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# TIME

## HER COMEBACK

LINDSEY VONN SEEKS OLYMPIC GLORY ONCE AGAIN

by SEAN GREGORY

# TIME Magazine

[November 24th, 2025]

- [Articles](#)

# Articles

- [Inside Lindsey Vonn's Unprecedented Attempt at an Olympic Comeback](#)
- [Computer Chips in Our Bodies Could Be the Future of Medicine. These Patients Are Already There](#)
- [Exclusive: How Democrats Plan to Capitalize on This Week's 'Blue Sweep' in the 2026 Midterms](#)
- ['Blood On the Sand': Thousands Missing As Militia Accused of Massacres During Capture of Key City in Sudan](#)
- [Is the NFL Safer Than High School Football?](#)
- [Dick Cheney Was the Most Powerful—and Polarizing—Vice President in U.S. History](#)
- [Wikipedia Co-founder Jimmy Wales on Rebuilding Trust Online and Off](#)
- [9 Phrases That Drive Your Therapist Up a Wall](#)
- [We Need a Global Movement to Prohibit Superintelligent AI](#)
- [Trump Wants Venezuela's Maduro Out. Will He Pull the Trigger?](#)
- [As Shutdown Fight Hits SNAP Aid and Obamacare, Trump States Set to Pay Bigger Price](#)
- [Climate Inaction is Leading to Millions of Deaths Each Year](#)

- [Why We All Need Emotion Regulation](#)
- [London Mayor Sadiq Khan: Zohran Mamdani's Win Is a Victory for Hope](#)
- [The Tragedy of Eric Adams](#)
- [Vince Gilligan Is Breaking Good](#)
- [George Clooney Is Quietly Touching in Noah Baumbach's Jay Kelly](#)
- [Rachel Sennott's I Love LA Can't Decide If It's Spoofing Superficiality or Just Shallow](#)
- [A New Zodiac Killer Documentary Challenges Everything We Think We Know About True Crime](#)
- [Bess Wohl on Feminism, Nudity, and Time Travel in Her New Broadway Play](#)

# Inside Lindsey Vonn's Unprecedented Attempt at an Olympic Comeback

Gregory is a senior sports correspondent at TIME. His work has been cited in the annual Best American Sports Writing anthology nine times. His stories have won awards from the U.S. Basketball Writers Association and the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, and his work was named a finalist for Deadline Club and Mirror awards for excellence in magazine writing and reporting on media, respectively.



## The Brief October 28, 2025

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Lindsey Vonn lifts her middle finger in the Southern California sun. Vonn, the Olympic gold medal skier, all-time leader in World Cup downhill wins, and rare figure in her sport whose talent, charisma, and celebrity have transcended the snow-covered slopes, is hiking a canyon near her Beverly Hills home. Not so long ago, this might have seemed unfathomable, as she struggled with not just standard wear and tear that comes from decades of competing at a professional level but swelling and pain caused by numerous crashes while flying down mountains. Since her partial knee-replacement surgery in the spring of 2024, however, Vonn, 41, has felt like a new person.

The gesture, though, is not just one of defiance as she walks briskly on the somewhat hilly terrain. It's a message to her detractors.

When Vonn launched a surprise comeback last year, after having been retired from the tour for five seasons, many fans cheered her return. But critics made themselves heard as well. They suggested her decision—and goal of earning a spot atop the podium in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, at the 2026 Olympics—revealed an unfulfilling life and wondered why she'd even try such a thing at her age.

Vonn was undeterred. Besides the faith she had in her newly restored knee and her unflagging work ethic, she had planted a little pep talk for herself years earlier. Before her last Olympics, [in 2018 in PyeongChang](#), she got a tattoo on the middle finger of her right hand that reads πιστεύω, which means “believe” in Greek, the language of the birthplace of the Olympic Games. “Believing in myself has always been so important,” says Vonn. “Now it has probably never rang more true.” And so as she directs the digit at her doubters, with an impish grin, she displays the word in all its glory. Then, for good measure, she does it again.



As the world's best winter athletes gather in February for a celebration of speed, acrobatics, and artistry on snow and ice, Vonn's attempt to earn another Olympic medal will likely be the buzziest story of the Games. During her illustrious career, Vonn, a Minnesota native who learned to ski on a tiny hill south of the Twin Cities, won a record-tying 20 World Cup crystal globes, awarded annually to the best performer in the various disciplines of skiing (downhill, slalom, etc.), plus the best all-around performer. She earned gold and bronze medals at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, becoming the [first U.S. woman to win gold in downhill](#), and her campaign to [ski against men](#), which the sport's bigwigs denied, drove considerable attention. Before injuries got the best of her, she was on pace to pass the mark for all-time World Cup victories: 86, set by Ingemar Stenmark of Sweden. Instead, Vonn won 82 times, and American [Mikaela Shiffrin](#) has since set a new record, with 101 and counting.

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Vonn's bionic quest will do nothing less than test the boundaries of human capabilities. No ski racer, male or female, has ever returned to the top level with titanium implanted onto the sport's central piece of hardware. With another Olympic medal, she'd shatter the previous record for the [oldest female alpine Olympic medalist](#): 33, Lindsey Vonn, in [PyeongChang](#).

Advances in sports science have allowed a host of high-profile male athletes to extend their greatness into middle age: [Tom Brady](#) winning a Super Bowl at 43; [Tiger Woods](#), whom Vonn dated for nearly three years in the 2010s, victorious at the Masters at the same age; [LeBron James](#) still making all-NBA teams at 40. Female examples, Vonn notes, are harder to find.

Since retiring from skiing in 2019, Vonn has faced tribulations that made her arrival at this moment even more remarkable. And after some disappointing results in her 2024–2025 comeback season that left her questioning the efficacy of her endeavor, a second-place finish at the World Cup Finals in Sun Valley, Idaho, in March gave her momentum going into her upcoming campaign, which starts Dec. 12 in St. Moritz, Switzerland. That performance, plus a full offseason dedicated to rigorous strength workouts, has boosted her confidence. “I am *not* a long shot,” says Vonn during an expansive pre-hike conversation on her living-room couch. “I am back in the game.”



**Some 48 hours after** what she thought would be her final ski race, a bronze-medal downhill run at the 2019 World Championships in Are, Sweden, Vonn woke up in Nashville, where her boyfriend at the time, P.K. Subban, was playing for the NHL's Predators. She called her agents, antsy, asking them to book something, anything, for her to do. They laughed. "The postcompetition chill out," says Mark Ervin, one of her reps, "did not last very long."

Vonn had first put on a pair of skis at age 3 and competed in her first race at 7. Without skiing, she struggled to find her identity. "I felt a pretty big hole," she says. "You don't want to get out of bed and you've got no drive." She'd felt depressed after prior ski injuries, especially the ACL tear during a November 2013 training crash that ultimately kept her out of the Sochi Olympics. Back then, however, she could at least look forward to returning to the mountain. "It was the one thing that really made me happy," says Vonn. "When I retired, that first year was like, 'How do I get out of this funk? What is going to make me feel like I have a purpose?'"

It didn't help that her personal life was also undergoing upheaval. Vonn and Subban, who got engaged in August 2019, split in December 2020. "I don't want to get too into the weeds on it," says Vonn, "but I'm not the kind of person that is going to stay home and not work." (Subban declined to comment.)



Vonn's friends have called her "the most confident unconfident person" they know, and her new therapist, Armando Gonzalez, would spend days with her in her homes in Beverly Hills and Park City, Utah, talking through Vonn's adjustment to her new life. "It's reckoning with some of these limiting self-beliefs that I would call lies," says Gonzalez, who spoke with TIME with Vonn's permission. "When you get to the root of them, they were plaguing her and limiting her in a lot of areas. She would need to remove them."

Her retirement funk gradually faded. Vonn co-directed a documentary about U.S. Olympic ski champion [Picabo Street](#), her childhood idol and later mentor. She wrote a [memoir](#), launched a skiwear line with longtime sponsor

Head, and invested in a pair of National Women's Soccer League franchises. Vonn put more energy into her foundation, which over the past decade has awarded more than \$1 million in scholarships for girls who show both athletic and academic promise. "I definitely have grown a lot since I retired," she says.

Vonn also drew strength from her mother Linda Krohn, who had a stroke while giving birth to her in 1984. (Vonn gained a younger sister in 1986 and three more siblings, triplets, in 1992; Krohn and Vonn's father Alan Kildow split in 2003. The last name Vonn is a remnant of a marriage that ended in 2013.) In the summer of 2021, Krohn, who already had limited mobility from the stroke, was diagnosed with ALS. "It was full meltdown," says Vonn. But even with the additional burden of this new diagnosis, Krohn stayed upbeat. Someone told her that when she couldn't lift her arms above her head, she was nearing the end. So she'd raise her hands and declare it another great day. "One thing that my mom's really given me is the ability to pick myself back up," says Vonn. "That's what she did her whole life, and I'll never stop doing that." Krohn died in August 2022.

[video id=WBa2khIE autostart="viewable"]

Still, mental fortitude could not erase the reality: Vonn's body was breaking down. Upon retiring, Vonn says, "I didn't really factor in the unfortunate part of not having a full-time physio. Like, 'Sh-t, everything hurts. Who's here to fix me?'" After two ACL tears, an MCL tear, shinbone fractures, and nine knee surgeries, she couldn't complete a flat hike with a friend and the friend's two kids. Even Vonn's dogs looked at her askance. "They were like, 'Why are we stopping?'" To take pressure off her knee, she'd elevate it on a chair at galas, on the dashboard while in a passenger seat. Kildow, a former competitive ski racer, felt guilty about introducing his daughter to the sport. "She's going to have a physical deficit for life," says Kildow. "And that really bothered me a lot."

Vonn walked with a limp, which contorted her body in a way that put stress on other areas, like her hips and ribs. "I was like, 'I just can't do this,'" says Vonn. "I can't keep managing my body in this way. It's not sustainable in any way."

She connected with Dr. Martin Roche, a South Florida-based surgeon, who recommended a robotic-assisted partial replacement for Vonn's right knee. Vonn's major pathology was cartilage loss on her lateral, or outer, side. A minimally invasive procedure would keep her ACL, her medial meniscus and the cartilage on the inner part of her knee intact. This would aid her postsurgery proprioception, or "sixth sense" ability to be aware of the movement and location of her knee joint for improved stability and balance.

Through a CAT scan, Roche built a virtual 3D model of Vonn's damaged knee. Before the April 2024 surgery, he used it to size the titanium implant. In the operating room, Roche guided the robotic arm that removes damaged bone and cartilage. "It's almost coloring within the lines," he says. "I can get down to millimeter precision." He didn't touch any muscle, ligaments, or tendons. "Recovery is much faster because we haven't traumatized or damaged any soft tissue," he says.

But no one—not even Roche—expected Vonn to bounce back as quickly as she did. She could fully extend her knee. She was back in high heels within a month. "Every day," says Vonn, "it was becoming more and more clear that this was different." She played tennis, on a hard court, with her ski coach, Patrick Riml. "She's running around like a 15-year-old, going after every single ball," says Riml. "I'm like, 'Holy cow.'" Vonn sent Roche a video of herself doing a single-leg jump onto a box, something she hadn't been able to do in years. Roche calls this his aha moment: he would sign off on any ski comeback, confident that Vonn's implant could withstand even the downhill's twists and g-forces.

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**The ski bug had** never left Vonn. Doing NBC commentary for the 2022 Beijing Olympics was difficult. "Everyone is texting me, 'You would have crushed this course,'" says Vonn. "And I'm like, 'Can you please not say that? This is not helping.'" Before her knee replacement, a return was out of the question. But in June 2024, after another robust weight-lifting session, she informed her agents of her plan to return to the mountain for a few training sessions, with the potential to launch a full comeback targeting the Olympics. After a moment of stunned silence, they were on board.

Fear wouldn't be a factor. As part of their therapy, Gonzalez insisted that he and Vonn spend an afternoon rewatching her worst accidents, so she could release them from her subconscious. Vonn told him this exercise wasn't necessary. "I'm like a goldfish," she says. "You have to have a three-second memory." They viewed the crashes anyway: Vonn broke them down as if they were routine football plays. "She has a superhuman ability," says Gonzalez, "to disassociate from pain."





“I’ve got a few circuits missing,” says Vonn, in a less clinical assessment. “I love what I do. I love going fast. I don’t think that will ever change.”

In July 2024, Vonn was waking up at 3:30 a.m. every morning to ski a glacier in Austria. “Seeing her up there, pretty much in the middle of the night with the sun coming up, the smile on her face, the look in her eye, it’s like, ‘This is what she wants,’” says Riml. In New Zealand, she trained super-G with top Kiwi racer Alice Robinson and nearly matched her times while skiing in a vest and shorts. (Robinson, Vonn says, was wearing a more aerodynamic racing suit.) Word spread that Vonn was toying with a return. Norwegian skiing star Aksel Lund Svindal, the two-time Olympic gold medalist whom Vonn recently added to her coaching team, texted her about her plans. Vonn usually responds to Svindal right away. This time, she went silent. “I caught onto her,” says Svindal. “Yup, she’s definitely considering a comeback.”

Vonn dreaded calling her father. She figured he’d chew her out for putting her finally healthy knee at risk. So she sent him a formal email. When they did connect on the phone, Kildow told her he knew how much she loved skiing in Cortina—it was the site of her first World Cup podium, almost 22 years ago—and that she deserved another shot at the Olympics. And, he added, even if he had disagreed with her decision, his hardheaded daughter wasn’t going to listen to him anyway.

The call went well. Perhaps too well. “I was like, ‘Aren’t you going to be a little concerned with my health?’” says Vonn.

After Vonn publicly announced in November 2024 that she was returning to World Cup skiing, a few of the sport’s prominent voices questioned her motives. “She should see a psychologist,” said two-time Olympic champion Michaela Dorfmeister of Austria. “Does she want to kill herself?” The downhill great Franz Klammer, also of Austria, said Vonn had “gone completely mad.” Swiss four-time overall World Cup champion and 1988 Olympic downhill gold medalist Pirmin Zurbriggen suggested she was starved for attention. “I have the feeling that Vonn hasn’t recognized the meaning and purpose of her other life in recent years,” he said. “She has probably suffered from no longer being a celebrated champion.”

Vonn despised these remarks. “They have no idea who I am. They have no idea what I’m doing,” she says. “They just want to be heard. It’s much more exciting when they say sh-tty things about me.” (Klammer, Dorfmeister, and Zurbriggen did not return requests for comment.) Yes, Vonn concedes, the Zooms involved in her investments, foundation, and other projects don’t give her the same adrenaline boost as zooming down a mountain. “As much as I love business and it challenges me, it’s not going 80 m.p.h. downhill,” she says.

But that doesn’t mean Vonn required this comeback to give meaning to an empty existence. “I need to see a psychologist for what? What about this is so crazy?” says Vonn. “I don’t need this. I’m doing it because I love it. It’s fun and it’s a challenge. And I think it means a lot to a lot of people. It’s not like I lack fulfillment. I don’t lack purpose. I don’t lack joy. I have all the things that I need in my life. Even though I’ve been through a lot of sh-t, I’m lucky enough to do what I love one more time. The only danger this presents is to myself. I am not endangering anyone else in this process.”

The negative headlines offered Vonn extra fuel. “I know exactly who said what about me,” she says. “It can tear you down. Or you can reframe it and use it as motivation. And that’s what I do.” Plus, Vonn is honoring the memory of her mother, who because of symptoms from her stroke couldn’t participate in most sports. “She would give anything to have this type of opportunity,” says Vonn. “My mom would be disappointed in me if I didn’t take it.”

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**Although Vonn spent** 19 years competing in World Cup races, she had to start from behind in the standings. At the beginning of the season, she raced with the group of women outside of the top 30 in ranking points, later in the day. The more established skiers go down the mountain first, potentially wearing out the course for the also-rans. Visibility can also erode in the afternoon when the sun dips lower.

So one of the greatest downhill skiers of all time essentially had to hang with the JV squad. “It was weird,” says Vonn. Some of the women were new to the tour, half her age, and asked to take pictures with her. “They’re like, ‘I used to watch you when I was growing up,’” says Vonn. “Can we please not

say that anymore? If I hear that one more time..." Slovenia's Ilka Stuhec, 35, started calling Vonn "grandma," a label Vonn grew tired of. "She did it to get under my skin," says Vonn. "Like, why are we doing this? I get it if it's the 18-year-old calling me grandma. You're 30-something. So let's reel it back." (Stuhec did not return requests for comment.)

Her references to her generation's comedies, like *Dumb and Dumber* and *Talladega Nights*, were usually met with blank stares. "Never mind," says Vonn. "I take it back. Just f-cking go ski fast."







Vonn's team figured last season would serve as a tune-up. "But there's one word in Lindsey's world that doesn't exist," says Riml. "And that's patience." At just her second World Cup event, in St. Anton, Austria, in January, she finished sixth in the downhill and fourth in the super-G. And while her results in Cortina the next week were less inspiring—20th in the downhill, a failure to finish the super-G—at Vonn's favorite pizza place in the Dolomites resort town, she learned that she had performed well enough to race with the top competitors group in future downhills. "I was like, 'Good job! You're such a good little ski racer,'" says Claire Abbe, Vonn's friend since childhood and partner at *Après* Productions, the media company they launched in 2019. An all-time great was celebrating making the top 30. The table shared a chuckle.

But the World Championships, three weeks later in Saalbach Hinterglemm, Austria, failed to offer such levity. Vonn wanted to make a statement podium. Instead, she crashed into a gate in the super-G, finished 15th in the downhill, and 16th in the team combined event, which makes its Olympic debut in Cortina (a downhill skier pairs with a slalom skier; fastest total time wins). "I felt slightly embarrassed," says Vonn. "I left Saalbach thinking, 'If I don't figure this out, what am I going to do? Because this isn't going to work like this.'"

Vonn switched her boots after Worlds, to an older model that offered her a better feel on the course. But at March's World Cup finals, she was dealing with a difficult distraction: the failing health of her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Lucy, whom she got after her 2015 breakup with Woods. Lucy accompanied Vonn everywhere on tour, even holding three passports. "She was my navigator," says Vonn. "She was my companion. She was always there. I was hoping she would always be there." Vonn tried not to check her phone for Lucy updates before the super-G—"I didn't want it to destroy me for race day"—but she couldn't help it.

Vonn put Lucy to sleep when she got back from the finals. But she managed to compartmentalize her sadness in Sun Valley. Vonn called the race, in which she won silver, the second most emotional finish of her career, behind only her Olympic gold 15 years ago. "Everyone told me I was crazy.

Everyone told me it couldn't be done, and it made me doubt myself," says Vonn. "That really hurt me."

Grandma Vonn, by the way, finished ahead of Stuhec in the overall standings. "Joke's on her."

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**Vonn and two friends** pile into her Range Rover in mid-September for the short drive from her 20-acre property overlooking Park City to a disco-themed fundraising gala for her foundation. Vonn, who's going through a country-music phase, puts on "20-20" by Ella Langley and belts out the lyrics. As she pulls up to the hotel, she notices that a sign directing vehicles to the gala is misplaced, too far up a hill for drivers to notice. So she leaps out of the car and jogs down the road in heels. There, passers-by may have noticed Lindsey Vonn, wearing a silver fringe dress, sticking a sign in the mud off the interstate.

At the event, Vonn takes pictures with a group of former scholarship recipients who now serve as youth ambassadors; in that role, these young women talk to adolescent girls about subjects like self-confidence, body image, and emotional intelligence. She also plays cajoling auctioneer assistant. When the bidding for tickets and a hotel stay for a Manchester City–Liverpool game starts slow, Vonn ups the ante with her powers of persuasion. "Tom Brady goes to this sh-t," she announces. (Brady is a minority owner of another English soccer club, Birmingham City.) The package sells for \$5,750.

"Who's ready to party?" she says. "We look too good not to dance."

Judging by her enthusiasm on this night, not to mention her social media feeds, Vonn seems to be enjoying her 40s. In late July, she shotgunned a beer onstage at a Dierks Bentley concert, something she would not have done when she was younger and in training. "Maybe it's because I have a different perspective, because I've been retired for a long time, maybe it's because I'm 40 and I just don't give a f-ck anymore," Vonn says. "But I need to enjoy my life." She points out that she had two workouts that day: letting loose occasionally won't compromise her goals. "My 40s, I was really dreading

it,” she says. “It’s the beginning of the end. And then you get past it and realize how good things really are.”

Vonn, who now sits on the advisory board of Athena Capital, a female-led venture firm, has grown close with a group of accomplished women, including actor and entrepreneur [Reese Witherspoon](#); venture capitalist [Amy Griffin](#), whose 2025 memoir *The Tell* became a New York Times best seller; psychological researcher [Angela Duckworth](#), a MacArthur “genius” grant recipient and author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*; and actor [Mariska Hargitay](#), star of Vonn’s favorite TV show, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. On the road, Vonn uses Olivia Benson as her alias. In July, a car-service driver complimented Vonn on an episode. “Oh,” he also told her, “you dyed your hair blonde.” Vonn rolled with it, thanking the guy.

Vonn knows that some people think she cares too much about celebrity hobnobbing. We are hiking near Hollywood, she’s a regular on red carpets, and during the U.S. Open final between [Jannik Sinner](#) and [Carlos Alcaraz](#) in September, she showed up on national TV, in Sinner’s box. (Sinner grew up skiing and was a fan of Vonn’s, and they’ve become friends.) But she calls the idea that she’s obsessed with fame the biggest misconception about her. “I’m not meeting these people because they’re famous,” says Vonn. “I’m interested in who they are, how they got there, and I enjoy watching their professions and they enjoy watching me.”

While Vonn’s quite content with her life at the moment, she still wants to start a family. She’s frozen her eggs, she tells me, which eases some pressure on that front. “I’m not stressed about it, which gives me peace of mind,” says Vonn. “But that’s definitely something that I’m really looking forward to.”

For now, another pup will do. After Lucy’s passing, Vonn questioned whether, at this point in her life, she really needed a dog with her all the time. But her sister reminded her that she’s happier around her pets. “The only negative about the sport is you just go home to an empty hotel room,” says Vonn. “It’s a tough life to live. I don’t have to live it that lonely.” In August she adopted Chance, a Cavalier like Lucy, but with a brown polka dot on his head. Before the fundraising event, Chance tried his best to

mangle duck and Lamb Chop chew toys, and peed on some bricks in front of Vonn's home.



Friends know Vonn's feeling good psychically, and with Chance in her carry-on, she's in a positive place. So she has inspired some certitude. In Cortina, Vonn will likely compete in three events: the downhill, super-G, and the combined team competition. "She's going to win one of them, if not more," says Picabo Street, who'll be commentating for NBC. "It's not a matter of if, it's when."

Since her announcement nearly a year ago, Vonn has come to realize that an Olympic medal—especially a gold—will elevate her place in sports history. Such knowledge can overheat an athlete's brain. But sitting on her Beverly Hills couch, Vonn says she doesn't see it that way. "I think it's a good thing," she says. "I like it when the stakes are high."

While Shiffrin has the most World Cup victories ever, and Vonn considers her the greatest skier of all time, Vonn also doesn't object when her own name comes up, as it did when Bentley called her the GOAT at his concert.

Vonn, for example, calls [Roger Federer](#) her tennis GOAT, even though [Novak Djokovic](#) has more major victories. “I don’t think it necessarily always comes down to how many wins you have,” says Vonn. “I think it’s also the impact you have on sports and culture. I do think I’ve changed the way people view certain things in skiing and in sports and in culture. My goal is not to just be a ski racer. I’m not a robot. I’m not just there to win. I’m there to enjoy the mountain and to be myself. I wouldn’t do it otherwise.”

Winning Olympic gold, in such historic fashion, could certainly alter that GOAT conversation. “I don’t know how satisfied I would be if I walked away with no medal,” says Vonn. “But I don’t think that’s going to happen.” What Vonn knows for sure is that if she makes it to the Cortina starting gate, you’ll be watching. “I’ve already done more than anyone ever expected,” she says. “I’ve already done the impossible.”

*On the cover: Jacket by HEAD, Turtleneck by VONN*

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Computer Chips in Our Bodies Could Be the Future of Medicine. These Patients Are Already There

Kluger is an editor at large at TIME. He covers space, climate, and science. He is the author of 12 books, including [\*Apollo 13\*](#), which served as the basis for the 1995 film, and was nominated for an Emmy Award for TIME's series [A Year in Space](#).



## The Brief November 6, 2025

**Flight cuts to hit 40 busiest U.S. airports due to government shutdown, computer chips in our bodies could be the future of medicine, and more**

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Podcast ID – Long Length: 14b099ff-2a0a-42d8-8b1e-4fe24320ea83

It's been a long time since Alice Charton got a good look at a human face. There are plenty of people moving through her world, of course—her husband, her friends, her doctors, her neighbors—but judging just by what she can see, she'd have to take it as an article of faith that any one person was there at all. It was five years ago that the 87-year-old retired schoolteacher, living in a suburb of Paris, first noticed her eyesight failing, with a point in the middle of her field of vision going hazy, muddy, and dim. Soon that point grew into a spot, and the spot into a blotch—until it became impossible for her to recognize people, read a book, or navigate unfamiliar places on the streets.

The cause of the problem was [age-related macular degeneration](#) (AMD), a disease that afflicts some [200 million people worldwide](#) and involves a breakdown of the cells in the retina, particularly in the area known as the macula, which is responsible for central vision. [AMD does not typically cause blindness](#), but vision can be severely impaired. As for a cure for AMD? Nonexistent.

“I always worked with children, teaching them how to read,” says Charton. “So it was especially devastating for me not to be able to read.”

