewhere else."

Nikki finds the work gratifying, messy, sleep-robbing. Most of the patients grew up in households

where drugs and abuse were common. When Nikki asked them each to name a short-term goal, one participant said he wanted a second pair of pants. Another wished to taste salmon for the first time. When Nikki passed out orange-capped pens for a writing exercise, she unknowingly triggered those who had used orange-capped needles to shoot up heroin or meth, which was just about everyone in the group. Nikki tossed the pens, and Gessendorf quickly changed course to talk about "euphoric recall" instead, explaining that powerful memories of a good high would be a long-term challenge to the participants' recovery.

Nikki took care of the second pair of pants and the salmon, and replaced the orange-capped pens. But a few weeks later, a patient was caught misusing buprenorphine—snorting it outside the courthouse—and trying to sell it to others in the group. Another threatened to pull Nikki's fingernails out.

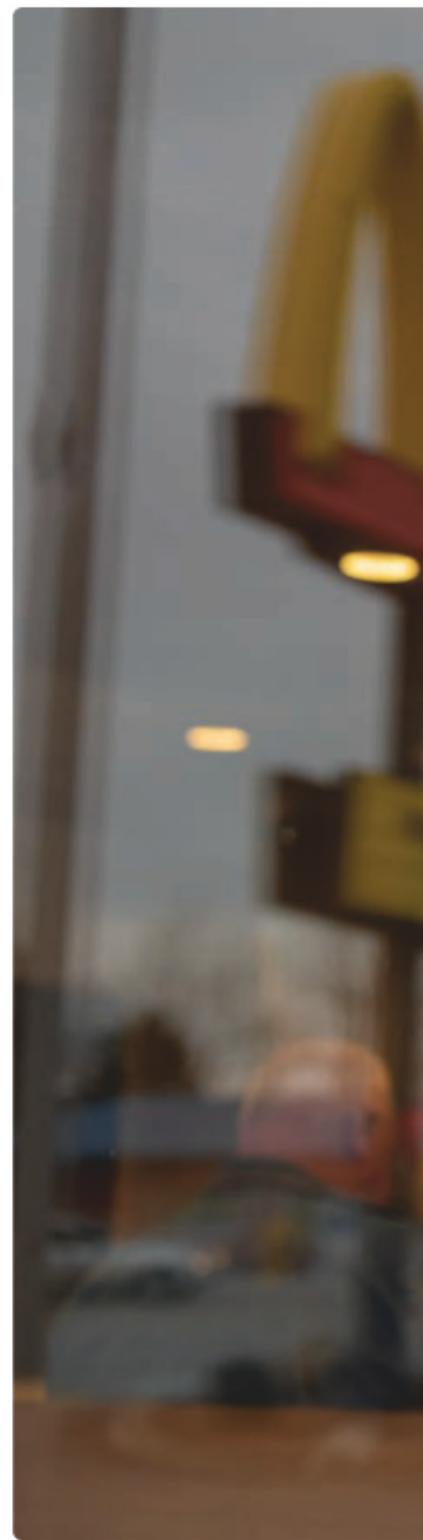
When Nikki told me about these setbacks, I thought of the ex-mayor living in a storage facility in Kentucky. Perhaps he was right. What hope did we have? The epidemic has only continued to worsen, and experts don't know when it will plateau. Barring a flat-out overhaul of the War on Drugs—wherein a significant chunk of the estimated \$50 billion the country spends on enforcement and incarceration each year would be funneled into treatment instead—how could a tiny program like Nikki's be replicated on a large-enough scale to turn back the tide?

"I ask myself that all the time," Tim Putnam, Nikki's boss and the hospital CEO, told me.

**KENNY SHADDAY TRIED** OxyContin for the first time in 2009, at age 15. He'd just come out as gay, and the pills numbed his anxiety, as well as the pain inflicted by bullies. By 16, he was bouncing between juvenile-detention facilities, children's homes, and jails. When Nikki launched the CADS program, in October 2018, he had just finished yet another sentence. He joined the inaugural class, and quickly became the most conscientious participant. He was so fearful of not being able to pee when his probation officer showed up to drug-test him at work that he routinely held it for hours at a time. He was also funny, and open with his vulnerability, qualities that made him a staff favorite. Within weeks, his time in the program became his longest period of sobriety (not counting jail time) since he was a teenager.

Two months in, Shadday was working 70-hour weeks at McDonald's when a friend showed up with some meth she was looking to off-load. It was free, he was stressed and tired, and he knew the drug would give him a boost. He regretted it even before his high wore off. Shadday assumed he'd be cut from the program and sent back to jail; that was how probation had always worked for him. But Shadday confessed the relapse to Nikki and Gessendorf the next day, and begged for another chance.

Gessendorf agreed to go to bat for him with Shannon Schmaltz, the head of probation. She planned to argue that expecting Shadday to get clean on his first try wasn't realistic. After all, addiction is a chronic, relapsing disease, and most people need multiple attempts at recovery. Gessendorf and Nikki thought



that letting Shadday stay in the program might become a turning point for the others as well—a way to build trust that could buttress the entire group.

Gessendorf had her work cut out for her with Schmaltz. Before the CADS program launched, he'd seen only the abuse of MAT medicines, never the successes. When Gessendorf suggested they not jail Shadday for his relapse, his first thought was *Are you serious?* But Schmaltz was impressed by the CADS program. For the first time in his career, he saw that people like Shadday *wanted* to get better. Because he knew them. Liked them, even. So he sat down with Nikki and Gessendorf, and together they worked out a three-strikes matrix—additional treatment after one relapse, a few days of jail time after a second relapse, and a court date after a third.

When Shadday was permitted to rejoin the program, Nikki realized that rural America may actually have a few advantages over cities when it comes to knocking down barriers to treatment. After all, her boss knows the judges who are Schmaltz's bosses. Nikki used to coach a girls' running club headed by Schmaltz's wife, and her fiancé coaches the high-school football team. And Margaret Mary Health has community cred among politicians and judges. It's both professional and homey—the kind of place where Brahms's "Lullaby" chimes over the loudspeakers whenever a baby is born.

**AFTER FOUR MONTHS**, nearly every participant had stuck with the CADS program, and it had doubled in size from 12 to 24 participants, with more on the waiting list—a good record, given the high failure rate of opioid-addiction recovery. Nikki was in talks with the area's three largest businesses to provide treatment to factory workers and potential hires who can't pass a drug test. All was going reasonably well, notwithstanding the fact that every day she felt like the cartoon dog sitting at a table saying "This is fine" while everything around him burns.

In late February 2019, Nikki was in a meeting with hospital administrators when one said, in an offhand way, that Medicaid wouldn't reimburse the hospital for the CADS program, because it was housed at the courthouse and not in a medical facility. He proposed that they shelve the program, and Nikki felt her composure slipping. Maybe they could use a hospital-owned practice in Batesville, someone else suggested. But that was half an hour from the



Kenny Shadday started using opioids at age 15 and spent years in and out of jail. He's now completed the CADS program and is training to become a regional supervisor at McDonald's.

courthouse, too far for many patients. Another practice was closer, just 10 minutes away. Maybe they could co-opt the break room, move a refrigerator around.

That was when Nikki lost it, right there in front of the administrators—all of whom were at least two decades her senior. Housing a medical program inside the courthouse had been the whole point, the key to finally making the medical and legal systems mesh. It was the heretofore-missing component, a way to coordinate the carrot and the stick. The fact that people like Gessendorf and Schmaltz knew each other so well now—their quirks, their backstories, the names of each other's spouses—those relationships, Nikki argued, were what made the program work.

But then she had an idea.

"Why can't I just buy part of the courthouse?" Nikki asked. They could wall off one side of the conference room they were already using and the hospital could rent it for \$25 a month. The county commissioners would have to sign off, as would the judges and Schmaltz, who worried, initially, about the appearance of spending taxpayer money to convert the space. But he was supportive. For the first time in some people's lives, the cycle of jail to probation to relapse and back was coming to a close.

Schmaltz even came in on Saturdays to oversee the construction. He directed probationers with carpentry experience to put up the walls and frame the door. He begged a local hardware store to donate supplies, and he brought in houseplants for decoration. He installed a sign outside the door that read: MARGARET MARY HEALTH, RIPLEY COUNTY COURTHOUSE, SUITE A.

"He's been on Pinterest," Nikki deadpanned.

Above the entrance, Schmaltz affixed an appliquéd he'd purchased on the internet, using a ruler to ensure consistent spacing between the words. MAKE TODAY AMAZING, it said.

**L**AST FALL, as Nikki and her team prepared to celebrate the program's first anniversary with lasagna and cake, she put up a PowerPoint: 45 people had completed the eight-month program with no issues; 18 had relapsed once, eight of whom reengaged immediately in treatment. No one had overdosed. In fact, one participant had used a Narcan kit from CADS to resuscitate a relative. "So technically, we're at plus one," Nikki said.

Shadday had been promoted at McDonald's and was training to become a regional supervisor. Whereas he'd arrived at our first interview,



back in January 2019, wearing pajama bottoms, he now took pride in special-ordering uniform shirts and a bow tie. He'd been sober for about six months, the longest he'd gone as an adult without being jailed. He was planning to start an LGBTQ recovery group and had become a leader in a post-CADS support group held on Friday nights.

Nikki was about to expand the program into an adjacent county and was getting ready to launch a recovery kitchen to teach healthy eating. And she'd more than tripled her staff, thanks in part to a \$300,000 grant from the very pharmaceutical



company she'd been seething about for years—Purdue Pharma. ("I told Nikki, 'If you want to treat more people, you just have to swallow your pride and take the money,'" Cindy Ziemke, a Republican state representative who'd lobbied Purdue for the grant, told me.)

Nikki's still working to change the mindset in Ripley County. She's had heated confrontations with jailers over hard-line bans on prescribed buprenorphine in jails, including once when a pregnant CADS patient relapsed and was arrested. Denying the woman buprenorphine while she detoxed

Graduates of the eight-month CADS program gather weekly to offer one another continuing support.

was a potentially life-threatening decision for her baby. Nikki helped arrange for her to get moved to inpatient treatment three and a half hours away.

Nikki and Ziemke are working on a statewide policy that would encourage Indiana jails to allow buprenorphine (currently all but two counties forbid it), and Nikki has been recruited to join the opioid advisory committee of the American Hospital Association, a position from which she plans to push for additional reforms.

She was happiest about the recent recruitment of a psychiatrist—the program's first. It had taken pure subterfuge to persuade Christopher Dull, who lives some 90 miles away, to come on board just four days a month. He already has his own practice in Zionsville, plus a part-time job in another rural county. But after hearing about his addiction-medicine bona fides, Nikki arranged for him to speak on a panel so she could court him. A dinner followed, during which she laid out her program. When he brought up typical barriers to recovery—jobs, transportation, food insecurity—Nikki explained how she had already overcome them. She begged him to work for her, repeatedly, over the next three months. He told her no; he didn't have the time.

But she kept calling, emailing, texting—once, she threatened to show up at his Zionsville practice, with lunch. Then she told him again about her sickest patient, a woman with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and opioid addiction, reminding him that Ripley County has no inpatient mental-health or addiction-treatment facilities and no resident psychiatrists. And she just kept talking, breathlessly, in that all-holler manner, while simultaneously tapping her foot. And somehow she landed on the magic, heart-tugging combination of words to show just how severe this patient's case was: "She's 50 years old, and she's never been in treatment before."

The twice-monthly drives and overnight stays would be a drag, and his wife wouldn't be happy. But Dull found himself powerless to say no to the force before him, or even to fully describe just how exactly the formidable Appalachian who would not stop talking and tapping her foot had snookered him. The best explanation he could come up with was this: "You have to work in mental health to fully understand that what she's done just doesn't exist." *A*

*Beth Macy is the Virginia-based author of Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America. This article is part of our project "The Presence of Justice," which is supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge.*



# WHAT CHINA WANTS

*Chinese leaders' combination  
of superiority and insecurity is  
growing more dangerous.*

*The U.S. needs a new strategy  
to reflect that.*

by H. R. McMaster

# I THE FORBIDDEN CITY

On November 8, 2017, Air Force One touched down in Beijing, marking the start of a state visit hosted by China's president and Communist Party chairman, Xi Jinping. From my first day on the job as President Donald Trump's national security adviser, China had been a top priority. The country figured prominently in what President Barack Obama had identified for his successor as the biggest immediate problem the new administration would face—what to do about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. But many other questions about the nature and future of the relationship between China and the United States had also emerged, reflecting China's fundamentally different perception of the world.

Since the heady days of Deng Xiaoping, in the late 1970s, the assumptions that had governed the American approach to our relationship with China were these: After being welcomed into the international political and economic order, China would play by the rules, open its markets, and privatize its economy. As the country became more prosperous, the Chinese government would respect the rights of its people and liberalize politically. But those assumptions were proving to be wrong.

China has become a threat because its leaders are promoting a closed, authoritarian model as an alternative to democratic governance and free-market economics. The Chinese Communist Party is not only strengthening an internal system that stifles human freedom and extends its authoritarian control; it is also exporting that model and leading the development of new rules and a new international order that would make the world less free and less safe. China's effort to extend its influence is obvious in the militarization of man-made islands in the South China Sea and the deployment of military capabilities near Taiwan and in the East China Sea. But the integrated nature of the Chinese Communist Party's military and economic strategies is what makes it particularly dangerous to the United States and other free and open societies.

John King Fairbank, the Harvard historian and godfather of American sinology, noted in 1948 that to understand the policies and actions of Chinese leaders, historical perspective is "not a luxury, but a necessity." During our state visit, Xi and his advisers relied heavily on history to convey their intended message. They emphasized certain historical subjects. They avoided others.

The American delegation—which included President Trump and the first lady, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and the U.S. ambassador to China, Terry Branstad—received its first history lesson as it toured the Forbidden City, the seat of Chinese emperors for five centuries. We were accompanied by Xi, his wife, and several other senior Chinese leaders. The message—conveyed in private conversations and public statements, as well as in official TV coverage and by the very nature of the tour—was consistent

with Xi's speech three weeks earlier at the 19th National Congress: The Chinese Communist Party was relentlessly pursuing the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." As Xi described it, "rejuvenation" encompassed prosperity, collective effort, socialism, and national glory—the "China dream." The Forbidden City was the perfect backdrop for Xi to showcase his determination to "move closer to the center of the world stage and to make a greater contribution to humankind."

