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The Danger Ahead

If Donald Trump returns to the White House, he'd bring a better understanding of the system's vulnerabilities, more willing enablers, and a more focused agenda of retaliation against his adversaries.

by David Frum



For all its marvelous creativity, the human imagination often fails when turned to the future. It is blunted, perhaps, by a craving for the familiar. We all appreciate that the past includes many moments of severe instability, crisis, even radical revolutionary upheaval. We know that such things happened years or decades or centuries ago. We cannot believe they might happen tomorrow.

When Donald Trump is the subject, imagination falters further. Trump operates so far outside the normal bounds of human behavior—never mind normal political behavior—that it is difficult to accept what he may actually do, even when he declares his intentions openly. What's more, we have experienced one Trump presidency already. We can take false comfort from that previous experience: We've lived through it once. American democracy survived. Maybe the danger is less than feared?

In his first term, Trump's corruption and brutality were mitigated by his ignorance and laziness. In a second, Trump would arrive with a much better understanding of the system's vulnerabilities, more willing enablers in tow, and a much more focused agenda of retaliation against his adversaries and impunity for himself. When people wonder what another Trump term might hold, their minds underestimate the chaos that would lie ahead.

By Election Day 2024, Donald Trump will be in the thick of multiple criminal trials. It's not impossible that he may already have been convicted in at least one of them. If he wins the election, Trump will commit the first crime of his second term at noon on Inauguration Day: His oath to defend the Constitution of the United States will be a perjury.

A second Trump term would instantly plunge the country into a constitutional crisis more terrible than anything seen since the Civil War. Even in the turmoil of the 1960s, even during the Great Depression, the country had a functional government with the president as its head. But the government cannot function with an indicted or convicted criminal as its head. The president would be an outlaw, or on his way to becoming an outlaw. For his own survival, he would have to destroy the rule of law.

From Trump himself and the people around him, we have a fair idea of a second Trump administration's immediate priorities: (1) Stop all federal and state cases against Trump, criminal and civil. (2) Pardon and protect those who tried to overturn the 2020 election on Trump's behalf. (3) Send the Department of Justice into action against Trump adversaries and critics. (4) End the independence of the civil service and fire federal officials who refuse to carry out Trump's commands. (5) If these lawless actions ignite protests in American cities, order the military to crush them.

A restored Trump would lead the United States into a landscape of unthinkable scenarios. Will the Senate confirm Trump nominees who were chosen because of their willingness to help the president lead a coup against the U.S. government? Will the staff of the Justice Department resign? Will people march in the streets? Will the military obey or refuse orders to suppress demonstrations?

The existing constitutional system has no room for the subversive legal maneuvers of a criminal in chief. If a president can pardon himself for federal crimes—as Trump would likely try to do—then he could write his pardon in advance and shoot visitors to the White House. (For that matter, the vice president could murder the president in the Oval Office and then immediately pardon herself.) If a president can order the attorney general to stop a federal case against him—as Trump would surely do—then obstruction of justice becomes a normal prerogative of the presidency. If

Trump can be president, then the United States owes a huge retrospective apology to Richard Nixon. Under the rules of a second Trump presidency, Nixon would have been well within his rights to order the Department of Justice to [stop investigating Watergate](#) and then pardon himself and all the burglars for the break-in and cover-up.

After Trump was elected in 2016, he was quickly surrounded by prominent and influential people who recognized that he was a lawless menace. They found ways to restrain a man they regarded as, to quote [the reported words of Trump's first secretary of state](#), “a fucking moron” and, to [quote his second chief of staff](#), “the most flawed person I’ve ever met in my life,” whose “dishonesty is just astounding.” But there would be no Rex Tillerson in a second Trump term; no John Kelly; no Jeff Sessions, who as attorney general [recused himself from the investigation](#) into the president’s connections to Russia, leading to the appointment of an independent special counsel.

Since 2021, Trump-skeptical Republicans have been pushed out of politics. Representatives [Liz Cheney](#) and [Adam Kinzinger](#) forfeited their seats in the House for defending election integrity. Representative Tom Emmer [withdrew his bid for House speaker](#) over the same offense. The Republican Senate caucus is less hospitable to Trump-style authoritarianism—but notice that the younger and newer Republican senators (Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, J. D. Vance) tend to support Trump’s schemes, while his opponents in the Senate belong to the outgoing generation. Trump’s leading rivals for the 2024 nomination seldom dare criticize his abuse of power.

Most of the people who would staff a second Trump term would be servile tools who have absorbed the brutal realities of contemporary Republicanism: defend democracy; forfeit your career. Already, an array of technically competent opportunists has assembled itself—from within right-wing think tanks and elsewhere—and has begun to plan out exactly how to dismantle the institutional safeguards against Trump’s corrupt and vengeful impulses. Trump’s likely second-term advisers have made clear that they would share his agenda of legal impunity and the use of law enforcement against his perceived opponents—not only the Biden family, but Trump’s [own former attorney general](#) and [chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff](#).

If Trump wins the presidency again, the whole world will become a theater for his politics of revenge and reward. Ukraine will be abandoned to Vladimir Putin; Saudi Arabia will collect its dividends for its investments in the Trump family.

First-term Trump told aides that he wanted to withdraw from NATO. Second-term Trump would choose aides who would not talk him out of it. Other partners, too, would have to adjust to the authoritarianism and corruption of a second Trump term. Liberals in Israel and India would find themselves isolated as the U.S. turned toward reaction and authoritarianism at home; East Asian democracies would have to adjust to Trump protectionism and trade wars; Mexico's [antidemocratic Morena party](#) would have scope to snuff out free institutions provided that it suppressed migration flows to the United States.

Anyway, the United States would be too paralyzed by troubles at home to help friends abroad.

If Trump is elected, it very likely won't be with a majority of the popular vote. Imagine the scenario: Trump has won the Electoral College with 46 percent of the vote because third-party candidates funded by Republican donors successfully splintered the anti-Trump coalition. Having failed to win the popular vote in each of the past three elections, Trump has become president for the second time. On that thin basis, his supporters would try to execute his schemes of personal impunity and political vengeance.

In this scenario, Trump opponents would have to face a harsh reality: The U.S. electoral system has privileged a strategically located minority, led by a lawbreaking president, over the democratic majority. One side outvoted the other. The outvoted nonetheless won the power to govern.

The outvoted would happily justify the twist of events in their favor. "We are a republic, not a democracy," many said in 2016. Since that time, the outvoted have become more outspoken against democracy. As [Senator Mike Lee tweeted](#) a month before the 2020 election: "Democracy isn't the objective."

So long as minority rule seems an occasional or accidental result, the majority might go along. But once aware that the minority intends to engineer its power to last forever—and to use it to subvert the larger legal and constitutional system—the majority may cease to be so accepting. One outcome of a second Trump term may be an American version of [the massive demonstrations that filled Tel Aviv streets](#) in 2023, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tried to remake Israel's court system.

And what might follow that? In 2020, Trump's advisers speculated about the possibility of using the Army to crush protests against Trump's plans to overturn that year's election. Now those in Trump's circle are apparently thinking further ahead. Some [reportedly want to prepare in advance to use the Insurrection Act](#) to convert the military into a tool of Trump's authoritarian project. It's an astonishing possibility. But Trump is thinking about it, so everybody else must—including the senior command of the U.S. military.

If a president can summon an investigation of his opponents, or summon the military to put down protests, then suddenly our society would no longer be free. There would be no more law, only legalized persecution of political opponents. It has always been Trump's supreme political wish to wield both the law and institutional violence as personal weapons of power—a wish that many in his party now seem determined to help him achieve.

That grim negative ideal is the core ballot question in 2024. If Trump is defeated, the United States can proceed in its familiar imperfect way to deal with the many big problems of our time: the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, climate change, educational standards and equal opportunity, economic growth and individual living standards, and so on. Stopping Trump would not represent progress on any of those agenda items. But stopping Trump would preserve the possibility of progress, by keeping alive the constitutional-democratic structure of the United States.

A second Trump presidency, however, is the kind of shock that would overwhelm all other issues. It would mark the turn onto a dark path, one of these rips between “before” and “after” that a society can never reverse. Even if the harm is contained, it can never be fully undone, as [the harm of January 6, 2021](#), can never be undone. The long tradition of peaceful

transitions of power was broken that day, and even though the attempt to stop the transition by violence was defeated, the violence itself was not expunged. The schemes and plots of a second Trump term may be defeated too. Yet every future would-be dictator will know: A president can attempt a coup and, if stopped, still return to office to try again.

As we now understand from memoirs and on-the-record comments, many of Trump's own Cabinet appointees and senior staff were horrified by the president they served. The leaders of his own party in Congress feared and hated him. The GOP's deepest-pocketed donors have worked for three years to nominate somebody, anybody, else. Yet even so, Trump's co-partisans are converging upon him. They are convincing themselves that something can justify forgiving Trump's first attempted coup and enabling a second: taxes, border control, stupid comments by "woke" college students.

For democracy to continue, however, the democratic system itself must be the supreme commitment of all major participants. Rules must matter more than outcomes. If not, the system careens toward breakdown—as it is careening now.

When Benjamin Franklin famously said of the then-new Constitution, "A republic, if you can keep it," he was not suggesting that the republic might be misplaced absentmindedly. He foresaw that ambitious, ruthless characters would arise to try to break the republic, and that weak, venal characters might assist them. Americans have faced Franklin's challenge since 2016, in a story that has so far had some villains, many heroes—and just enough good luck to tip the balance. It would be dangerous to continue to count on luck to do the job.

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Trump Will Abandon NATO

If reelected, he would end our commitment to the European alliance, reshaping the international order and hobbling American influence in the world.

by Anne Applebaum



“I don’t give a shit about NATO.” Thus did former President Donald Trump once [express his feelings](#) about America’s oldest and strongest military alliance. Not that this statement, made in the presence of John Bolton, the national security adviser at the time, came as a surprise. Long before he was

a political candidate, Trump [questioned the value of American alliances](#). Of Europeans, [he once wrote](#) that “their conflicts are not worth American lives. Pulling back from Europe would save this country millions of dollars annually.” NATO, founded in 1949 and supported for three-quarters of a century by Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike, has long been [a particular focus of Trump’s ire](#). As president, Trump threatened to withdraw from NATO many times—including, infamously, at the 2018 NATO summit.

But during Trump’s time in office, the withdrawal never happened. That was because someone was always there to talk him out of it. Bolton says he did; Jim Mattis, John Kelly, Rex Tillerson, Mike Pompeo, and even Mike Pence are thought to have done so too.

But they didn’t change his mind. And if Trump is reelected in 2024, none of those people will be in the White House. All of them have broken with the former president, [in some cases dramatically](#), and there isn’t another pool of Republican analysts who understand Russia and Europe, because most of them either [signed statements opposing him in 2016](#) or criticized him after 2020. In a second term, Trump would be surrounded by people who either share his dislike of American security alliances or don’t know anything about them and don’t care. This time, the ill will that Trump [has always felt toward American allies](#) would likely manifest itself in a clear policy change. “The damage he did in his first term was reparable,” Bolton told me. “The damage in the second term would be irreparable.”

Institutionally, and maybe even politically, leaving NATO could be difficult for Trump. As soon as he announced his intentions, a constitutional crisis would ensue. Senate approval is required for U.S. treaties—but the Constitution says nothing about congressional approval for withdrawal from treaties. Recognizing this gap in the law, Democratic Senator Tim Kaine and Republican Senator Marco Rubio introduced legislation, which has already passed the Senate, designed to [block any U.S. president from withdrawing from NATO](#) without two-thirds Senate approval or an act of Congress. Kaine told me he feels “confident that the courts would uphold us on that and would not allow a president to unilaterally withdraw,” but there would certainly be a struggle. A public-relations crisis would unfold too. A wide range of people—former supreme allied commanders, former chairmen of

the Joint Chiefs of Staff, former presidents, foreign heads of state—will surely rally to make the case for NATO, and very loudly.

But none of that would necessarily matter, because long before Congress convenes to discuss the treaty, the damage will have been done. That's because NATO's most important source of influence is not legal or institutional, but psychological: It creates an expectation of collective defense that exists in the mind of anyone who would threaten a member of the alliance. If the Soviet Union never attacked West Germany between 1949 and 1989, that was not because it feared a German response. If Russia has not attacked Poland, the Baltic states, or Romania over the past 18 months, that's not because Russia fears Poland, the Baltic states, or Romania. The Soviet Union held back, and Russia continues to do so now, because of their firm belief in the American commitment to the defense of those countries.

This deterrent effect doesn't come just from [the NATO treaty](#), a bare-bones document whose signatories simply agree in Article 5 that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." Deterrence comes from the Kremlin's conviction that Americans really believe in collective defense, that the U.S. military really is prepared for collective defense, and that the U.S. president really is committed to act if collective security is challenged. Trump could end that conviction with a single speech, a single comment, even a single Truth Social post, and it won't matter if Congress, the media, and the Republican Party are still arguing about the legality of withdrawing from NATO. Once the commander in chief says "I will not come to an ally's aid if attacked," why would anyone fear NATO, regardless of what obligations still exist on paper? And once the Russians, or anyone else, no longer fear a U.S. response to an attack, then the chances that they will carry one out grow higher. If such a scenario seems unlikely, it shouldn't. Before February 2022, [many refused to believe](#) there could ever be a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

When I asked several people with deep links to NATO to imagine what would happen to Europe, to Ukraine, and even to Taiwan and South Korea if Trump declared his refusal to observe Article 5, all of them agreed that faith in collective defense could evaporate quickly. Alexander Vershbow, a former

U.S. ambassador to NATO and a former deputy secretary-general of NATO, pointed out that Trump could pull the American ambassador from his post, prevent diplomats from attending meetings, or stop contributing to the cost of the Brussels headquarters, all before Congress was able to block him: “He wouldn’t be in any way legally constrained from doing that.” Closing American bases in Europe and transferring thousands of soldiers would take longer, of course, but all of the political bodies in the alliance would nevertheless have to change the way they operate overnight. James Goldgeier, an international-relations professor at American University and the author of several books on NATO, thinks the result would be chaotic. “It’s not like you can say, ‘Okay, now we have another plan for how to deal with this,’” he told me. There is no alternative leadership available, no alternative source of command-and-control systems, no alternative space weapons, not even an alternative supply of ammunition. Europe would immediately be exposed to a possible Russian attack for which it is not prepared, and for which it would not be prepared for many years.

Without NATO, and without an American commitment to European security, supplies for Ukraine would also dry up. The prospect of America leaving NATO would force many European countries to keep their military resources at home; after all, they might soon face invasion as well. The Ukrainians would begin to run out of ammunition quite quickly. The Russian conquest of all of Ukraine—[still President Vladimir Putin’s goal](#)—would become thinkable once again. Ukrainian military logistics would become much harder, because the Russians could bomb airports and other supply hubs in Poland and Romania. They have already come very close: At least one Russian missile [accidentally struck Poland](#), and Russian strikes have hit the Romanian-Ukrainian border. Early in the war, the Russians [deliberately attacked](#) a base in western Ukraine, very near the Polish border, where foreign soldiers were known to be training. If the Russians begin to target bases inside Poland itself, the logistics of arming Ukraine become impossible.

This change would immediately reverberate beyond Europe. Once Trump has made clear that he no longer supports NATO, all of America’s other security alliances would be in jeopardy as well. Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and even Israel would figure they can no longer count on automatic American support. The end of NATO might not affect them directly, but its

demise would signal that everyone, everywhere, has to assume the United States is no longer a reliable ally.

Over time, all of America's allies would begin to hedge. Many European countries would cozy up to Russia. Many Asian countries would calculate that, as Kaine puts it, "I guess we need to get closer to China, just as a matter of self-preservation." To avoid invasion, pragmatic leaders near China or Russia might begin to take more seriously the commercial and political demands from the world's second- and third-largest military powers, respectively. At the same time, many political parties and heads of state (both in and out of power) backed by Russia and China—or Iran, Venezuela, Cuba—would have a compelling new argument in favor of autocratic methods and tactics: America, a country whose image has already been severely damaged by Trump and Trumpism, would be seen to be retreating. Over time, American economic influence would decline too. Trade agreements and financial arrangements would change, which would have an impact on American companies and eventually the U.S. economy.

If Trump is reelected, Americans will be so consumed by the drama of their own failing institutions that, for a long while, most won't note the problems caused by the shifting international order. Lithuania's and South Korea's troubles would seem distant, irrelevant. The end of American influence would probably unfold in relative obscurity. By the time people here realize how much has changed, it will be too late.

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Loyalists, Lapdogs, and Cronies

In a second Trump term, there would be no adults in the room.

by McKay Coppins



When Donald Trump first took office, he put a premium on what he called “central casting” hires—people with impressive résumés who matched his image of an ideal administration official. Yes, he brought along his share of [Steve Bannons](#) and [Michael Flynns](#). But there was also [James Mattis](#), the

[decorated four-star general](#) who took over the Defense Department, and Gary Cohn, the Goldman Sachs chief operating officer who was appointed head of the National Economic Council, and Rex Tillerson, who left one of the world's most profitable international conglomerates to become secretary of state.

Trump seemed positively giddy that all of these important people were suddenly willing to work for him. And although his populist supporters lamented the presence of so many swamp creatures in his administration, establishment Washington expressed pleasant surprise at the picks. A consensus had formed that what the incoming administration needed most was “adults in the room.” To save the country from ruin, the thinking went, reasonable Republicans had a patriotic duty to work for Trump if asked. Many of them did.

[From the December 2019 issue: James Mattis on the enemy within](#)

Don’t expect it to happen again. The available supply of serious, qualified people willing to serve in a Trump administration has dwindled since 2017. After all, the so-called adults didn’t fare so well in their respective rooms. Some quit in frustration or disgrace; others were publicly fired by the president. Several have spent their post–White House lives fielding congressional subpoenas and getting indicted. And after seeing one Trump term up close, vanishingly few of them are interested in a sequel: This past summer, NBC News reported that [just four of Trump’s 44 Cabinet secretaries](#) had endorsed his current bid.

Even if mainstream Republicans did want to work for him again, Trump is unlikely to want them. He’s made little secret of the fact that he felt burned by many in his first Cabinet. This time around, according to people in Trump’s orbit, he would prioritize obedience over credentials. “I think there’s going to be a very concerted, calculated effort to ensure that the people he puts in his next administration—they don’t have to share his worldview exactly, but they have to implement it,” Hogan Gidley, a former Trump White House spokesperson, told me.

What would this look like in practice? Predicting presidential appointments nearly a year before the election is a fool’s errand, especially with a

candidate as mercurial as this one. And, whether for reasons of low public opinion or ongoing legal jeopardy, some of Trump's likely picks might struggle to get confirmed (expect a series of contentious hearings). But the names currently circulating in MAGA world offer a glimpse at the kind of people Trump could gravitate toward.

One Trump-world figure with a record of deference to the boss is [Stephen Miller](#). As a speechwriter and policy adviser, Miller managed to endure while so many of his colleagues flamed out in part because he was satisfied with being a staffer instead of a star. He was also fully aligned with the president on his signature issue: immigration. Inside the White House, Miller championed some of the administration's most draconian measures, including the Muslim travel ban and [the family-separation policy](#). In a second Trump term, some expect Miller to get a job that will give him significant influence over immigration policy—perhaps head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or even secretary of homeland security. Given Miller's villainous reputation in Democratic circles, however, he might have a hard time getting confirmed by the Senate. If that happens, some think White House chief of staff might be a good consolation prize.

[From the September 2022 issue: The secret history of the U.S. government's family-separation policy](#)

For secretary of state, one likely candidate is Richard Grenell. Before Trump appointed him [ambassador to Germany](#) in 2018, Grenell was best-known as a right-wing foreign-policy pundit and an inexhaustible Twitter troll. He brought his signature bellicosity to Berlin, hectoring journalists and government officials on Twitter, and telling a *Breitbart London* reporter early in his tenure that he planned to use his position to “empower other conservatives throughout Europe.” (He had to walk back the comment after some in Germany interpreted it as a call for far-right regime change.)

Grenell’s undiplomatic approach to diplomacy exasperated German officials and thrilled Trump, who reportedly described him as an ambassador who “gets it.” Grenell has spent recent years performing his loyalty as a Trump ally and, according to one source, privately building his case for the secretary-of-state role.

One job that Trump will be especially focused on getting right is attorney general. He believes that both of the men who held this position during his term—Jeff Sessions and Bill Barr—were guilty of grievous betrayal. Since then, Trump has been charged with 91 felony counts across four separate criminal cases—evidence, he claims, of a historic “political persecution.” (He has pleaded not guilty in all cases.) Trump has pledged to use the Justice Department to visit revenge on his persecutors if he returns to the White House.

“The notion of the so-called independence of the Department of Justice needs to be consigned to the ash heap of history,” says Paul Dans, who served in the Office of Personnel Management under Trump and [now leads an effort by the Heritage Foundation](#) to recruit conservative appointees for the next Republican administration. To that end, Trump allies have floated a range of loyalists for attorney general, including Senators Ted Cruz, Mike Lee, and Josh Hawley; former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi; and Jeffrey Clark, formerly one of Trump’s assistant attorneys general, who was indicted in Georgia on charges of conspiring to overturn the 2020 election (the charges are still pending).

Vivek Ramaswamy—[the fast-talking entrepreneur](#) running in the Republican presidential primary as of this writing—is also expected to get a top post in the administration. Ramaswamy has praised Trump on the campaign trail and positioned himself as the natural heir to the former president. Trump has responded to the flattery in kind, publicly praising his opponent as a “very, very, very intelligent person.” Some have even speculated that Ramaswamy could be Trump’s pick for vice president.

One source close to Ramaswamy told me that a Trump adviser had recently asked him what job the candidate might want in a future administration. After thinking about it, the source suggested ambassador to the United Nations, reasoning that he’s a “good talker.” The Trump adviser said he’d keep it in mind, though it’s worth noting that Ramaswamy’s lack of support for Ukraine and his suggestion that Russia be allowed to keep some of the territory it has seized could lead to confirmation trouble.

Beyond the high-profile posts, the Trump team may have more jobs to fill in 2025 than a typical administration does. Dans and his colleagues at Heritage

are [laying the groundwork for a radical politicization of the federal civilian workforce](#). If they get their way, the next Republican president will sign an executive order eliminating civil-service protections for up to 50,000 federal workers, effectively making the people in these roles political appointees. Rank-and-file budget wonks, lawyers, and administrators working in dozens of agencies would be reclassified as Schedule F employees, and the president would be able to fire them at will, with or without cause. These fired civil servants' former posts could be left empty—or filled with Trump loyalists. To that end, Heritage has begun to put together a roster of thousands of pre-vetted potential recruits. “What we’re really talking about is a major renovation to government,” Dans told me.

Trump actually signed an executive order along these lines in the final months of his presidency, but it was reversed by his successor. On the campaign trail, Trump has vowed to reinstate it with the goal of creating a more compliant federal workforce for himself. “Either the deep state destroys America,” he has declared, “or we destroy the deep state.”

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The Specter of Family Separation

Donald Trump and his allies have promised to restore their draconian zero-tolerance immigration policy.

by Caitlin Dickerson



Honduran asylum seekers are detained near the U.S.-Mexico border in June 2018. Trump has refused to rule out trying to reinstate family separations.
(John Moore / Getty)

Almost as soon as Donald Trump took office in 2017, agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement were [dispatched across the country](#) to round up as many undocumented foreigners as possible, and the travel

ban put into limbo the livelihoods of thousands of people from majority-Muslim countries who had won the hard-fought right to be here—refugees, tech entrepreneurs, and university professors among them. The administration drew up plans for erecting a border wall, as well as an approach to stripping away the due-process rights of noncitizens so they could be expelled faster. These changes to American immigration policy took place in the amount of time that it would take the average new hire to figure out how to use the office printer.

Within days of Trump’s election, his key immigration adviser, Stephen Miller, was already gathering a group of loyal bureaucrats to start drafting executive orders. Civil servants who were veterans of the George W. Bush administration found the proposals to be so outlandishly impractical, if not also harmful to American interests and perhaps even illegal, that they assumed the ideas could never come to fruition. They were wrong. Over the next four years, lone children were loaded onto planes and sent back to the countries they had fled without so much as a notification to their families. Others were wrenched from their parents’ arms as a way of sending a message to other families abroad about what awaited them if they, too, tried to enter the United States.

From the September 2022 issue: The secret history of the U.S. government’s family-separation policy

If given another chance to realize his goals, Miller has essentially boasted in recent interviews that he would move even faster and more forcefully. And Trump, who’s been campaigning on the promise to finish the job he started on immigration policy, would fairly assume if he is reelected that harsh restrictions in that arena are precisely what the American people want. “Following the Eisenhower model, we will carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history,” he declared during a speech in Iowa in September, referring to 1954’s offensively titled Operation Wetback, under which hundreds of thousands of people with Mexican ancestry were deported, including some who were American citizens.

Trump and other key fixtures of his time in office have refused to rule out trying to reinstate family separations. They have been explicit about their plans to send ICE agents back into the streets to make arrests (with help

from the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the National Guard), and finish their work on the wall. They say that they [will reimpose the pandemic-related expulsion policy](#) known as Title 42, which all but shut off access to asylum, and that they will expand the use of military-style camps to house people who are caught in the enforcement dragnet. They have laid out plans and legal rationales for major policy changes that they didn't get around to the first time, such as ending birthright citizenship, a [long-held goal of Trump's](#). They've floated ideas such as [screening would-be immigrants for Marxist views](#) before granting them entry, and using the Alien and Sedition Acts in service of deportations. Trump and his advisers have also made clear that they intend to invoke the Insurrection Act to allow them to deploy the U.S. military to the border, and to use an extensive naval blockade between the United States and Latin America to fight the drug trade. That most drug smuggling occurs at legal ports of entry doesn't matter to Trump and his team: They seem to have reasonably concluded that [immigration restrictions don't have to be effective to be celebrated](#) by their base.

The breakneck pace of work during Miller's White House tour was periodically hampered by worried bureaucrats attempting end runs around him, or by his most powerful detractors, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, [whispering reservations](#) into the president's ear. But Trump's daughter and son-in-law have left politics altogether, and Miller used Trump's term to perfect strategies for disempowering anyone else who dared to challenge him. As for job applicants to work in a second Trump administration, Miller told *Axios* that being in lockstep with him on immigration issues would be "non-negotiable." Others need not apply.

Those who choose to join Trump in this mission to slash immigration would do so knowing that they would face few consequences, if any, for how they go about it: Almost all of the administration officials who pushed aggressively for the most controversial policies of Trump's term [continue to enjoy successful careers](#).

The speed of Trump's work on immigration can obscure its impact in real time. This is why Lucas Guttentag, a law professor at Stanford and Yale and a senior counselor on immigration issues in the Obama and Biden administrations, [created a database](#) with his students to log and track the

more than 1,000 immigration-policy changes made during Trump's years in office. Most remain in place. This is worth dwelling on. Trump's time in office already represents a resurgence of old, disproven ideas about the inherent threat—physical, cultural, and economic—posed by immigrants. And if Trump does return to office, this moment may qualify less as a blip than an era: a [period like previous ones when such misconceptions prevailed](#), and laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act and eugenics-based national-origins quotas ruled the day.

[Caitlin Dickerson: America never wanted the tired, poor, huddled masses](#)

Returning Trump to the presidency would reopen wounds that have barely healed in the communities he has said he would target immediately. Recently, I stood outside a church in the Northeast that caters mostly to undocumented farmworkers, with a Catholic sister who oversees the parish's programming. As we stood in the autumn light, I remarked on the picturesque scene around her place of worship and work. She replied by pointing in one direction, then another, then another, at the places where she said ICE agents used to hide out on Sunday mornings during the Trump administration, waiting to capture her congregants as they left Mass to go about their weekly errands at the laundromat and the grocery store.

Beyond the emotional impact of Trump's return, the economy could also face a pummeling if the number of immigrant workers, legal and otherwise, were to drop. In [a November 2022 speech](#), Jerome Powell, the chair of the Federal Reserve, detailed the harm from COVID-related dips in immigration, which left the country short an estimated 1 million workers.

America's rightward shift on immigration is part of a global story in which Western countries are, in general, turning against immigrants. But the world tends to look to the United States as a guide for what sorts of checks on immigration are socially permissible. A new Trump administration would provide a pretty clear answer: just about any.

An anything-goes approach to immigration enforcement may indeed be what the country is left with if Trump succeeds in the next general election. "The first 100 days of the Trump administration will be pure bliss," [Stephen](#)

Miller told Axios, “followed by another four years of the most hard-hitting action conceivable.”

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Specter of Family Separation.”

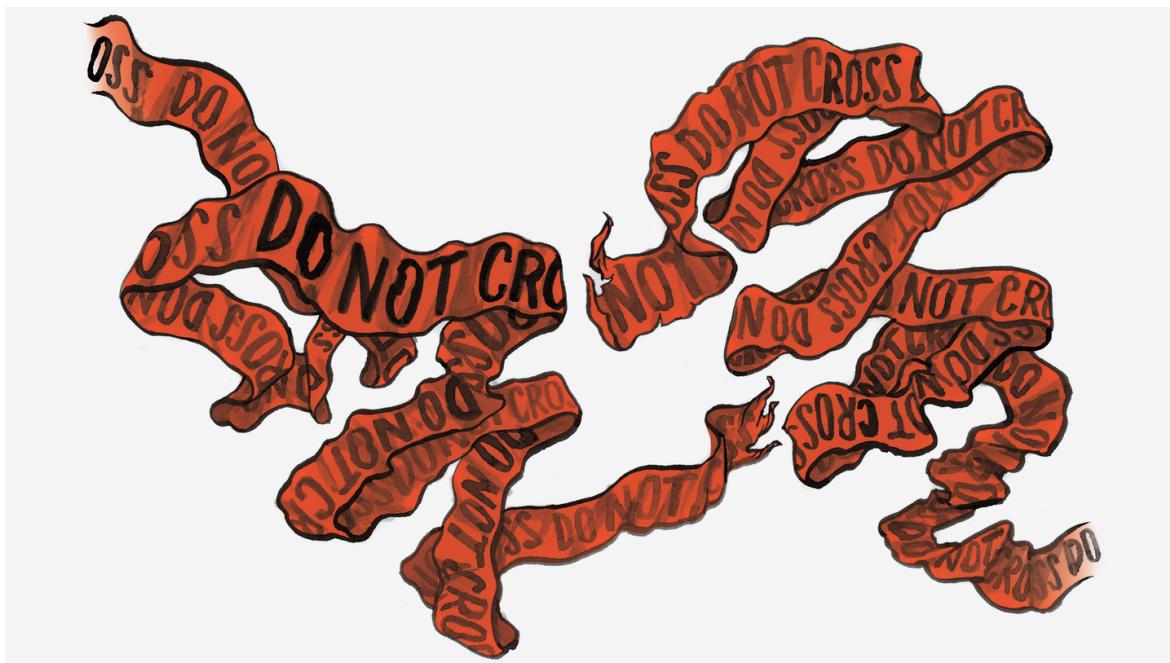
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How Trump Gets Away With It

If reelected, he could use the powers of the presidency to evade justice and punish his enemies.

by Barton Gellman



If Donald Trump regains the presidency, he will once again become the chief law-enforcement officer of the United States. There may be no American leader less suited to “take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed,” as the Constitution directs the president. But that authority comes with the office, including command of the Justice Department and the FBI.

We know what Trump would like to do with that power, because he's said so out loud. He is driven by self-interest and revenge, in that order. He wants to squelch the criminal charges now pending against him, and he wants to redeploy federal prosecutors against his enemies, [beginning with President Joe Biden](#). The important question is how much of that agenda he could actually carry out in a second term.

Trump tried and failed to cross many lines during his time in the White House. He proposed, for example, that the IRS conduct punitive audits of his political antagonists and that Border Patrol officers [shoot migrants in the legs](#). Subordinates [talked the former president out of many such schemes](#) or passively resisted them by running out the clock. The whole second volume of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report, which documented 10 occasions on which Trump tried to obstruct justice, can be read as a compilation of thwarted directives.

[From the November 2023 issue: How General Mark Milley protected the Constitution from Donald Trump](#)

The institutional resistance Trump faced has reinforced his determination to place loyalists in key jobs should he win reelection. One example is Jeffrey Clark, who tried to help Trump overturn the 2020 election. Trump sought to appoint Clark as acting attorney general in early January 2021, but backed off after [a mass-resignation threat](#) at the DOJ. People who know him well suggest that he would not let that threat deter him a second time. Trump will also want to fire Christopher Wray, the FBI director, and replace him with someone more pliable. Only tradition, not binding law, prevents the president and his political appointees from issuing orders to the FBI about its investigations.

The top jobs at the DOJ require Senate confirmation, and even a Republican Senate might not confirm an indicted conspirator to overturn an election like Clark for attorney general. Under the Vacancies Reform Act, which regulates temporary appointments, Trump can appoint any currently serving Senate-confirmed official from anywhere in the executive branch as acting attorney general. Of course, all of the officials serving at the beginning of his new term would be holdovers from the Biden administration.