NOV. 24, 2025



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But three years ago, everything changed. After battling two years of slowly deteriorating vision, Charton was able to claw back a small portion of her lost world. Today, while she still can't see faces or walk the streets unassisted, she does read—not very much; just an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon. But restoring even that small portion of her lost sight was transformative. "This brought me hope," she says. "It literally changed my life."

The breakthrough came about thanks to two decades of work now being led by [Science Corp.](#), a four-year-old neuroscience company based in San Francisco and led by biomedical engineer Max Hodak. In an experimental procedure dubbed [Prima](#), which has now been performed on a few dozen people, surgeons implant a 2-mm-by-2-mm computer chip with 400 hexagonal electrodes directly on the spot in the retina that the AMD has destroyed. Patients like Charton then put on a pair of bulky, black plastic glasses equipped with a tiny camera that looks out on the world and beams what it sees in an infrared impulse directly to the chip. The system uses the infrared wavelength—invisible to the naked eye—as opposed to visible light to prevent the signals from interfering with the residual peripheral vision the subjects still have. From the chip, the signal is transmitted to the optic nerve and then to the brain, restoring something resembling normal vision.

The chip that works this optical magic is not much to see. Under a powerful microscope attached to a computer at the Science headquarters, it resembles an oversize circuit board. To the naked eye, it is a tiny flake of nothing, but a flake of nothing that brings sight—imperfect, maybe, but sight all the same—to the nearly blind.

"There is an eye chart that [healthy] people are supposed to be able to read at a distance of 4 meters; even at 1 meter, untreated patients can barely read the biggest letters on the top line, using their peripheral vision," says Hodak. "In a clinical trial of Prima, patients were able to read down to the fifth line on the eye chart."



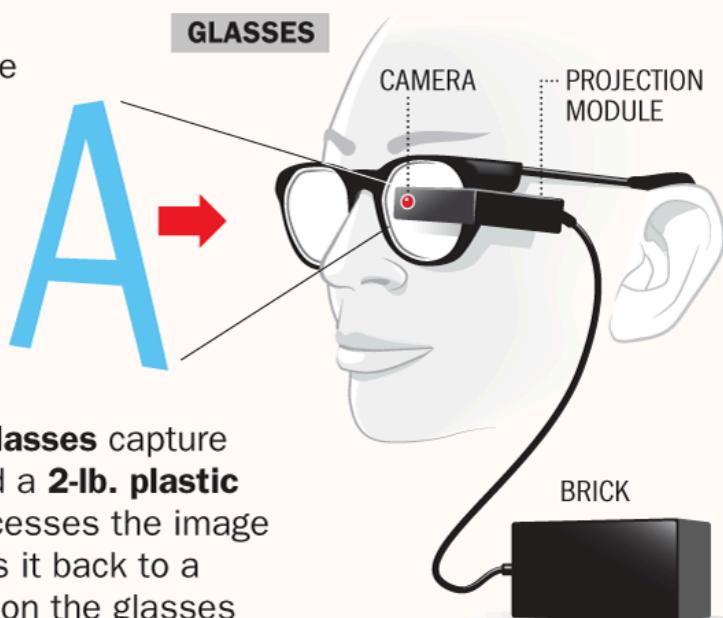
That trial, [just published](#) in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, involved 38 patients, including Charton, recruited from across Europe, all of whom

underwent the Prima procedure. Postsurgery, nearly 80% of them improved their performance on the eye chart by 20 letters, and 84% of them could read letters, numbers, and words at home.

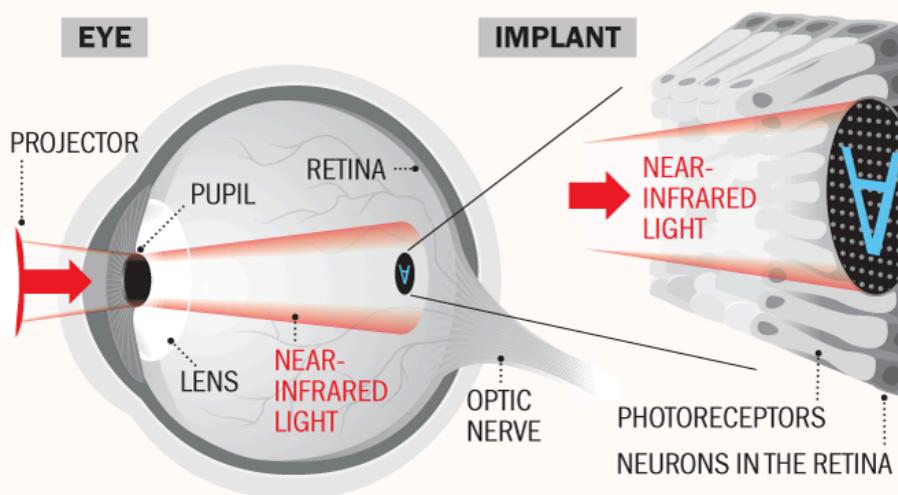
“AMD patients in our clinical trial were able to read and write again, not just letter by letter but word by word,” said Daniel Palanker, professor of ophthalmology and electrical engineering at Stanford University, in a statement that accompanied the release of the journal study. Palanker conceived of the Prima system in 2004, and has recently been working closely with Hodak and the Science team, serving as a part-time consultant on the Prima project. “The next-generation implant should have pixels that are five times smaller and more of them, going from about 400 in the current implant to 10,000. This should allow for visual acuity of 20/80, and with the help of the camera’s zoom function could even reach the equivalent of 20/20 resolution.”

# How the retinal chip works

A patient viewing the letter A with the Prima system



- 1 Special glasses capture video, and a **2-lb. plastic brick** processes the image and sends it back to a **projector** on the glasses



- 2 The **projector** transmits **near-infrared light patterns** through the eye onto a subretinal photovoltaic **implant**

- 3 The **implant** stimulates **neurons** to send signals through the **optic nerve** to the brain. The patient sees the image right side up

TIME

Science Corp. is not stopping there. The company's researchers are also developing technology that involves implanting a chip directly on the brain, which could allow people who are paralyzed by a stroke, an accident, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) to operate a computer, a smartphone, a wheelchair, or even lights and appliances, with their thoughts alone. For those whose condition has robbed them of speech, the chip could one day make it possible to translate thoughts into words and sentences and paragraphs on a screen. The technology could even translate those thoughts into spoken, computer-generated words—in the person's own voice, if video or other recordings of them speaking before their illness were available, which the AI loaded into the computer could copy.

In this system, the implanted computer chip would not just sit on the brain, but become part of the brain. Using a technology Hodak calls the biohybrid model, the chip would be seeded with stem cells which would grow into the brain tissue, forging useful connections with neurons that govern thought, speech, creativity, and more.

"You can imagine making a chip with 100,000 electrodes that, when this grows into the brain, you could get a billion synapses," Hodak says. "Right now you can get information into the brain very easily. Getting information out of the brain is limited. Imagine if you could get imagery or audio or imagination or memories out of the brain." He says James Cameron's *Avatar* movies are "a pretty good reference" for how biohybrid interfaces work. Paralyzed people would not, of course, inhabit new bodies as they do in the films, but they would gain some control over their worlds as if they were up and about.

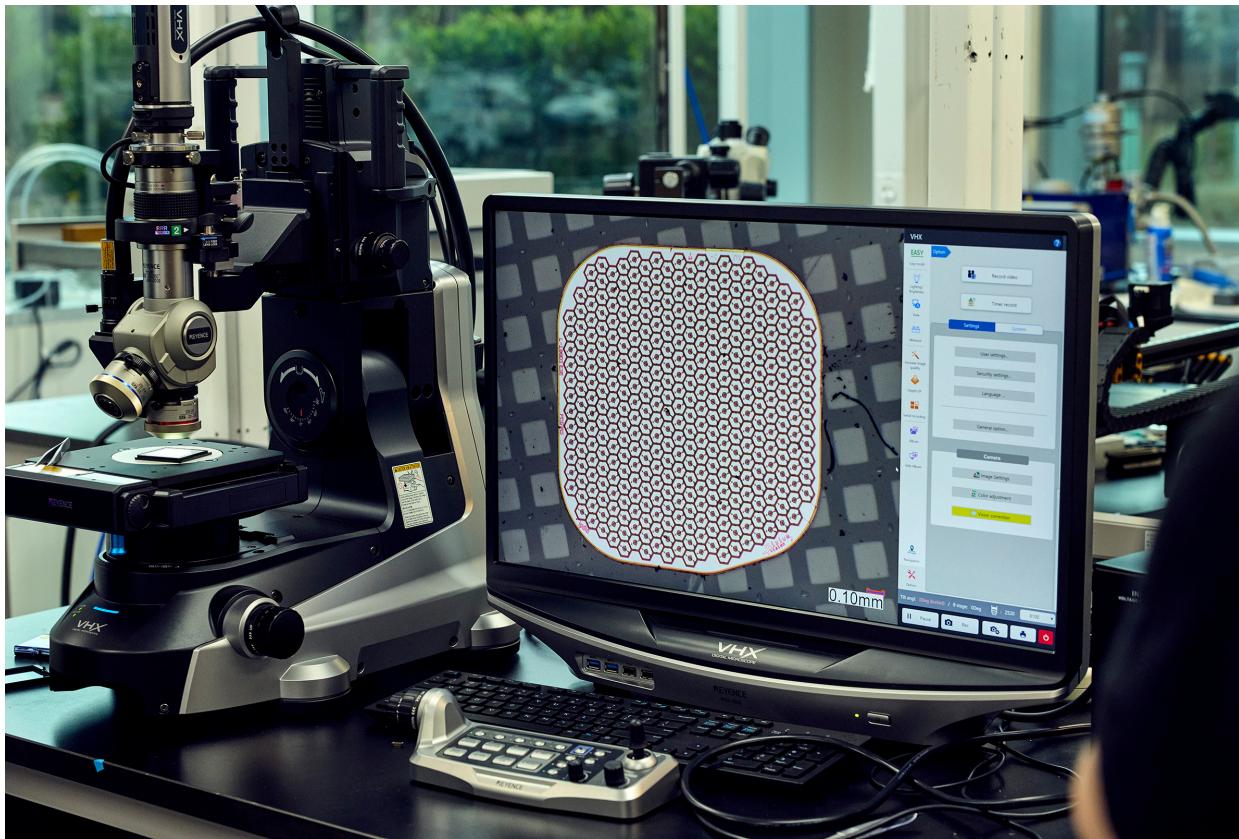
Science Corp. is not remotely alone in pursuing this union of the computer and the brain—this wedding of cold silicon and warm carbon. According to the [World Economic Forum](#), there are up to 680 companies worldwide at least dabbling in brain-computer interface (BCI) technology, making for a sector valued at \$1.74 billion in 2022, and expected to grow to \$6.2 billion by 2030. BCI today is what the personal computer was in the early 1980s—an infant technology that could grow in globe-shaking ways, with some of the companies talking about not just treating patients with ALS or other forms of paralysis, but also using the technology with firefighters, the

military, and other first-responders, speeding reaction times and communication. BCI could even be used by the general public—or at least that part of the general public that wants to have mind-to-mind access to AI systems.

“People with brain implants will be able to interact with AI in ways that people without brain implants do not,” says Matt Angle, CEO and founder of the Austin-based BCI company [Paradromics](#). “That is in some sense a superpower.”

The new science is causing not just a technological sensation, but also a cultural one, twanging a live wire in the popular mind. No sooner were the COVID vaccines released in 2020 than unfounded [rumors swirled](#) that they contained microchips that would be injected in the body—giving the government access to your thoughts. No sooner did reports go around that the [U.S.](#) and [China](#) were installing dashboard cameras and other equipment to detect signs of fatigue in long-haul truckers than the internet spun that up into stories about both countries using hardware that could read the drivers’ minds. It’s not for nothing that Apple TV’s [Severance](#)—the addictively twisty thriller about office workers who undergo microchip brain surgery to separate their work minds from their home minds—earned a staggering 27 Emmy nominations at the 2025 awards. The public reaction to developments in the BCI field is all of a piece with this—equal parts healthy fascination and troubling misinformation.

“Over the last 20 years, every time there was an advance in this technology, the principal investigators would get calls saying that someone—the government, their wives—had put a chip in them,” says Florian Solzbacher, the co-founder and chief science officer of Utah-based [Blackrock Neurotech](#), a BCI company. “There’s a lack of training in critical thinking.” BCI, for better or worse, is here. The job now is for scientists to figure out how to use it—and for laypeople to figure out what to make of it.



The best known of the BCI companies—thanks to the ubiquitous presence and deep pockets of its founder, Elon Musk—is [Neuralink](#), based in Fremont, Calif. Founded in 2016, the company has so far placed its implants in the [brains of 12 people](#), hoping to allow them to operate a computer or smartphone with their thoughts. Neuralink is currently running a clinical program dubbed [Prime](#), which is seeking to enroll patients [22 years old and up](#), who have quadriplegia and are willing to have a 1,024-electrode chip, about the size of a quarter, implanted for a study expected to last six years.

In January 2024, the company implanted its first chip, into the brain of [Noland Arbaugh](#), a 29-year-old Yuma, Ariz., quadriplegia patient who lost movement below the shoulders in a diving accident. The implant allows him to control a cursor on a screen with only his thoughts—playing video games, surfing the web, and communicating with friends. Hodak was part of this groundbreaking work, as one of Neuralink’s founders and its president before leaving to launch Science.

There is, too, San Francisco-based [Echo Technologies](#), led by University of California, San Francisco, neurosurgeon Dr. Edward Chang. In 2021, Chang and his colleagues [published a paper](#) in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reporting that they had developed a so-called neuroprosthesis allowing a paralyzed man who could not speak to generate words on a computer screen with nothing but his thoughts. In 2023, [as reported in Nature](#), they improved the system to include computer voice synthesis along with the text, as well as a facial avatar that can display emotions and expressions as it speaks, reflecting the subject's words. In 2024, [as reported in Nature Biomedical Engineering](#), Echo upgraded the hardware to allow another patient, who was bilingual, to toggle between English and Spanish.

“Our system is fully wireless,” says Chang. “The onscreen avatar is designed to resemble the person who’s doing the speaking. But in reality it could be anything. It could even be an emoji if that’s what the person wanted.”

With the rise of AI in information processing it’s no surprise that it’s at play here too. BCI speech systems rely on so-called large language models that interpret speech and predict the next word or words—much as word-processing programs will suggest the word *juice* if you type out *orange*, or *States* if you type *United*.

“The things we’re decoding are not just single words but the probability of any single word,” says Chang. “We’ve been working to learn how the brain processes words, how the electrical activity of the brain gives rise to consonants and vowels, how they give rise to the planning of words.”

The system also recognizes the parts of the brain that control the lips, jaw, tongue, and larynx. By thinking about speaking, even people who have lost the ability activate these brain centers in ways that would form any given word. Think about saying *ball* and your brain would send a signal for you to press your lips together to pronounce the *b* and move your tongue to the back of your front teeth to pronounce the *l*. The computer recognizes these signals and helps convert them to words.

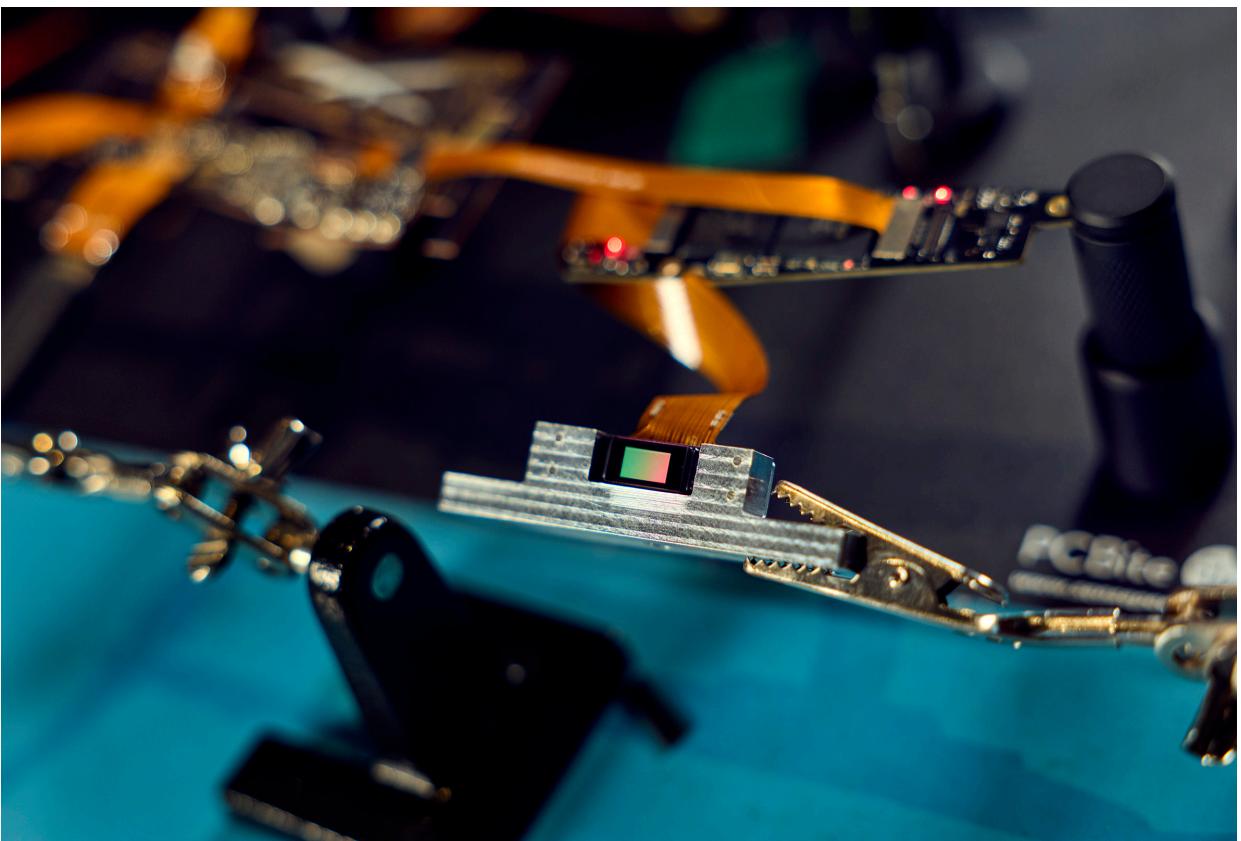
Elsewhere, Blackrock Neurotech has implanted over 50 people with brain chips, and boasts of amassing thousands of patient–days without adverse events. The most common of these events are infection of brain tissue at the

site of the implant; malfunction of the implant, causing it to send spurious signals that would damage the brain; or fibrous encapsulation of the chip, as tissue grows around it, causing it to fail. With these risks avoided, Blackrock focuses on using its system to allow patients to operate computers and, as with Echo, speak via an on-screen avatar. Solzbacher describes one ALS patient whose disease had progressed to what is known as locked-in syndrome, in which the mind remains alert but with no way to communicate with the outside world. That patient underwent surgery to have a chip implanted and a computer voice created.

“He was able to talk with his 3-year-old daughter,” says Solzbacher. “That was the first time that happened in his daughter’s life and it’s quite powerful, actually.”

The matter of how a locked-in patient gives consent to the surgery is a tricky one. Typically, says Solzbacher, consent is given earlier in the course of the disease, before the subject slips into a completely locked-in state. Relatives may also be in possession of advance declarations the patient made while still able to communicate.

Blackrock has been at this work for a while. In 2014 it ran a clinical trial in which a subject named Ian Burkhart, who was paralyzed from the elbows down at age 19 when he was swimming off the Outer Banks of North Carolina and dived into a wave that pushed him into a sandbar, was implanted with a brain chip and then outfitted with electrodes on the skin of his forearm, hand, and elsewhere. Merely by thinking of moving his extremities he could activate the electrodes, which would cause the arm or hand to move as commanded, allowing him to grasp and hold objects and even play *Guitar Hero*. Burkhart felt a sense of triumph—and even vindication—at the results.



“For quite a few years I heard doctors saying, ‘Well, you’re never going to be able to move this, move that, do this, do that,’” he says. “And now I was able to.”

Brain-computer interface technology sometimes doesn’t even require scientists to bother the brain at all. Even minimal, lightly invasive brain surgery is still, well, brain surgery, and at New York City–based [Synchron Inc.](#) they’re able to avoid it. Instead, they thread a probe carrying a chip through the radial artery in the forearm or the femoral artery in the thigh up to the brain and deposit the chip in the main vein between the brain’s two motor cortices. From there, says Kurt Haggstrom, Synchron’s chief commercial officer, “you can actually listen to the brain and understand it, without ever having to touch the brain itself.”

The first BCI surgery [occurred in 1998](#), when neurologist Philip Kennedy implanted a chip in the brain of a man who suffered from locked-in syndrome caused by a brain-stem stroke. After intensive practice, the patient was able to move a cursor on a screen—a significant achievement, but a painstaking one. The limitations in the results were partly the result of the limitations of the chip, which was a four-channel model that was able to carry only minimal information.

“It was a very primitive device,” says Jamie Brannigan, a resident neurologist at Mount Sinai in New York and a BCI expert. “But it was the first example of an in-human brain–computer interface.”

Since then, a more powerful chip, the [Utah array](#), has become the default device for the BCI field. The chip measures 4 mm by 4 mm and includes 100 needlelike probes, each measuring 1.5 mm, which penetrate brain tissue. It was first implanted in a human being [in 2004](#), and has been the go-to chip for most BCI work since.

“The Utah array has a proven track record of safety, reliability, and longevity,” says Solzbacher.

Blackrock’s 50 implant surgeries certainly suggest that there’s evidence behind what it claims it can do with the chip, but the company’s competitors aren’t so certain. For starters, even at 4 mm by 4 mm, the Utah array would

be too big and clumsy a hunk of hardware for Science to implant in the eye or Synchron to thread through a vein. And the 100 probes, while a not inconsiderable number, put a ceiling on how much data the system can carry.

“The thing about the Utah array is that it’s a 1990s device,” says Brannigan, “and if you were using a 1990s chip in your smartphone, you’d very quickly know about it.”

There is also the sort of controlled trauma inflicted on the brain when the 100-wire chip punches 100 tiny holes in its surface. At Paradromics, researchers have developed a chip with thinner wires than the Utah array, something that reduces, but does not eliminate, the damage done to brain tissue.

“There’s a fairly considerable amount of brain injury and cell loss with those technologies,” says Chang. “There is a term in the field called *butcher ratio*, and it refers to the number of cells killed for every one neuron you can record from. The more electrodes you put into the brain, the cumulative injury rises. The worst-case scenario is that a patient has some residual function, and this is lost as a result of the implantation.”

His company, Echo, sidesteps the problem, using not a chip with probes, but a thin film that sits on the brain without penetrating it. “The film is just laying safely on the brain surface monitoring signals from there,” says Chang.

It’s Hodak’s biohybrid model that would represent the real revolution in chip design, but the technology is not yet ready for human experimentation. In one section of the Science labs is a modified, tractor-trailer-size shipping container housing a small colony of cynomolgus monkeys. The animals have room to climb and jump and perch on a few branches—a big improvement over the tiny wire boxes in which they would have been forced to live their entire lives in the past. But they still don’t appear terribly happy.

“Don’t look them in the eye,” Hodak says. “They take that as a threat display.”

Happy or not, the monkeys will make their contribution to science. Last summer, the first of the animals was implanted with a biohybrid chip, and the company is now tracking its progress and seeing if the stem cells actually grow into the brain.

Hodak concedes that the biohybrid model poses perils. There is always a chance the stem cells could grow uncontrollably, crowding out native cells and damaging the brain. To prevent that, the system has a “kill switch,” in the form of an antiviral drug called ganciclovir that could be used off-label to attack the new cells and stop the growth process.



The hardware the BCI players are building might be impressive, but it's very much in the beta stage—not remotely ready for release. The Prima system has given Alice Charton the ability to read the newspaper, but the glasses are wired to a 2-lb. plastic brick that houses the processing computer and the battery. It is difficult to carry around, especially for someone trying to navigate the street, and it tends to grow hot. On lab bench after lab bench in the Science headquarters, researchers are working on a second-generation

Prima system in which the hardware currently in the brick will be miniaturized and housed in the glasses' temple bars. But Prima 2.0 is not ready for release yet, so for now users are stuck with the brick.

Buckhart, whose Blackrock implant enabled him to move despite his paralysis, had the chip removed seven years after it was implanted. The system included a wire that ran from the implant to a small hole in his skull to which a cable was screwed when he was using the chip. Over time, the skin of his scalp would try to grow over the port, leading to repeated infections and causing him enough discomfort that he gave up on the system. He would have it re-implanted, he says, but only if it were wireless and required no port.

"I'm looking forward to getting another device," Buckhart says.

He could be part of a group that may one day number in the millions—including able-bodied people who see BCI as a force multiplier for their natural abilities. Solzbacher envisions a lot of uses for BCI technology on the battlefield and among firefighters and other first responders, who could control the tools of their trades with their thoughts.

"There are performance parameters that can be made better and faster," says Solzbacher. Performing a physical action like launching a weapon or calling for help takes time. "A signal goes out, and it has to go from intent and planning to premotor to motor execution to the spinal cord to the muscles until you push a button on a joystick. You lose relevant time. You could shortcut all of that. If you're a firefighter or a soldier this could make the difference between coming home alive and unharmed or not."

And none of that touches the benefits that could accrue to other people outfitted with BCI chips, who could then communicate and interact with AI systems. "As the devices become more powerful," says Angle, "healthy people will want those abilities and be willing to undergo surgery to get them. The capabilities that will enable augmentation of natural human abilities are inseparable from those that restore function for persons with disabilities."