The Forbidden City was built during the Ming dynasty, which ruled China from 1368 to 1644—a period considered to be a golden age in terms of China's economic might, territorial control, and cultural achievements. It was during this dynasty that Zheng He, an admiral in the Ming fleet, embarked on seven voyages around the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, more than half a century before Christopher Columbus set sail. His "treasure ships," among the largest wooden vessels ever built, brought back tribute from all parts of the known world. But despite the success of the seven voyages, the emperor concluded that the world had nothing to offer China. He ordered the treasure ships scuttled and Chinese ports closed. The period that followed—the 19th and 20th centuries in particular—is seen by Xi and others in the leadership as an aberrational period during which European nations and, later, the United States achieved economic and military dominance.

Like the closing show of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which placed modern technological innovation in the context of 5,000 years of Chinese history, the tour of the Forbidden City was meant, it seemed, as a reminder that Chinese dynasties had long stood at the center of the Earth. The art and architectural style of the buildings reflected the Confucian social creed: that hierarchy and harmony fit together and are interdependent. The emperor held court in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the largest building in the Forbidden City. The grand throne is surrounded by six golden pillars, engraved with dragons to evoke the power of an emperor whose state ruled over *tianxia*—over "everything beneath heaven."

While the images broadcast to China and the rest of the world from the Forbidden City during our visit were meant to project confidence in the Chinese Communist Party, one could also sense a profound insecurity—a lesson of history that went unmentioned. In its very design, the Forbidden City seemed to reflect that contrast between outward confidence and inner apprehension.

*China's leaders believe they have a narrow window of opportunity to strengthen their rule and revise the international order in their favor.*

The three great halls at the city’s center were meant not only to impress, but also to defend from threats that might come from both outside and inside the city’s walls. After the end of the Han dynasty, in A.D. 220, China’s core provinces were ruled only half the time by a strong central authority. And even then, China was subject to foreign invasion and domestic turmoil. The Yongle emperor, Zhu Di, who built the Forbidden City, was more concerned about internal dangers than he was about the possibilities of another Mongol invasion. To identify and eliminate opponents, the emperor set up an elaborate spy network. To preempt opposition from scholars and bureaucrats, he directed the executions of not only those suspected of disloyalty, but also their entire families. The Chinese Communist Party used similar tactics centuries later. Like Xi, the emperors who sat on the elaborate throne in the heart of the Forbidden City practiced a remote and autocratic style of rule vulnerable to corruption and internal threats.

Our guide showed us where the last royal occupant of the Forbidden City, Emperor Puyi, was stripped of power in 1911, at the age of 5, during China’s republican revolution. Puyi abdicated in the midst of the “century of humiliation,” a period of Chinese history that Xi had described to Trump when the two leaders met for dinner at Mar-a-Lago, seven months before our tour. The century of humiliation was the unhappy era during which China experienced internal fragmentation, suffered defeat in wars, made major concessions to foreign powers, and endured brutal occupation. The humiliation began with Great Britain’s defeat of China in the First Opium War, in 1842. It ended with the Allied and Chinese defeat of imperial Japan in 1945 and the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949.

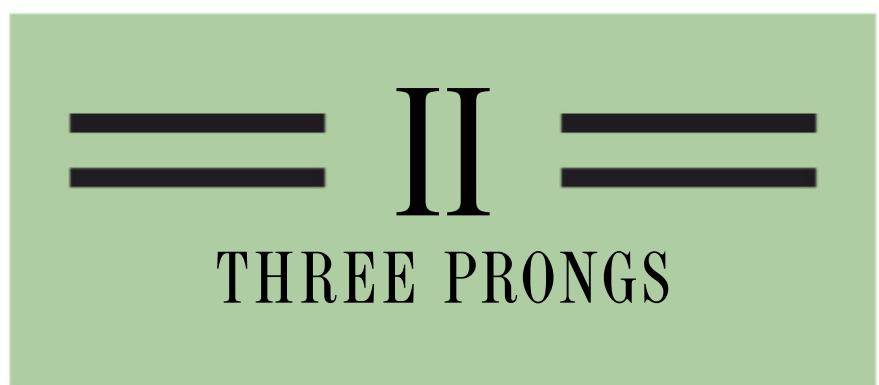
Our last meeting of the state visit, in the Great Hall of the People, was with Li Keqiang, the premier of the State Council and the titular head of China’s government. If anyone in the American group had any doubts about China’s view of its relationship with the United States, Li’s monologue would have removed them. He began with the observation that China, having already developed its industrial and technological base, no longer needed the United States. He dismissed U.S. concerns over unfair trade and economic practices, indicating that the U.S. role in the future global economy would merely be to provide China with raw materials, agricultural products, and energy to fuel its production of the world’s cutting-edge industrial and consumer products.

Leaving China, I was even more convinced than I had been before that a dramatic shift in U.S. policy was overdue. The Forbidden City was supposed to convey confidence in China’s national rejuvenation and its return to the world stage as the proud Middle Kingdom. But for me it exposed the fears as well as the ambitions that drive the Chinese Communist Party’s efforts to extend China’s influence along its frontiers and beyond, and to regain the honor lost during the century of humiliation. The fears and ambitions are inseparable. They explain why the Chinese Communist Party is obsessed with control—both internally and externally.

The party’s leaders believe they have a narrow window of strategic opportunity to strengthen their rule and revise the international order in their favor—before China’s economy sours, before the population grows old, before other countries realize that the party is pursuing national rejuvenation at their expense,

and before unanticipated events such as the coronavirus pandemic expose the vulnerabilities the party created in the race to surpass the United States and realize the China dream. The party has no intention of playing by the rules associated with international law, trade, or commerce. China’s overall strategy relies on co-option and coercion at home and abroad, as well as on concealing the nature of China’s true intentions. What makes this strategy potent and dangerous is the integrated nature of the party’s efforts across government, industry, academia, and the military.

And, on balance, the Chinese Communist Party’s goals run counter to American ideals and American interests.



## THREE PRONGS

As China pursues its strategy of co-option, coercion, and concealment, its authoritarian interventions have become ubiquitous. Inside China, the party’s tolerance for free expression and dissent is minimal, to put it mildly. The repressive and manipulative policies in Tibet, with its Buddhist majority, are well known. The Catholic Church and, in particular, the fast-growing Protestant religions are of deep concern to Xi and the party. Protestant Churches have proved difficult to control, because of their diversity and decentralization, and the party has forcefully removed crosses from the tops of church buildings and even demolished some buildings to set an example. Last year, Beijing’s effort to tighten its grip on Hong Kong sparked sustained protests that continued into 2020—protests that Chinese leaders blamed on foreigners, as they typically do. In Xinjiang, in northwestern China, where ethnic Uighurs mainly practice Islam, the party has forced at least 1 million people into concentration camps. (The government denies this, but last year *The New York Times* uncovered a cache of incriminating documents, including accounts of closed-door speeches by Xi directing officials to show “absolutely no mercy.”)

Party leaders have accelerated the construction of an unprecedented surveillance state. For the 1.4 billion Chinese people, government propaganda on television and elsewhere is a seamless part of everyday life. Universities have cracked down on teaching that explains “Western liberal” concepts of individual rights, freedom of expression, representative government, and the rule of law. Students in universities and high schools must take lessons in “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” The chairman’s 14-point philosophy is the subject of the most popular app in China, which requires users to sign in with their cellphone number and real name before they can earn study points by reading articles, writing comments, and taking multiple-choice tests. A system of personal “social credit scores” is based on tracking people’s online and other activity to determine their friendliness to Chinese government

priorities. Peoples' scores determine eligibility for loans, government employment, housing, transportation benefits, and more.

The party's efforts to exert control inside China are far better known than its parallel efforts beyond China's borders. Here again, insecurity and ambition are mutually reinforcing. Chinese leaders aim to put in place a modern-day version of the tributary system that Chinese emperors used to establish authority over vassal states. Under that system, kingdoms could trade and enjoy peace with the Chinese empire in return for submission. Chinese leaders are not shy about asserting this ambition. In 2010, China's foreign minister matter-of-factly told his counterparts at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations: "China is a big country, and you are small countries." China intends to establish a new tributary system through a massive effort organized under three overlapping policies, carrying the names "Made in China 2025," "Belt and Road Initiative," and "Military-Civil Fusion."

"Made in China 2025" is designed to help China become a largely independent scientific and technological power. To achieve that goal, the party is creating high-tech monopolies inside China and stripping foreign companies of their intellectual property by means of theft and forced technology transfer. In some cases, foreign companies are forced to enter into joint ventures with Chinese companies before they are permitted to sell their products in China. These Chinese companies mostly have close ties to the party, making routine the transfer of intellectual property and manufacturing techniques to the Chinese government.

The "Belt and Road Initiative" calls for more than \$1 trillion in new infrastructure investments across the Indo-Pacific region, Eurasia, and beyond. Its true purpose is to place China at the hub of trade routes and communications networks. While the initiative at first received an enthusiastic reception from nations that saw opportunities for economic growth, many of those nations soon realized that Chinese investment came with strings attached.

The Belt and Road Initiative has created a common pattern of economic clientelism. Beijing first offers countries loans from Chinese banks for large-scale infrastructure projects. Once the countries are in debt, the party forces their leaders to align with China's foreign-policy agenda and the goal of displacing the influence of the United States and its key partners. Although Chinese leaders often depict these deals as win-win, most of them have just one real winner.

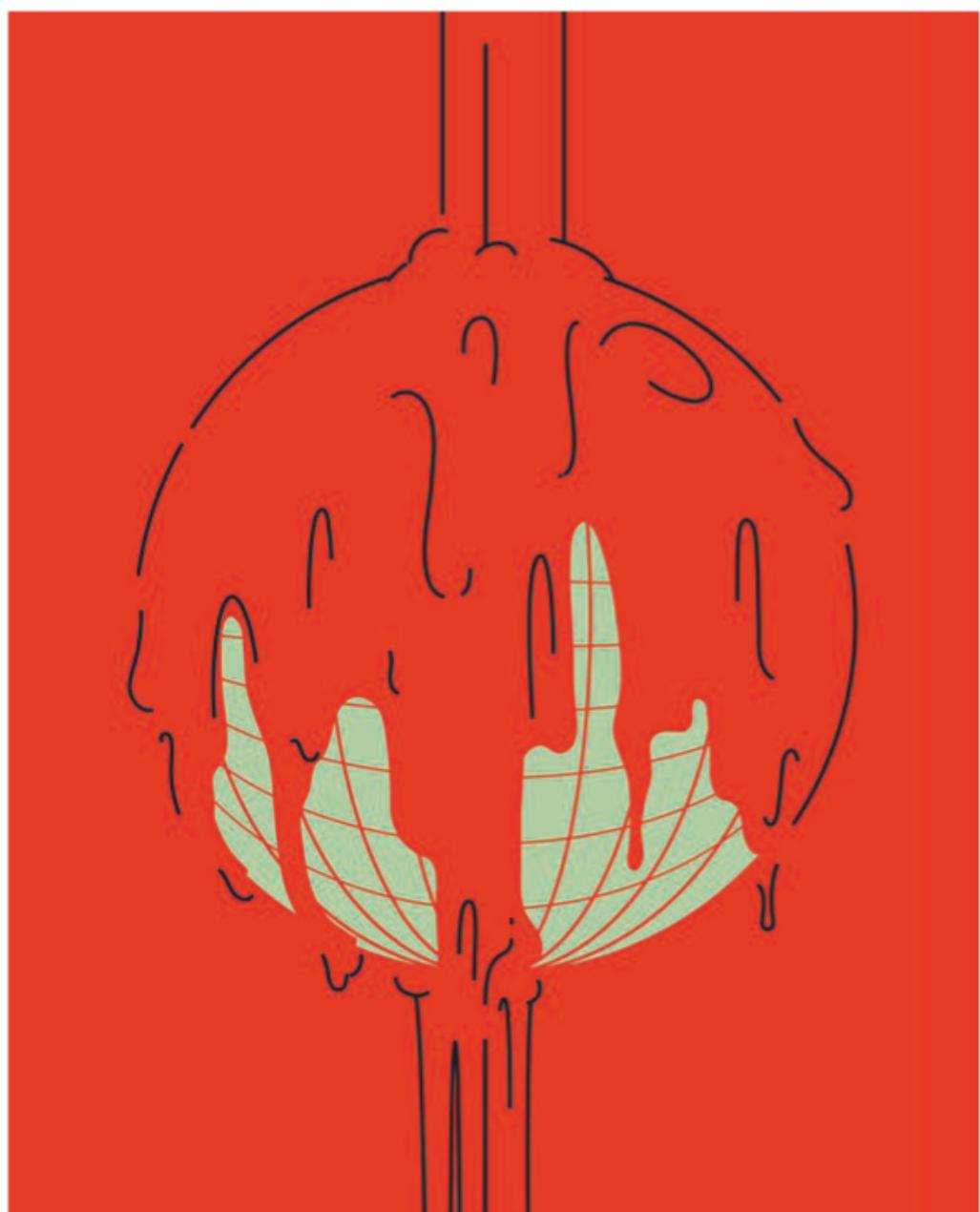
For developing countries with fragile economies, Belt and Road sets a ruthless debt trap. When some countries are unable to service their loans, China trades debt for equity to gain control of their ports, airports, dams, power plants, and communications networks. As of 2018, the risk of debt distress was growing in 23 countries with Belt and Road financing. Eight poor countries with Belt and Road financing—Pakistan, Djibouti, the Maldives, Laos, Mongolia, Montenegro, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—already have unsustainable levels of debt.

China's tactics vary based on the relative strength or weakness of the target states. When undertaking large-scale investment projects, many countries with weak political institutions succumb to corruption, making them even more vulnerable to Chinese tactics.

In Sri Lanka, the longtime president and current prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, incurred debts far beyond what his nation could bear. He agreed to a series of high-interest loans to finance Chinese construction of a port, though there was no apparent need for one. Despite earlier assurances that the port would not be used for military purposes, a Chinese submarine docked there the same day as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Sri Lanka in 2014. In 2017, following the commercial failure of the port, Sri Lanka was forced to sign a 99-year lease to a Chinese state-owned enterprise in a debt-for-equity swap.

The new vanguard of the Chinese Communist Party is a delegation of bankers and party officials with duffel bags full of cash. Corruption enables a new form of colonial-like control that extends far beyond strategic shipping routes in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, and elsewhere.