Trump's allies are searching for loyalists among the Republicans currently serving on several dozen independent boards and commissions, such as the Federal Trade Commission, that have "party balancing" requirements for their appointees. Alternatively, Trump could choose any senior career official in the Justice Department who has served for at least 90 days in a position ranked GS-15 or higher on the federal pay scale—a cohort that includes, for example, senior trial attorneys, division counsels, and section chiefs. As Anne Joseph O'Connell, a Stanford law professor and an expert on the Vacancies Reform Act, reminded me, "This is how we got Matthew Whitaker," the former attorney general's chief of staff, as acting attorney general. (Whitaker was widely criticized as unqualified.)

Would some career officials, somewhere among the department's 115,000 employees, do Trump's bidding in exchange for an acting appointment? Trump's team is looking.

Once Trump has installed loyalists in crucial posts, his first priority—an urgent one for a man [facing 91 felony charges in four jurisdictions](#)—would be to save himself from conviction and imprisonment.

Of the four indictments against him, two are federal: the Florida case, with charges of unlawful retention of classified documents and obstruction of justice, and the Washington case, which charges Trump with unlawful efforts to overturn the 2020 election. Those will be the easiest for him to dispose of.

To begin with, there is little to stop Trump from firing [Special Counsel Jack Smith](#), who is overseeing both of the federal investigations. Justice Department regulations confer a measure of protection on a special counsel against arbitrary dismissal, but he may be removed for "misconduct, dereliction of duty, incapacity, conflict of interest, or for other good cause." That last clause is a catchall that Trump could readily invoke.

[David A. Graham: The cases against Trump: A guide](#)

The regulations state that a special counsel may be fired "only by the personal action of the Attorney General," but that would not stop Trump either. In the unlikely event that his handpicked attorney general were

reluctant, he could fire the attorney general and keep on firing successors until he found one to do his bidding, as Richard Nixon did to get rid of Archibald Cox. Alternatively, Trump could claim—and probably prevail, if it came to a lawsuit—that the president is not bound by Justice Department regulations and can fire the special counsel himself.

Smith’s departure would still leave Trump’s federal criminal charges intact, but no law would prevent Trump from ordering that they be dropped. He could do so even with a trial in progress, right up to the moment before a jury returned a verdict. No legal expert I talked with expressed any doubt that he could get away with this.

Dismissing the charges would require the trial judges’ consent. But even if the judges were to object, Trump would almost certainly win on appeal: The Supreme Court is not likely to let a district judge decide whether or not the Justice Department has to prosecute a case.

Trump will be able to avoid going to prison even if he has already been convicted of federal charges before he is sworn in. Here again, a trial judge is unlikely to order Trump imprisoned, even after sentencing, before he exhausts his appeals. And there is no plausible scenario in which that happens before Inauguration Day.

At any time while Trump’s appeals are pending, his Justice Department may notify the appellate court that the prosecution no longer wishes to support his conviction. This is known as a confession of error on the government’s part; the effect, if the court grants the request, is to vacate a conviction. Under Attorney General Bill Barr, the Trump administration did something to similar effect in a false-statements case against former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, [moving to dismiss the charges](#) after Flynn had pleaded guilty but before his sentencing. (Trump later pardoned Flynn.) According to the relevant rule of criminal procedure, dismissal during prosecution—including on appeal from a conviction—requires “leave of the court,” but it’s highly unlikely that an appellate court would refuse to grant such a motion to dismiss.

Trump might also invoke the pardon power on his own behalf. He has already asserted, as far back as 2018, that “I have the absolute right to

PARDON myself.” No president has ever tried this, and whether he can is [a contested question among legal scholars](#). Experts who agree with Trump say the Constitution frames the pardon power as total but for one exception, implicitly blessing all other uses. (The exception is that the president may not pardon an impeachment.) Those who disagree include the Justice Department itself, through its Office of Legal Counsel, which concluded in 1974 that a self-pardon would be invalid under “the fundamental rule that no one may be a judge in his own case.”

But the debate over self-pardons wouldn’t matter much to Trump in practice. If he pardoned himself of all criminal charges, there would be no one with standing to challenge the pardon in court—other than, perhaps, the Justice Department, which would be under Trump’s control.

Unlike the federal charges, Trump’s state criminal cases—for alleged [racketeering and election interference in Georgia](#) and [hush-money payments to a porn star in New York](#)—would not fall under his authority as president. Even so, the presidency would very likely protect him for at least the duration of his second term.

The Office of Legal Counsel, which makes authoritative interpretations of the law for the executive branch, has twice opined, in 1973 and again in 2000, that “the indictment or criminal prosecution of a sitting President would unconstitutionally undermine the capacity of the executive branch to perform its constitutionally assigned functions.” That conclusion is binding for federal prosecutors, but state prosecutors are not obliged to follow it.

No one knows what would happen if Fani Willis, the district attorney in Fulton County, Georgia, or Alvin Bragg, the DA in New York, decided to press ahead with their cases against Trump should he regain the presidency. Like so many outlandish questions pertaining to Trump, this one has no judicial precedent, because no sitting president has ever been charged with felony crimes. But legal scholars told me that Trump would have strong arguments, at least, to defer state criminal proceedings against him until he left the White House in 2029. By then, new prosecutors, with new priorities, may have replaced Willis and Bragg.

Trump has named a long list of people as deserving of criminal charges, [or execution](#). Among them are Joe Biden, Mark Milley, James Comey, Andrew McCabe, John Brennan, James Clapper, and Arthur Engoron, the judge in his New York civil fraud case.

If he returns to office, Trump may not even have to order their prosecutions himself. He will be surrounded by allies who know what he wants. One likely DOJ appointee is Mike Davis, a Republican who has substantial government credentials: He was a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch and chief counsel for nominations to Senator Charles Grassley when Grassley chaired the Judiciary Committee.

If Davis were acting attorney general, he said on a right-wing YouTube show, he would “rain hell on Washington.” First, “we’re gonna fire a lot of people in the executive branch, in the deep state.” He would also “indict Joe Biden and Hunter Biden and James Biden and every other scumball, sleazeball Biden.” And “every January 6 defendant is gonna get a pardon.” Trump could not immediately appoint an outsider like Davis attorney general. But he could make him a Justice Department section chief, and then appoint him as acting attorney general after 90 days.

Trump could also appoint—or direct his attorney general to appoint—any lawyer, at any time, as special counsel to the Justice Department, with the authority to bring charges and prosecute a case. Trump might not be able to convict his political enemies of spurious charges, but he could immiserate them with years of investigations and require them to run up millions of dollars in legal fees.

Likewise, if he managed to place sufficiently zealous allies in the Office of Legal Counsel, Trump could obtain legal authority for any number of otherwise lawless transgressions. Vice President Dick Cheney did that in the George W. Bush administration, inducing the OLC to issue opinions that authorized torture and warrantless domestic surveillance. Those opinions were later repudiated, but they guided policy for years. Trump’s history suggests that he might seek comparable legal blessing for the [use of lethal force at the southern border](#), deployment of federal troops against political demonstrators, federal seizure of state voting machines, or deferral of the next election in order to stay in power. He would be limited only by the

willingness of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the career civil service to say no.

It occurred to me, as I interviewed government veterans and legal scholars, that they might be blinkered by their own expertise when they try to anticipate what Trump would do. All of the abuses they foresee are based on the ostensibly lawful powers of the president, even if they amount to gross ruptures of legal norms and boundaries. What transgressions could he commit, that is, within the law?

But Trump himself isn't thinking that way. On Truth Social, in December 2022, he posted that righting a wrong of sufficient "magnitude" (in this case, his fictitious claim of election fraud) "allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution."

The "take Care" clause of the Constitution calls for the president to see that laws are carried out faithfully. But what if a court rules against Trump and he simply refuses to comply? It's not obvious who would—or could—enforce the ruling.

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Four More Years of Unchecked Misogyny

In a second Trump term, women would once again be targets.

by Sophie Gilbert



Strange as this might be to say of the only American president found legally liable for sexual abuse, the only leader of the free world accused of dangling a TV gig in front of a porn performer seemingly as an enticement for sex, the only commander in chief to publicly denigrate the sexual attractiveness

of both Heidi Klum (“no longer a 10”) and Angelina Jolie (“not a great beauty”), I don’t believe Donald Trump hates women. Not by default, anyway. “When it comes to the women who are not only dutifully but lovingly catering to his desires,” the philosopher Kate Manne wrote in her 2017 book, *Down Girl*, “what’s to hate?”

The misogyny that Trump embodies and champions is [less about loathing than enforcement](#): underscoring his requirement that women look and behave a certain way, that we comply with his desires and submit to our required social function. The more than 25 women who have accused Trump of sexual assault or misconduct (which he has denied), and the countless more who have endured public vitriol and threats to their life after being targeted by him, have all been punished either for challenging him or for denying him what he fundamentally believed was his due.

[Read: What E. Jean Carroll means for #MeToo](#)

At the micro level, Trump’s misogyny can be almost comical, in an absurdist sort of way, like the time in 1994 when he fretted over whether his new infant daughter would inherit her mother’s breasts, or when he tweeted to Cher in 2012, “I promise not to talk about your massive plastic surgeries that didn’t work.” On a larger scale, the legislative and cultural shifts he fostered during his four years in the White House are so drastic that they’re hard to fully parse. Until 2022, women and pregnant people had the constitutional right to an abortion; now, thanks to Trump’s remade Supreme Court, [abortion is unavailable or effectively banned](#) in about [a third of states](#). The MAGA Republican Party is ever more of a boy’s club: [All 14 representatives](#) who announced bids to become House speaker after the ouster of Kevin McCarthy were men; the victor, Mike Johnson, has [blamed Roe v. Wade in the past for depriving the country of “able-bodied workers”](#) to prop up the American economy. Online and off, old-fashioned sexists and trollish provocateurs alike have been emboldened by Trump’s ability to say grotesque things without consequences.

Trump’s glee in smacking down women has filtered into every aspect of our culture. If, as the literary critic Lionel Trilling wrote, “ideology is not acquired by thought but by breathing the haunted air,” then Trump has helped radicalize swaths of a generation essentially through poisonous

fumes. He didn't create the manosphere, the fetid corner of the internet devoted to sending women back to the Stone Age. But he elevated some of its most noxious voices into the mainstream, and vindicated their worst prejudices. "I'm in a state of exuberance that we now have a President who rates women on a 1–10 scale in the same way that we do," [wrote](#) the former self-described pickup artist Roosh V on his website shortly after the election.

By now, misogyny has bled into virtually every part of the internet. TikTok clips featuring Andrew Tate, the [misogynist influencer](#) and accused rapist and human trafficker who has said that women should bear some personal responsibility for their sexual assaults and frequently derides women as "hoes," have been viewed billions of times. (Tate has denied the charges against him.) In 2021, before Elon Musk bought Twitter and [oversaw a spike in misogynistic and abusive content](#)—not to mention reinstating the accounts of both Trump and Tate—the Tesla entrepreneur and men's-rights icon tweeted that he was going to inaugurate a new college called the Texas Institute of Technology & Science (TITS). Boys on social media are being inundated with messaging that the only qualities worth prizing in women are sexual desirability and submission—a worldview that aligns perfectly with Trump's. Misogyny, as my colleague Franklin Foer [wrote in *Slate* in 2016](#), is the one ideology Trump has never changed, his one unwavering credo. Seeking to dominate others with his supposed sexual prowess and loudly professing disgust at women he doesn't desire has been his modus operandi for decades. Any woman who challenges him is "a big, fat pig," "a dog," a "horseface."

What would four more years of Trump mean for women? It's hard to conclude that Trump was moderated by the presence of his daughter in the West Wing, exactly—or, for that matter, by any of the advisers who thought they could temper his worst instincts before they ended up fleeing in droves. But what's most chilling about a possible second Trump presidency is that he would certainly now be unchecked. The advisers who remain are the ones who bolster his darker impulses. It was Trump's adviser Jason Miller, [Axios's Mike Allen reported](#), who psyched him up between segments of his 2023 CNN town hall as he became more and more aggressive toward the moderator, Kaitlan Collins. "Are you ready? Can I talk? Do you mind?" Trump jeered at her. Anyone who's ever witnessed an abusive relationship could instantly recognize the tone.

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Women Will Be Targets.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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The Climate Can't Afford Another Trump Presidency

His approach to the environment: ignore it.

by Zoë Schlanger



On the last Saturday before Donald Trump took office, in January 2017, I watched the [controlled chaos of a hackathon](#) unfold in a library at the University of Pennsylvania. Volunteer archivists, librarians, and computer scientists were trawling government websites, looking for data sets about climate change to duplicate for safekeeping. Groups like this [were meeting across the country](#). Flowcharts on whiteboards laid out this particular room's priorities: copy decades of ice-core statistics from the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration; scrape the Environmental Protection Agency's entire library of local air-monitoring results from the previous four years; find a way to preserve a zoomable map of the factories and power plants emitting the most greenhouse gases.

The fear was that the incoming administration would pull information like this from public view—and within a week, it did. By noon on Inauguration Day, the Trump administration had [scrubbed mentions of climate change from the White House website](#). By May, officials had [taken down the EPA's page](#) laying out climate science for the general public, as well as 108 pages associated with the Clean Power Plan, the landmark Obama policy meant to curb emissions from power plants—months before the Trump administration tried [to repeal the policy](#) altogether.

The administration's goal was to bury the issue of climate change. Nothing was done to address it; the very mention of it was knocked from the national agenda—and, by extension, the international agenda. If Trump returns to office, he will surely double down on this strategy.

First, the global implications: The United States would probably exit from the Paris Agreement again, Michael Gerrard, the founder and director of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University, told me. Despite its status as the wealthiest big emitter, the United States continues to express little to no interest in substantially funding global climate action, even during Democratic administrations. For now, though, at least the country is still at the table for international climate talks. Pulling out of Paris might be a largely symbolic move, but it could have [a domino effect](#). “India, Indonesia, Brazil—if they see the U.S. is not acting, it’s easy for conservative politicians in those countries to say, ‘These big rich guys aren’t doing anything; why should we?’” Gerrard said.

Domestically, it would in some ways be harder now for Trump to meaningfully alter climate policy than it was when he first came to office. Electric vehicles have become popular, and solar power will likely be the cheapest source of electricity in basically every country by 2030. Heat pumps have proved to be fantastically efficient, and a bipartisan consortium of 25 governors just [agreed to quadruple](#) the number of them installed in homes in their states. One consequence of the Trump administration was the

emergence of a new kind of subnational climate diplomacy: [Mayors and governors began meeting](#) with international leaders to discuss the issue on their own. During a second Trump term, these efforts would surely pick up again.

In addition, certain new climate-friendly policies are so good for Republican states that their representatives probably won't want to touch them. The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 promotes clean power by offering major tax credits to individuals and businesses that make or use renewable energy, and [most of that money](#) is likely to flow to red states.

[Read: Not even a single Republican voted for the climate bill](#)

But a second Trump administration [could still do major damage](#). The fossil-fuel lobby would work to dismantle climate policies. Groups led by the Heritage Foundation and the America First Policy Institute are already making a “battle plan” to block electricity-grid updates that would allow for solar and wind expansion, to prevent states from adopting California’s car-pollution standards, and to gut clean-power divisions at the Department of Energy, among other things.

Under a second Trump term, the EPA would no doubt be threatened with budget cuts, as it was during the first. Staffers would likely retire en masse, as they did before, and enforcement of climate policy would slow or stop.

But the first thing to go will likely be the websites—again. The U.S. has no law against a government agency deleting pages from its own websites, even if the information on them is in the public interest. “We have been telling the Biden administration that this is a real vulnerability,” Gretchen Gehrke, a co-founder of the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, told me. For now, all of the data sets that those teams of hackers scraped the first time around are still housed on private servers, just in case.

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Climate Denial Will Flourish.”

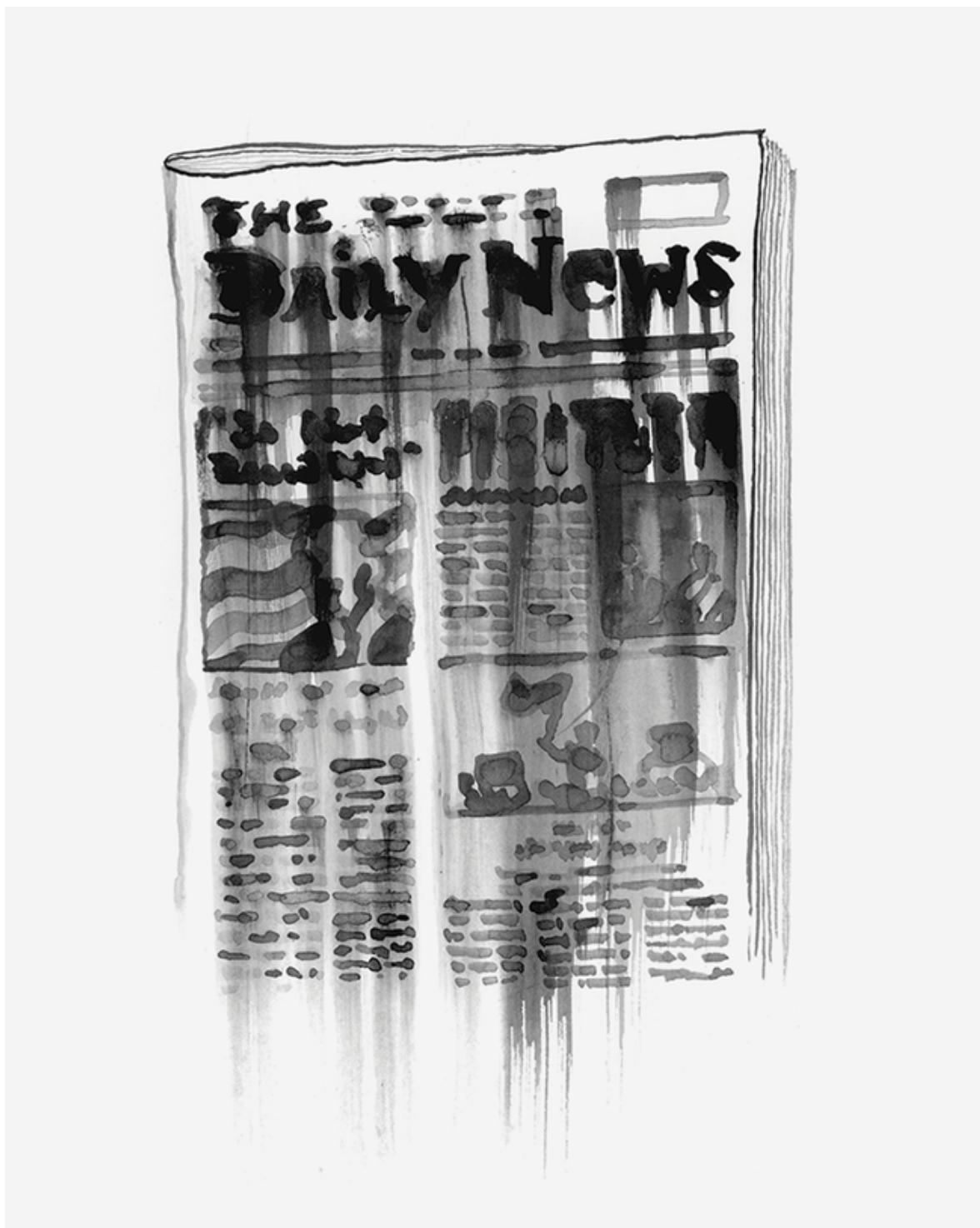
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Is Journalism Ready?

The press has repeatedly fallen into Donald Trump's traps. A second term could render it irrelevant.

by George Packer



The relationship between Donald Trump and the news media has always been a little disingenuous, like a pair of fighters trading insults and throwing air punches at a weigh-in. The hostility is real, but the performance benefits both sides.

Trump claims to despise the journalists who cover him, calling them “the enemy of the American people,” suing them, and threatening unspecified reprisals for their transgressions against him. But his narcissism craves their constant attention, and as president he gave reporters far more access than his successor has, taking [their late-night phone calls](#), then framing their cover stories in gold. Media organizations, including this one, have warned for years that Trump is a danger to the democracy that makes journalism possible, and that a vigorous press is essential to a free society. At the same time, the media became dependent on his vile words and scandalous deeds for their financial health, squeezing droplets of news from his every tweet even if the public had nothing to learn. Leslie Moonves, the disgraced former TV-network chair, said of Trump’s first candidacy: “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.”

As soon as Trump left office, [readers and viewers disappeared](#)—within a month, *The Washington Post* lost a quarter of its unique visitors, and CNN lost 45 percent of its prime-time audience. From exile, Trump summoned one reporter after another to Mar-a-Lago and gave interviews for books that both sides knew would attack his presidency and become best sellers. When he returned as a presidential candidate and criminal defendant, cable-news-network ratings climbed again.

It’s impossible not to feel that Trump has gotten the better of this codependent clench. His endless stream of grievance and invective [eroded his supporters’ trust in the news media](#) to the point where 58 percent of Republicans now say they have none. If half the country believes most of what the mainstream media report and the other half thinks it’s mostly lies, this isn’t a partial win for journalists, whose purpose isn’t to strengthen the opposition but to give the public information it needs to exercise democratic power. Trump’s purpose is to destroy the very notion of objective truth. The match was rigged in his favor, and being compelled to fight it has not been good for journalism.

Though reporters did excellent work covering Trump’s presidency, his effect was to make the American media a little more like him: solipsistic (foreign reporting nearly disappeared), divisive, and self-righteous. Trump corrupts everyone who gets near him—spouses, children, followers, accomplices, flunkies. He corrupts the press by obsessing it; by flooding it with so much

shit that news becomes almost indistinguishable from fluff and lies; by baiting it into abandoning independence for activism; by demoralizing it with the recognition that much of the public doesn't care.

Trump wants power again for two reasons, and a policy agenda isn't one of them: to remove the humiliating stain of defeat, including the prospect of prison, and to exact revenge on his enemies. In a [speech in Michigan](#) last June, he named them one by one and promised to destroy them all: "the deep state"; "the warmongers"; "the globalists"; "the communists, Marxists, and fascists"; "the sick political class that hates our country"; and finally—he pointed at reporters in the room—"the fake-news media."

The first time around, Trump's attempts to use presidential power against the media were desultory. He was accused of trying to deny a large Pentagon contract to Amazon [in order to damage Jeff Bezos](#), the owner of the *Post*. To hurt CNN, he pushed his Justice Department to block the merger of AT&T and Time Warner, which owned the network. He talked about weakening journalists' legal protections and even having them arrested. He created a threatening atmosphere by singling out individuals and organizations. All of it put the media under constant pressure and made their work more difficult. None of it was very effective.

[From the November 2023 issue: Martin Baron on how we got 'Democracy dies in darkness'](#)

Last April, Trump's campaign website posted a video on deregulation in which the candidate vowed to bring the Federal Communications Commission "back under presidential authority as the Constitution demands"—giving himself direct control over broadcast licenses and other regulatory matters. It's hard to imagine that at the start of his presidency, he knew what the initials *FCC* stood for. "One general nightmare is he will be more competent at undermining a free press in a second term, either through advisers or lessons learned," John Langford, a counsel at Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to combatting authoritarianism, told me.

"People who actually believe are going to do a better job," a conservative who served in the Trump administration and is now involved in [efforts by](#)

[the Heritage Foundation](#) to build a loyal cadre of political appointees for a second term told me. In its approach to the media, he said, the biggest mistake of Trump’s presidency was appointing officials who wanted to be liked by journalists. Second-term hires would welcome being the subject of a hit piece in *Politico*.

A second Trump White House would give important policy scoops to friendly publications such as *The Federalist* and *The Washington Free Beacon* rather than to supposedly unfair outlets like *The New York Times*, which would report them unfavorably. “The White House press corps could be shaken up,” the former Trump official said, explaining that the administration’s director of communications could say to the White House press corps, “I know you have your rules, but we’re not going to play by those rules. Give these people”—administration allies—“press credentials, or we’ll have briefings with only people we invite, in a different room.”

It’s not hard to imagine Trump breaking laws to go after journalists, seeking embarrassing personal information on his most effective pursuers. At the start of his term, he floated to James Comey, the FBI director, the possibility of jailing journalists who published classified information. Comey [laughed off the idea](#); with fanatic loyalists in the bureau, a second-term Trump could carry it out. In a 900-page manual on how to bring the administrative state under the president’s complete control, Heritage advises that “the Department of Justice should use all of the tools at its disposal to investigate leaks,” including seizing reporters’ email and phone records, a practice that Attorney General Merrick Garland ruled out in 2021. The conservative supermajority on the Supreme Court might be less likely to defend press freedom during a second Trump term than the Court has been in the past. Joel Simon, the founding director of the Journalism Protection Initiative at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, has urged colleagues to prepare, practically and psychologically, for legal assaults, economic pressure, “a toxic online environment,” and dangerous streets with violence from both police and demonstrators.

President Richard Nixon put his critics in the press [on an enemies list](#), illegally wiretapped and surveilled them, discussed siccing his IRS on them. Nixon’s henchmen even proposed various ways to [kill the columnist Jack Anderson](#) (they postponed the plot, instead bugging the Democratic National

Committee at the Watergate, and never got back to it). Trump doesn't need to have journalists poisoned. He doesn't even need to have them investigated. His most powerful weapon is his ability to convince large numbers of Americans that the press has no particular value for democracy and deserves no special protection; that it's just another racket of corrupt, self-serving elites; that its hard-won exposés and running fact-checks are all fake news; that the evidence of the senses can be vaporized by a Truth Social post. His epistemological nihilism drives journalists half-mad, unable to counter him or escape his hall of mirrors.

The worst fate for the press in a second Trump term would be neither legal jeopardy nor financial ruin. It would be irrelevance.

Other democracies have reached this point. "Political leaders discredit the press and plant in the minds of the public that they're just another political actor," Simon told me. "The public doesn't see attacks on the press as threats to their own interests, and that opens the door to consolidation of power." Szabolcs Panyi, an investigative journalist in Budapest, worries that Americans haven't paid enough attention to the decline of freedom in other countries to prevent it from happening here. "The American public doesn't recognize that the same could happen to them," he told me. "They're not even aware that democracies can be turned in just a matter of years—two election cycles—into hybrid regimes."

Starting in 2014, Hungary's leading media companies were acquired by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's cronies and turned into regime mouthpieces or shut down. (For seven months in 2019, Panyi's phone was surveilled.) Journalists haven't disappeared into Hungarian prisons. Orbán has [crushed independent media](#) with a combination of economic pressure, Kremlin-inspired disinformation, and the "fake news" label. "They killed the news outlets—they don't have to kill the journalists," Panyi said. But the key to Orbán's success has been public opinion. As he neutralized the press, Hungarian voters gave him four election victories in a row. Power creates more power; once the process starts, it can be unstoppable. "Probably the job that we journalists were doing was not good enough," Panyi said, "or we didn't make enough efforts to describe to our readers why it's important what we're doing."

Sheila Coronel, an acclaimed Philippine journalist and a professor at Columbia Journalism School, began her career on the eve of [the ‘People Power’ revolt](#) that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. “We took our freedom for granted,” she told me. “Looking back, maybe we weren’t such good caretakers of that freedom to really serve the public good, as opposed to building profitable media businesses.” As the country’s elected leaders became more corrupt, Coronel said, media companies made fortunes from “entertainment and sensationalism, feeding off political scandals without looking at the underlying causes.”

When the demagogic President Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016, he was able to “emasculate” the media, Coronel said. His successor, Bongbong Marcos, the dictator’s son, feeds the public an information diet of “sheer inanity,” undiluted by a critical press. “It’s death by cotton candy.” Like Panyi, Coronel watched her profession [lose popular trust](#), partly through state pressure, partly through its own isolation and carelessness. “We contributed to the erosion of the allure and attraction of democracy,” she said.

[Read: Maria Ressa on how to fight fascism before it’s too late](#)

How can the American media prevent their own irrelevance in a second Trump term? First, by getting rid of a few illusions. The press can do little, if anything, to drain the sea of disinformation in which Americans are drowning. *The Washington Post*’s [running tally of Trump’s false statements](#) in office—there were 30,573, or about 21 a day—was a worthy project, but did the recording of all those lies change a single mind? Political beliefs are rarely based on demonstrable facts. Information of any kind only reinforces voters’ views and deepens polarization. The *Post* and other outlets should continue to hold public figures accountable for their lies, but none of us should expect it to make much difference.

Nor will there be any Watergate for Trump. Nixon was brought down by the work of aggressive journalists, along with a federal judge, a unanimous Supreme Court, and a bipartisan Congress—by strong democratic institutions. But they worked only because Americans still believed in them —because two-thirds of the public, which had just given Nixon a landslide victory, could not abide a criminal in office. That was a different public.

Today, almost half the country is prepared to reelect Trump in spite of his two impeachments and 91 criminal charges. What scandal could investigative reporters possibly uncover that would reduce Trump's support to Nixon's 24 percent?

In a second Trump presidency, the press would be torn between what's good for its narrow interests and what's good for its broader mission of "public interest or public service," in Joel Simon's words—that is, democracy. For 25 years, journalists have been scrambling to survive the damage done to their business model by the internet. Venerable outlets perish or self-mutilate; newer ones come and go in a flash; mountains of bait are thrown into the water to see what rises to the surface, producing trillions of bits of data to be collected and examined for financial clues. This exhausting effort consumes so much time and talent that it's difficult to face the obvious truth: The for-profit model of journalism shows signs of being broken.

And here lies the dilemma: that model works better with Trump. Covering him brought CNN, the *Times*, the *Post*, *The Atlantic*, and other outlets larger audiences. But much of that profitable coverage takes place in a glass booth that seals out a hostile or indifferent public. Claiming a higher purpose, the media flood the zone with their own shit—talking heads, hot takes, angry jeremiads—to stay afloat, and in doing so, they trade long-term credibility for short-term gain. Social-media platforms, far richer and more powerful than the mainstream press, don't even have to feign a higher purpose. "This is the existential question that we have to ask ourselves," Simon told me: Carry out a public service at the risk of economic ruin, or give in to incentives to cover Trump in ways that serve him better than the public?

Panyi, the Hungarian journalist, who has lived through what might await us here, spoke of "the tragedy of real journalism," by which he meant the imperative to "stick to the good old rules of free, fair journalism even if we're taking the punches and it's a battle we're about to lose." That would be my hope for the press in a second Trump term: to investigate his presidency relentlessly, burrowing deep into every obscure corner where power might be abused, for the record and the future if not for now, and leave the cotton candy aside. Journalists can give the public what it needs to govern itself, but they can't save democracy. That will be up to the American people.

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Trump's Polarization of Science Is Bad for Everyone

A reelected Donald Trump would continue to attack studies that stand in the way of his agenda—and to make support for scientific inquiry a tribal belief.

by Sarah Zhang



The president of the United States cannot control the trajectory of a hurricane, but he can—we learned in 2019—force the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to endorse a trajectory that he invented. [Thus went Sharpiegate](#), the brief episode that began when Donald Trump tweeted

a warning about Hurricane Dorian's danger to several states. It was one of his more anodyne tweets, but he erroneously included Alabama. He doubled down when questioned, producing as proof a NOAA forecast altered with what looked suspiciously like a Sharpie. When this failed to quiet criticism, he strong-armed the agency into a statement that affirmed his tweet.

By then, Dorian was already making landfall nowhere near Alabama. But so what? Even if Trump could not bend reality, he found that he could [bend the federal bureaucracy](#) to his lies. Given another four years in the White House, he will certainly do so again and again.

When science gets in his way, Trump is happy to attack or distort it—or block it altogether. His administration [kicked scientists off EPA advisory panels](#), replacing them with allies who questioned the need to regulate smog and greenhouse gases. It canceled a \$1 million study on the risks of mountaintop-removal coal mining. It stopped funding children's health centers that studied the impact of pollution.

The pandemic, of course, is where Trump's willful and wishful ignorance [turned the most deadly](#). Even as he privately acknowledged the danger of the novel coronavirus in February 2020, he publicly proclaimed that it would "go away" as the weather warmed. When that didn't happen, Trump tried new ways to downplay the virus's threat. He promoted miracle cures: first hydroxychloroquine and then convalescent plasma, diverting federal resources to drugs that did nothing against the virus. He mocked masks. When the vaccines finally arrived, he endorsed only half-heartedly what should have been his administration's crowning scientific achievement, because admitting that the shots were a big deal would have meant admitting that the virus was a big deal.

[From the September 2020 issue: Ed Yong on how the pandemic defeated America](#)

During his presidency, Trump's so-called war on science set off existential fears that he was single-handedly destroying trust in science itself. This adage is not borne out in polling data, at least not quite in that way: Confidence in scientists was as high as ever during the Trump administration; if anything, it increased. The percentage of Americans who

professed a fair or great deal of confidence in scientists climbed from 76 to 87 percent from 2016 to 2020, according to the Pew Research Center—the same period in which Trump was retconning hurricane forecasts and stoking COVID denialism.

But this upswing conceals a sharp polarization: Republicans lost confidence in the scientific community under Trump, while Democrats gained it. And those two trends appeared to reinforce each other. As conservatives ditched masks and refused vaccines, liberals enthusiastically flocked to them. They populated their lawns with IN THIS HOUSE, WE BELIEVE ... signs, which declared that SCIENCE IS REAL, alongside BLACK LIVES MATTER and NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL. Even before the pandemic, they turned out in droves for [the March for Science](#), in April 2017, which, while ostensibly nonpartisan, was inspired by the Women's March in January of that year, and displayed nerdy slogans plainly directed against Trump, such as SCIENCE CURES ALTERNATIVE FACTS.