For now the work goes on—slowly. Most BCI studies in the U.S. are conducted under the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) investigational device exemption, which permits developers to work with animal and human subjects before a device is approved. Planning for clinical trials, running the trials, writing up the results, and then waiting for permission to market the device can take five years. Still, most of the leaders of the BCI companies agree with the FDA’s go-slow way of doing things—at least for the public record.

“These are Class III medical devices, which means a permanent implant,” says Haggstrom. “You really want to make sure you develop a good safety profile while the device operates over time. After that, the FDA usually requires a 12-month follow-up study.”

Finally, there is the inevitable matter of what all this shiny new technology will cost. The companies aren’t at all ready to discuss marketing so nascent a product, but Hodak does venture a number—on the order of \$100,000 to \$200,000 for a Prima implant.

“Even though we would like this to be as low-cost as possible,” he says, “the reality is that this technology cost several hundred million dollars to develop and bring to market.”

BCI is now at a profound inflection point—a young science that is only now beginning to mature. The matters being sorted out in the lab and in the field are not just technical and medical. They are existential. Humanity has developed a lot of new technologies in the past 150 years—powered flight, automobiles, electric lights, radio, television, the telephone, motion pictures, and more. But there has always been an unbreachable barrier between them and us. The machines stood over there and we stood over here. Computers demolished that wall. They actively engage our eyes, our hands, our ears, our minds. With BCI, they are becoming part of our physical selves. In at least small ways, the machines are becoming more human and the humans, by definition, are becoming more machine. The benefits are real. So too are the questions they raise. □

**Correction, Nov. 11:**

*The original version of this story mischaracterized Science Corporation's role in developing Prima. Science is not solely responsible for the procedure; the technology has been in development since 2004.*

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Exclusive: How Democrats Plan to Capitalize on This Week's 'Blue Sweep' in the 2026 Midterms

Bennett is the senior White House correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C., bureau. He has covered wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, interviewed world leaders, traveled across the globe with President Trump and President Biden, and written extensively about intelligence, immigration, and the fallout of major disasters.



**The Brief November 7, 2025**

**How Democrats plan to pivot to midterms, a White House deal lowers prices of weight-loss drugs, and more**

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Podcast ID – Long Length: e90cd8c1-ac46-4f7d-853d-ca2b193d1461

After a year in the [political wilderness](#), Democrats rode frustration over high prices and President Donald Trump's disruptive economic policies to win a raft of elections across the country on Nov. 4. In [Virginia and New Jersey](#), voters handed the party the keys to the governor's mansions by larger than expected margins. In [California](#), voters overwhelmingly approved new congressional districts to benefit Democrats, after Texas passed its own new map to favor the GOP.

But it was a series of decisive wins in down-ballot races in places like Pennsylvania and Georgia that stunned leaders in both parties and bolstered Democrats' hopes that they had landed on a viable playbook for next year's midterm elections.

The Democratic National Committee is describing its performance on Nov. 4 as a "blue sweep," one that provides a blueprint for winning in 2026, according to a [memo](#) obtained exclusively by TIME from DNC Chairman Ken Martin on the party's key takeaways from Election Day. As they pivot to the midterms, Democrats plan to continue to hammer the affordability issue, emphasizing to voters that Trump's policies are dragging the country into a "gilded recession" that will benefit CEOs at the expense of working families, the memo states.

"Our candidates, no matter where they are, no matter how they fit into our big-tent party, are meeting voters at the kitchen table, not in the gilded ballroom," Martin writes.

The way forward, the memo continues, is rolling out coordinated campaigns at every level of government. "For too long, we have ceded ground to Republicans at the local and state levels," Martin writes.

There are signs that strategy paid off in unexpected places on Tuesday. Pennsylvanians voted to keep three justices backed by Democrats on the state Supreme Court. Democrats in Georgia won two utility commission seats by double digits, the widest margins Democrats have seen in statewide

contests there in two decades. In Mississippi, where absentee ballots were still being counted days later, Democrats appeared poised to flip two seats in the state Senate, breaking a GOP supermajority.

In the wake of months of polls showing much of the electorate was dissatisfied with both parties, the initial response from many Democrats at running the table in such a hodgepodge of contests was a mixture of jubilation and disbelief. Martin says the Democrats are now “full steam ahead to take back the Congress next year” as the “party of affordability.”

**Read more:** [Democrats Debate Potential End to Shutdown in Light of Election Wins](#)

Republicans are scrambling to chart their own path forward. The party has a year to show they’re making a difference on the issues the electorate cares about most, says Whit Ayres, a longtime GOP strategist. He called the margins of victory voters gave to Governors-elect Abigail Spanberger in Virginia and Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey “pretty remarkable,” and the Republican losses in Mississippi and Georgia concerning. “The less visible races are as much of a concern as the most visible races,” Ayres said.

Democrats are giving a particularly close look to the upset in Georgia, where they managed to flip two seats on the Georgia Public Service Commission which oversees the Georgia Power Co. Democrats Peter Hubbard and Alicia Johnson both won with more than 60% of the vote. Party leaders see the results as a sign that utility bills has emerged as one of the most salient issues for voters. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, home electricity bills rose 6.1% from August 2024 to August 2025.

But a widespread Trump backlash is also part of the story. Exit polling suggests Trump dragged down Republicans in multiple races. In New Jersey, 97% of voters who voted for Sherrill said their vote was to oppose Trump, according to NBC exit polling. A year after Kamala Harris carried the state by 6 points, Sherrill won it by 13.

Democrats won back young voters between the ages of 18 and 29 who had swung toward Trump in 2024. Spanberger won Virginia men under 29 by

17 points, the DNC memo states, and Sherrill won that group in New Jersey by 14 points.

Trump had some excuses for the GOP's poor performance, including the fallout from a government shutdown that his party has tried to blame entirely on Democrats. "I don't think it was good for Republicans," Trump told GOP senators at the White House the morning after. Vice President JD Vance posted on X that "it's idiotic to overreact to a couple of elections" but acknowledged that Democrats' focus on cost of living broke through with voters. He argued that Trump's policies had helped lower interest rates and inflation, and that making "a decent life affordable" is "the metric by which we'll ultimately be judged in 2026 and beyond."

But the other GOP strategy appears to be tying Democrats to [Zohran Mamdani](#), the democratic socialist set to be New York City's next mayor. Mamdani drew more than a million votes on a campaign focused on hiking taxes on the wealthy to pay to make child care, rent and transportation more affordable.

In the run-up to the election, some Democrats held Mamdani at arm's length. Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, a New York City resident, refused to say who he voted for in the race. Republicans insist he is a warning sign that Democrats are veering further to the left. "Working families watching this play out have a right to know that socialism and communism are not just confined to New York City," House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters on the steps of the Capitol the morning after Mamdani's win. "They are quickly coming to a town near you unless you stand up and let your voice of common sense be heard."

But Democratic leaders say the results show them that the party does best when candidates [reflect the local electorate](#), pointing to the moderate campaigns of Spanberger and Sherrill. Democrats also flooded Virginia and New Jersey with volunteers and calls. In Virginia, the campaign used DNC phonebanking tools to make 2.8 million calls, knocked on more than 1 million doors and had more than 220,000 in person conversations. New Jersey Democrats worked with the national party to recruit more than 6,000 volunteers and make more than 4.1 million calls.

A flood-the-zone approach focused on affordability appears to have landed with voters. In her victory speech as Virginia's first woman elected governor, Spanberger delivered lines that Democrats will likely echo over the next 12 months. "We chose our Commonwealth over chaos," Spanberger said. "You all chose leadership that will focus relentlessly on what matters most: lowering costs, keeping our communities safe, and strengthening our economy for every Virginian—leadership that will focus on problem solving, not stoking division."

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# ‘Blood On the Sand’: Thousands Missing As Militia Accused of Massacres During Capture of Key City in Sudan

Schneid is a general assignment reporter for TIME covering U.S. and global news.



Sudan’s [brutal civil war](#) entered a new round of extreme violence this week after the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) captured the key city of El Fasher in Western Darfur following a year and a half of siege.

Witnesses and local reports described sexual violence, massacres and executions of civilians by the militia as tens of thousands fled the city. El

Fasher was seen as the last holdout in Darfur of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which the RSF has been fighting for the past [three years in the brutal civil war](#). Both sides have been accused of war crimes.

Aid agencies raised concerns as more than 60,000 people had fled El Fasher, but only 5,000 had arrived in the nearest city, Tawila, some 30 miles away across the desert.

Martha Ama Akyaa Pobee, the Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations for Africa, [told](#) an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council that there was no safe passage for civilians to leave.

**Read More:** [Sudan's Crisis in the Shadows](#)

“In the past week, the U.N. human rights office has documented widespread and serious human rights violations in and around El Fasher,” she said. “These include credible reports of mass killings in various locations and summary executions during house-to-house searches and as civilians have tried to flee the city.”

Here is what we know about the atrocities so far.

## The fall of El Fasher

Last weekend, the city of El Fasher was captured by the RSF militia after months of fighting Sudan’s military, a development that led to a series of reported massacres and mass killings by the group against the local population.

El Fasher, the Sudanese military’s last stronghold in the region, had been under siege for some 17 months before its fall this week. The city was hosting more than a million civilians who had been displaced by the civil war from other parts of the country.

The RSF began to mass outside of El Fasher in November 2023, after having led a campaign of conquest across the Darfur region in the months prior. According to the International Crisis Group, the RSF had carried out a campaign of “massacres, sexual violence, looting and, some say,

subjugation” against non-Arab communities in the territory they held in West Darfur.

On April 10, 2024, the RSF declared war on the Sudanese army and various allied groups in Al Fasher, which caused the inhabitants of the city—numbering in the hundreds of thousands—to be trapped and targeted by shelling and bombardment.

El Fasher is surrounded by desert, which is hard to traverse on foot even outside of wartime. Hunger ran rampant as the siege continued.

The city’s fall marks a “significant shift in the security dynamics” of Sudan, Pobee told the Security Council on Thursday, adding that the implications for the country’s civil war and the wider region are “profound.”

“The territorial scope of the conflict is broadening,” she said, cautioning that drone strikes by both RSF and SAF were hitting new targets further afield across Blue Nile, South Kordofan, West Darfur and Khartoum.

Read More: [Cindy McCain: It Has Never Been Harder to Be a Humanitarian](#)

“The risk of mass atrocities, ethnically targeted violence and further violations of international humanitarian law, including sexual violence, remains alarmingly high,” Pobee said.

Within the first few days of sieging the city, the Sudan Doctors Network said that the RSF killed at least 1,500 people as civilians tried to flee the city, describing the situation as “a true genocide.” On Oct. 30, the group [documented](#) the arrival of more than 15,000 displaced persons who fled the mass killings in El Fasher and arrived in the city of Tawila.

Despite a communications blackout in the besieged city, testimony from survivors in Tawila has helped aid groups learn more about the killings. The United Nations Human Rights Office said it had seen [videos](#) that show “dozens of unarmed men being shot or lying dead, surrounded by RSF fighters.”

## **‘It was like a killing field’**

Witnesses who survived the massacres described scenes of chaos as RSF fighters went house to house in El Fasher, beating and shooting at people, including women and children.

“It was like a killing field. Bodies everywhere and people bleeding and no one to help them,” one man, Tajal-Rahman, a man in his late 50s, told the Associated Press by phone after escaping to the city of Tawila.

One witness, describing the carnage in the city, Alkheir Ismail, told [Reuters](#) by video interview that he had survived an attack by fighters riding camels near El Fasher, who rounded up a couple of hundred men outside the city and brought them to a reservoir to kill them. He said that one of his captors recognized him from his school days and let him escape.

“He told them, ‘Don’t kill him,’” Ismail told Reuters. “Even after they killed everyone else – my friends and everyone else.”

One of the worst massacres took place at the Saudi Hospital, which was the last hospital still operating in the city during the siege.

Christian Lindmeier, a World Health Organization (WHO) spokesman, told a press briefing in Geneva that gunmen abducted doctors and nurses from the hospital before returning to kill at least 460 people—including staff and patients—in several waves of attacks. Lindmeier said at least six medical staff are still being held by the group.

The Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health [corroborated](#) alleged executions around the Saudi Hospital and a previously unreported potential mass killing at an RSF detention site at the former Children’s Hospital in eastern El-Fasher, utilizing satellite imagery collected on October 27 and October 28 outside both sites.

The U.N. also received credible reports of organized sexual violence.

“At least 25 women were gang raped when RSF’s forces entered a shelter for displaced people near El Fasher University. Witnesses confirm RSF’s

personnel selected women and girls and raped them at gunpoint," Seif Magango, spokesperson for the UN human rights office, said.

Aid agencies have raised fears that thousands of civilians are missing, feared dead, or are trapped in El Fasher, after only a trickle of people arrived in Tawila. The U.N. estimated that some 260,000 people were living in El Fasher in late August, and said that [more than 62,000](#) fled the city in the last week, but only 5,000 had arrived in Tawila as of Friday, according to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

"The arrival numbers don't add up, while accounts of large-scale atrocities are mounting," said Michel Olivier Lacharité, MSF head of emergencies. "Where are all the missing people who have already survived months of famine and violence in El Fasher?"

"Based on what patients tell us, the most likely—albeit frightening—answer is that they are being killed, blocked, and hunted down when trying to flee," Lacharité said.



MSF said most people arriving in Tawila were “women, children, and elderly people with catastrophic levels of [malnutrition](#).”

“Others, including gunshot victims, traveled on foot, hiding by daylight and trekking at night to avoid armed men along main roads,” the aid agency said.

The top U.N. humanitarian official, Tom Fletcher, told the Security Council on Thursday that “women and girls are being raped, people being mutilated and killed with utter impunity” in El Fasher.

“Tens of thousands of terrified, starving civilians have fled or are on the move,” Fletcher said. “Those able to flee – the vast majority women, children, and the elderly – face extortion, rape and violence on the perilous journey.”

“I urge colleagues to study the latest satellite imagery of El Fasher; blood on the sand,” he told the chamber.

A senior RSF commander denied the reports of massacres in an interview with Reuters, calling them “media exaggeration” by th Sudanese army “to cover up for their defeat and loss” of Al Fasher.

## What is the RSF?

The RSF is a Darfur-based Sudanese militia that has been fighting the Sudanese military for three years to control the nation. The RSF was formally created in 2013 by former dictator Omar al-Bashir, drawing heavily from the notorious Janjaweed militias that led the 2003–2005 Darfur campaign in which some 300,000 people were killed.

**Read More:** [Reflecting on Sudan’s Civil War One Year Later](#)

The RSF was the most powerful paramilitary group to emerge from the Bashir era, and the group eventually grew big enough to challenge the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which began a civil war in April 2023 that ravaged the country, claiming some 150,000 lives and forcing almost a quarter of its population of 50 million to flee their homes. The RSF has also

in particular been subject to extensive accusations of [utilizing sexual violence](#) to terrorize communities.

Widespread hunger has escalated since last year, when the [Famine Review Committee](#) officially confirmed famine in the Darfur region in August 2024, as the UN estimates that over half of Sudan's population, meaning at least 25 million people, are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Nearly three million displaced Sudanese have fled to other nations in Africa, including refugee camps in Chad, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.

Now, RSF controls all major urban centres in Darfur.

## **U.S. lawmakers react**

U.S. lawmakers have accused the RSF of “genocide” and ethnic cleansing against Sudan’s non-Arab ethnic groups throughout the civil war. Now, Republicans and Democrats in Congress are calling on President Donald Trump to respond strongly to the news of massacres in El Fasher.

Some have asked Trump to designate the RSF a terrorist organization.

“The horrors in Darfur’s El-Fasher were no accident — they were the RSF’s plan all along,” one Senator Jim Risch wrote on X Tuesday. The Idaho Republican joined Republican Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina and Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire in a [statement](#) condemning the violence and asking for Trump to consider the designation. “The RSF has waged terror and committed unspeakable atrocities, genocide among them, against the Sudanese people.”

Shaheen and other lawmakers have also criticized the United Arab Emirates, which the Sudanese forces say has provided military support to the RSF.

A UAE official told TIME that the UAE “has consistently supported regional and international efforts to achieve an immediate ceasefire, protect civilians, and ensure accountability for violations committed by all warring parties.”

“We categorically reject any claims of providing any form of support to either warring party since the onset of the civil war, and condemn atrocities committed by both Port Sudan Authority and RSF,” they added.

The official also said that a report from a U.N. Panel of Experts published in April found “no substantiated evidence that the UAE has provided any support to RSF, or has any involvement in the conflict.”

Earlier this year, Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy from Connecticut noted Trump’s relationship with the UAE and their investment in Trump’s stablecoin, while both Trump and his predecessor, President Joe Biden, continued to sign weapons deals with the country’s strong ally in the Middle East.

Lawmakers, including Rep. Gregory Meeks of New York, have called for the passage of legislation to ban weapons sales to countries supplying weapons to the SAF or RSF, while others have called for enforcement of the UN’s arms embargo in Sudan.

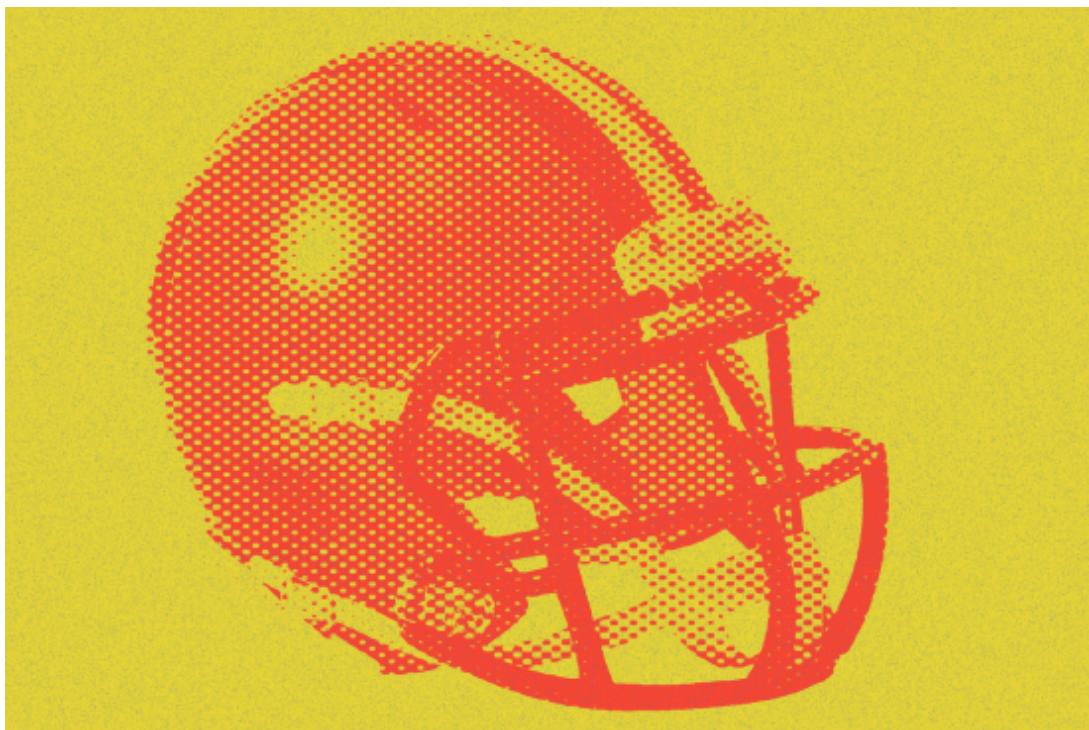
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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Is the NFL Safer Than High School Football?

Semuels is a senior correspondent at TIME covering the consumer side of healthcare. She previously wrote about economics and business news. She is a four-time finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism, and she has won awards from the Society of Business Editors and Writers and the Los Angeles Press Club.



**The Brief October 20, 2025**

**Major global outage impacts popular apps and websites, looking at the safety of the NFL, and more**

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Near the end of the high-school football season a few years ago, John Pizzi realized he had a problem. Because of season-ending injuries, the football team at Riverdale Country School, the New York private high school where he is the athletic director, did not have enough kids to finish the season.

He canceled the team's last game and then called Chris Nowinski, the CEO and co-founder of the Concussion Legacy Foundation, who has been talking for years about the need to better protect athletes of all ages from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), the degenerative brain disease caused by repeated hits to the head.

"I said to him, 'You have to help me: football is either not going to continue here or we have to figure something out,'" Pizzi says.

Nowinski dove into research and looked at how Riverdale and its sports league, the Metropolitan Independent Football League, might tweak the game so that players were injured less frequently. He found there were some easy wins—research had found that college kickoffs in the Ivy League specifically made up 6% of plays but 21% of concussions, so getting rid of kickoffs could help easily avoid some injuries—and put together a presentation with about a dozen suggestions.

Some of the changes were minimal, like limiting teams to 6 hours of full-contact practice in the preseason and 20 minutes per week in the regular season. Some were bigger, like eliminating kickoffs. Pizzi and Nowinski presented the ideas to the league and then to parents, and though many people were skeptical, most understood that they needed to do something to

get participation up and injuries down. So they decided to try out the new rules.

Their changes were extremely unusual outside of the world of professional football. Although the NFL, pushed by the players' union, has made some [significant changes](#) in recent years to try to reduce head injuries, youth leagues like Pop Warner, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), and even the NCAA have done very little.

"Everybody in football is aware of what the NFL has done and has made an active choice not to follow," Nowinski says. "It's just a dramatic failure of leadership."



Changes to make football safer have met resistance at all levels—even from the highest office. In a September social-media [post](#), President Donald Trump called the league's new kickoff policy “‘sissy’ football” and said that “the NFL has to get rid of that ridiculous looking new Kickoff Rule.”

Scientists, meanwhile, are starting to better understand CTE as more athletes say they [believe they have it](#). “Our best understanding of what causes CTE is that it’s the cumulative force that a person gets exposed to,” says Dr. Daniel Daneshvar, chief of the division of brain injury rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School.

CTE is closer to Alzheimer’s disease than it is to a traumatic brain injury, Daneshvar says. Scientists believe that repeated hits to the head damage the brain cells, which causes chronic inflammation and cells to convert into a diseased and dying state. That type of diseased brain cell is similar to the type found in Alzheimer’s and a host of other neurodegenerative diseases.

Because CTE is caused by cumulative head impacts and not just one big blow, people who start playing football as kids—and who often don’t play past high school—can end up with CTE. One [2011 study](#) found that high-school players in some positions experienced as many as 868 impacts to the head over one 14-week season. Another Boston University [study](#) found that the risk of developing CTE doubles for every 2.6 years of playing football.

Shane Tamura, the gunman [who killed four people](#) in Manhattan in July before taking his own life, believed that he had developed CTE even though he never played professionally or even in college. (CTE can currently be diagnosed only after a person has died.) Tamura, who started football at age 6 and played through high school, reported having frequent, debilitating headaches as an adult. He left a [three-page note in his wallet](#) referencing CTE and asking researchers—including, [reportedly, Nowinski](#)—to study his brain. In September, New York City’s medical examiner [released a statement](#) saying that it had found “unambiguous diagnostic evidence” of CTE in Tamura’s brain.

## What the NFL changed to reduce injuries

In recent years, as research about CTE has become more conclusive, some sports leagues have begun to concede that head impacts are a problem. In 2016, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell acknowledged that football-related head trauma [was linked to brain disease](#), a big step for a league that had been reluctant to admit any connection.

Since then, the NFL has made a number of changes to game rules and practice guidelines to try to reduce head impacts. The league has prohibited tackling during offseason practices and in early stages of preseason, and allows only one full-contact practice per week. It [reduced the length of overtime](#) in the preseason and regular season to 10 minutes from 15, and [prohibited players](#) from lowering their heads to make contact with an opponent using their helmet. Perhaps most importantly, the NFL [significantly changed the kickoff](#) in the 2024 season, moving teams closer together to limit how fast players run at one another.

The changes appear to be reducing concussions. Recorded concussions [decreased 17% in 2024](#), the year the new kickoff rules went into place, compared to 2023.

But aside from Pizzi's Metropolitan Independent Football League, few college, high school, or youth leagues have made major changes to how the game is played—or even acknowledged the connection between the game and CTE.

"If the same rule changes that have been implemented at the NFL level were implemented at the college, high school, and youth level, it would substantially reduce the number of individuals who develop CTE and the severity of CTE for those who develop it," said Daneshvar.

## Fewer changes at the college level

The NCAA, for example, still allows a relatively high number of live contact practices—those in which players wear full pads and practice tackling and blocking—according to its [Division I manual](#). While preseason starts with five days of practice without live contact, schools can practice in full pads beginning on the sixth day. After that, schools are allowed to have eight full-contact practices in the preseason, and they are allowed to practice tackling and blocking for as long as 75 minutes in each practice.

The NCAA has also not adopted the NFL's kickoff changes. (Trump alluded to this in his post: "Fortunately, college football will remain the same, hopefully forever!!" he wrote.)

“The NFL makes changes to the kickoff rule, and that seems like a rule that can be implemented widely. I always wonder why that hasn’t been implemented across other levels,” says Dr. Michael Alosco, a neuropsychologist who is the co-director of clinical research at Boston University’s CTE Center. “When you think about CTE, the best way to mitigate it is to reduce your amount of exposure.”

The NCAA has made some changes, though far fewer than the NFL. Certain drills—like the Oklahoma drill, in which two players essentially collide head-on—have been prohibited in college football since 2021, the NCAA says. Back in 2012, the NCAA also moved kickoffs to the 35-yard line from the 30 in the hope that more balls would be kicked out of play and not returned. Still, many kickoffs are still returned, and NCAA kickoffs are vastly different from those in the NFL today because they still involve players running at each other from great distances, allowing them to build up speed that can lead to hard hits.