The Military-Civil Fusion policy is the most totalitarian of the three prongs. In 2014 and then again in 2017, the party declared that all Chinese companies must collaborate in gathering intelligence. "Any organization or citizen," reads Article 7 of China's National Intelligence Law, "shall support, assist with, and collaborate with the state intelligence work in accordance with the



law, and keep the secrets of the national intelligence work known to the public." Chinese companies work alongside universities and research arms of the People's Liberation Army. Military-Civil Fusion encourages state-owned and private enterprises to acquire companies with advanced technologies, or a strong minority stake in those companies, so that the technologies can be applied for not only economic but also military and intelligence advantage. It fast-tracks stolen technologies to the army in such areas as space, cyberspace, biology, artificial intelligence, and energy. In addition to espionage and cybertheft by the Ministry of State Security, the party tasks some Chinese students and scholars in the U.S. and at other foreign universities and research labs with extracting technology.

Sometimes U.S. defense funding supports China's technology transfers. One of many examples is the Kuang-Chi Group, described in the Chinese media as "a military-civilian enterprise." The Kuang-Chi Group was founded largely on the basis of U.S. Air Force-funded research into meta-materials at Duke University.

Chinese cybertheft is responsible for what General Keith Alexander, the former director of the National Security Agency, described as the "greatest transfer of wealth in history." The Chinese Ministry of State Security used a hacking squad known as APT10 to target U.S. companies in the finance, telecommunications, consumer-electronics, and medical industries as well as NASA and Department of Defense research laboratories, extracting intellectual property and sensitive data. For example, the hackers obtained personal information, including Social Security numbers, for more than 100,000 U.S. naval personnel.

China's military has used stolen technologies to pursue advanced military capabilities of many kinds and drive U.S. defense companies out of the market. The Chinese drone manufacturer Dà-Jiāng Innovations (DJI) controlled more than 70 percent of the global market in 2017, thanks to its unmatched low prices. Its unmanned systems even became the most frequently flown commercial drones by the U.S. Army until they were banned for security reasons.

Chinese espionage is successful in part because the party is able to induce cooperation, wittingly or unwittingly, from individuals, companies, and political leaders. Companies in the United States and other free-market economies often do not report theft of their technology, because they are afraid of losing access to the Chinese market, harming relationships with customers, or prompting federal investigations.

Co-option crosses over to coercion when the Chinese demand that companies adhere to the Communist Party's worldview and forgo criticism of its repressive and aggressive policies. When a Marriott employee using a company social-media account "liked" a pro-Tibet tweet in 2018, the hotel company's website and app were blocked in China for a week, and the employee was fired under pressure from the Chinese government. Last October, when Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team, tweeted his support of the Hong Kong protesters, Chinese state-run television canceled the broadcast of Rockets games.

The Chinese Communist Party has also pursued a broad range of influence efforts in order to manipulate political processes in target nations. Sophisticated Chinese efforts have

been uncovered in Australia and New Zealand to buy influence within universities, bribe politicians, and harass the Chinese diaspora community into becoming advocates for Beijing.

## III

### STRATEGIC EMPATHY

Americans, as Hans Morgenthau noted long ago, tend to view the world only in relation to the United States, and to assume that the future course of events depends primarily on U.S. decisions or plans, or on the acceptance by others of our way of thinking. The term for this tendency is strategic narcissism, and it underlies the long-held assumptions I mentioned earlier: about how greater integration of China into the international order would have a liberalizing effect on the country and alter its behavior in the world.

But there's another way of thinking about how countries behave: strategic empathy. According to the historian Zachary Shore, strategic empathy involves trying to understand how the world looks to others, and how those perceptions, as well as emotions and aspirations, influence their policies and actions. An outlook of strategic empathy, taking into account history and experience, leads to a very different set of assumptions about China—one that is borne out by the facts.

The Chinese Communist Party is not going to liberalize its economy or its form of government. It is not going to play by commonly accepted international rules—rather, it will attempt to undermine and eventually replace them with rules more sympathetic to China's interests. China will continue to combine its form of economic aggression, including unfair trade practices, with a sustained campaign of industrial espionage. In terms of projecting power, China will continue to seek control of strategic geographic locations and establish exclusionary areas of primacy.

Any strategy to reduce the threat of China's aggressive policies must be based on a realistic appraisal of how much leverage the United States and other outside powers have on the internal evolution of China. The influence of those outside powers has structural limits, because the party will not abandon practices it deems crucial to maintaining control. But we do have important tools, quite apart from military power and trade policy.

For one thing, those "Western liberal" qualities that the Chinese see as weaknesses are actually strengths. The free exchange of information and ideas is an extraordinary competitive advantage, a great engine of innovation and prosperity. (One reason Taiwan is seen as such a threat to the People's Republic is because it provides a small-scale yet powerful example of a successful political and economic system that is free and open rather than autocratic and closed.) Freedom of the press and freedom of expression, combined with robust application of the rule of law, have exposed China's predatory business tactics in country after country—and shown China to be an untrustworthy partner.

Diversity and tolerance in free and open societies can be unruly, but they reflect our most basic human aspirations—and they make practical sense too. Many Chinese Americans who remained in the United States after the Tiananmen Square massacre were at the forefront of innovation in Silicon Valley.

Beyond a focus on strengths that the Chinese Communist Party regards as our weaknesses, there are explicit protective steps we must take. They include the following:

- Many universities, research labs, and companies in countries that value the rule of law and individual rights are witting or unwitting accomplices in China's use of technology to repress its people and improve the Chinese military's capabilities. For dual-use technologies, the private sector should seek new partnerships with those who share commitments to free-market economies, representative government, and the rule of law, not with those acting against these principles. Many companies are engaged in joint ventures or partnerships that help China develop technologies suited for internal security, such as surveillance, artificial intelligence, and biogenetics. In one of many examples, a Massachusetts-based company sold DNA-sampling equipment that has helped the Chinese government track Uighurs in Xinjiang. (The company has ended such sales.) Companies that knowingly collaborate with China's efforts to repress its own people or build threatening military capabilities should be penalized.
- Many Chinese companies directly or indirectly involved in domestic human-rights abuses and violation of international treaties are listed on American stock exchanges. Those companies benefit from U.S. and other Western investors. Tougher screening of U.S., European, and Japanese capital markets would help restrict corporate and investor complicity in China's authoritarian agenda. Free-market economies like ours control the majority of the world's capital, and we have far more leverage than we are employing.
- China's use of major telecommunications companies to control communications networks and the internet overseas must be countered. There should no longer be any dispute concerning the need to defend against the multinational technology company Huawei and its role in China's security apparatus. In 2019, a series of investigations revealed incontrovertible evidence of the grave national-security danger associated with a wide array of Huawei's telecommunications equipment. Many Huawei workers are simultaneously employed by China's Ministry of State Security and the intelligence arm of the People's Liberation Army. Huawei technicians have used intercepted cell data to help autocratic leaders in Africa spy on, locate, and silence political opponents. A priority area for multinational cooperation among free societies should be the development of infrastructure, particularly 5G communications, to form trusted networks that protect sensitive and proprietary data.
- We must defend against Chinese agencies that coordinate influence operations abroad—such as the Ministry of State Security, the United Front Work Department, and the Chinese Students

*During our state visit, Xi and his advisers relied heavily on history to convey their message—emphasizing certain subjects and avoiding others.*

and Scholars Association. At the same time, we should try to maximize positive interactions and experiences with the Chinese people. The United States and other free and open societies should consider issuing more visas and providing paths to citizenship for more Chinese—with proper safeguards in place. Chinese who engage with citizens of free countries are the ones who are most likely to question their government's policies—whether from abroad or when they return home.

- The U.S. and other free nations should view expatriate communities as a strength. Chinese abroad—if protected from the meddling and espionage of their government—can provide a significant counter to Beijing's propaganda and disinformation. Investigations and expulsions of Ministry of State Security and other agents should be oriented not only toward protecting the targeted country but also toward protecting the Chinese expatriates within it.

Without effective pushback from the United States and like-minded nations, China will become even more aggressive in promoting its statist economy and authoritarian political model. For me, the state visit to Beijing—and exposure to China's powerful combination of insecurity and ambition—reinforced my belief that the United States and other nations must no longer adhere to a view of China based mainly on Western aspirations. If we compete aggressively, we have reason for confidence. China's behavior is galvanizing opposition among countries that do not want to be vassal states. Internally, the tightening of control is also eliciting opposition. The bravado of Li Keqiang and other officials may be intended to evoke the idea of China as sovereign of “everything beneath heaven,” but many beneath heaven do not, and must not, agree. *A*

*H. R. McMaster, a retired United States Army lieutenant general, is a former White House national security adviser and the author, most recently, of Battlegrounds, from which this article is adapted. He is also the author of Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam (1997).*

PROMOTION

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# Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

## The Secret of *Scooby-Doo*'s Enduring Appeal

*Why on earth has the formulaic series, which debuted half a century ago, outlasted just about everything else on television?*

By Christopher Orr

I grew up watching *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* every Saturday morning. The Hanna-Barbera cartoon had launched in 1969, two years after my birth, so it was precisely in my little-kid sweet spot. Much as I loved it, though, the feeble animation and repetitive plots were apparent even to the young me. Whereas characters such as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny seemed eternal, extending far into the past and future, *Scooby-Doo* felt like a show just for that particular moment, for my specific childhood.

Fast-forward 35 years or so, and to my astonishment, my children loved it just as much as I had. I probably wound up watching more *Scooby-Doo* episodes with my kids than I had watched as a kid. Evidence suggests that my experience is not unique. *Scooby-Doo*, believe it or not, has over the years been the subject of at least 19 TV series (on CBS, ABC, the WB, Cartoon Network, and Boomerang); more than 40 animated films; and two live-action movies in the early 2000s, the first of which grossed \$275 million worldwide. A new series featuring celebrity-guest voices, *Scooby-Doo and Guess Who?*, premiered last year. And a new animated movie, *Scoob!*, starring Zac Efron, Amanda Seyfried, and Tracy Morgan, is scheduled to be released in mid-May.

Which raises the obvious question: What on earth is going on? Why has *Scooby-Doo*—described by the *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott in 2002 as “one of the cheapest, least original products of modern American juvenile culture”—outlasted not only such Hanna-Barbera brethren as *The Flintstones* and *Yogi Bear*, but also pretty much everything else on television? *The Washington Post*'s Hank Stuever once summed up the cartoon's message as “Kids should meddle, dogs are sweet, life is groovy, and if something scares you, you should confront it.” But that hardly seems enough for half a century of on-air appeal.

The essential premise, for those not weaned on the show, is straightforward. A group of four teenagers—some of whom seem considerably older (more on this in a moment)—and a Great Dane, Scooby-Doo, drive around in a van called the Mystery Machine in search of, yes, mysteries. (The gang, like its later Hanna-Barbera cousin, *Josie and the Pussycats*, was originally conceived as a band that would play a musical number each episode.)

The mystery they find almost always appears at first to be paranormal—a vindictive ghost or ghoul, a rampaging dinosaur—but is ultimately revealed as an elaborate hoax involving disguises, holograms, hidden wires, phosphorescent paint, or some combination thereof. Each time the gang unmasks the genuine villain, typically male and on the older side, he utters some variation of “And I would’ve gotten away with it if not for you meddling kids.”

The Mystery Inc. members are Fred, the blond, broad-shouldered presumptive leader of the group (who wears, implausibly, an ascot); Daphne, the fashion-conscious redhead and semi-comical damsel in distress (a stereotype that the show subverted in its later iterations); Velma, the frumpishly sweat-erred and bespectacled brainiac; and Shaggy, the ever-famished slacker-coward defined by his prominent slouch and chin grizzle. Scooby himself—his name was inspired by Frank Sinatra’s “dooby dooby doo” scat in “Strangers in the Night”—is inseparable from Shaggy and in many ways indistinguishable: same appetite, same poltroonery, same plot functions. Essentially split aspects of the same character, the two are not id and superego, but something closer to id and more id. A typical story line involves Daphne getting kidnapped or otherwise endangered; Fred devising a Rube Goldberg-esque, and spectacularly unsuccessful, trap to ensnare the villain; and the case being wrapped up by a blend of Velma’s smarts and Shaggy/Scooby’s bumbling good luck.

The show owed its launch in part to complaints that Saturday-morning cartoons—including Hanna-Barbera’s *Space Ghost*—were becoming too violent. So the producers William Hanna and Joseph Barbera (along with the story writers Joe Ruby and Ken Spears, and the animator Iwao Takamoto) decided that their new show wouldn’t merely solve mysteries; it would demystify them altogether. As any parent knows, the surest way to comfort kids is to offer them an alternative explanation for the horrors that go bump in the night: It was the cat, or the wind, or the uncle who forgot where the guest room was. In the premiere of *Scooby-Doo*, “What a Night for a Knight,” the ambulatory suit of armor freaking everyone out is discovered to be Mr. Wickles, the seemingly hapless museum curator who is also (gasp!) a secret art smuggler. Case closed. Sleep tight.

*Essentially split aspects of the same character, Shaggy and Scooby are not id and superego, but something closer to id and more id.*

No less an arbiter of reality than Carl Sagan hailed the show as a “public service … in which paranormal claims are systematically investigated and every case is found to be explicable in prosaic terms.” Later variations of the show tried tweaking the formula. Some featured real monsters (including a 1985 miniseries titled *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo*, starring Vincent Price as the warlock Vincent Van Ghoul). One, *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo*, recast the gang as elementary-school-aged. And characters were regularly subtracted or added—notably Scrappy-Doo, Scooby’s pint-size and pugnacious nephew. But the show consistently returned to its core premise.

Given that Nancy Drew and the Hardy boys had long since established the template of liberated teens outsmarting adult crooks, surely the show’s enduring success rests on more than that. Having a friendly dog involved has helped, certainly, though placing a Great Dane front and center is no guarantee of universal popularity, as Marmaduke fans will sadly inform you. A more telling clue, I think, can be found in the show’s timing. It debuted during a period of acute generational conflict and anxiety: the Vietnam/Nixon years, the “Never trust anyone over 30” years. Whether by accident or design, the makeup of the Mystery Inc. gang played perfectly into that moment.