As liberals mixed science and politics, conservatives recoiled. The March for Science, according to one study, made conservatives' attitudes toward science more negative. And after the prestigious journal *Nature* [endorsed Joe Biden in the 2020 election](#), the only effects, another study found, were to make Trump supporters more distrustful of scientists and of information published in *Nature*. The journal ran an editorial acknowledging the study but stood by its endorsement anyway because "silence was not an option." In other words, *Nature* also doubled down. Trump has a preternatural ability to politicize everything—through his actions and the reactions they provoke—and science proved no exception.

A second Trump administration would likely revive the [crackdown on environmental science](#) that characterized the first, and it is now hard to imagine Trump lending weight to vaccination or support to the CDC. He could also pressure the federal bureaucracy to target areas of science policy that have become politically salient since 2020, such as the regulation of abortion pills and the use of fetal tissue in research.

[From the January/February 2024 issue: The climate can't afford another Trump presidency](#)

The more abiding danger might be the continued transmutation of support for scientific study and findings—which wasn’t always so strongly associated with one party—into a cast-iron tribal belief. A reelected Trump would continue to attack any science that stands in the way of his agenda, and he would also likely provoke his liberal opponents into still more full-throated defenses of science, including clumsy and overreaching ones. It would be a mistake, as well, for liberals to cling too tightly to science as the ultimate arbiter of policy. Closing schools for COVID, for example, came with genuinely difficult trade-offs in the uncertain days of March 2020; cutting off sources of viral transmission also meant cutting kids off from free lunches, socialization, reporting of child abuse—not to mention learning. But some of the bluest cities kept schools closed well into 2021, even as it became clearer that these other costs were steep.

The upshot of Trump’s polarization of science is bad for everyone. The early days of the coronavirus were, despite everything that came after, a time of remarkable social cohesion. COVID attitudes had not yet hardened along clear partisan lines, and Americans, by and large, stayed home at first. We followed social-distancing guidelines. We successfully flattened the curve, at least for a time. In another crisis—another hurricane, another pandemic—we will again have to rely on one another. But can we, if we cannot even agree on the same reality?

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Corruption Unbound

Donald Trump and his cronies left his first administration with a playbook for self-enrichment in a second term.

by Franklin Foer



Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump in the Oval Office in 2019 (Mark Wilson / Getty)

In the annals of government ethics, the year 2017 exists in a bygone era. That September, Donald Trump's secretary of health and human services, Tom Price, [resigned in disgrace](#). His unforgivable sin was chartering private jets funded by taxpayers, when he just as easily could have flown commercial. Compared with the abuses of power in the years that followed,

the transgression was relatively picayune. But at that early moment, even Trump felt obliged to join the criticism of Price.

During Trump's first months as president, it wasn't yet clear how much concentrated corruption the nation, or his own party, would tolerate, which is why Trump was compelled to [dispose of the occasional Cabinet secretary](#). Yet nearly everything about Trump's history in real estate, where he greased palms and bullied officials, suggested that he regarded the government as a lucrative instrument for his own gain.

A week and a half before taking office, he held a press conference in front of towering piles of file folders, theatrically positioned to suggest rigorous legal analysis, and announced that he would not divest himself of his commercial interests. Instead, he became the first modern commander in chief to profit from a global network of businesses, branded in gilded letters blaring his own name.

It didn't happen all at once. Trump spent the early days of his presidency testing boundaries. He used his bully pulpit to unabashedly promote his real-estate portfolio. His properties charged the Secret Service "exorbitant rates"—[as much as \\$1,185 a night](#), per a House Oversight Committee report—for housing agents when Trump or his family members visited. By the time Trump and his cronies left the White House, they had slowly erased any compunction, both within the Republican Party and outside it, about their corruption. They left power having compiled a playbook for exploiting public office for private gain.

[From the March 2018 issue: Franklin Foer on Paul Manafort, American hustler](#)

That know-how—that confidence in their own impunity, that savvy understanding of how to profitably deal with malignant interests—will inevitably be applied to plans for a second term. If the first Trump presidency was, for the most part, an improvised exercise in petty corruption, a second would likely consist of systematic abuse of the government. There's a term to describe the sort of regime that might emerge on the other side: a Mafia state.

The term [was popularized](#) by Bálint Magyar, a Hungarian sociologist and a dissident during Communist times. He wanted to capture the kleptocracy emerging in his country, which was far more sophisticated than other recent examples of plunder. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán didn't need to rely on brute force. He operated with the legitimacy that comes from electoral victories. And he justified the enrichment of his inner circle in carefully crafted legalisms. His abuses of office were so deftly executed that Hungary remains a member of the European Union and a magnet for multinational corporations.

At the center of Orbán's Mafia state is a system of patronage. When he finally won consolidated control of the government in 2010, he purged the nation's civil service—a “bloodless liquidation,” as Magyar describes the tactic. In place of professionals and experts, Orbán installed party loyalists. This wasn't a superficial shuffling of his cabinet, but a comprehensive remaking of the nation's public sphere. It is testimony to the thoroughness of his conquest that his apparatchiks took control of the Hungarian Chess Federation and a state-funded project to develop dental tourism.

The party loyalists Orbán appointed became the capos of his crime family. Their job was to reward its friends (by sharing the spoils of government contracts) and to punish its vocal critics (with tax audits and denial of employment). The loyalists constituted, in Magyar's memorable phrase, an “organized upperworld.”

The goal of the apparatus was to protect the apparatus. A small inner circle around Orbán guarded the spectacular wealth accrued through contracts to build infrastructure and the leasing of government-owned land on highly favorable terms. By 2017, a former gas-line repairman from Orbán's home village had ascended to No. 8 on *Forbes*'s list of the richest Hungarians.

Orbán's system is impressively sturdy. His loyalists need their patron to remain in power so that they can continue to enjoy their own ill-gotten gains. In pursuit of that goal, they have helped him slowly and subtly eliminate potential obstacles to his Mafia state, eroding the influence of local governments, replacing hostile judges, and smoothing the way for his allies to purchase influential media outlets.

[From the January/February 2022 issue: Anne Applebaum on the kleptocrats next door](#)

Corruption in the Trump administration wasn't nearly sophisticated or comprehensive enough to rival Hungary's. Compared with its kleptocratic cousins in other countries, it was primitive. Companies and other interest groups simply pumped money into Trump properties. As they sought government support for a merger, executives at T-Mobile spent \$195,000 at Trump's Washington, D.C., hotel. When the Air-Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Institute wanted the administration to support an international treaty that helped its member firms, it paid more than \$700,000 to host an event at a Trump golf resort in Florida. The Qatari government bought an apartment in a Trump-branded building in New York for \$6.5 million.

Such examples were so commonplace that they ceased to provoke much outrage, which was perhaps the gravest danger they posed. Ever since the founding of the republic, revulsion at the mere perception of public corruption had been a bedrock sentiment of American political culture, one of the few sources of bipartisan consensus. But fidelity to Trump required indifference to corruption. It was impossible to remain loyal to the president without forgiving his malfeasance. By the end of Trump's term, Republicans had come to regard corruption as a purely instrumentalist concept—useful for besmirching rival Democrats, but never applicable to members of their own party.

With the confidence that it will never face opposition from within its own ranks, a second Trump administration would be emboldened to hatch more expansive schemes. The [grandest of these plans](#), at least among those that have been announced by Trump's allies, mimics Orbán's "bloodless liquidation," where loyalists replace nonpartisan professionals and career civil servants. By instituting [a new personnel policy](#), called Schedule F, Trump could eliminate employment protections for thousands of tenured bureaucrats, allowing him to more easily fire a broad swath of civil servants.

[Read: The open plot to dismantle the federal government](#)

The mass firing of bureaucrats may not seem like a monumental opportunity for self-enrichment, but that will be the effect. The old ethos of the civil

service was neutrality: Tenure in government deliberately insulated its employees from politics. But the Trumpists have plotted a frontal assault on that ethos, which they consider a guise for liberal bureaucrats to subvert their beloved leader. It doesn't require much imagination to see what this new class of bureaucrats might unleash. Picked for their loyalty, they will exploit the government in the spirit of that loyalty, handing government contracts to friendly firms, forcing companies who want favors from the state to pay tribute at Trump properties, using their power to punish critics.

The United States isn't a post-Communist state like Hungary. It doesn't have state-owned firms that can be lucratively privatized. But the Biden years have remade the contours of the government, unwittingly generating fresh possibilities for corruption. With [proposed new guidelines for antitrust enforcement](#), which aim to empower the Justice Department to aggressively block mergers, the government can more easily penalize hostile firms. (While in office, Trump reportedly experimented with this by [pressuring an official](#) to block AT&T's merger with Time Warner, out of his antipathy toward CNN, which would have been part of the new mega-firm.) These were policies designed to promote the national interest. In the hands of a corrupt administration, they can be exploited to enrich hackish officials and a governing clique.

Autocratic leaders of other countries will intuitively understand how to seek favor in such a system. To persuade the United States to overlook human-rights abuses, or to win approval for controversial arms sales, they will cultivate mid-level officials and steer development funds toward Trump-favored projects. Some might be so brazen as to co-develop Trump properties in their home countries. (According to an analysis of his tax returns, Trump's [foreign holdings earned him at least \\$160 million while in office](#).) Such buying of favors will not be particularly costly, by the standards of sovereign wealth. In aggregate, however, they could massively enrich Trump and his allies.

It was just such a scenario, in which the virus of foreign interests imperceptibly implants itself in the American government, that the Founders most feared. They designed a system of government intended to forestall such efforts. But Trump has no regard for that system, and every incentive to

replace it with one that will line his own coffers. Having long used [the language of the five families](#), decrying snitches and rats, Trump will now have a chance to build a state worthy of his discourse.

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Why Xi Wants Trump to Win

A second Trump term would allow China to cement its grip on the developing world.

by Michael Schuman



No one would be happier to see Trump reelected than Xi Jinping. (Fred Dufour / AFP / Getty)

After four years of Joe Biden, China's leaders would likely be relieved to have Donald Trump back in the White House.

Compared with his predecessor, Biden has operated quietly. Trump [launched a trade war](#); slapped tariffs on Chinese imports; and infuriated Beijing by referring to the coronavirus as “[the Chinese Virus](#),” blaming the Chinese Communist Party for its spread, and even at times humoring theories that the party may have played a role in its creation.

But Biden has hit China harder than Trump ever did. Armed with a more determined foreign policy, he has inflicted acute damage on the country’s economy and geopolitical ambitions, from which China’s leader, Xi Jinping, has struggled to recover. “A Biden-led U.S., probably from the Chinese perspective, looks like a more formidable challenge,” Scott Kennedy, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., told me.

The most telling example is Biden’s technology policy. In 2022, his administration [effectively barred the export to China](#) of advanced semiconductors and the complex equipment required to manufacture them. The controls will likely set back China’s hopes of building a competitive chip industry for years and hamper its progress in other key tech sectors, [such as artificial intelligence](#).

[Read: Why Biden’s block on chips to China is a big deal](#)

Biden has revitalized the American-led global alliance network that had atrophied under Trump, and has marshaled its power to counter China. The advanced democracies in the Group of Seven have displayed an unusual degree of coordination on Biden’s watch, agreeing in 2023 to a common approach to decrease their reliance on the Chinese economy. Biden has also fostered closer ties with new partners, especially India, to compete with Chinese influence in the developing world. Biden’s success has apparently alarmed a Chinese leadership [fearful of becoming encircled and contained](#) by a coalition of American allies.

By comparison, from Beijing’s point of view, haggling with Trump over tariffs or exchanging bombastic rhetoric was a mere nuisance. Trump’s withdrawal from American global leadership encouraged Xi to promote China as a more responsible world power. The chaos of the Trump presidency—the administration’s inept response to the pandemic, the

violence of January 6—allowed Chinese propagandists to cast the United States as [a superpower in decline](#). Biden’s diplomatic reengagement has made spreading that narrative harder. In response, Xi has become more hostile to Washington. He has routinely resisted dialogue with the Biden administration and become more determined to upset the U.S.-led world order. He has grown more desperate and isolated as a result. Opposed by most of the world’s major powers, Xi has thrown in his lot with the pariah states Russia and Iran in an attempt to build an anti-American coalition to challenge U.S. primacy.

Even if a second Trump presidency were to retain some aspects of Biden’s China policy—the technology controls, for instance, would almost certainly stay in place—Trump’s return would jeopardize the united front that Biden has forged among the major democracies. His “get tough” policy could fixate on one issue with China—trade, for instance—and waver on others of importance, such as human rights and policy toward Taiwan. By comparison, Biden has consistently pressed Beijing on a range of fronts, even straying beyond Washington’s [traditionally ambiguous position on Taiwan](#) to suggest that the United States would defend the island from a Chinese military assault. From Beijing’s standpoint, that makes Trump less threatening than Biden, and much more manageable.

[From the December 2022 issue: Ben Rhodes on how Taiwan is preparing to be invaded](#)

Whoever wins the White House, Xi will pursue his agenda to roll back American power and create a China-centric world order. But he would likely push even harder [to promote China as a world leader](#) if Trump were in charge. By weakening U.S. standing abroad and democracy at home, Trump would offer Xi more opportunities than Biden to extend Chinese influence and win hearts and minds within the developing world.

Of course, one can’t assume that Trump would cut and paste his China policy from his first term. A newly reelected President Trump would face a geopolitical environment altered by the war in Ukraine and Xi’s intensified animosity toward the United States. He might change his China policy in light of these new realities. But he won’t change his personality. Trump is just as likely to fawn over Xi and other dictators as he is to stand his ground.

If Xi could vote in November, he would surely cast his ballot for Trump.

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A MAGA Judiciary

In a second term, Donald Trump would appoint more judges who don't care about the law.

by Adam Serwer



In *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the conservative justices cited historical facts that strengthened their arguments while ignoring those that contradicted them. (Mandel Ngan / AFP / Getty)

Thanks to Donald Trump's presidential term, the conservative legal movement has been able to realize some of its wildest dreams: overturning the constitutional right to an abortion, ending affirmative action in college

admissions, and potentially making most state-level firearm restrictions presumptively unconstitutional. That movement long predates Trump, and these goals were long-standing. But, like the rest of conservatism, much of the conservative legal movement has also been remade in Trump's vulgar, authoritarian image, and is now preparing to go further, in an endeavor to shield both Trump and the Republican Party from democratic accountability.

The federal judiciary has become a battleground in a right-wing culture war that aims to turn back the clock to a time when conservative mores—around gender, sexuality, race—were unchallenged and, in some respects, unchallengeable. Many of the federal judges appointed during Trump's presidency seem to see themselves as foot soldiers in that war, which they view as a crusade to restore the original meaning of the Constitution. Yet in practice, their rulings have proved to be little more than Trump-era right-wing punditry with cherry-picked historical citations.

The 2016 Trump administration was focused on quickly filling the judiciary with judges who are not just ideologically conservative but dedicated right-wing zealots. But that administration “didn’t have all of the chess pieces completely lined up” to get right-wing ideologues into every open seat, Jake Faleschini, of the liberal legal-advocacy group [Alliance for Justice](#), told me. More restrained conservative jurists filled some of those seats. Trump and his allies will be better prepared next time, he said. “Those chess pieces are very well lined up now.”

[Read: Trump's most lasting legacy could be his judges](#)

The federal district judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, a former anti-abortion activist, is the prototypical Trumpist judge. He has [publicly complained](#) about the sexual revolution, no-fault divorce, “very permissive policies on contraception,” and marriage equality, and has opposed nondiscrimination protections for the LGBTQ community. And like many of his Trump-appointed peers, Kacsmaryk has predictably issued rulings flouting precedent when doing so is consistent with his personal morals.

One of the most egregious examples came in September, when he [dismissed a lawsuit filed by students](#) at West Texas A&M University after the school’s president, Walter Wendler, banned a drag-show benefit aimed at raising

money for the Trevor Project, an LGBTQ-focused suicide-prevention organization. Wendler made clear his political objections to the show, referring to drag as “derisive, divisive and demoralizing misogyny.” But even Wendler himself recognized that the show, as expressive conduct, was protected speech; amazingly, he admitted that he was violating the law. He would not be seen to condone the behavior of the show’s actors, Wendler wrote in his message banning the event, “even when the law of the land appears to require it.”

The case landed on Kacsmaryk’s desk. And because Kacsmaryk does not like pro-LGBTQ speech, he simply ignored decades of precedent regarding free-speech law on the grounds that, by his understanding of history, the First Amendment does not protect campus drag shows. The drag show “does not obviously convey or communicate a discernable, protectable message,” Kacsmaryk wrote, and consists of potentially “vulgar and lewd” conduct that could, he suggested, lead to “the sexual exploitation and abuse of children.” (The confidence with which conservatives have accused their political opponents of child sexual exploitation in recent years is remarkable, especially because their concern applies almost exclusively to situations, like this one, that justify legal suppression of their favored targets. It is far easier to find examples of pedophilia in religious institutions—hardly targets of either conservative ire or conservative jurisprudence—than it is to find drag queens guilty of similar conduct.)

The key to Kacsmaryk’s ruling was “historical analysis,” which revealed a “Free Speech ecosystem drastically different from the ‘expressive conduct’ absolutism” of those challenging Wendler’s decision. Echoing the Supreme Court’s recent emphasis on “history and tradition” in rulings such as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which overturned the constitutional right to an abortion, and *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, which struck down gun restrictions in New York State, Kacsmaryk simply decided that the First Amendment did not apply. If not for its censorious implications, the ruling would be an amusing example of some conservative beliefs about free speech: A certain form of expression can be banned as “nonpolitical”—nothing more than obscenity—even as those banning it acknowledge their disapproval of that expression’s political implications.

The invocation of “history and tradition,” however, is no joke. The prevailing mode of conservative constitutional analysis for the past half century has been “[originalism](#),” which promises to interpret the Constitution as it was understood at the time of its writing. As the dissenters pointed out in *Dobbs*, the Founders themselves imposed no such requirements on constitutional interpretation, noting that the “Framers defined rights in general terms, [to permit future evolution](#) in their scope and meaning.” And in practice, originalism has just meant invoking the Framers to justify conservative outcomes.

[Harry Litman: Originalism, divided](#)

“It’s a very subjective inquiry,” the NYU law professor Melissa Murray told me. “This insistence on originalism as history and tradition ties you to a jurisprudence that’s going to favor a particular, masculine kind of ideology. Because those are the only people making meaning at that moment in time.”

In 1986, the late conservative legal scholar Philip B. Kurland [observed](#), “We cannot definitively read the minds of the Founders except, usually, to create a choice of several possible meanings for the necessarily recondite language that appears in much of our charter of government. Indeed, evidence of different meanings likely can be garnered for almost every disputable proposition.”

“History should provide the perimeters within which the choice of meaning may be made,” Kurland wrote. “History ordinarily should not be expected, however, to provide specific answers to the specific problems that bedevil the Court.”

Right-wing justices have in all but name imposed this expectation, despite Kurland’s warning. It is no surprise that Kurland was not heeded—he testified against the nomination of Robert Bork, the father of originalism, to the Supreme Court, and [cautioned that](#) “he will be an aggressive judge in conforming the Constitution to his notions of what it should be,” one “[directed to a diminution of minority and individual rights](#).” Now, with six Republican appointees on the Supreme Court, every judge is slowly being forced to conform the Constitution to Bork’s notions of what it should be.

[Adam Serwer: The most baffling argument a Supreme Court justice has ever made](#)

In *Dobbs* and *Bruen*, and in a later case striking down race-based affirmative action in college admissions, the conservative justices cited historical facts that strengthened their arguments while ignoring those that contradicted them, even when the evidence to the contrary was voluminous. In *Dobbs*, Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the majority opinion, [ignored the history of legal abortion in the early American republic](#) and the sexist animus behind the 19th-century campaigns to ban it. In *Bruen*, Justice Clarence Thomas was happy to invoke the history of personal gun ownership but dismissed the parallel history of firearm regulation. In the affirmative-action case, [Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College](#), Thomas's imposition of modern right-wing standards of "color blindness" on the debate over the Fourteenth Amendment was ahistorical enough that it drew [an objection from Eric Foner](#), the greatest living historian of the Reconstruction era.

Not every right-wing judge is as blatantly ideological in their decision making as Kacsmarcky, nor is every Republican appointee a Trumpist zealot. But those with ambitions to rise up the ranks stand out by how aggressively they advertise both qualities. And the proliferation of the language of "history and tradition" is turning originalism from an ideology of constitutional interpretation into something more like a legal requirement. Judges are expected to do historical analysis—not rigorous analysis, but the kind that a prime-time Fox News host will agree with. Conservative originalists seem to see themselves as the true heirs of the Founders, and therefore when they examine the Founders, they can see only themselves, as if looking in a mirror.

It is no coincidence that as conservatism has become Trumpism, originalism has come to resemble Trumpist nationalism in its view that conservatives are the only legitimate Americans and therefore the only ones who should be allowed to wield power. The results for the federal judiciary are apparent as right-wing appeals courts turn "[fringe ideas into law at a breakneck pace](#)," as the legal reporter Chris Geidner has put it, in the hopes of teeing up cases for the Roberts Court, which can hide its own extremism behind the occasional refusal to cater to the most extreme demands of its movement allies.

It is not only the substance of the rulings that has changed—many now resemble bad blog posts in their selective evidence, motivated reasoning, overt partisanship, and recitation of personal grievances—but the behavior of the jurists, who seek to turn public-service roles into minor celebrity by acting like social-media influencers.

Fifth Circuit Judge James Ho, a favorite of the conservative legal movement and a [potential future Trump Supreme Court nominee](#), is one example. In 2022, Ho announced that he was [striking a blow](#) against “cancel culture” by boycotting law clerks from Yale after an incident in which Yale students disrupted an event featuring an attorney from a Christian-right legal-advocacy group. In 2021, the Trump-appointed judge Barbara Lagoa [complained publicly](#) that American society had grown so “Orwellian” that “I’m not sure I can call myself a woman anymore.” She later upheld an Alabama law making gender-affirming care for minors a felony, arguing, of course, that such care was not rooted in American “history and tradition.” In June 2023, in the midst of [a scandal over Justice Thomas receiving unreported gifts](#) from right-wing billionaires with [interests before the Court](#), the Trump-appointed judge Amul Thapar [went on Fox News](#) to promote his book about Thomas, and defended him with the zeal of a columnist for *Breitbart News*.

During Joe Biden’s presidency, the appointment of far-right ideologues has meant a series of extreme rulings that have [upheld speech restrictions and book bans](#); forced the administration to pursue the right’s preferred restrictive immigration policies; [narrowed the fundamental rights](#) of women, the LGBTQ community, and ethnic minorities; blessed law-enforcement misconduct; restricted [voting rights](#); limited [the ability of federal agencies to regulate corporations](#); and [helped businesses exploit their workers](#).

[Read: Red states are rolling back the civil-rights revolution](#)

All of this and more will continue should Trump win a second term. Conservative civil servants who placed their oath to the Constitution above Trump’s attempt to overturn the 2020 election were depicted by Trump loyalists not as heroes but as internal enemies to be purged. Republican-appointed judges will take note of which path leads to professional advancement and which to early retirement.

Already imitating Trump in affect and ideology, these judges are indeed unlikely to resist just about any of Trump's efforts to concentrate power in himself. They will no doubt invoke "history and tradition" to justify this project, but their eyes are ultimately on a future utopia where conservative political power cannot be meaningfully challenged at the ballot box or in court.

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The Proud Boys Love a Winner

A second Trump term would validate the violent ideologies of far-right extremists—and allow them to escape legal jeopardy.

by Juliette Kayyem



Until the very end of his presidency, Donald Trump's cultivation of the [Proud Boys](#), the [Oath Keepers](#), and other violent far-right groups was usually implicit. He counted on their political support but stopped short of asking them to do anything.

Trump had [mastered a form of radicalization](#) sometimes known as [stochastic terrorism](#)—riling up followers in ways that made bloodshed likely while preserving plausible deniability on his part.

But in the weeks after November 3, 2020, his language became more direct. He named the place and occasion for a “big protest”—on January 6, 2021, when Congress would be certifying his election loss—and told supporters, “[Be there, will be wild!](#)” When that day arrived, Trump told the assembled crowd, “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” With that, the president of the United States embraced violence as the natural extension of Americans’ democratic differences, and he has not stopped since.

Trump continues to lash out at his perceived enemies. Yet Americans have mostly been able to treat Trump’s extremism as background noise. That’s partly because he’s no longer in office, and partly because he’s [no longer using Twitter](#). But it’s also because the legal counteroffensive against pro-Trump extremism, along with a proliferation of court proceedings holding Trump himself to task for his misdeeds, appears to have given his fans reason to think twice before committing crimes on his behalf.

[From the November 2020 issue: A pro-Trump militant group has recruited thousands of police, soldiers, and veterans](#)

Extremism ebbs and flows. Violent groups can grow only when they can raise money and recruit members faster than law enforcement can shut down their operations. They thrive when they are perceived to be winning; even the kind of person who might be drawn to violence [makes a calculation](#) about whether taking part in a plot to, say, overthrow an election or [kidnap the governor of Michigan](#) will be worth the risk. In the past few years, Trump’s election loss and his legal woes have made him less persuasive in this regard.

Trump now faces both state and federal conspiracy charges for his efforts to stay in power despite losing the election. Leaders of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers have received long prison sentences for their role in the violence of January 6. Fox News, which knowingly broadcast false statements about faulty voting machines rather than offend its pro-Trump

core audience, agreed to a [defamation settlement of nearly \\$800 million](#) with Dominion Voting Systems. All of these proceedings have demonstrated that Trump and his supporters will be held accountable for what they do and say.

But if Trump wins another term, both he and his most disreputable supporters will feel vindicated. The Republican Party has already given Trump a pass for exhorting a mob to break into the Capitol. In turn, Trump has [promised to pardon many of the January 6 insurrectionists](#). His forgiveness could extend to extremist leaders convicted on federal charges.

Federalism, to be sure, would be a check on his power. Trump's followers, like Trump himself, may still be subject to state prosecution. But a president with [firm control of the Justice Department](#), who wields a corps of supporters willing to use intimidation for political ends and who has maintained a considerable following among police, could overwhelm the ability of state institutions to uphold the law.

[From the January/February 2024 issue: Barton Gellman on how Trump gets away with it](#)

Trump's bullying of [military leaders](#), journalists, and judges was never merely the ranting of an attention seeker, and that behavior—backed by the credible threat of violence from radicalized supporters—will likely become even more central to his governing style. “The extremism won’t be some side group,” Erica Chenoweth, a Harvard professor who studies political violence, told me. “It won’t be like a terror group against the state. The conditions will be different. It will be embedded into state institutions, and into the orientation of the state against perceived opponents.”

What’s clear is that a restored Trump would have a winning narrative in which right-wing extremism, after suffering some legal setbacks during the Biden interregnum, thrives again.

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Extremists Emboldened.”

[boys-oath-keepers-extremism/676131/](#)

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A Plan to Outlaw Abortion Everywhere

Activists hope a Trump Justice Department would criminalize the procedure, with or without a federal ban.

by Elaine Godfrey



Anti-abortion activists see a path to total victory under Trump. (Bryan Olin Dozier / NurPhoto / AP)

The year 2022 was a triumphant one for the anti-abortion movement. After half a century, the Supreme Court [did what had once seemed impossible](#) when it overturned *Roe v. Wade*, stripping Americans of the constitutional right to terminate a pregnancy. Now movement activists are feeling bolder than ever: Their next goal will be ending legal abortion in America once and for all. A federal ban, which would require 60 votes in the Senate, is unlikely. But some activists believe there's a simpler way: the enforcement by a Trump Justice Department of a 150-year-old obscenity law.

The Comstock Act, originally passed in 1873 to combat vice and debauchery, [prohibits the mailing](#) of any “article or thing” that is “designed, adapted, or intended for producing abortion, or for any indecent or immoral use.” In the law’s first 100 years, a [series of court cases](#) narrowed its scope, and in 1971, Congress removed most of its restrictions on contraception. But the rest of the Comstock Act has remained on the books. The law has sat dormant, considered virtually unenforceable, since the *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973.

Following the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision in 2022, the United States Postal Service asked the Justice Department for clarification: Could its workers legally transport abortion-inducing medications to states with bans? The DOJ replied by [issuing a memo](#) stipulating that [abortion pills can be legally mailed](#) as long as the sender does not intend for the drugs to be used unlawfully. And whether or not the drugs will be used within the bounds of state law, the memo notes, would be difficult for a sender to know (the pills have medical uses unrelated to abortion).

[From the May 2022 issue: The future of abortion in a post-*Roe* America](#)

If Donald Trump is reelected president, many prominent opponents of abortion rights will demand that his DOJ issue its own memo, reinterpreting the law to mean the exact opposite: that Comstock is a de facto ban on shipping medication that could end a pregnancy, regardless of its intended use (this would apply to the USPS and to private carriers like UPS and FedEx). “The language is black-and-white. It should be enforced,” Steven H. Aden, the general counsel at Americans United for Life, told me. A broader interpretation of the Comstock Act might also mean that a person *receiving*

abortion pills would be committing a federal crime and, if prosecuted, could face prison time. Federal prosecutors could bring charges against abortion-pill manufacturers, providers receiving pills in the mail, or even individuals.

The hopes of some activists go further. Their [ultimate aim in reviving the Comstock Act](#) is to use it to shut down every abortion facility “in all 50 states,” Mark Lee Dickson, a Texas pastor and anti-abortion advocate, told me. Taken literally, Comstock could be applied to prevent the transport of all supplies related to medical and surgical abortions, making it illegal to ship necessary tools and medications to hospitals and clinics, with no exceptions for other medical uses, such as miscarriage care. Conditions that are easily treatable with modern medicine could, without access to these supplies, become life-threatening.

Legal experts say that the activists’ strategy could, in theory, succeed—at least in bringing the issue to court. “It’s not hypothetical anymore,” Mary Ziegler, a law professor at the UC Davis School of Law, told me. “Because it’s already on the books, and it’s not ridiculous to interpret it this way, [the possibility] is not far-fetched at all.”

Eventually, the Supreme Court would likely face pressure to weigh in. Even though a majority of the Court’s justices have supported abortion restrictions and ruled to overturn *Roe*, it’s unclear how they’d rule on this particular case. If they were to uphold the broadest interpretation of the Comstock Act, doctors even in states without bans could struggle to legally obtain the supplies they need to provide abortions and perform other procedures.

This is what activists want. The question is whether Trump would accede to their demands. After years of championing the anti-abortion cause, the former president seemed to pivot when [he blamed anti-abortion Republicans’ extremism](#) for the party’s poor performance in the 2022 midterm elections (only [a small fraction of Americans](#) favors a complete abortion ban). Recently, he’s come across as more moderate on the issue than his primary opponents by [condemning Florida’s six-week abortion ban](#) and endorsing compromise with Democrats.

As president, Trump might choose not to enforce Comstock at all. Or he could order his DOJ to enforce it with discretion, promising to go after drug

manufacturers and Planned Parenthood instead of individuals. It's hard to be certain of any outcome: Trump has always been more interested in appeasing his base than reaching Americans in the ideological middle. He might well be in favor of aggressively enforcing the Comstock Act, in order to continue bragging, as he has in the past, that he is "the most pro-life president in American history."

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The Truth Won't Matter

If reelected, Donald Trump will once again churn out absurdity and outrage with factory efficiency.

by Megan Garber



“I have a gut,” Donald Trump announced in 2018, “and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else’s brain can ever tell me.” The president’s gut would go on to inform him that climate change is partisan propaganda; that COVID-19 might be cured through [the injection of bleach](#); that any election that fails to produce a Trump victory must be rigged. Trump gut-trusted the nation into political crisis. His first term emphasized the [fragility of American democracy](#). A second would threaten the foundation of that

democracy: the public's willingness to accept that reality is a shared resource.

Facts are work. They require study; they require curiosity; they require patience; they require humility. Democracy [requires the same](#). The demands of both become greater in [an information environment](#) teeming with stories that are ever more suspect—a place where truth has plausible deniability. Trump will ease the burden, he suggests: You can outsource your mind to his gut. You would be foolish not to. Science lies to you. Hollywood lies to you. The media lie to you. Books lie to you. Courts lie to you. Teachers lie to you. Other people lie to you. Democracy lies to you. The only thing you can trust, in this dizzying world, is [the inveterate liar](#) who would never lie to you.

A good pitchman identifies a problem and sells a solution. A great one creates the problem to be solved. Trump, having lived his life as an endless ad, has mastered the art of problem-making. He churns out shock and amusement and outrage and absurdity with factory efficiency. He makes the world seem hard. And then he offers himself up as the person who will make America easy again.

This is how he has been so able to transform lies from liabilities into selling points. The falsehoods do not merely bend the truth. They obliterate it. Marketers speak the language of desire, and Trump has brought its vernacular to his political movement. He has both benefited from and expanded the work done by partisan media outlets that talk about narratives rather than truth. Every story Trump invents—every wild claim, freed from the dull weight of accuracy—doubles as permission: You, too, can feel your way to your facts. Truth is rebranded as a lifestyle good: There are many stories to choose from, and all the consumer needs to do is select the ones that suit them. When attention is your currency, the difference between the true and the false matters much less than the difference between [the compelling and the boring](#).