The NCAA declined to comment for this story. Its Division 1 manual outlines one way it sets itself apart from leagues like the NFL: “College football is different from professional football and collegiate coaches rely on these practice opportunities to teach their student-athletes the fundamentals of the game,” the manual says.

## Nominal changes to high school football

High school football has done even less than college. Although every high school and league can change its own rules, like the Metropolitan League did, most look to the NFHS for guidance on player health and safety.

When asked whether it had changed any aspects to the game, like kickoff, to reduce head impact, a NFHS spokesperson cited a 1975 rule change that defined “spearing”—using the top of a player’s helmet to initiate contact—as a disqualifying personal foul.

In 2014, NFHS issued recommendations for minimizing head impact exposure and concussions in football that included limiting full-contact practice to the regular season and limiting contact in practices. But the

recommendations still allowed full-contact practices two to three times a week and limited full-contact time to about 90 minutes per week. The recommendations also acknowledged that preseason practices might require “more full-contact time” than practices in the regular season.

It's not enough, says Nowinski, of the Concussion Legacy Foundation. “There is still an extraordinary culture of CTE denial at the college, high school, and youth levels,” Nowinski says.

Karissa Niehoff, CEO of NFHS, wrote in a [2019 blog post](#) that there was no link between CTE and playing high school football. She says she still believes that today, and that there's no way for researchers to disentangle the possible effects of playing other sports when they study this question. “It's really hard to strictly pinpoint high-school football with CTE, because we often see that the concussion injury is like a snowflake,” she says. “It's different for everybody.” (Scientists say that CTE is caused not only by concussions but also by repeated head impacts.)

“I think we have to remember that at the lower levels, from youth to high school, these are not elite athletes,” says Niehoff. “We've got to really help our athletes learn the sport, and then as they become more skilled and they get bigger and faster and stronger, we just have to watch how the rules help protect them.”

In her blog post, Niehoff cited [a study by Munro Cullum](#) and colleagues that studied 35 former NFL players over the age of 50 who had sustained at least one concussion in their careers. It found no association between the number of years they had played or number of head impacts they had sustained and their cognitive function later in life. (The study did not have the brains of the players so it could not report on CTE.)

Cullum, a professor of psychiatry, neurology, and neurological surgery at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, says that although there's a correlation between repeated head hits and CTE, that doesn't mean that one causes the other. It could be that some people are at greater risk for CTE because of genetic or other factors. He also believes there's not enough evidence to link repeated head hits to abnormal behavior or cognitive decline later in life.

“We believe that concussions and head hits can be a risk factor for cognitive decline later in life, but not for most people,” he said. CTE is still very rare, he says, and many NFL players do not have any cognitive difficulties when they get older.

Some recent research, however, suggests that CTE may not be as rare among professional football players as once thought. [One 2023 study](#) from the Boston University CTE Center studied the brains of 376 former NFL players and found that 345, or 91.7%, had CTE.

NFHS has taken some steps to reduce contact, such as limiting the amount of playing time kids have in a week, because some kids on both the varsity and junior varsity teams had been playing in two games on a weekend, Niehoff says. Every state has a sports medicine advisory committee that is involved in thinking about protecting kids, she says.

But some states go even further than NFHS requires. In 2019, New Jersey’s Interscholastic Athletic Association reduced the amount of time that teams could engage in full-contact drills to [15 minutes per week](#), down from the limit of 90 minutes that NFHS suggests. The state also limited preseason contact drills to six hours total and banned spring and summer practices. In 2019, Michigan set a limit of [30 minutes](#) of full-contact practice a week.

## Minimal protections for football’s youngest players

Experts argue that youth football is the least regulated of all. “Unlike just about every other sport in America, nobody sets the rules of youth football,” Nowinski says. “You have a bunch of small, capitalist fiefdoms that are rewarded by enrollment, so nobody is willing to be a leader on these changes because they don’t want to scare away clients.”

It’s easy to find [TikTok videos](#) of [kids](#) in youth football leagues running the [Oklahoma drill](#) or the [bull in the ring](#) drill, both of which pit two players against each other in close contact. Both lead to high incidents of injury and are not allowed at the professional level. But even without those drills, youth football can result in serious injuries. In 2024, a 13-year-old [died from brain](#)

[trauma](#) after making a tackle during middle-school football practice; in 2023, three young football players died of head injuries.

Unlike at the college or high school level, there often are no medical professionals on the field during youth football games or practices, which can mean that when someone does get hurt, their injuries can turn fatal. In 2023, a 12-year-old New Jersey boy died after collapsing at football practice; no one on the field [knew CPR](#).

Pop Warner, one of the largest youth football leagues in the U.S., made some changes to limit exposure to head impact. In 2012, it banned full-speed head-on blocking or tackling drills where players lined up more than three yards apart. In 2016, it announced that contact is restricted to 25% of practice time and said that if a team has practice on two consecutive days, it can have live contact in only one of them. In 2016 it also eliminated kickoffs for its youngest divisions, according to a spokesperson. But it still allows tackling for even its 6-and-under division.

The best strategy to protect youth, Nowinski and other experts say, is to set minimum ages for the most dangerous activities, like tackling. In 2011, USA Hockey [banned body checking](#) in the 12-and-under leagues, and in 2016, U.S. Club Soccer banned heading for [players under 12](#). There seems to be little interest in banning tackling in football for kids under 12, though, Nowinski says.

“American football may be the only sport in the world that has zero discussion of—and will probably never themselves create—an age minimum for tackling,” he says.

The only way for bans on youth tackling to reach all the kids who play would be state or national legislation. In 2023, the Concussion Legacy Foundation worked with legislators in California on a bill banning tackle football for children under 12. The bill had the support of legislators and cleared a key legislative committee, Nowinski says, but in January 2024, Gov. Gavin Newsom [vowed that he would not sign it](#) if it reached his desk. ([Newsom has said](#) that he believes it’s possible to “strengthen” tackle football and grow flag football in California “without implementing bans

that infringe on parents' rights.") If California won't pass such a bill, Nowinski says, it's unlikely any other state will.

But making changes at the individual league level is doable—just ask John Pizzi. The Riverdale athletic director says that although some other coaches and parents were hesitant at first, the league has fully embraced the safer game rules. That's probably because they have led to decreased concussions and increased enrollment. As high school football nationally sees its numbers slip, enrollment in the football program at Riverdale is increasing, Pizzi says.

Some families who had prohibited their kids from playing football have relented under the new rules, he says.

The school has figured out ways to make the game safer while still helping players get better, he says; using a tackling wheel—essentially a big foam donut—instead of a person helps teach technique without risking kids' health, he says. Not having to practice kickoffs frees up more time to practice other aspects of the game. The school now also runs junior-varsity practices as "controlled practices," essentially having the coaches walk players through what they're doing rather than just presiding over chaos, Pizzi says.

Now, some players and parents at Riverdale's games have never experienced a season where the team does a kickoff—they just place the ball on the field and start playing.

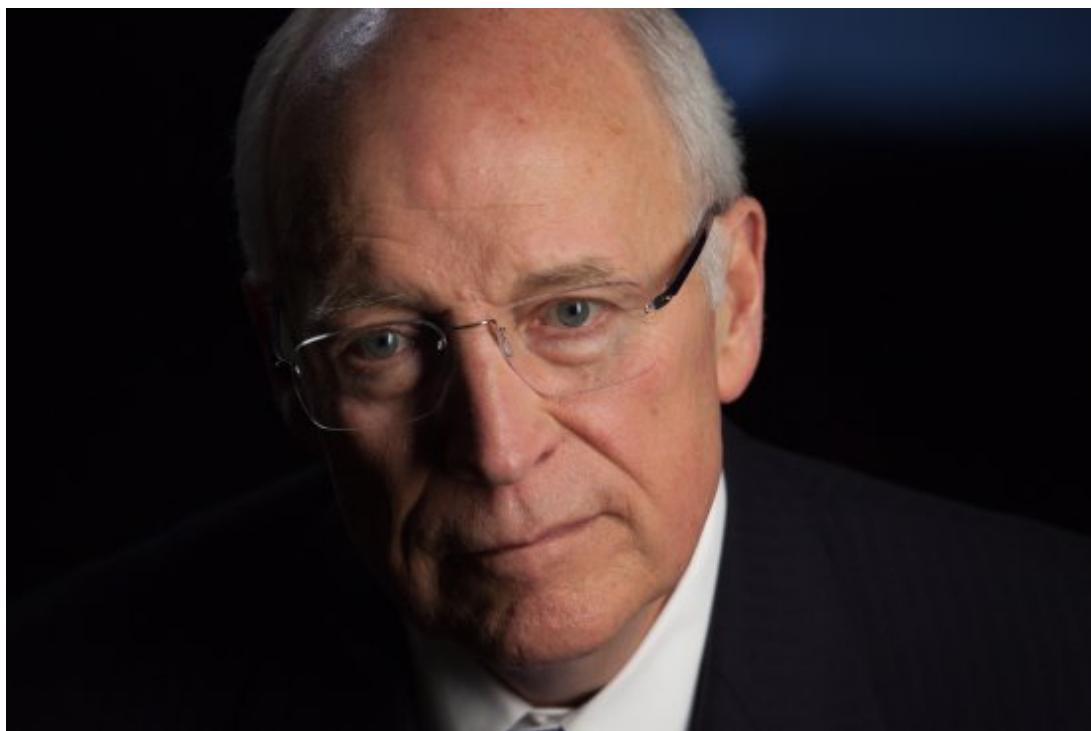
Pizzi has heard from parents of kids in other football leagues who are envious of the changes that Riverdale has made, wishing their school would do the same. But, he says, he hasn't heard from other coaches or leagues who want to implement what Riverdale has done, and make football safer for kids to play.

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# Dick Cheney Was the Most Powerful—and Polarizing—Vice President in U.S. History

Vick is an editor at large at TIME. He has also served as TIME's Jerusalem bureau chief. He has reported from 60 countries and in 2001 was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for coverage of the spread of AIDS in Africa.



In the half century he navigated the heights of U.S. executive power, [Dick Cheney](#) went from being universally admired—as the competent public servant overseeing the lopsided victory in the First Gulf War—to profoundly polarizing, albeit in ways that made many Americans wistful: The divisions Cheney inveigled were grounded not in personal aggrandizement but in differing concepts of duty to nation. His legacy at the time of his death on

Monday, at 84, was as the uniquely powerful Vice President who after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 intrigued for the CIA to use torture, for the National Security Agency to [scoop up](#) the communications of every American, and for the misbegotten [military invasion of Iraq](#), which killed hundreds of thousands and shifted the balance of power in the region to Iran while expanding the terrorist threat.

Cheney made himself, hands-down, the most powerful Vice President in U.S. history, mining the powers of the office so effectively that, in the first term of President George W. Bush, he was described as [regent](#), the nominal subordinate who wields the real power over a boy king. His reputation for stealth and rigidity gratified conservatives, and in liberal circles sketched a caricature of villainy that found an apotheosis in *Vice*, the 2015 [feature film](#) that portrayed Cheney ([played by Christian Bale](#)) as a henpecked bumpkin who a few scenes later was a diabolical mastermind.

**Read More:** [\*Tributes Pour In for Former Vice President Dick Cheney, Who Has Died at 84\*](#)

His ascent to power was, in fact, meteoric. And no American politician in modern history moved so swiftly from light to shadow without the accelerant of personal scandal. “He would run the gauntlet of being the toast of America after Gulf War One and then being ‘this monstrous hideous person, this warmonger, torturer—‘blow up the world!’’’ his late friend Alan Simpson, said in 2021. “And he isn’t. He’s the same person.”

Cheney elected to embrace the notoriety, joking in speeches about his reputation as “Darth Vader” and in 2007 [dressing](#) his black Labrador for Halloween as the Dark Lord of the Sith. The reputation distracted, perhaps shrewdly, from Cheney’s failure, as the official Bush had placed in charge of terrorism, to heed warnings about 9/11. After the attacks, he would say he did not recall meetings in which an attack was called imminent.

Other parts of the caricature were entirely accurate.



Cheney genuinely preferred working in the shadows, eyebrow cocked in meetings where he maintained a Sphinx-like silence. In a city where information is power, Cheney warned subordinates not to characterize his views to outsiders while manipulating the processes of a federal government he had learned from the inside out. (Except for five years as chairman at the oil services firm Halliburton, which reportedly paid him \$44 million, he never worked anywhere else.). Former aide Eric Edelman noted that, in the Bush White House “we put our own gloss on” documents produced by the National Security Council, which passed through Cheney’s office before going to the President, as did all emails between staff. Cheney was the only Vice President who saw the President’s daily threat report *before* the President did.

“He was always going to be probably both the most powerful and the most controversial Vice President in history,” says Edelman, who was Cheney’s national security aide. “He knew where everything was, where the bodies were buried inside the Administration, and that gave him an enormous

opportunity to provide the President with a realm of advice in private. Which he did.”

[video id=LBOu6pHY]

Cheney was an avid student of both power and of mortality, intrigued by the mechanics of presidential succession decades before assuming the office whose only official duties have been described as presiding over the Senate and “inquiring daily into the health of the President.” His own health was a topic of constant speculation; the first of five heart attacks came at age 37. By the time of he was Vice President, he physically embodied both paranoia and prudence: In 2007, the cardiac defibrillator implanted in his chest had its wifi specially disabled, against any possibility of a malign actor sending a signal that would induce cardiac arrest in the man a heartbeat from the presidency. His life was extended for 13 years by a heart transplant in 2012.

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Richard Bruce Cheney was born on Jan. 30, 1941, in Lincoln, Nebraska, the son of a civil servant. When he was 13, the family moved to Casper, Wyoming, where his father worked in the Soil Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A local alumnus got Cheney a free ride to Yale, where he washed out and returned to Wyoming, installing electrical lines and drinking enough to be twice arrested for drunk driving. After his high school sweetheart, Lynne Vincent, “made it clear she wasn’t interested in marrying a lineman for the county,” as Cheney told biographer Stephen F. Hayes, he earned a masters at the University of Wyoming, then pursued a PhD in political science at the University of Wisconsin, using first student and then family deferments to avoid the Vietnam draft. His parents were Democrats, and by his own account he might have become one, too, if the last opening for a state legislative intern had not been with the Republican caucus. Cheney said he “didn’t have a political identity” at the time.



He would acquire one in Washington, D.C., during an ascent so rapid it could have been written by Charles Dickens, or Horatio Alger, if either had thought to place a hero in the U.S. federal bureaucracy. In just six months, Cheney moved from a temporary fellowship on Capitol Hill to a White House office. He studied the interior of government from beneath the wing of Donald Rumsfeld, whom he succeeded as Chief of Staff to President Gerald Ford in 1975. It was a formative period in more ways than one. The son of a federal employee would later say his skepticism of government activism was informed by troubleshooting political interference and corruption in the Office of Economic Opportunity, the LBJ-era War on Poverty clearinghouse that he helped Rumsfeld run. His expansive views on Presidential power were rooted in his resistance to the constraints Congress imposed after the Watergate scandal (which Cheney avoided by sitting out the Richard Nixon 1972 campaign).

“Cheney had a very broad view of executive power,” noted Jack Goldsmith, who after taking over the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel discovered the secret torture and surveillance programs Cheney had put in

place. The Vice President argued (to the Supreme Court, no less) that neither Congress nor the courts had any right to compel information from the executive branch—that the President was simply beyond oversight. When Donald J. Trump was conniving to remain in office after losing the 2020 election, Cheney’s maximalist reputation made him an effective advocate for the rule of law, organizing a letter of warning signed by all ten living former defense secretaries.

Rumsfeld’s signature on the group letter amounted to a coda in something Washington rarely produces: a buddy movie. After a terrible first meeting, the former Michigan Congressman had given Cheney not only his first White House job, but vouched for the younger man to the newly installed President Ford (who had been inclined to dump Cheney over the drunk driving convictions), then effectively shared the Chief of Staff job with his nominal deputy before ceding it to him. The dynamic prefigured the White House of Bush 43, which the Veep largely staffed, and substantially dominated. Associates said Bush trusted the older man because he demonstrated no appetite to become President himself. For his part, Cheney was content to exercise his discreetly assembled powers secure in the knowledge that the Vice President was the only person a President cannot fire.

He had taken the job, famously, after W. Bush placed Cheney in charge of finding a running mate in his 2000 campaign. Less well known was that, after compelling would-be candidates to surrender their most sensitive secrets in hopes of landing a spot on the ticket, Cheney in at least one case used the information against the aspirant, Barton Gellman recounts in his deeply reported account of Cheney’s vice presidency, *Angler*. The book takes its title from Cheney’s Secret Service code name.

Cheney was becoming an oxymoron—a famous Vice President. But not a popular one. He had been around Washington for decades: running Ford’s losing 1976 campaign, then, after being elected to Wyoming’s only House seat, chairing the Republican caucus, serving as whip. But the public first knew Cheney as, along with Joint Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell, the quietly confident, visibly competent public face of the 1990-91 Gulf War that ejected Iraqi troops from Kuwait (and the gates of Saudi Arabia) in just 100 hours of ground combat. But the war failed to knock out Saddam Hussein,

and in the months before the 9/11 terror attacks, it was the Iraqi dictator, not al-Qaeda, that preoccupied the man Bush *fills* had placed in charge of intelligence and anti-terrorism.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Secret Service agents lifted Cheney out of his chair by his belt (“they must rehearse it,” he later said), and hustled him into a command bunker beneath the White House on reports that a hijacked passenger jet was headed their way. With the President airborne, the Vice coolly directed the response to the attacks, at one point ordering U.S. fighter jets to “take out” passenger jets that may have been hijacked. In the months that followed, one descriptor of the nation’s fears was Cheney’s announced work station: “a secure, undisclosed location.” Inside the Administration, “The Dark Side” was the shorthand for the architecture Cheney constructed against the Hobbesian world he now saw: Secret legal memos that would give CIA employees legal cover to torture suspects confined in third countries, and coaxing the NSA to nudge aside institutional respect for the Fourth Amendment and widen its surveillance to include all telephone calls originating in the United States.



“We were flying blind,” Edelman recalls. “We used enhanced techniques [torture] because we didn’t know much...Was the juice worth the squeeze? I guess the record will say, maybe not. Cheney in his own defense will say we knew almost nothing about al Qaeda in 2001.” To justify going to war against Iraq—which had played no role at all in the 9/11 attacks—Cheney reached into the bureaucracies to cherry-pick intelligence that would support deposing Saddam. The Iraq adventure diverted key intelligence and Special Forces assets from Afghanistan (from which Osama bin Laden had ordered 9/11) and 20 years later both countries continue to be plagued by terrorist groups, including ISIS, spawned by the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Cheney appeared unperturbed by all of it, especially his thuggish image. “That’s exactly what he thought: ‘I don’t give a sh-t,’” said Simpson, before his own death in March. “So they poured it on him, waterboarding, torture, twisted sneer.” On the Senate floor in 2004, the Vice President actually told Patrick Leahy, the Vermont Democrat, “Go f—k yourself.” But Bush was in his second term the February 2006 morning that Cheney peppered the face and torso of a 78-year-old lawyer with [lead shot during a quail hunt](#). Both wars had become quagmires, and Cheney—who repeatedly offered to leave the ticket as Bush approached the 2004 campaign—was no longer being called “regent” in a White House that was no longer his. For Bush, a point of departure was a seismic rebellion by the heads of the FBI and Justice Department over the secret domestic surveillance program. For his part, Cheney believed Bush had failed a loyalty test, having refused to pardon Cheney aide “Scooter” Libby on charges that grew out of the Veep’s attempts to justify the Iraq invasion through leaks to the press.

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# Wikipedia Co-founder Jimmy Wales on Rebuilding Trust Online and Off

Booth is a reporter based in TIME's London bureau.



Jimmy Wales describes himself as a “pathological optimist.” And yet, when the co-founder of Wikipedia spoke with TIME in October, he still seemed somewhat surprised that his online encyclopedia actually worked. “Wikipedia is very trusting, in a way that always seemed a bit crazy,” Wales

says. If you think about the chaos of social media, Wikipedia's model of allowing anyone to edit any entry seems "completely insane," he says.

We're speaking because Wales just penned his first book, *The Seven Rules of Trust*, which tries to distill what Wikipedia and a few other bright corners of the internet—Wales cites Airbnb, Uber, and Ebay—can teach us about rebuilding trust in a world awash in skepticism. Since Wikipedia's launch in 2001, trust in politicians, mainstream media, and "to some extent each other" has all plummeted, Wales says—with consequences extending beyond political deadlocks. Wales, 59, was friends with Jo Cox, the British Labour Member of Parliament who was murdered in 2016 by a far-right extremist days before the Brexit referendum. He believes the rise of politically motivated violence is "a natural result of this feeling of a complete breakdown of societal norms and of the idea of trust—of being able to say, 'Look, I disagree with you, but I trust that we can have a dialogue and we'll find a compromise and we can move forward,'" he says. And yet, "Wikipedia has gone from being kind of a joke to one of the few things people trust."

Lately, though, that breakdown of trust has started nipping at Wikipedia's heels. Billionaire Elon Musk, who was once a big fan of Wikipedia, has turned on the encyclopedia, as has White House AI and crypto czar David Sacks, conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, and even Wales' estranged co-founder Larry Sanger, who have all claimed Wikipedia is biased.

In October, the day before Wales published his book, Musk released a Wikipedia rival called Grokipedia, which he said used his AI chatbot Grok to generate entries. Currently, the AI-driven encyclopedia has more than 885,000 articles—many of which appear very similar to their Wikipedia counterparts. While Grokipedia is dwarfed by Wikipedia's more than 7 million English-language articles, Musk said in a post on his social media platform X that Grokipedia will exceed Wikipedia by several orders of magnitude in breadth, depth, and accuracy. Musk has been critical of Wikipedia for some time, calling it "Wikipedia" and in 2023 offering to give the platform, which is overseen by the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, \$1 billion if he could rename it "Dickipedia." Wales told

[Bloomberg](#) in October that Musk's accusations of bias are "not true," adding, "A better message is to say, if you feel like Wikipedia has got some bias, encourage people to come and participate—people who agree with you. Don't paint us as ... crazy left-wing activists or something. We aren't."

Early responses to Grokipedia have split along familiar lines. Musk fans have lauded Grokipedia for having "[no human bias and no errors](#)" and for its "[nuance and detail](#)" in entries on topics like George Floyd's death. Grokipedia's article foregrounds Floyd's criminal record in its opening lines, mentioning his murder by a police officer only later. Critics, meanwhile, note that articles about Musk and his companies are [longer than their Wikipedia counterparts](#) yet omit unflattering details. Unlike Wikipedia, Grokipedia can't be directly edited by users. They can inspect the sources and submit correction suggestions, but these aren't debated on public talk pages or decided by human moderators the way Wikipedia's are. They are instead processed by Grok, a version of the same AI chatbot that made antisemitic statements after an update in July, forcing xAI to apologize and deactivate the update. Wales' response to all this? "I don't think we're about to see fragmentation in online encyclopedias. Wikipedia will continue to strive to be high quality and neutral," he says. "If Elon makes an encyclopedia skewed to his world view, I'm sure it will have some traffic but it won't be anything like Wikipedia."

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Wales seems keenly aware of Wikipedia's shortcomings. His book revisits infamous episodes like when an online troll used the site to falsely implicate journalist John Seigenthaler in the Kennedy assassinations. Wales writes that governments, activists, and ideologues have sought to use the platform's editing tools to push their worldview. But the site's continued growth suggests these interests haven't won out over the voluntary army of "Wikipedians," he says. "The fact that Wikipedia is still massive, more popular than any newspaper, is partly because we try really hard—not perfect for sure—to stick to the facts and to give transparency," Wales says. "You can see where the information came from. You can click on it and check."

Wales himself waded into an editing conflict over the site's entry titled "Gaza genocide" on Nov. 2, writing on a page for discussing edits that the article "fails to meet our high standards" for stating in Wikipedia's voice that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. He called it "a particularly egregious example" of the site's broader neutrality issues. Wales' comments prompted pushback from some editors. "Why should the opinions of the largely impartial U.N. and human rights scholars be weighed equally to the obviously partisan opinions of commentators and governments?" one commenter asked. "Because that's what neutrality demands," Wales responded. "Our job, as Wikipedians, is not to take sides in that debate but to carefully and neutrally document it." (The Wikimedia Foundation said in a statement that even as co-founder, Wales is just "one of hundreds of thousands of editors, all striving to present information, including on contentious topics, in line with Wikipedia's policies.")

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Grokikipedia isn't the only AI-driven threat to Wikipedia. Some 65% of the nonprofit's most server-straining traffic now comes from bots, some of which scrape the site to feed into chatbots for training. Instead of clicking through to Wikipedia, search-engine users can now often find their answers in—sometimes wrong—AI-generated summaries. That's if they don't go straight to ChatGPT or Claude. Wales says all of this means islands of human-generated content like Wikipedia "become more important than ever." He says his principles of trust are just as relevant to AI developers, "because every time you get an AI answer and find out that the AI hallucinated and just made that up, it reduces your trust."

That's where the "real world" comes in. Part of Wales' pitch is that most of us already practice trust in "very routine ways," such as getting into a rideshare or sharing an elevator with strangers. He points to Braver Angels, a U.S. group that hosts in-person conversations between people with opposing politics. Participants often emerge "a little more understanding ... a little more ready to think about compromises," Wales says. The challenge is designing institutions and online spaces that tap into those impulses. Wikipedia's collaborative culture, at its best, is a web version of that: slow, structured, and imperfect.

And for internet interactions, Wales' best advice is disarmingly simple. Direct your attention toward activities that build trust. Audit your feeds. "If you find yourself spending too much time using social media and being fed information that you don't trust, then stop doing that," he says. He offers one specific nudge: delete X from your phone.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# 9 Phrases That Drive Your Therapist Up a Wall

Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



A therapist's job is to listen—but not all words are music to their ears. Some indicate that clients aren't taking the process seriously; others reveal misunderstandings that need to be clarified or deep-rooted beliefs that need to be corrected.