A fundamental division has always prevailed within the group, occasionally hinted at but rarely made explicit, between Fred and Daphne on the one hand and Velma and Shaggy/Scooby on the other. The former looked and sounded older; the idea that Fred and Daphne were a couple (or an ex-couple) has been frequently suggested. And how else to account for that deepest mystery of the Scoobyverse—Fred’s fondness for his orange ascot? On some level, viewers are intended to see him as a grown-up. Daphne is a slightly more complicated case. But her maybe-relationship with Fred, her overt sexualization (her outfits, unlike Velma’s, are aggressively formfitting), and the eventual revelation that her family wealth supports Mystery Inc. clearly position her as the second quasi-adult in the group. She even has a scarf that mirrors Fred’s ascot—neckwear as a signifier of maturity.

By contrast, Velma, who is cited as the youngest of the gang, stands out as the quintessential TV representation of the smart, awkward teenager, right down to the glasses without which she is virtually blind. She has also been rumored for decades among fans to be gay, or at least bisexual. James Gunn, who wrote the screenplay for the 2002 live-action film, said he was “pretty sure” Velma is gay; Linda Cardellini, who played the character, described her sexuality as “a little ambiguous.” A kiss—relatively chaste—between Velma and Daphne was even shot for the film as a kind of inside joke, though it didn’t make the final cut.

Shaggy, meanwhile, has consistently been reputed to be a stoner, thanks to his slovenly look, his persistent case of the munchies, and his addiction, shared by Scooby, to a treat called “Scooby Snacks.” (The 2002 movie has fun with the stoner myth, too.) Throw in the fact that Shaggy was voiced for the better part of four decades by Casey Kasem, the DJ responsible for *American Top 40*, and the character was a walking bundle of youth-culture signifiers.

What better way to toy, below the surface, with the cultural tensions of the late '60s and early '70s? Juxtapose two borderline misfits in Velma and Shaggy—who are perhaps experimenting a little with sexuality and drugs—with two grown-up stand-ins for the more conventional sort in Fred and Daphne, and then let the offbeat characters consistently (yet all in good fun) one-up the establishment types. Even the show's signature line, “And I would've gotten away with it if not for you meddling kids,” sounds like it could have been uttered by Richard Nixon.

But the genius of the young mystery hunters is that they were not prisoners of their era. (In fact, they were based explicitly on characters from an earlier show, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*—one of the first TV series to make teenagers leading characters—in which a pre-Gilligan Bob Denver played Maynard G. Krebs, a kind of proto-Shaggy, right down to the chin scruff.) You don't have to envision the group's internal dialectic as the counterculture versus the establishment. The show's longevity demonstrates that the metaphor works equally well as outsiders versus popular kids. Or, most primally, as children versus parents.

Indeed, over the past 50 years the *Scooby-Doo* characters have become almost archetypal, Joseph Campbell-worthy portraits of teenagerdom. Watch just about any ensemble teen show or movie, and you'll find your Freds and Daphnes (often as foils or outright villains) and your Velmas and Shaggys. Perhaps no one applied this paradigm more self-consciously than the writer-director Joss Whedon in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which winked at its predecessor by imagining a group of teen monster-fighters led by a superhero version of Daphne. Buffy and her pals even referred to themselves as the “Scoobies.” Whedon later claimed, tongue only partly in cheek, “All great fiction is *Scooby-Doo*-like.”

So we watch—and our kids watch, and eventually *their* kids will watch—four so-called teenagers and their Great Dane roam the countryside, pulling the mask off some fraudulent phantom or counterfeit creeper. They'll be headed for your local multiplex soon enough. And fear not: They won't ever really leave. *A*

*Christopher Orr is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.*

## Variations on a Phrase by Cormac McCarthy

By Linda Gregerson

Like the carpenter whose tools were so dull  
he couldn't for the life of him devise a miter joint

Like the mattress left out on the curb all night

Like the woman  
so fallen out of practice, she can no longer sing from the hymnal  
Like the smoker on the scaffolding

Like the sleeper on his cardboard on the pavement Like the rain

Like the dog whose human so loves her Whose hip  
will never heal again

Like the dog who trembles in pain on her leash whose human  
so loves her, he cannot bear to let her go

Like the takeout tossed into the bin for recycling Like  
the crosswalk the postbox the flashing light

Like the beggar whose accordion knows only  
the single musical phrase Like the air  
with its particulates Like the idling bus

Like the cherries at the fruit stall Like the cyclist Like  
the bus Like the cyclist Like his cellphone Like the bus

Like the beggar so bored with the music, he  
has never sounded out the rest of the song Like the carpenter

whose work went so slowly for the dullness of his tools,  
he had no time to sharpen them

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*Linda Gregerson's most recent collection is Prodigal: New and Selected Poems (2015). This poem references a passage from Cormac McCarthy's The Crossing.*

PROMOTION

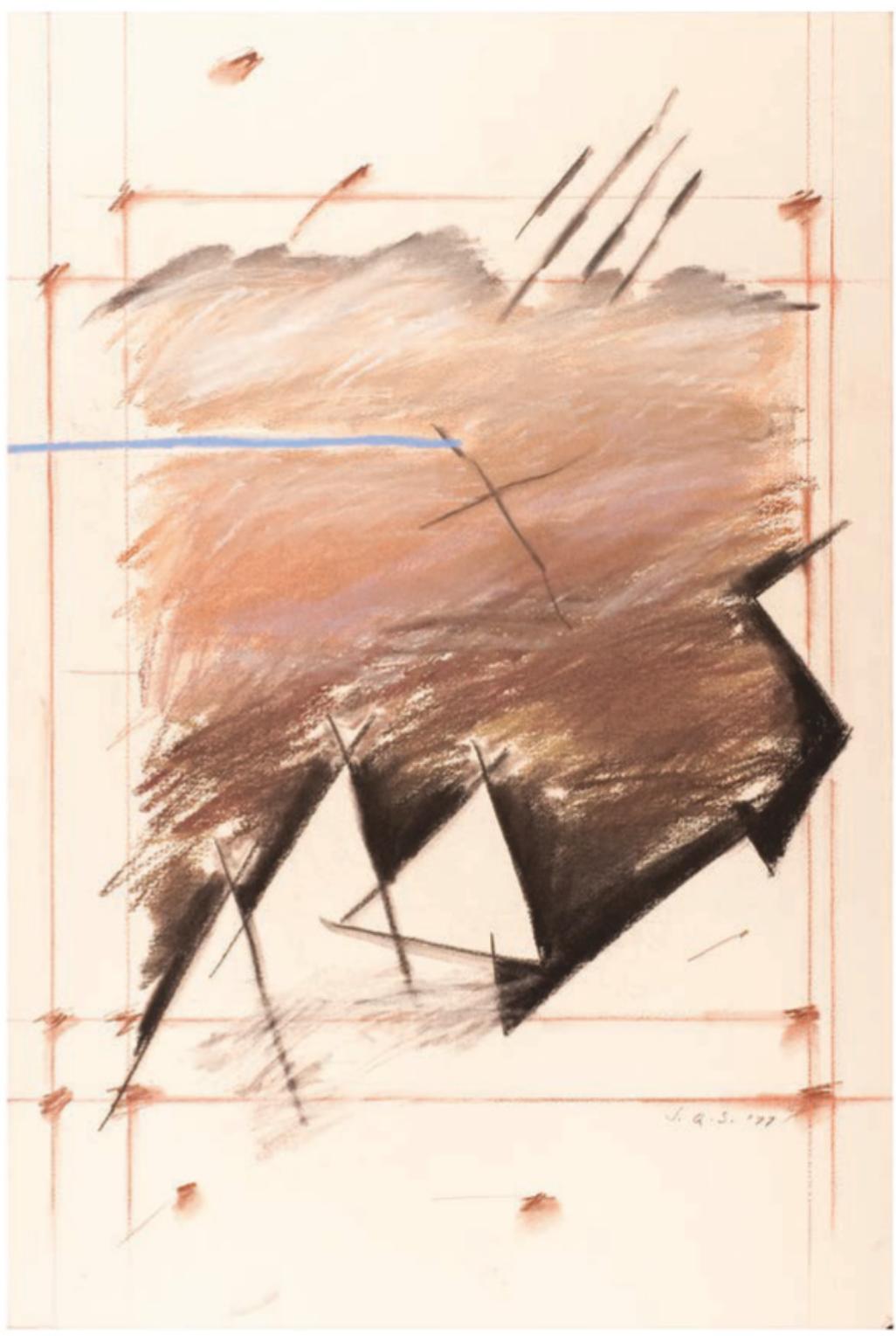


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BOOKS

## A Trail of Tears and Money

*The deportation of Native people westward in the 1830s was fueled by busy bankers and unchecked avarice. Yet it could have been stopped.*

By Caitlin Fitz

They held back tears as they left, touching the autumn leaves one last time. The Choctaw had fought alongside Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812, and a U.S. official had ensured their territory in perpetuity. Now they were being forced west anyway, the first indigenous nation to be expelled from its ancestral homelands under President Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act. Abandoning the schools, spinning wheels, and carpentry shops they had built throughout what is now Mississippi, the Choctaw embarked on an arduous journey to Oklahoma, their eviction "an experiment on human life," as an outraged Massachusetts congressman warned. Survivors called their new home "the Land of Death."

Expulsion was a windfall for the white Mississippians who raced into Choctaw houses, harvesting the crops and supping on the spoils. Over the next decade, the United States repeated the pattern from Ohio to Alabama, banishing some 80,000 women, men, and children beyond the Mississippi River, to the western fringe of an unabashed American empire. "They are on an *outside* of us," a Senate committee exulted, "and in a place which will ever remain an *outside*." More than 25,000 Native people died.

In *Unworthy Republic*, Claudio Saunt, a historian at the University of Georgia, offers a damning synthesis of the federal betrayals, mass deportations, and exterminatory violence that defined the 1830s. Two of his principal arguments—that mass expulsion wasn't inevitable and that it was a "turning point for indigenous peoples and for the United States"—are largely accepted among scholars. His third, that it was administratively "unprecedented" in American history, invites debate about longer histories of dispossession. But Saunt's greatest contribution is to weld the narrative of deportation to new histories of capitalism that emphasize slavery's centrality to national economic development: He follows the money, exhaustively researching company correspondence and government records to show how bankers in Boston and London financed the dirty work of dispossession in collaboration with southern speculators. The result is a haunting story of racialized cruelty and greed, which came to define a pivotal period in U.S. and indigenous history alike.

It is also a story of how—despite all the money that white people stood to make—expulsion almost didn't happen, thanks to a storm of protest from indigenous people and the white allies they activated. And after it unfolded, the consequences lingered. As Saunt persuasively observes, we have yet to reckon with them today.

**THE MASS DEPORTATIONS** of the 1830s superseded an earlier federal policy of cultural assimilation and piecemeal expansion. Beginning in the 1790s, U.S. officials spread throughout eastern North America and pressured the continent's longtime residents

to change their ways: to wear pantaloons, use plows, pray to Jesus. The policy was paternalistic and pernicious, a tool of empire. But Native people strategically played along, adopting the customs of “civilization”—such as missionary schools and writing—that could help them exert their authority. Sometimes Natives and newcomers, the white families lurching in by the wagonload as the century turned, coexisted. Choctaw were “pretty good neighbors,” recalled a federal official who was grateful to share their food and buy their farm labor for a “very reasonable wage.”

Through the mid-1820s, U.S. politicians hailed this “civilization policy” as a self-evident success. Indigenous people were adapting, while the United States won partial and patchy land cessions, a process accelerated by the War of 1812. From 1800 to 1820, the United States wrested 600,000 square miles from its indigenous neighbors.

But Native Americans still controlled millions of acres east of the Mississippi, particularly in the South. In the 1820s, Creek Indians owned a fifth of present-day Alabama; Choctaw and Chickasaw, half of Mississippi. They farmed some of the world’s blackest, most fertile soil, the kind that might convert men into millionaires—especially if cultivated intensively, by workers under the lash. In fact, wealthy indigenous southerners already owned several thousand enslaved black people.

White southerners grumbled, then growled. They looked at the cravat-wearing, Bible-quoting Native Americans who farmed that soil, and they felt “feverish,” one observer remarked. Newspapers spread the contagion. Worried that northern politicians would oppose further indigenous land cessions in the South—thereby threatening slaveholders’ power—a Georgia columnist reminded readers of the “inalienable rights you possess to your slaves and to your Indian territory!”

But how to justify the eviction of people who had so effectively adopted white Americans’ ways, and at the government’s own insistence? With falsities, for starters. Although the indigenous population in eastern North America was stable and probably even growing, advocates of expulsion argued the opposite: Unless white Americans moved them west, Native people were doomed to disappear. Some blamed Native Americans for their own supposed decline, insisting that they hunted too much and farmed too little—charges at odds with the reality of indigenous agricultural expertise. Leave or vanish: It was a self-serving and self-fulfilling fiction, one that enabled advocates of dispossession to abjure responsibility while simultaneously casting themselves as humanitarian heroes.

Creek leaders criticized such “statements calculated to mislead the minds of good men.” “We repeat again,” the *Cherokee Phoenix* editor Elias Boudinot wearily wrote, “that the Cherokees are not on the

decline.” But it was easier for white Americans to believe what served their interests. Published in 1826, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*—which elevated the myth of the vanishing Indian to a romanticized cornerstone of white U.S. identity—sold like backcountry hotcakes.

**ANDREW JACKSON** had risen to fame during the War of 1812 as a frontier fighter, a killer of Creek. Within months of assuming the presidency in 1829, he proposed his hallmark legislation: a bill that effectively empowered him to push all Native people west of the Mississippi by instituting “an exchange” of their eastern homelands for ill-defined western parcels. The measure, he said, would save them from extinction.

Deviating as it did from the assimilationist gradualism of the “civilization policy,” this “state-sponsored mass expulsion of indigenous people,” in Saunt’s words, ignited scorching opposition. Native people sent diplomats to Washington, published pamphlets, and petitioned Congress by the thousands. Motivated by their arguments, northern white evangelicals—whose missionaries had lived in indigenous communities for decades—swung into action. Missionary leaders wrote incensed editorials; Pennsylvanians acknowledged themselves “invaders”; white women went door-to-door with petitions of their own, weathering public ridicule for their unladylike political meddling. Congressman Edward Everett of Massachusetts even disputed the bill’s name. “*Removal*,” he bellowed, is “a soft word . . . and words are delusive.” The vote was so close: 102 yeas in the House, 97 angry nays, who would have triumphed if the Constitution’s notorious three-fifths clause hadn’t inflated slaveholders’ power.