[From the March 2023 issue: Megan Garber on how we've lost the plot](#)

These problems are both very old and very new. The [Founders feared](#), above much else, the idea that a demagogue would rise to power in their new

country, playing on passions and making rationality seem beside the point. They understood the market power of unchecked feelings. The emotional style in American politics today does not expand people's political imaginations; instead, it limits them. It forecloses empathy rather than inspiring it. You may not know what it feels like to be undocumented or unhoused or 14 years old and forced to carry a pregnancy to term; democracy, though—and basic decency—asks you to imagine the feeling. Trump, by contrast, absolves you of the need to try. His voters are his customers. And the customer is always right.

“We are divided,” Stephen Colbert once observed, “between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart.” He was speaking in 2005, as the character he played on his TV show at the time: a buffoon who shouted his way into political relevance. Back then, that line was still a joke. Politicians have long pitched themselves straight to voters’ feelings. But Trump does much more than appeal to emotion. He insists that, in politics, emotion is all there is. He interprets liberty as a freedom from facts. More than a year after Trump lost the 2020 election, one of his voters was asked why he continued to doubt the defeat. His reply: “It didn’t smell right.”

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Donald Trump vs. American History

He has promised to impose his harmful, erroneous claims on school curricula in a second term.

by Clint Smith



This past fall, in a small southern foundry, Robert E. Lee's face was placed on a furnace that reached a temperature of more than 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. As the heat mounted, a haunting orange-red glow appeared across Lee's severed visage, and the cracks that split his bronze cheeks began to look like streams of dark tears beneath his eyes. Lee's face was

once part of a larger statue of the Confederate general that stood in Charlottesville, Virginia, and was at the center of protests and counterprotests during the [infamous “Unite the Right” rally](#) there in 2017. The city had taken the statue down in 2021 and given it to a local Black-history museum. Once melted, the statue’s bronze would be repurposed into a new work of public art.

As I contemplated Lee’s [metal face glowing like a small sun](#) in the dark universe of the workshop, I thought of the statement issued by former President Donald Trump when the statue had come down. “Robert E. Lee is considered by many Generals to be the greatest strategist of them all,” Trump [had written](#), reaffirming his past praise for the Confederate leader. Trump was implicitly telling his base: *They came for Lee, and next they will come for you.* It’s not hard to see why the metalworkers who melted down the statue of Lee did so at an undisclosed location; they reportedly feared for their safety.

The claim that Lee was a brilliant strategist is a bit of [Lost Cause mythology](#) that historians have largely debunked. Still, it’s worth pausing to consider why Trump has made a point, on several occasions, of commanding a man who led an army that fought a war predicated on maintaining and expanding the institution of chattel slavery. Lee himself was a slave owner who tortured those he enslaved; one man said Lee was “not satisfied with simply lacerating our naked flesh, [he] then ordered the overseer to thoroughly wash our backs with brine.” Lee also argued that slavery benefited African Americans, deeming it “necessary for their instruction as a race.”

[From the June 2021 issue: Clint Smith on why Confederate lies live on](#)

Trump is not a student of history, military or otherwise. But he knows very well what defending Lee signals to his supporters, many of whom see the general as a paragon of white, male, southern Christianity. Nostalgia for a past in which white Christian men possessed the nation’s political power has always been at the core of Trump’s appeal; his most enduring slogan, “Make America great again,” is an unsubtle pledge to restore just such an order.

Trump rode that pledge to power in 2016. Now running for a second term, he has promised yet more: to impose his harmful, erroneous historical claims

on school curricula and to instill a culture of fear in classrooms across the country that dare to deviate from his preferred historical narrative.

Although educational policy is formed most directly at the state level, the Department of Education has \$79 billion of discretionary funding that it can use as both carrot and stick, to encourage states and school districts to teach—or stop them from teaching—certain topics in certain ways. Trump’s 2024 education-policy plan promises to cut federal funding to any school or program that includes “critical race theory, gender ideology, or other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content” in its curriculum. Already, in Texas, Florida, and other Republican-controlled states, [educators are being ostracized](#) for attempting to teach parts of American history that don’t cast straight, white, Christian Americans as the primary protagonists. Teachers are being punished for engaging with the history of policies that segregated, violated the rights of, or oppressed those whose identities fell outside that group. Trump would encourage such sanctions on a national scale.

What Trump and the MAGA movement want is a country where children are falsely taught that the United States has always been a beacon of righteousness. Despite our nation’s many virtues, the truth of its past is harrowing and complicated. Slavery, Jim Crow, Indigenous displacement and slaughter, anti-immigrant laws, the suppression of women’s rights, and the history of violence against the LGBTQ community—these things sully the MAGA version of the American story.

In September 2020, Trump held a “White House Conference on American History,” at which he announced that he was establishing the 1776 Commission to create standards for “patriotic education.” (The commission’s name was a direct reference to, and rebuke of, “[The 1619 Project](#),” a *New York Times* series that outlined the centrality of slavery in America’s origins.) “We must clear away the twisted web of lies in our schools and classrooms, and teach our children the magnificent truth about our country,” Trump said in a speech that day. “We want our sons and daughters to know that they are the citizens of the most exceptional nation in the history of the world.” Trump embraces, uncritically, the idea of American exceptionalism. But the “truth about our country” has not always been magnificent for all Americans—particularly those who, for

generations, were denied access to social, economic, and political advancement.

A central part of Trump's project is to depict the presentation of empirical evidence as an attempt at ideological indoctrination. The claim that this country has prevented millions from achieving upward mobility should not be a controversial one; it reflects actual policies such as convict leasing, school segregation, and housing covenants. To Trump and his allies, however, anyone making such a claim has fallen prey to a "radical movement" that sees America as an inherently and irredeemably evil country. A professor stating that the Confederacy seceded from the Union because of slavery and racism is a member of the "woke mob," never mind the fact that the seceding states said this directly in their declarations of secession. (Mississippi in 1861: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest in the world.") An elementary-school teacher highlighting the importance of LGBTQ figures in the history of American activism is reprimanded for being part of an effort to force sexuality onto students, never mind the fact that Bayard Rustin, Harvey Milk, and Marsha P. Johnson played an indisputable role in shaping political life.

Trump would prefer to simplify that which is complex and celebrate that which is abhorrent. He would prefer to ignore everything that doesn't align with a narrative that suggests, as he did when announcing the 1776 Commission, that "to grow up in America is to live in a land where anything is possible, where anyone can rise, and where any dream can come true." The notion that Americans must acknowledge multiple realities at once—that George Washington was both a Revolutionary War hero and an enslaver who hired slave catchers to recapture his runaway property, for example—is anathema to this worldview.

The 1776 Commission [released its report](#) on January 18, 2021, two weeks after Trump inspired thousands of people to attack the U.S. Capitol, and two days before Joe Biden was inaugurated. Upon taking office, Biden terminated the commission. Trump has shown a clear commitment to continuing its work.

[Adam Harris: 'An existential threat to American higher education'](#)

In a second term, Trump would have even more reason to promote the rewriting of the American past. January 6, 2021, was [one of the darkest days in our country's history](#). Already, the MAGA movement has attempted to make it into a contemporary Lost Cause, framing the insurrectionists as patriotic heroes on a righteous mission to protest a rigged election. In this telling, the people who have been charged for the violence and destruction they inflicted are innocent “political prisoners.” This, too, is dangerously fictitious.

The most patriotic education is one that demands that we sit with the totality and complexity and moral inconsistencies of the American project.

Trumpism seeks to [censor attempts](#) to tell this sort of story. Trump says that he will double down on this effort if reelected. History has taught us that we should believe him.

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A War on Blue America

**In a second term, Trump would
punish the cities and states that
don't support him.**

by Ronald Brownstein



Trump sent federal personnel to Portland, Oregon, ostensibly to protect a federal courthouse amid the city's chaotic protests. (Nathan Howard / Getty)

During his term in the White House, Donald Trump governed as a wartime president—with blue America, rather than any foreign country, as the adversary. He sought to use national authority to achieve factional ends—to impose the priorities of red America onto Democratic-leaning states and cities. The agenda Trump has laid out for a second term makes clear that those bruising and divisive efforts were only preliminary skirmishes.

Presidents always pursue policies that reflect the priorities of the voters and regions that supported them. But Trump moved in especially aggressive ways to exert control over, or punish, the jurisdictions that resisted him. His 2017 tax bill, otherwise a windfall for taxpayers in the upper brackets, capped the federal deductibility of state and local taxes, a costly shift for wealthy residents of liberal states such as New York and California. He moved, with mixed success, to deny federal law-enforcement grants to so-called sanctuary cities that didn't fully cooperate with federal immigration agents. He attempted to [strip California of the authority](#) it has wielded since the early 1970s to set its own, more stringent pollution standards.

[Read: Trump's war on blue America](#)

In Trump's final year in office, he opened a new, more ominous front in his campaign to assert control over blue jurisdictions. As the nation faced the twin shocks of the coronavirus pandemic and the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd, Trump repeatedly dispatched federal law-enforcement agents to blue cities, usually over the opposition of Democratic mayors, governors, or both. Trump sent an array of federal personnel to Portland, Oregon, ostensibly to protect a federal courthouse amid the city's chaotic protests; reports soon emerged of camouflage-clad federal agents without any identifying insignia [forcing protesters into unmarked vans](#). Trump responded to the huge racial-justice protests in Washington, D.C., by [dispatching National Guard troops drawn from 11 states](#), almost all of them led by Republican governors. Later he sent other federal law-enforcement officers [to combat rising crime in Kansas City and Chicago](#), a city Trump described as "worse than Afghanistan."

Trump has signaled that in a second presidential term, he would further escalate his war on blue America. He's again promising federal legislation that would impose policies popular in red states onto the blue states that

have rejected them. He has pledged to withhold federal funding from schools teaching critical race theory and “gender ideology.” He says he will initiate federal civil-rights investigations into liberal big-city prosecutors (whom he calls “Marxist local District Attorneys”) and require cities to adopt policing policies favored by conservatives, such as stop-and-frisk, as a condition for receiving federal grants.

Even more dramatic are Trump’s open pledges to launch militarized law-enforcement campaigns inside blue cities. He has proposed initiatives that cumulatively could create an occupying federal force in the nation’s largest cities. Trump has indicated that “in cities where there’s been a complete breakdown of public safety, I will send in federal assets, including the National Guard, until law and order is restored.”

[Read: Why the 2020s could be as dangerous as the 1850s](#)

Trump envisions an even more invasive door-to-door [offensive against undocumented immigrants](#). In an early-2023 speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump said he “will use all necessary state, local, federal, and military resources to carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history.” Stephen Miller, who was his top immigration aide in the White House, later added that Trump envisions [establishing massive internment camps for undocumented immigrants](#) awaiting deportation. Trump has also promised “to use every tool, lever, and authority to get the homeless off our streets,” and move them to camps as well. (On this front, Trump has said he would work with states, but in practice that would likely involve partnering with Republican governors to impose policies to clear the streets opposed by their own Democratic mayors.)

Michael Nutter, a former mayor of Philadelphia, told me that if a reelected Trump sought to implement these policies, the result would be “chaos, confusion,” and “massive demonstrations.” “Nobody is going to allow that to just happen,” Nutter said. “You are just going to see standoffs. It is going to be the Philadelphia Police Department versus the National Guard. Neighbors are going to be surrounding people’s houses. Folks are going to rush and seek safety in churches and synagogues and mosques and temples.”

Of course, Trump would face other obstacles in attempting to implement these plans. The president's legal authority to deploy federal forces over the objections of local officials is murky. And the relatively small number of federal law-enforcement officers under his direct control at agencies such as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection could limit his options, according to Richard Briffault, a professor at Columbia University Law School who studies relations among cities, states, and the federal government.

But in Trump's final months in office, he got creative about augmenting the forces at his command by drawing on National Guard troops provided by sympathetic Republican governors. His advisers are already talking about doing the same to staff his deportation agenda, as well as using the emergency authority he cited to fund his border wall to build his camps for undocumented immigrants without congressional approval.

Briffault told me that the inevitable court challenges to any Trump-ordered projections of force into blue cities would likely pivot on the courts' interpretation of how much authority the president possesses under various emergency statutes. His advisers have already [discussed invoking the 19th-century Insurrection Act](#), for example. As legal scholars have pointed out, the scope of the president's emergency powers is much broader than most Americans recognize, and Trump is clearly signaling that if he returns to the White House, he intends to test the outer boundaries of that authority. The question for the courts will be "to what extent can he engage directly in law enforcement and having militarized law enforcement in the United States, in the absence of a request by a governor or a mayor that there is a riotlike condition or civil disorder?" Briffault said. "Can he declare an emergency even though he's not being asked for it?"

[From the January/February 2022 issue: Barton Gellman on how Trump's next coup has already begun](#)

As president, Trump seemed to view himself less as the leader of a unified republic than as [the champion of a red nation within a nation](#)—one that constitutes the real America. If anything, Trump has assumed that factional role even more overtly in his 2024 campaign, promising that he will deliver "retribution" for his supporters and dehumanizing his opponents. Powered

by such fetid resentments and grievances, the agenda Trump seeks to impose on blue cities and states could create the greatest threat to the nation's cohesion since the Civil War.

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Trump Isn't Bluffing

We've become inured to his rhetoric, but his message has grown darker.

by David A. Graham



“We pledge to you that we will root out the Communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical-left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country, that lie and steal and cheat on elections,” Donald Trump said this past November, in a campaign speech that was ostensibly honoring Veterans Day. “The real threat is not from the radical right; the real threat is from the radical left ... The threat from outside forces is far less sinister, dangerous, and grave than the threat from within. Our threat is from within.”

David A. Graham: Trump says he'll be a dictator on “day one”

What immediately leaps out here is the word *vermin*, with its [echoes of Hitler and Mussolini](#). But Trump's inflammatory language can overshadow and distract from the substance of what he's saying—in this case, appearing to promise a purge or repression of those who disagree with him politically.

This sort of language isn't entirely new. Trump spoke in Manichaean terms throughout his first campaign and term, [encouraging chants to lock up Hillary Clinton](#) in 2016, and in 2018 referring to [undocumented immigrants as “animals”](#) who would “[infest our country](#).” Over time, the shock of Trump's rhetoric has worn off, making it easy to miss the fact that his message has grown even darker.

Trump himself has changed, too—the old Trump seemed to be running for office partly for fun and partly in service of his signature views, such as opposition to immigration and [support for protectionism](#). Today's Trump [is different](#). His fury over his 2020 election defeat, the legal cases against him, and a desire for [revenge against political opponents](#) have come to eclipse everything else.

From the January/February 2024 issue: David Frum on the revenge presidency

In the past few months, the former president has described himself as a “[very proud election denier](#).” He has repeatedly [threatened and intimidated](#) judges, witnesses, prosecutors, and even the family of prosecutors involved in the cases against him, going so far as to say that his legal opponents will be [consigned to mental asylums](#) if he's reelected. He has suggested that the man he picked for chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff deserves to be executed on grounds of treason. He's called for [investigating NBC and possibly yanking the network off the air](#), also on grounds of treason—one of his most direct attacks on the First Amendment. And he's vowed to arrest and indict President Joe Biden and other political opponents for no apparent reason other than that they oppose him.

The fact that Trump's ideas have become more authoritarian is not yet fully appreciated. One reason is people have heard Trump say outlandish things

for so long that they can't identify what's new, or they've become numb. Another is venue: Once Trump left the White House and stopped tweeting, his vitriol became less noticeable to anyone who didn't attend his rallies, seek out videos of them, or join Trump's own Truth Social network.

Even when a comment is so extreme that it does break into the mainstream, what happens next is predictable. The first time Trump says something, people react with shock and compare him to Hitler. The second time, people say Trump is at it again. By the third time, it becomes background noise—an appalling but familiar part of the Trump shtick.

[David A. Graham: Trump isn't merely unhinged](#)

This is just the sort of “normalization” that Trump’s critics warned against from the start, but it’s also a natural human response to repeated exposure. The result is that Trump has been able to acclimate the nation to authoritarianism by introducing it early and often. When a second-term President Trump directs the Justice Department to lock up Democratic politicians or generals or reporters or activists on flimsy or no grounds at all, people will wring their hands, but they’ll also shrug and wonder why he didn’t do it sooner. After all, he’s been promising to do it forever, right?

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Civil Rights Undone

How Trump could unwind generations of progress

by Vann R. Newkirk II



Bill Barr and Ben Carson: not fans of disparate-impact theory (Cheriss May / NurPhoto / Getty)

In late 2020, even as the instigators of insurrection were marshaling their followers to travel to Washington, D.C., another kind of coup—a quieter one—was in the works. On December 21, in one of his departing acts as attorney general, Bill Barr submitted a proposed rule change to the White House. The change would eliminate the venerable standard used by the Justice Department to handle discrimination cases, known as “disparate

impact.” The memo was quickly overshadowed by the events of January 6, and, in the chaotic final days of Donald Trump’s presidency, it was never implemented. But [Barr’s proposal](#) represented perhaps the most aggressive step the administration took in its effort to dismantle existing civil-rights law. Should Trump return to power, he would surely attempt to see the effort through.

Since the legislative victories of the civil-rights movement in the 1960s, legal and civil rights for people on the margins have tended to expand. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, [the Voting Rights Act of 1965](#), and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 were followed by voting provisions for Indigenous people and non-English speakers, a Supreme Court guarantee of the right to abortion, increased protections for people with disabilities, and [formal recognition of same-sex marriage](#). The trend mostly continued under presidents of both parties—until Trump. Though his administration could be bumbling, the president’s actions matched his rhetoric when it came to eroding civil-rights enforcement.

[From the March 2021 issue: American democracy is only 55 years old—and hanging by a thread](#)

Under Trump, the Justice Department [abandoned its active protection of voting rights](#). The Environmental Protection Agency ignored civil-rights complaints. The Department of Housing and Urban Development scaled back investigations into housing discrimination. Trump’s appointees to the Supreme Court, for their part, have whittled away at landmark civil-rights legislation and presided over the end of affirmative action.

In a second term, the most effective way for Trump to continue rolling back protections would be to [dismantle disparate-impact theory](#). Under the theory, the federal government can prohibit discriminatory practices not just in instances of malicious and provable bigotry, but also in cases where a party’s actions unintentionally affect a class of marginalized people disproportionately.

The theory is important because discrimination can be perpetuated without ill intent; even seemingly benign or neutral policies can perpetuate a legacy of bias, or create new inequities. But disparate impact is also essential

because landlords, business owners, and municipal officials who do wish to discriminate have learned how to operate without expressing overt bigotry. Under disparate impact, the government's burden is not to prove that these actors intended to discriminate, only that their actions resulted in discrimination.

For decades, lawyers have invoked disparate impact as a means of fighting discrimination. The standard has been applied across the federal government. After the housing crisis of 2008, the DOJ [brought a series of lawsuits](#) against banks that had charged higher mortgage rates and fees to minority borrowers, winning hundreds of millions of dollars in settlements from the lenders. In 2015, the DOJ [released a damning report](#) on the practices of the police department in Ferguson, Missouri, after an 18-year-old Black man, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a police officer. Disparate impact was mentioned at least 30 times in the report, including in its main takeaway: "African Americans experience disparate impact in nearly every aspect of Ferguson's law enforcement system."

[Adam Serwer: Trump is making it easier to get away with discrimination](#)

Many conservatives have long been suspicious of disparate impact. The most principled objections center on the claims that it invites government overreach and inefficiency, that it impedes state and local policy development, and that it always entails some degree of ghost-chasing—in a country as unequal as America, discerning what exactly contributes to a disparate outcome can be difficult.

But these philosophical and practical objections to the theory have always served to disguise a more visceral disdain. Many conservatives simply believe that ensuring equality is not a legitimate federal priority. In the Trump era, as the Republican Party has [embraced white nationalism](#), its leaders have been emboldened to abandon the guise. They edge closer to the line once held by the architects of Jim Crow: Equality is undesirable because people are not equals; some of us might not even be people.

Trump himself has always had a preternatural gift for identifying and channeling grievance; white backlash against civil-rights legislation was one of the major forces behind his advancement to the presidency, and that

backlash can be traced directly to disdain for civil-rights legislation and enforcement. Once Trump was in office, one of his early targets was HUD. In 2020, the department finalized a rule that [demolished its discriminatory-effect standard](#), which had been the basis for enforcement at the department for at least 40 years. Trump's HUD secretary, Ben Carson, said that the move would spur efficiency at the local level without undermining the department's antidiscrimination work. But Carson has long been a skeptic of desegregation; during his 2016 presidential campaign, he described desegregation efforts in cities as "failed socialist experiments." Ultimately, Carson's attempt to undermine the discrimination standard was stymied by lawsuits. But the cause of fighting bias suffered nevertheless. In 2020, at the end of Carson's tenure, the number of secretary-initiated complaints had gone from several dozen in 2015 to three.

Trump did serious damage to disparate impact as president; there's little question that he would finish the job if given another chance. A second Trump administration could go beyond simply abandoning the theory, perhaps even bringing lawsuits seeking to declare the entire concept unconstitutional. Trump could thus attack civil-rights law from both sides, sabotaging the government's capability to adjudicate cases while also arguing that it should not have that capability in the first place. If this two-pronged strategy succeeds, it will be difficult for any future administration to undo the changes. With today's conservative-dominated judiciary and high levels of political polarization, any substantive changes Trump makes to civil-rights enforcement could effectively become permanent.

Without disparate impact, the DOJ would lose its primary tool for addressing brutality in police departments, and current efforts to [finally enforce environmental laws in communities of color](#) and hold cities accountable for creating slums in Black and Latino neighborhoods would be stalled. Given the damage that has already been done by the courts, there is a future—perhaps a likely future—in which the remaining foundations of the civil-rights era are undone. If Trump were to win in 2024, he would see the victory as a mandate to tear everything down now.

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Trump's Plan to Police Gender

**His campaign is promising a more
repressive and dangerous America.**

by Spencer Kornhaber



After decades of gains in public acceptance, the LGBTQ community is confronting a climate in which political leaders are once again calling them weirdos and predators. Texas Governor Greg Abbott has directed the Department of Family and Protective Services to [investigate the parents of](#)

[transgender children](#); Governor Ron DeSantis has tried to purge Florida classrooms of books that acknowledge the reality that some people aren't straight or cisgender; Missouri has imposed [rules that limit access to gender-affirming care](#) for trans people of all ages. Donald Trump is promising to nationalize such efforts. He doesn't just want to surveil, miseducate, and repress children who are exploring their emerging identities. He wants to interfere in the private lives of millions of adults, revoking freedoms that any pluralistic society should protect.

During his 2016 campaign, Trump seemed to think that feigning sympathy for queer people was good PR. "I will do everything in my power to protect our LGBTQ citizens," he promised. Then, while in office, he oversaw a broad rollback of LGBTQ protections, removing gender identity and sexuality from [federal nondiscrimination provisions regarding health care](#), employment, and housing. His Defense Department restricted soldiers' right to transition and banned trans people from enlisting; his State Department refused to issue visas to the same-sex domestic partners of diplomats. Yet when seeking reelection in 2020, Trump still made a show of [throwing a Pride-themed rally](#).

[Carter Sickels: Being trans shouldn't exclude me from health laws](#)

Now, recognizing that red-state voters have been energized by anti-queer demagoguery, he's not even pretending to be tolerant. "These people are sick; they are deranged," Trump said during a speech, amid a rant about transgender athletes in June. When the audience cheered at his mention of "transgender insanity," he marveled, "It's amazing how strongly people feel about that. You see, I'm talking about cutting taxes, people go like that." He pantomimed weak applause. "But you mention transgender, everyone goes crazy." The rhetoric has become a fixture of his rallies.

Trump is now running on a 10-point "Plan to Protect Children From Left-Wing Gender Insanity." Its aim is not simply to interfere with parents' rights to shape their kids' health and education in consultation with doctors and teachers; it's to effectively end trans people's existence in the eyes of the government. Trump will call on Congress to establish a national definition of gender as being [strictly binary and immutable from birth](#). He also wants to use executive action to cease all federal "programs that promote the

concept of sex and gender transition at any age.” If enacted, those measures could open the door to all sorts of administrative cruelties—making it impossible, for example, for someone to change their gender on their passport. Low-income trans adults could be blocked from using Medicaid to pay for treatment that doctors have deemed vital to their well-being.

The Biden administration reinstated many of the protections Trump had eliminated, and the judiciary has thus far curbed the most extreme aspects of the conservative anti-trans agenda. In 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that, contrary to the assertions of Trump’s Justice Department, the Civil Rights Act [protects LGBTQ people from employment discrimination](#). A federal judge issued a temporary restraining order preventing the investigations that Governor Abbott had ordered in Texas. But in a second term, Trump would surely seek to appoint more judges opposed to queer causes. He would also resume his first-term efforts to promote an interpretation of religious freedom that allows for unequal treatment of minorities. In May 2019, his Housing and Urban Development Department proposed a measure that would have permitted federally funded homeless shelters [to turn away transgender individuals](#) on the basis of religious freedom. A 2023 Supreme Court decision affirming a Christian graphic designer’s refusal to work with gay couples will invite more attempts to narrow the spaces and services to which queer people are guaranteed access.

[Listen: When the state has a problem with your identity](#)

The social impact of Trump’s reelection would only further encourage such discrimination. He has long espoused old-fashioned ideas about what it means to look and act male and female. Now the leader of the Republican Party is using his platform to push the notion that people who depart from those ideas deserve punishment. As some Republicans have engaged in queer-bashing rhetoric in recent years—including the libel that queerness is pedophilia by another name—[hate crimes motivated by gender identity and sexuality have risen](#), terrifying a population that was never able to take its safety for granted. Victims of violence have included people who were merely suspected of nonconformity, such as the 59-year-old woman in Indiana who was killed in 2023 by a neighbor who believed her to be “a man acting like a woman.”

If Trump's stoking of gender panic proves to be a winning national strategy, everyday deviation from outmoded and rigid norms could invite scorn or worse. And children will grow up in a more repressive and dangerous America than has existed in a long time.

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A Military Loyal to Trump

In 2020, the armed forces were a bulwark against Donald Trump's antidemocratic designs. Changing that would be a high priority in a second term.

by Tom Nichols



A second Trump Department of Defense: more Michael Flynns (Alex Wong / Getty)

If Donald Trump wins the next election, he will attempt to turn the men and women of the United States armed forces into praetorians loyal not to the Constitution, but only to him. This project will likely be among his administration's highest priorities. It will not be easy: The overwhelming majority of America's service people are professionals and patriots. I know this from teaching senior officers for 25 years at the Naval War College. As president, Trump came to understand it too, when he found that "his generals" were not, in fact, mere employees of a Trump property.

But the former president and the people around him have learned from that experience. The last time around, Trump's efforts to pack the Defense Department with cranks and flunkies came too late to bring the military under his full political control. The president and his advisers were slow-footed and disorganized, and lacked familiarity with Washington politics. They were hindered as well by the courage and professionalism of the military officers and civilian appointees who, side by side, serve in the Defense Department.

Trump now nurses deep grudges against these officers and civilians, who slow-rolled and smothered his various illegal and autocratic impulses, including [his enraged demand to kill the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad in 2017](#), and [his desire to deploy America's military against its own citizens](#) during the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020.

The 2020 election, of course, is the source of Trump's chief grudge against senior military leaders. General Mark Milley, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was especially determined to keep the armed forces out of the various schemes to stay in office devised by the Trump team and its allies, including a delusional plan, proposed by retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, [to have the military go into swing states and seize voting machines](#). Trump [has since implied](#) (in response to [a profile of Milley](#) by *The Atlantic*'s Jeffrey Goldberg) that Milley should get the death penalty. Milley [reportedly believes](#) that Trump, if reelected, will try to jail him and other senior national-security figures, a concern shared by [former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper](#) and [former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper](#).

[From the November 2023 issue: Jeffrey Goldberg on how Mark Milley held the line](#)

In a second term, Trump would combine his instincts for revenge and self-protection. He would seek not only to get even with an officer corps that he thinks betrayed him, but also to break the military as one of the few institutions able to constrain his attempts to act against the Constitution and the rule of law.

Publicly, Trump presents himself as an unflinching advocate for the military, but this is a charade. He has no respect for military people or their devotion to duty. He loves the pomp and the parades and the salutes and the continual use of “sir,” but as retired Marine General John Kelly, Trump’s former chief of staff, [said in 2023](#), Trump “couldn’t fathom people who served their nation honorably” when he was in office. Privately, as Goldberg has reported, Trump [has called American war dead](#) “losers” and “suckers,” and has said that wounded warriors are disgusting and should be kept out of sight.

Trump instead prizes military people who serve his ego and support his antidemocratic instincts. [He thinks highly of Flynn](#), for example, who had to resign after 22 days as national security adviser and [is now the marquee attraction](#) at various gatherings of Christian nationalists and conspiracy theorists around the country. In late 2020, angered by his election loss and what he saw as the disloyalty within the national-security community, [Trump fired or forced out top Defense Department leaders](#) and tried to replace them with people more like Flynn. The brazen actions that the 45th president took in his final, desperate weeks in office—however haphazard—illustrate the magnitude of the threat he may pose to the military if he is reelected.

On November 9, 2020, Trump dumped Esper and named Christopher Miller, a retired colonel and Pentagon bureaucrat, as acting secretary of defense. Miller took along Kash Patel, a Trump sycophant, as his chief of staff. Trump [sent Douglas Macgregor, another retired colonel and a pro-Russia Fox News regular](#), to Miller as a senior adviser. (Earlier, Trump had attempted and failed to make Macgregor the ambassador to Germany.) Trump installed Anthony Tata—a retired one-star Army general [who has](#)

claimed that Barack Obama is a Muslim and that a former CIA director was trying to have Trump assassinated—in the third-most-senior job at the Pentagon. A few months earlier, the Senate had wisely declined to confirm Tata’s appointment to that position, but in November, Trump gave him the job in an acting capacity anyway.

These moves, among others, led all 10 living former secretaries of defense to issue a startling and unprecedented joint statement. On January 3, 2021, they directly enjoined Miller and his subordinates to uphold their constitutional duty and “refrain from any political actions that undermine the results of the election or hinder the success of the new team.” The letter pointedly reminded Miller and his team that they were “bound by oath, law and precedent,” and called upon them, “in the strongest terms,” to honor “the history of democratic transition in our great country.”

Listen to Tom Nichols discuss this article with Hanna Rosin on *Radio Atlantic*:

If reelected, Trump would attempt to gain authoritarian control of the Defense Department’s uppermost levels from the very beginning. There are more Anthony Tatas and Douglas Macgregors out there, and Trump’s allies are likely already seeking to identify them. If the Senate refused to confirm Trump’s appointees, it wouldn’t matter much: Trump has learned that he can keep rotating people through acting positions, daring the Senate to stop him.

The career civil servants underneath these appointees—who work on everything from recruiting to nuclear planning—would disobey Trump if he attacked the constitutional order. These civilians, by law, cannot be fired at will, a problem Trump tried to remedy in the last months of his administration by proposing a new category of government appointments (Schedule F) that would have converted some of the most important civil-service positions into political appointments directly controlled by the White House. President Joe Biden immediately repealed this move after taking office, but Trump has vowed to reinstate it.

[Read: Trump’s open plot to dismantle the federal government](#)

In his two-pronged offensive to capture the military establishment while eviscerating the civil service, Trump would likely rely on former officers such as Miller and fringe-dwelling civilians such as Patel, but he would also almost certainly find at least a few serving senior officers—he would not need many—who would accept his offer to abandon their oath. Together, they would make a run at changing the nature of the armed forces.

This is not abstract theorizing. The Heritage Foundation recently released “[Project 2025](#),” a right-wing blueprint for the next Republican president’s administration. The Defense Department chapter was written by none other than former Acting Secretary Christopher Miller. It is mostly a rationalization for more spending, but it includes a clear call for a purge of the military’s senior ranks to clean out “Marxist indoctrination”—an accusation he does not define—along with demands for expelling trans service members and reinstating those service members who were dismissed for refusing COVID vaccinations.

The problems of ideological polarization and extremism in the armed forces are not as extensive as some critics of the military imagine, but they are more worrisome than the military leadership would like to admit. Military officers tend to be more conservative than the public, and as far back as the Clinton and Obama administrations, I occasionally heard senior officers speak of these liberal presidents in deeply contemptuous terms (potentially a crime under military regulations). Today, military bases are subjected to a constant barrage of Fox News in almost every area with a television, and toward the end of my teaching career (I retired in 2022), I often heard senior officers repeating almost verbatim some of the most overheated and paranoid talking points about politics and national affairs from the network’s prime-time hosts. Some of these officers would be tempted to answer Trump’s call.

The rest of the members of the professional military, despite their concerns, would likely follow their instincts and default to the orders of their chain of command. The American political system was never intended to cope with someone like Trump; the military is trained and organized to obey, not resist, the orders of the civilian commander in chief.