We asked a handful of therapists which phrases drive them up a wall—and why.

**“I don’t want to take up too much time.”**

When someone spends 15 minutes apologizing for being in Lauren Auer's office, they're burning through the exact time they're worried about wasting. "They made the appointment," says Auer, a therapist in Peoria, Ill. "They know how long it is, so it's nothing worth apologizing for. It's literally my job." Yet she ends up needing to devote part of the session to convincing her client they deserve to be there.

There may be underlying beliefs about worthiness at play: "A lot of times, it's rooted in what they've learned about taking up space or being too much," Auer says. If she and the client haven't established a therapeutic rapport yet, she responds gently: "Let's talk about that. What I'm hearing from you is..." But if they already know each other well, she might laughingly remind them: "It's *your* appointment. You know you don't need to apologize."

## **"This is probably stupid."**

Auer's clients "constantly" warn that whatever they're about to say is "probably stupid"—before then going on to share something important. She calls this type of qualifier a "progress-killer."

"I want to be, like, 'Stop!'" she says. "'You're sharing something crucial, and even if it feels small or stupid, you're bringing it up for a reason, so it's not.'" She refers to the habit as "self-gaslighting," and over the years, she's developed a go-to strategy to nip it in the bud. "I pretend to spray them with an invisible spray bottle, like a cat scratching the furniture," she says. "I have to educate them and explain, 'You're invalidating yourself.' And usually, with clients I've been seeing for a while, I don't even have to say anything—I just pick up the imaginary spray bottle, and they're like, 'OK, I know.'"

## **"Sorry for crying."**

Uttering these words "is like apologizing for breathing in my office," Auer says, yet she hears them daily. She typically reminds clients that "crying is

actually really healthy, and it means they're feeling safe enough to let their guard down, which is a good sign of healing."

**Read More:** [\*Stop Saying These 5 Things to People With Social Anxiety\*](#)

When someone clearly feels bad about all the waterworks, Auer smiles and says, "Hey, no crying allowed in therapy," in a way that makes it clear she's joking. "It usually gets a laugh, and that can break the shame spiral," she says. "It helps them realize how ridiculous it sounds to apologize for crying in therapy."

## **"I should be over this by now."**

When people assume they should be over whatever they're going through, "they're shaming themselves for being human and having a very normal healing timeline," Auer says. "People often think therapy healing should look like healing a broken bone: It should be linear, upward progress, and then you're fixed and done. But healing doesn't look that way."

When this happens, Auer tries to point out positive shifts in her clients' behavior. Someone might be upset about a situation that triggered them, for example, and complain that they resorted to an unhealthy coping mechanism. She responds: "Well, this time you recognized it was unhealthy more quickly than last time, and then you stopped." Or: "Right now you're telling me about it, which is way better than holding it inside and telling no one. That is progress."

## **"I don't know."**

Nicole Herway is used to hearing three different variations of "I don't know." The first sticks closely to the literal meaning: "You've thought about it, and you've tried to figure it out, but you have absolutely no idea, and you're stuck and need help," says Herway, a therapist in Murray, Utah. She'd rather clients say that directly, "because we want to see that you've tried to solve your own problem rather than coming to us saying, 'I haven't thought about it,'" she says.

Herway's clients employ the second version of "I don't know" when they want to shut the conversation down because it's uncomfortable. She'd prefer they verbalize their feelings: "I'm not ready to talk about that yet."

The third variation, she says, comes from people who would rather not push themselves to self-reflect. "It's because they don't trust that they have the capacity to figure it out," she says. "That's more of a self-esteem, self-confidence issue."

When clients tell her they "don't know," she trains them to rephrase it. "'You can't just throw out 'I don't know' and think I'm going to come in to rescue you from not knowing,' she says. "We have to figure out why you don't know something—what's behind it."

## **"What should I do?"**

Only your grandma can truly answer this query, Herway says, because she probably has plenty of opinions. Therapists, on the other hand, "have absolutely no idea—and we're not supposed to know what you should do," she says. "We're here to empower you to make decisions for yourself, to try things and fail, and to learn and to grow."

A better way of phrasing things, Herway adds, is to ask your therapist: "Can you help me consider some options?" They'll be happy to oblige.

## **"Nothing ever changes."**

There are a few reasons why these words are so irksome. "First of all, I would say, 'Hold up: Is that actually true?'" Herway says. "Most things change in small increments—and often, when people are saying nothing ever changes, they're trying to self-sabotage growth, because it's not happening on their timetable."

**Read More:** [The Worst Things to Say to a Narcissist](#)

Instead, try asking your therapist this: "I feel hopeless and helpless. Can we dig into why?"

“That’s where we explore expectations,” Herway says. “What did you think was going to happen? Because if you’re saying nothing ever changes, that’s because you had some expectation for what was supposed to happen.”

## **“Therapy has never worked for me.”**

Clients often ask Lisa Shows to make promises or guarantees about therapeutic outcomes. They might add that therapy has never worked for them in the past—so why would it this time? “They’re trying to hook me into saying, ‘Well, *this* therapy will work for you,’” says Shows, a licensed professional counselor in Flagstaff, Ariz. “I absolutely want it to work, and I also want to instill hope that it can work. But at the same time, I can’t promise that it’s going to be the thing that’s suddenly helpful.”

Therapy is a collaborative relationship, she adds, that requires engagement and work on both parties’ part in order to be successful.

## **“I’m just going to take this call real quick.”**

You might be surprised how often clients check their phone throughout therapy sessions, texting or taking non-emergency phone calls. “They’ll be a little preoccupied with it, and getting notification after notification, and even if they have it on the chair, I can hear it buzzing,” Shows says.

**Read More:** [7 Things to Say When Someone Gaslights You](#)

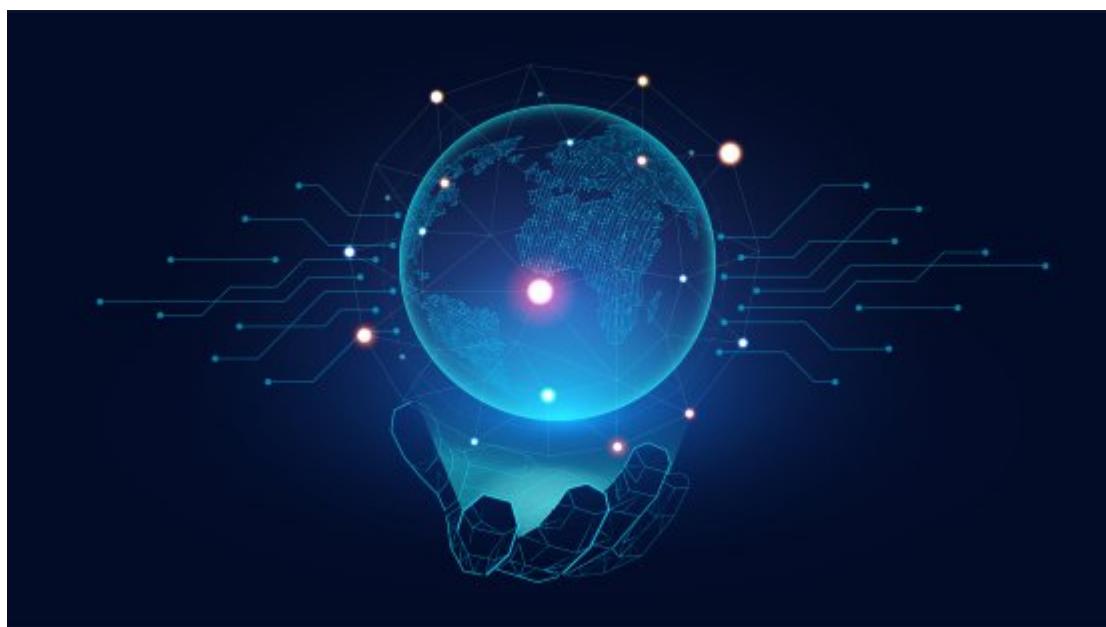
So what’s the proper etiquette around phone usage during therapy? Ideally, clients will silence their device and drop it into their bag, Shows says, so that it’s there if they need it (or want to reference a specific text, which can be helpful for her to see verbatim). That way, they’re not distracted—and are able to give themselves the space “to do something a little different than we do the rest of our lives,” she says.

*Wondering what to say in a tricky social situation? Email [timetotalk@time.com](mailto:timetotalk@time.com)*

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# We Need a Global Movement to Prohibit Superintelligent AI

Andrea Miotti is the founder and CEO of ControlAI.



Last week, a coalition of scientific, religious, and political leaders [called](#) for a global prohibition on developing superintelligence: AI that outperforms humans across all cognitive tasks. I was one of the early signatories, alongside Nobel laureates like Geoffrey Hinton; the world's-most cited AI scientist Yoshua Bengio; former advisor to President Donald Trump Steve Bannon; former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mike Mullen; and Prince Harry and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex.

What's bringing this [unprecedented coalition](#) together? The urgent, [extinction-level threat posed by superintelligence](#). Tech companies are pouring billions of dollars into [privately](#) reaching superintelligence as fast as possible. No one knows how to control AIs that are vastly more competent than any human, yet we are getting closer and closer to

developing them, with many experts expecting superintelligence in the next 5 years at the current pace.

This is why leading AI scientists [warn](#) that developing superintelligence could result in humanity's extinction.

## The need for a ban on superintelligence

Once we develop machines significantly more competent than us across all domains, we will most likely be at the mercy of the superintelligent machines themselves, as currently no country, no company, and no person knows how to control them. In theory, a superintelligent AI would pursue its own goals, and if those goals are incompatible with sustaining human life, we will be annihilated.

To make matters worse, AI developers do not understand how current powerful AI systems actually work. Unlike bridges or power plants, which are designed to precise human specifications, today's AI systems are [“grown”](#) from vast datasets through processes their own creators cannot interpret. Even Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei [admits](#) that we only “understand 3% of how they work.”

Despite this danger, superintelligence remains [the explicit goal](#) of leading AI companies: OpenAI, Anthropic, Google DeepMind, Meta, xAI, DeepSeek. And given the skyrocketing valuation of these companies, they are not about to stop by themselves.

Governments worldwide must step in before it is too late. Yet the international situation is not encouraging. We live in an era of rising geopolitical tension, rife with [trade wars](#) between the U.S. and China. Countries are rushing to invest billions in data centers to power AI at a time when developing and deploying dangerous AI systems remains less regulated than opening a new restaurant or building a house.

## How to ban superintelligence

In this climate, is an international ban on the development of superintelligence even possible?

Yes, because we've achieved such global prohibitions before.

In 1985, the world [learned](#) there was a hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica, thanks to three scientists from the British Antarctic Survey. The culprits for this atmospheric crime were [chlorofluorocarbons](#) (CFCs), ubiquitous industrial chemicals. Unless something was done, the hole would keep growing, and [millions of people](#) would get skin cancer or turn blind because of the lack of UV protection.

Instead, millions [banded together to ban CFCs](#). Scientists made the threat tangible with colored satellite pictures and clear discussion of the health consequences. NGOs orchestrated boycotts of huge brands and directed thousands of concerned citizens to write protest letters. Schools worldwide ran educational programs, and the UN endorsed public awareness campaigns.

In 1987, a mere two years after the ozone hole was made public, every existing country signed [the Montreal Protocol](#). Signed during the Cold War, the Montreal Protocol demonstrates that it is possible to reach quick and decisive international agreements in the midst of geopolitical tensions.

One key factor was that the ozone hole endangered nearly everybody in the world. It was not an externality pushed by some people onto others, but something that everyone would suffer from. Superintelligence is a similarly universal threat: loss of control of AI means that even those who develop it will not be spared from its dangers. The extinction risk from superintelligence thus has the potential to cut through every division. It can unite people across political parties, religions, nations, and ideologies. Nobody wants their life, their family, their world to be destroyed.

When people learn about superintelligence and the extinction risk it poses, many see the danger and start worrying about it. Like with the ozone hole, this worry must be catalyzed into civic engagement, building a global movement that works with governments to make a prohibition on superintelligence a reality.

Unfortunately, most lawmakers simply still do not know about the threat of superintelligence or its urgency, and AI companies are now deploying [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to crush attempts to regulate AI.

The best counterbalance to this gargantuan lobbying effort is for lawmakers to hear from their constituents what they truly think about superintelligence. Very often, lawmakers will find that most of their [constituents](#) want them to say “[no” to superintelligence](#), and “yes” to a future where humanity survives and thrives.

In an era of declining political engagement and increased partisanship, prohibiting superintelligence is a common sense issue that unites people across the political spectrum.

As with the depletion of the ozone layer, everyone stands to lose from the development of superintelligence. We know the movement to avoid this fate can be built.

The only question left is: can we build it fast enough?

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Trump Wants Venezuela's Maduro Out. Will He Pull the Trigger?

*Ian Bremmer is a foreign affairs columnist and editor-at-large at TIME. He is the president of Eurasia Group, a political-risk consultancy, and GZERO Media, a company dedicated to providing intelligent and engaging coverage of international affairs. He teaches applied geopolitics at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and his most recent book is [The Power of Crisis](#).*



Signals are [growing louder](#) that U.S. President Donald Trump [wants](#) Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro out of office. He'd like to accomplish this without starting a war that might not go to plan.

So far, [U.S. military action](#) against Venezuela has been [limited to strikes](#) against more than a dozen boats the White House insists are carrying

narcotics toward the U.S.—drugs that Trump [said](#) in a Nov. 2 interview on *60 Minutes* are “destroying families all over our country.” Asked if that meant war, Trump said, “I don’t think so. But they’ve been treating us very badly.” Some [69 people](#) have been killed by U.S. strikes on boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific in recent weeks.

The U.S. has now moved significant military hardware into position in the Caribbean, [deploying an aircraft-carrier group](#) and placing significant naval strike capability and U.S. troops just off Venezuela’s coast. The next U.S. step could be to hit targets inside Venezuela that the Trump Administration insists fuel the drug trade. “I’m not gonna tell you what I’m gonna do with Venezuela, if I was gonna do it or if I wasn’t going to do it,” Trump said in the same *60 Minutes* interview. In addition, U.S. officials [reportedly](#) told the *New York Times* last month that “the Trump Administration [had] secretly authorized the CIA to conduct covert action in Venezuela.”

Although Venezuela plays a [minor role](#) in the trafficking of drugs that reach the U.S., a hard line against Caracas appeals to Trump’s MAGA base and Latino backers [who think](#) the U.S. is too soft on Latin American leftists like Maduro, who has been in power since the [death of Hugo Chávez](#) in 2013 and is accused of [stealing the 2024 election](#).

#### **Read More:** [Trump’s War on ‘Narcoterrorists’ Is Doomed to Fail](#)

Enter the growing U.S. pressure, which appears [aimed](#) at persuading Maduro’s inner circle that the cost of continued loyalty to Venezuela’s strongman has become too high, and that he should be removed from within to avoid military escalation. If these tactics fail, the Trump Administration might target Maduro directly.

A move against Maduro from within Venezuela’s security services would probably lead to U.S.-Venezuelan negotiations that allow a member of Maduro’s team to replace him. A new President from within the armed forces might mend fences with Washington. In a less likely scenario, given deep military mistrust of the opposition, some segments of the military could side with opposition leaders [María Corina Machado](#) and Edmundo González or push for fresh elections.

## **Read More:** [\*Venezuela's Opposition Is Using Misinformation\*](#)

But dealing with Maduro's men remains the only way to avoid war. The ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela controls all of the country's powerful institutions, including state-run oil company [Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.](#), the regime's [cash cow](#). To cut Maduro loose, the security services would demand guarantees that their safety, and control of the country's power and access to wealth, would be protected, likely with international mediation that makes Trump Administration commitments more credible.

Yet senior Venezuelan military leaders know that Maduro [uses Cuban intelligence](#) to spy on his own generals, and that any move against their President risks execution. To persuade them to move, the U.S. could directly target senior members of the regime, like Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello—for whom there is an [outstanding \\$25 million U.S. reward](#)—to press others to act.

Trump knows that failure to remove Maduro could prove humiliating. And if Maduro is removed by direct U.S. military action, the situation inside Venezuela [could quickly spiral out of control](#), forcing the U.S. President into decisions he'd rather avoid. Widespread social unrest could cost Trump the ability to influence who's in charge in Caracas and, assuming a deep reluctance in the White House to put American troops in harm's way to keep order, could leave Trump responsible for an ensuing bloodbath as Venezuela's army and security services fight to contain the [risk of civil war](#).

The U.S. President will make the final call, now that a bid to check his war powers have [failed in the Senate](#). And while he appears supportive of an escalating pressure campaign, there's no indication yet that he has settled on a single strategy to get what he wants.

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# As Shutdown Fight Hits SNAP Aid and Obamacare, Trump States Set to Pay Bigger Price

Elliott is a senior correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C., bureau, where he covers national campaigns, elections, and government. He also writes TIME's politics newsletter, [The D.C. Brief](#).



*This article is part of The D.C. Brief, TIME's politics newsletter. Sign up [here](#) to get stories like this sent to your inbox.*

As the government shutdown reaches the one-month mark, the country is about to hit two milestones that are set to make it feel all too real for many Americans. On Saturday, Nov. 1, food stamp benefits will dry up just as

open enrollment begins for those purchasing health insurance for the next year, complete with steep, double-digit rate [hikes](#).

The impact is going to be felt by millions of Americans. Some will find it tougher to put food on the table as soon as next week. Others will wonder if they can still afford health insurance for themselves or loved ones. Many will find themselves in both groups.

Neither challenge is likely to be resolved soon. Players on both sides believe they are “winning” this fight and thus don’t need to reach across the aisle. The shutdown that began Oct. 1 is being discussed as a problem to be solved mid-November or even into December, according to sources on the Hill and on K Street who are universally dug in. This is a shutdown without consequence, at least on the surface.

But many Republicans in Congress are just starting to realize their constituents are going to be hit harder than the Democrats on both of these issues. And what Democrats are realizing is that President Donald Trump 2.0 is not the same pliable neophyte they faced in his first term and that the disparate effects on his MAGA base is unlikely to move him. It’s a mismatched understanding that leaves at least 40 million Americans watching as their meals, medical tests, and savings accounts all stand to be pressure-tested in short order.

Here’s a look at how the loss of SNAP funding loss and Obamacare subsidies are going to hit red and blue states differently.

## **SNAP Benefits Cut Off**

There are two major conversations taking place among lawmakers and influence-peddlers right now. The first is a program commonly known as food stamps. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is used by about one-in-eight Americans, or 42 million people, and offers a meager lifeline to poor families. The Department of Agriculture says it is going to shut off SNAP’s aid for November—about \$9.2 billion—starting Saturday. Economists predict that will have a down-stream effect on everything from farmers and grocery stores to truck drivers and gas stations. According to

most [studies](#), the return on investment for every \$1 in direct aid to poor Americans is \$1.50 to \$1.80 to the economy.

While the SNAP cutoff will reverberate from coast to coast, red states may feel it more acutely. In the 30 states that Trump carried last year, 25 of them were more reliant on SNAP than the national average. While the national average of SNAP recipients stands at 12%, an [analysis](#) from the Center for Policy and Budget Priorities shows that deep-red states like Louisiana—home to House Speaker Mike Johnson—surpass that with 18%.

Drill down a little more in those Trump states, and it's easy to imagine some of those numbers in future campaign ads against Republicans. South Dakota —home to Senate Majority Leader John Thune—has a smaller total roll but 70% of it is for families with kids. In 29 of the 30 Trump states, the proportion of SNAP recipients with kids passes the national average of 62%. That total share under 18 nationally? That's 20 million kids.

The Trump Administration says the SNAP program is out of money and officials have no choice. It's a novel read on the situation given that under past funding lapses—including one as recently as this summer—agencies have been able to [restack](#) cash to keep this spigot open for needy families. Congress actually built into the budget a multi-year safety valve for exactly this situation. Yet the Trump Administration is claiming the current standoff leaves them no choice.

## Obamacare Subsidies Expire

The second point of a fight is the health care system. In order to pay for tax cuts this summer, Trump used some budget gimmicks: he pulled subsidies for low- and middle-income families included in a Joe Biden-era pandemic-relief package to cover the costs of a [\\$3.4 trillion](#) trillion law that [disproportionately](#) helps the richest Americans. Trump says those subsidies for single individuals making more than \$64,000 were no longer needed now that Covid-19 is over. It's just an added bonus that the health program most benefited by the subsidies is known as Obamacare, named for a longtime Trump nemesis.

If 22 million people losing access to those subsidies was palatable on its own, those who have unsubsidized health care are going to get hit, too. Congress' scorekeepers [estimate](#) 4 million of those subsidized Americans will choose to go without coverage, further pushing up costs for those who stay in the insurance pool. Preventing that exodus comes with a hefty [cost](#): \$350 billion, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

On Wednesday, an early look at rates for next year [showed](#) insurers upped rates in federal plans by about 30% and state plans by about 17%. While the prices for insurance could still drop, so far it does not look likely. Insurers have to work on the assumption that Congress will not get its act together in time for new insurance terms to kick in before the sign-up deadline. And, in normal times, insurers like to have rates settled shortly after Labor Day. These, of course, are not normal times.

Trump states again are the biggest losers if things go as planned. Nationally, the Urban Institute's state-by-state modeling [estimates](#) there will be a 38% decrease in subsidized health care coverage. But in Georgia—where Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green has been [sounding](#) the alarm from inside the MAGA revival tent—that number hits 53%. In Louisiana, the dip reaches 61%. And in Texas, a staggering 60% of Lone Star State residents enrolled in a subsidized health plan will be cut out.

What that will look like to red state lawmakers is a spike in uninsured constituents. In Mississippi, the number of folks choosing to drop coverage is projected to spike 65%, per the Urban Institute's [numbers](#). Half of South Carolina subsidized families would drop insurance if the help expires. In Tennessee, the numbers would be a sizable 41%. In Texas, 39%. In West Virginia, 35% of subsidized Americans would do without if the aid goes away.

All of these red state constituents seeing red—both in rage and in their bank statements—make clear why even some conservative warriors alike are starting to look for an offramp from the shutdown. Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri is still [favoring](#) a clean re-opening but is publicly trying to whip votes to do a stand-alone extension of SNAP. That so far has gone nowhere.

The same is true for a stand-alone extension of the Obamacare subsidies. Senate Republicans, though, are hinting to colleagues that those could be in the mix as a stand-alone measure—but only if both sides can come to a deal that keeps the government open for a good while, perhaps long enough to take this sort of brinksmanship off the table until after the midterms.

It's now Thursday. The healthcare cost increases are real and published on the government's main clearinghouse for Obamacare plans. Harried parents are realizing their EBT cards may not work when they do grocery shopping this weekend. And here in Washington, there is the persistent disconnect between lawmakers who want to win the fight and families who just want the government to have their backs.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Climate Inaction is Leading to Millions of Deaths Each Year

Shah is a reporter at TIME.



## The Brief October 29, 2025

**The tragedy of Eric Adams, how to help those impacted by Hurricane Melissa, and more**

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Podcast ID – Long Length: 9d10be15-1655-4c2e-8796-2ef24e6d4ae3

Global failure to adapt to climate change is taking a toll on people's lives and is responsible for millions of deaths every year, according to a new

report from [The Lancet](#).

*The Lancet* today published its 9th annual “Countdown on Health and Climate Change” report, led by University College London and produced in collaboration with the World Health Organization. It aims to provide a comprehensive breakdown of the connections between climate change and health.

“This year’s health stocktake paints a bleak and undeniable picture of the devastating health harms reaching all corners of the world—with record-breaking threats to health from heat, extreme weather events, and wildfire smoke killing millions. The destruction to lives and livelihoods will continue to escalate until we end our fossil fuel addiction and dramatically up our game to adapt,” Marina Romanello, executive director of the Lancet Countdown at University College London, warned in a press release.

Twelve of the 20 indicators for the health risks and impacts of climate change in the report set concerning new records—showing that the health impacts caused by our changing climate have reached unprecedented levels that cannot be ignored. The indicators studied include extreme heat, weather events, food security, and pollution.

Weather events, like extreme heat and wildfires, are becoming more common due to climate change and are having a deadly impact on the lives of thousands. The number of heat-related deaths have surged 23% since the 1990s, now reaching 546,000 a year, according to the report. In 2024, the hottest year on record, the average person was exposed to a record 16 additional health-threatening hot days, the report found. Air pollution from wildfire smoke was also linked to a record 154,000 deaths last year.

Delays in the adoption of clean energy are also taking a toll on our health. Each year, 2.5 million deaths are attributable to the air pollution that comes from continued burning of fossil fuels. Many of these deaths could be prevented by the transition to clean energy—air pollution resulting from the household use of dirty fuels and technologies across 65 countries resulted in 2.3 million deaths in 2022, according to the report. Energy related emissions have reached new highs, the report says, with the world’s largest fossil fuel giants having increased their projected production to a scale three

times greater than a liveable planet can support. According to the Paris Agreement, the world must peak global emissions before this year at the latest and decline 43% by 2030 in order to limit global warming by 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

The report calls on leaders to focus on green solutions that can also improve health outcomes, and warns that political backsliding on climate commitments will only cause more harm. “Scarce financial support for adaptation remains a key barrier, and data in this report shows it is still grossly insufficient to cover the financial needs disclosed by countries,” said Romanello. “A political shift towards reduced foreign aid support from some of the world’s wealthiest countries, further restricts financial support for climate change action, leaving all populations increasingly unprotected.”