Jackson’s deportation act didn’t operate alone. It worked in tandem with calls for outright and sometimes even “exterminatory” warfare, including the U.S.-Sauk War (fought in the Midwest in 1832) and the Second U.S.-Seminole War (waged in Florida from 1835 to 1842). It also worked alongside state laws in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi that asserted sovereignty over indigenous nations in the late 1820s and the 1830s, subjecting them to the South’s racial hierarchy and denying them legal protection. The states’ goal: to terrorize Native people until they fled. (Consider Mrs. Oosunaley, a Cherokee woman who—along with her friend—fought off an armed Georgia sheriff attempting to rape her. She approached a magistrate “and exhibited to him her wounds,” the *Cherokee Phoenix* reported, only to be informed that “no Indian testimony could be received.”) These state laws defied earlier federal treaties that, indigenous people contended, should have prevailed. In 1832, the U.S. Supreme Court concurred, decisively asserting federal power. But Jackson famously declined to enforce the Court’s decision.

*In the 1820s,  
Creek Indians  
owned a fifth  
of present-day  
Alabama;  
Choctaw and  
Chickasaw, half  
of Mississippi.*

The result was conquest by law, and by lawlessness. “Hurrah boys! Let’s steal all we can,” laughed one Georgia speculator, his partners scrambling for the spoils like children rushing to a cracked piñata. Soldiers and squatters raped mothers and daughters, chased families from their homes with clubs and whips, “and then slept in their still-warm beds,” Saunt writes. Families bolted into woods and swamps, starving on diets of bark. Terrified of what would happen if white vigilantes heard them, fugitive mothers suffocated their crying babies, then choked back their own sobs.

INTO THIS ACCOUNT of expulsion, Saunt injects new insights about the development of American capitalism. He shows how southern politicians—better known for vilifying federal power—worked with northern allies to mobilize legions of officers, agents, clerks, and soldiers in support of expulsion, and at mind-boggling expense: millions per deportee in today’s dollars, Saunt estimates, a figure that includes expenses from military operations like the Second U.S.-Seminole War. In addition to funding battles, that money bankrolled corrupt administrators, private contractors, and opportunistic provisioners who collectively moved people west on the cheap and then pocketed the profits. Little went directly to Native people, who traversed cholera-ridden routes without medical care, fighting hypothermia with rags and starvation with six-year-old pork discarded by the Army as too old to eat, then repurposed by a military official who knew desperation when he saw it. But if expulsion was expensive, Saunt argues, the land was worth more, especially when repopulated with enslaved black people. Lining up his own calculations alongside recent studies of slavery, Saunt casts indigenous expulsion and the domestic slave trade as twinned trails of tears, economic successes rooted in profound moral failures.

Even after indigenous families had been forced out, tens of millions of antebellum dollars were required to transform their farms into slave-labor camps (as more historians are calling them). Surveyors, charging by the mile, had to lattice the land with their measurement chains, so that faraway bankers could buy and sell it with ease. Gins and seeds and slaves had to be delivered, overseers hired and equipped with guns and whips. In forensic detail, Saunt exposes how investment bankers on Wall Street and beyond got rich not simply by financing slavery but also by financing deportation. They were conquerors armed with spreadsheets, and their support of expulsion did more than empower the South’s slave empire; their profits helped lay railroad tracks across the continent and subway tracks across New York City.

With such money to be made, how could opponents of deportation possibly have triumphed? At times,

*After indigenous families had been forced out, their farms were transformed into slave-labor camps.*

UNWORTHY  
REPUBLIC: THE  
DISPOSSESSION  
OF NATIVE  
AMERICANS  
AND THE ROAD  
TO INDIAN  
TERRITORY

Claudio Saunt

W. W. NORTON

Saunt’s pessimistic narrative of unchecked and racialized avarice operates in tension with his more hopeful emphasis on anti-expulsion activism, and with his broader insistence that expulsion wasn’t inevitable. He might have strengthened his case by analyzing Jackson’s Whig Party adversaries, whose opposition to deportation defined their coalition more than any other issue of the 1830s. While Jacksonians championed the ever-expanding territorial and agricultural empire that Saunt so powerfully describes, Whigs embraced economic diversification and intensive commercial development. Their party was more likely to eschew deadly and costly violence in favor of grudging compromise and coexistence. In the 1830s and ’40s, for example, Whigs in New York successfully opposed Jacksonian efforts to expel the neighboring Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois). Pressured by indigenous resistance, Whigs argued instead for taxing the Haudenosaunee and confining them to smaller tracts of land. It is not a stretch to think that their alternative capitalist vision—hardly a generous deal—could have triumphed more widely.

In a probing afterword, Saunt tracks white Americans’ stolen wealth—and Native Americans’ resulting poverty—through the generations. The Civil War, he notes, forced otherwise reluctant white Americans to grapple with the nation’s origins in human bondage; the ongoing civil-rights movement has kept the conversation alive. But “there has been no comparable reckoning with the conquest of the continent,” he writes, “little serious reflection on its centrality to the rise of the United States, and minimal sustained engagement with the people who lost their homelands.”

*Unworthy Republic* welcomes readers to that reckoning. What would it mean for the United States to restore land and water rights, uphold treaties, and respect indigenous sovereignty now and ever after? Readers might also follow contemporary Native activists by reconsidering today’s other policy debates in light of continued dispossession. If we acknowledge the land to be stolen, for instance, on what grounds (literal and figurative) can we exclude present-day immigrants? Above all, Saunt’s uneasy toggling between commercial greed and anti-expulsion activism raises the question of whether American capitalism will always represent an amoral pursuit of profits, or whether it can ever factor justice into its bottom line.

Saunt doesn’t ask such questions, but he invites them. Our republic, one hopes, need not be unworthy forever. *A*

Caitlin Fitz, who teaches history at Northwestern University, is the author of *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions*.

## BOOKS

# The Sculptor Who Made Art Move

*How Alexander Calder gave objects a life of their own*

By Rachel Corbett



CRINKLY WITH A RED DISC (MAQUETTE), CIRCA 1973, © 2020 CALDER FOUNDATION, NEW YORK / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

If Alexander Calder were alive to visit the kids' department of Pottery Barn or West Elm today, he would probably feel deeply torn, which tells you a lot about America's best-known sculptor. He might well say that the shelves of knockoff mobiles "nauseate" him, as he did when DIY mobile-making guides started proliferating among craft hobbyists in the 1950s. Gimmicky popularizing of his work pained him. Then again, he would likely take real pleasure in discovering that his greatest sculptural innovation has found new life as an enchanting crib toy.

Calder, born in a suburb of Philadelphia in 1898, came of age at a time when prominent artists and thinkers had begun to consider play a serious pastime. "Everything good in life—love, nature, the arts, and family jests—is play," Vladimir Nabokov declared in 1925. By the last decade of Calder's life—he died in 1976—the view had acquired prescriptive authority. "It is in playing and only in playing," the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott argued, "that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."

It would be hard to find a more apt embodiment of that vision than Calder, who took a professional approach to play beginning in his 20s, as a designer of push-and-pull toys. Many of the same lively adjectives are commonly used to describe both the man and his art: *playful, charming, colorful, big, unpretentious, brilliant*. Yet his work also reflected his "whole personality," not simply his high-spirited temperament: Calder's sculptures are the products of a notably eclectic education. He was a student first of engineering and later of the modernist-art movements—surrealism, Dadaism, neoplasticism—that he encountered in Paris, where he lived on and off for five decades, starting in the 1920s.

A visit to the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's Paris studio in 1930 awakened Calder to the possibilities of abstract art, a concept he'd only begun to consider. Seeing the artist's grids of primary-colored rectangles, he felt like a "baby being slapped to make his lungs start working," he wrote later. Mondrian described his work as "fast" because it stimulated a viewer's retinas to rhythmically track its lines and colors, an experience that gave Calder the idea to make his work move too. And from the Spanish painter Joan Miró, whom he met in 1928, Calder may have plucked the petal-like forms that adorned many of the new rotating sculptures he began creating in 1931. Another friend he made in Paris, Marcel Duchamp, coined the term *mobile* to describe the new art form.

But the influence of Calder's contemporaries shouldn't undercut the originality of the artist's vision. That is the argument Jed Perl makes in his exhaustive

two-volume biography, *Calder*, which now concludes with *The Conquest of Space: The Later Years: 1940–1976*. (*The Conquest of Time: The Early Years: 1898–1940* came out in 2017.) A contributing art critic for *The New York Review of Books*, Perl offers a sweeping dismissal of previous assessments of Calder, particularly those that emphasized the lighthearted and derivative dimensions of his work. “All the critics of Calder’s art, from the philistines to the intellectuals, missed the point,” he announces, a dose of hyperbole that might prompt some readers to ask just how clear-eyed this reverent guide can be about his subject. But Perl’s devotion has fueled a passionate, erudite, and scrupulously researched reckoning with one of the 20th century’s most exciting artists. If some of the minutiae packed into nearly 1,400 pages induce yawns (Calder found one ship voyage to Europe “uneventful, very smooth,” and his fellow passengers rather dull), they don’t impede Perl’s case for Calder’s seriousness and stature.

Perl situates Calder in the lineage of modern-art pioneers such as Auguste Rodin, Paul Cézanne, Constantin Brancusi, and Pablo Picasso, “who reconsidered what it meant to create life.” They weren’t, as Perl sees it, simply upending academic conventions and representational techniques. They were intent on transforming “the life of the work of art itself” and unlocking new sources of aesthetic vitality. “For Calder, this meant that the object had to take on a life of its own. Calder’s objects began to move.” A modern master, he enlisted science—in particular, physics—in the service of a spatial and kinetic leap forward in art.

**N O B I O G R A P H I C A L S U B J E C T** would complain about an assessment as ambitious as Perl’s, but Calder’s self-presentation was far more reticent. He didn’t like to talk about the deeper meaning of his work, so much so that when asked questions about it, he might mumble incomprehensibly or grunt gibberish like “ercaberk.” His life followed an undramatic arc: A middle-class boy from Philadelphia, he grew up to be a faithful husband, a responsible father of two, and an engaged citizen who protested the Vietnam War and gave to charitable causes. What few vices Calder had—he loved sweets and wine—caused little harm beyond his own waistline. He was a family man and liked keeping company with other “devoted duos.” (When asked why he didn’t care for Picasso, Calder said it was because he wasn’t a good father.)

His own parents—his mother was a painter and his father was a sculptor—attentively nurtured their son’s early creative inclinations. Calder hammered sheets of brass into animal figurines in the family’s basement workshop, and transformed his bedroom into a “maze of strings” (his sister’s phrase) that raised and lowered the shades, and turned the lights on and

off. But he took his time entering the family trade. Calder chose to study engineering in college because, he later claimed, it was “the only profession I had ever heard of, except for ‘artist’—and I did like mechanics.” At the esteemed Stevens Institute of Technology, in New Jersey, he wrote his senior paper on how steam propels turbines—a harbinger, Perl says, of Calder’s interest in wind-propelled mobiles.

After graduating in 1919, Calder spent a few years testing out career options, among them becoming a merchant marine and working in a ship’s boiler room. The experience provided a taste of adventure, but also an unexpected bit of aesthetic training: Perl joins others, including Calder himself, in locating the origin story of his art in that experience. Having slept on deck one night, he awoke to see in the sky “a fiery red sunrise on one side and the moon looking like a silver coin on the other.” The astonishing sight “left me with a lasting sensation of the solar system,” he wrote decades later. Perl goes further. “This was a natural occurrence,” he writes, “but to Calder it was much more than that. The sun was rising and the moon was fading and the two developments were absolutely interrelated, just as everything in the solar system was somehow related.” Calder had glimpsed the animating principle of his art, “an art not of isolated or singular objects,” as Perl frames it, “but of a dialogue between objects—of disparate but linked elements and forces.”

The following year, in the fall of 1923, Calder enrolled in classes at the Art Students League of New York. What became stylistic hallmarks of his work began to appear—in his one-line drawings of animals, and in the uncanny portraits of friends sculpted from a single thread of wire. He started hammering and curling strips of brass into spiral-shaped jewelry, which he sold and gave away to female friends and patrons, his boyish charm on display.

Perl keeps his eye on the ambition and intellectual rigor beneath the image of Calder the naïf stumbling upon success and beauty, though some of the artist’s contemporaries, at least initially, were more amused than impressed. Trivializing the young American was all too easy: During visits to Paris in the ’20s and ’30s, he was known for wearing an orange suit and for puppeteering a miniature circus in his studio. He would sit on the floor with his tiny trapezists, horses, and weight lifters made from wire, cork, and fabric. Then he would hand-operate the show: hitting a springboard to fling an acrobat onto a horse, lowering an aerialist down a cord, inflating a clown’s balloon through a tube connected to his mouth. The novelist Thomas Wolfe attended one of these performances in New York and wrote a scathing parody of it in *You Can’t Go Home Again*. Calder appears as the character Piggy Logan, a thick-handed ringmaster whose circus

*When asked about his work, Calder might grunt gibberish like “ercaberk.”*

act symbolizes the wasteful frivolity of the era's idle rich. In Wolfe's view, Calder was the clown.

The portrayal felt unfair to Calder, who was genuinely captivated by the carnival spectacle. "I love the space of the circus. I made some drawings of nothing but the tent. The whole thing of the vast space—I've always loved it," he once said in an interview. The circus was also a fascinating experiment in spatial relations. The expansive volume under the tent, the spherical ring, the arcs of leaping gymnasts, the diagonals of tightrope were like the elements in the solar system, orbiting around one another, all bound by gravity. The *Cirque Calder*, as his performative installation became known, was a crucial stepping-stone toward the artist's classical style, "the magisterial lyricism of his greatest mobiles," Perl writes.

Word of the *Cirque Calder* spread when an influential performing-arts journalist praised its technical ingenuity and remarkably intricate miniatures: "All of this is arranged and balanced according to the laws of physics in action so that it allows for the miracles of circus acrobatics." The writer Jean Cocteau was an early visitor, and in 1930, the prominent architect Frederick Kiesler lured the city's creative haut monde—Mondrian, the architect Le Corbusier, and the artist Fernand Léger—to see Calder's peculiar parlor trick. Léger soon inducted Calder into the Parisian modernist elite with an essay he wrote for Calder's 1931 exhibition of elegant wire sculptures at Galerie Percier, the artist's first foray into abstraction and his first prestigious gallery show. "Looking at these new works," Léger wrote, "I think of Satie, Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, Brancusi, Arp ... Calder is of the same line."