Trump's plans would likely use this obedience to the chain of command to exploit an unfortunate vulnerability in the modern American armed forces: The military, in my experience, has a political-literacy problem. Too many people in uniform no longer have a basic grounding in the constitutional foundation of American government and the civil-military relationship. (Some of my colleagues who teach in senior-military educational institutions share this concern, and over the years, some of us have tried, often in vain, to push more study of the Constitution into the curricula.) These men and women are neither unintelligent nor disloyal. Rather, like many Americans, they are [no longer taught basic civics](#), and they may struggle with the line between executing the orders of the president as the commander in chief and obeying the Constitution.

Trump's appointees also would be able to influence the future of the armed forces through assignments and promotions (and non-promotions) within each branch—and through their behavior as examples to the rest of the military. With top cover from the White House, Trump's functionaries in the Pentagon, working with his supporters in the ranks, could poison the military for years to come by ignoring laws, regulations, and traditions as they see fit. (Recall, for example, that Trump is an admirer of the disgraced Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher, and intervened to make sure Gallagher [kept his SEAL Trident](#) after he was charged with war crimes and found guilty of [posing for photos](#) with a captive's dead body.) America's military is built on virtues such as honor and duty, but abusing and discarding the norms that support those virtues would change the military's culture—and faster than we may realize.

Even if only some of the actions I've described here succeed, any number of disasters might follow. Trump could jeopardize national security by surrounding himself with military and defense officials who would help him dissolve our alliances ([especially NATO](#)), weaken our military readiness, undermine our intelligence services, and abandon our friends around the world, all while he seeks closer relations [with authoritarian regimes](#)—especially Vladimir Putin's Russia. He could issue illegal orders to engage in torture or to commit other war crimes overseas. And he could bring the entire planet to disaster should senior military leaders obey his unhinged orders to kill foreign leaders, start a war, or even use nuclear weapons.

From the January/February 2024 issue: Anne Applebaum on how Trump will abandon NATO

At home, Trump could order unconstitutional shows of military support for his administration to intimidate his opponents. He could order American soldiers into the streets against protesters. (Trump's allies are reportedly drawing up plans to invoke the Insurrection Act on Inauguration Day to quell any demonstrations against his return to office.) Officers refusing such orders could be dismissed or reassigned, which in turn could provoke a political confrontation between the Trump loyalists in the high command and the rest of the armed forces, itself a frightening and previously unthinkable prospect.

And if Trump succeeds in simultaneously capturing the U.S. military while gutting the other key institutions that protect democracy—especially the courts and the Justice Department—nothing will stop him from using force to put down opposition and stay in power.

Some Americans fear that the United States is already in a struggle with fascism. The firm constitutional loyalty of the armed forces during Trump's presidency was a reminder that such fears are overblown, at least for the moment. But Trump and his allies understand that by leaving the military outside their political control the last time around, they also left intact a crucial bulwark against their plans. They will not make the same mistake twice.

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The Left Can't Afford to Go Mad

A second Trump term would require an opposition that focuses on his abuses of power—and seeks converts rather than hunting heretics.

by Helen Lewis



The left embraced slogans that alienated the center. (John Minchillo / AP)

The Trump years had a radicalizing effect on the American right. But, let's be honest, they also sent many on the left completely around the bend. Some liberals, particularly upper-middle-class white ones, cracked up because other people couldn't see what was obvious to them: that Trump was a bad candidate and an even worse president.

At first, liberals tried established tactics such as sit-ins and legal challenges; lawyers and activists [rallied to protest the administration's Muslim travel ban](#), and courts successfully blocked its early versions. Soon, however, the sheer volume of outrages overwhelmed Trump's critics, and the self-styled resistance settled into a pattern of high-drama, low-impact indignation.

Rather than focusing on how to oppose Trump's policies, or how to expose the hollowness of his promises, the resistance simply wished Trump would disappear. Many on the left insisted that he wasn't a legitimate president, and that he was only in the White House because of Russian interference. Social media made everything worse, as it always does; the resistance became the #Resistance. Instead of concentrating on the hard work of door-knocking and community activism, its members tweeted to the choir, drawing no distinction between Trump's crackpot comments and his serious transgressions. They fantasized about a deus ex machina—impeachment, [the Twenty-Fifth Amendment](#), [the pee tape](#), [outtakes from The Apprentice](#)—leading to Trump's removal from office, and became ever more frustrated as each successive news cycle failed to make the scales fall from his supporters' eyes. The other side got wise to this trend, and coined a phrase to encapsulate it: "Orange Man Bad."

The Trump presidency was a failure of right-wing elites; the Republican Party underestimated his appeal to disaffected voters and failed to find a candidate who could defeat him in the primary. Once he became president, the party establishment was content to grumble in private and grovel in public. But the Trump years demonstrated a failure of the left, too. Trump created an enormous reservoir of political energy, but that energy was too often misdirected. Many liberals turned inward, taking comfort in self-help and purification rituals. They might have to share a country with people who would vote for the Orange Man, but they could purge their Facebook feeds, friendship circles, and perhaps even workplaces of conservatives, contrarians, and the insufficiently progressive. Feeling under intense threat,

they wanted everyone to pick a side on issues such as taking the Founding Fathers' names off school buildings and giving puberty blockers to minors—and they insisted that ambivalence was not an option. (Nor was sitting out a debate, because “silence is violence.”) Any deviation from the progressive consensus was seen as a moral failing rather than a political difference.

The cataclysms of 2020—the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd—might have snapped the left out of its reverie. Instead, the resisters buried their heads deeper in the sand. Health experts insisted that anyone who broke social-distancing rules was selfish, before deciding that attending protests (for causes they supported, at least) was more important than observing COVID restrictions. The summer of 2020 made a best seller out of a white woman's book about “white fragility,” but negotiations around a comprehensive police-reform bill collapsed the following year. As conservative Supreme Court justices laid the ground for the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, activist organizations became fixated on purifying their language. (By 2021, the ACLU was so far gone, it rewrote a famous Ruth Bader Ginsburg quote on abortion to remove the word woman.) Demoralized and disorganized, having given up hope of changing Trump supporters' minds, the left flexed its muscles in the few spaces in which it held power: liberal media, publishing, academia.

From the April 2023 issue: George Packer on the moral case against equity language

If you attempted to criticize these tendencies, the rejoinder was simple whataboutism: Why not focus on Trump? The answer, of course, was that a bad government demands a strong opposition—one that seeks converts rather than hunting heretics. Many of the most interesting Democratic politicians to emerge during this time—the CIA veteran Abigail Spanberger, in Virginia; the Baptist pastor Raphael Warnock, in Georgia; Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who promised to “fix the damn roads”—were pragmatists who flipped red territories blue. When it came to the 2020 election, Democrats ultimately nominated the moderate candidate most likely to defeat Trump.

That Joe Biden would prevail as the party's candidate was hardly a given, however. He defeated his more progressive rivals for the Democratic

nomination only after staging a comeback in the South Carolina primary. [He was 44 points ahead of his closest rival](#), Bernie Sanders, among the state's Black voters, according to an exit poll. That is not a coincidence. These voters recognized that they had far more to gain from a candidate like Biden, who regularly talked about working with Republicans, than from the activist wing of the party. As Biden put it in August 2020, responding to civil unrest across American cities: "[Do I look like a radical socialist with a soft spot for rioters?](#)"

Biden is older now, and a second victory is far from assured. If he loses, the challenges to American democratic norms will be enormous. The withering of Twitter may impede Trump's ability to hijack the news cycle as effectively as last time, but he'll only be more committed to [enriching himself](#) and [seeking revenge](#). I hope that the left has learned its lesson, and will look outward rather than inward: The battle is not for control of [Bud Light's advertising strategy](#), or who gets published in *The New York Times*, but against gerrymandering and election interference, against women being [locked up for having abortions](#), against transgender Americans losing [access to health care](#), against domestic abusers being able to buy guns, against police violence going unpunished, against the empowerment of white nationalists, and against book bans.

The path back to sanity in the United States lies in persuasion—in defending freedom of speech and the rule of law, in clearly and calmly opposing Trump's abuses of power, and in offering an attractive alternative. The left cannot afford to go bonkers at the exact moment America needs it most.

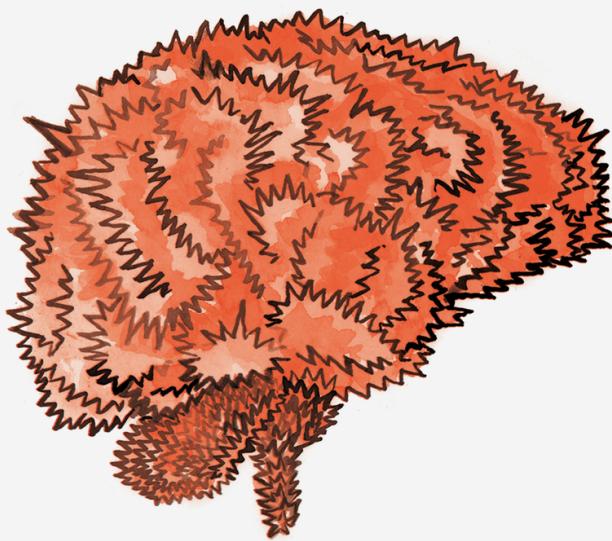
This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Left Can't Afford to Go Mad.”

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What Will Happen to the American Psyche If Trump Is Reelected?

Our bodies are not designed to handle chronic stress.

by Jennifer Senior



There were times, during the first two years of the Biden presidency, when I came close to forgetting about it all: the taunts and the provocations; the incitements and the resentments; the disorchestrated reasoning; the verbal incontinence; the press conferences fueled by megalomania, vengeance, and a soupçon of hydroxychloroquine. I forgot, almost, that we'd had a man in the White House who governed by tweet. I forgot that the news cycle had shrunk down to microseconds. I forgot, even, that we'd had a president with

a personality so disordered and a mind so dysregulated (this being a central irony, that our nation's top executive had zero executive function) that [the generals around him had to choose between carrying out presidential orders and upholding the Constitution.](#)

I forgot, in short, that I'd spent nearly five years scanning the veldt for threats, indulging in the most neurotic form of magical thinking, convinced that my monitoring of Twitter alone was what stood between Trump and national ruin, just as Erica Jong believed that [her concentration and vigilance were what kept her flight from plunging into the sea.](#)

Say what you want about Joe Biden: He's allowed us to go days at a time without remembering he's there.

[Adam Serwer: An incompetent authoritarian is still a catastrophe](#)

But now here we are, faced with the prospect of a Trump restoration. We've already seen [the cruelty](#) and chaos that having a [malignant narcissist](#) in the Oval Office entails. What will happen to the American psyche if he wins again? What will happen if we have to live in fight-or-flight mode for [four more years](#), and possibly far beyond?

Our bodies are not designed to handle chronic stress. Neuroscientists have a term for the tipping-point moment when we capitulate to it—*allostatic overload*—and the result is almost always sickness in one form or another, whether it's a mood disorder, substance abuse, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, or ulcers. “Increase your blood pressure for a few minutes to evade a lion—a good thing,” Robert Sapolsky, one of the country’s most esteemed researchers of stress, emailed me when I asked him about Trump’s effect on our bodies. But “increase your blood pressure every time you’re in the vicinity of the alpha male—you begin to get cardiovascular disease.” Excess levels of the stress hormone cortisol for extended periods is terrible for the human body; it hurts the immune system in ways that, among other things, can lead to worse outcomes for COVID and other diseases. ([One 2019 study](#), published in *JAMA Network Open*, reported that Trump’s election to the White House correlated with a spike in premature births among Latina women.)

Another major component of our allostatic overload, notes Gloria Mark, the author of [Attention Span](#), would be “technostress,” in this case brought on by the obsessive checking of—and interruptions from, and passing around of—news, which Trump made with destructive rapidity. Human brains are not designed to handle such a helter-skelter onslaught; effective multitasking, according to Mark, is in fact a complete myth (there’s always a cost to our productivity). Yet we are once again facing a news cycle that will shove our attention—as well as our output, our nerves, [our sanity](#)—through a Cuisinart.

[Read: ‘This is fine,’ the meme that defined a decade](#)

One might reasonably ask how many Americans will truly care about the constant churn of chaos, given how many of us still walk around in a fog of political apathy. Quite a few, apparently. The American Psychological Association’s annual stress survey, conducted by the Harris Poll, found that [68 percent of Americans reported that the 2020 election was a significant source of strain](#). Kevin B. Smith, a political-science professor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, found that [about 40 percent of American adults](#) identified politics as “a significant source of stress in their lives,” based on YouGov surveys he commissioned in 2017 and 2020. Even more remarkably, Smith found that about 5 percent reported having had suicidal thoughts because of our politics.

Richard A. Friedman, a clinical psychiatry professor at Weill Cornell Medical College, wonders if a second Trump term would be like a second, paralyzing blow in boxing, translating into “learned helplessness on a population-level scale,” in which a substantial proportion of us curdle into listlessness and despair. Such an epidemic would be terrible, especially for the young; we’d have a generation of nihilists on our hands, with all future efforts to #Resist potentially melting under the waffle iron of its own hashtag.

Which is what a would-be totalitarian wants—a republic of the indifferent.

Ironically, were Trump to win, an important group of his supporters would bear a particular psychological burden of their own, and that’s our elected GOP officials. I’ve [written before](#) that Trump’s presidency sometimes

seemed like an extended Milgram experiment, with Republican politicians subjected to more and more horrifying requests. During round two, they'd be asked to do far worse, and live in even greater terror of his base—and even greater terror of him, as he tells them, in the manner of all malignant narcissists, that they'd be nothing without him. And he wouldn't be wholly wrong.

The Trump base, however, will be intoxicated. We should brace ourselves for a second uncorking of what Philip Roth called “the indigenous American berserk”: The Proud Boys [will be prouder](#); the Alex Jones conspiracists will let their false-flag freakishness fly; the “Great Replacement” theorists will become more savage in their rhetoric about Black, Hispanic, and Jewish people. (The Trump administration coincided with a measurable increase in hate crimes, incited in no small part by the man himself.)

[From the January/February 2024 issue: The Proud Boys love a winner](#)

But at this point, even an electoral defeat for Trump might not significantly diminish the [toll that politics is taking](#) on the collective American psyche. “In such a polarized society, everyone is always living with a lot of hate and fear and suspicion,” Rebecca Saxe, a neuroscientist at MIT who thinks a good deal about tribalism, told me. The winner of the presidential election “may change *who* bears the burden every four or eight years, but not the burden *itself*.”

Of course, fractured attention, heightened anxiety, and moral cynicism may come to seem like picayune problems if Trump wins and some 250 years of constitutional norms and rules unravel before our eyes, or we’re in a nuclear war with China, or the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is frog-marched off to court for treason.

“You get Trump once, it’s a misfortune,” Masha Gessen, the author of [Surviving Autocracy](#), told me. “You get him twice, it’s normal. [It’s what this country is.](#)”

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Psychic Toll.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Trump Voters Are America Too

If he wins a second term, perhaps we'll finally dispense with the myth that “this is not who we are.” ****

by Mark Leibovich



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

In the last spring of the Obama administration, Michelle Obama was delivering her final commencement address as first lady, at City College of New York. Then, as now, the specter of Donald Trump had become the

inescapable backdrop to everything. He'd spent the past year smashing every precept of restraint, every dignified tradition of the supposedly kindhearted nation he was seeking to lead. Obama couldn't help but lob some barely cloaked denunciations of Trump's wrecking-ball presidential campaign—the one that would soon be ratified with the Republican nomination. "That is not who we are," the first lady [assured the graduates](#). "That is not what this country stands for, no."

The promise did not age well. Not that November, and not since.

"This is not who we are": The would-be guardians of America's better angels have been scolding us with this line for years. Or maybe they mean it as an affirmation. Either way, the axiom prompts a question: Who is "we" anyway? Because it sure seems like a lot of this "we" keeps voting for Trump. Today the dictum sounds more like a liberal wish than any true assessment of our national character.

In retrospect, so many of the high-minded appeals of the Obama era—"We are the ones we've been waiting for"; "[When they go low, we go high](#)"—feel deeply naive. Question for Michelle: What if they keep going lower and lower—and that keeps landing the lowest of the low back in the White House?

[Unthinkable: 50 moments that define an improbable presidency](#)

Recently, I read through some old articles and notes of mine from the campaign trail in 2015 and 2016, when Trump first cannonballed into our serene political bathtub. This was back when "we"—the out-of-touch media know-it-alls—were trying to understand Trump's appeal. What did his supporters love so much about their noisy new savior? I dropped into a few rallies and heard the same basic idea over and over: Trump says things that no one else will say. They didn't necessarily agree with or believe everything their candidate declared. But he spoke on their behalf.

When political elites insisted "We're better than this!"—a close cousin of "This is not who we are"—many Trump disciples heard "We're better than them." Hillary Clinton ably confirmed this when [she dismissed](#) half of the Republican nominee's supporters—at an LGBTQ fundraiser in New York—

as people who held views that were “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it.” Whether or not she was correct, the targets of her judgment did not appreciate it. And the disdain was mutual. “He’s our murder weapon,” said the conservative political scientist Charles Murray, [summarizing the appeal](#) that Trump held for many of his loyalists.

After the shock of Trump’s victory in 2016, the denial and rationalizations kicked in fast. Just ride out the embarrassment for a few years, many thought, and then America would revert to something in the ballpark of sanity. But one of the overlooked portents of 2020 (many Democrats were too relieved to notice) was that the election was still extremely close. Trump received [74 million votes](#), nearly 47 percent of the electorate. That’s a huge amount of support, especially after such an ordeal of a presidency—the “[very fine people on both sides](#),” the “[perfect](#)” phone call, the [bleach](#), the daily [OMG and WTF of it all](#). The populist nerves that Trump had jangled in 2016 remained very much aroused. Many of his voters’ grievances were unresolved. They clung to their murder weapon.

[From the January/February 2024 issue: Jennifer Senior on what happens to the American psyche if Trump is reelected](#)

Trump has continued to test their loyalty. He hasn’t exactly enhanced his résumé since 2020, unless you count a second impeachment, several loser endorsements, and a bunch of indictments as selling points (some do, apparently: more medallions for his victimhood). January 6 posed the biggest hazard—the brutality of it, the fever of the multitudes, and Trump’s obvious pride in the whole furor. Even the GOP lawmakers who still vouched for Trump from their Capitol safe rooms seemed shaken.

“This is not who we are,” Representative Nancy Mace, the newly elected Republican of South Carolina, [said of the deadly riot](#). “We’re better than this.” There was a lot of that: thoughts and prayers from freaked-out Americans. “Let me be very clear,” President-elect Joe Biden tried to reassure the country that day. “The scenes of chaos at the Capitol do not reflect a true America, do not represent who we are.”

One hoped that Biden was correct, that we were in fact not a nation of vandals, cranks, and insurrectionists. But then, on the very day the Capitol

had been ransacked, [147 House and Senate Republicans](#) voted not to certify Biden's election. Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader, skulked back to the ousted president a few weeks later, and the pucker-up parade to Mar-a-Lago was on. Large majorities of Republicans never stopped supporting Trump, and claim they never stopped believing that Biden stole the 2020 election and that Crooked Joe's regime is abusing the legal system to persecute Trump out of the way.

Here we remain, amazingly enough, ready to do this all again. Trump might be the ultimate con man, but his essential nature has never been a mystery. Yet he appears to be gliding to his third straight Republican nomination and is running strong in a likely rematch with [an unpopular incumbent](#). A durable coalition seems fully comfortable entrusting the White House to the guy who left behind a Capitol encircled with razor-wire fence and 25,000 National Guard troops protecting the federal government from his own supporters.

You can dismiss Trump voters all you want, but give them this: They're every bit as American as any idealized vision of the place. If Trump wins in 2024, his detractors will have to reckon once again with the voters who got us here—to reconcile what it means to share a country with so many citizens who keep watching Trump spiral deeper into his moral void and still conclude, "Yes, that's our guy."

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Essay

- **[My Father, My Faith, and Donald Trump](#)**

My Father, My Faith, and Donald Trump

**Here, in our house of worship,
people were taunting me about
politics as I tried to mourn.**

by Tim Alberta



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

It was July 29, 2019—the worst day of my life, though I didn’t know that quite yet.

The traffic in downtown Washington, D.C., was inching along. The mid-Atlantic humidity was sweating through the windows of my chauffeured car. I was running late and fighting to stay awake. For two weeks, I'd been sprinting between television and radio studios up and down the East Coast, promoting my new book on the collapse of the post–George W. Bush Republican Party and the ascent of Donald Trump. Now I had one final interview for the day. My publicist had offered to cancel—it wasn't that important, she said—but I didn't want to. It *was* important. After the car pulled over on M Street Northwest, I hustled into the stone-pillared building of the Christian Broadcasting Network.

All in a blur, the producers took my cellphone, mic'd me up, and shoved me onto the set with the news anchor John Jessup. Camera rolling, Jessup skipped past the small talk. He was keen to know, given his audience, what I had learned about the president's alliance with America's white evangelicals. Despite being a lecherous, impenitent scoundrel—the 2016 campaign was marked by [his mocking of a disabled man](#), his xenophobic slander of immigrants, his casual calls to violence against political opponents—Trump had won [a historic 81 percent of white evangelical voters](#). Yet that statistic was just a surface-level indicator of the foundational shifts taking place inside the Church. Polling showed that born-again Christian conservatives, once the president's softest backers, were now his most unflinching advocates. Jessup had the same question as millions of other Americans: Why?

As a believer in Jesus Christ—and as the son of an evangelical minister, raised in a conservative church in a conservative community—I had long struggled with how to answer this question. The truth is, I knew lots of Christians who, to varying degrees, supported the president, and there was no way to summarily describe their diverse attitudes, motivations, and behaviors. They were best understood as points plotted across a spectrum. At one end were the Christians who maintained their dignity while voting for Trump—people who were clear-eyed in understanding that backing a candidate, pragmatically and prudentially, need not lead to unconditionally promoting, empowering, and apologizing for that candidate. At the opposite end were the Christians who had jettisoned their credibility—people who embraced the charge of being reactionary hypocrites, still fuming about Bill

Clinton's character as they jumped at the chance to go slumming with a playboy turned president.

[From the April 2018 issue: Michael Gerson on Trump and the evangelical temptation](#)

Most of the Christians I knew fell somewhere in the middle. They had to some extent been seduced by the cult of Trumpism, yet to composite all of these people into a caricature was misleading. Something more profound was taking place. Something was happening in the country—something was happening in the Church—that we had never seen before. I had attempted, ever so delicately, to make these points in my book. Now, on the TV set, I was doing a similar dance.

Jessup seemed to sense my reticence. Pivoting from the book, he asked me about a recent flare-up in the evangelical world. In response to the Trump administration's policy of forcibly separating migrant families at the U.S.-Mexico border, Russell Moore, a prominent leader with the Southern Baptist Convention, had tweeted, "Those created in the image of God should be treated with dignity and compassion, especially those seeking refuge from violence back home." At this, Jerry Falwell Jr.—the son and namesake of the Moral Majority founder, and then-president of Liberty University, one of the world's largest Christian colleges—took great offense. "Who are you @drmoore?" he replied. "Have you ever made a payroll? Have you ever built an organization of any type from scratch? What gives you authority to speak on any issue?"

This being Twitter and all, I decided to chime in. "There are Russell Moore Christians and Jerry Falwell Jr. Christians," I wrote, summarizing the back-and-forth. "Choose wisely, brothers and sisters."

Now Jessup was reading my tweet on-air. "Do you really see evangelicals divided into two camps?" the anchor asked.

I stumbled. Conceding that it might be an "oversimplification," I warned still of a "fundamental disconnect" between Christians who view issues through the eyes of Jesus and Christians who process everything through a partisan political filter.

[From the June 2022 issue: Tim Alberta on how politics poisoned the evangelical church](#)

As the interview ended, I knew I'd botched an opportunity to state plainly my qualms about the American evangelical Church. Truth be told, I *did* see evangelicals divided into two camps—one side faithful to an eternal covenant, the other side bowing to earthly idols of nation and influence and fame—but I was too scared to say so. My own Christian walk had been so badly flawed. And besides, I'm no theologian; Jessup was asking for my journalistic analysis, not my biblical exegesis.

Walking off the set, I wondered if my dad might catch that clip. Surely somebody at our home church would see it and pass it along. I grabbed my phone, then stopped to chat with Jessup and a few of his colleagues. As we said our farewells, I looked down at the phone, which had been silenced. There were multiple missed calls from my wife and oldest brother. Dad had collapsed from a heart attack. There was nothing the surgeons could do. He was gone.

The last time I saw him was nine days earlier. The CEO of *Politico*, my employer at the time, had thrown a book party for me at his Washington manor, and Mom and Dad weren't going to miss that. They jumped in their Chevy and drove out from my childhood home in southeast Michigan. When he sauntered into the event, my old man looked out of place—a rumpled midwestern minister, baggy shirt stuffed into his stained khakis—but before long he was holding court with diplomats and *Fortune 500* lobbyists, making them howl with irreverent one-liners. It was like a Rodney Dangerfield flick come to life. At one point, catching sight of my agape stare, he gave an exaggerated wink, then delivered a punch line for his captive audience.

It was the high point of my career. The book was getting lots of buzz; already I was being urged to write a sequel. Dad was proud—very proud, he assured me—but he was also uneasy. For months, as the book launch drew closer, he had been urging me to reconsider the focus of my reporting career. Politics, he kept saying, was a “sordid, nasty business,” a waste of my time and God-given talents. Now, in the middle of the book party, he was taking

me by the shoulder, asking a congressman to excuse us for just a moment. Dad put his arm around me and leaned in.

“You see all these people?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded, grinning at the validation.

“Most of them won’t care about you in a week,” he said.

The record scratched. My moment of rapture was interrupted. I cocked my head and smirked at him. Neither of us said anything. I was bothered. The longer we stood there in silence, the more bothered I became. Not because he was wrong. But because he was right.

“Remember,” Dad said, smiling. “On this Earth, all glory is fleeting.”

Now, as I raced to Reagan National Airport and boarded the first available flight to Detroit, his words echoed. There was nothing contrived about Dad’s final admonition to me. That is what he believed; that is who he was.

Once a successful New York financier, Richard J. Alberta had become a born-again Christian in 1977. Despite having a nice house, beautiful wife, and healthy firstborn son, he felt a rumbling emptiness. He couldn’t sleep. He developed debilitating anxiety. Religion hardly seemed like the solution; Dad came from a broken and unbelieving home. He had decided, halfway through his undergraduate studies at Rutgers University, that he was an atheist. And yet, one weekend while visiting family in the Hudson Valley, my dad agreed to attend church with his niece, Lynn. He became a new person that day. His angst was quieted. His doubts were overwhelmed. Taking Communion for the first time at Goodwill Church in Montgomery, New York, he prayed to acknowledge Jesus as the son of God and accept him as his personal savior.

Dad became unrecognizable to those who knew him. He rose early, hours before work, to read the Bible, filling a yellow legal pad with verses and annotations. He sat silently for hours in prayer. My mom thought he’d lost his mind. A young journalist who worked under Howard Cosell at ABC Radio in New York, Mom was suspicious of all this Jesus talk. But her

maiden name—Pastor—was proof of God’s sense of humor. Soon she accepted Christ too.

When Dad felt he was being called to abandon his finance career and enter the ministry, he met with Pastor Stewart Pohlman at Goodwill. As they prayed in Pastor Stew’s office, Dad said he felt the spirit of the Lord swirling around him, filling up the room. He was not given to phony supernaturalism—in fact, Dad might have been the most intellectually sober, reason-based Christian I’ve ever known—but that day, he felt certain, the Lord anointed him. Soon he and Mom were selling just about every material item they owned, leaving their high-salaried jobs in New York, and moving to Massachusetts so he could study at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

For the next two decades, they worked in small churches here and there, living off food stamps and the generosity of fellow believers. By the time I arrived, in 1986, Dad was Pastor Stew’s associate at Goodwill. We lived in the church parsonage; my nursery was the library, where towers of leather-wrapped books had been collected by the church’s pastors dating back to the mid-18th century. A few years later we moved to Michigan, and Dad eventually put down roots at a start-up, Cornerstone Church, in the Detroit suburb of Brighton. It was part of a minor denomination called the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), and it was there, for the next 26 years, that he served as senior pastor.

Cornerstone was our home. Because Mom also worked on staff, leading the women’s ministry, I was quite literally raised in the church: playing hide-and-seek in storage areas, doing homework in the office wing, bringing high-school dates to Bible study, working as a janitor during a year of community college. I hung around the church so much that I decided to leave my mark: At 9 years old, I used a pocket knife to etch my initials into the brickwork of the narthex.

The last time I’d been there, 18 months earlier, I’d spoken to a packed sanctuary at Dad’s retirement ceremony, armed with good-natured needling and PG-13 anecdotes. Now I would need to give a very different speech.

Standing in the back of the sanctuary, my three older brothers and I formed a receiving line. Cornerstone had been a small church when we'd arrived as kids. Not anymore. Brighton, once a sleepy town situated at the intersection of two expressways, had become a prized location for commuters to Detroit and Ann Arbor. Meanwhile, Dad, with his baseball allegories and Greek-linguistics lessons, had gained a reputation for his eloquence in the pulpit. By the time I moved away, in 2008, Cornerstone had grown from a couple hundred members to a couple thousand.

Now the crowd swarmed around us, filling the sanctuary and spilling out into the lobby and adjacent hallways, where tables displayed flowers and golf clubs and photos of Dad. I was numb. My brothers too. None of us had slept much that week. So the first time someone made a glancing reference to Rush Limbaugh, it did not compute. But then another person brought him up. And then another. That's when I connected the dots. Apparently, the king of conservative talk radio had been name-checking me on his program recently—"a guy named Tim Alberta"—and describing the unflattering revelations in my book about Trump. Nothing in that moment could have mattered to me less. I smiled, shrugged, and thanked people for coming to the visitation.

Here, in our house of worship, people were taunting me about politics as I tried to mourn my father.

They kept on coming. More than I could count. People from the church—people I'd known my entire life—were greeting me, not primarily with condolences or encouragement or mourning, but with commentary about Limbaugh and Trump. Some of it was playful, guys remarking about how I was the same mischief-maker they'd known since kindergarten. But some of it wasn't playful. Some of it was angry; some of it was cold and confrontational. One man questioned whether I was truly a Christian. Another asked if I was still on "the right side." All while Dad was in a box a hundred feet away.

It got to the point where I had to take a walk. Here, in our house of worship, people were taunting me about politics as I tried to mourn my father. I was in the company of certain friends that day who would not claim to know Jesus, yet they shrouded me in peace and comfort. Some of these card-

carrying evangelical Christians? Not so much. They didn't see a hurting son; they saw a vulnerable adversary.

That night, while fine-tuning the eulogy I would give at Dad's funeral the following afternoon, I still felt the sting. My wife perceived as much. The unflappable one in the family, she encouraged me to be careful with my words and cautioned against mentioning the day's unpleasantness. I took half of her advice.

In front of an overflow crowd on August 2, 2019, I paid tribute to the man who'd taught me everything—how to throw a baseball, how to be a gentleman, how to trust and love the Lord. Reciting my favorite verse, from Paul's second letter to the early Church in Corinth, Greece, I told of Dad's instruction to keep our eyes fixed on what we could not see. Reading from his favorite poem, about a man named Richard Cory, I told of Dad's warning that we could amass great wealth and still be poor.

Then I recounted all the people who'd approached me the day before, wanting to discuss the Trump wars on AM talk radio. I proposed that their time in the car would be better spent listening to Dad's old sermons. I spoke of the need for discipleship and spiritual formation. I suggested, with some sarcasm, that if they needed help finding biblical listening for their daily commute, the pastors here on staff could help. "Why are you listening to *Rush Limbaugh*?" I asked my father's congregation. "Garbage in, garbage out."

There was nervous laughter in the sanctuary. Some people were visibly agitated. Others looked away, pretending not to hear. My dad's successor, a young pastor named Chris Winans, wore a shell-shocked expression. No matter. I had said my piece. It was finished. Or so I thought.

A few hours later, after we had buried Dad, my brothers and I slumped down onto the couches in our parents' living room. We opened some beers and turned on a baseball game. Behind us, in the kitchen, a small platoon of church ladies worked to prepare a meal for the family. *Here, I thought, is the love of Christ.* Watching them hustle about, comforting Mom and catering to her sons, I found myself regretting the Limbaugh remark. Most of the folks

at our church were humble, kindhearted Christians like these women. Maybe I'd blown things out of proportion.

Just then, one of them walked over and handed me an envelope. It had been left at the church, she said. My name was scrawled across it. I opened the envelope. Inside was a full-page-long, handwritten screed. It was from a longtime Cornerstone elder, someone my dad had called a friend, a man who'd mentored me in the youth group and had known me for most of my life.

He had composed this note, on the occasion of my father's death, to express just how disappointed he was in me. I was part of an evil plot, the man wrote, to undermine God's ordained leader of the United States. My criticisms of President Trump were tantamount to treason—against both God and country—and I should be ashamed of myself.

However, there was still hope. Jesus forgives, and so could this man. If I used my journalism skills to investigate the “deep state,” he wrote, uncovering the shadowy cabal that was supposedly sabotaging Trump’s presidency, then I would be restored. He said he was praying for me.