In spite of the rollbacks on climate action in the U.S., many governments and communities are taking action globally—and reaping the health benefits that come along with it. According to the most recent data the study analyzed, an increased shift away from coal, particularly in wealthy countries, prevented an estimated 160,000 premature deaths annually between 2010 and 2022, and renewable energy generation also reached record-highs in 2022.

It’s just one example of how combating climate change can improve health outcomes for people around the globe, the report’s contributors say.

“Climate change action remains one of the greatest health opportunities of the 21st century, also driving development, spurring innovation, creating jobs, and reducing energy poverty,” Tafadzwa Mahbhaudi, director of the Lancet Countdown Africa said in a statement. “Realizing the myriad benefits of a health-centered response requires unlocking so-far untapped opportunities to mitigate climate change and build resilience to the impacts already being felt.”

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# Why We All Need Emotion Regulation

*Marc Brackett is the founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, a professor in Yale’s Child Study Center, and the author of [Permission to Feel](#) and the new book, [Dealing with Feeling](#).*



As the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, I recently [warned](#) that we are facing an overreaction epidemic. The response to my warning has been, perhaps predictably, extreme.

Thousands of people have messaged me, and commented at me, on social media. Many have accused me of being tone-deaf. Some argued I was asking people to “calm down” while [fascism rises](#).

“Imagine the layers of privilege it takes to gaslight people into thinking they are overreacting,” stated one critic. Others pushed back in the opposite direction, insisting our constant state of panic is unsustainable.

As one person put it: “You can’t fight for what’s right if you’re so emotionally decimated that you’re living your day-to-day in fight-or-flight mode.”

Another countered: “We are not overreacting—we’re underreacting.”

All of these perspectives hold truth. And their passion highlights why we need a deeper, clearer conversation about what emotion regulation is—and just as important, what it isn’t. Let me be crystal clear: anger is not inherently a bad thing. But the solution to the overreaction epidemic is emotion regulation—which will be vitally important to address our global challenges ahead.

Emotion regulation is a set of intentional, learned skills for managing feelings wisely. At its core, it’s about choosing responses that reflect our goals and values. This can include calming ourselves down before a meeting, reframing a negative thought, or expressing frustration constructively with a loved one. But no matter the emotion, emotional regulation keeps us in the driver’s seat

## **Why regulation gets misunderstood**

The word “overreaction” can be a lightning rod. For many, it signals dismissal: as if I were saying, “Your fear is invalid” or “Your outrage is excessive.” That is not my message. Emotions are not the problem. Fear, anger, grief—all of these are human, appropriate responses to real crises.

The problem is what happens when our emotions run unchecked. We lash out at loved ones, doomscroll until 2 a.m., or paralyze ourselves with despair. Over time, our nervous systems stay locked in fight-or-flight. We burn out before we can meaningfully act.

This is why emotion regulation so often gets misunderstood. Many people hear “regulate” and think “suppress.” They imagine some kind of emotion police telling us what we may and may not feel or should or should not do. But that’s not it. Emotion regulation is about choice. It’s about deciding how to use our emotions wisely so they fuel action rather than hijack it.

## **Anger is not the enemy**

Emotion regulation should never mean silencing anger. Anger is not a problem to be eliminated—it is crucial data which tells us we believe something unfair has happened. Outrage tells us our moral code is being violated. These are not feelings to be ignored. They are signals.

The challenge is that dysregulated anger can turn destructive—both personally and collectively. I’ve spent decades studying and teaching emotion regulation, and I’ve learned that anger without direction is like a wildfire. It burns hot and fast, then leaves nothing but ashes. With emotion regulation, that same anger becomes a steady flame—a force that warms, guides, and endures.

Civil rights leaders didn’t succeed because they lacked rage; they succeeded because they learned to channel it without being consumed. That’s the difference between fury that scorches everything in sight and anger that fuels justice.

## **Emotion regulation is a strength, not a weakness**

Another misconception is that regulation makes you soft—that if you pause before reacting, you’ve lost your edge. Some have implied that my call for regulation is a call to “calm down” in the face of injustice, a recipe for complacency. But regulation isn’t about compliance. It’s about power.

Consider this: snapping at a friend or colleague because you’re overwhelmed may feel cathartic in the moment, but it can erode trust. Pausing long enough to express anger with clarity instead of rage-blindness? That’s not weakness. That’s strength.

Researchers have studied the effects of emotion regulation for decades. People who regulate effectively are more likely to think clearly about solutions and to sustain the relationships that make collective action possible. Far from being a pushover, regulated individuals are more likely to be effective in standing up, speaking out, and persisting.

## What emotional regulation looks like in practice

So what does healthy regulation actually look like? It's not about "just breathe and ignore it." It's a set of concrete, science-based skills:

- Name it. Accurately labeling emotions—fear, anger, despair—helps us target our responses. Anger may fuel protest. Grief may lead us to seek solidarity.
- Shift, don't suppress. Reframing how we see a situation can turn "this is hopeless" into "this is a call to organize."
- Anchor before acting. A pause for breath isn't avoidance. It's ensuring your nervous system is steady enough to act with clarity rather than rashness.
- Choose renewal. Rest, joy, and connection are not escapism. They are how we resist burnout so we can keep showing up tomorrow, next year, and for the long haul.

Without these skills, outrage can spiral into paralysis or misplaced aggression. With them, outrage becomes fuel for sustained, wise action.

And importantly, we almost never regulate alone. Our nervous systems are permeable. We catch emotions from each other. We shape one another's states all day long. That process is called "co-regulation."

Think of the teacher who calms a nervous child before a test, the colleague who steadies a panicked coworker during a crisis, or the friend who listens with empathy instead of judgment. These small acts are not small. They are the fabric of resilience.

Of course, co-regulation can also go wrong. Dismissing, shaming, or escalating someone else's feelings is a form of *unhealthy* co-regulation. But when we co-regulate with warmth, empathy, and respect, we literally lend our stability to one another. That's why movements only endure when people create micro-climates of safety and trust. Outrage alone doesn't keep a movement alive; co-regulated communities do.

For this reason, regulation never means silencing marginalized voices, excusing injustice, or encouraging apathy. Regulation is not resignation. It's what allows us to keep going when the fight is long.

We need not only personal skills but also cultural and structural supports—schools that teach emotional intelligence, workplaces that value mental health, and media platforms that stop monetizing outrage.

## A call to act—with strength, not exhaustion

We live in terrifying times. [Authoritarianism is on the rise](#). Rights are being eroded. Climate disasters [grow more frequent](#). No one is suggesting we look away. But let's be honest: living in constant panic will not save us.

Emotion regulation is how we turn fear into courage, outrage into justice, and grief into solidarity. It doesn't tell us to ignore crises. It equips us to face them without losing ourselves—or each other—in the process.

So the next time you feel like freaking out, don't silence the feeling. Name it. Anchor it. Share it with someone who can co-regulate with you. Then use it.

Because the world doesn't need less passion. It needs passion that lasts.

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# London Mayor Sadiq Khan: Zohran Mamdani's Win Is a Victory for Hope

Sadiq Khan is Mayor of London.



A couple of weeks before his [election victory](#), Zohran Mamdani stood in front of a mosque in the Bronx. There, he gave the [most personal speech](#) of his campaign—a speech which sounded like it had been [months, perhaps years](#), in the making.

Just days before, a New York radio host had [suggested](#) Zohran would be “cheering” if another 9/11 happened on his watch. It was the high-water mark of a rising tide of anti-Muslim hatred that [Mamdani had faced](#) since the moment he declared his candidacy last year.

Zohran's response was [defiant](#). He spoke about his [pride in his faith](#). He talked about the climate of fear which, like many Muslim New Yorkers, he had faced for much of his life. And he recalled the advice of a community elder who had suggested that if he wanted to make it in politics, he'd be better off keeping his religion to himself.

**Read More:** [\*Zohran Mamdani on His Unlikely Rise\*](#)

The speech took courage. Zohran could have chosen to stay quiet and spend the final fortnight of the campaign focused on his core messages, ignoring his critics' attempts to lower the tone and use his faith to other him. Sometimes, though, we must stand up and say enough is enough.

[video id=mYhF89bH autostart="viewable"]

Sadly, this is an experience I know all too well. I've never defined myself as a Muslim politician, but rather as a politician who happens to be a Muslim. My decision to run for Mayor of London was motivated by one thing alone: my determination to improve the lives of people in my city—the city I love, and which gave me everything. During my first mayoral election campaign, I [promised](#) to be a mayor for all Londoners. Yet time and again, rival candidates sought to define me solely by my faith. Days before I was elected, my main opponent [even penned a newspaper article](#) accusing me of being friends with terrorists, accompanied by an image of a double-decker bus destroyed by the [horrific 7/7 London bombings](#).

These kinds of attacks have persisted. Rather than opposing my decisions as Mayor as those of a politician they disagree with, a small but vocal minority have tried to deride them as those of a Muslim man. Just last month, the President of the United States [claimed](#) in his address to the U.N. General Assembly that I was trying to introduce Sharia Law in London!

It is hard not to read these outlandish claims as a symptom of a deepening fear among President Trump and his allies that, in places like London and New York, this form of toxic politics does not work. The fact that [both cities](#) now have Mayors who are also Muslim is extraordinary, but—in two of the most diverse cities on Earth—it's a bit beside the point. We did not

win because of our faith. We won because we addressed voters' concerns, rather than playing on them.

In recent years, we've heard a growing chorus of commentators and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic attacking cities for their liberal values. Painting a picture of a lawless dystopia, they advocate the same old authoritarian solutions—from [deporting](#) hundreds of thousands of legal migrants by removing their right to remain, to [deploying](#) the National Guard to clamp down on dissent. Ask most Londoners or [New Yorkers](#), though, and you'll find that this narrative falls on deaf ears.

They don't care about the place your family are originally from or the God you worship. They are [proud of the diversity](#) of their city and don't choose their politicians by creed, color, or culture. They choose them because they want bold, ambitious policies commensurate with the size and scale of the challenges their cities are facing. They want greener cities, where they can walk without worrying about breathing toxic air. They want fairer societies, where the size of their salaries does not determine their children's chances in life. They want help dealing with the cost-of-living crisis. And they want a more prosperous economy where growth leaves no one behind.

**Read More:** [\*The Billionaires Who Failed to Stop Zohran Mamdani, and How Much They Spent\*](#)

Mayor Mamdani and I might not agree on everything. Many of the challenges our cities face are similar, but they are not identical. Put policy differences aside, though, and it's clear that we are united by something far more fundamental: our belief in the power of politics to change people's lives for the better.

For decades, doubters have predicted the decline of London and New York. But each time we've faced a crisis of confidence, we've emerged even stronger than before. That's not just because of the City or Wall Street, the West End or Broadway, the green lawns of Wimbledon or the bright blue acrylic of Flushing Meadows. It's because London and New York are cities where the dream of social mobility is [still alive](#).

Today, an affordability crisis means that dream is under threat. But Mayor Mamdani's [election](#) shows that New Yorkers—like Londoners—know that the answer is not to renounce the values which define us. Instead, we must defend them, with policies that protect the foundational promise of our cities: that, no matter who you are or where you're from, you can achieve anything. As some seek to turn back the clock on progress, we are standing firm. In our cities, fear and division won't get you far. Hope and unity will always win.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Tragedy of Eric Adams

Molly Ball is the national political correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. She covers campaigns, the White House, political personalities and policy debates across America. She has received numerous awards for her political coverage, including the Dirksen Award for Distinguished Reporting of Congress, the Gerald R. Ford Prize for Distinguished Reporting on the Presidency and the Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting. She is the author of *Pelosi*, a bestselling biography of the first woman Speaker of the House.



Before Eric Adams can start explaining the conspiracy that took him down, the soon-to-be-former mayor of New York City must make his morning smoothie. On a chilly recent Friday, he is standing in the stainless-steel kitchen of Gracie Mansion, the stately official residence on the Upper East Side, layering blueberries and ginger and flaxseed and greens into a Nutribullet blender.

“People think that our stomachs are like a washing machine—that when you eat, everything mixes up together—and it is not,” he says, whirring the mixture into a greenish-brown sludge. “Our stomachs are like a sink, where what you put in it first goes down the drain first.” He pours me a sample. It tastes like ginger-flavored grass.

We are speaking a week and change since Adams bowed to the inevitable and dropped his bid for re-election. There is a lot he wants to get off his chest. When he was elected four years ago, Adams seemed poised to be a transformational figure. Amid rising crime and racial tensions, the former police captain promised there need be no compromise between safety and justice. Like Joe Biden’s election a year earlier, his win was a triumph of the Democratic Party’s moderate Black base over the radical-chic faculty liberals and their alienating ideas. “I’m the Biden of Brooklyn,” Adams boasted. “Look at me and you’re seeing the future of the Democratic Party.” Aides whispered that he could run for President.

Four years later, the Democrats’ future looks murkier than ever, and Adams’ lofty ambitions lie in ruins. His approval rating sank [as low as 20%](#) in the wake of his federal indictment on bribery and corruption charges and its subsequent dismissal by President Trump’s Justice Department. In the mayoral race between Zohran Mamdani and Andrew Cuomo, Adams was relegated to an afterthought, an object of ridicule and scorn. The [cloud of scandal](#) has obscured the message he wants to leave on his way out.

“I could have made better choices,” he says, reflecting on all the appointees who broke the rules and betrayed him. “But I had a city to run. And when you look at it, even with the crew that I assembled, there was not one year that we were not moving the city forward.” He’s been punished, as he sees it, for telling unpopular truths, harassed by an unfair justice system, hammered by a biased press, his achievements diminished by a system he threatened.

It’s hard not to think about what might have been. “It strikes me as Shakespearean in its tragic outcome, because there was so much there to admire,” says Juan Williams, the Fox News analyst who has known Adams since the 1990s, when *Playboy* assigned him to write a profile of the young lieutenant who’d risked his career to testify about racism in the NYPD. “There was so much energy and determination,” Williams recalls, “a sense

that this guy was going somewhere and he was going to take other people with him, especially Black people. But I don't think there's any question it's his fault. He was selfish, and it clouded his thinking—his sense of right and wrong."

Adams proceeds to a peach-colored parlor, the smoothie in one hand and a container of carrot slices in the other. All he is asking, he says, is for people to look at his record. To put the good alongside the bad and see how it all adds up. The crime and homelessness he reduced, the jobs numbers and test scores he improved, the nightlife he brought back from its COVID-era slumber.

Settling onto an orange couch, a carrot stick in each hand, he turns the conversation to his late mother, whom he says left school after third grade, worked three jobs, and raised six kids on her own. A black-and-white photograph of her adorns the cufflinks he's wearing. "There was one point during this whole thing that it took everything to get out of bed," Adams says. "And it was only thinking about Mommy—how she always got up, no matter what she had to go through—that I said, listen, Eric, you just can't surrender."

He came so far, only to end up isolated and diminished. "They didn't think I could do it," he says. "You're a darn former cop, how are you going to run a city this complex? And there was a body of people that was not even willing to give me a chance."



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**Adams grabs the smoothie** and his suit jacket and climbs into the back of the black Suburban that is his de facto office. There is a packed day ahead. The next 12 hours will take us to 10 stops across three of the city's five boroughs, from a rundown police precinct to a glitzy nightclub, from a subway platform to a taxi-drivers' gala.

The indictment is on Adams' mind as we make our way to City Hall. "No gold bars, no bags of cash, nothing—the case was about upgrades," he says of the bribery charges. "Over years of investigating me, they could never find anything. So they had to concoct this."

Adams was born in Brooklyn and moved to Queens in elementary school. By his teens he was a street hustler affiliated with a local crew. At 15, he was arrested with his brother after being caught stealing. In police custody, officers repeatedly kicked the brothers in the groin, [according to Adams](#), leaving him urinating blood. The encounter left Adams' brother with a hatred of cops—but it motivated Eric to become one. In 22 years on the force, he became known as an outspoken internal critic.

Adams left the NYPD and ran for state Senate in 2006, where one of his first causes was pay raises for lawmakers. (“Show me the money!” he said in a floor speech.) He served four terms before being elected the first Black Brooklyn borough president in 2013. In 2020, he joined a crowded Democratic mayoral primary that included tech executive Andrew Yang and several liberal technocrats. Adams’ focus on public safety stood out. His upset victory, powered by outer-borough Black voters, signaled that the party’s working-class silent majority wanted more and better policing, not the “defund the police” of the fashionable activist slogan.

Under Adams, the city has seen a decline in both violent and property crimes. This year, shootings are down 54% and murders are down 36% compared to the same period four years ago, according to the NYPD. Subway crime in the third quarter of 2025 was the lowest in recorded history excluding the pandemic. And crime isn’t the only area where Adams’ accomplishments have been “substantial,” says Kathryn Wylde, president of the powerful Partnership for New York City, who has worked with mayors since the 1970s. The city’s economy has grown at a faster pace than the rest of the country, hitting records for gross output and jobs last year. Adams’ zoning reform, the biggest in decades, is projected to spur the construction of 80,000 new homes over 15 years, and his “Trash Revolution” has begun to move the city’s notorious garbage piles off the sidewalk and mitigate the rat problem. As one X user argued: “Eric Adams is legitimately insane and literally committed treason in exchange for airline miles. He’s also the only NYC mayor in ~50 years to make progress on two of the biggest issues the city has: trash & housing.”

Adams cut billions from the budget and took on entrenched urban nonprofits, weathering criticism from homelessness advocates when he ramped up the city’s use of involuntary commitment for those with severe mental illness—a policy Mamdani has vowed to roll back. His chief of staff, Camille Joseph Varlack, tells me Adams has a skepticism of government grounded in his upbringing. “He feels the city failed his family, and that drives him in a way I don’t know if he even understands,” she says. “I tell him, ‘I always think of you as Batman, and not just because you like to go out at night.’”

New Yorkers are not convinced. In a [recent CBS News poll](#), 61% of respondents said that things in the city are “going badly.” Just 22% said crime had decreased over the last four years, while 46% said it had increased. Ana María Archila, co-director of the left-wing Working Families Party, says Adams doesn’t deserve credit for declines in crime when rates have been falling nationally. Adams, she says, has been too willing to see police as the answer, and has governed the city for the benefit of his wealthy patrons rather than his working-class constituents. “He spent so much time fear-mongering about crime,” she says, “and at the same time he put police officers on the front lines of the approach to mental health and homelessness in ways people perceived as highly ineffective and not very humane.”

But political leaders are often defined not by the plans they make but by the crises forced upon them. For Adams, it was the migrant surge. When he came into office, the Biden Administration was insisting there was no crisis at the border. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott then began sending buses of asylum seekers to Washington in protest. In July 2022, Adams called Abbott’s action “heartless” and vowed that New York City would welcome migrants and provide them with shelter and services. Abbott was happy to oblige, and in August he announced he had sent buses to Manhattan. (Adams contended that Texas was busing migrants to New York prior to the announcement.)

A year later, Adams’ tone changed. New York was spending billions housing the migrants, whose numbers had reached six figures, in shelters, encampments, leased hotels and a cruise terminal. Adams began criticizing the Administration, saying Biden had “[failed New York City](#).” In private meetings, Adams says, he urged Biden and his team to secure the border. He says Administration officials urged him to be quiet and compared the crisis to gallstones—it would be painful, but it would pass, and the best thing to do was tough it out.

For Adams, who was cutting back library hours to pay for the shelters and taking political heat for giving handouts to migrants, that was not a satisfying answer. Adams wondered who was really in charge at the White House: in his later meetings with Biden, he says he noticed a marked decline, and suspected the president wasn’t well-served by his staff. He found himself frozen out by the White House, dropped from the advisory

council of Biden's reelection campaign. (A Biden spokesperson did not return a request for comment.)

On Nov. 2, 2023, Adams was headed to Washington to confront federal officials about the migrant crisis when the FBI raided the home of his chief campaign fundraiser. The mayor turned his car around on the way to LaGuardia and canceled the trip. Four days later, the feds stopped Adams on the street and seized his phones and iPad. To Adams, the connection seems obvious: He called out Biden, and then Biden's Department of Justice went after him.

A few months later, Trump went on trial in Manhattan, and Adams began to sympathize with the former president's claims of political targeting. Adams read the book *Government Gangsters*, by Kash Patel, the erstwhile MAGA influencer who is now Trump's FBI director, which painted a sinister picture of the "deep state" that would stop at nothing to destroy Biden's enemies. He watched Biden decry Trump's subversions of justice and then pardon his son on his way out of office. "Take Trump's name off it," Adams says. "They basically had a hit list."

Back in the car after taping a TV interview about subway surfing, the mayor takes a sip of his smoothie, which has been sitting untouched for hours. "My spinach," he says, "like Popeye."



We pass the flashing screens of Times Square and descend the steps to its subway station, where a dozen reporters and a row of television cameras await. Adams, as is his custom for even the most banal announcement, enters to the strains of Jay-Z's "Empire State of Mind."

The press conference begins normally enough. Adams and his well-respected police commissioner, Jessica Tisch, tout the program they've instituted to reduce crime and homelessness on the subway, which they say has removed 2,100 people for quality-of-life violations and connected thousands with shelter beds and permanent housing. It's when the reporters start asking questions that things start to go off the rails.

One asks about the latest gruesome subway crime, a 64-year-old man [beaten to death](#) at a Brooklyn station. Another asks if Adams' campaign failed because his claims of progress weren't convincing. Adams blames the media. "My campaign didn't struggle because we failed," he says. "My campaign struggled because the story has not been told by the same people that are not telling the story right now."

Perhaps, another reporter suggests, there are shootings not being recorded in official statistics. Tisch takes this one. “If the suggestion is that we are in some way hiding people with bullet holes in them, I think that’s absurd,” she says.

Adams seizes the lectern. “Let’s be honest,” he says. “You didn’t think I could turn this city around. Many of you thought, He’s just a cop. What does he know about running a city this complicated? You don’t want to deal with the fact of more housing than ever in the history of the city, lowest crime in the history of the city, more jobs—we broke the record 11 times. Outpacing the state in reading and math. We have dropped unemployment all across the city, but particularly in the Black and brown community. All of these indicators. You didn’t think I could do it in four years.” The same statistics the press uses to judge other mayors demonstrate his success, Adams argues, yet “you’re still talking about how we’re fudging numbers.”

He’s getting heated now, lapsing into the third person: “Eric has turned around the economy. Broadway had the best 12 months in recorded history. Crime is at record levels. Just report the facts. Stop coming up with all of these creative ways of saying Eric failed. Eric didn’t fail. Eric did the job of a working-class mayor.”

Now Adams points a finger at his least favorite reporter, Chris Sommerfeldt of the *Daily News*, whom he banned from City Hall press conferences earlier this year. In today’s paper, Sommerfeldt has a story about *Political Humanity*, a new memoir self-published by Adams’ former girlfriend Jasmine Ray, who later worked in his administration. Their relationship first turned romantic, according to the book, in a 2014 encounter at Brooklyn Borough Hall. Adams takes issue with Sommerfeldt’s description of this as “the first time she slept with Adams.” (The book strongly implies it, but Ray tells me they merely kissed.)

“You’re a dark, sick person, man,” Adams says, glaring at Sommerfeldt. Tisch and some of the other officials are starting to look uncomfortable. He dismisses them: “Y’all can depart. Let me do this.” A prolonged diatribe at Sommerfeldt ensues.

New York Attorney General Letitia James has just been indicted by Trump's Justice Department, but her indictment, Adams notes, is being widely portrayed as politically motivated payback, unlike his own. "People attacked me. They called me names. They destroyed an impeccable record in the city," he rants. "Folks, I've been doing this for 40 years. I have 40 years of delivering for the people of the City of New York. And within months, because of a lawfare, you all of a sudden turned me into a criminal."

Adams goes on in this vein for some time. "So don't start asking me about what's going on now," he finally concludes. "I want to know what did y'all think about when my life was destroyed in this city. And I wish I had a mic so I can drop it right now."

He turns on his heel, exuding the calm of a man whose anger has escaped his body. The small crowd that has gathered on the other side of the turnstiles breaks into a mix of heckling and applause. As Adams strides back up the subway steps to his waiting car, a voice calls out behind him: "Would you take the upgrades again, Mr. Mayor?"

Adams settles into the back seat, turns to me, and grins. "For the next three months," he says, "I'm going to have so much fun."



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The federal indictment of Eric Adams, unsealed in September 2024, [alleges](#) that before he became mayor, Adams accepted valuable gifts from the Turkish government in exchange for official favors, and that his mayoral campaign accepted illegal donations by laundering them through straw donors. Among the alleged gifts in question were airline upgrades on Turkish Air between the years of 2016 and 2021; the official favor is that he called the FDNY in 2021 to see what was holding up the inspection of the new Turkish consulate building.

[video id=2c15KbDX autostart="viewable"]

As we make our way through traffic to a police precinct in the Bronx, Adams lays out his defense. “When you get an upgrade, if you’re in your official capacity, there’s no problem—you’re allowed to do it,” he says, with the confidence of a man who has carefully scrutinized what the ethics laws permit. As for calling the fire department, he says, he was just trying to make sure the city’s bureaucracy was working to meet the needs of an important resident. “I was indicted for calling the fire department and saying to them,

‘Hey, the president of Turkey is coming in and they have a new building. Can you go do a building inspection?’ I didn’t say pass them. I said, if you can’t do it, let me know and I’ll manage their expectations.” (In fact, the [indictment](#) describes a lengthy back and forth between Adams, the fire commissioner, and a Turkish representative as he sought to facilitate the building’s opening without an inspection. In the course of urging the commissioner to get it done “today if possible,” Adams says that if it can’t be done, he will “manage their expectation.”)