But that anointment, however heady, didn't capture the kinetic dimension of Calder's vision, which soon became a driving force in the evolution of his art. He added motors to his wire-and-wood sculptures to make them rotate and dance. "Just as one can compose colors, or forms, so one can compose motions," Calder said. Perl probes and elaborates, singling out, for example, the concept of "parity" in physics as fundamental to Calder's ideas about symmetry, balance, and movement. In his mobiles, elements on one side of the string may balance out those on the other, Perl writes. At the same time, they are locked in a complex dance of "disparity": Shapes wield different energies, depending on where they fall in relation to the central axis. And then Calder stopped using motors; by 1940, he was letting the mobiles move on their own in the wind. These new works are "freedom incarnate," Perl writes; "they play by themselves."

**YOU COULD SAY** that Calder did a kind of dance of disparity himself as his career progressed, seemingly guided less by formal scientific or artistic doctrines

than by the urge to keep experimenting and playing. Starting in the late 1930s and on through the '70s, he built freestanding sheet-metal sculptures, many of them red or black biomorphic forms, that catapulted him beyond the confines of the art gallery. These large, stationary works, dubbed "stabiles," still dealt with motion; now it was spectators who moved, in a circle around the sculptures. Yet even as he produced monumental public pieces—filling plazas and parks around the world—Calder remained much the same modest custodian of his creations that he had been back when staging his miniature circuses. He liked to keep his hands busy making "objects"—the word he preferred to *sculpture*—and his stabiles, unlike lots of other public art, conformed to no fixed theoretical school. The artist who often gave works away sometimes let his collectors go ahead and repaint them in different colors.

Calder's hands-off approach led to an exceptionally hands-on form of engagement with his work, the ethos of play come full circle. At the Museum of Modern Art retrospective that celebrated him in 1943—he was a mere 45—a sign read PLEASE TOUCH, a directive that had been in place at Calder exhibitions for the previous decade. "The artist was allowing his admirers to test the limits of traditional museum-going behavior, much as he had tested the limits of traditional three-dimensional art when he made sculpture move," Perl writes.

Yet balancing insouciance and seriousness proved a challenge, too, even for a master of disparity like Calder. When the Guggenheim held a retrospective in 1964, 12 years before Calder died of a heart attack at age 78, children flooded the show, delighted to find tactile sculptures hung at their height. "My fan mail is enormous—everybody is under six," Calder joked, except he wasn't entirely amused. He hoped to "remedy the situation," he wrote, by hanging his mobiles higher when the show traveled to Paris, where it would include "many large stabiles of the dreadnought variety ... This may raise the age limit." The news that the huge crowds at the Guggenheim were damaging his work prompted more immediate action: Plexiglass cases were placed around the most fragile pieces, and others were moved out of reach. When objects take on a life of their own—Calder's great artistic feat—the results may be creatively liberating, but also bittersweet. "Don't touch" became the policy at the Guggenheim, and it's been in effect at Calder shows ever since. *A*

CALDER: THE CONQUEST OF SPACE: THE LATER YEARS: 1940–1976  
Jed Perl

KNOPF

*Rachel Corbett is the author of You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin, which won the 2016 Marfield Prize.*



A

## BOOKS

# Robert Stone's Dark Dream of America

*His novelistic ambition to define the national condition is more relevant than ever.*

By George Packer

Robert Stone was one of those novelists who try to wrap their arms around America itself. His career spanned almost 50 years, but he never really stopped writing about the '60s and their fallout—American power and virtue collapsing in an eruption of violence and drugs and moral chaos, under the 10,000-mile, decades-long shadow of Vietnam. In 1971, Stone contrived to get a London alternative weekly to send him to Saigon so that he could research a novel about the war that was consuming American life. "I realized if I wanted to be a 'definer' of the American condition, I would have to go to Vietnam," he later said.

Stone's America is a dark place, but its failures are commensurate with the scale of its aspirations. His protagonists—they can be roughly divided into seekers and ironists, each representing aspects of their creator—are haunted by a vision of life more abundant, a sense of possibility that's betrayed by their own weakness and the destabilizing undercurrents of history. His prose, with its potent mix of hard-boiled irony, romantic excess, and violent dissolution, can render the mood of a whole period instantly indelible. "If the world is going to contain elephants pursued by flying men," thinks John Converse, the small-time American journalist in *Dog Soldiers* (1974) who's preparing to smuggle heroin from Saigon back to the States, "people are just naturally going to want to get high."

Stone once told an interviewer that his subject was "America and Americans." That kind of ambition produced his best work, but in a way it also dates him. The '60s feel antiquated, and so does the notion of the novelist as definer of the national condition. *Whose America?*, readers today would ask. *Which Americans?* In our fragmented time, the project seems presumptuous, if not delusional. We no longer look to novels for essential reflections of a national narrative. Just five

years after his death, Stone, one of the major postwar novelists, is in danger of being forgotten.

Madison Smartt Bell, a friend of Stone's and a novelist himself, is making a bid to secure Stone's place in American culture by publishing the first full-length biography of him, *Child of Light*, while editing a collection of his nonfiction and a Library of America volume of three of his eight novels. A look back at the writer and his work, especially his earliest novels, turns out to be well timed. In books that deserve to endure, Stone anticipates the present in surprising, unsettling ways.

Stone was born in 1937 in Brooklyn. He was abandoned early by his father and raised by his mother, Gladys, a public-school teacher who suffered from mental illness, possibly schizophrenia. Their life together was unstable and isolated, "two against the world," he later said. They moved among single-room-occupancy hotels and, after Gladys's condition cost her her job, homeless shelters. Stone enrolled in and sometimes boarded at a Catholic school on the East Side of Manhattan, where, between frequent beatings, the Marist Brothers taught him to read Latin and write well. Catholic education also induced a short period of intense religiosity, which, after it ended, left a lifelong hole in Stone's soul where God had been.

By Bell's account in *Child of Light* (compulsively readable but reliant almost exclusively on Stone and his wife as sources), Stone survived his grim childhood thanks to intelligence, street wits, and the ability to retreat for long periods into his imagination. He suffered from besetting fears and bouts of rage and depression, and in his teens he began the heavy drinking that both sustained and plagued him all his life. Drunkenness and atheism got him kicked out of high school just before he was to graduate with a coveted college scholarship. He enlisted in the Navy

for three years of stability, working as a radioman and journalist on a research expedition to Antarctica. After mustering out in 1958, he returned to New York, where he met a young student named Janice Burr in an NYU writing class. When she became pregnant, they married (and stayed married for 55 wandering, often strained, ultimately “unbreakable” years). In 1960 the Stones moved to New Orleans for a year of lousy jobs and bohemian poverty.

The New Orleans of early-'60s civil-rights battles, with its assortment of right-wing racists, do-gooders, pot-smoking hipsters, and con artists, gave Stone the material for his first novel, *A Hall of Mirrors*, published in 1967. “Stone’s approach to the sociopolitical situation is utterly oblique,” Bell writes. “With the characters paying little attention to it, it simply builds itself out of inchoate dark matter, like the late-afternoon New Orleans rainstorms.” *A Hall of Mirrors* traces a geometry that Stone, a master of novelistic architecture, would go on to use many times: He intercuts among three protagonists who drift along on events, almost without agency, sliding downward but struggling toward some meaning that they never reach, gathering great narrative momentum as they converge on a plane of social tension that’s headed toward an apocalypse.

Rheinhardt, a “juicehead” and former clarinet virtuoso who has squandered his talent out of self-destructive spite, arrives in New Orleans by Greyhound in the aftermath of Mardi Gras. He stumbles into a job as an announcer for an ultraconservative radio station, fabricating inflammatory reports that today ought to be called fake news. The station owner, a plutocratic bigot named Bingamon, explains to Rheinhardt: “People can’t see because they don’t have the orientation, isn’t that right? And a lot of what we’re trying to do is to give them that orientation.” Bingamon’s purpose is to incite hatred and start a race war that will crush black people’s political aspirations. Rheinhardt is too lost in private despair to object.

He falls in with Geraldine, a young drifter from West Virginia—one of Stone’s few successfully realized female characters. For a time, Geraldine and Rheinhardt make a wounded pair in the French Quarter, until he can’t bear the intimacy and drives her away. These scenes are full of a strange pathos, as when Rheinhardt notices a cigarette burn on Geraldine’s stomach and says,

“You been ill used. You’re a salamander.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re a salamander because you walk through fire and you live on air.”

Geraldine closed her eyes.

“I wish,” she said.

*Stone never really stopped writing about the '60s and their fallout—American power and virtue collapsing in an eruption of moral chaos.*

The third protagonist is their upstairs neighbor, Morgan Rainey—a disturbed seeker after “humanness,” his own and others’, who goes door-to-door conducting surveys in black neighborhoods and becomes the unwitting tool of Bingamon’s scheme to gut the welfare rolls.

These three meet their separate fates in the novel’s long climax, Bingamon’s Patriotic Revival, a stadium rally in which a staged riot spins out of control. Stone was a realist—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos were among his influences—and a lifelong believer in the moral valence of fiction; he shunned the surrealism and metafiction of his contemporaries John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon. But *A Hall of Mirrors*, like much of Stone’s other work, ends in a hallucinatory spasm of altered consciousness and rhetorical excess. Geraldine, stoned and desperate, searches the stadium in vain for Rheinhardt, who is onstage, wasted, preparing to conduct an imaginary symphony orchestra. On cue, he exhorts the crowd of thousands with a perversion of virtuosity that displays Stone’s power to combine irony and terror:

“Let us consider the American Way … The American Way is innocence,” Rheinhardt announced. “In all situations we must and shall display an innocence so vast and awesome that the entire world will be reduced by it. American innocence shall rise in mighty clouds of vapor to the scent of heaven and confound the nations! Our legions, patriots, are not like those of the other fellow. We are not perverts with rotten brains as the English is. We are not a sordid little turd like the French. We are not nuts like the Kraut. We are not strutting maniacs like the gibroney and the greaseball! … When your American soldier fighting today drops a napalm bomb on a cluster of gibbering chinks, it’s a bomb with a heart. In the heart of that bomb, mysteriously but truly present, is a fat old lady on her way to see the world’s fair. This lady is as innocent as she is fat and motherly. This lady is our nation’s strength. This lady’s innocence if fully unleashed could defoliate every forest in the torrid zone … In her mind there is but a single thought, and it is this: ‘Iowa’s never so pretty as in May.’”

Rheinhardt’s performance is a fun-house mockery of the kind of political theater that has lately risen from underground to occupy the main stage of American life. Years later, Stone said of his first novel: “I had taken America as my subject, and all my quarrels with America went into it.” They were a lover’s quarrels, equal parts longing and disillusionment, held in a tension that never broke either way. Morgan Rainey’s blighted idealism is as central to Stone’s vision as Rheinhardt’s fluent nihilism is.

Stone is often compared to Graham Greene, perhaps because they both wrote about Vietnam and America's destructive innocence abroad. Stone admired *The Quiet American*—"It carries a weight of truth that America and American readers will have to live with"—but he was no fan of Greene's and rejected any lineage. For Greene, American innocence meant moral and spiritual shallowness, "the absence of any kind of inner life," Stone once wrote. For Stone, it meant just the opposite: the amplitude and excess of America's self-myth, the striving that ends in ruin. In *Prime Green* (2007), his memoir of the '60s, and particularly of the cohort of acid-dropping artists and showmen gathered around Ken Kesey, Stone wrote:

We were one of the generations to which the word "Romantic" might be applied—the offspring of a period inclined by history to highly value the Dionysian and the spontaneous, to exalt freedom over order, to demand more of the world than it may reasonably provide. We saw—may we not be the last to see—this country as blessed in its most generous hopes.

Or, as the protagonist of Stone's third novel says, "I think what's best about my country is not exportable." That novel, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), is about Americans caught up, messing up, in a Central American revolution. The Stone stand-in is an anthropologist named Frank Holliwell. Having compromised himself on behalf of his government by doing intelligence work in Vietnam, Holliwell is involuntarily drawn to repeat the mistake in the imaginary country of Tecan. On his way there, Holliwell stops in another Central American country to give a speech. But scotch and a lack of reading glasses conspire to turn Holliwell's address into a biting and hilarious improvisation on American culture that recalls Rheinhardt's hallucinatory oration at the Patriotic Revival. "In my country we have a saying—Mickey Mouse will see you dead," Holliwell tells his audience, to silence. "There isn't really such a saying," he admits.

"My countrymen present can reassure you as to that. I made it up to dramatize the seriousness with which American popular culture should be regarded. Now American pop culture is often laughed at by snobbish foreigners—as we call them. But let me tell you that we have had the satisfaction of ramming it down their throats. These snobbish foreigners are going to learn to laugh around it or choke to death."

As the audience of North Americans and locals grows hostile, Holliwell changes key and begins to describe another, older American culture, "a secret culture ... the one we live by."

"It's a wonderful thing—or it was. It was strong and dreadful, it was majestic and ruthless. It was a stranger to pity. And it's not for sale, ladies and gentlemen. Let me tell you now some of the things we believed: We believed we knew more about great unpeopled spaces than any other European nation. We considered spaces unoccupied by us as unpeopled. At the same time, we believed we knew more about guilt. We believed that no one wished and willed as hard as we, and that no one was so able to make wishes true. We believed we were more. More was our secret watchword."

Stone's first three novels—*A Hall of Mirrors*, *Dog Soldiers*, *A Flag for Sunrise*—can be read together as an inner history of the cataclysmic time when Americans first lost faith in themselves. He went on to write another eight books—novels, short-story collections, his memoir. None of them quite matches the level of the early work, as if his talent required an era on the scale of the '60s to realize itself. Stone continued to conjure various apocalypses, but they felt strained and unpersuasive as his subject, "America and Americans," shrank in the age of the hedge fund and the personal computer. In his later years, Stone seemed to do his truest work—including "Helping" (1987), a masterful short story about a couple brutally confronting the husband's return to drinking; parts of his sailing novel, *Outerbridge Reach* (1992); and *Death of the Black-Haired Girl* (2013), his final novel—on a more intimate canvas as the '60s receded.

The shattering of national myths is a rich subject for fiction, and one can be forgiven for thinking that as a source of irony and pathos, it can happen only once. Yet the theme might be infinitely renewable. In the years since Stone's death, in 2015, American life has taken a turn that he would recognize as a subject fit for the strenuous demands of literary art. The berserk has returned to the public square, more extreme than ever, in a guise that seems new and yet also recalls earlier intrusions. The Patriotic Revival that climaxes *A Hall of Mirrors* now occurs on TV 24/7. The demagogic radio-station owner now runs the country. An ambitious young writer could do worse than to take a job at a local-news website in Baltimore or Elkhart, Indiana, in order to gauge the American condition today, while steeping in the work of a novelist who transformed our aspirations and follies into literature. *A*

*George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author, most recently, of Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century.*

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## ESSAY

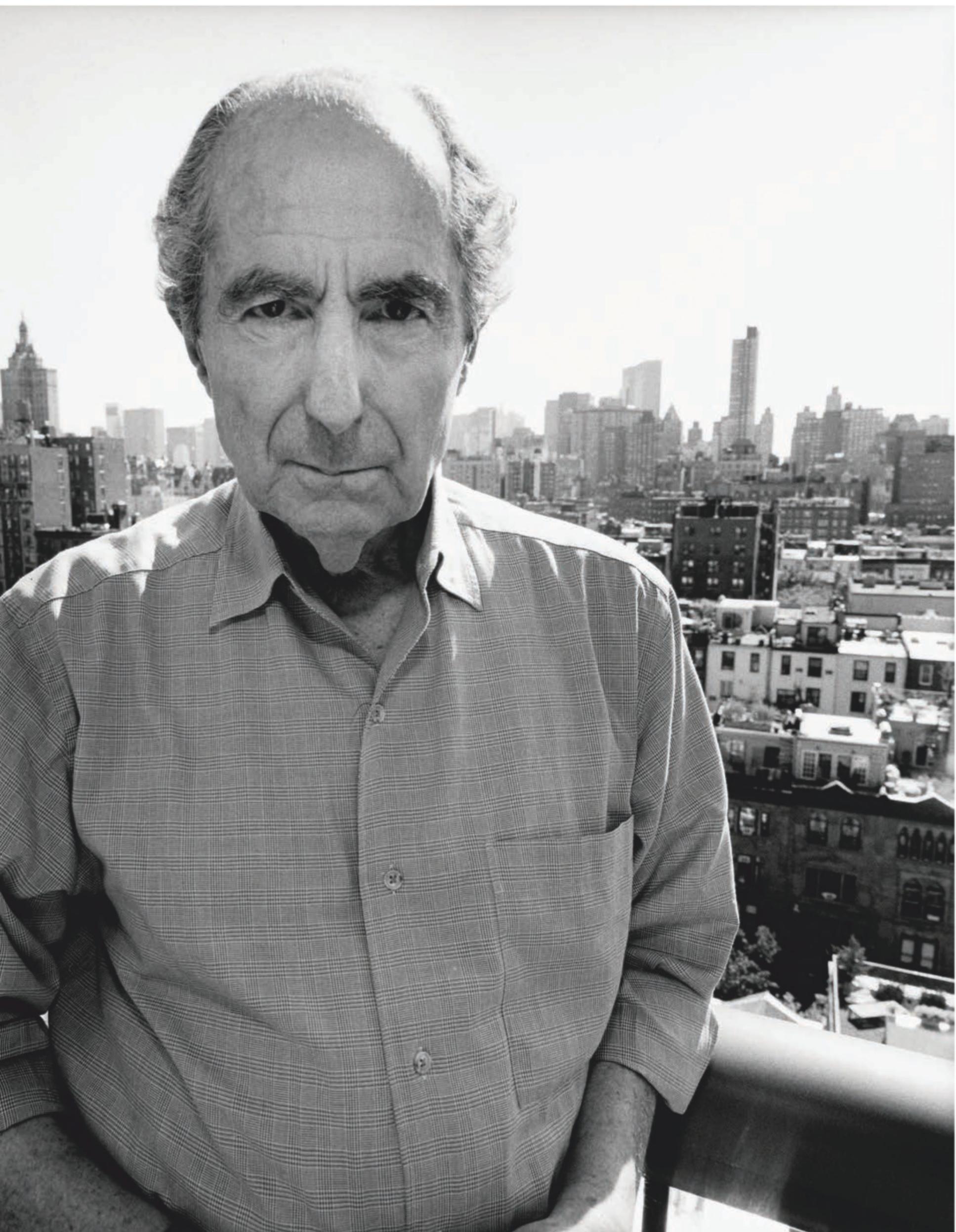
### Being Friends With Philip Roth

*During his last two decades, we spent thousands of hours in each other's company. Ours was a conversation neither of us could have done without.*

By Benjamin Taylor

Delirious near the end, he said, “We’re going to the Savoy!”—surely the jauntiest dying words on record. But it was Riverside Memorial Chapel, the Jewish funeral parlor at Amsterdam and 76th, that we were bound for. I was obliged to reidentify the body once we arrived there from





New York-Presbyterian Hospital. An undertaker pointed the way to the viewing room and said, “You may stay for as long as you like. But do not touch him.” Duly draped, Philip looked serene on his plinth—like a Roman emperor, one of the good ones. I pulled up a chair and managed to say, “Here we are.” Here we are at the promised end. A phrase from *The Human Stain* came to me: “the dignity of an elderly gentleman free from desire who behaves correctly.” I wanted to tell him that he was doing fine, that he was a champ at being dead, bringing to it all the professionalism he’d brought to previous tasks.

To talk daily with someone of such gifts had been a salvation. There was no dramatic arc to our life together. It was not like a marriage, still less like a love affair. It was as plotless as friendship ought to be. We spent thousands of hours in each other’s company. I’m not who I would have been without him. “We’ve laughed so hard,” he said to me some years ago. “Maybe write a book about our friendship.”

Our conversation was about everything—novels, politics, families, dreams, sex, baseball, food, ex-friends, ex-lovers. Philip’s inner life was gargantuan. Insatiable emotional appetites—for rage as for love—led him down paths where he seethed with loathing or desire. “There’s too much of you, Philip. All your emotions are outsize,” I once said to him. “I’ve written in order not to die of them,” he replied.

But our keynote was American history, for which Philip was ravenous, consuming one big scholarly book after another. He became a great writer over the course of the 1980s and especially the ’90s, when his novels became history-haunted. In the American trilogy—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*—the heroes, Swede Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk, are solid men torn to pieces when the blindsiding force of history comes to call. Such was Philip’s mature theme: the unpredictable brutalities at large in the world and the illusoriness of ever being safe from them. He never stopped marveling at how contingently a fate is made. For him, that was most basic to storytelling: the happenstance that in retrospect turns epic.

I’d been taking notes all along. A lot of conversation got squirreled away. “Memories of the past,” he wrote in *The Facts*, “are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the facts.” Though imagination in memoir may indeed be inevitable, I have tried at every turn to bar the way. As a novelist, he believed that the truth was composed of perspectives and partial understandings. “Getting people right is not what living is all about anyway,” he wrote in *American Pastoral*. “It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful

Thomas Beer, who was Stephen Crane’s first biographer, wove a tissue of creative lies, inventing loves and friendships that never were, even concocting virtuoso letters from Crane. His 1923 book was fiction posing as fact. A succession of Crane scholars went charging down Beer’s blind alleys.

“May his bad example haunt you,” Philip said.

**H**E WAS GENUINELY PUZZLED by gossips. “All the fun of a secret is in keeping it. Why blab?” Maybe he took this view because he’d been more victimized by gossip than other people have been. He was oversensitive, and sometimes mistook genuine concern for idle chatter. One mutual friend particularly drew fire for talking to anyone who’d listen about a recent operation that Philip had undergone. Orthopedic surgeries could be openly reported, in Philip’s view, but cardiac procedures were confidential. “Can you imagine? He told five more people after I told him to stop. All of whom called this afternoon.” In our friend’s defense, I said his gossiping was like a locomotive and could stop only gradually.

Secrets and deceptions of every kind, though, appealed to Philip. He was not averse to cuckolding inattentive husbands. More wholesome opportunities for subterfuge were catnip too. Some years ago, when I was submitting for publication a novel I’d written, he suggested that I employ a pseudonym. We settled on Shoshana Lipshitz, a winner by the sound of the curriculum vitae we concocted: four years at Hotchkiss, women’s studies and astronomy at Harvard, an internship at *The Paris Review*, Romance languages, European wanderings, the whole bit. We decided she was very pretty, a Natalie Portman type. To top it off, I proposed an archaeological year in Mesoamerica, but Philip said we were getting carried away. “Maybe publishers won’t like being fooled like this,” I said. “They know how to Google.” For our part, we Googled what turned out to be a small army of Shoshana Lipshitzes, variously active in the world. Our ruse, which would have been doomed to quick exposure had we launched it, died at birth.

Although he was my best friend and I his, there were rooms in the fortress of secrets marked “P. Roth” that I know I was

*Philip had  
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for a beautiful  
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to see to him  
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Mr. Rochester.  
What he got  
instead was me.*

reconsideration, getting them wrong again.”

Yet he was not similarly skeptical about his own self-understanding in real life—“the unwritten world,” as he preferred to call it. “We judge the author of a novel by how well he or she tells the story,” Philip wrote, again in *The Facts*. “But we judge morally the author of an autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical as against aesthetic.” Then we want to know: “Is the author hiding his or her motives ... telling in order *not* to tell?” All I can say is, I am trying for candor here.

One day I described for Philip a strange case I’d been reading about. A man named

excluded from. This went both ways, but he was an incomparable student of inner lives, of what's invisibly afoot. He managed to figure out more about me than I ever could about him. In *The Ghost Writer*, the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, says of the novelist Felix Abravanel that the master's charm was "a moat so oceanic that you could not even see the great turreted and buttressed thing it had been dug to protect." Philip, too, could seem a beguiling but remote citadel: august, many-towered, lavishly defended. Those who reached the inner keep met someone quite different from the persona devised for public purposes. Still vitally present at home was the young man he'd remained all along, full of satirical hijinks and gleeful ventriloquisms and antic fun.

We weren't equals, of course, and not just because he was 20 years older. Sometimes I thought of him as the chosen parent of my middle age. His love acted on me, as on everyone, like a truth serum. He possessed the terrible gift of intimacy. He caused people to tell him things they told no one else. His mineral-hard stare was impossible to hide from.

"Something's not right with you. Don't bother saying you're okay, because you're not. Just say what's going on."

I told him it was bleakness. The shine had gone out of everything. Strangulation in the viscera; no food seemed edible. Once or twice, to my shame, I'd gone to bed hoping a heart attack would finish me. In a word, I was ill.

Here was the sort of assignment Philip reveled in. He got me to his psychiatrist within 24 hours. "Tell him exactly what you told me. He'll fix you up. Don't tell him about how Mama burned the roast in '57 and Daddy got so mad. He's not that kind of doctor." I had thought anxiety and depression were mutually exclusive. Our doctor told me they go together like Rogers and Astaire. He fixed

me up with sertraline and olanzapine and may have saved my life. But the drugs have made me tearless. An odd side effect. At Riverside Chapel, seated beside the dead man I adored, I found I could not cry.

I can't be the first gay man to have been an older straight man's mainstay. Philip had searched diligently for a beautiful young woman to see to him as Jane Eyre looked after old Mr. Rochester. What he got instead was me. The degree of attachment surprised us both. Were we lovers? Obviously not.

dedicated to me. A couple of misguided attempts at courtship followed, painful for the women involved. Then he closed the door on erotic life entirely. He'd learned how to be an elderly gentleman who behaves correctly. He joined the ranks of the sexually abdicated.

I said: "I think I've worshipped at the altar of Eros long enough. I think my dues are paid."

"Wait 'til you go well and truly to sleep where the body forks," he said. "A great peacefulness, yes. But it's the harbinger of night. You're left to browse back through the enticements and satisfactions and agonies that were your former vitality—when you were strong in the sexual magic." The peace was hard-won. "First my vehement youth, all fight and craving," he told me. "Then this so suddenly—old age telling me to have a long last look. I've come through. I'm on the other side of all battles. Aspiration, that beast, has died in me. Whenever death comes to mind, I tell myself, *It is now and here we are*, and this suffices. So long as we're alive, we're immortal, no?"



*Philip Roth, 1985, drawn in charcoal pencil by R. B. Kitaj, a longtime friend of the writer's*

Were we in love? Not exactly. But ours was a conversation neither could have done without. Twelve years ago I saw him through his last love, for a young person less than half his age whose family strongly disapproved of the association and who evidently grew to disapprove of it herself. It was a trauma that might have plowed Philip under and that he told aslant in *Exit Ghost*, the novel

WHY WAS the public so exceptionally interested in his personal life? E. L. Doctorow inspired no such curiosity. Neither has Alice Munro nor Toni Morrison nor Cormac McCarthy. Gossip about Cynthia Ozick is hard to come by. About Don DeLillo, it is nil. Philip was something else altogether. True, J. D. Salinger comes to mind, chiefly because of his refusal to come out of hiding. Like Salinger, like Robert Frost, like Ernest Hemingway, Philip generated a carapace that became a myth. In Frost's case, the farmer-poet was the legend. In Hemingway's, the sportsman-artist. In Salinger's, the wrathful recluse determined to give his readers nothing more.

In Philip's case, the myth was the good Jewish boy traduced by inner anarchy.

Despite all the shifts and guises of fiction, it has been not so much protagonists as the man himself who, in book after book, keeps barging into the public eye, provoking adulation, hatred, learned commentary—everything but indifference. As with few other writers, readers have felt admitted into an inner sanctum they respond strongly to. At dinner one night in an Indian place on Broadway, the actor Richard Thomas, spruce in a white beard, said to Philip: “You’re the writer who’s meant most to me.” In a favorite restaurant on Third Avenue, a woman at the bar beckoned to me with a long forefinger. “Young man, is that Philip Roth you’re with?” I nodded. She passed me her card. “Tell him I’ve got a classic six on Park and am available.” Some variant of the encounter occurred when we went to any public place. Particularly on the Upper West Side. “Let’s have dinner on the East Side,” Philip would occasionally say. “Nobody knows me over there.”

If monogamy was anathema to him, so was enduring the opprobrium that the

polyamorous suffer. In *My Life as a Man*, the hero, Peter Tarnopol, speaks for his maker when he says:

I may not be well suited for the notoriety that attends the publication of an unabashed and unexpurgated history of one’s erotic endeavors. As the history itself will testify, I happen to be no more immune to shame or built for public exposure than the next burgher with shades on his bedroom windows and a latch on the bathroom door—indeed, maybe what the whole history signifies is that I am sensitive to nothing in all the world as I am to my moral reputation.

Torment about rectitude plagued Philip as acutely as any itch in the loins. That a man who’d written those books and led that life should be so primly worried about what people were saying struck me as funny.

Prior to the 1980s, he’d just been one of the interesting writers. Some of his books meant little to me—*The Breast*, for instance, which is lousy any way you look

at it. But then came marvels like *The Ghost Writer*, *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, and *Sabbath’s Theater*, proving him the best American novelist of his generation, our likeliest candidate for immortality. It was in 1994, the year before *Sabbath’s Theater*, that I met Philip. The occasion was our friend Joel Conarroe’s 60th birthday. The venue was the James Beard House on West 12th Street. There was Philip, aglow and triumphant: the dogged athlete who’d rebounded from orthopedic and mental breakdown, the natural bachelor who’d extracted himself from an untenable marriage, the tenacious self-reinventor who would soon publish *Sabbath*, his most scandalous book.

That night he was all speed and laughter, head thrown back—supernaturally quick with the next line. He asked what I’d been reading. I said Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*. “Yes, that loaf of bread a rat has burrowed into, leaving his rat shape, Herzog cutting slices from the other end.” Then he quoted a few lines from memory: “‘But what do you want, Herzog?’ ‘But that’s just it—not

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a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy.” Before leaving he said, “Let’s have lunch, kid”—but there was to be no lunch for years.

In the summer of 1998, after reading bound proofs of *I Married a Communist*, I decided to write to him. I was struck particularly by the final pages, in which the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, recalls his mother telling him that his grandfather has died and is now a star: “I searched the sky and said, ‘Is he that one?’ and she said yes, and we went back inside and I fell asleep.” Stars make sense anew to Nathan as an explanation of the dead, each of them a furnace burning away up there, “no longer impaled on their moment but dead and free of the traps set for them by their era.” No more calumny or betrayal. No more idealism or hope. Just the blazing heavens, “that universe into which error does not obtrude.”

A few days after I mailed my letter, the phone rang. It was Philip, wanting to talk. I felt at once that I was laughing with someone I knew well. Acrobatically

unpredictable though the conversation was, I could follow his moves. Someone had to lead. Then he hung up without notice and I felt I’d been danced off the edge of the world.

Our first meal together, the first of hundreds, was three years after that. I’d moved back to New York full-time and he was there seasonally, and we decided to have the long-delayed lunch. He’d sent me *The Dying Animal* and proposed that we talk about it. I met him at a Thai restaurant called Rain, at Columbus and 82nd. The neighborhood around the American Museum of Natural History had already been Philip’s for more than 20 years.

“What do you think of my little book?”

Determined not to gush, I said that the scene where Consuela Castillo shows David Kepesh, her literature professor, her doomed, cancerous breasts reminded me of a similar scene in Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*, in which a young woman, on the night before her mastectomy, goes to the room of a young man sick with a cancer of his own and chastely asks him to worship

her doomed right breast. “Today it was a marvel. Tomorrow it would be in the trash bin,” I said, quoting Solzhenitsyn. In the silence that followed, I felt our friendship begin.

Early on he told me this: “What I care about is individuals enmeshed in some nexus of particulars. Philosophical generalization is completely alien to me—some other writer’s work. I’m a philosophical illiterate. All my brainpower has to do with *specificity*, life’s proliferating details. Wouldn’t know what to do with a general idea if it were hand-delivered. Would try to catch the FedEx man before he left the driveway. ‘Wrong address, pal! Big ideas? No, thanks!’”

I mentioned a few characters of his whose intense particularity touches the universal: Mickey Sabbath, Swede Levov, Coleman Silk.

“Glad for the vote of confidence, but I aim only at specifics. Entirely for others to say whether some universal has been hit. I have, for instance, never—I repeat, never—written a word about women in general. This will come as news to my

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harshest critics, but it's true. Women, each one particular, appear in my books. But womankind is nowhere to be found."

"I'VE GOT an earworm, Ben." I say, "There's only one thing to drive out a worm, and that's another worm," and I sing, "Lydia, oh Lydia, oh Lydia, Lydia the *tat-tooed* lady!"

"I think that worked," he says, shaking a finger in one ear. We're on our way to Alice Tully Hall to hear the Emerson String Quartet. They've been doing Shostakovich's string quartets in a series of evenings. Tonight is the conclusion.

Philip loves the intimacy of chamber music. Orchestral and classical vocal are not for him. The one time I got him to enjoy an opera, it was Shostakovich's *The Nose*, hardly standard fare. Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, he refers to as *Der Schmerz im Tuchas*. He does allow that Strauss's *Four Last Songs* are pretty good in the Elisabeth Schwarzkopf version. While he does not read music, he tends to grasp it in highly structural terms—exposition, development, reprise, etc.—and has a remarkable musical memory, along with a quicksilver way of finding metaphors for what he's heard: "The scherzo is four madmen making up a dance as they go." "The cello is bearing a grudge." "The second violin is more confidential than the first."

Following intermission he is rigidly at attention for Shostakovich's 13th quartet. The elaborate pizzicati and strange slapping of the viola belly with the bow stick fascinate us both, as if composer and performers were trying to get at something more elemental than music.

Later, out on Broadway, we listen to a bespectacled, wild-haired, Upper West Side-type boy of about 14 expostulating with his father: "No, Dad, the violist has to climb into 13th position to play the unison note with the violins!" The unison note, if that's what it's called, was indeed a keening voice to send us home with. "How about *that* for a worm?" Philip asks. "Don't

think I'll ever get it out of my brainpan." Again he shakes a finger in his ear.

"Brainpan": I go home and write that down. All of life up there in the brainpan, all of it somehow husbanded there. In old age, waiting for sleep, Philip would pick a year and revisit it month by month, week by week, room by room. "It's all *there*. What happened is now the sum of me. A little patience, and the locks turn. I'm back wherever I choose to go."

*"All my brainpower  
has to do with ... life's  
proliferating details.  
Wouldn't know  
what to do with a  
general idea if it were  
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Would try to catch  
the FedEx man ...  
'Wrong address, pal!  
Big ideas? No, thanks!'"*

My own locks turn and I am at Philip's country house, in the pool. I swim a few laps, then dog-paddle, then just float on my back. He comes out. "Found it!" he announces. "Opened the book and skimmed for 10 minutes and there it was. Goes like this, and you're ideally situated to hear it: A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns. The way is to the destructive element

submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up ... In the destructive element immerse.' This has been my credo, the lifeblood of my books. I knew it was from *Lord Jim* but didn't know where. All I had to do was put myself in a trance and I found it: 'In the destructive element immerse.' It's what I've said to myself in art and, woe is me, in life too. Submit to the deeps. Let them buoy you up."

Another turn of the lock, and I am at Philip's 74th-birthday celebration, in 2007. He'd said it would be tempting fate to hold out for 75, so a 74th was planned at the writer Judith Thurman's townhouse. The garden has been tented in and a marvelous supper laid on. Afterward Philip asks, rather surprisingly, if anyone cares to recite a poem from memory. Mark Strand reels off one of his own ("In a field, I am the absence of field"), then looks at me as if to say, "Your serve." What comes to mind and I recite, stumbling only once or twice, is Frost's "I Could Give All to Time," with its stirring conclusion:

I could give all to Time except—  
except  
What I myself have held. But why  
declare  
The things forbidden that while the  
Customs slept  
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am  
There,  
And what I would not part with I have  
kept.

"Those rhymes!" says Philip on the phone the following morning. "It's as if nature made them." *A*

*Benjamin Taylor has written two novels, among other books, and is the author of *Here We Are: My Friendship With Philip Roth*, published this month by Penguin Books. This essay was adapted from that memoir.*

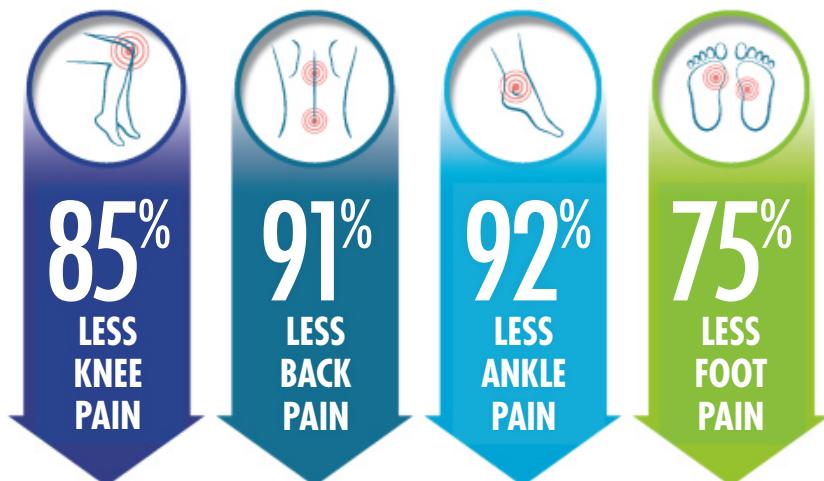


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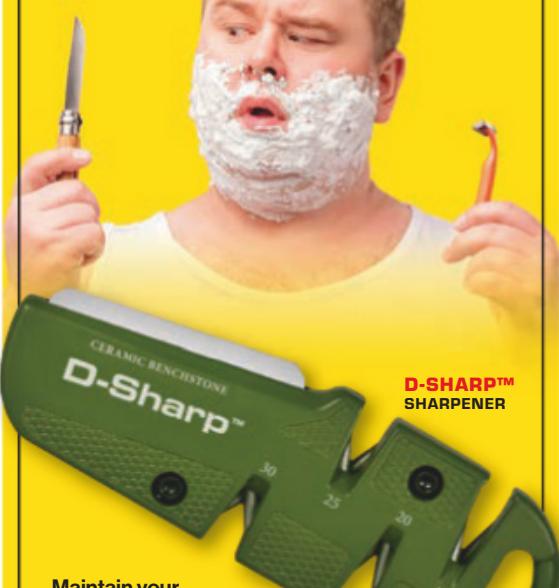
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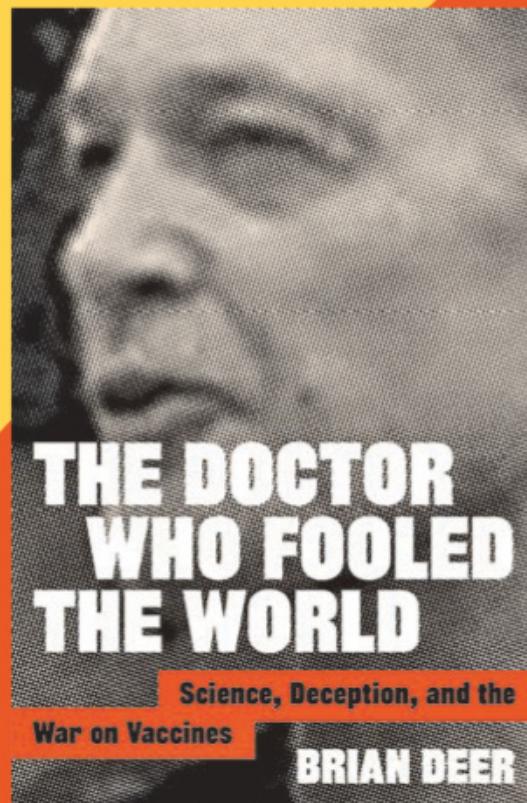
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*It used to hit me  
particularly  
in rental cars.  
“Ameripanic,”  
I called it:*

an overwhelming (for a Brit) apprehension of scale, a kind of horizontal vertigo at the vastness and possibility of this great country. I learned to drive on a smaller scale, noodling along the winding country roads of southern England. I was held in by the high hedges, nursed around corners by the dreaming verges, soothed by an occasional vision of a plowed field. But in the roaring U.S., I was out there. At large. Alone. Slewing between lanes on the New Jersey Turnpike, in vague command of (I think) a large Pontiac—pure Ameripanic. Called to be Neal Cassady, feeling like J. Alfred Prufrock.

I get it less and less these days. Now, driving in America, I feel sort of—how shall I put it?—American. Cup of Dunkin’ coffee, radio tuned to the local classic-rock station. You know where you are—wherever you are—with a classic-rock station: “Cinnamon Girl,” “Sweet Emotion,” “War Pigs,” always the same playlist. It’s a liturgy. And a liturgy gets you there. Somewhere outside New York, on a bright winter morning, the DJ played a Led Zeppelin song. Then—no talk, no commercials—he played another. “Wait a second,” I said to my passenger. “Hang on a bloody minute here ... I know what this is. This is a Rock Block!”

I was ecstatic. It wasn’t just that I’d recognized the radio format. It was the Led Zep-ness of driving in America, the wail of its power, the mighty, bluesy momentum of it. Reality cracked open, with Robert Plant squealing like a tiny white-hot Buddha at its core.

There are, of course, other people driving in America. You must try to love them. A friend of mine, a big dude with a shaved head, drives a scary-looking tank of a black truck. But he floats through traffic on a cloud of magnanimity. His foot on the gas pedal is soft and musical. He lets people in, he lets people out, hazily waving them through. And this is Boston traffic—Boston, home of the pinched face and the middle finger. My friend stays gentle.

Driving in L.A. recently with my son, I made a slightly over-excited right on red and got a blare of indignation up my posterior. I let the protesting vehicle pass and then pulled up next to it, lowering my window. *You cut me off*, mouthed the woman at the wheel, her face distorted with rage. *I'M SORRY*, I half-shouted back. I made penitent gestures and signals of contrition. I may have beat my breast. “I’m not sure she accepted your apology, Dad,” observed my son. Ah, but it felt good. The road forgave me.

So now it stretches before me, as it stretches before you, my fellow drivers in America. It has taken me as I am, as have (to a remarkable extent) you. My vertigo has calmed. I’ve grown up, you might say, driving in America. Dunkin’. “War Pigs.” The pull of the white line, the pull of futurity. I will never not be grateful. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# ODE

— to —

## DRIVING IN AMERICA

*By James Parker*





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