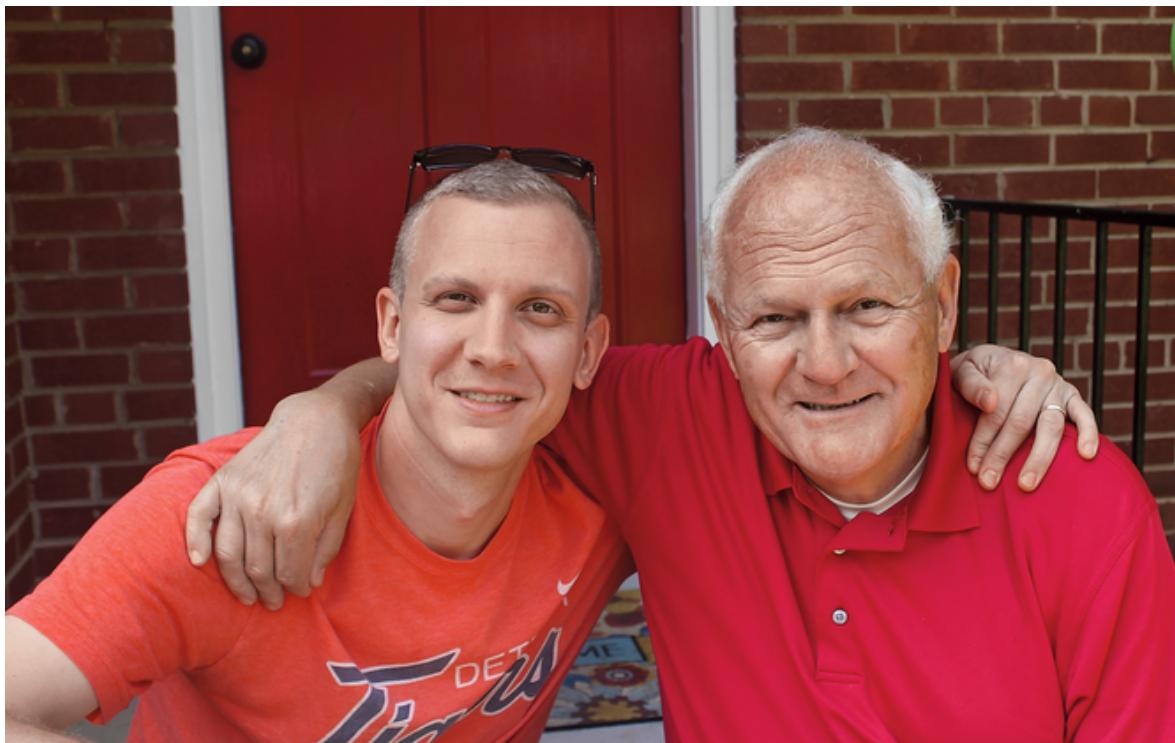
I felt sick. Silently, I passed the letter to my wife. She scanned it without expression. Then she flung the piece of paper into the air and, with a shriek that made the church ladies jump out of their cardigans, cried out: “What the hell is wrong with these people?”

There has never been consensus on what, exactly, it means to be an evangelical. Competing and overlapping definitions have been offered for generations, some more widely embraced than others. Billy Graham, a man synonymous with the term, [once remarked](#) that he himself would like to inquire as to its true meaning. By the 1980s, thanks to the efforts of televangelists and political activists, what was once a religious signifier began transforming into a partisan movement. *Evangelical* soon became synonymous with *conservative Christian*, and eventually with *white conservative Republican*.

[Read: Defining *evangelical*](#)

My dad, a serious theologian who held advanced degrees from top seminaries, bristled at reductive analyses of his religious tribe. He would frequently state from the pulpit what *he* believed an evangelical to be: someone who interprets the Bible as the inspired word of God and who takes seriously the charge to proclaim it to the world.

From a young age, I realized that not all Christians were like my dad. Other adults who went to our church—my teachers, coaches, friends’ parents—didn’t speak about God the way that he did. Theirs was a more casual Christianity, less a lifestyle than a hobby, something that could be picked up and put down and slotted into schedules. Their pastor realized as much. Pushing his people ever harder to engage with questions of canonical authority and trinitarian precepts and Calvinist doctrine, Dad tried his best to run a serious church.



The author and his father in 2019 (Courtesy of Tim Alberta)

But for all his successes, Dad had one great weakness. Pastor Alberta’s kryptonite as a Christian—and I think he knew it, though he never admitted it to me—was his intense love of country.

Once a talented young athlete, Dad came down with tuberculosis at 16 years old. He was hospitalized for four months; at one point, doctors thought he might die. He eventually recovered, and with the Vietnam War escalating, he joined the Marine Corps. But at the Officer Candidates School in Quantico, Virginia, he fell behind in the physical work. His lungs were not healthy. After receiving an honorable discharge, Dad went home saddled with a certain shame. In the ensuing years, he learned that dozens of the second lieutenants he'd trained alongside at Quantico—as well as a bunch of guys he'd grown up with—were killed in action. It burdened him for the rest of his life.

This experience, and his disgust with the hippies and the drug culture and the war protesters, turned Dad into a law-and-order conservative. Marinating in the language of social conservatism during his time in seminary—this was the heyday of the Moral Majority—he emerged a full-spectrum Republican. His biggest political concern was abortion; in 1947, my grandmother, trapped in an emotionally abusive marriage, had almost ended her pregnancy with him. (She had a sudden change of heart at the clinic and walked out, a decision my dad would always attribute to holy intercession.) But he also waded into the culture wars: gay marriage, education curriculum, morality in public life.

Dad always told us that personal integrity was a prerequisite for political leadership. He was so relieved when Bill Clinton's second term ended that he and Mom hosted a small viewing party in our living room for George W. Bush's 2001 inauguration, to celebrate the return of morality to the White House. Over time, however, his emphasis shifted. One Sunday in early 2010, when I was home visiting, he showed the congregation an ominous video in which Christian leaders warned about the menace of Obamacare. I told him afterward that it felt inappropriate for a worship service; he disagreed. We would butt heads more regularly in the years that followed. It was always loving, always respectful. Yet clearly our philosophical paths were diverging—a reality that became unavoidable during the presidency of Donald Trump.

Dad would have preferred any of the other Republicans who ran in 2016. He knew that Trump was a narcissist and a liar; he knew that he was not a moral man. Ultimately Dad felt he had no choice but to support the Republican ticket, given his concern for the unborn and the Supreme Court majority that

hung in the balance. I understood that decision. What I couldn't understand was how, over the next couple of years, he became an apologist for Trump's antics, dismissing criticisms of the president's conduct as little more than an attempt to marginalize his supporters. Dad really did believe this; he believed that the constant attacks on Trump's character were ipso facto an attack on the character of people like himself, which I think, on some subconscious level, created a permission structure for him to ignore the president's depravity. All I could do was tell Dad the truth. "Look, you're the one who taught me to know right from wrong," I would say. "Don't be mad at me for acting on it."

To his credit, Dad was not some lazy, knee-jerk partisan. He was vocal about certain issues—gun violence, poverty, immigration, the trappings of wealth—that did not play to his constituency at Cornerstone.

Dad wasn't a Christian nationalist; he wanted nothing to do with theocracy. He just believed that God had blessed the United States uniquely—and felt that anyone who fought to preserve those blessings was doing the Lord's work. This made for an unfortunate scene in 2007, when a young congregant at Cornerstone, a Marine named Mark Kidd, died during a fourth tour of duty in Iraq. Public opinion had swung sharply against the war, and Democrats were demanding that the Bush administration bring the troops home. My dad was devastated by Kidd's death. They had corresponded while Kidd was overseas and met for prayer in between his deployments. Dad's grief as a pastor gave way to his grievance as a Republican supporter of the war: He made it known to local Democratic politicians that they weren't welcome at the funeral.

"I am ashamed, personally, of leaders who say they support the troops but not the commander in chief," Dad thundered from his pulpit, earning a raucous standing ovation. "Do they not see that discourages the warriors and encourages the terrorists?"

This touched off a firestorm in our community. Most of the church members were all for Dad's remarks, but even in a conservative town like Brighton, plenty of people felt uneasy about turning a fallen Marine's church memorial into a partisan political rally. Patriotism in the pulpit is one thing; lots of sanctuaries fly an American flag on the rostrum. This was something else.

This was taking the weight and the gravity and the eternal certainty of God and lending it to an ephemeral and questionable cause. This was rebuking people for failing to unconditionally follow the president of the United States when the only authority we're meant to unconditionally follow—particularly in a setting of stained-glass windows—is Christ himself.

I know Dad regretted it. But he couldn't help himself. His own personal story—and his broader view of the United States as a godly nation, a source of hope in a despondent world—was impossible to divorce from his pastoral ministry. Every time a member of the military came to church dressed in uniform, Dad would recognize them by name, ask them to stand up, and lead the church in a rapturous round of applause. This was one of the first things his successor changed at Cornerstone.

Eighteen months after Dad's funeral, in February 2021, I sat down across from that successor, Chris Winans, in a booth at the Brighton Bar & Grill. It's a comfortable little haunt on Main Street, backing up to a wooden playground and a millpond. But Winans didn't look comfortable. He looked nervous, even a bit paranoid, glancing around him as we began to speak. Soon, I would understand why.

Dad had spent years looking for an heir apparent. Several associate pastors had come and gone. Cornerstone was his life's work—he had led the church throughout virtually its entire history—so there would be no settling in his search for a successor. The uncertainty wore him down. Dad worried that he might never find the right guy. And then one day, while attending a denominational meeting, he met Winans, a young associate pastor from Goodwill—the very church where he'd been saved, and where he'd worked his first job out of seminary. Dad hired him away from Goodwill to lead a young-adults ministry at Cornerstone, and from the moment Winans arrived, I could tell that he was the one.

Barely 30 years old, Winans looked to be exactly what Cornerstone needed in its next generation of leadership. He was a brilliant student of the scriptures. He spoke with precision and clarity from the pulpit. He had a humble, easygoing way about him, operating without the outsize ego that often accompanies first-rate preaching. Everything about this pastor—the

boyish sweep of brown hair, his delightful young family—seemed to be straight out of central casting.

There was just one problem: Chris Winans was not a conservative Republican. He didn't like guns. He cared more about funding anti-poverty programs than cutting taxes. He had no appetite for President Trump's unrepentant antics. Of course, none of this would seem heretical to Christians in other parts of the world; given his staunch anti-abortion position, Winans would in most places be considered the picture of spiritual and intellectual consistency. But in the American evangelical tradition, and at a church like Cornerstone, the whiff of liberalism made him suspect.

Trump warned that, as president, Biden would "hurt God" and target Christians for their religious beliefs.

Dad knew the guy was different. Winans liked to play piano instead of sports, and had no taste for hunting or fishing. Frankly, Dad thought that was a bonus. Winans wasn't supposed to simply placate Cornerstone's aging base of wealthy white congregants. The new pastor's charge was to evangelize, to cast a vision and expand the mission field, to challenge those inside the church and carry the gospel to those outside it. Dad didn't think there was undue risk. He felt confident that his hand-chosen successor's gifts in the pulpit, and his manifest love of Jesus, would smooth over any bumps in the transition.

He was wrong. Almost immediately after Winans moved into the role of senior pastor, at the beginning of 2018, the knives came out. Any errant remark he made about politics or culture, any slight against Trump or the Republican Party—real or perceived—invited a torrent of criticism. Longtime members would demand a meeting with Dad, who had stuck around in a support role, and unload on Winans. Dad would ask if there was any substantive criticism of the theology; almost invariably, the answer was no. A month into the job, when Winans remarked in a sermon that Christians ought to be protective of God's creation—arguing for congregants to take seriously the threats to the planet—people came to Dad by the dozens, outraged, demanding that Winans be reined in. Dad told them all to get lost. If anyone had a beef with the senior pastor, he said, they needed to take it up

with the senior pastor. (Dad did so himself, buying Winans lunch at Chili's and suggesting that he tone down the tree hugging.)

Winans had a tough first year on the job, but he survived it. The people at Cornerstone were in an adjustment period. He needed to respect that—and he needed to adjust, too. As long as Dad had his back, Winans knew he would be okay.

And then Dad died.

Now, Winans told me, he was barely hanging on at Cornerstone. The church had become unruly; his job had become unbearable. Not long after Dad died—making Winans the unquestioned leader of the church—the coronavirus pandemic arrived. And then George Floyd was murdered. All of this as Donald Trump campaigned for reelection. Trump had run in 2016 on a promise that “Christianity will have power” if he won the White House; now he was warning that his opponent in the 2020 election, former Vice President Joe Biden, was going to “hurt God” and target Christians for their religious beliefs. Embracing dark rhetoric and violent conspiracy theories, the president enlisted prominent evangelicals to help frame a cosmic spiritual clash between the God-fearing Republicans who supported Trump and the secular leftists who were plotting their conquest of America’s Judeo-Christian ethos.

People at Cornerstone began confronting their pastor, demanding that he speak out against government mandates and Black Lives Matter and Joe Biden. When Winans declined, people left. The mood soured noticeably after Trump’s defeat in November 2020. A crusade to overturn the election result, led by a group of outspoken Christians—including Trump’s lawyer Jenna Ellis, who later pleaded guilty to a felony charge of aiding and abetting false statements and writings, and the author Eric Metaxas, who suggested to fellow believers that martyrdom might be required to keep Trump in office—roiled the Cornerstone congregation. When a popular church staffer who had been known to proselytize for QAnon was fired after repeated run-ins with Winans, the pastor told me, the departures came in droves. Some of those abandoning Cornerstone were not core congregants. But plenty of them were. They were people who served in leadership roles, people Winans counted as confidants and friends.

By the time Trump supporters invaded the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, Winans believed he'd lost control of his church. "It's an exodus," he told me a few weeks later, sitting inside Brighton Bar & Grill.

The pastor had felt despair—and a certain liability—watching the attack unfold on television. Christian imagery was ubiquitous: rioters forming prayer circles, singing hymns, carrying Bibles and crosses. The perversion of America's prevailing religion would forever be associated with this tragedy; as one of the legislative ringleaders, Senator Josh Hawley, explained [in a speech the following year](#), long after the blood had been scrubbed from the Capitol steps, "We are a revolutionary nation precisely because we are the heirs of the revolution of the Bible."

That sort of thinking, Winans said, represents an even greater threat than the events of January 6.

"A lot of people believe there was a religious conception of this country. A biblical conception of this country," Winans told me. "And that's the source of a lot of our problems."

For much of American history, white Christians have enjoyed tremendous wealth and influence and security. Given that reality—and given the miraculous nature of America's defeat of Great Britain, its rise to superpower status, and its legacy of spreading freedom and democracy (and, yes, Christianity) across the globe—it's easy to see why so many evangelicals believe that our country is divinely blessed. The problem is, blessings often become indistinguishable from entitlements. Once we become convinced that God has blessed something, that something can become an object of jealousy, obsession—even worship.

"At its root, we're talking about idolatry. America has become an idol to some of these people. If you believe that God is in covenant with America, then you believe—and I've heard lots of people say this explicitly—that we're a new Israel," Winans said, referring to the Old Testament narrative of God's chosen nation. "You believe the sorts of promises made to Israel are applicable to this country; you view America as a covenant that needs to be protected. You have to fight for America as if salvation itself hangs in the balance. At that point, you understand yourself as an American first and

most fundamentally. And that is a terrible misunderstanding of who we're called to be."

Plenty of nations are mentioned in the Bible; the United States is not one of them. Most American evangelicals are sophisticated enough to reject the idea of this country as something consecrated in the eyes of God. But many of those same people have chosen to idealize a *Christian America* that puts them at odds with *Christianity*. They have allowed their national identity to shape their faith identity instead of the other way around.

Winans chose to be hypervigilant on this front, hence the change of policy regarding Cornerstone's salute to military personnel. The new pastor would meet soldiers after the service, shaking their hand and individually thanking them for their service. But he refused to stage an ovation in the sanctuary. This wasn't because he was some bohemian anti-war activist; in fact, his wife had served in the Army. Winans simply felt it was inappropriate.

"I don't want to dishonor anyone. I think nations have the right to self-defense. I respect the sacrifices these people make in the military," Winans told me. "But they would come in wearing their dress blues and get this wild standing ovation. And you contrast that to whenever we would host missionaries: They would stand up for recognition, and we give them a golf clap ... And you have to wonder: Why? What's going on inside our hearts?"

This kind of cultural heresy was getting Winans into trouble. More congregants were defecting each week. Many were relocating to one particular congregation down the road, a revival-minded church that was pandering to the whims of the moment, led by a pastor who was preaching a blood-and-soil Christian nationalism that sought to merge two kingdoms into one.

As we talked, Winans asked me to keep something between us: He was thinking about leaving Cornerstone.

The "psychological onslaught," he said, had become too much. Recently, the pastor had developed a form of anxiety disorder and was retreating into a dark room between services to collect himself. Winans had met with several

trusted elders and asked them to stick close to him on Sunday mornings so they could catch him if he were to faint and fall over.

I thought about Dad and how heartbroken he would have been. Then I started to wonder if Dad didn't have some level of culpability in all of this. Clearly, long before COVID-19 or George Floyd or Donald Trump, something had gone wrong at Cornerstone. I had always shrugged off the crude, hysterical, sky-is-falling Facebook posts I would see from people at the church. I found it amusing, if not particularly alarming, that some longtime Cornerstone members were obsessed with trolling me on Twitter. Now I couldn't help but think these were warnings—bright-red blinking lights—that should have been taken seriously. My dad never had a social-media account. Did he have any idea just how lost some of his sheep really were?

I had never told Winans about the confrontations at my dad's viewing, or the letter I received after taking Rush Limbaugh's name in vain at the funeral. Now I was leaning across the table, unloading every detail. He narrowed his eyes and folded his hands and gave a pained exhale, mouthing that he was sorry. He could not even manage the words.

We both kept quiet for a little while. And then I asked him something I'd thought about every day for the previous 18 months—a sanitized version of my wife's outburst in the living room.

“What’s wrong with American evangelicals?”

Winans thought for a moment.

“America,” he replied. “Too many of them worship America.”

This article was adapted from Tim Alberta's new book, [The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism](#). It appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Church of America.”

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SNL's New Kings of Bizarro Buddy Comedy

The Gen Z zaniness of Please Don't Destroy

by David Sims



The video that ushered *Saturday Night Live* into the digital era barely made it to television, and when it did, it was largely ignored. It's a heartfelt conversation between two friends (played by Andy Samberg and Will Forte) about a recent tragic loss; after every emotional beat, each of them takes a bite out of a large head of lettuce. When the video was screened during *SNL*'s live taping, the studio audience was clearly puzzled, the laughs barely rising above a polite chuckle. "Lettuce," created in December 2005 by

Samberg's Lonely Island sketch group, could have been the end of *SNL*'s experimentation with prerecorded digital sketches.

But then, two weeks later, came "[Lazy Sunday](#)," a music video in which Samberg and his *SNL* co-star Chris Parnell rap about "lame, sensitive stuff," as Samberg once put it: buying Magnolia Bakery cupcakes and going to a matinee of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. To this day, it feels like something furtively sneaked onto the air, a blast of youthful punchiness wedged in between *SNL*'s often bloated bits of vaudeville. "Lazy Sunday" became a breakaway hit and ultimately helped demonstrate that *SNL* could still be [a place where comedy felt fresh and strange](#) rather than rote and reactive.

As Lonely Island's profile rose, its grainy videos turned into slick, celebrity-studded spectacles. Perhaps the pinnacle of the group's achievements was 2006's "[Dick in a Box](#)," in which Samberg parodied the songwriting and music-video conventions of '90s boy-band pop, recruiting a veteran of that moment, Justin Timberlake, to join in. Wearing gift-wrapped packages on their crotches, Samberg and Timberlake deliver a pitch-perfect send-up of the baby-making ballads of acts like Color Me Badd and Backstreet Boys. The production is gleefully boneheaded and delightfully weird—but not so weird that the show's core demographic would miss the joke.

Samberg left *SNL* in 2012; the other two members of Lonely Island, Akiva Schaffer and Jorma Taccone, left around the same time. For a while, it seemed like the show might never recapture the group's knack for virality. Two cast members, Kyle Mooney and Beck Bennett, starred in several surreal "digital exclusives," but they failed to attract much of a following (and were often cut before airtime). These had the bizarro vibe that viewers had come to expect from the form, but without Lonely Island's mainstream legibility: more "Lettuce" than "Lazy Sunday."

Then, in 2021, *SNL* hired Ben Marshall, John Higgins, and Martin Herlihy, a comedy team who'd met at NYU and called themselves Please Don't Destroy. The group had [developed a big following](#) with short videos for TikTok and Twitter during the COVID lockdowns, but its members could easily have been dismissed as legacy hires by a nearly half-century-old institution: Both Higgins's and Herlihy's fathers wrote jokes for *SNL*.

Despite that pedigree, the three have brought something new to the venerable sketch show, which [recently returned from a hiatus](#) lengthened by the writers' strike. They've figured out how to tap into the manic, juddering energy of comedy in the smartphone era.

Part of what makes a Please Don't Destroy sketch so disorientingly funny is the way it can snap from the quotidian to paranoid hysteria in seconds. In March 2021, before the group joined *SNL*, one video opened with Marshall returning home after getting his first COVID vaccine. His friends ask the then-ubiquitous question: Pfizer or Moderna? Neither, it turns out. Marshall proudly proclaims that [he's gotten the off-brand "Dumbrekka" vaccine](#) ("They put me under for the whole thing, and it only took a couple of hours," he reports cheerily). Higgins and Herlihy's confusion builds to concern as Marshall describes his post-jab symptoms: "I've been expelling a ton of black bile," he says. His friends try to impress upon him that his health seems imperiled, but Marshall angrily denounces them as "anti-vaxxers"—before promptly collapsing on the floor, unconscious.

On *SNL*, the group's brisk, lo-fi skits still play like fever dreams, with the intense, quick-cut cadence that defines [the TikTok aesthetic](#). The videos tend to begin in mundane settings, often the ambience-free office that the three young writers inhabit at Rockefeller Center. Their tenuous place in the show's hierarchy and desperation to come up with material are a consistent backdrop.

Please Don't Destroy, in its dry, Gen Z way, relies on the classic sketch-comedy gambit of escalating some minor concept into absurdity. But it's arguably doing something deeper, too. The videos have a certain fraternal energy that is key to the group's appeal; they feel like compressed buddy comedies with an edge of lunatic horror. The three men are presented as best friends, yet they are always on the brink of exploding into some outlandish fight. Because they seem to know almost everything about one another, they can attack insecurities with abandon, then reconcile just as quickly.

This dynamic is perhaps most clearly on display in a sketch where Marshall feels excluded after discovering that Higgins and Herlihy are lying about having plans just so they can hang out alone. Marshall decides to spy on his friends ([with help from a deranged Woody Harrelson](#)) and learns that not

only are they happily playing video games without him, but they have secretly married and started a family.

Simmering straight-male insecurity is the engine of the comedy.

Shifting ideas of masculinity is a theme *SNL* has frequently mined in recent years; one 2021 sketch, “[Man Park](#),” advertises the equivalent of a dog park where men who struggle with intimacy can connect over football and Marvel movies. Although entertaining as far as it goes, the sketch was content to hit a familiar satirical target: the inability of men to express emotions. *Please Don’t Destroy* is at once more surreal and more nuanced in its portrait of male friendship. In one sketch, Marshall and Herlihy gleefully rattle off insults about Higgins’s ex-girlfriend, only to learn that they’ve gotten back together, that they are in fact now engaged, and that the ex-girlfriend has been sitting in the room the entire time. (Also, her entire family has been listening on Zoom.) The skit captures the male tendency to bond through ridicule, to avoid the subject of romance at all costs, and to fear that maintaining an adult relationship is antithetical to being one of the boys.

And despite the terrible things the three do and say to one another, the fun they have pushing the boundaries of their comedy ever further is palpable.

Inevitably, the group’s success has now led to a movie deal; in November, NBC’s streaming service, Peacock, released [Please Don’t Destroy: The Treasure of Foggy Mountain](#), written by and starring Herlihy, Higgins, and Marshall. The three play “themselves,” except they’re all employees of a Bass Pro-type store run by Marshall’s disapproving dad (depicted with cruel relish by Conan O’Brien). Seeking an escape from the daily grind, the friends go into the woods on a treasure hunt.

The Treasure of Foggy Mountain struggles in ways that are familiar from many of the *SNL*-themed movies that flooded theaters in the ’90s after [the success of Wayne’s World](#)—comedies that tried to elevate one-joke sketches like “Coneheads” and “A Night at the Roxbury” into film-length odysseys. There are flashes of comic virtuosity here, but like most *SNL* films, *The Treasure of Foggy Mountain* feels padded, even at 90 minutes, perhaps more

so given the sprightly sketches with which Please Don't Destroy made its name.

Simmering straight-male insecurity remains the engine of the comedy, with the needy alliances of the three pals shifting throughout the plot. Here, though, that dynamic wears itself out. As the stars hunt for treasure, their friendship is tested, before all is eventually forgiven; think *The Goonies*, except the children are nominally adults. Seeing the trio do their thing at feature length, you mostly just miss that dingy *SNL* office and those fun-house-mirror glimpses of their oddly charming bond.

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Bizarro Buddy Comedy of Please Don’t Destroy.”

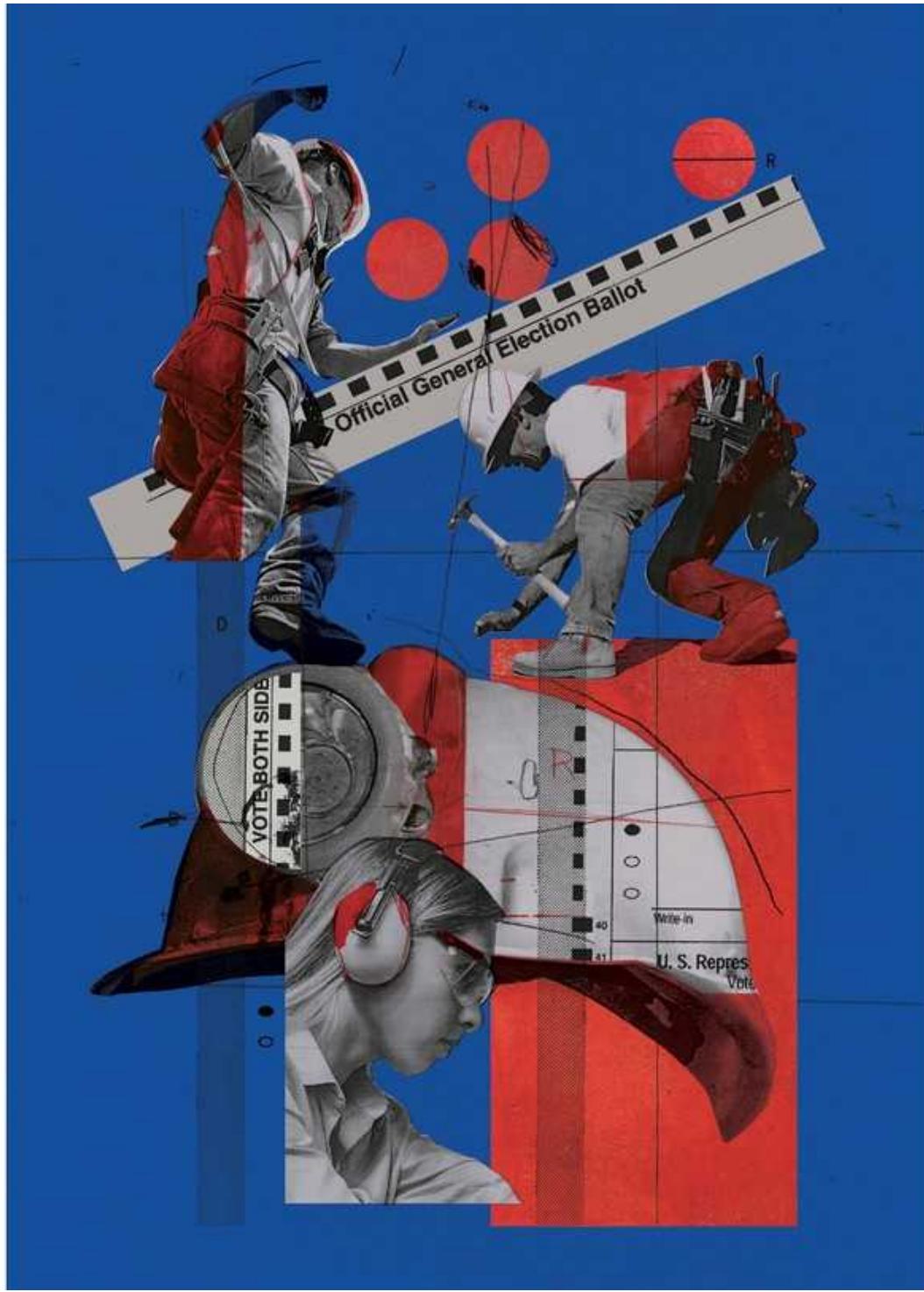
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What Does the Working Class Really Want?

**Vying for its crucial support,
neither Democrats nor Republicans
are focusing on the essential
question.**

by George Packer



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Political partisans are always dreaming of final victories. Each election raises the hope of realignment—a convergence of issues and demographics and personalities that will deliver a lock on power to one side or the other. In

my lifetime, at least five “permanent” majorities have come and gone. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s landslide triumph over Barry Goldwater in 1964 seemed to ratify the postwar liberal consensus and doom the Republican Party to irrelevance—until, four years later, Richard Nixon’s narrow win augured an “[emerging Republican majority](#)” (the title of a [book by his adviser Kevin Phillips](#)) based in the white, suburban Sun Belt. In 1976, Jimmy Carter heralded a winning interracial politics called “[the Carter coalition](#),” which proved even shorter-lived than his presidency. With Ronald Reagan, the conservative ascendancy [really did seem perpetual](#). After the Republican victory in the 2002 midterm elections, George W. Bush’s operative Karl Rove floated the idea of a majority lasting a generation or two.

But around the same time, the writers John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira published [The Emerging Democratic Majority](#), which predicted a decades-long advantage for the party of educated professionals, single women, younger voters, and the coming minority majority. The embodiment of their thesis soon appeared in Barack Obama—only to be followed by Donald Trump and [the revenge of the white working class](#), a large plurality that has refused to fade away.

Recent American history has been hard on would-be realigners. The two parties are playing one of the longest deuce games since the founding. Even with the structural distortion of the Senate and [the Electoral College favoring Republicans](#), the American people remain closely divided. The Democratic presidential candidate has won seven of the last eight popular votes, while the national vote for the House of Representatives keeps swinging back and forth between the parties. Stymied by a sense of stalemate, both now indulge in a form of magical thinking.

Neither side believes in the legitimacy of the other; each assumes that the voters agree and will soon sweep it into power. So the result of every election comes as a shock to the loser, who settles on explanations that have nothing to do with the popular will: foreign interference, fraudulent ballots, viral disinformation, a widespread conspiracy to cheat. The Republican Party tries to hold on to power by antidemocratic means: the Electoral College, the filibuster, grotesquely gerrymandered legislatures, [even violence](#). The Democratic Party pursues a majority by demography, targeting

an array of identity groups and assuming that their positions on issues will be predictably monolithic. The latter is a mistake; the former is a threat to democracy. Both are ways to escape the long, hard grind of organized persuasion that is politics.

[From the January/February 2022 issue: Barton Gellman on how Trump's next coup has already begun](#)

Two other jarring features define our age of deadlock. One is a radical shift in the two parties' center of gravity. The signature of elections today is the class divide called education polarization: In 2020, Joe Biden won by claiming a majority of college-educated white voters, the backbone of the old Republican Party. Trump, with a lock on the white working class, lost despite making gains among nonwhite, non-college-educated voters, yesterday's most reliable Democrats. Meanwhile, on the political stage, cultural and social issues have eclipsed economic issues—even as every facet of American life, whether income or mortality rates, grows less equal and more divided by class.

These two trends are obviously related, and they have a history. From the late 1970s until very recently, the brains and dollars behind both parties supported versions of neoliberal economics: one hard-edged and friendly to old-line corporate interests such as the oil industry, the other gentler and oriented toward the financial and technology sectors. This consensus left the battleground open to cultural warfare. The educated professionals who dominate the country's progressive party have long cared less about unions, wages, and monopoly power than about race, gender, and the environment. In the summer of 2020, millions of young people did not come out of isolation to protest the plight of meatpackers laboring in COVID-ridden processing plants. They were outraged by a police killing, and they called for a “racial reckoning”—a revolution in consciousness that ended up having little effect on the lives of the poor and oppressed.

For their part, Republicans have spoken the traditionalist language of the working class ever since Nixon’s “silent majority”; Trump dropped the mantra of low taxes and deregulation that used to excite the party when it was more upscale, and directed his message to a base that votes on issues such as crime, immigration, and what it means to be an American. More

recently, Republican candidates have turned to anti-“woke” rhetoric. In losing its voice as the champion of workers, the Democratic Party [lost many of the workers themselves](#), and during the past half century, the two parties have nearly switched electorates.