Adams is not the only one to find both the quid and the quo alleged in the case underwhelming. The CNN legal analyst Elie Honig, a former federal prosecutor, [opined](#) that it was “not a slam dunk.” Former Mayor Bill de Blasio, whose campaign was also investigated for alleged campaign finance violations, says there ought to have been a higher bar to bring the first-ever indictment of a sitting mayor. “I did not see how on earth he would ever be convicted on those charges,” de Blasio tells me. “Something involving airline upgrades? An allegation of foreign money, but nothing linking him to it directly? It seemed very thin.” Adams’ staff refers to it as “an indictment over legroom.”

More vexing to many New Yorkers than whatever he did or didn’t take from the Turks were Adams’ dealings with Trump in the aftermath. The two men met for the first time, according to Adams, in October 2024, three weeks after Adams was indicted and three weeks before the presidential election, when they both appeared at the Al Smith Dinner, an annual white-tie charity roast. At the time, top Democratic politicians had disowned Adams, and Gov. Kathy Hochul was considering using an obscure state law to force him from office.

Trump saw a fellow victim. “I’ve never met a person who’s a vegan who liked Turkey so much,” Trump razzed, before adding: “I was persecuted, and so are you.” He continued to champion Adams’ case on the campaign trail. In January, as Trump prepared to move back into the White House, Adams traveled to Florida to meet with him. He skipped Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations in New York to attend Trump’s inauguration; I found him in the Capitol before the program began, sitting with his eyes closed. After I interrupted Adams’ meditation to ask if he was angling for a pardon, he insisted he only wanted to talk to Trump about their shared policy priorities.

Trump's Justice Department filed to dismiss Adams' case in February. At least 10 prosecutors resigned in protest. In her resignation letter, then acting U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon wrote that the case was being dismissed in exchange for Adams' cooperation with the Administration's deportation efforts. "I cannot agree to seek a dismissal driven by improper considerations," she wrote. Two days later, Adams went on *Fox and Friends* alongside Tom Homan, Trump's immigration czar. "If he doesn't come through, I'll be back in New York City," Homan grinned, "up his butt, saying, 'Where the hell is that agreement we came to?'"

A judge, while observing that "everything here smacks of a bargain," dismissed Adams' case in April, saying he could not force the Justice Department to prosecute. The next day, Adams dropped out of the Democratic primary, staying in the race as an independent candidate. His re-election bid was hobbled by the city's Campaign Finance Board, which denied him more than \$4 million in matching funds, citing the corruption charges. Cuomo, the former governor who'd once vowed not to run if Adams was in the race, had already reversed himself and entered the field.

Rumors swirled that Trump's allies were working to lure Adams out of the race. He was offered the ambassadorship to Saudi Arabia, or a position at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, per various reports. Adams says none of it was ever true: "There was never a deal with Trump." The proof, he says, is that he was consistent when it came to the migrant crisis. "I said pre-election that if you break the law you need to get the hell out of this country," he says. "I said that after the election." He has urged Trump not to send the National Guard to New York City—successfully, thus far—and criticized the Administration for a recent ICE raid.

"The visceral hate for Donald Trump, and the feeling that he did something for me—the city turned on me," Adams says. "It was like I became the symbol of their hate." New Yorkers were convinced Adams couldn't be trusted, and he, in turn, was radicalized—disillusioned about the justice system, the law-and-order apparatus he'd held dear.

To hear Adams' critics tell it, the mayor was not a victim but a serial offender, a machine pol on the make who was never really vetted before he won the keys to the city in a stroke of lucky timing. Adams was repeatedly

investigated for alleged ethical lapses prior to his mayoral election. Once in office, he surrounded himself with cronies, many of whom were quickly enmeshed in scandal.

“In 2021, I warned people that he would be corrupt and there would be chaos, and unfortunately I was right,” says Curtis Sliwa, the Republican who ran against Adams four years ago and is once again the GOP nominee. “He is the most corrupt mayor in the history of New York City, and that’s saying a lot. He created his own destruction, but like every politician, he can never acknowledge it, can never apologize. It’s always a conspiracy.”

By the time Adams was indicted, dozens of city officials had resigned or been fired, and many had themselves been indicted for allegedly selling contracts and trading favors. An October 2024 *New York* magazine cover blared, “Last one out of City Hall, turn out the lights.” It is a testament to either Adams’ governance or to New York’s vast and competent bureaucracy that the city continued to function smoothly as members of the mayor’s cabinet fell like dominoes.

Adams’ car pulls up to the NYPD Academy in Flushing, Queens, where this year’s class of more than 1,000 cadets has assembled in a massive auditorium. He stands at the front beside a pair of flags, a tiny figure against a big gray wall. “It takes a special person to complete their career and not be bitter, because you’re going to watch the worst things that man can do to man,” he says, speaking with feeling and without notes. “And you can either leave your career being engulfed by the pain and devastation of that, or you can embrace it.”

He urges the young officers to take care of their families and relationships, and to learn from one another about their diverse communities. “Wearing that shield and that gun and that vest is a commitment. It’s a dedication. And you cannot do anything to tarnish that.”

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**Adams is vague** about what he’s going to do next. Back at Gracie, as he microwaves a vegan dinner for one—a lentil-based pasta and medley of vegetables smothered with nutritional yeast—he tells me he’d like to travel the world and work in the private sector. In recent days he has regaled the

city press corps with talk of a book, a documentary, a Ph.D. he wants to pursue.

Our conversation turns to the election. Adams considers Mamdani's promises unrealistic; he predicts buyer's remorse when the frontrunner's supporters realize he can't actually freeze most people's rent, make buses free, or bring down the cost of living. Adams is also concerned about the threat of Islamic extremism, with which he thinks Mamdani is too comfortable, and perplexed by polls that show Mamdani getting a large proportion of the Jewish vote. (In public comments, Mamdani has cast such criticism as Islamophobic.)

In 2023, Adams hosted Mamdani and his father, a scholar of post-colonialism at Columbia University, for dinner. "The frightening thing is, he really believes this stuff!" Adams tells me as he mixes the veggies. "Globalize the intifada, there's nothing wrong with that! He believes, you know, I don't have anything against Jews, I just don't like Israel. Well, who's in Israel, bro?" At the dinner's end, Adams says he told the Mamdanis, "Listen, I just don't believe what you do." (Mamdani has decried antisemitism and [recently](#), after a prolonged controversy, said he will discourage use of the loaded *intifada* phrase.)

On Oct. 23, Adams endorsed Cuomo, calling him the better candidate to keep the city safe. Mamdani's candidacy, Adams tells me, is "the number one threat to our city, and to be honest with you, I think the entire country, because you're going to watch cities fall like dominoes if his philosophy takes root in New York City." But he is still no fan of Cuomo, whom he sees as too inclined to capitulate to the left. "Andrew sabotaged this race," Adams tells me. "He's better than Zohran, yes, but that's not a hard choice, because to me everybody's better than Zohran."

Later in the evening, Adams will take me to a taxi-drivers' gala in Queens, where numerous young Black and brown men tell me they think he got a raw deal. Then it's on to a club opening in downtown Manhattan, where he'll pose with a pair of puffy-vested DJs at an outdoor roller rink while a deafening beat thumps, and crypto billionaire Brock Pierce will urge him to reenter the race. He'll swap his suit coat for a maroon dinner jacket and head

back uptown, where a celebrity chef, an ambassador, and a selection of imported wines await in a private room.

But for now, as he eats his plant-based meal standing up in his taxpayer-funded kitchen, he seems like a man who is very much alone. “There won’t be anybody like him again,” the veteran New York Democratic consultant Hank Sheinkopf tells me. The city’s demographics are changing, becoming more Chinese and Muslim, less Black and Jewish and white-ethnic, and its politics have been taken over by an educated, professionalized cohort. “The political-industrial complex is now in control, and they don’t need the Eric Adamses of the world. He wasn’t from Harvard, wasn’t from Yale; he was from the streets. He was held to a different standard in many ways. He never had a shot.”

The Democratic strategists who have chewed over their party’s unpopularity in memo after memo since last November pine for an authentic tribune of the working class. A candidate who plays to the middle. Someone who can sound tough on crime and immigration without being a malicious racist. Someone who understands the aspirations of regular people. Who can embody masculinity without disrespecting women or gay people, who can speak to the men—particularly young men of color—leaving the party in droves. Someone who can work the system and deliver for the people.

“You had a mayor that was probably one of the finest mayors for working-class people, and the city turned against him,” Adams says. “But no one said it’s supposed to be fair.”—*With reporting by Leslie Dickstein*

**Correction appended, Oct. 30:** *The original version of this story misstated Adams’ comments about the migrant busing controversy. Gov. Abbott announced that he would begin busing migrants to New York City in August 2022 in response to Adams’ criticism, but Adams had accused him of sending the buses prior to that announcement.*



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# Vince Gilligan Is Breaking Good

Berman is the TV critic at TIME. Along with reviewing current television, she writes about the ways in which entertainment and pop culture intersect with our larger social and political realities. Her TIME essay on [Ted Lasso and modern masculinity](#) won a New York Press Club award in 2022.



Vince Gilligan knows better than to try to explain where his stories come from. Like the extraterrestrial transmission that kicks off his new Apple TV series, *Pluribus*, their origin is a mystery. But the writer, producer, and director best known for creating the era-defining crime drama [Breaking Bad](#) can approximate where and when he started mulling the idea for the sci-fi epic that would become his first major project since leaving the Walter White universe.

It was probably 2016, in Burbank, where Gilligan had convened the writers' room for Season 3 of [Better Call Saul](#), the *Breaking Bad* spinoff he created

with Peter Gould. “We would take lunch breaks that seemed to stretch longer and longer,” he recalls. “I’d walk around the neighborhood, and my mind would wander.” Eventually, his thoughts coalesced around the concept of wish fulfillment. “I thought: What if everyone in the world got along? And, specifically, what if everyone in the world was suddenly really, really nice to me personally?” When he took himself out of the scenario, the question became: “Why would one guy be that interesting to people?”

The answer forms the wild premise of *Pluribus*, whose particulars are being kept under wraps until Apple unveils its first two episodes on Nov. 7. But as for that irresistibly interesting guy, well, he turned out not to be a guy at all. Gilligan recruited Rhea Seehorn, who earned two Emmy nominations for playing the [beloved \*Saul\* character Kim Wexler](#), to anchor the show as his first female protagonist, Carol Sturka. Despite press materials that introduce Carol as “the most miserable person on Earth,” she is also his first bona fide hero.

For a creator synonymous with the rise of antihero television, who made his name telling what he [famously called](#) “a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr. Chips into Scarface,” this is a seismic shift. Yet it’s also a reflection of the keen moral sensibility that has always permeated Gilligan’s work, as well as the kindness for which he has long been known throughout his industry. Though he remains proud of *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, both of which aired on AMC, the once avowedly apolitical storyteller has become convinced that pop culture’s recent supersaturation with antiheroes has been unhealthy for society. His most ambitious series to date, *Pluribus* can be seen as a corrective of sorts—a grand, artful, mind-bendingly philosophical, darkly funny, sometimes heartbreakingly, but consistently humane vindication of our fractious species.



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When Gilligan reflects on his trajectory, from a kid making Super 8 movies in the Richmond, Va., area to, at 58, one of the small screen's most acclaimed creators, the word that comes up most is *luck*. "I really feel like I'm the Kramer of the TV-writing world," he says when we meet in October at a boutique hotel in New York City. "I fell ass-backward into good luck time and time again." This self-assessment egregiously undersells the talent of a man who has made two of the medium's greatest dramas. But rather than false modesty, it comes across as the genuine humility of a guy who, throughout our conversation, reflexively credits his collaborators.

It's about a month before *Pluribus* is slated to debut, and Gilligan, who lives in New Mexico—his new show, like the *Breaking Bad* universe, is set in Albuquerque—is in town for a round of press and a preview screening during New York Comic Con. Dressed in a bright blue T-shirt that happens to match the hotel room's azure-and-white decor, in an accidental echo of the meticulous production design for which his series are known, he speaks largely in anecdotes, with a soft Southern twang. As if to mark a new phase

of his career, he has shaved the goatee that was his signature throughout the AMC years.

He's been through several eras already. Gilligan was studying film at NYU when, in 1989, he won the Virginia Governor's Screenwriting Award for the screenplay that would become the movie *Home Fries*. He spent the next few years writing feature scripts. But by 1994 screenwriting work was drying up; he was broke and had lost his Writers Guild insurance. When his agent got him a meeting with *The X-Files* creator Chris Carter, Gilligan only intended to compliment him. But Carter asked for ideas, Gilligan pitched an episode about a character whose shadow came to life, and the man who'd soon become his boss hired him on the spot to write it.

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Gilligan's three-decade tenure in television has paralleled the rapid evolution of the medium. In the mid-'90s, broadcast networks dominated prime time with megahits like *Seinfeld*, *ER*, and *The X-Files*, whose viewership on Fox peaked at a now-inconceivable [20 million](#). *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* emerged into what has been called the Third Golden Age of Television, a renaissance in audacious, cinematic cable programming for adult audiences, spurred by the success of [The Sopranos](#) and sustained by Netflix's need to build a streaming library. Now he's making *Pluribus* for Apple, one of the few companies still reliably funding expensive streaming series—especially science-fiction titles like [Foundation](#) and [Severance](#)—at a time of consolidation and austerity in Hollywood.

And yet Gilligan initially doubted he could make it as a TV writer. "The thing I was most trepidatious about is, I am so lazy," he says. Surely, he figured, a guy whose process involved frequent video-game breaks wouldn't last past his 13-week *X-Files* probation. "I thought, *I don't really need to clean out my fridge in Virginia. The ketchup will keep 13 weeks.*" But to his surprise, he took to the hard work. "The two things about TV that are so great," he discovered, are that "your writing actually gets produced"—unlike film scripts, which can take years to reach the screen, if they do at all—and "working with smart, talented people you can stand to be in a room with for 12 hours a day, five or six days a week."

Another aimless period followed *The X-Files*' 2002 finale. But Gilligan counts himself, yes, lucky to have been pitching *Breaking Bad* amid a boom in cable networks making bespoke scripted series, an escape hatch from broadcast's grueling 22-plus-episode seasons. The 2008 premiere of the show, which follows a terminally ill teacher ([Bryan Cranston](#)) who cooks meth to stockpile money for his family, failed to generate the same buzz as AMC's flagship original, [\*Mad Men\*](#). A [2011 New York Times Magazine profile](#) ventured, in an observation that has aged awkwardly, that Gilligan might be "TV's first true red-state auteur." Just when it looked as if that crowd might not be enough to sustain it, Netflix licensed the show during its fourth season, driving millions of new viewers to AMC for new episodes.

*Breaking Bad* not only ended its five-season run with a [record-breaking](#) 10.3 million viewers tuning in for [\*Walter White's Shakespearean sendoff\*](#), but also yielded a more ruminative companion show in *Saul*, about Walt's crooked lawyer ([Bob Odenkirk](#)), and a feature-length Netflix sequel, [\*El Camino\*](#), that followed Walt's puppyish partner in crime, Jesse Pinkman ([Aaron Paul](#)). Gilligan isn't wrong that he benefited from serendipitous timing. Yet it's equally true that none of *Breaking Bad*'s rivals maintained both the huge audiences (*Mad Men* never averaged more than 2.6 million) and the consistent quality (see: [\*Game of Thrones\*](#)) of what became basic cable's crown jewel of the 2010s.

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*Pluribus*, which arrives three years after the final episode of *Saul*, opens by having a bit of fun with the clichés of prestige apocalypse dramas, from [\*The Walking Dead\*](#) to [\*The Last of Us\*](#) to [\*3 Body Problem\*](#). The premiere hints at many types of extinction events before pivoting to a cataclysm so surprising, it's useless to guess. All you really need to know is that, within the first half-hour, the world we know is transformed beyond recognition. I wouldn't want to reveal more even if I hadn't been asked not to, because the show works best when you're just as clueless as poor Carol.

What is clear from the outset is *Pluribus*' global scale, which required a much larger canvas than Gilligan had ever been given. Portions of the nine-episode season were shot in the Canary Islands and northern Spain. There are scenes set at a Norwegian ice hotel and in the hills of Tangier, Morocco. The production built Carol's entire neighborhood in the desert outside

Albuquerque: “We picked a spot with this beautiful view of the Sandia Mountains,” Gilligan says. “And we said, ‘OK, in however many months we’re gonna have a whole cul-de-sac here.’” It wasn’t just a flex. “We knew we couldn’t shoot in a real neighborhood,” he explains, “because the neighbors would kick us out after the second episode.” Suffice to say, a lot of weird stuff happens at Carol’s house.

This cul-de-sac at the end of civilization feels like a physical manifestation of the loneliness Carol radiates even before the cataclysmic incident. A best-selling [romantasy](#) author with a perma-grimace, she dismisses her own books as “mindless crap” and hates her fans in what Gilligan says is a projection of self-loathing. Her manager and romantic partner, Helen (Miriam Shor), serves as a buffer between Carol and everyone else. When your hero has so many flaws that they initially obscure positive traits like independence and grit, it doesn’t hurt to cast an actor your loyal audience already adores. For Gilligan, who wrote the character specifically for Seehorn, the reunion also meant getting to spend more time with a performer who was “as sweet and kind and pleasant to be around as anyone I’ve ever worked with.”



He didn’t take the challenge of crafting his first female protagonist lightly. (While Kim, a chronically underestimated lawyer torn between law and morality, was so popular that viewers lived in fear she’d be killed off, Walt’s long-suffering wife, Skyler, played by Anna Gunn, was [widely despised](#) for her perceived shrillness.) “I always worry about writing female characters,”

he says. “A lesbian character as well, because that’s not my experience.” But women are well represented among the series’ writers and directors. Besides, what makes Carol, like Kim, a great character is that she isn’t defined by gender or sexuality; she’s a person first. “It doesn’t feel like [Gilligan] had an agenda of, ‘I’m going to write a female-empowerment story,’” Seehorn says. “He wrote a fascinating, complex, incredibly reluctant hero with a lot of flaws but a lot of strengths, some of which she didn’t know she had.” “I wasn’t thinking in terms of masculine versus feminine,” Gilligan confirms. “I was just writing this character who’s got a lot of issues and is struggling to find happiness” but somehow feels even worse once society reorients itself around her whims. Only in hindsight did he realize that her anxious, misanthropic tendencies—“standard writer problems”—mirrored his own.

Still, for all that *Pluribus* constitutes a departure from male-antihero crime capers, it’s also unmistakably a Vince Gilligan creation: mournful undertones cut by dark humor; visual grandeur and distinctive characters. Gilligan’s trademark cold opens, which can transport us halfway around the world or introduce new characters, remain a masterly way of calibrating suspense. Exiting the New York screening, I heard one giddy attendee regale her companion with a list of *Breaking Bad* Easter eggs I hadn’t even noticed. In many ways, returning to speculative storytelling has felt like a homecoming to Gilligan, even as swerving away from crime presents a chance to expand his legacy. “I’m lucky as hell to be known for *Breaking Bad*. That’ll be the first thing on my tombstone,” he reflects. “But I don’t want to be a one-trick pony. If I have any life left in me, I want to do a few other things before I’m done.”

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Between the second and third seasons of *Better Call Saul*, in 2016, [the news broke](#) that Gilligan was developing a drama about the [Jonestown massacre](#). But the project never got off the ground, in what he looks back on as “a real failure on my part.” Gilligan found himself paralyzed by the task of doing justice to the victims and their families without elevating the perspective of their “scumbag” leader. “So I realized I better stay in my lane,” he says. “I’m better at making up stories. Then I don’t have to feel responsible” for dramatizing real people’s pain.

As adaptations and franchises crowd out the original storytelling of a bygone Golden Age, Gilligan is notable for what he *doesn't* do as well as what he does. You're not likely to find him helming the next [\*Andor\*](#) or [\*The Penguin\*](#) or any other prestige-branded series based on monolithic IP. "We've got modern mythologies now, with *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* and Marvel and DC—and all that stuff's great," he says. "But that stuff was created for people who are now in their 60s and 70s. In terms of DC Comics, it was created for people who are now long deceased. It's good that they continue. It shows that they have a fundamental worth in terms of myth." He just thinks it's vital for pop culture to keep producing stories organic to the times we're living in: "Every generation deserves its own mythology."



Another lucrative option that would surely be open to Gilligan is the megaproducer route, in which a big-name creator like [Ryan Murphy](#) or [Shonda Rhimes](#) develops a stable of series, each with their valuable imprimatur but its own showrunner. "I probably should figure out how to do that, because there's a lot more money," he muses. But the idea of

parachuting into a writers' room, dispensing high-level feedback, then moving on to the next? "That sounds like hell on Earth," he says.

Though often described as an auteur—a term he has rejected—Gilligan continues to thrive on the collaborative spirit of the writers' room as well as the production process. "There are writers who write every episode of a TV show, and my hat is off to them," he says. (Think Mike White's *The White Lotus*.) Not only does he appreciate camaraderie; he also believes that, were he to script every episode solo, he'd have "a poorer show creatively." Seehorn describes him as "the composer in the middle of the orchestra," working to realize "this beautiful story in his mind" but also leaving room for each musician to contribute. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gilligan alums were represented in almost every department of the *Pluribus* crew.

In his 2013 book *Difficult Men*, which profiled the mostly prickly personalities behind contemporaries like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, [Brett Martin observed](#) that Gilligan "was known as a good man to work for—someone who managed to balance the vision and microscopic control of the most autocratic showrunner with the open and supportive spirit of the most relaxed." This reputation has persisted; as Shor noted at the preview screening, he's been called the nicest guy in Hollywood. (Even the mildest criticisms are difficult, [though not impossible](#), to find.) This fosters creativity. When Seehorn joined *Saul*, she found herself surrounded by "people that are all working at the very top of their game." What was even more remarkable, she says, is that it was "all in service to the story, not ego. And you come on and they cannot wait for your contribution."

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Standing before a crowd of peers in February to accept a lifetime achievement award from the Writers Guild, [Gilligan argued](#) that pop culture needed to move on from bad guys like Walter White. "We are living in an era where bad guys, the real-life kind, are running amok," he said. "Bad guys who make their own rules, bad guys who, no matter what they tell you, are only out for themselves. Who am I talking about? Well, this is Hollywood, so guess." It was time, he believed, for heroes to make a comeback.

Gilligan has been expressing similar sentiments since [at least 2018](#). What changed to make a creator who spent the better part of the Obama years cultivating his own Scarface nostalgic for Mr. Chips? Gilligan doesn't mention names. But Donald Trump took office in 2017, so guess. "I've been studiously apolitical my whole career," he says, because he found that polemic "instantly turned off half the potential audience." *Breaking Bad* and *Saul* were concerned with larger moral truths: "At their heart, both say: actions have consequences." Simple though it is, Gilligan points out that this message eluded TV for years, as characters in the episodic fare that predominated before DVR and streaming enabled serialized storytelling could commit murder in one episode and never speak of it again.

Now, Gilligan feels compelled to reexamine the kinds of characters he's creating because "what's going on does not seem like it's about left or right anymore. It feels like it's about maintaining a democracy, maintaining a civil republic and the rule of law and the right to free speech versus giving it all away." Though it seems, to him, like the U.S. is "right on the edge of civil war," he's convinced that no one actually desires that outcome.



"We've got to find a way to talk to each other," he says. Gilligan wants to see people from across the partisan spectrum interact face to face, instead of taunting each other online. He's as stumped as anyone about how to make that happen. But he does hope *Pluribus*, a show too removed from our reality to explicitly address current political debates that is nonetheless

“about people struggling to do the right thing,” can play a small part in facilitating those conversations.

Despite its speculative premise, the series captures the loneliness that has pervaded society since the COVID pandemic and the dread of a future in which artificial intelligence might render human interaction obsolete.

(Gilligan didn’t have LLMs in mind when he conceived *Pluribus* but says he’s “happy if this show, in any way, shape, or form, could turn people off to AI.”) And in the imperfect hero who is Carol Sturka, viewers get a role model who doesn’t let her own anger or grief stop her from trying to save the world.

Gilligan is probably incapable of saccharine. *Pluribus* is as dry, ironic, brutal, and alert to the horrors festering in no small number of human souls as anything he’s made. Yet, as the season goes on, Carol’s quest becomes kind of inspiring. This reflects not just Seehorn’s charm and Gilligan’s frustrations with antiheroes, but also his anxiety about the prevalence of postapocalyptic sci-fi stories. “It started to worry me that we were writing so many of them,” he says. “It was like it was priming people for the apocalypse, instead of priming them to avoid the apocalypse at all cost.” Distilled to its essence, the message of *Pluribus* might be: Humanity is worth fighting for.

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By the time *Pluribus* premieres, Gilligan will be back in the writers' room, at work on a second season that was greenlighted along with the first. He's

relieved to have gone into the project knowing he'd have time to tell his story, as viewers who get invested in its expansive world-building surely will be, too. Does it bother him that he won't get to hear audience feedback first? No, he says, because "I don't think that's the job." Ever since *The X-Files* became one of the first shows to engage the online commentariat, he's avoided fan chatter. "Fellow writers would say: 'You need to check out this chat room. They're talking about your episode,'" he recalls. "I instinctively knew to never do that." Now he jokes to friends that they should euthanize him if he ever makes a social media account.

Not that he's closed off to all input. "He never, ever shuts me down," Seehorn says. And as meticulous as he is in constructing his richly detailed stories, Gilligan also values dynamism and spontaneity. As a showrunner, "you have to be ready to jettison ideas at the drop of a hat," he says. *Breaking Bad* lore is littered with major plot changes made on the fly, alternate endings tossed around the writers' room, characters as major as Jesse that Gilligan kept around much longer than he'd intended because he liked the actors' performances so much. He has a clearer sense of how he wants to wrap up *Pluribus* than he did for previous shows at this point in their runs but makes no guarantees that he'll stick to it.