This remapping helps explain the outpouring of new books that pay political attention to those overlooked Americans of all races who lack a college degree, many employed in jobs that pay by the hour—factory workers, home health aides, delivery drivers, preschool teachers, hairdressers, restaurant servers, farm laborers, cashiers. During the pandemic, they were called “[essential workers](#).” Now they’ve been discovered to hold the key to power, giving rise to yet another round of partisan dreaming of realignment, this time hinging on the working class. But these Americans won’t benefit from their new status as essential voters until the parties spend less effort coming up with what they think the working class wants to hear, and more effort actually delivering what it wants and needs.

The economic decline and political migration of the American working class receive the most compelling treatment in [*Ours Was the Shining Future: The Story of the American Dream*](#), by the *New York Times* writer David Leonhardt. He describes the rise and fall, from the New Deal to the present, of what he calls “democratic capitalism”—not a neutral phrase, but a positive term for a mixed economy that benefits the many, not just the few. By now, the story of growing inequality and declining mobility is familiar from the work of Thomas Piketty, Gary Gerstle, [Raj Chetty](#), and other scholars. Leonhardt has a gift for synthesizing complex trends and data in straightforward language and persuasive arguments whose rationality doesn’t fully mute an undertone of indignation. He appreciates the power of stories and weaves obscure but telling events and people into his larger narrative: a 1934 strike in the Minneapolis coal yards that showed the political potential of worker solidarity; the mid-century businessman Paul Hoffman, who argued to members of his own class that they would benefit from a prosperous working class; the pioneering computer programmer and Navy officer Grace Hopper, who saw the economic benefits of military spending on technological research.

An economy that gives most people the chance for a decent life doesn’t arise by accident or through impersonal forces. It has to be created, and Leonhardt

identifies three agents: political action, such as union organizing, that gives power to the have-nots; a civic ethos that restrains the greed of the haves; and public spending on people, infrastructure, and ideas—“a form of short-term sacrifice, an optimistic bet on what the future can bring.”

The labor movement lost interest in social justice, and progressive politicians lost interest in the working class.

All three—power, culture, and investment—combined in the postwar decades [to transform the American working class](#) into the largest and richest middle class in history. Black Americans, even while enduring official discrimination and racist violence, closed the gap in pay and life expectancy with white Americans—progress, Leonhardt writes, that “reflected class-based changes more than explicitly race-based changes.” In other words, the right of workers to form unions, an increased and expanded federal minimum wage, and a steeply progressive tax code that funded good schools all reduced racial inequality by reducing economic inequality. But after the 1960s, the economy’s growth slowed, and the balance of power among the classes grew lopsided. American life became stratified. Wealth flowed upward to the few, [unions withered](#), and public goods such as schools starved. In their rush to cash in, elites knocked over taboos that had once restrained the worst extremes of greed. Metropoles prospered and industrial regions decayed. Despite the end of Jim Crow and the growth of a Black professional class, the gap between Black and white Americans began to widen again as the country’s top 10 percent pulled away from the rest.

This economic analysis comes with a political argument that will not be welcomed by many progressives. Leonhardt places blame for the decline of the American dream where it belongs: on free-market intellectuals, right-wing politicians, corporate money. But he also points to the shortsighted complacency of union leaders, and, even more, the changing values and interests of well-educated, comfortable Democrats. Beginning in the early ’70s, they dropped concern about bread-and-butter issues for more compelling causes: the environment, peace, consumer protection, abortion, identity-group rights. The labor movement lost interest in social justice, and progressive politicians lost interest in the working class. Neither George Meany nor George McGovern sang from the New Deal songbook. After the

'60s, "the country no longer had a mass movement centered on lifting most Americans' living standards."

Why did the white working class abandon the party that had been its champion? "In the standard progressive telling," Leonhardt writes, "the explanation for this political shift is race." Race had a lot to do with it, and Leonhardt affirms that Democrats' embrace of the Black freedom movement in the '60s, followed by white backlash (exploited by Republicans with their "southern strategy") and persistent racism, is a major cause. But the progressive telling falls short on three counts. It's morally self-flattering and self-exonerating; it's politically self-defeating (accusing voters of racism, even if deserved, is not the way to convince them of anything); and it fails to explain too many recent political trends. For example, nearly all-white West Virginia remained mostly Democratic decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and only turned indelibly red in 2000. According to one estimate, almost a quarter of the working-class white voters who gave Trump the presidency in 2016 had voted for a Black president only a few years earlier. The stark polarization of the current college-educated and non-college-educated white electorate shows the key role of class. And what are we to make of an openly bigoted president running for a second term and *increasing his share of the Black [and Latino vote](#)?*

Leonhardt's subtler account is rooted in the working class's growing cultural and economic alienation from a Democratic Party ever more dominated by elites and activists, and out of touch on the issues that hurt less affluent Americans most, especially crime, trade, and immigration. The financial crisis of 2008 was a pivotal event, leaving large numbers of Americans with the sense that the country's upper classes were playing a dirty game at the expense of the rest.

That fall, I reported on the presidential campaign in a dying coal town in Appalachian Ohio. To my surprise, its white residents were giving Obama a close hearing, and he ended up doing better in the region than John Kerry had. But at a local party gathering, an older white man told me that neither party had done anything to reverse the decline of his town, and that he would no longer vote Democratic, for one reason: illegal immigration. I listened politely and discounted his grievance—I didn't see any undocumented immigrants in Glouster, Ohio. Why did he care so much?

Leonhardt provides an answer. In a comprehensive analysis, he shows that the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which liberal politicians sold as nondiscriminatory but still restrictive, [opened the gates to mass immigration](#). The result put downward pressure on wages at the lower end of the economy. Again, racial resentment partly explains hostility to large-scale immigration, but Leonhardt shows that rapid demographic change can erode the social bonds that make collective efforts for greater equality possible: “Low immigration numbers in the mid-1900s improved the lives of recent immigrants by fostering a stronger safety net for everybody.” As Democrats were reminded in 2022’s midterms, immigration is less popular among working-class Americans of all races than among college graduates. The mayor of my very progressive city, [a son of the Black working class](#), recently sounded like that working-class white ex-Democrat in Ohio when he warned that the arrival of more than 100,000 migrants “will destroy New York.”

[David Leonhardt: The hard truth about immigration](#)

These positions reflect class differences in approaches to morality. Drawing on social-science research, Leonhardt distinguishes between “universal” values such as fairness and compassion, which matter more among educated professionals, and “communal” values such as order, tradition, and loyalty, which count more lower down the class ladder. It shouldn’t be surprising that working-class Americans of color sympathize with migrants but don’t necessarily want an open border, that they fear crime at least as much as police misconduct. But their views confound progressives, who see these issues through the [almost metaphysical lens of group identity](#)—the belief that we think inside lines of race, gender, and sexuality, that these accidental and immutable traits dictate our politics.



This worldview provided a sense of meaning to a generation that came of age after 2008, amid upheaval and disillusionment. Because the new progressivism flourished among younger, educated Americans who lived online, its cultural reach was disproportionate, making rapid inroads in universities, schools, media, the arts, philanthropy. But its believers badly overplayed their hand, giving Republicans easy wins and driving away ordinary Democrats. Americans remain a wildly diverse, individualistic, aspirational people, with rising rates of mixed marriage, residential integration, and immigration from all over the world. Any rigid politics of identity—whether the left’s obsession with “marginalized communities,” or its sinister opposite in the reactionary paranoia of “[white replacement theory](#)”—is bound to shatter against the realities of American life.

Identity politics has been a feverish interlude following [the demise of the neoliberal consensus](#) that prevailed from Reagan to Obama. What will take its place? Leonhardt hopes for a Democratic Party that learns how not to alienate the nearly two-thirds of Americans without a college degree. He believes that education can be a force for upward mobility, but that the current version of meritocracy—built-in advantage at the top, underfunding below—has created a highly educated aristocracy. He advises a renewed emphasis on economic populism, a hard line on equal rights for all but reasonable compromise on other controversial social issues, and a general attitude of respect. His hero is the martyred Robert F. Kennedy, whose 1968 presidential campaign was the last to unite working-class Americans of all colors.

Yascha Mounk: Where the new identity politics went wrong

A version of the same argument, with less historical depth and feeling but more charts and polemics, can be found in John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira's *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes*. Judis and Teixeira have been explaining their earlier book's thesis for two decades even as the majority of its title kept failing to emerge. Now they diagnose their error: "What began happening in the last decade is a defection, pure and simple, of working-class voters. That's something that we really didn't anticipate." Like Leonhardt, they call on Democrats to embrace New Deal-style "economic liberalism" (but not Green New Deal-style socialism) and to reject "today's post-sixties version of social liberalism, which is tantamount to cultural radicalism." In a series of scathing chapters, Judis and Teixeira show how far left the Democrats' "shadow party" of activists, donors, and journalists has moved in the past 20 years on immigration, race, gender, and climate.

The authors want a return to the party's cultural centrism of the '90s. Instead of decriminalizing the border, which most 2020 Democratic presidential candidates advocated, they call for tighter border security, enforcement of laws that prohibit hiring undocumented immigrants, and a way for those already here to become citizens. They show that middle-ground policies like these and others—the pursuit of racial equality that focuses on expanding opportunity for individuals, not equity of group outcomes; support for equal rights for trans Americans without insisting on a gender ideology that denies biological sex—remain majority views, including among nonwhite Americans. Judis and Teixeira are less persuasive on climate change: Although their gradualism might be politically helpful to Democrats, the country and the planet will be at the mercy of extreme weather that's indifferent to such messaging.

Joshua Green's fast-paced, sober, yet hopeful *The Rebels: Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the Struggle for a New American Politics* argues that a Democratic renewal is already under way. Like Leonhardt, Judis, and Teixeira, Green traces the Democrats' estrangement from working Americans back to the '70s; he begins his story with a moment in 1978, when Jimmy Carter abandoned unions for Wall Street. The narrative reaches a climax in 2008, when the financial crisis

destroyed home values and retirement savings [while taxpayer dollars rescued the banks](#) that had triggered it, convincing large numbers of Americans that the system was rigged by financiers and politicians. Because of policy choices by the Obama administration—Democrats’ last spasm of neoliberalism—much of the blame fell on the former party of the common people.

Yet out of the wreckage rose a new group of Democratic stars who sounded like their New Deal predecessors, many of whom were every bit as radical. Taking aim at corporate elites, Green’s protagonists want to increase economic equality through worker power and state intervention. Though Sanders and Warren failed as presidential candidates, Green argues that their populism transformed the party, [including the formerly moderate Joe Biden](#), who has pushed a remarkably ambitious legislative agenda with working-class interests at its center.

Green is a first-rate journalist, but his book suffers from a blind spot: It ignores the role of culture in the party’s struggles with the working class. His analysis omits half the story until the 2016 election, when, he acknowledges, Trump “reshuffled Democratic priorities. As he moved cultural issues to the center of national political conflict, race, gender, and immigration eclipsed populist economics as the focus of the liberal insurgency.” In the face of Trump’s bigotry, Democrats felt compelled to adopt the “maximalist” positions of activists, assuming that these would align the party with “the groups on the receiving end of Trump’s ugliest barbs,” [such as Latino immigrants](#). Instead, the party’s working-class losses began to extend beyond white voters. Green’s answer is to double down on economic populism: “Rather than fear the Republicans’ culture wars—or respond to them by racializing policies that benefit everyone—Democrats should take the opportunity to reestablish the party as serving the interests of working people of every race and ethnicity.”

None of these books offers a shortcut to a new Democratic majority. The erosion of working-class support is too old and too severe to be easily reversed. In fact, it’s the Republican pollster Patrick Ruffini, in [Party of the People: Inside the Multiracial Populist Coalition Remaking the GOP](#), who imagines a coming realignment—for Republicans. Ruffini can’t resist making the case that, in addition to transforming the party, this coalition

could become the next permanent majority. To do so, he breezes through some of the same history, and reaches a similar conclusion: Democrats have fallen into a “cosmopolitan trap,” losing their hold on a key constituency in the process.

Ruffini’s most original contribution is to apply close statistical analysis to the past few election cycles as he [builds his case for a Republican multiracial coalition](#). He supplies strong evidence of the moderate social views of most Black, Latino, and Asian American voters. On that basis, Ruffini doesn’t think Democrats can win back their lost supporters just by changing the subject to class. “Democrats may calculate that, simply by focusing on economic issues, they can keep cultural issues from eating into their base,” but they’re wrong, he writes. “When voters’ economic views and social views are in conflict, one’s social stances more often drive voting behavior … Cultural divides are what voters vote on even if politicians don’t talk about them.” Ruffini offers no data to support this conclusion, but it underpins his counsel for a politician like Biden. Never mind his legislative accomplishments that benefit the working class; what he really needs, Ruffini advises in political-operative mode, is a “hard pivot against the cultural left”—he seems to have in mind a Sister Souljah moment—to neutralize Republican attacks.

Though Ruffini doesn’t spend much time on economic policy, it’s worth noting that a few high-profile Republicans have recently discovered that monopolistic corporations can be oppressors, that capitalism tears communities apart. Senators Josh Hawley of Missouri and Marco Rubio of Florida, as well as other politicians, limit this insight to their partisan enemies in Silicon Valley, but a few conservative writers, such as Sohrab Ahmari, the author of [Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—And What to Do About It](#), are open to ideas of social democracy. This internal party battle between the old libertarians and the new egalitarians doesn’t seem to interest Ruffini; oddly, given his populist ambitions, he remains unmoved by the anti-corporate critique. Nor does he have much to say about the Republican Party’s descent with Trump [into authoritarian nihilism](#).

Social issues aren’t manufactured by power-hungry politicians to divide the masses. They matter—that’s why they’re so polarizing.

Ruffini's formative years as a professional Republican came during the George W. Bush presidency, and his thinking hasn't kept up with the America of fentanyl and Matt Gaetz. The populist future of Ruffini's desires is a wholesome mixture of culturally conservative, "pro-capitalist" families and low taxes. His "commonsense majority" would combine white people who didn't graduate from college and nonwhite people of all classes, because "the education divide makes a much bigger difference in the attitudes of whites than it does among nonwhites." It sounds like a twist on the Judis-Teixeira emerging majority of two decades ago. Demography as destiny seduces realigners on both sides.

Ruffini recognizes that Republicans are a long way from attracting enough nonwhite voters to achieve his majority. But, he argues, if the party battles job discrimination based on a college degree, makes voting Republican socially acceptable among Black Americans, and [apologizes for the southern strategy](#), his goal could be realized by 2036. By then, the Democratic Party would presumably be a pious rump of overeducated white people demanding open borders and anti-racist math.

These writers are all trying to solve a puzzle: One party supports unions, the child tax credit, and some form of universal health care, while the other party does everything in its power to defeat them. One president passed major legislation to renew manufacturing and rebuild infrastructure, while his predecessor cut taxes on the rich and corporations. Yet polls since 2016 have shown Republicans closing the gap with Democrats on which party is perceived to care more about poor Americans, middle-class Americans, and "people like me." During these years, the energy on the left has been fueled by an identity politics that resisted Trump and became the orthodoxy of educated progressives, with its own daunting lexicon. Many Democrats fell silent, out of fear or shame or confusion.

Now, encouraged perhaps by the excesses and failures of a professional-class social-justice movement, and by the relative success of Biden's pro-worker agenda, they seem to be finding their voice. Judis and Teixeira cite polling data from Wisconsin and Massachusetts as evidence that Americans are less divided on cultural issues than activists on both sides, who benefit by stoking division, would like: "If you look at the country's voters, and put aside the culture wars, what you find are genuine differences between the

parties' voters over economic issues." The real disagreements have to do with taxation, regulation, health care, and the larger problem of inequality. Democrats' way forward seems obvious: emphasize differences on economics by turning left; mute differences on culture by tacking to the middle. If the party can free itself from the moneyed interests of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, and the cultural radicalism of campus and social media, it might start to win in red states.

I want Leonhardt, Judis, Teixeira, and Green to be right. Having long held the same views, I'm an ideal audience for these books and other new ones making related arguments, such as Yascha Mounk's *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*, Susan Neiman's *Left Is Not Woke*, and Fredrik deBoer's *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement*. Yet the solutions that some of them propose for the Democrats' working-class problem leave me with a worrying skepticism. In an age of shredded social bonds and deep distrust of institutions, especially the federal government, we can't go back to New Deal economics. If Ruffini is right, the culture wars aren't easily put aside. "Guns and religion," in Obama's unfortunate phrase, are genuinely held values, not just proxies for economic grievance; conservative politicians manipulate them, but they aren't inauthentic. Race and gender are more important categories than class for millions of Americans, especially younger ones. Illegal immigration legitimately vexes citizens living precarious lives. Social issues aren't manufactured by power-hungry politicians to divide the masses. They matter—that's why they're so polarizing.

The working class is immense, varied, and not all that amenable to being led. It's more atomized, more independent-minded, more conspiracy-minded and cynical than it was a couple of generations ago. Although unions are gaining popularity and energy, only a tenth of workers belong to one. Abandoned to an unfair economy while the rich freely break the rules, bombarded with images of fame and wealth, awash in drugs, working-class Americans are less likely to identify with underdogs like Rocky and Norma Rae or the defeated heroes of Springsteen songs than to admire celebrities who pursue power for its own sake—none more so than Trump.

The argument over which matters more, economics or culture, may obsess the political class, but Americans living paycheck to paycheck, ill-served by

decades of financial neglect and polarizing culture wars, can't easily separate the two. All of it—wages, migrants, police, guns, classrooms, trade, the price of gas, the meaning of the flag—can be a source of chaos or of dignity. The real question is this: Can our politics, in its current state, deliver hard-pressed Americans greater stability and independence, or will it only inflict more disruption and pain? The working class isn't a puzzle whose solution comes with a prize—it isn't a means to the end of realignment and long-term power. It is a constituency comprising half the country, whose thriving is necessary for the good of the whole.

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Zombie History Stalks Ukraine

In a haunted novel, memories of a brutal past transform bodies as well as psyches.

by Judith Shulevitz



The Ukrainian writer Tanja Maljartschuk's novel [Forgottenness](#) broods upon what I'd call zombie history. There are other terms for inherited memory of catastrophic events experienced by one's forebears, such as [intergenerational transmission of trauma and postmemory](#). But the past in

this novel rises from the grave and takes possession of the bodies of the living. Memories resurface as tics, gestures, obsessions—the condensations of meaning that Freud called neurotic symptoms. Sometimes these show up in the personally traumatized. Much of the literature about intergenerational trauma focuses on the reappearance of symptoms in the next generation, though they may, indeed commonly do, persist into the third and beyond. Here they seem dormant in the children and resurface in a grandchild.

In *Forgottenness* (the first novel originally written in Ukrainian to be published by a major U.S. trade house), a young woman mops compulsively, finally driving away her fiancé. She is the narrator, a writer who is never named. The time is the present, which seems to mean about a decade ago; the novel came out in Ukraine in 2016. As a child, she learned how to wash a floor—*really* wash it—from her maternal grandmother, Sonia, a cleaning woman who is now barely clinging to life. You have to do the floor at least twice, Sonia taught her. Go over it once, and you’ll leave streaks of dirt. Sonia used to grab the mop out of the narrator’s hands when she didn’t apply enough force. “Why are you washing as if you haven’t eaten in three days?” she would demand.

Sonia’s reproach is not the innocent hyperbole of a babushka. Nothing is innocent in zombie history. Sonia is the one who didn’t eat for three days, likely more. Her mother died soon after she was born, and when she was 3 or 4, she tells the narrator, her father left her on the steps of an orphanage and said he’d be right back with some *pampushky*, garlic rolls. Instead he walked to the gatehouse of a factory and died. It was 1932, the first year of [the Holodomor, a horrific famine in which close to 4 million Ukrainians were starved to death](#) by Stalin’s monstrous agricultural policies, possibly deliberately. The orphanage took Sonia in but soon could manage to feed the orphans only three beans a day. She ran away and somehow made it home, to a large farmstead that had been turned into a commissary for the Communist Party elite. For lack of anything better to do, she went to the cemetery, lay down on her mother’s gravestone, and screamed for three days. Thereafter she spoke “almost inaudibly, her voice more like the rasp of an old wooden door.” How she survived is unclear. She had “an incredible, innate strength,” the narrator says.

Maljartschuk never uses the word *resurrection*, but we understand that the exhuming of memory is meant to be a miracle.

Transmuting raw experience into symbols, and symbols back into raw emotions, is a basic operation of psychic processing. We do it in our dreams. Literature does it for us, as does, of course, religion. Wafers and wine conjure up the real presence of Christ; ritual is how we reconnect with the miraculous. It's no coincidence that Sonia spent her working life cleaning a music school that had once been a Catholic monastery, lugging around a mop with a giant handle "that looked more like a cross awaiting a crucifixion." After crucifixions come resurrections, and the narrator is getting ready to perform one. She scrubs the floor, once, then twice, day in and day out, refusing to leave her apartment, until Sonia's long-repressed terror finally reemerges and takes hold of her. "A fear stronger than I had ever felt gripped and paralyzed me, and my mop fell to the floor with a clunk," the narrator says.

Resurrection is the great theme of *Forgottenness*. Maljartschuk never uses the word, but reading between the lines, we understand that the exhuming of memory is meant to be a miracle. So much militates against it. History, for one, which she compares to the soot that coats an old painting. To restore color and detail—life—to the canvas, there must be a scrubbing, an undoing. Or, you might say, a mopping and a nervous breakdown. A mightier enemy of memory is time itself. "Time consumes everything living by the ton, like a gigantic blue whale consumes microscopic plankton, milling and chewing it into a homogenous mass, so that one life disappears without a trace, giving another, the next life, a chance," the narrator says. "It wasn't the disappearance that grieved me the most, but the tracelessness of it."

That whale, monstrous and deadly, swims through the novel like a biblical leviathan. We and all that we are made up of, "billions of minuscule, almost invisible worlds," the narrator says, begin disappearing into its maw from the moment we're born. Meanwhile the whale endures "in its own whale-space, absolute and immutable, where the need to think about something or remember anything doesn't exist." Maljartschuk doesn't say this outright either, but we understand that the only memories that have a chance of outlasting oblivion are the ones written down.

Maljartschuk was born in 1983, eight years before the fall of the Soviet Union and the liberation of Ukraine. She is one of her country's best-known and most prolific writers, the prizewinning author of several short-story collections and one other novel. She has lived in Vienna since 2011, and also writes in German. When Maljartschuk came of age, at the turn of the millennium, Ukrainians were engaged in [what Milan Kundera called “the struggle of memory against forgetting,”](#) revisiting the history of violence and terror under Russian czars, Soviet Communists, and German Nazis, and rehabilitating characters who were erased from memory when the history of the Ukrainian nation was suppressed.

Viktor Yushchenko, a democratic reformist and the Ukrainian president from 2005 to 2010, [was particularly preoccupied with the Holodomor](#). He embraced the view that it was an attempted genocide and erected Holodomor monuments throughout the country, incorporated it into curricula, and initiated government-sponsored research. And then, in 2010, the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych defeated Yushchenko in a presidential election that had partly turned on Yushchenko's uses of history. The public reckoning with the past came to an end.

Two years before *Forgottenness* was published, [the Maidan Revolution drove Yanukovych out of Ukraine](#); shortly thereafter, Russia invaded the Donbas region, claiming it was Russian. The novel was presumably in process during this fraught period. In her earlier work, Maljartschuk availed herself of satire, absurdism, and fable to depict Ukraine's mutating reality. One of her favorite tropes is having animals stand in for people and vice versa, blurring the lines between bestiary and human society. In her first novel, [A Biography of a Chance Miracle](#) (2012), set during the chaotic, impoverished Ukraine of the 1990s, a town starts paying its residents to round up stray dogs; a young, idealistic protagonist discovers that they're being sold to restaurants and wages a quixotic campaign to save them: "Dogs of the world, unite! We won't let ourselves get eaten!"

[Franklin Foer: It's not 'The' Ukraine](#)

Forgottenness is more rambling than *A Biography of a Chance Miracle*—memoiristic (maybe) and realistic-ish, with a heavy overlay of metaphor. The tone is distraught rather than wry, at times oppressively so. Human

bodies do more of the work of social critique than animal bodies—with the exception of the stupefying bulk of the whale.

The novel weaves together two stories: the narrator's and that of Viacheslav Lypynskyi, who was a political thinker and influential theorist of Ukrainian statehood at the turn of the 20th century. The narrator comes across an obituary of him when she begins taking old newspapers out of the library as part of her mission to revive the past. Three words are splashed in huge type across the front page of a 1931 issue of the Ukrainian American newspaper *Svoboda*, "VIACHESLAV LYPYNSKYI DEAD." Here's an obviously important man she's never heard of. She decides to research his story, because it seems somehow bound up in hers.

The broad outlines of the narrator's account of Lypynskyi's life are factual; Maljartschuk makes up the details and the dialogue. Lypynskyi was an unlikely Ukrainian hero, Ukrainian by choice. He was born in 1882 in the town of Zaturtsi in Volhynia, a region then in the Russian empire (now in western Ukraine) and predominantly populated by Ukrainians (then known as East Slavs). Lypynskyi came from a small elite of wealthy, aristocratic Poles. Maljartschuk imagines how he announced his decision to identify as Ukrainian to his family: at the dinner table, at the age of 19. "Don't call me Wacław. I'm Viacheslav," he says.

In another scene, likely fictional, set in his professor's house near Jagiellonian University, in Kraków, he tells fellow Polish students that he's "a Ukrainian Pole." To his family and friends, the statement makes no sense. Hybrid identity hasn't been conceptualized yet, and anyway, as far as they're concerned, "Ukrainian" is barely an identity; it denotes an illiterate peasant or a "peasant tongue." In czarist Russia, the printing of Ukrainian books is illegal. In Kraków, which is Austro-Hungarian, Ukrainian is tolerated but considered ridiculous. Lypynskyi's professor of Ukrainian has only one outdated high-school grammar book to teach from and must supplement the lessons by reciting poetry and singing folk songs. Antiquated, tradition-bound, "the stateless Ukrainian society increasingly resembled a dust-coated stage set that someone had simply forgotten to strike," the narrator says.

Undaunted, Lypynskyi makes the rebirth of a Ukrainian nation his lifelong cause. In the novel, Polish friends call him a traitor. For a while, he does

little besides study the life and career of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, the leader of the great Cossack revolt against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1648 that led to the establishment of a free Ukrainian state that lasted 100 years. Ukrainians now hail Khmelnytskyi as a founding father, their George Washington. Lypynskyi points out to his critics that Khmelnytskyi was the son of a Polish courtier, therefore also a Ukrainian Pole. (I have to add that, all my life, [I've been aware of a very different Khmelnytskyi](#): the leader whose uprising unleashed the slaughter of perhaps as many as 20,000 Jews. How much blame he deserves is now in dispute, but he is not absolvable. Maljartschuk doesn't mention this Khmelnytskyi; to be fair, Ukrainians almost never do.)

Perhaps to show other Poles from Ukrainian areas how to imagine themselves as Ukrainian Poles, Lypynskyi eventually comes up with what the narrator calls his “best political idea,” territorialism: Citizenship should be determined by residence on a common land, regardless of ancestry, language, politics, or creed. This is true. Territorialism *was* Lypynskyi’s most original contribution to Ukrainian political thought. In a 1925 book not cited in the novel, he explained how his land-based concept of the nation differed from then-prevailing European views that grounded national identity in race. “Such a notion, in our colonial conditions, with periodic migration of peoples on our territory … is a complete absurdity,” Lypynskyi wrote. “There have never been and never will be ‘pure-blooded Ukrainians.’” Today what seems notable is how pro-immigrant he is: “Whoever settled in our country … and became part and parcel of the Ukraine is Ukrainian, regardless of tribe or cultural origin, of ‘racial’ or ‘ideological’ genealogy.”

Lypynskyi is to Maljartschuk what Khmelnytskyi was to Lypynskyi: a prophet and warrior for a better Ukraine. For the rest of his life, in the novel and in reality, Lypynskyi fought bitterly against Ukrainian ethno-nationalists. He also opposed Ukrainian socialists, who considered nation-states reactionary and obsolete. By the mid-1920s, he had lost both battles. The Bolsheviks absorbed the short-lived Ukrainian People’s Republic into the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, a book by Lypynskyi’s nationalist nemesis won a following among Ukraine’s youth. They “would flail between socialist and nationalist ideologies like between the banks of a swift

mountain river onto which few manage to clamber alive,” the narrator says. (The translation, by Zenia Tompkins, can get choppy.)

The portions of the novel devoted to Lypynskyi’s political evolution are straightforward and lively, even inspiring. Lypynskyi is a little pallid, though, compared with the narrator’s grandparents, who tromp through the novel like damaged giants. Bomchyk, the narrator’s paternal grandfather, is a toothless, joyous farmer. The narrator lived with him for a year when she was little, a period she associates with “the happiest times of my life.” Bomchyk weighed 330 pounds when he died. Before he got so fat, he laughed constantly. Now, as an adult, the narrator understands his transmogrification. Bomchyk laughed because he had the gift of being easily amused, but also because he had nothing besides laughter to call his own. He’d handed over whatever the Communists demanded when they established a collective farm in his village; resistance would have meant Siberia or worse. To avoid conscription, he’d played the idiot in front of the recruiters. Friends who melted into the woods to fight the Soviets wanted him to join them, but he pulled a comforter over his head and pretended not to hear them. The friends were shot and their bodies put on display as a warning, and villagers averted their eyes as they went by. Bomchyk’s laughter hid shame and powerlessness, and as life got sadder, he smothered the urge to giggle with food.

In a part of the world left bloody by ethnic wars, dual identity may pit the soul against itself.

Symptoms circulate freely among the narrator and her characters: Zombie history would appear to operate on a principle of mimetic contagion. Right before she tells Bomchyk’s story, she goes through a phase of pathological overeating. This comes in the middle of a longer-lasting phase of agoraphobia, so when she runs out of food, she can’t leave to go shopping. Her parents bring over potato dumplings and cabbage rolls, which she stuffs into her mouth while they watch. “Look, don’t eat so much or you’ll end up like Grandpa Bomchyk,” her father says.

Lypynskyi is more vivid when his psychic crises hijack his body the way the narrator’s problems commandeer hers. He contracts tuberculosis and struggles to breathe, an apt malady for a man squeezed between inimical

identities and mass movements that have no room for nuanced thought. His erotic impulses are bizarre. He meets his future wife under extremely unpropitious circumstances: During a lecture he gives on Ukrainian history, he claims that Polish nobles in Ukraine had fought on the side of the Cossacks during the Khmelnytskyi uprising, rather than for Poland, and a blond Polish student, a woman, stands up and screams, “Shame!” He is chased out of the building—and becomes obsessed with the woman, Kazimiera, whom he ultimately persuades to marry him. The marriage, of course, is a disaster; she can barely read Ukrainian, has no interest in Ukrainian independence, and won’t live with him on the family estate in Ukraine. This fixation on a woman who rejects him so thoroughly is a telling pathology. In a part of the world left bloody by ethnic wars, dual identity may pit the soul against itself.

You can’t rethink the past—your past, a nation’s past—with a radical shift in perspective, and sure enough, angles of vision get very strange in the novel. Drafted into the Russian army at the start of World War I, Lypynskyi narrowly escapes a massacre and ends up in a military hospital with a curious neurological condition. “Every person he encountered appeared to him to have only one eye—right in the middle, at the bridge of the nose,” Maljartschuk writes. “The human world had become a world of Cyclopes.” Shortly after the narrator tells that story, she starts standing on her head so that she can see the world upside down. Her head throbs; noise rings in her ears. “World War I has broken out in my chest,” she tells her fiancé, who thinks she’s gone mad.

The real question is: Is madness the sane response to history? Maljartschuk thwarts the urge for an answer. There turn out to be no denouement and few big revelations. One occurs during the narrator’s visit to Lypynskyi’s family estate, now a museum. The great man was buried in a nearby cemetery, but where is no longer known. The Soviets turned the property into a collective farm, and the cemetery was razed and the gravestones used for flooring. Afterward, the narrator waits for a bus that never comes, and she weeps. Too many bones have been bulldozed, too much memory excised. The dead will never be raised. We who walk unaware over their now-unmarked graves will never realize that life in their absence is a lusterless shadow of what it could have been, “just a branch growing green on a withered tree.”

And yet the novel itself pushes back against despair, simply by virtue of existing. Which means that Maljartschuk exists. She could so easily not have been born. What do we owe the ancestors who survived, notwithstanding ignominy and torment? Just that. To survive. Every single one of them had to survive for the line of descent to arrive at us, and now we must too. And maybe record a memory or two. “Through the generations, considerable interest had accrued,” the narrator says. “Little by little, I had to start paying off my debts.”

Maljartschuk’s repayment is a novel, haunted and haunting, that is disorienting and less than perfect but does what it has to do: It’s memorable. I worry, though, that she might not be doing much debt-paying at the moment. Two months after Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, [she told the German public-broadcasting company Deutsche Welle](#) that she could no longer imagine writing poetry or fiction. Though she lives in Austria, far from the front, she said she felt “as if Russian tanks were attacking my body, my organs, my heart, my kidneys.” Watching that interview, I thought of the whale. Toward the end of *Forgottenness*, Maljartschuk has her narrator say, “I can hear how the gigantic blue whale is slapping its tail against the surface of the sea somewhere not too far away. Very soon, it will open its mouth and begin to suck in everything and everyone.” Far be it from me to deny the leviathan its status as the cosmic principle of death and destruction, but, I thought, it might also be Putin’s Russia.

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The Rise and Fall of the ‘IBM Way’

What the tech pioneer can, and can’t, teach us

by Deborah Cohen



IBM is one of the oldest technology companies in the world, with a raft of innovations to its credit, including mainframe computing, computer-programming languages, and AI-powered tools. But ask an ordinary person under the age of 40 what exactly IBM does (or did), and the responses will

be vague at best. “Something to do with computers, right?” was the best the Gen Zers I queried could come up with. If a Millennial knows anything about IBM, [it’s Watson](#), the company’s prototype AI system that prevailed on *Jeopardy* in 2011.

In the chronicles of garage entrepreneurship, however, IBM retains a legendary place—[as a flat-footed behemoth](#). In 1980, bruised by nearly 13 years of antitrust litigation, its executives made the colossal error of permitting the 25-year-old Bill Gates, a co-founder of a company with several dozen employees, to retain the rights to the operating system that IBM had subcontracted with him to develop for its then-secret personal-computer project. That mistake was the making of Microsoft. By January 1993, Gates’s company was valued at \$27 billion, briefly taking the lead over IBM, which that year posted some of the largest losses in American corporate history.

But [The Greatest Capitalist Who Ever Lived](#), a briskly told biography of Thomas J. Watson Jr., IBM’s mid-20th-century CEO, makes clear that [the history of the company](#) offers much more than an object lesson about complacent Goliaths. As the book’s co-authors, Watson’s grandson Ralph Watson McElvenny and Marc Wortman, emphasize, IBM was remarkably prescient in making the leap from mechanical to electronic technologies, helping usher in the digital age. Among large corporations, it was unusually entrepreneurial, focused on new frontiers. Its anachronisms were striking too. Decades after most big American firms had embraced control by professional, salaried managers, IBM remained [a family-run company](#), fueled by loyalty as well as plenty of tension. (What family isn’t?) Its bosses were frequently at odds. Meanwhile, it served its customers with fanatical attentiveness, and, starting in the Depression, [promised its workers lifetime employment](#). “Have respect for the individual” was IBM’s creed.

Today, as we hurtle toward a future in which AI threatens to obliterate the individual both as employee and creator, much of the IBM story reads like a tale from a faraway world. The company’s technological accomplishments are still recognizable as the forerunners of the digital era, yet its culture of social responsibility—a focus on employees rather than shareholders, restraint in executive compensation, and investment in anti-poverty programs—proved a dead end. A mashup of progressivism and paternalism,

communalism and cutthroat competition, the once ballyhooed “IBM Way” was, for better and worse, inextricably intertwined with the family at the top.

For most of its history, and especially from the First World War through the 1970s, IBM’s business was making business run more efficiently. During the late 19th century, the development of railways, the telegraph, and electricity created the conditions for a significant expansion in the scale and scope of American firms. As companies produced and distributed goods to middlemen and consumers, they had to deal with ever more complex logistics. Firms required new ways of tabulating, storing, and recalling information. Enter the typewriter (patented in 1868), the cash register (1883), and the adding machine (1888).

At the apex of this information-machine ecosystem was the firm National Cash Register, which was where Thomas J. Watson Sr., born in 1874 and raised on a farm near Painted Post, New York, served a 17-year apprenticeship. At NCR, Watson found his calling as a salesman. At the behest of NCR’s dictatorial boss, he also ran a shady scheme to undersell secondhand-cash-register vendors to drive them out of the market. He was indicted for restraint of trade and then, deepening the humiliation, forced out at NCR. By the time Watson landed on his feet as the new general manager of the New York-based Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company in 1914, he was 40 years old and newly married with an infant son, Tom Jr.

Watson soon renamed the company International Business Machines Corporation, a much more fitting description of his global ambitions. IBM’s embrace of punch-card technology, the state-of-the-art method for aggregating information, was his doing. So was the creation of an evangelical company culture, equal parts moral uplift, corporate paternalism, and personality cult. Inscribed on the company’s walls were Watson’s favorite slogans: “A company is known by the men it keeps.” “Spend a lot of time making customers happy.” And “THINK,” a dictum that to Watson (as the business historian Richard S. Tedlow has observed) likely meant “Think like me.”

If these injunctions call to mind “Don’t be evil” (Google’s former mantra) or “Do the right thing” (the current Alphabet slogan), those are the hollow echoes of what was at IBM an all-encompassing credo, anchored by the

promise of a permanent job. Attached to IBM plants were [IBM country clubs](#), which served dinner three nights a week. When Watson and his wife traveled to visit IBM offices in other cities, they attended meticulously planned employee “family dinners.” IBM men were clean-shaven and wore the regimental attire: dark suits, starched white shirts, and ties. Alcohol was forbidden at company events.

With the optimism of a true believer, Watson Sr. boldly expanded the business during the Great Depression, stockpiling tabulators, adding to the sales force, introducing the lifetime-employment guarantee. A Democrat and (unusual for a corporate executive) a supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he was perfectly placed to furnish the machines necessary [to implement the Social Security Act](#) when it passed in 1935. By the late 1930s, IBM was the dominant player in data processing.

Young Tom had a front-row seat to both his father’s formidable ambitions and his vanities, including his 20,000-plus-square-foot mansion in Manhattan and the appreciative letters from FDR he carried in his pocket. But even by the free-and-easy standards applied to well-heeled young men of the time, he was an underachiever. He got into mischief and flunked his classes; he spent weeks in bed suffering from bouts of depression. Despite his father’s money, Princeton refused to admit him: The director of admissions told Watson Sr. that his son was “a predetermined failure.”

Indeed, without the Second World War, what would Tom Watson Jr. have been? A flying enthusiast, in May 1940 he joined the Army National Guard. Major General Follett Bradley, the commander of the First Air Force, made him his personal pilot. During the war, Watson kept a diary for the first time, as if—at age 28—his life was just beginning. After the war, he returned to IBM at Bradley’s suggestion. His father was pleased. As Watson Sr. liked to say, nepotism was “good for business”: In a company run like a family, he encouraged the employment of fathers and sons, and expected that his own sons, Tom and his younger brother, Dick, would one day head IBM. But Tom was stifled by his father’s rule, disgusted by the sycophants he thought his style of management encouraged.

Their fights were frequent, titanic, and brazen—and often conducted in plain view of IBM employees: “God damn you, old man! Can’t you ever leave me

alone?” They agreed on IBM’s guaranteed lifetime employment, the importance of customer service, the need for a CEO to have an open-door policy, and the danger of complacency. Like his father, Tom Watson Jr. was a political liberal; he refused to permit racial segregation in IBM’s southern plants and opposed [Senator Joseph McCarthy’s witch hunts](#). But they disagreed about nearly everything else, not least the direction of IBM’s core business.

Watson Sr. forbade the term *computer*, worrying that it would antagonize people who feared that these novel machines would replace workers. Curious as he was about the new “thinking machines,” he didn’t see the point of electronic speed, figuring that few companies would need it. They certainly weren’t business equipment. Tom, by contrast, was beginning to grasp their significance.

By the early 1950s, the father, now in his 70s, started to withdraw from day-to-day management, naming his older son as president of IBM in 1952. Watson Sr. had cultivated a patriarchal style, with 38 managers reporting directly to him. His son introduced an IBM organization chart, and the company’s managers started to take down the photographs of Watson Sr. that had once decorated every sales branch’s showroom. More important, he moved IBM decisively into computers; in 1952, the company opened a campus in San Jose, Silicon Valley’s first computer factory and corporate-research facility.

The company’s growth was extraordinary, and so was Watson Jr.’s risk-taking. In the early 1960s, he made a bet-the-company gamble on the decision to produce a fully compatible line of computers, [the System/360](#). At that point, IBM was producing seven entirely separate systems with different levels of computing power. Each had a distinct internal architecture, so migrating data from one computer line to another was often impossible. Clients that wanted to upgrade their computers would effectively have to start from scratch. And IBM itself was saddled with inefficiencies in production, including 2,500 distinct types of circuit boards.

The System/360 has been described as one of the greatest product innovations in 20th-century American history, next to the Ford Model T. Achieving compatibility across a wide array of processors was an

engineering nightmare, requiring millions and millions of lines of code. IBM's investment was equivalent to \$50 billion today, more than twice the cost of [the Manhattan Project](#). The new computer made every one of the company's other lines obsolete, meaning that if the System/360 didn't work as anticipated, IBM stood to lose its clientele to other firms.

When the System/360 line finally shipped after many reversals, including problems in both the engineering and manufacture, it proved an instant success. From 1964 to 1970, IBM added almost 120,000 new employees (for a total workforce of 269,000), and its revenues more than doubled, from \$3.2 billion to \$7.5 billion, unprecedented growth for a major corporation. Saying "let's not be piggish," Watson Jr. had stopped taking his stock options, worth five times his annual salary, in 1958.

As the economist Theodore Levitt famously argued in 1960, businesses that bank on particular products, even very successful ones, are courting obsolescence. Hollywood's moguls failed to see that their business wasn't movies but entertainment; they let television, the greatest opportunity of the era, slip from their grasp. Watson Sr. thought he was in the tabulator-and-punch-card business. Watson Jr. [understood that IBM's actual business was information](#).

Why IBM made the shift from mechanical to electronic modes of data processing has presented something of a puzzle for scholars. The leap into the unknown, as James W. Cortada deftly explains in his recent history of the company, [IBM: The Rise and Fall and Reinvention of a Global Icon](#), owed much to the ways in which the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and especially the Korean War, supercharged the federal funding available to private R&D efforts. The company's engineers, too, played a key role, initially in pressuring management to see the promise of the new technology, then in transforming complex computing systems into commercially viable products. IBM's customers began to demand the new machines. Still, it could easily have been otherwise. Despite a technological head start in computers, Remington Rand, IBM's major competitor in the tabulator industry, chose to focus on electric razors, typewriters, and office furniture.

The Greatest Capitalist Who Ever Lived, as is inevitably the case with biographies, puts the emphasis on individuals—Thomas Watson Jr.,

specifically, as well as the IBM executives who at various points served as his consiglieri, soothsayers, and foes. As Watson Jr.'s grandson, McElvenny offers an insider's assessment of familial dynamics, drawn from interviews and private papers. Most notable, the authors go further than most scholars have in portraying the son's embrace of computers as a repudiation of his father. The resentment, they explain, was mutual: When Watson Jr. [appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1955](#), a marketing triumph for the company, the old man didn't say a word. The rivalry between them continued to spur Watson Jr. on, even after his father died the next year.

In a sense, Watson Jr. was founding a new company when he took over IBM, and the need to prove himself meant that he ran the firm like an entrepreneur rather than an heir. Instead of surrounding himself with yes-men, he preferred, he wrote, "sharp, scratchy, harsh, almost unpleasant guys who could see and tell me about things as they really were." He established a system of "contention management" that required executives and their subordinates to fight out disagreements in front of the corporate management committee. The guarantee of lifetime employment was supposed to encourage responsible risk-taking and make the inherent friction within the hierarchy productive for the company. As Richard Tedlow has observed, Watson Jr. wanted the dynamic he had with his father to "metastasize" throughout IBM.

As profitable as this Oedipal conflict may have been for IBM's bottom line, it was near disastrous for the Watsons. In McElvenny and Wortman's apt description, they were "the Kennedys of the corporate world," complete with yacht racing, extramarital affairs, ski weekends with the actual Kennedys, and psychological breakdowns. The story of the System/360 was also the undoing of Dick, Tom Watson Jr.'s younger brother. Dick Watson was a much less rebellious character than Tom; he'd even permitted his father to accompany him and his bride on their honeymoon. As young men, the brothers had been close, and Dick was able to cajole a depressed Tom out of bed when no one else could. Dick had been running IBM's worldwide operations very successfully; Tom wanted his brother to follow him as CEO.

But Tom's decision to put Dick in charge of the manufacturing and engineering of the System/360, and to task his rival for the CEO position, T. Vincent Learson, with selling the line, backfired badly. As production delays

mounted, Dick stopped coming to work; rumor had it that he was drinking too much. The brothers barely talked to each other, and after Tom effectively fired Dick, the estrangement was complete. In 1970, at age 56, Tom had a major heart attack and soon resigned as CEO; he formally retired from IBM in 1974. Later that year, [Dick died at 55 from a fall](#) down the stairs at home.

Tom Watson Jr. was in the Soviet Union, [serving as President Jimmy Carter's ambassador](#) there, when IBM's executives made the disastrous deal with Bill Gates. Watson wrote an unusually frank memoir, [Father, Son & Co.](#), which in 1990 spent 14 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. By that time, IBM—"my company," he still called it—was a wounded giant. Overinvested in the mainframe business during the 1980s, Watson's successors failed to capitalize on the PC and its software, forfeiting a huge consumer market. As [IBM's fortunes sank in the early '90s](#), Watson Jr. would wake up crying at night. He [died in 1993](#) after a stroke.

Lou Gerstner, the executive who took on the job of rescuing IBM that same year, was respectful about the Watsons' leadership. But in [his own memoir](#), he left no doubt about the damage their six-decade reign had caused. The contention-management system had failed: The bad feeling it created led to a habitual avoidance of conflict rather than a frank airing of alternatives. The lifetime guarantee of employment had ossified into an entitlement, and [Gerstner insisted on its formal end](#).

Nearly two years into Gerstner's tenure at IBM, nearly half of the employees who had been on the company's payroll in 1987 were gone. The old Watsonian culture barely survived as a memory. IBM has been [sued multiple times](#) in the past decade for firing workers over the age of 40. (The company has said that it "never engaged in systemic age discrimination.")

Maybe humans won't matter much longer anyway. Last spring, IBM [debuted its new AI product, watsonx](#), which has been lauded as the company's most valuable innovation in years. It can streamline HR operations, [provide tennis commentary at Wimbledon](#), and much more—a creation with the potential to accelerate automation in unprecedented ways.

Watson Sr. had always been more concerned than his son about the possibility that machines could take the place of humans. At the same time,

in his mind, IBM had never been merely a company. “IBM,” he once proclaimed, “is not merely an organization of men; it is an institution that will go on forever.” Preserving its soul, in his view, was crucial. That relinquishing its humanity might in fact turn out to be the secret to eternal life would surely have stunned both father and son.

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Camille Claudel's 'Revolt Against Nature'

In a new exhibition, the sculptor escapes the shadow of her mentor Rodin, and claims a place as one of the finest artists of her era.

by Farah Peterson



“Crouching Woman” (c. 1884–85), by Camille Claudel (Musée Camille Claudel / Marco Illuminati)

In 1892, the French sculptor Camille Claudel [applied to France's Ministry of Fine Arts for a block of marble](#). As was customary, the ministry sent an inspector to decide whether her planned work was worth the state's support. Her plaster model, showing two nude figures waltzing, was a "virtuoso performance," the official wrote. Not even Auguste Rodin, Claudel's mentor, could "have studied with more artistic finesse and consciousness the quivering life of muscles and skin." But although the ministry commissioned equally sensual works from Rodin in that era, it refused to support one by a female artist. In Claudel's composition, the "closeness of the sexual organs" went too far.

Claudel spent months on a version that veiled the female figure. The resulting bronze, [The Waltz](#), was a triumph—an ethereal work of romance, air, and sweeping movement. The composer Claude Debussy, a friend of Claudel's, acquired a plaster version and kept it near him. *The Waltz* became her most celebrated work, produced in many different iterations, several of which are gathered in [a new exhibit of Claudel's work](#), which opened at the Art Institute of Chicago in October and will move on to the J. Paul Getty Museum, in Los Angeles, in April. But Claudel never did get the marble she had applied for.

Claudel bent every effort to make a name for herself, undeterred by the restrictive mores of her time. Though she won acclaim at the height of her brief career, her reputation faded in the decades after her death. Despite renewed interest in Claudel's work in the 1980s, her tumultuous life story and Rodin's role in it [tended to deflect attention from her art](#), particularly in the United States. "Her best pieces," H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson wrote in their canonical *History of Art*, "might pass for his." But Claudel's oeuvre, especially its sensitive and moving evocation of women's interior lives, is not so easily dismissed. The new show presses the argument that Claudel ranks among the greatest French sculptors of the 19th century.

Gathering dozens of pieces in terra-cotta, plaster, bronze, and stone, the exhibit spurs reflection not just on Claudel's singular talent, but on the extraordinary determination that her successes required. When Rodin pressured her to become his mistress, she demanded he support her career. When she became pregnant during their relationship, she had an abortion,

not a safe or easy undertaking. In the years after their partnership ended, Claudel created some of her most compelling work.

[From the December 2016 issue: Sarah Boxer on an era for women artists](#)

Yet Claudel remained dependent—for patronage, for materials, and eventually for her freedom itself—on the men in her life. Prompted by her erratic behavior, Claudel’s family, led by her brother, Paul, committed her to an asylum at age 48. There she stayed, long after her doctors urged her release, until her death 30 years later, in 1943. This was a penance, her conservative-Catholic brother would write, for the abortion. She never sculpted again. The exhibition leaves us wondering what else she might have shown us had she been allowed to pursue her vision.

Claudel’s talent was already evident by the time she entered Rodin’s studio, around 1884. “Right away,” recalled Mathias Morhardt, a critic who closely followed her career, Rodin “became, not a teacher, but rather a brother of the young artist who was later to become his loyal and intelligent young collaborator.” Rodin consulted Claudel “about everything,” deliberating “each decision” with her and proceeding “only after they [were] in agreement.” Walking through the exhibit’s rooms, one can easily see why.

The show opens with some of Claudel’s earliest work—pieces Rodin may well have seen on their first meeting in 1882, when she was a 17-year-old art student and he was 41 and starting to enjoy commercial success. Here we encounter *Young Roman*, Claudel’s tender portrait of Paul, the brother who would become her jailer. Already showing her sense of aesthetic play, Claudel flattened her brother’s brow and broadened the planes of his cheeks to better imitate the Roman ideal, while maintaining the idiosyncratic details of his face—the slight twist to his bottom lip, his elongated earlobes, his abstracted gaze. To complete the classical illusion, she even painted the plaster version in the exhibit, a recent Art Institute acquisition, to mimic the patina of an ancient bronze found at sea, with algal blooms of green and yellow where it might have rested at the bottom of the Adriatic.

Though *Young Roman* and other works of this period show Claudel’s potential, her rise as an artist was hardly a given. Early feminist ideas had begun to circulate in cafés, lecture halls, and even the popular press. But

many in France regarded ambition like Claudel's with suspicion. To bureaucrats responsible for doling out ever-vital state support for sculpture, a woman in the male-dominated art was an interloper. The invitation to work in Rodin's studio, then, was not just a learning opportunity. It was a lifeline that offered Claudel access to the expensive materials and large-scale commissions she needed in order to establish herself as an artist.

Claudel's *Crouching Woman* curls into herself. Her clasped hands cross her head, covering her face in a gesture of self-protection and self-effacement.

Her precarious position cannot have been far from Claudel's mind when, not long after she started working for him, Rodin began to pursue her relentlessly. They soon became lovers, but Claudel seems to have set certain terms. In a document that survives among his papers, Rodin agreed to promote Claudel's work among his influential friends, to pay for her to be professionally photographed, and to turn away his other students, "to avoid," he wrote, any "risk of rival talents, though it's unlikely one would encounter anyone so naturally gifted." In return, she would let him visit her studio four times a month and live with him for certain parts of the year. They never married. Rodin would never make up his mind to sever ties with his other lover, Rose Beuret, with whom he shared a son. But the sculptors' creative and romantic alliance held for about a decade.

The exhibit's treatment of Claudel's years in Rodin's studio reveals at once the depth of their artistic collaboration and the emergence of Claudel's vision. Though her style is sometimes dismissed as an imitation of his, the show's curators, Emerson Bowyer and Anne-Lise Desmas, demonstrate convincingly that the borrowing and influence went in both directions. An eloquent bronze hand by Claudel evokes Rodin's well-known preoccupation with that subject. It may even seem derivative—until one considers that Claudel fashioned so many of the hands and feet of Rodin's sculptures that she complained those labors left her little time for her own work. Elsewhere, Claudel's terra-cotta figure Young Girl With a Sheaf is shown alongside Rodin's celebrated marble Galatea. The close resemblance between the two works confirms Rodin's influence. But Claudel's *Girl* is no copy; her sculpture preceded his.

At the same time, the artists' styles diverged in important ways, and strikingly so in their depiction of women. Compare, for example, their crouching female nudes, so similar in composition and yet so different in final effect. Rodin's *Crouching Woman*, paired in the exhibit with Claudel's later work of the same name, is locked in an unlikely, bestial position. Her neck strains forward with her eyes closed, and her sharply bent knees are spread, thrusting her genitals toward the viewer. Rodin has perhaps captured an idea, but he has not shown us a person. One influential critic nicknamed it "the frog."



Crouching Woman (c. 1880–82), by Auguste Rodin (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Some art historians have made much of the fact that Claudel had Rodin's as an example when she made her own *Crouching Woman*. But a glance at Claudel's nude dispels any notion that it's purely derivative. Claudel's woman curls into herself. Her clasped hands cross her head, covering her face in a gesture of self-protection and self-effacement. The folds of fat in the belly, the arm resting on the knee, the hollow space between armpit and thigh—the realism of the rendering is startling, the pressure of flesh on flesh palpable. “It is impossible to convey the care that went into the sequence of these lines, the choice of these planes, the subtlety of these contours,” Morhardt wrote. “The arms, the back, the stomach, have a suppleness in which life shudders.”

Claudel’s bronze of the same sculpture—made after she and Rodin parted company—distills its power even further. Claudel sheared off the head and arms and one knee, leaving the feet planted on the ground to support the woman’s body, a choice that emphasizes the agonized curve of her back, with its perfectly articulated spine. The viewer may sympathize with the figure depicted in plaster, but she feels that she has *been* the figure portrayed in bronze. And one cannot help but think that this compelling final version drew on Claudel’s own experiences of anguished helplessness within a woman’s body.

Unfortunately, the otherwise comprehensive exhibit doesn’t include *Clotho*, another important example of how sharply Claudel’s vision diverged from Rodin’s. Rodin had earlier used the same elderly female model for *She Who Was Once the Helmet Maker’s Beautiful Wife*, a figure sitting demure and hunched, her head bowed under the viewer’s gaze. Rodin’s figure is an allegory of time, but also its victim. Claudel’s *Clotho* is time’s master.

One of the three Fates, Clotho spins the threads of men’s lives. The wool, its texture like ancient gnarled vines, sits heavy on her head; she lifts the tangled masses with her arm as she steps forward, revealing an expression of calm self-possession. To have crafted Clotho’s pose, Claudel would have had to imagine the intimate darkness under those weighty skeins of yarn. It was this ability to put herself in her subjects’ place, particularly when she depicted women, that gave modern sculpture some of its most provocative early monuments.

First exhibited alongside the sensual *Waltz* at the 1893 Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, *Clotho* showcased Claudel's creative range. Debussy, who so loved *The Waltz*, found *Clotho* unsettling. A critic described *Clotho*'s breasts "drooping like dead eyelids" and her legs made for "terrible, never-ending" strides that "mow down human lives." The sculpture shows that Claudel did not shy away from exploring the female grotesque—that she could find power in grotesquerie. Coming after decades of graceful nymphs, stately ladies, and shapely Grecian goddesses, *Clotho* is exhilarating because of its utter indifference to the male gaze.

Claudel's critical success at the 1893 Salon marked the start of a new chapter in her life. Her place in Rodin's studio had connected her to a network of artists, journalists, and collectors, many of whom became her own enduring supporters, helping her place her sculptures in museums and win commissions and patrons. But by 1892, Claudel had grown resentful of Rodin, and she took steps to end their relationship. She moved into her own studio, determined to prove her independent merit as an artist.

Claudel's serious study of a young girl, *The Little Lady* (in French, *La Petite Châtelaine*), is the first masterpiece of this period. Begun in 1892 and completed in marble in 1895, the bust portrays the taut, upward-looking gaze of a child asked to hold still for an important purpose. Some have suggested that *The Little Lady* is a kind of redemption piece, given the timing of its completion—after her abortion. We cannot know whether Claudel believed she needed redemption. What she did need, however, and what this work provided, was an opportunity to distinguish herself from Rodin.

From the November 1940 issue: Sculptors of today

Though Rodin would pose for photographs with a chisel in hand, he relied on assistants to translate his plaster visions into stone. Claudel could carve, and in successive versions of *The Little Lady*, she shows her virtuosity in marble—changing the hair in one and hollowing another so that light could illuminate the features from within. But *The Little Lady* is not just a technical marvel. Its respect for the reality of girlhood sets the piece apart from many portrayals of young girls in 19th-century sculpture. There is no

trace here of the pubescent figure with noticeable nipples or of the decorative, soft-cheeked cherub.

The same distinctive perspective shines through in *The Chatterboxes*. Here we find something rare in European sculpture of this period: a depiction of platonic female intimacy, not as an excuse to display a breast or a hip for the onlooker, but as women actually experience it. Featured in the exhibit in both white marble and green marble onyx, *The Chatterboxes* shows a group of three women listening with rapt attention to a story told by a fourth. The space between the women's bodies as they lean into one another recalls Claudel's emotive use of interior space in other works—the gap between thigh and arms in the plaster *Crouching Woman*, the dark area under the Fate's skeins in *Clotho*—to create a sense of inner life. In an 1893 letter to her brother sketching her initial idea for the composition, Claudel exclaimed, "You see, it is no longer anything like Rodin."

Age of Maturity, the most ambitious of her projects during this era, provides the visual centerpiece of the exhibit. It shows in one sweep her skill at portraying the human body, creating the sensation of movement, and conveying emotion through small gestures. The three-figure composition portrays a young woman pleading on her knees as a man turns away and walks into an older woman's embrace—an allegory of man leaving youth behind and entering old age. Scholars believe that Rodin, embarrassed by the composition's obvious reference to their relationship, may have used his influence to persuade officials to cut the funding promised to cast the work in bronze. It would be years before Claudel was able to secure private funding for its final casting. The grand and poignant sculpture was so much more than a breakup ballad, however. It finally established, one critic declared, that "we can no longer call Mademoiselle Claudel a student of Rodin; she is a rival."

Even as Claudel attracted acclaim, her talent confounded many of her contemporaries. She was, a prominent critic marveled, "a revolt against nature: a woman genius." Others groped to describe her expressive force—sometimes ending, in bafflement, by calling it "virile" or "male." Rather than giving Claudel her due, many continued to find it easier to attribute her strengths to Rodin's tutelage.

Rodin himself seemed to have deeply mixed feelings about Claudel's emergence as a great sculptor in her own right. "When women have bronze and marble and clay, the stuff of which creation is made," Rodin said of her in his old age, "they find a sculptor a mighty poor lover!" Perhaps he harbored anxiety about her creativity, a part of her that he never could control. Rodin taught that "we must unfreeze sculpture," and that "life is movement." Yet his portrait of Claudel, *Thought*, on view in the exhibit, imprisons her from the chin down in a solid block of marble. Another, *The Farewell*, which Rodin modeled in 1892, shows Claudel's eyes wide and worried, her hands pressed against her lips as though withholding a confession, her features sinking as though drowning in a sea of stone. And although Rodin meant to honor Claudel by including a room devoted to her work in the Musée Rodin, one effect of that decision was to ensure that her artistic legacy would long be subsumed into his.

Rodin's disturbing portraits proved prescient. By the early 1900s, Claudel's mental health had begun to falter. Her father, who had stood out as an unwavering supporter through her artistic struggles and successes, died in 1913. Just eight days later, her remaining family had her committed to the asylum. Even after her health improved, they rebuffed both her entreaties and her doctors' advice to release her, using a legal order of sequestration to deny her all contact with the outside world. "Of the dream that was my life," she wrote, "this is the nightmare." To her brother, this life sentence was punishment for the "crime" of killing "a child ... an immortal soul."

Claudel took every opportunity to develop her skill and to experiment with color, scale, and texture while she remained free to pursue her art. But it is her emotional insight and range, not just the textures she borrowed from nature and her dramatic windswept angles, that truly set her apart. As talented as her male contemporaries, Claudel showed that she had something different to say, important truths to add to our understanding of the human condition. Her contributions, largely eclipsed in the years since her death, have rarely been accorded the respect they receive in this exhibit. The renewed attention is well timed: Claudel's work confronts us with the power and vulnerability of the female body, and her life is a reminder of what is lost when women's choices are wrested from their control.

This article appears in the [January/February 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Rodin’s Rival.”

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‘If Trump Is Reelected, There Will Be No Mark Milley to Stop Him’

Readers respond to our November 2023 cover story and more.



The Patriot

In the November 2023 issue, [Jeffrey Goldberg considered](#) what a general ought to do when the commander in chief undermines the Constitution.

I am a lifelong Republican voter. The Lafayette Square incident described in Jeffrey Goldberg’s article convinced me that any Democrat would be preferable to a second Trump term. The events of January 6 merely

confirmed what Lafayette first suggested—that there are no boundaries Donald Trump will not cross.

General Mark Milley’s willingness to block Trump’s worst impulses puts a very different light on Senator Tommy Tuberville’s ongoing obstruction of military promotions. Perhaps Tuberville’s pro-life pretext is just that, a smoke screen providing a cover to gut the upper echelons of military leadership, such that Trump may have a free hand to load the Pentagon with loyalists if he wins the 2024 election. The first putsch failed. If Trump is reelected, the next one will not; there will be no Milley to stop him.

Steve Mittelstaedt

Ferndale, Wash.

“The Patriot” is a deeply insightful look at how the Constitution sits astride American political power dynamics. General Milley dealt with many complexities when serving as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Trump administration, most notably the challenge of balancing his sense of the obligations of his oath of office and the destructive, ugly fantasies of his commander in chief.

As Milley experienced, the press of time and situation rarely allows for good interpretation of the propriety of an order from someone in your chain of command—but Milley consistently did it exceptionally well. I was an enlisted service member. When I ended my term of duty as an Air Force sentry-dog handler, I was of the opinion that common sense and good moral judgment were likely to be inversely proportional to rank. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve come to accept that those qualities may simply be independent of military rank, as Milley’s tenure demonstrates.

In October 1968, on our last night on post at Tuy Hoa Air Base in Vietnam, my dog, King, and I were patrolling a section of beach adjacent to the South China Sea. At about midnight, my dog and I spotted a sampan about 75 yards offshore. The rule for fishing boats was that they had to be at least 200 meters offshore and have a running light aboard. The sampan was unlit and way too close to shore. I radioed in the sighting to Defense Control. The sergeant on dispatch replied, “Fire two shots over their heads.” My quick

assessment was that those were probably two tired local fishermen who had drifted off course, and not a Vietcong recon team. I radioed back, “Firing a flare.” (When one has a radio or a rifle in one hand, and the leash of an alert 80-pound dog in the other, communications tend to be brief.) The flare signaled that we’d seen the boat and were instructing it not to come any closer. Clearly under surveillance, the people on the boat moved out.

My experience adjusting a military command was trivial compared with what Milley had to deal with during the Trump administration. There can be a risk in bucking orders. But Milley’s example provides a model for how and when to do it.

George Cartter

Vacaville, Calif.

What Mitt Romney Saw in the Senate

Behind closed doors, the hypocrisy and cynicism are even worse than you think, [McKay Coppins wrote](#) in the November 2023 issue.

Thank you for your article on the retirement of Senator Mitt Romney. Without his presence in the Senate, there is one fewer Republican willing to stand up for democratic principles and put the country above party and self-interest. His ethics and principles will be sorely missed in government.

Ken Derow

Swarthmore, Pa.

It is both charming and troubling that someone with Romney’s access and experience is surprised by the venality of his fellow senators and the illusory nature of American democracy.

Robert Scribner

Oakland, Calif.

Though Mitt Romney is correct that the Republicans in office now are a different sort of group than Republicans of the past, it's wrong to say that the change is merely that they've fallen for a "demagogue" who doesn't believe in the Constitution. The shift is far deeper and more insidious than that. Many of today's Republicans have thrown away democratic principles for the acquisition of power. They disguise their betrayal of democracy with flag waving and hide their personal immorality behind Bible thumping; their main concern is satisfying whatever selfish impulse they are experiencing in the moment, regardless of who or what is harmed. This shift predates Donald Trump. His example just gives them permission to be more open about it.

Ginny Oliver

Santa Maria, Calif.



We decided for this month's issue to use our cover as a table of contents, thereby placing the focus squarely on the stories and their authors. The cover as table of contents is a venerable tradition at *The Atlantic*: Our covers were used exclusively in this fashion from July 1905 to November 1947. This particular cover explicitly references the design—the typography, the layout,

and the color—of *The Atlantic* in the late 1930s. Above, the August 1939 issue.

— Peter Mendelsund, *Creative Director*

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Poetry

- [The Wish](#)

The Wish

by Dong Li



once again
of not coming
to know
the strident
sorrows
unfulfilled for
fatherland
of not seeing
loved ones
their remains
drifted
in the far earth
of saying father
father and to be

heard
in this benign
beginning
a gray sky
a fleet
of nonbirds
of faces
of inaudible
singsongs
not a word
unrecognizable
atoned in this
despicable pit
of a large burning
once and for all
again a face
your face
flies
into nothing
the wish
never to be
in-
visible

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