"I want to stay open to the possibilities of going a different way," Gilligan explains. "It's like if you get in your car and you say, 'I'm in Virginia, I want to head out to California. So I know, basically, the direction I need to head.' But there's all these little side trips and backroads you can take along the way—and that makes the trip more exciting." Luck is part of that ride. You may get a flat tire, or you may run into a long-lost friend at a rest stop. But if the destination is appealing and the driver adept, the journey is bound to be worth taking.

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# George Clooney Is Quietly Touching in Noah Baumbach's *Jay Kelly*

Zacharek is the film critic at TIME. She is the recipient of a Newswomen's Club of New York award and was a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist.



One minute a man is a hot young movie star; the next, he's a silver fox. Who knows where the time goes? There are lots of movies about aging Hollywood actresses—*Sunset Boulevard* and *All About Eve* are prime examples—but somehow we're supposed to assume that growing older doesn't faze men as much. A woman generally loses some of her allure as she ages; it's easier for a man to ease into a state of sexy gravitas. That's true of both [George Clooney](#) and the George Clooney-like character he plays in [Noah Baumbach's \*Jay Kelly\*](#), premiering at the Venice Film Festival. You

couldn't find a more fitting performer for this story of a ragingly successful actor who, after an encounter with an old friend that begins with fond reminiscing and ends in a fistfight, reconsiders everything he's done with his life. The idea by itself is refreshing, and it gives Clooney lots to work with: as Jay, he gets to razzle-dazzle one minute—anytime he's on set, or in a crowd—and brood over his many mistakes the next. Clooney can do it all.

Yet there's something strangely inert about *Jay Kelly*. Baumbach co-wrote the script with Emily Mortimer, a marvelous actor herself, who also shows up here in just a few brief scenes. There's nothing overtly dislikable about the film, and there are a handful of scenes that are beautifully written, acted, and directed. But *Jay Kelly* feels more sentimental than truly thoughtful, particularly in the motif that resounds like a clanging bell in Jay's brain: Why didn't I spend more time with my kids? Jay has two, an older daughter ([Riley Keough](#)) who harbors bitterness toward her father, and a younger one (Grace Edwards) who understands him better, though she's just about to go off to college. His only true friend is the guy who, the movie reminds us several times, gets a 15% cut of everything he earns, his manager Ron (played, superbly, by [Adam Sandler](#)). And is that really a friend at all? Both he and Ron confront that question, and the answer they come up with makes neither of them happy.

Maybe the problem is that *Jay Kelly* tries to cover so much ground that it ends up skating over things that should be momentous. As the movie opens, Jay is filming the final scene of his most recent big movie. (It's called *Eight Men from Now*, an obvious but not particularly relevant nod to Budd Boetticher's 1956 western *Seven Men from Now*.) He's already gone through more than a half-dozen takes, but he wants to do one more. This is his refrain: he's so devoted to perfection that he's sure he can always top himself. When he finally leaves the set, he waves to the whole crew, thanking them heartily, and they love it. He feeds off that kind of attention. When he's alone, which is hardly ever, he doesn't know what to do with himself. Another of the movie's refrains, repeated perhaps a few too many times, is "It's harder than you think to be yourself."

Alienated or semi-alienated from his daughters, Jay is delighted and intrigued when he runs into an old acting-school friend, [Billy Crudup](#)'s Timothy. On impulse, they go out for drinks. Timothy is now a child

psychiatrist; he simply opted out of acting, or so Jay thinks. He heaps praise on his old friend, revealing his own insecurities—Timothy was a *Method* guy, denoting a level of seriousness Jay feels he could never achieve. Then Timothy, affable at first, turns on him. It turns out Timothy believes Jay is the very reason he hasn't had a career. In interviews, Jay has often jokingly told a story about accidentally getting his first big role because he tagged along on a friend's audition. Timothy was that friend, and in his view, Jay just used him. "You stole my life," he says bitterly, and Jay is crestfallen. He may be oblivious—but he isn't cruel.



There's plenty to dig into there, but before you know it, *Jay Kelly* is off to the next thing. This is a restless, wriggly movie. There's the film festival in Tuscany that wants to honor Jay with a fancy tribute. Jay at first says no, then changes his mind when he realizes his younger daughter is going to be traveling in Europe around the same time. Consequently, Baumbach weaves in a long sequence, set on a train from Paris to the Italian countryside, that might have been nipped and tucked, or nearly altogether excised. Because there are people around Jay nearly every moment, the movie is packed with supporting actors who show up for just a scene or two, including Jim Broadbent as the benevolent director who gave Jay his big break, Alba

Rohrwacher as a charming festival gofer, [Greta Gerwig](#) as Ron's harried wife, and Stacy Keach as Jay's garrulous but difficult father. [Laura Dern](#) shows up for a hot minute as Jay's frustrated publicist; she and Sandler have the best scene in the movie, reflecting on the time they almost got together forever, though they're now settled with other partners.

Clooney's Jay Kelly is the beaming, brooding star at the center of this constellation. As much light as he gives off, he actually soaks up more from those around him: he needs them in a way they don't need him. There's something quietly touching about this performance—Clooney manages to make you care about a man who really may be pretty much empty. When he finally gets to that tribute in Tuscany—with much angst and strife along the way—he sits with the audience as they watch the predictably laudatory assemblage of film clips drawn from every era of Jay Kelly's career. Only it's snapshots from Clooney's career we're seeing: clips from *Michael Clayton*, *The Thin Red Line*, even 2020's *The Midnight Sky*, in which Clooney plays a loner-scientist with a big gray beard. We watch him watching himself—this is not just Jay Kelly watching Jay Kelly, but George Clooney watching George Clooney, in roles where he looks pleasantly dignified in that middle-aged way, but also at times impossibly young, a baby movie star just taking his first steps. The look on his face—on Jay's face, on Clooney's face—is one of pure wonder. Who is that person? he seems to be asking himself, enchanted and seduced by his own image. It's the best visual question mark in a movie filled with unanswerable questions.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Rachel Sennott's I Love LA Can't Decide If It's Spoofing Superficiality or Just Shallow

Berman is the TV critic at TIME. Along with reviewing current television, she writes about the ways in which entertainment and pop culture intersect with our larger social and political realities. Her TIME essay on [Ted Lasso and modern masculinity](#) won a New York Press Club award in 2022.



*Influencer* is a divisive word. Your gut reaction to it will probably be a good gauge of how you'll feel about the new HBO series *I Love LA*, a hangout comedy created by and starring [Shiva Baby](#) breakout Rachel Sennott. For people under 30, who may not even remember a time when influencers were not ubiquitous, as well as all manner of marketers and salespeople, the term's connotations tend to be neutral to positive. (Some studies have found

that [more than half of Gen Z](#) aspires to influencerdom.) The older a person is, the more likely they are to find influencer culture faintly embarrassing, even if they do privately pore over [tradwife content](#). Finally, there are the lucky few who've never had to learn what an influencer is. If that's you, feel free to set aside this review and move on to more high-minded pursuits.

The latest in a wave of shows by and about young adults (including [FX's Adults and Amazon's Overcompensating](#)) that is breaking a little over a decade after *Girls* touched off a monsoon of controversy about and among millennials, *I Love LA* understands the inherent hazards of chasing fame, success, and wealth for their own sakes. Sennott has a keen eye for the absurd workings of the influencer world, not to mention some great jokes about it. But her engagement with this new form of celebrity is so superficial for most of the 8-episode season that it's hard to tell whether the show is meant as a commentary on shallowness or if it's just shallow.



Sennott's mix of awkwardness, intensity, and smolder made her a revelation in *Shiva Baby* and another black comedy, [Bottoms](#), and an almost-saving

grace of HBO's pop-star cult flop [\*The Idol\*](#). She brings similar energy to the role of Maia, who aspires to a “big life” but has been languishing for years as an assistant at the confusingly named talent management firm Alyssa 180. We meet her on the morning of her 27th birthday, as she scrolls on her phone; has loud sex with her sweet teacher boyfriend, Dylan ([Josh Hutcherson](#)) during an earthquake; and then frets about her frequent UTIs from the toilet while he brushes his teeth. This is all very West Coast Lena Dunham. But despite its frankness, the show is more interested in ambition than in sexuality or gender relations.

Aside from Dylan, who seems to be the only grounded person in all of La La Land, Maia is surrounded by narcissistic clout chasers. Her employer, Alyssa, a sometimes-intriguing twist on the girlboss archetype played by a smartly cast Leighton Meester, claims to be her mentor but gets cagey about promotions. Maia’s flaky friends Alani (True Whitaker) and Charlie (Jordan Firstman) are, respectively, a nepo baby with a titular vice presidency at her famous father’s production company and a mouthy stylist genuflecting at the feet of small-time pop singers.



The sudden arrival of Maia's old best frenemy, Tallulah (Odessa A'zion), a rising New York influencer, presents both an opportunity and a threat. If Maia signs Tallulah to Alyssa 180, her boss will have to promote her to manager. But bubbly, unstrategic, free-spirited Tallulah also has a tendency to suck up all the oxygen in a city, relegating Maia to the role of sidekick. *I Love LA* chronicles our Type A hero's efforts to mix business with friendship, pinning her dreams of industry domination on an It girl who might be a bit too authentic to be a good investment.

Sennott and A'zion (the daughter of *Better Things* creator Pamela Adlon) are perfectly matched, the former all nervous energy while the latter glides on charm and impulse. Some character development does take place over the course of the season. Maia questions how cutthroat she really wants to be; Tallulah chafes at the distortion of her image. And the show can be uproarious when it's spoofing the norms of its subculture, from at-home vitamin IVs to virtue-signaling snackfood brands to unironic rhapsodizing over an influencer-branded Chipotle bowl. Guest stars are deployed sparingly but well. It makes for a fun but mostly forgettable hang. I kept waiting in vain for hints that *I Love LA* possessed more insight than its characters. Sennott never steps outside the frame to ask what kind of person flocks to the influencer sphere and why, or whether any meaning can be found in such apparently soulless work. Maybe existential soul-searching is too much of a luxury for a generation that will likely have to fight harder than any other still living to survive. But why make art grounded in your own experience if you're not prepared to do some introspection?

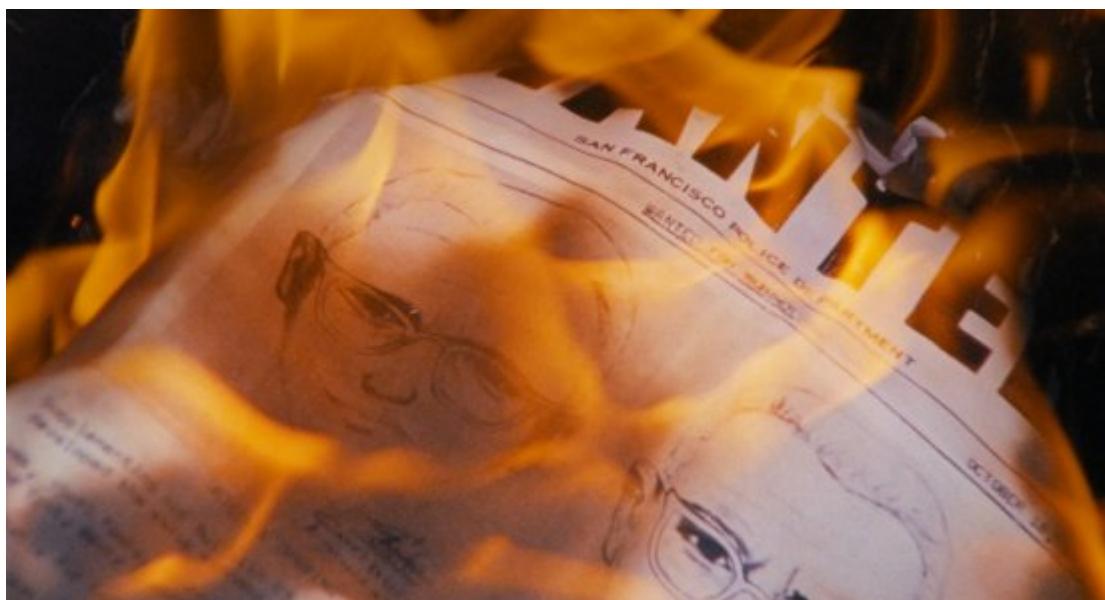
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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# A New Zodiac Killer Documentary Challenges Everything We Think We Know About True Crime

Zuckerman is a contributor for TIME.



Director Charlie Shackleton thought he could have his cake and eat it too.

For years Shackleton had been considering the idea of making a documentary centered on the [Zodiac Killer](#). The [mysterious](#) and legendary serial killer haunted the Bay Area in the late 1960s and has been a fixture of pop-culture fascination ever since, from [David Fincher's 2007 thriller](#) starring Jake Gyllenhaal to last year's Netflix doc [This Is the Zodiac Speaking](#).

"I had a sort of general love-hate relationship with true crime," he says in a video call. "It seemed like the way to make something that would genuinely interest me but could also potentially be quite commercial."

Shackleton, whose previous features include the essay-like *Beyond Clueless* about teen movies and *Fear Itself* about the horror genre, found his angle when he came across the book [The Zodiac Killer Cover-Up: The Silenced Badge](#). Published in 2012 by Lyndon Lafferty, a California Highway Patrolman, the book hones in on a suspect he calls George Russell Tucker and chronicles how Lafferty believed his efforts to bring Tucker to justice were thwarted. Alas, Lafferty's family did not grant Shackleton the rights to *The Zodiac Killer Cover-Up*.

So instead, Shackleton made *Zodiac Killer Project*, which premiered on Jan. 27 at the Sundance Film Festival. This documentary is about the documentary that Shackleton would have made had he secured those rights, and in turn serves as a deconstruction of the entire genre of true crime and how filmmakers in his position often manipulate their audiences.

Shackleton narrates, with a charming British accent and a wry sense of humor that veers into the self-deprecating, how he would have approached Lafferty's tale. Instead of the reenactments he might have staged, the images on the screen are largely static shots of California locations mostly devoid of people.

**Read more:** [The Human Cost of Binge-Watching True Crime Series](#)

Shackleton also steps back to reveal how his movie might have adhered to the tropes of the true crime genre. For instance, how the title sequence would have used “country-inflected music, but with a sort of dark edge” as it cycles through layered images of landscapes and shadowy men. He uses examples from shows like [The Jinx](#) and [Making a Murderer](#). He introduces us to terms like “evocative b-roll,” the kind of stock footage of, say, cigarettes burning or ominous-looking out-of-focus figures that get the blood pumping.

“I was never blind to the many complex ethical lapses of these things,” Shackleton explains. “And it wasn’t, I suppose, until I got my hands dirty, as it were, that I began to engage with those questions more actively.”

The idea for what *Zodiac Killer Project* eventually became emerged from conversations Shackleton had with friends, the kinds of chats he would

have at a pub. Despite the fact that he legally couldn't make a movie based on Lafferty's book, he couldn't let the idea go.

"I started from thinking about how it would be to have me tell it as I had already so many times to friends," he says. "But obviously I was working within the restriction of not being able to adapt the book. Not being able to have any of the content of the thing. So what was left without the content? It was just like the shape and the feelings that I was convinced people would have felt if only I could have done the thing." This led him to the idea of empty images of locations. If he couldn't tell the whole story, what was left but absence? Sounds dull, yes? It's not, though, because Shackleton makes the lack of action oddly hypnotic, allowing you to fill in the spaces with his intelligent, often funny descriptions of what might have been.

**Read more:** [33 True Crime Documentaries That Shaped the Genre](#)

But the shape the *Zodiac Killer Project* ultimately took proves fascinating in the way Shackleton calls himself out for the ethical leaps he might have taken. He acknowledges that there's a certain degree of exaggerated "glibness" in the way he talks about what he might have done, and that he doesn't know how far he would have actually gone in terms of salacious liberties taken. Still, he casually notes, calling out his own hypocrisy, he doesn't show the house of Lafferty's Zodiac suspect because it didn't look spooky enough for the lair of a potential murderer, especially based on the way Lafferty describes it in the text. The completely unrelated building Shackleton shows is eerily shrouded in trees, unlike the real thing.

"I think if you make documentaries, when you watch documentaries, you have quite a heightened awareness of where those sorts of deceptions are happening because you're watching with an eye on how it's been made," he says. "It appealed to me to kind of wrap the entire audience into that scrutiny so that they could scrutinize my choices just as I would anyone else's."

However, Shackleton was also careful not to call out viewers for being attracted to true crime, or shame them for [liking exploitative stories](#) of blood and guts. In fact, he believes that true crime itself has co-opted that narrative, scolding while still trying to offer up all the addictive material of

the genre. During *Zodiac Killer Project*, he specifically calls out the highly watched and [highly criticized](#) Jeffrey Dahmer installment of Ryan Murphy's *Monster* franchise, showing how the series offers up hours of Evan Peters as Dahmer committing heinous acts, while simultaneously asking for respect for Dahmer's [victims](#).

"Whatever value that analysis might ever have had has been completely cannibalized now by the true crime industry," he says. Instead, Shackleton wants to turn the lens on the industry itself.

He adds that the other part of the equation is the question of supply. "The streamers and everyone else are constantly saying, 'Well, this is what viewers want, there's a huge demand for this so we just make it. But of course they are also putting out so much of it that often it's just the thing that's there when you pull up Netflix."

Shackleton is not dismissive of all true crime. When asked to point out a documentary that he thinks does the style well he calls out Errol Morris' seminal 1988 film *The Thin Blue Line*, about the wrongful conviction of Randall Dale Adams, accused of killing a police officer. "It holds up perfectly," Shackleton says. "It set the mold of all these cliched shots that I'm taking the piss out of in my film but obviously when it was doing it they weren't cliches." But he says he struggles to think of a recent true crime documentary he thinks gets a clean bill of ethical health.

So has making [Zodiac Killer Project](#) killed Shackleton's desire to make a real true crime doc himself? Yes, likely.

"I think my confidence that it's possible to both lean into that genre and also make something interesting has reduced over time," Shackleton said. "Not that it wasn't formulaic before, but it has become so formulaic in the last couple of years, at least by my experience of watching all this stuff that comes up on streaming, that I think I'd be a lot less confident I could have my cake and eat it."

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# Bess Wohl on Feminism, Nudity, and Time Travel in Her New Broadway Play

Zuckerman is a contributor for TIME.



It took Bess Wohl a long time to write what would eventually become *Liberation*, her acclaimed play which opened last week on [Broadway](#). After all, she started thinking about making something about the women's liberation movement of the 1970s about 20 years ago.

"I was trying to crack it really not for political reasons, but for personal reasons, for most of my writing life," she says in a recent Zoom call.

Now *Liberation* exists in a world that has, in many ways, shockingly regressed with the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and the rise of “tradwife culture.” The circumstances make the work feel more urgent than ever. Still, the production doesn’t profess to explain where we are now. Instead, it’s a deeply inquisitive look at how we got here.

The play opens with a narrator (Susannah Flood) directly addressing the crowd, explaining that she is going to tell the story of her mother, Lizzie (also played by Flood), who started a consciousness raising group in an Ohio rec center basement. Director [Whitney White](#) invites us into that room and we meet the women who have gathered—among them, a housewife who has grown disillusioned with her life (Betsy Aidem); a woman caring for her ailing mother while writing a book on radical feminism (Kristolyn Lloyd); an Italian immigrant in a green card marriage (Irene Sofia Lucio). But Flood often steps out of the action to comment on it and bring us into the present, along the way eliciting questions that range from “what went wrong?” to “is marriage an act of betrayal?”

The ways in which *Liberation* moves through time and breaks from theatrical convention, including by having its actors play multiple roles, make it a sort of magic trick that turns cathartic, not just for the characters on stage, but for the audience. Speaking with TIME, Wohl discussed how she finally nailed down the narrative and what she makes of the intimate conversations the play is sparking.

## **TIME: What made you want to write this?**

Wohl: Because my mom [worked at Ms.](#), I grew up steeped in the ideas of [second wave feminism](#) and women’s liberation. And I loved them. I loved sitting on the floor of her office under a giant Wonder Woman poster while I could hear her clacking away and having a little basket of toys that I could play with. As I got older, the world changed, but also, I started to come into contact with some of those ideas in a personal way. I got married. I had children. I tried to have a career and be taken seriously. All of a sudden, I started to experiment with these ideas in my own life: “What was correct, what was wrong, what was left out? Are these actually practical?”



**What has been your relationship to second wave feminism? It has gotten a bad rap over the years.**

I didn't want to leave any of that out of the play. The play is struggling to contain all of it, at the same time knowing that it's impossible to contain all of it. One of the things I love to do when I write a play is set myself up an impossible task and then show people my attempt. [When I was raised] we talked about boys and girls being completely the same. You can do anything a boy can do, and in fact, it doesn't really matter what your gender is. I listened to *Free to Be... You and Me* on repeat. As I got older, especially as I became a mother, I learned that, as Betsy Aidem's character in the play says, the expectations and the rules are not equal and they never will be. That line gets applause some nights because I think people understand that now in a different way.

**How did you crack what the play was going to be? Because the structure is so unique. It's a memory play that's not actually a**

**memory because the narrator is the daughter of the woman whose story she is telling.**

Once I introduced the narrator, the whole play opened up for me. I had started thinking this is going to be about this group of women in the '70s trying to change the world. It is about that to a degree, but it also now is in direct conversation with today because of this character who goes back and forth in time and who actually plays her own mother. So much of my life was a conversation in my own head about whether or not I was going to become my mother. My mother was also a writer. I had to go and become an actress for a little while because I was not going to become my mother. The act of having a character physically embody a struggle that had been in my own head for so long felt really powerful to me.



**How much did the regression women are experiencing in this moment influence the play?**

I think I would've written the play either way. It was own personal history. I couldn't have anticipated how women's rights would be under assault in our current world. That only upped the urgency and affected deeply how people are receiving the play. It's like the audience comes in ready to receive and ready to speak up.

**When I saw the play, a woman in the audience actually consoled the narrator when she mentioned on stage that her mother was no longer alive. How have you experienced the audience reaction?**

I've observed those things too. People feel that they have a stake in what's happening and permission to show up in that way. It's something that I wish happened more at the theater. The fourth wall can really be a sad thing because ultimately, we're all here in community together. That's the point of theater. Our bodies are in space together in this moment, not to wax poetic, but it's never going to happen again just like this. To create a piece that feels so alive to people that they have to sit forward and have their voice be heard too in the expression of it, that's really incredible to me.

**What was your research process beyond your personal experience?**

I had looked at old periodicals and done a broad array of reading. But the thing that really cracked it open was starting to speak to women who were active in the second wave, in particular, members of a certain consciousness raising group. I would talk to one person and then she would say, "Oh, you got to talk to my friend so-and-so." It allowed me to get really specific about who these women were beyond the things that you can read in a book. It was their voices that started activating in my mind. I was in conversation with them, and it felt like it gave me permission to write the play because suddenly I felt grounded in a different authenticity.

**The play is very explicit about your own limitations as a white woman telling this story. How did you approach that?**

That is one place where the research really helped me. One of the women that this group directed me to was named Celestine Ware, a Black feminist writer who has passed away, but who provided some foundational ideas and helped me understand the character of Celeste, played by Kristolyn Lloyd. Being grounded in the real gave me a feeling of permission that I might not have had otherwise.

The form of the play is very overtly grappling with this in the way it allows actors to step into the shoes of multiple characters. That theatrical language is asking what the limits of identity are, and can we ever overcome them. The goal was to create that representation while being honest about the limitations of my own understanding. One thing that I love that Whitney did in the direction of the play was that she kept Susannah Flood on stage the entire time. The fact that this is her fever dream is knit into the way that this is presented.



**At the top of the second act, the women all appear nude and discuss their bodies. How did that come about?**

It came again from my conversations with these women and writings that they directed me to. I just felt that this is a really important part of the work and of their legacy. I knew that it would be risky, and that it would shock some people, and we would have to do with a lot of care and thought and intentionality. This scene where women are nude on stage but are not sexualized feels really important to me. Women's bodies can exist in space in this way. We can be subjects, not objects, and this is what it looks like, and audience, you are going to witness it now.

**Because of the nude scene, the audience members have to put their phones away in Yondr pouches, which are locked for the duration of the show. It really makes you connect with the play.**

I never could have anticipated that that would be one of the most liberating things about seeing this play, right? We're going to liberate you from this technology, which honestly is such a huge just time suck for so many people. This play is about having deep and truthful conversation. That's what happens among the women, and hopefully, that's what this provokes in the audience after they leave. So putting your phone away is part of that experience. I've heard from audience members that the conversations that they were able to have even during intermission without their phone around were really unique and deep for them.

**What have been some of the most surprising reactions you've heard?**

I think a lot of people leave this play saying they want to call their mom, or they want to come back with their mom, or it made them think about their relationship with their mom in a different way. That's been really beautiful that the play could actually create a very personal action step. Other people come home and see their relationship with their partner in a different way. This play can penetrate the walls of people's homes and their personal experiences in such intimate ways. Of course, this play asks a lot of political questions, but the intimacy of the responses has been the real surprise.

## **Has it transformed the way you think about your relationship with your own mother?**

It has, in a way, because one of the many questions raised in the play is whether it's possible to see—now I'm going to get emotional—whether it's possible to see your mom as a person beyond the role she played in your life. Looking back at this time, thinking about my mom as a young woman, just setting out in life, is something that I've been able to and really hold in a different way. Betsy Aidem says in the play, "Maybe I should have showed you more of who I was." Of course, that's so difficult as a mom. I'm a mom myself now, and I have three daughters. Am I showing them too much? Am I not showing them enough? Will they ever see me as something beyond mom, and should they? To be able to see the full humanity of my mom and think about her life choices in that way has been really transformational for me and for our relationship.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |