

# I SPENT 491 DAYS AS A HOSTAGE OF HAMAS. THIS IS MY STORY

BY ELI SHARABI

TIME



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# I Spent 491 Days as a Hostage of Hamas. This Is My Story



*Eli Sharabi's Hostage, the first memoir of captivity in Gaza in the aftermath of Oct. 7, appeared in Israel in May, just four months after his release; the English translation will be published in the U.S. on the second anniversary of the Hamas attack. A taut, immersive chronicle of endurance, the book also serves as a window into the Israeli view of the war.*

*The author was pulled away from his wife and two daughters in the first hours of the attack. For the next 491 days, with rare exceptions, the only people Sharabi saw were [other hostages](#) and Hamas militants—the same parties that have remained front and center in the viewfinder of Jewish Israelis for two solid years, even as most of the world shifted its focus to the Palestinian civilians also [confined in Gaza](#), and dying in the tens of thousands under Israeli fire.*

*During captivity Sharabi ached for his life in Be’eri—which as a kibbutz, or commune, is the original expression of the interdependence on which Israel functions. Another is the army, which he looked for frantically, and in vain, as he was thrown into a car along with a Thai farmworker.*

*In the first of the excerpts below, they have just arrived in the Strip. In the next, 51 days have passed. He has been hidden in a family’s home, sometimes bound with rope in excruciating pain. Sharabi, who is terrified of being held in a tunnel, is being moved to one. He travels with a fellow Israeli hostage, one of several who will be his intermittent companions. In January, he’s been moved again, this time to a space where he will remain for eight months. Deliberately underfed, he loses a great deal of weight, but finds a different sustenance in traditions that bind even secular Israeli Jews.*

*Sharabi also passes hours working to shore up the spirits of [fellow prisoners](#), and to glean something of what’s happening outside from the mood of his jailers ...*

## **October 2023**

The vehicle stops. The terrorists pull me and the Thai worker out. The sun is beating down on me. I’m sweating: it was hot in the car, I had a heavy blanket over me, and another person chucked on top of that the whole way. I’m also sweating from fear. The terrorists lead me out of the vehicle, still wrapped in the blanket. There’s a huge commotion around us. I hear a noisy crowd, ecstatic, and suddenly hands start pulling me. Many hands. I’m being dragged into a sea of people who start thumping my head, screaming, trying to rip me limb from limb. They’re fighting over me. Cursing and whistling all around. My heart is pounding, my mouth is dry, I can barely breathe. I’m a goner. The Hamas terrorists try to push the mob back, and after a struggle,

they pull me back into their own hands, drag me, and quickly smuggle me into a building.

This is our first stop in the [Gaza Strip](#). It's a mosque. I realize it because I can see the floor through my blindfold—which isn't too tight, at this point—and I recognize the colorful prayer rugs. Having just managed to save us from getting lynched, the terrorists slam the doors behind us.

Inside the mosque, it's quiet for a moment. I can hear my own breathing and the Thai worker sobbing next to me. The terrorists take us into a side room, where they remove our blindfolds and order us to strip. I blink, look around, and see that we're in what looks like a grand boardroom, with a long table and luxurious chairs, like I've just stumbled into a board meeting at an American corporate office, not a mosque. In Gaza. With trembling hands, I remove my shirt and pants and strip down to my boxers in front of the terrorists' prying eyes. They start interrogating me.

## November 2023

**We climb down** a long ladder, into the shaft. I'm scared. Every nightmare, every fear, every fevered thought climbs down with me, step by step, down the ladder. I brace myself for total darkness, for the Hamas tunnels I've seen on TV, the ones we've all heard about. And now it's me—me!—going down into them. Any moment now, the trapdoor will shut above me, and I'll be buried there.

The anxiety is all-consuming. After two tense minutes of carefully climbing down, we reach the bottom, about one hundred feet underground. It's pitch black. The terrorists have only headlamps to light the way. We walk a few steps, then descend a flight of stairs. A few more steps—another staircase. After the stairs, we keep moving forward, and I feel the ground sloping downward. We're going even deeper underground.

OCT. 27, 2025

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We spend several stressful, silent minutes walking through a dark corridor with arched concrete walls. Then, at last, a faint white glow appears ahead. It's a fluorescent light, growing brighter as we approach. The corridor begins to widen, and we enter a space that's clearly been adapted for living. There's lighting. A real floor. Ceramic tiles on the walls. A sink. A kitchen. A bathroom.

They order us to sit on a mattress in the middle of this large room.

It's hot. Very hot. I assume it's from the stress and fear. I take off my shirt, but I'm still hot. I take off my pants too and sit in my boxers. Almog sits beside me. We wait. I look around. The room we're in is long and narrow. At one end there's a large TV mounted on the wall; at the other end, where we came from, is a wide opening that leads to the corridor. The corridor has other doors, to the kitchen and a bathroom. There is another narrow corridor extending from the room, seemingly leading to another space. The terrorist we call "the Triangle" and the one who greeted us at the ladder, who we later call "Smiley," bring us water to drink and some wafers to eat. I don't feel like eating. I just keep drinking. I'm still boiling. I can't believe I'm going to stay here. That I'm going to spend tonight here, and who knows how many more after that.

I can barely breathe.

We hear more people approaching. In the tunnels, we quickly learn, every sound carries, clear and sharp, from one end to the other. The sealed acoustics amplify everything. Almog hears it before me, because my hearing has been a bit weak for years, and I guess the explosions have made it weaker still. Almog hears the creak of the trapdoor opening, hushed whispers, approaching footsteps. I hear them too. Two young men are brought into the room and placed on the mattress across from us. We study them in silence. One is missing an arm. They glance around, disoriented. I wonder: Are they hostages too? Are they Israeli?

After the captors leave again, one of them turns to us. "You're Israelis, right?" he asks. We nod.

“I’m Ori, and this is Hersh,” he says, pointing at the young man who is missing an arm. “Who are you?”

“I’m Almog.”

“I’m Eli,” I say. “Where are you from?”

“We were at the Nova Festival,” says Ori. “So was I,” says Almog.

They look at me. “I’m from Kibbutz Be’eri,” I say.

## **January–September 2024**

### **Difficult days lie ahead.**

This tunnel lacks basic supplies and equipment. It doesn’t even have a landline for our captors, and they spend several days trying to set one up. Our only food is what they brought with them from the previous tunnel. In the kitchenette across from our cell, there’s no gas. No way to cook the dry food. Like before, our captors sleep in the space next to ours. There’s no corridor connecting the rooms, just a narrow opening at the edge of the wall.

For the first three days in this tunnel, we eat nothing but biscuits. Two or three in the morning. Two or three at night. Biscuits and water. That’s it. After three days, they bring us some raw *ful* beans. I start feeling weak. My body needs real food. I think it takes them nearly two weeks to get pitas into the tunnel. They’re stale, probably foraged from the street. I don’t care. I savor the single pita bread I’m given and devour it slowly. Besides the pitas, they give us a can of cream cheese. I break my pita into pieces, dip each one into the cheese, and chew slowly. I save the last morsel for the end of the day, just to fall asleep with something in my stomach.



After two weeks of surviving on biscuits, one daily can of cheese between four men, and a handful of stale pitas, a gas burner finally arrives. We hope things will start to improve. They clearly have supply issues. That's clear soon enough. Unlike in the previous tunnel, there are no regular deliveries. All they have is what they manage to scavenge outside. And outside, there's hardly anything. [Hunger sets in](#). Not from deliberate starvation, but from scarcity. For them too. Sure, they eat more than us, and better. But even they don't have much. The shortages make them more irritable. Less patient with us. We're careful not to cross them, not to speak out of line, not to make any requests.

We're impatient too. The hunger turns each man inward. Empathy dries up. These are hard moments. When everything you are, everything I am, is reduced to one thing: hunger. Nothing else matters.

Slowly, our captors manage to sneak in more supplies. Because our room faces the kitchenette, we see them cooking and eating. They don't like that. We're too exposed to the contrast between their food and ours. They cook flatbread over the burner. Sometimes, when they have sugar and oil, they

make sweets—for themselves. Right in front of us. The Mask and Smiley remain nice to us, even in these conditions. Sometimes they sneak us treats: halva, a scoop of sesame seeds, a small pita. But food is scarce. The stale pitas that arrive every few days give us a glimpse of the world above: The bakeries aren't operating. There's no food coming in. Sometimes they manage to bring rice or pasta; they cook some and give us a little.

We have no mattresses. At night, we spread our blankets on the ground and sleep on them, in pain. Our toothpaste from the previous tunnel runs out after three weeks. We brush our teeth with plain brushes. After a few months, we get a new tube, but it only lasts a month, even after we agree to ration it and use toothpaste once every other day. There's no toilet paper. We clean up in the bathroom with a water bottle. There are jerricans in the tunnel: some for drinking, hauled down by our captors, and others, not safe to drink, for washing and toilet use. We reuse the same water to wash our hands, clean ourselves off after using the toilet, and refill the water tank, since there is no running water.

Our rations keep shrinking, and with them, the frequency of our bathroom visits. We do not share toilets with our captors. We have ours; they have theirs. They clean theirs, not ours. Soap is a rare commodity. When they have some, they give us a little. At first more often. Then much less. Eventually, not at all.

Our hygiene deteriorates. Our bodies are filthy. We go for weeks without showering. Our clothes are never washed. Our space is never cleaned. And there's no way to clean it. Everything becomes gross. In the last tunnel, we got to shower twice in forty days. Here, not even that. We shower once every six or eight weeks. With a bucket. And a bit of soap. Every time we shower, we're shocked by how dirty our bodies are. The layers of grime. I scrub and I scrub with the little soap I have. I never knew the human body could collect so much filth.

We constantly pray we won't get sick. We realize how easily it could happen. Diseases we'd never worry about at home, infections that shouldn't occur, could absolutely happen here. I'm spared most of them, thankfully. But not the others. Or, Alon, and Elia suffer from constant diarrhea. Frequent

vomiting. Fungal infections. Nails falling off. My problem is mostly dizziness. I think it's because I'm so weak.

Another week passes. And then another. The days crawl by and pile atop of each other. The cesspit under the toilet stops draining. Everything spills over. The raw sewage rises to the surface, adding to the unbearable stink, which spreads and worsens with every passing day. I don't know how to describe it. How do you convey what it feels like to be swallowed in such a suffocating odor? It's a stench you never get used to.

### **November 2023**

#### **Until release**

**In all the hard moments**—the fights, hunger, humiliating searches, and conflicts between us—we try to create moments of strength. Moments of togetherness.

Many of our shared moments revolve around tradition and faith. I'm not religious, but I'm no stranger to Jewish tradition. I come from a traditional family. I spent many hours in my childhood in a synagogue on Shabbat and Jewish holidays. I make Kiddush with Lianne and the girls every Friday night. And even though I lead a very secular life, and I'm perfectly happy with that life, these traditional spaces give me strength. They give me fulfillment.

Even in the early [days of captivity](#), I find myself murmuring Shema Yisrael again and again, almost unconsciously. Like a mantra to keep me grounded. Every morning, Elia recites the traditional Jewish morning prayers out loud. He grew up religious and knows them by heart. He recites the prayers, and we stand and answer, "Amen." That's how we start every day.

And every Friday night, we do Kiddush. No matter what we've been through during the week, what fights we did or didn't have, whatever our frustration or sorrow or pains, we gather in silence. The four of us. We listen to Elia, holding a cup of water in both hands, reading in a trembling, quiet voice:

*Yom hashishi vayechulu hashamayim vehaaretz vekhol tzeva'am ...*

The sixth day, and the heavens and the earth and all that filled them were complete ...

Before Kiddush, I sing “Eshet Chayil,” a traditional hymn from Proverbs. “She is good to him, never bad, all the days of her life. She looks for wool and flax, and sets her hand to them with a will ...” I sing with my eyes closed, thinking about the women in my life: my mom, my sisters, Lianne, Noiya and Yahel. Elia doesn’t know the song. I teach him the words every Friday, till he starts joining me and we sing together.

Then we break the bread, or rather, a slice of pita we’ve saved especially for the Hamotzi blessing. Like on Jewish holidays, when we share memories with each other, every Shabbat we tell stories. We each share what Shabbat was like at home—the foods we cooked or ate, the customs we observed.

On Saturday nights, when the Jewish Sabbath ends, Elia chants the zemirot, the traditional table hymns. Sometimes we join him. Songs I remember my father singing. And that memory comes as a pinch of sweetness.



I don't know if I feel God in those moments. But I feel power. I feel a connection. To my people. To our tradition. To my identity. It connects me to my family. To my childhood. To my roots. It reminds me why I must survive. Who I'm surviving for. What I'm surviving for. It brings back glowing memories of childhood. Of my father. Of my mother. Of a white tallit during Shabbat prayers. Wine in a goblet. Candles on the windowsill. Opening the ark. Torah scrolls. A cantor singing. A white tablecloth spread over a table overflowing with good food. Everything that feels so far from here.

And it brings to life the whole cast of characters waiting for me. Mom. My siblings. Lianne. The girls. I imagine returning to all of them. I imagine their hugs. I imagine the souls I love most enveloping me in light, whispering:

Shabbat shalom, Eli. Shabbat shalom.

It's so good to have you home.

## February 2025

**Saturday morning arrives.** Our captors wake us up in the dark tunnel at 05:00 to start getting ready. We take our plastic bags, and together with our captors begin the long ascent to the top. There are sections of this tunnel with very low ceilings, so low that you practically have to crawl. We get covered in mud. We keep walking and crawling through furrows of bare, cold, filthy earth, inching up toward ground level. It's a long ascent: the tunnel is extremely deep.

When we finally reach the exit, we get given new, clean clothes for the release itself. Ugly brown suits, the perfect complement to our anyway-disheveled look.

We make our way through garbage dumps and junkyards until we reach a vehicle. The car windows are blacked out. Our eyes are blindfolded, our heads pinned down. The terrorists are not only afraid of [the IDF](#), but also of the frenzied mob that would attack the car if it realized who's inside.

The car stops. The terrorists remove us from the vehicle and remove our blindfolds. After a few minutes of standing around, the dress rehearsal

begins. Hamas operatives give us stage directions for every moment of the ceremony: how to get out of the car, walk up to the stage, and go up the stairs, what to say, what they'll say, how to wave as instructed, when to smile. Everything. It's a meticulously stage-managed spectacle.

The team handling [our release](#) includes one Hamas member who speaks Hebrew. He's in charge of our media messaging and interviews. He sits down with us to coach us for the questions he'll ask onstage. The questions are similar to those we were asked on Thursday night, for the "movie shoot." "Say this like that," he corrects us. "And that like this. Emphasize this here. Add that there." He drills us again and again until he's satisfied with our answers and happy that they meet the needs of the production.

We each have to answer four or five questions. I have only one goal: to do whatever it takes, and give them whatever they want, to ensure a smooth release. To survive. To get home.

*Adapted from Hostage, available Oct. 7 from HarperCollins*

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# Inside the Making of Stranger Things' Epic Final Season

Dockterman is a correspondent at TIME. She covers culture, society, and gender, including topics from blockbuster movies to the #MeToo movement to how the pandemic pushed moms out of the workplace.



Matt and Ross Duffer have been dying to destroy Hawkins for a decade. Their show *Stranger Things* became a [phenomenon](#) when it debuted in 2016 and has achieved unrivaled popularity in a fractured TV landscape. But the identical twin showrunners knew it would stretch credulity if the citizens of their '80s-era Spielbergian hamlet continued to live in a town overrun by extradimensional threats. So for years, they kept the series' supernatural showdowns to abandoned malls and far-flung Soviet prisons. But now, in the fifth and final season of Netflix's biggest show, the brothers can finally unleash hell on Main Street.

I step onto the Atlanta set in July 2024, ready to watch the mayhem unfold. It's day 135, about halfway through filming, and somewhere between 400 and 500 cast and crew members are working today. Nearly 100 camo-clad extras mill outside the library and enjoy craft services' finest shawarma beside fake bloodied corpses. Stuntmen wait to be thrown into the air by people in gray bodysuits with orange ping-pong balls attached to their heads, who will be transformed into monsters called Demogorgons by the magic of CGI. And it's not even the biggest scene they're shooting this year. "The sets were no less ambitious than the ones I used with Marvel," executive producer and frequent director Shawn Levy tells me later. Levy helmed his last two episodes of *Stranger Things* between wrapping [Deadpool & Wolverine](#) and starting [a Star Wars film](#). "It happens to be a television series, but it's epic storytelling by any metric."

OCT. 27, 2025

# TIME



## THE END OF STRANGER THINGS

INSIDE THE  
UPSIDE-DOWN  
WORLD OF NETFLIX'S  
BIGGEST SHOW EVER

BY ELIANA  
DOCKTERMAN

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On the day of my visit, the Duffer brothers are directing a series of sequences that, when stitched together, will look like a single shot. From inside a dilapidated faux Radio Shack, they call, “Action!” Mike, played by now 22-year-old actor Finn Wolfhard, herds a group of children, one dressed in an “E.T. Phone Home” shirt, away from danger. “By the end of this scene,” visual effects supervisor Michael Maher tells me, “just about everyone you see standing up is going to be dead except the kids.” Ninety minutes and three takes later, Wolfhard wanders over to the Duffers’ monitors and declares the shot looks “sick.” Ross agrees.

When the brothers conceived of *Stranger Things* in 2013 as a series inspired by childhood favorites like *Stand by Me* and *E.T.*, they had no idea it would become one of the most profitable shows ever. Data firm Parrot Analytics estimates the series has brought in 2 million new subscribers and over \$1 billion in revenue for Netflix since 2020, the year it started tracking data. And each new installment has grown in cost and ambition. “It’s a little scary,” says Matt. “It puts pressure on every season because it has to perform better than the one prior to it in order to continue to justify growing the scale of the show.”

Ross jumps in: “We were nervous about Season 4.” It [reportedly cost \\$30 million per episode](#), \$270 million total, among the most expensive seasons of television ever made. Three years later, Season 4 still sits atop [Netflix’s most-watched list](#) based on the number of hours viewed, at 1.8 billion. “It was such a relief when it got the viewership it did because you don’t want to scale down for your final season.”



“Or an abbreviated final season,” Matt says. “These were all possible realities.” Netflix will not confirm how much the final installment cost. But in early October, [Puck reported](#) that Netflix spent \$50 million to \$60 million on each of the eight episodes, for a total of nearly half a billion dollars—close to double the previous season’s sizable spend. “We don’t operate in a bottomless reservoir of cash,” Levy says. “Blank checks? No. Big checks? Yes.”

Since the show premiered nine years ago, the TV landscape has shifted dramatically. Netflix is doubling down on cheaper reality and international programming. Disney is trimming [its costly Marvel](#) slate. Even Apple, which bankrolls costly series like [The Morning Show](#) and *Severance* at a reported \$150 million to \$200 million a season, is [spending less](#). Studios are scrambling for prestige-urals like *The Pitt* that can be [made for a relative bargain at a mere seven figures per episode](#). TV is scaling down. And yet *Stranger Things* is scaling up.

For Netflix, it's worth the risk. Though the streamer does not release much viewership data, over two years of reporting, one thing becomes clear: *Stranger Things* is Netflix's most valuable property, spawning [Halloween costumes](#), a [Tony-winning play](#), an [upcoming animated series](#), and—if all goes well—at least one spin-off. For the final season, they are trying to achieve [Barbie-level cultural saturation](#) with *Stranger Things* partnerships: [Nike sneakers](#), [Pandora jewelry](#), [Squishmallow stuffies](#), [Dungeons & Dragons games](#), and even [Palermo's frozen pizza](#).

[video id=C1qyR0sm autostart="viewable"]

Unlike Disney or Warner Bros., Netflix doesn't possess a deep library of intellectual property to endlessly reboot; it only started producing [originals in 2012](#). Instead, it must [license proven stories](#) or build franchises from scratch. And the competition is catching up: in 2021, 80% of the shows on Nielsen's weekly top 10 lists were Netflix originals, [according to the Entertainment Strategy Guy](#), an oft-cited industry newsletter. Midway through this year, that number is down to just 52%. To hold on to subscribers, Netflix needs its own hits like *Stranger Things* more than ever.

That's why the Duffer brothers' latest move raised eyebrows. This summer [they signed a deal with Paramount](#), which promised them theatrical releases—a dream come true for creators who once described themselves to me as “more movie guys than TV guys.” It’s a sharp break from Netflix, whose co-CEO Ted Sarandos [told TIME in April](#) that movie theaters were an “outmoded idea for most people.”



Still, the Duffer brothers say they want to continue building the *Stranger Things* Universe at Netflix. But how expansive—and expensive—that universe becomes may depend on how the series finale is received. “I think everyone was pretty worried, honestly,” Wolfhard tells me over Zoom a year after my set visit. “The way that [\*Game of Thrones\* got torn to shreds](#) in that final season, we’re all walking into this going, ‘We hope to not have that kind of thing happen.’” He fiddles with his oversized headphones. “But then we read the scripts. We knew that it was something special.”

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Drones circle the Atlanta set, intruders trying to sneak unauthorized footage of the final season. Unlike other genre epics like [\*House of the Dragon\*](#) or [\*Shōgun\*](#), which are based on preexisting material, nobody knows how *Stranger Things* will end. That’s a source of intrigue—and an opportunity for leaks. A sense of paranoia pervades the lot.

A year later in their edit bay in Los Angeles, the twins are still guarded. They spend all morning searching for a spoiler-free scene to show me, landing on

a comically mundane sequence of Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) and Robin (Maya Hawke) pushing an elevator button in a hospital. It betrays very little—except that Lucas is visiting Max (Sadie Sink), who has been [comatose since the end of Season 4](#) and apparently remains so midway through Season 5. Dramatic musical cues imply that she will be enlisted in *some* plan to fight the villain. “*Tony nominee* Sadie Sink is too good not to keep,” says Matt, referencing Sink’s Broadway run in *John Proctor Is the Villain*. When I try to coax information out of Sink a few weeks later, she laughs: “They wouldn’t have kept me around if they didn’t have a purpose for me. They would have killed me off.”





The edit suite looks like a dorm room, full of fanboy figurines like a life-size Funko Pop of *Stranger Things*' protagonist Eleven (played by [Millie Bobby](#).

[Brown](#)) that guards the front door in her blonde wig, clutching her favorite snack, Eggo waffles. The twins sit on adjacent black couches in front of a TV. A ragged shark dog toy lies at their feet, a plaything for staff pets and perhaps an ode to one of their heroes, Steven Spielberg.

*Stranger Things* speaks to a generation that grew up renting VHS tapes from Blockbuster and trading Stephen King paperbacks. The show begins with the disappearance of a boy named Will (Noah Schnapp). His frantic mother (Winona Ryder) enlists the help of the town's reluctant sheriff (David Harbour) while Will's older brother (Charlie Heaton) recruits his crush Nancy (Natalia Dyer) and her boyfriend Steve (Joe Keery). Meanwhile, Will's nerdy buddies encounter Eleven, a girl raised in a lab with telekinetic powers. She rescues Will from the Upside Down, a parallel dimension that threatens to swallow Hawkins whole. But the show's dangers aren't limited to supernatural creatures—sinister scientists, Soviet spies, and government cover-ups all loom large.

A final boss emerges: Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower), a patient from the same lab as Eleven who has grown into a monster and is linked to every creature in the Upside Down through what the characters dub a "hive mind." At the beginning of Season 5, Vecna has disappeared. The gang must hunt him down while avoiding the military, which has imposed a quarantine to cover up the portal that Vecna opened between the Upside Down and Hawkins.

[video id=bGIjxRi0 autostart="viewable"]

If this all sounds like the fever dream of two boys who gorged on Wes Craven and John Carpenter, that's because it is. The Duffer brothers, 41, grew up in Durham, N.C., with a film-buff dad and have been writing stories together since the fourth grade, when they directed a movie based on the fantasy card game *Magic: The Gathering*. They pointed a camcorder at friends shooting Nerf arrows and wearing Freddy Krueger masks while a boom box played the scores of Tim Burton movies. Trying to break into Hollywood, the Duffers wrote for the M. Night Shyamalan-produced TV show *Wayward Pines* and made a feature that got shelved for years. Frustrated by the dearth of opportunities, they created their own. The

brothers pitched the show to around a dozen production companies with no success.

Levy, then known for family-friendly movies like *Night at the Museum*, was not in the TV business. But, in 2015, a beautifully rendered booklet outlining a limited series called *Montauk* landed on his desk. It included iconic images from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Firestarter*, all in service of a story about a missing boy. Two days later, the Duffers were sitting in Levy's office.

"They were not a slick meeting," says Levy. "Frankly, they seemed like two young adult brothers who had spent most of their lives talking only to each other." They refined the pitch for then-Netflix executive [Cindy Holland](#), who shepherded early Netflix breakouts like *Orange Is the New Black* and *House of Cards*. With a few concessions—the setting shifted from a Long Island beach town to a cheaper-to-film Indiana suburb—the company was willing to take a risk on these unknown writers if their show could add value to the streamer's then small catalog. While most studios write big checks to proven properties with built-in audiences like [Star Wars](#) or [The Lord of the Rings](#), Netflix's need for homegrown hits compelled them to invest more and more into each season of *Stranger Things*, and it delivered. It's now something vanishingly rare: an original blockbuster. "It's been an advantage in a lot of ways creatively," says [Bela Bajaria](#), Netflix's chief content officer. "We were always going to lean into what's the next, big, bold idea rather than what's the IP in the library."

**Read More:** [The Duffer Brothers Recommend Watching These Movies Before Stranger Things Season 5](#)

The Duffers' pitch assured networks that the limited series would leave "no loose ends." But the streamer saw franchise potential. "Netflix made us write this big mythology document halfway through Season 1, which at the time we really didn't want to write," says Ross.

Matt continues: "So we went in and pitched Season 2, and it was basically all five seasons. And Cindy just said, 'That's way too much.'" She advised them to spread it out. "I'm glad we did it because then we had a huge grab bag of ideas, and we sprinkled it throughout all five seasons." (The Duffers

and Holland will reunite at Paramount, where Holland now heads up streaming.)

Though the Duffers developed *Stranger Things* as fodder for nostalgic grown-ups, they also tapped into the magic of watching a Stephen King adaptation as a kid with your fingers covering your eyes. The tween audience only grew as each year a new crop of young viewers discovered the show in Netflix's library. But its popularity exploded in the spring of 2022 with "Dear Billy," an episode in which Max escapes Vecna to the tune of [Kate Bush's '80s anthem "Running Up That Hill."](#) Thirty-seven years after its release, the song hit No. 1.

The Duffers attribute the success of that season in part to COVID-19 delays, which allowed them the rare luxury of finishing the scripts for the season before filming began. But the pause exacerbated a running joke among fans that the kids have clearly outgrown the bikes they ride around Hawkins. In real life, they're adults: Schnapp is about to graduate college, McLaughlin sports a beard, and Brown is married with a baby. The brothers bristle at the critique when, they say, many shows feature 20-somethings playing teens. Still, they felt it was time to offer the fans closure. "We can't kick any more cans down the road," says Matt. "Every character's arc has to be resolved."

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I'm exploring a tunnel on the set in Atlanta when I nearly trip over Barb's body. Covered in inky black vines made partly of spray-painted pool

noodles, the dummy's lips purple and slightly agape with a giant bleeding gash on her neck, the fan-favorite character is half buried in the ground. Like Will, Nancy's friend Barb (Shannon Purser) was pulled into the Upside Down in Season 1. Unlike Will, she never made it back. No one cared—except for the fans. #JusticeForBarb going viral was one the first indications that *Stranger Things* was a sensation. The Duffers didn't get it.

"The one note that we consistently got back was, 'What about Barb?' And we're like, 'It's a show about Will,'" says Ross, rolling his eyes.

"Netflix kept harassing us about it," adds Matt. "And it turns out they were right."

"We neglected her, and as such, Hawkins neglected her, and it made her that much more famous," says Ross. And now she is back, or at least her body is.

**Read More:** [The Stranger Things Creators on Why They Killed Off Four Beloved Characters](#)

Netflix representatives drive me in a golf cart around the sprawling *Stranger Things* campus. I watch what appears to be a hallucination in which Holly—Nancy and Mike's baby sister from Season 1 who is now played by 13-year-old Nell Fisher—wanders through a labyrinthine orange rock formation in a '50s-era blue A-line dress, reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, blood smeared across her forehead.

Hilary Leavitt, the president of the Duffers' Upside Down Pictures, begins to explain how the scene connects to the *Stranger Things* stage production, *The First Shadow*, which premiered on London's West End before transferring to Broadway earlier this year. Holly's vintage outfit is an important detail, and, later, when I visit an old-fashioned room, there's an *Alice in Wonderland* picture hanging on the wall—though I'm distracted by a Raggedy Ann doll with a missing eye and a demonic-looking stuffed bunny. As Leavitt leads me down the rabbit hole, the brothers exchange a look, and Matt half-jokingly asks Leavitt not to spoil the season.



Everyone on set is quick to mention the twins' unusual connection. "They do finish each other's sentences. They'll rarely not check in with each other before rendering an opinion, but that checking in is largely nonverbal," Levy says. "In early episodes, I don't think they spoke to many people other than each other. They've grown immensely." They also used to write scenes individually and argue over edits. It took forever. Now, they write simultaneously in the same Google doc while sitting on opposite sides of the room with headphones on, editing each other as they go. They call it working as a hive mind.

The Duffers' fingerprints are all over the set. WSQK "The Squawk" 94.5 FM was built to mimic the Art Deco radio station from the Duffers' hometown. "We did the mall, the arcade, the video store, the skating rink," says production designer Chris Trujillo. "With the radio station, we're messing with another touchstone of Americana." Squawk will serve as the headquarters for the gang as they rebel against the military. "This is where the kids are prepping their hijinks," says Trujillo. The Duffers add that one of the key inspirations for this season is *Home Alone*—specifically the booby traps. Another is *Terminator 2*; that movie's star, Linda Hamilton, will play a government scientist named Dr. Kay. (Costume designer Amy Parris, while explaining the many different types of fatigues featured this season, drops hints about Dr. Kay's mission: "There's this sort of mercenary regime,

they're called the Wolf Pack. They're Dr. Kay's men who are meant to be finding Eleven.”)

The sun is setting by the time we walk into downtown Hawkins to watch the battle scene. This season, the Duffers are experimenting with a new type of shot they call “demo-vision.” Using a drone, they capture fight scenes from the perspective of a Demogorgon. In the first season, the characters played *Dungeons & Dragons* in a cozy basement. By Season 4, there was a lot more cardio. “I had to run up this hill—no pun intended—like 10 times. I straight up almost puked,” says Wolfhard. “I started seeing a trainer for Season 5. It’s a lot of longer sequences that involve action.”

Balancing the core of each character with the show’s evolving tentpole status hasn’t been easy. Harbour’s haunted small-town cop has transformed into an action hero who wields a flamethrower. “The model for TV is *Gilligan’s Island*. Gilligan is always wearing the red shirt and the bucket hat. He’s always going to respond to a situation in a Gilligan-esque way,” says the actor. “*Stranger Things* sometimes tries to push the boundaries of that while still maintaining the character as a source of comfort.”

By midnight on set, the cast and crew have settled into that sluggish yet giddy feeling you get staying up all night at summer camp. The lights are so bright that they create the disorienting sense that it’s dawn. The Duffers debate how many takes they’ll need: Matt thinks seven, and Ross shakes his head. “More,” he groans. “How many times are we allowed to throw these guys?” he says, referring to the stuntmen in fatigues strapped to wires. “Thirteen?”

When I fly back to New York in the wee hours of the morning, I can spot the show’s floodlights from the airplane.

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Schnapp was nervous about crying on camera for the first time. At 11, he was new to acting when Season 1 began filming. So Ryder stepped in. “She was also a child actor, so I think she understood the quirks of having to run to set, cry, then go take a biology test,” he says. “She was like, ‘Oh sweetie, I’ve got you.’ I still do this today.” He demonstrates the technique, holding his hands up and slowly taking five deep breaths.

Several of the young actors say they were lucky to have adults on set looking out for them. But nobody could mitigate the particular challenges of being young and operating in an adult world. “It’s just a symptom of what filmmaking can be, which is chaotic,” says Wolfhard. “As a child actor, you’re trying to make things easy for people. You don’t know how to speak up for yourself. You don’t know how to ask for a break.”







The show's popularity didn't help. "It was incredible and subconsciously terrifying to be 13 and all of the sudden everyone knows who you are," he says. He remembers an overwhelming moment from Season 4: "I was having normal first-relationship struggles and juggling COVID and the show. Halfway through a scene I started hyperventilating. It was kind of like a fishbowl because a lot of the extras are fans. It culminated in sort of a panic attack." McLaughlin, now 24, and Gaten Matarazzo, 23, pulled him aside and reassured him that they were feeling the same pressure.

That stress hasn't changed, although the reactions of the young cast have. One difference between the first and final season? "We got along!" says Brown, laughing. "We stopped fighting." They do admit to regressing to their younger selves on set. "When I'm around Gaten and Finn and Noah, I'm probably the most childish I've ever been," McLaughlin says. "We're doing these jokes from when we were, like, 12 years old. It's easy because we grew up together." The Duffers tailored the scripts to match the actors' real-life energy.

But Brown, 21, had a slightly different experience. "[The Duffers] really got to understand the boys' personalities," she says. "Whereas Eleven, you can't really write to me, because she grew up in a laboratory, and she has powers, and has such a traumatic past."

Brown, unlike the boys, also had to face sexism. In the spring, she [made a video](#) responding to articles that accused her of looking older than her age. When asked what she would say to other young women who face trolling, she's circumspect: "I don't really have much to say on the matter. But I'm always going to be a source of advice from the experience I've been through." Brown has carved out a successful career starring in big-budget Netflix projects but has chosen to build a life away from the limelight on a [farm in Georgia](#) with her husband, baby, and (at the time of publication) 86 animals.

**Read More:** [\*What It's Like to Grow Up on the Set of Stranger Things\*](#)

Navigating the spotlight has also been complicated for Schnapp in part because of an important connection between his character and his real life.

Will came out as gay last season, and Schnapp himself came out at 18—but only after spending years struggling to answer questions from journalists about his sexuality. “When I was younger, I was obviously very scared of talking about it,” he says. “They would pry and ask me, ‘Is he gay? Are you gay?’ I was 12, 13. I didn’t know what to say.”

And more recently Schnapp, now 21, has gotten pushback for posts he made in support of Israel after Oct. 7. I ask him whether he’s learned any lessons about his online presence. “I was one of the most in touch with my fan base. I just welcomed them with open arms because that’s the way I am,” he says. “It comes with pros and cons. I’m still a kid trying to figure it out. I’ll have a different answer for you in five years.”





As the young actors stare down their post-*Stranger Things* future, the Duffers have sought to foster their careers when possible. Sink got an offer to be in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* while filming Season 4. Sink says she's grateful to the showrunners for working around her schedule so she could leave for two months. "It opened up a new channel of vulnerability to work on this grounded character in a movie without special effects," she says. "They would have gotten a much different performance out of me in Season 4 if I hadn't done that."

After long days of filming, much of the cast decamped to houses in a nearby neighborhood, many within walking distance of one another. Sometimes, they met up at the neighborhood bar. "Yes," Sink, 23, says. "It might be crazy for some people to hear, but we're old enough to drink now."

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In the spring, I attend plays starring Denzel Washington, Paul Mescal, and George Clooney. None elicit the level of frenzy I experience at [\*Stranger Things: The First Shadow\*](#), where the audience screams to the point of drowning out dialogue whenever the name of a character from the show is mentioned. Ushers roam the aisles flashing lights at people trying to film scenes on their phones. A girl a few seats down clutches a nightmare-inducing Demogorgon plushie purchased in the lobby.

Kate Trefry, a *Stranger Things* writer who [co-wrote the First Shadow story](#) with the Duffers and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* scribe Jack Thorne, tells me that 60% of the primarily young theatergoers who come to the show have never been to a play before. "I think the response is the pure shock and joy of seeing something performed live for the first time," Trefry says. "If you've been watching stuff on your computer your entire life, and then you go to the theater and all of a sudden, action is happening, that's pretty visceral."

The spectacle, which opens with flashing lights and deafening music, sets up an elaborate origin story for Vecna and ties into the final season. At the end of the show, Netflix's "Next Episode" button appears to not-so-subtly remind the crowd to tune in this fall.

I ask Bajaria what *Stranger Things*' final season needs to achieve to justify the no-doubt hefty cost. To Bajaria, the obvious benchmark is cracking Netflix's list of the most popular shows ever. But it's about more than just the numbers: "The other part is, do fans love it?" Netflix measures that love in metrics like a [14% boost in Eggo sales](#) after Season 1 or a 600% search increase in *Dungeons & Dragons* after Season 4.

And Netflix will stoke the conversation by [releasing the season in three installments](#): Four episodes the day before Thanksgiving, three on Christmas Day, and the series finale on New Year's Eve. The showrunners had always planned to split the season in two, and Netflix executives suggested debuting the movie-length finale on its own to head off spoilers. "Everybody thought it was a good idea," says Bajaria, "for people to be caught up and have that shared experience of watching it together."

Christofer Hamilton, a streaming expert at Parrot Analytics, expects the series finale to be a "victory lap" regardless of fan reception. "Attention is attention. Even if people are up in arms, they are going to watch it," he says. "*Game of Thrones* was obviously controversial. But the finale set a series record. And [the prequel] *House of the Dragon* has been huge. People didn't throw up their arms and walk away."

Given *Stranger Things*' success, it's surprising the streamer hasn't mined the IP even more aggressively. The Duffers are producing two upcoming Netflix shows, [Something Very Bad Is Going to Happen](#) and [The Boroughs](#), though neither ties into *Stranger Things*. Levy claims the creative team has turned down "opportunities that would have been low-hanging fruit but didn't feel organic to our story." Yet in June, the Duffers told me they *did* have an idea for a *Stranger Things* sequel. "I'm kind of surprised there hasn't been more pressure [from Netflix]," says Matt. "They would love us to go in and pitch it, but they haven't forced us to do it."

I press Bajaria on why Netflix hasn't done just that. "We've always talked about it loosely," she says. "For them and for us, it was really important to make sure that all of their focus, time, and energy was being spent on making sure they deliver an incredible last season that people love." She pauses. "But I'll say when they're ready, I'm ready."

Netflix—and the fans—may have to wait. Season 1 of *Stranger Things* premiered nine long years ago. “We write pretty quick,” says Matt. “I’m sure most people, if they heard me say that, would laugh because they think we’re so slow. But we’re writing, basically, five to six movies in a season.” And with the Paramount deal in place, the brothers now have even more on their plates.

When I reach out in late September to both Netflix and the showrunners to ask about the franchise’s future, both decline to comment. But it is clear any continuation would demand the brothers’ involvement. “It either has to come from us or someone who comes to us super excited about an idea, not from Netflix. Otherwise you’re just making stuff to be making it, and then it’s going to diminish the brand,” Matt told me in June. “You’ve seen that too many times.”

Creatively, a long pause may not be a bad thing. Just as [Ryder returned to the Beetlejuice franchise](#) 36 years after the original—and helped it top the box office—there’s always a chance the cast could revisit the show that made them stars. “I would love to play Dustin at another point in my life. It would definitely have to be a long time from now,” says Matarazzo. “But if in 15 years they call, I would be lying if I said I wouldn’t jump on that instantaneously.” —With reporting by Simmone Shah

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*Stranger Things* photographs by Michal Pudelka for TIME; Set design by Rastislav Matys—Razzmatazz; Fashion Direction by Milena Zuravljova; Wardrobe: Cover: Matarazzo: Issey Miyake look; Brown: Monse look, Mejuri earrings; Wolfhard: Valentino shirt, Issey Miyake pants; Schnapp: Kimia Arya look; McLaughlin: Private Policy look; Sink: Stella McCartney look; Lead group: Wolfhard: Gucci look; Sink: Beaufile look; McLaughlin: Peter Do look; Schnapp: Dolce&Gabbana look; Brown: David Koma look, Mejuri earrings; Matarazzo: Thom Browne look; Secondary group: Matarazzo: Uniqlo turtleneck, Loewe trousers; Sink: MaxMara look; McLaughlin: Thom Browne jacket, pants, shoes, Amiri sweater; Brown: Isabel Marant look, Mejuri earrings; Schnapp: YSL look; Wolfhard: Gabriela Hearst look; Brown solo: Wolford turtleneck, LaPointe shorts, Mejuri earrings; Matarazzo solo: Dior look; McLaughlin solo: Peter Do look; Schnapp solo: YSL look; Sink solo: Stella McCartney look; Wolfhard solo:

Dior look

Duffer Bros photograph by Devin Yalkin for TIME

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# How We Chose the Best Inventions of 2025



For each of the past 25 years, TIME editors have highlighted the most impactful new products and ideas in [TIME's Best Inventions](#) issue. The first, published under a cover featuring the protracted Bush v. Gore presidential vote count in December 2000, covered about 35 inventions, including some that feel a world away: the [Ricoh RDC-i700](#) (a digital camera that could post photos to the internet), the first 3D ultrasound imaging for pregnant parents, and a [bike with two pontoons](#) that intrepid cyclists could ride on a lake.

Others could just as easily be on the 2025 list. Medtronic's Activa Tremor Control Therapy was featured in the 2000 issue as one of the first forays into deep brain stimulation as a treatment for Parkinson's. This year's issue includes the same company's newly FDA-approved upgrade to the same

technology, [BrainSense](#), which continually adjusts to patients' unique tremors.

Across a quarter century, the pace of innovation has only accelerated, and to accommodate that, this year's list features 300 inventions—our biggest list ever. To compile it, we solicited nominations from TIME's editors and correspondents around the world, and through an online application process, paying special attention to growing fields, such as health care and artificial intelligence. We then evaluated each contender on a number of key factors, including originality, efficacy, ambition, and impact.

The result is [300 groundbreaking inventions](#) (and [100 special mention inventions](#))—including an [AI detector](#) for teachers, a [home sprinkler system](#) for wildfires, the world's biggest [rollercoaster](#), and a [humanoid robot](#) that loads the dishwasher—that are changing how we live, work, play, and think about what's possible.

[Read the full list here.](#)

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# What Comes After Fentanyl? In a ‘Period of Hyper-change,’ a New Opioid Is Emerging

Greene is an editorial fellow at TIME, reporting on breaking news and politics out of the D.C. bureau.



As efforts to fight the fentanyl trade ramp up, new synthetic opioids that are less detectable and sometimes stronger than the notorious drug are cropping up with greater frequency in the American market.

Multiple “analogues,” or variations, of opioids known as nitazenes have now been detected across more than a dozen states. Some are on par in potency with fentanyl, which has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of drug users in just the last five years, compounding the already dire, decades-long

[opioid crisis](#) in the country. Others, which are less prevalent but have been detected in the U.S., are exponentially more potent.

And nitazenes' presence in the market—as well as their involvement in overdose deaths—is likely being underreported, because the technology needed to identify them isn't widely used in autopsies, posing unique problems for their detection.

Their emergence is being seen by scientists who track the spread of opioids around the country as a harbinger of a much different, more variable landscape of drugs about which comparatively little is known.

“We’re at this really unique inflection point where a lot of the fentanyl supply is contracting,” Dr. [Nabarun Dasgupta](#), a scientist at the University of North Carolina’s Gillings School of Global Public Health who has been tracking nitazenes and other novel drugs within the U.S., tells TIME.

In the coming months and years, Dasgupta suggests, other drugs—potentially including nitazene analogues, as well as certain sedatives his lab has also detected in the drug supply—may become more prominent in the market and fill gaps fentanyl is leaving.

The sheer volume of fentanyl circulating into and within the country means a major shift in the opioid supply is not immediately imminent, according to experts.

But cracking down on one drug has led to the rise of another before, including in the case of fentanyl itself. And it’s possible the apparent increase in nitazenes across the country happening at the same time fentanyl’s presence is waning marks the beginning of a similar trend—though it may take years to establish, if it ever does.

“Fentanyl largely replaced heroin,” says Joseph J. Palamar, a professor at New York University who specializes in drug use epidemiology. “And I wonder, could nitazines replace fentanyl?”

## **What we see, and what we don’t**

Dr. [Dasgupta](#)'s lab analyzes drug samples from over 40 states provided by roughly 200 public health agencies, clinics, hospitals, and health departments to provide up-to-date metrics on what drugs are circulating in American markets.

He has detected nitazenes in 15 states so far. Protonitazene and metonitazene, analogues of the drug that are similar in strength to fentanyl, are the most common on the East Coast. But data from Tennessee, which Dasgupta describes as a known “bellwether for synthetic opioids,” has shown the greatest concentration of the drugs in the U.S.

Alex Krotulski has done work similar to Dasgupta's as the program manager for [NPS Discovery](#), the Center for Forensic Science Research and Education's drug early warning system, which monitors thousands of drug samples from around the country to rapidly identify emerging trends. The system has seen an increasing number of deaths from nitazenes in recent years.

Although [nitazene-related deaths](#) in Europe have garnered more attention, Krotulski says his research has yielded data indicating a far greater concentration of such deaths in North America.

“In general, the United States and Canada really bear the majority of nitazene consumption around the world,” he says. “Anyone who has intimate knowledge of the nitazene supply would know, or should know, that nitazenes in the U.S. and Canada are far above in terms of prevalence anywhere else.”

Krotulski notes that the U.S. lacks a “uniform way of tracking drugs,” and that the absence of this infrastructure suggests the country’s numbers are deflated.

That also makes it extremely difficult to predict how the drug supply is going to change, even as data is showing an influx of nitazenes analogues and other drugs.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) categorizes synthetic opioid-related deaths without specifying if an overdose is attributed to

nitazenes or a combination of both nitazenes and another drug, such as fentanyl. Meanwhile, the CDC's State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS) does not provide real-time data or differentiate lesser-known and widespread substances like nitazenes, which makes the intentional tracking of less common, yet emerging, drugs all the more important.

President Donald Trump's budget [request](#) for Fiscal Year 2026 sought to eliminate "duplicative, DEI, or simply unnecessary programs" within the CDC, among which it listed the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), a branch of the health agency that tracks opioid use and subsequently implements safety nets and new surveillance methods. SUDORS works out of the NCIPC, and Dasgupta warns that the center's elimination would likely stymie the system's ability to adapt to and detect novel drugs in the market. Trump's budget request would slash the overall budget of the CDC by \$3.6 billion. It's not yet clear to what extent the requested cuts will be made, however: Congress is currently in the process of weighing government funding measures ahead of a Sept. 30 deadline.

In any case, Krotulski says, "I don't think there's ever going to be an accurate picture of what drug emergence looks like in the United States. We have a very underrepresented picture of what's going on."



## ‘A period of hyper-change’

Dr. Dasgupta attributes the emergence of the new drugs being detected in the market, in part, to enforcement pressure from the government.

The U.S. has been fighting for years across both [Democratic](#) and Republican Administrations to stop the spread of fentanyl and the devastation the drug has wrought across the country.

In his second term, Trump has redoubled his efforts to crack down on fentanyl trafficking by [targeting cartels](#) and seeking to [ramp up](#) fentanyl seizures and constrict the flow of people and products across the U.S.’s southern border.

In July, Trump signed the [HALT Fentanyl Act](#) into law, which classifies fentanyl as a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act and increases the punishment for traffickers.

“Today, we strike a righteous blow to the drug dealers, narcotic traffickers and criminal cartels that we’ve all been hearing so much about for so many years,” Trump said just before signing the bill in July. “We take a historic step toward justice for every family touched by the fentanyl scourge.”

This kind of effort to combat one drug ultimately leading another to emerge would not be without precedent. Dasgupta cited the “Iron Law of Prohibition,” which holds that drug markets begin to favor new products that are easier to trade, and potentially more potent, when law enforcement on a more common product intensifies. This dynamic was seen roughly ten years ago when heroin was largely replaced by fentanyl, which now dominates its predecessor in the U.S. market, Dasgupta explains.

That transition process happens gradually, however, and the U.S.’s detection infrastructure—as well as the ways nitazenes are moving within the country’s drug market—make it difficult to document.

“There is no one consistent supply chain across all 50 states,” says Sheila Vakharia, a national expert on harm reduction and policy. She explained how regional and urban supply chains interact within their own bubbles across the country, evolving at different rates and slowly introducing new substances like nitazenes into the market.

“What we see when these new drugs take hold, is that they start off in one market, one region, and they start to saturate that geographic area, starting usually with a city, but then kind of spreading to the rural areas surrounding it,” Vakharia explains to TIME.

Palamar, the NYU drug use epidemiology professor, suggests it’s possible that now “nitazenes, oftentimes more potent than fentanyl, could come creeping into the supply and replace fentanyl.”

Palamar is also the Deputy Director of the NIDA-funded National Drug Early Warning System (NDEWS), which provides timely data on emerging substance use trends. He says NDEWS’s research has found that fentanyl is harder to find, more expensive and weaker, according to recent data.

But he says he doesn't know the extent to which nitazenes are coming in to fill the gap, because "oftentimes the nitazenes are co-present with fentanyl in the supply," meaning they might be mixed in with other drugs without the knowledge of the user.

Krotulski, the NPS program manager, notes that while the mixing of nitazenes with other drugs has been documented in low numbers, the fentanyl and nitazene supplies are by no means directly linked.

Fentanyl mostly comes to the U.S. through Mexico, while nitazenes are primarily produced in China. They "merge and overlap at times," he says, but the two don't directly influence each other because their supply chains for the most part operate on their own.

"It is possible that if fentanyl decreases that nitazenes could increase, but that doesn't have to necessarily be the case," he tells TIME.

By all accounts, the increasing—and likely underrepresented—presence of nitazenes in the U.S. does not come close to rivaling the fentanyl trade at this point.

But their emergence is indicative of a market that is undergoing a period of unpredictable shifts and diversification and that is, once again, being changed into something new and unknown.

"Fundamentally, an unregulated drug supply is going to always be changing," Dasgupta says. "And we're just at kind of a period of hyper-change that we've never seen before."

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# Trump Vowed His Mass Deportation Efforts Would Target ‘the Worst of the Worst.’ Here’s What the Data Shows

Greene is an editorial fellow at TIME, reporting on breaking news and politics out of the D.C. bureau.



President Donald Trump and Administration officials have repeatedly insisted his hard-line immigration agenda is focused on rooting out and expelling dangerous criminals, painting their efforts to carry out [mass deportations](#) as a means of protecting law-abiding Americans.

Since launching his reelection campaign, Trump has vowed to deport “the worst of the worst” while [blaming](#) migrants for bringing “crime, drugs, misery and death” to the U.S.

As recently as last week, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security reiterated that the immigration crackdown is primarily aimed at criminal offenders—and claimed it is succeeding in detaining and removing them.

“Ramped-up immigration enforcement targeting the worst of the worst is removing more and more criminal illegal aliens off our streets every day and is sending a clear message to anyone else in this country illegally: Self-deport or we will arrest and deport you,” DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said in a [statement](#).

Yet a number of studies [have found](#) that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than Americans born in the U.S., and that undocumented immigration [does not](#) increase violent offenses. And [recent federal data](#) show that over 70% of detainees who were being held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as of Thursday had no criminal convictions.

As of Sept. 25, according to the data, 59,762 people were in ICE detention. Among them, 17,007 had been convicted of a crime and another 15,009 faced pending criminal charges, while the largest group—comprising 27,746 detainees—had neither a conviction nor pending criminal charges against them.

The share of people without criminal records in detention appears to have [grown](#) significantly since Trump’s return to the White House in January. [The Cato Institute reported](#) in June, citing nonpublic data from the agency, that at the time 65% of the people who had been processed by ICE since fiscal year 2025 started at the beginning of October 2024 had not been convicted of crimes, while 53% of those who had were convicted of nonviolent offenses compared to 6.9% who were convicted of violent crimes.

The data seems to contradict the Administration’s narrative that it has prioritized the “worst” criminals as it has deported tens of thousands of

people and detained many others. By the end of last month, the number of deportations it had carried out was nearing [200,000](#). The Department of Homeland Security announced last week that “2 million illegal aliens have been removed or have self-deported” since Trump’s inauguration on Jan. 20, saying the Administration was on pace to “shatter historic records and deport nearly 600,000” by year’s end.

In addition to increasing the pace of deportations, Trump has targeted several major cities in recent months amid his efforts to crack down on both crime and immigration, deploying troops to [Los Angeles](#), [Washington, D.C.](#), and [Portland](#) while threatening to do the same in a number of others. He has also ramped up immigration enforcement operations in [Massachusetts](#) and [Chicago](#), and sought to fight the sanctuary city policies some have in place that limit local law enforcement’s cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

While Trump has repeatedly pointed to violent crime in the cities amid the deployments and threatened further deployments, data shows crime rates already declining in cities including [D.C.](#) and Portland after they previously rose during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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# How Is Climate Change Impacting Fall Foliage?

Shah is a reporter at TIME.



It's officially fall in the northern hemisphere, but depending where you are, it might not look like it.

From Maine and Vermont to New York, tourists often flock to the U.S. East Coast to see the maples and oak leaves transform into vibrant oranges and reds. Leaves can change their color from as early as mid-September all the way through early November.

But pay closer attention and you might notice that it doesn't always follow a predictable pattern from year-to-year. Research shows that climate change is impacting when leaves fall along with the vibrancy of their colors—a tree

that was previously barren by the end of October might still have leaves come November, while a drought stricken region might see dull, brown leaves that simply crumble off the tree.

Here's what to know about why leaves change color in the fall—and how the process is being impacted by climate change.

## Why do leaves change color in the fall?

When temperatures drop and the days get shorter, trees get less sunlight, causing the energy-absorbing chlorophyll, which gives them their green hues, to break down and reveal the other color pigments.

"They're present the whole time," says Stephanie Spera, a professor at the University of Richmond who is currently studying shifts in the fall foliage season. "They're just masked by all the chlorophyll."

However, not all trees turn red in the fall. Some, like Aspens, the most widespread tree in North America, turn yellow. "Aspen trees, and also some other trees, get extra nitrogen from fungi in their roots, so they don't need to make such a big effort to recuperate the last nitrogen from their leaf," says Susanne Renner, honorary professor of biology at Washington University in St. Louis.

Since maple and oaks can't do the same, they have to produce an energy-consuming "sunscreen" that allows the leaves to stay on the branches—and absorb more nutrients—a little longer.

Some don't even change color at all. Evergreens, for example, have protections that prevent them from losing their leaves altogether. "Their needles are really thin and covered in wax," says Spera. "And because their needles are so thin, it's not like the big energy-intensive situation where you have a giant leaf, taking all this light."

## How is climate change impacting fall foliage?

There's no one-size-fits-all answer for how climate change is impacting the natural phenomenon. Impacts vary depending on the type of tree and the region it lives in.

"It is not possible to predict across the board how climate warming will impact leaf coloration," says Renner.

One thing's for certain, which is that the color change that we see in the autumn is caused by a chemical process—and that isn't likely to be impacted by climate change.

"The maple trees will continue to be red no matter the temperature, because of the underlying chemical ability of the plant to produce this or that color," says Renner.

However, trees need cold temperatures to produce the vibrant hues we're used to seeing. If the leaves in your area are a disappointing brown, it could be that the temperatures didn't drop low enough to produce bright colors.

"Fall colors in some regions and some years are pretty dull because the nights weren't cold enough," says Renner.

Higher temperatures in the summer and fall can also impact when the leaves begin to fall. Without a stronger decline in temperature, "the trees don't have that cue to start shutting down chlorophyll production and shutting down photosynthesis," says Spera. In the region of Maine that Spera has been studying, fall foliage has been delayed by almost a day each decade, mostly due to warmer summer temperatures.

Rain and drought can also impact the leaves, with too much leading to fungus and too little leading to "drought scorch." "The leaves literally crisp off the trees," says Spera. After a summer of drought and erratic rainfall, experts predict that New England's famous fall foliage, which brings an estimated [\\$8 billion to local economies](#), will be "[bright, brief and early](#)" this year.

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# Jane Goodall's Message of Hope Lives On

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 October 2, 2025

**Workers kept on in shutdown raises questions, Trump doubles down as layoffs loom, and more**

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There are few people in human history whose last names alone are sufficient to conjure up kindness, goodness, wisdom, grace—Mandela, Gandhi, King, Lincoln. Add to that list Goodall. The other four left us years ago. Jane Goodall—primatologist, zoologist, anthropologist, conservationist, winner of the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE)—joined them today, dying at age 91.

“Dr. Jane Goodall DBE, U.N. Messenger for Peace and founder of the Jane Goodall Institute, has passed away, due to natural causes. She was in California as part of her speaking tour in the United States” the Jane Goodall Institute [posted on Instagram](#). “Dr. Goodall’s discoveries as an ethologist revolutionized science, and she was a tireless advocate for the protection and restoration of our natural world.”

The spare prose of the announcement was a fitting reflection of the quiet, austere, deliberate way Goodall lived her remarkable life—qualities that were essential for work that required hours, months, and years crouched in the jungles and clearings of Africa, most notably in the Gombe National Park in Tanzania, observing chimpanzees from a sort of intimate distance and discovering their sometimes loving, sometimes violent, sometimes ingenious lives.



It was in 1960 that Goodall first arrived in Gombe, part of a group of three young naturalists—including [Dian Fossey](#) and [Biruté Mary Galdikas](#)—whom famed anthropologist [Louis Leakey](#) dispatched to Africa to study primates in their natural environment. Leakey playfully dubbed them [The Trimates](#). All three women distinguished themselves. Galdikas spent 50 years studying the orangutans of Indonesian Borneo in their native habitat. Fossey dedicated herself to studying mountain gorillas in their Congo homeland, and lost her life in their cause: [in 1985 she was murdered](#) in her cabin in Rwanda while working to protect the gorillas from poachers. Goodall had the gift of years—and the gift of patience—and over the decades her discoveries spilled forth.

[In 1960](#), she witnessed a group of chimpanzees eating a bushpig, doing away with the previous belief that chimps were strictly vegetarians. That same year she made the startling observation that chimps strip the bark from twigs and use the denuded stick to fish for termites in rotting logs—overturning the even more closely held belief that humans are the only animal to use tools.

Chimps, she discovered, mirror humans in other, decidedly less benign ways. From 1974 to 1978 she observed what she dubbed “the four year war,” an extended, bloody conflict between two groups of rival chimpanzees in Gombe—groups she called the main Kasakela group and the Kahama splinter group. That same year she observed cannibalism among chimpanzees, when a mother and daughter pair stole, killed, and ate babies in their own community—likely to eliminate a line of rival females.

But Goodall discovered a [gentle side](#) to chimpanzees too. They play, they tickle, they kiss, they grieve. They make submissive, gestural apologies after a quarrel. And, in powerful moments of cross-species care, they sometimes accepted her—the quiet, comparatively hairless, human observer—as part of their band.



In 2009, [Goodall spoke to TIME's Andrea Sachs](#) about her time in the field, and shared some of her most treasured exchanges with the chimps. In one such moment she was following a young male through the jungle, fighting

her way through the brush and the scrub and catching thorns in her hair as the chimp hurried ahead. Finally she reached a clearing—an open space across which the chimp could have easily hurried if he was trying to leave his pursuer behind. Instead, she found him sitting quietly, apparently waiting for her. Touched by the gesture, she found a palm nut on the ground—something chimps love—picked it up and held it out to him. At that moment, however, the chimp wasn't hungry.

"He turned his face away," she recalled. "So I put my hand closer. And he turned, he looked directly in my eyes, he reached out, he took the nut ... he dropped it, but he very gently squeezed my hand, which is how chimpanzees reassure each other. That was a communication that, for us, pre-dates words."

On another occasion, she was observing a young mother she named Flo and her five-month-old baby, who was just learning to walk. "[Flo] trusts me so much that when he totters towards me, and reaches out, she doesn't snatch him away like she used to, but she just keeps her hand protectively around him and she lets him reach out to touch my nose. And this was just so magic."

Flo wasn't alone in trusting Goodall. The billions of members of Goodall's own species did too. We trusted her to be something of an ambassador between the human nation and that of our closest genetic kin. We trusted her to be an advocate for nature and for conserving the wild world. And it was a trust that was rewarded.



In her [final article for TIME](#), in 2021, Goodall took up the cause not of fauna, but flora, writing about the devastating consequences the planet could suffer as [millions of acres](#) of trees are cut, razed, and burned every year. At one time, she wrote, the planet was home to six trillion trees. Now that number has been halved—mostly in the last 100 years. She called on readers to support the [Trillion Trees](#) campaign—a drive to plant one trillion trees by 2030. And she lent her name to a similar effort—the [Trees for Jane](#) initiative. From space, Goodall wrote, our planet is a palette of white and blue and brown and green—and the green is in retreat.

[video id=rLmnP5U4 autostart="viewable"]

“One trillion trees planted and protected is a big number, even over a ten-year period,” she wrote. “But if everyone pitches in, we have a fighting chance to make a difference. Together, let’s create a sustainable planet for generations to come. Join us today. Let’s give our planet a new reason for hope.”

In her near-century of life, Goodall was all about the hope. In her [final conversation with TIME](#), also in 2021, she said, “I’m about to leave the world with all the mess, whereas young people have to grow up into it. If they succumb to the doom and gloom that’s the end. If you don’t hope you sink into apathy; hope is a crucial way to get through this.”

Goodall’s long, heartening campaign ended today. Let’s now see if we’re all worthy of her work.

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# What Japan's First Female Prime Minister Could Mean for the Country's Gender Politics

De Guzman is a reporter at TIME, based in the Singapore bureau. He covers the Asia-Pacific region and global overnight news.



Sanae Takaichi just broke Japan's highest glass ceiling.

The country's ruling Liberal Democratic Party on Saturday voted Takaichi to be the party's next leader, which is also effectively Japan's next Prime Minister, setting her up to be the first woman to lead the country.

According to [public broadcaster NHK](#), Takaichi, 64, secured 185 of 341 votes cast from the party's sitting parliamentarians and current members.

The race, much like last year's party leadership contest that Takaichi initially led but ultimately lost to Shigeru Ishiba, went to a run-off vote between Takaichi and the would-be youngest-ever Prime Minister, 44-year-old Shinjiro Koizumi.

"Instead of just celebrating, I know the real challenge starts now," Takaichi said. "I believe there is a mountain of work ahead and we must tackle it together with everyone's support. With all of you, I will strive to fire up the LDP and make it a positive party, which turns people's anxieties into hope."

Following a premiership vote in Japan's parliament, Takaichi will presumably take over from Ishiba, [who resigned last month](#) after the LDP suffered two election defeats since he took office in 2024. The party and its coalition partner lost majorities in both chambers of parliament for the first time since 1955, and are now operating under a minority government. The LDP's successive election failures were in part caused by several political scandals that have in recent years [tarnished the party's reputation](#).

Takaichi, a more far-right pick for the typically center-conservative party, takes charge amid growing calls for the party to reform itself as Japanese voters have increasingly gravitated toward [right-wing political movements](#).

Takaichi's LDP election win also marks a departure from the long male-dominated politics that Japan is used to. The country ranks 118th among 148 economies, the lowest among G-7 members, in the World Economic Forum's [2025 Global Gender Gap Report](#), languishing particularly in the political empowerment metric.

But the elevation of Takaichi, a staunch conservative and fiscal dove who "[behaves like men](#)," experts previously told TIME, and has [embraced](#) comparisons to former U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, does not necessarily portend a brighter future for Japanese women.

"She doesn't have a very positive track record on gender issues, on family-friendly policies, women's empowerment," Jeff Kingston, a professor of Asian studies and history at Temple University's Tokyo campus, tells TIME. "Coming from the right wing of the party, there is a strong, conservative family-and-social-values emphasis."

## **Who is Sanae Takaichi?**

A native of Nara Prefecture in the country’s west, Takaichi, the daughter of a manufacturing company employee and police officer, graduated from Kobe University in 1984 with a business degree. In 1987, she spent a year in the U.S. as part of a congressional fellowship, working for [late feminist](#) Rep. Pat Schroeder (D, Colo.).

Before entering politics, Takaichi briefly worked as a TV presenter. She began her political career in 1993, when she was elected as an independent to the lower parliamentary chamber, and she joined the LDP in 1996. Since her first term, she’s been reelected nine times.

Throughout her tenure, she developed a close working relationship with the assassinated Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#), also a right-wing politician. During Abe’s first term, Takaichi served as minister of state in five portfolios, including one involving addressing gender equality and birth rates. Back then, Takaichi approached family policy reform in a “traditionalist” manner, [wrote](#) Hiroko Takeda, a professor of political science at Nagoya University in Japan, in 2018.

In December 2012, Takaichi became the LDP’s Policy Research Council Chairperson. Two years later, Abe, who became Prime Minister again, selected her to take over the internal affairs and communications ministry.

Takaichi ran for Prime Minister twice before, in [2021](#) and in [2024](#). She previously spoke about what it’s like to be a female candidate in the LDP. “It’s like an ant challenging an elephant—perhaps that’s what everyone thinks,” she [said in 2021](#). “When I first ran for election, it was a time when being a woman was disadvantage. But it’s totally different now compared to 30 years ago.”

## **What is Takaichi’s gender agenda?**

In the 2025 election, Takaichi appeared to promise an improvement in Japan’s treatment of women by [promising Nordic-like](#) female representation in her Cabinet and LDP executive committee. Ishiba’s

Cabinet had only two female members, and [only 15% of Japan's parliament is female](#).

Takeda from Nagoya University tells TIME that Takaichi's campaign this year is different from her previous election campaigns, as she's previously not highlighted her gender on the trail. "This time she sort of started the appeal that she is a female candidate," Takeda said. "She made a little bit of effort."

But that effort is somewhat diminished by her history with policies that critics say work against women.

Takaichi has ardently defended conservative family values. Despite growing public support for a dual-surname law (*fūfubessei*), which allows married couples to have differing surnames, Takaichi remains a [vocal opponent](#) of such a reform because, she's [said](#), it "may destroy the social structure based on family units." (Takaichi herself, however, still uses her maiden name despite being twice married to fellow lawmaker Taku Takaichi. Initially she had taken his surname, Yamamoto, but after their divorce and remarriage, he took hers.)

She's also known to oppose Japan's patrilineal imperial succession laws, "I feel extremely strongly about whether it would be right for our generation to destroy this," Takaichi [said](#) in 2021, echoing the party's stand to maintain that only men from the male imperial line could become emperor.

Nevertheless, Takaichi, on the 2025 campaign trail, promised partial tax deductions for babysitting fees and corporate tax incentives for companies offering in-house childcare—a sign that she may be warming up to more women-friendly policies.

However, experts Takeda and Kingston warn that those could simply reflect a strategic softening to help her electoral prospects, without any real change of convictions.

"Maybe she's had a moment to reflect on her past and decided she's going to reinvent herself, but when people are suddenly making these changes during the campaign, one could be skeptical," Kingston says.

Takaichi is largely expected to follow the right-wing agenda of her mentor, Abe. During his rule, he promoted the [economic participation of women](#) but stayed firm on the traditional social views on women that the LDP has championed.

“We tend to appreciate the symbolic effect,” Takeda says of Takaichi’s win. “There is some superficial impact by having a female leader. But I’m to think, with Takaichi becoming LDP’s President... the essence there is an Abe-type LDP politics, which is very conservative, particularly in terms of culture and tradition.”

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# 11 Symptoms Foot Doctors Say You Should Never Ignore

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



If you want to take a step toward better health, see a foot doctor. You might learn something about a totally different (and seemingly unrelated) part of your body.

Sometimes, “your feet are the first place where you can see warning signs of things like diabetes or vascular disease or even skin cancer,” says Hira Mirza, a podiatrist at CLS Health in Houston. “If you look closely enough, it really is a window to the rest of your health.”

We asked experts about the foot-related symptoms you should never ignore—and what some of these issues can reveal about your health.

## Hair that stops growing on your toes

When Anne Sharkey examines patients' feet, she always checks the hair on their toes—prompting a quizzical reaction. “They’re like, ‘Why are you looking at my hair?’ And I tell them, ‘Because if it stops growing, we have a problem,’” says Sharkey, a podiatrist in Cedar Park, Texas. It could indicate vascular insufficiency, which means the body’s veins aren’t working properly, leading to poor blood flow back to the heart. “I tell my patients that skin is like grass,” she says. “Skin needs blood to grow, grass needs water to grow, and if we aren’t getting enough blood down here, we’re not going to grow hair.”

Toe hair that’s gone MIA isn’t the only foot-related sign of a potential vascular problem. Sharkey also pays attention to changes in color, like if your toes look super pale or shiny, and temperature changes. “People come in to see us and are like, ‘My feet are really cold,’” she says. That’s a red flag for circulation problems—which are particularly common among people with diabetes—and her office helps patients get scheduled to see a vascular specialist as soon as possible.

## Sudden changes in arch height or foot shape

Women over 40 often show up in Sharkey’s office complaining of swelling and pain in one of their feet. They tell her they feel like they sprained their ankle, but they didn’t do anything that would have caused such an injury. When she examines them while they’re standing up, one foot looks normal, while the arch on the swollen one is flat.

**Read More:** [You Should Be Washing Your Shoes. Experts Explain How](#)

Many of these patients are dealing with failure of the posterior tibial tendon, which is the tendon that provides support to your arch while you’re in motion. Menopause can increase the risk: “We’re seeing a relationship

between the decline in estrogen and tendon dysfunction,” Sharkey says. Patients do best when they seek treatment right away; usually, that means a combination of physical therapy, a cast or boot, and orthotics. However, “Sometimes we catch it really late because people just didn’t realize, or they thought it was a sprain and walked through it for years,” she says. “Then there’s surgeries and reconstructions to bring that tendon back to where it was.”

## A red or irritated ingrown nail

Ingrown toenails are one of the most common reasons why people see a podiatrist. Yet often, they wait too long. “If you have an ingrown nail that’s red and irritated, don’t ignore it, because it’s only going to get worse,” Mirza says. “Those infections can go really wrong, really quickly.”

In addition to turning red, keep an eye out for tenderness, pain when you’re walking, drainage, or dried-up blood. Don’t try to fix the problem at home: “What happens is people unfortunately try to mess with that toenail with a non-sterile instrument or tool,” she says. “That worsens the infection, and at that point, people do end up coming in.” She typically prescribes antibiotics and does a procedure to remove the nail growing inside the skin, which turns “a three-day problem into a two- to three-week problem.”

## Leg swelling that doesn’t resolve with elevation

Sudden one-sided foot or leg swelling is an emergency that can indicate deep vein thrombosis (a blood clot in the lower leg). “We need this evaluated right away,” Sharkey says. “I’ve had people walk into my office and think they ruptured their Achilles tendon because their leg was swollen, and I was like, ‘Well, your Achilles is fine, but we need to get a stat ultrasound.’”

People at particularly high risk of blood clots include those recently bedridden following surgery as well as people who traveled a long distance in a car or plane. If Sharkey is suspicious a patient has a blood clot, she

sends them to the emergency room for an ultrasound and immediate treatment with clot-busting drugs.

## Sudden pain in your big toe

If you wake up at night with severe toe pain, it could be a sign of gout—which Sharkey is seeing more and more in her office. The telltale symptom: a red, hot, swollen big toe that's extremely tender and painful. “You don’t even want a bed sheet to touch it,” she says. “Patients call the office frantic in the morning, like, ‘I didn’t do anything and I woke up in the middle of the night, and I have this excruciating pain in my foot.’” They often show up to their appointment barefoot, she adds, unable to withstand the sensation of anything touching their foot.

**Read More:** [The Health Benefits of Wearing Shoes in the House](#)

Gout is diagnosed through a physical exam and lab tests, and patients need steroids or oral anti-inflammatories to get their pain under control, in addition to ongoing medication management and dietary changes.

## An ankle that rolls all the time

Most ankle sprains heal without triggering any long-term issues. However, 10% to 15% of people who have experienced a sprain go on to develop ankle instability, which means their foot rolls under their ankle when they do certain activities, says Dr. Travis Hanson, an orthopedic foot and ankle surgeon at Houston Methodist West. “If you saw somebody walking down the street who had an episode of ankle instability, they’d probably hop around and—depending how bad it was—maybe limp away,” he says. Many continue hobbling anywhere but to the doctor, convinced the situation will eventually resolve by itself.

That’s a bad idea: Repeatedly rolling your ankle could lead to significant problems, like torn tendons or cartilage damage. Hanson prefers to see people as soon as possible and is often able to help them strengthen their

ankle with physical therapy and by improving their balance. A small percentage end up needing surgery, he adds.

## An inability to pull your foot up

If you can push your ankle down—as though you were flooring it in your car—but you’re unable to pull it upwards, you may be experiencing foot drop. When this happens, “You have zero strength,” Hanson says. People tend to develop a limp, and their foot slaps so hard against the ground that “you can actually hear them as they’re walking down the hall.”

Foot drop is often caused by a pinched nerve in the lower back, but it can [also be related to damage caused by knee, hip, or spine surgery](#). It could even be the result of the position in which you slept, in which case it usually resolves on its own within a few hours. Otherwise, after running imaging tests, doctors generally recommend treatments like physical therapy and braces, splints, or shoe inserts.

## A dark streak under your toenail

Mirza recently diagnosed a patient with subungual melanoma, a rare type of skin cancer that develops under the nail bed. The telltale sign is a dark vertical line that can also lead to other color changes in or around the nail. Get in the habit of doing regular self-checks, she urges; if you typically wear nail polish, which would conceal any discoloration, check your toes before reapplying a new coat. If anything looks different than usual, schedule a doctor’s appointment.

Subungual melanoma is curable when it’s detected in an early stage. While treatment depends on the stage of the cancer, it might include removing the nail or amputating the toe in some cases. “The goal is to not have to remove the entire toe, but it depends how soon you catch it,” Mirza says.

## Numbness or tingling in the feet

Sharkey's patients sometimes show up with symptoms that indicate metabolic problems—like numbness, tingling, or burning in their feet that gets worse at night. "During the day, our body is processing so much external feedback," she says. "At night, when things are quiet, all of a sudden your body is so much more aware." What your body might be saying: "'My toes are tingling, or they feel like they're on fire,'" Sharkey says.

While people in this situation could be experiencing any type of neuropathy, the most common is related to diabetes, Sharkey adds—which is often a surprise to the patient. Foot problems are the first clue, she says, that leads to their eventual diagnosis and treatment.

## **Sudden onset of painless swelling, warmth, and redness of the ankle or mid-foot**

This is a commonly missed symptom among people with diabetes who have lost feeling in their feet and ankles, says Damian Roussel, a podiatrist at the Centers for Advanced Orthopaedics in Maryland. It points to a condition called Charcot neuroarthropathy, or Charcot foot, which happens when a small injury or infection makes the bones and joints start to collapse—which people overlook for a long time because of their decreased ability to feel pain.

When they finally notice redness or swelling, "They'll usually go to their primary care doctor, and the primary care doctor sometimes assumes it's an infection because they're diabetic, and they'll put them on antibiotics," he says. "Then the patient won't get better, and they'll end up seeing me a month later, and no one's done an X-ray."

**Read More:** [Put Your Shoes Back On. Here's the Problem With Going Barefoot](#)

Roussel's imaging tests typically reveal that the bones in the middle part of the foot have started to get soft and break down. Patients with Charcot neuroarthropathy need to get off their foot entirely, he says—sometimes for a few months—to allow the bones an opportunity to heal.

## An inability to bear weight on an injured foot after a few days

If you twist your ankle playing pickleball or wearing high heels, you might assume you can walk the injury off and that you'll be back to normal soon. That might be true. But Roussel's patients often ask him what counts as a concerning amount of pain and swelling, and how to know if they should make a doctor appointment. "I generally tell them that if you're still not able to put weight on the foot three to four days after the injury, it needs to be seen," he says. "That indicates a more significant injury than they probably anticipated," such as a fracture or dislocation, or a tendon or ligament injury that requires special care.

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# The Arc of History is Bending Backward

Richard Stengel is the former Editor of TIME, an MSNBC analyst, and the author of [\*Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation.\*](#)



In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. The Cold War had ended, and it looked like liberal democracy had triumphed.

That same year, Francis Fukuyama published his famous essay, [“The End of History.”](#) which posited the idea that with the fall of communism, an international consensus had been reached that liberal democracy was “the final form of government.” No more communism, or fascism; no more theocracy, or monarchies. No more totalitarianism. Democracy had won.

The phrase, “the end of history,” comes from Hegel, who prophesized that “history” would end when there was no longer ideological competition in world affairs. This was not the end of “events” happening—front pages would still be filled with news—but the end of history as a struggle for the best way for human beings to govern themselves.

Hegel even worried that the world would reach a state of global boredom.

In the years after the fall of the wall, dozens of nations in eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia embraced constitutional democracy. There was, in Bernard Bailyn’s wonderful phrase, a contagion of liberty. The gap between rich and poor narrowed.

But something started to change around 2005. According to the Freedom House survey, 2005 was the last year when global movement toward democracy outnumbered declines. Every year since then, the number of countries moving away from democracy has outnumbered those becoming more democratic.

This is what political scientist Larry Diamond calls the “democratic recession.” We are still in the middle of it.

The signs: The weakening of the rule of law. The undermining of an independent judiciary. The diminishment of free speech. Corrupt elections, or no elections at all. And political parties that do not accept election results

The causes: The steep rise in global immigration in part due to the Syrian Civil War and wars in Sudan and Congo. Climate change making life more difficult for hundreds of millions of people. Increasing economic inequality. The grievances of older white populations in the West who felt they had been shunted aside. The extraordinary economic growth of China and their influence on nations around the world.

Democracies do not die from the outside, but from within. They do not die at the end of a gun, but at the ballot box. They elect leaders who then dismantle democracy. It’s often unwitting. They elect leaders who seem strong, or who don’t like immigrants, or who stoke their grievances, who say, It’s not your fault.

**Read more:** [Trump and Putin Didn't Make a Deal, but Putin Still Won](#)

If you vote for a candidate who does not promise to uphold the Constitution, you will get a leader who unravels the Constitution.

My old boss, Barack Obama, loved to quote the Martin Luther King line that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. It's a beautiful sentence. The idea also arises from the notion that history is linear, directional, even providential. And, of course, you have to bend it yourself.

Autocrats do not think that history bends toward justice. I'm not sure Xi and Putin even think there is a moral universe. They believe, like the ancient Greeks, that history is cyclical, and that humankind is not advancing. That life, like Hobbes said, is nasty, brutish, and short.

What we're seeing now is a rise in soft fascism—a combination of ultra-nationalism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, and toxic nostalgia. The reason is clear: the immigration of brown people from the global south to the global north. The universal slogan of "Make country X great again," is very often, "Make country X white again."

Instead of moving forward, the wheel of history has turned back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century world of strongmen and power politics, spheres of interest and economic nationalism. Spheres of interest is the idea that great powers can dominate and control other nations in their spheres of interest.

Strongmen love spheres of interest. Putin justified invading Ukraine because it is in Russia's sphere of interest. Xi says Taiwan is part of China because it is in their sphere of interest. And an American president [called Canada the 51st state](#) because it is in our sphere of interest.



And it doesn't just operate on land, it operates in the realm of information. The trend for the last twenty years is for a Balkanized internet—not the idealistic worldwide web, but local internet without much access to the outside. Countries, beginning with Russia, have passed data localization laws.

It is happening, too, in the AI race, with competition between China and the US. There will be a Western AI, and there will be a Chinese or authoritarian AI. That idealized 1990s world of “information wants to be free” is long gone.

Conservatives celebrate the past and believe the benefits of immigration ended after World War I and the advantages of free trade ended after World War II. They have a 19-century mercantilist view of trade that American must have surpluses with its trading partners and high walls to secure American sovereignty.

Gone are the days when American presidents and Secretaries of State talked to foreign authoritarian leaders about human rights, transparency, and

democracy.

I had the privilege of seeing them do it. I sat in a room and witnessed Barack Obama and John Kerry talk to Xi Jinping and other world leaders about human rights and transparency.

That is what we used to do, and you can debate whether or not it was effective. But it was who we were. The world has changed.

I remember meeting with an African foreign minister. At the end of the meeting he said to me, “You come and talk to me about transparency and human rights, and the Chinese build me a super highway. Who do you think I’m going to listen to?”

China’s argument is that you can create prosperity without free speech or elections, without democracy. Other countries are listening.

Twenty years ago, I was the head of the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. One of the things I did was recruit Justice Sandra Day O’Connor for the board, the first female Supreme Court Justice. Take it from me, she was a force. (She is a member of the [National Cowgirl Hall of Fame](#). You can look it up.)

One day she said to me, “Mr. Stengel, we’re going to pay a terrible price for having stopped teaching civics in this country.”

We have.

In one of the exhibition halls at the Constitution Center, carved into the marble wall were some lines from one of the most beautiful speeches ever given about democracy: [“The Spirit of Liberty,” given by Judge Learned Hand](#) in Central Park in 1944, as WWII was raging.

“I often wonder,” he said, “whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can do much to help.”

Finally, he says something very poignant, “The spirit of liberty is the spirit that is not too sure it is right.”

Authoritarians don’t wonder whether they are right.

So, what to do? We don’t have time to start teaching civics again. But one thing that civics teaches is that elections and voting is the democratic superpower.

This is why the enemies of democracy spend a lot of time and money on making it harder to vote. Voting should be as easy and ubiquitous as online banking. A country that succeeds in making it harder and harder to vote ends up not being a democracy anymore.

The other democratic superpower is protest. In the 1960s, dissent was patriotic. Now the silent majority seems to be those of us who are pro-democracy.

Let’s get out there. Let’s continue to enlarge the circle of liberty. We actually haven’t been at it for that long. Yes, we’re 250 years old, but it was only the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#) that really made voting possible for all Americans. That made us a democracy. I do think the only way to combat anti-democracy is with a more inclusive and efficient democracy. As the old saying goes, democracy is the worst form of government, [except for all the others](#). Let’s give it a try.

*This essay was adapted from the [Christ Church, Oxford 500th anniversary lecture](#).*

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# Javier Milei Is Losing His Grip on Argentina

*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](#).*



Argentina's [President Javier Milei](#), a man who's enjoyed extraordinary success with a "move-fast-and-break-things" approach to politics and economic policy, is [starting](#) to [look a lot more vulnerable](#). And at an inconvenient moment, with the approach of the country's [Oct. 26 midterm elections](#), which could mark the beginning of the end for Milei and his reform efforts.

In early October, lawmakers resoundingly [overturned two vetoes](#) that were part of his economic reform process: Argentina's Senate voted 59-7 to overturn Milei's block on new funding for universities and 58-7 against his attempt to veto new money for pediatric health care. The Chamber of Deputies, Argentina's lower house, had already rejected Milei's vetoes.

Milei had argued that both bills would force government to spend money it doesn't have, but opponents in the Senate argued the plans were essential on moral, not fiscal, grounds.

These defeats come at a time of scandal. Allegations linking Jose Luis Espert, head of the ruling Liberty Advances ticket in Buenos Aires province, to a corruption scandal look likely to damage Milei's party's standing. Espert faces accusations of [close ties with Federico Machado](#), a man indicted in the U.S. for drug trafficking and money laundering. Documents surfaced that appear to show Espert received a \$200,000 transfer from Machado after the former had denied its existence. Though Espert denies any wrongdoing and [quit the race on Oct. 6](#), the damage is done, in part because his name and photo will remain on the ballot.

The story is particularly damaging at a moment when public anger over violence is rising in Buenos Aires province in the wake of a [recent high-profile crime](#) involving drug-trafficking gangs.

This is not the first time that Milei, who rose to power in part with attacks on the venality of Argentina's elite, has been [tarred with corruption accusations](#). In 2023, leaked audio messages suggested a senior official had discussed kickbacks with a drug company. Worse still, the leak appeared to implicate Karina Milei, his sister and chief of staff. (She denies the allegations.)

Milei faces these challenges at a time when the country's financial conditions [continue to deteriorate](#) and help from the Trump Administration is uncertain. Last month, U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's [promises of aid](#) triggered optimism within the ruling party. But Washington's plan didn't offer many specifics, and Bessent [later clarified](#) that any U.S. help would come only as a currency swap, would not include a plan to buy Argentinian debt, and would come only after the midterms.

Milei's economic team will [soon travel to Washington](#), and he is set to sit down with Trump on Oct. 14, but a major breakthrough before the upcoming midterms is unlikely.

For all these reasons, Milei's party is set to underperform in the midterms, where half the seats in the Chamber and a third in the Senate are up for grabs. The party will likely draw less than 40% of the vote, an outcome that would bolster the view that Milei is politically wounded, and leave him with fewer willing negotiating partners for the next round of [unpopular reforms](#). Milei's party will also, of course, face greater opposition in Congress, further damaging the prospects of his agenda.

For instance, after the midterms, Milei will likely have to take the hugely controversial step of [devaluing the Argentine peso](#), and for that he'll need the full support of his base. A tepid election showing will make it more difficult. His party already holds just seven out of 72 seats in the Senate and 38 out of 257 seats in the Chamber in Argentina's fragmented politics.

Other political players, including governors and members of former President Mauricio Macri's allied Republican Proposal party, will demand more concessions on reform and a much greater say in Milei's future policy choices—concessions he will be reluctant to concede.

In November 2023, Milei won a commanding presidential election. He is weakened, and yet his opponents underestimate his continuing appeal with voters exhausted by decades of political dysfunction. The big question is if Milei, off-balance now, can bounce back.

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# ByteDance's AI Videos Are Scary Realistic. That's a Problem for Truth Online.

Chow is a technology correspondent at TIME. He covers crypto, AI, tech regulation, and culture.



This week, OpenAI [released](#) its latest AI video generation model, Sora 2, advertising it as a “big leap forward” for the space. As Sora hits the public, it will have to compete for market share in a crowded market, including with a major competitor that is rapidly gaining steam: the Chinese company ByteDance, which owns [TikTok](#).

In the past few months, ByteDance released Seedance, an AI video generator that many users are already [calling the best](#) in the world, and a new version

of Seedream, an [elite](#) image model. Its LLM, Doubao, has 150 million monthly active users, according to website analytics site [Aicpb.com](#).

ByteDance's AI advancements are a prime example of how Chinese AI companies are quickly catching up to American ones, despite chip export controls. Because their models are high quality and also cheaper, they are winning over consumers around the world, including in America. But while these models are entralling many users, they also come with a host of concerns that plague many of the cutting edge models: they allow anyone to create affordable deepfakes that are indistinguishable from reality—and to also freely reproduce copyrighted material.

## Reaching the Frontier

Over the past year, ByteDance has assembled top AI talent, [hiring](#) a former vice president of Google DeepMind to lead AI foundational research and luring other engineers and researchers away from Alibaba and other startups, the *Financial Times* reported in December. It has also invested [billions of dollars](#) into infrastructure, including advanced Nvidia chips.

ByteDance released the first iteration of its video model Seedance in June, and a new image generator, Seedream 4.0, in September. The models can be accessed in the U.S. through third-party platforms.

Jobin Jonny, a designer based in Kerala, India, first discovered Seedream in late August, and was particularly impressed with how it imagined the face of someone from his region. “The generated face carried the exact features and details of a real Kerala man,” he says.



Jonny says that Seedance is now his favorite video model, especially with how it captures physics and [natural movements](#). It doesn't hurt that Seedance is much cheaper: On the third-party platform Freepik, it costs half as many credits as Google's Veo 3. On social media, several AI influencers have [encouraged their followers](#) to switch over to Bytedance's products based on their price point.

Tiezhen Wang, an engineer at the machine learning platform Hugging Face, tested the tools. He says he designed an "amazing" poster with Seedream, and that Seedance "shines on image-to-video tasks, preserving style and character consistency. . . . ByteDance has clearly moved into the frontier of AI across multimodal generation," he says.

This is the future of AI animation.

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No more brain-melting workflows — now it's all about your creative vision.

Want to try it yourself? Here's how  [pic.twitter.com/hXDq7LJR9Y](https://pic.twitter.com/hXDq7LJR9Y)

— Framer  (@0xFramer) [July 25, 2025](#)

Eric Lu, the co-founder of the online video editing software program Kapwing, has offered AI image generation to his customers for several years, starting with Stable Diffusion. When Seedance and Seedream came out, his team conducted internal testing to compare their prompt adherence, image quality, speed, and cost to American competitors. "And it wasn't close —the models are better in every way," he says.

Lu quickly switched Kapwing's default AI image models to Seedance and Seedream away from American models. "It was almost a no-brainer, because we save money, but also give our users a better quality output," he says.

## "Unrestricted" AI

But this rise in quality has many implications. First, it shows that Chinese companies have successfully navigated around the U.S.'s chip export controls designed to slow them down. *The Information* [reported](#) in December that ByteDance has been accessing advanced Nvidia chips by renting them outside of China. The company has been [rapidly expanding](#) its data center usage in Malaysia.

The price point of ByteDance's tools also enables many new users to turn to AI to create realistic images. The affordability and accessibility of these tools could upend the workflows of advertising, marketing, and the stock footage industry. "Why buy clips when you can generate any shot you need instantly?" one X user [wrote](#) in a thread about Seedance.

As these hyper-realistic AI tools spread, threats of deepfakes and misinformation loom large. In June, TIME found that Google's video model Veo 3 generated realistic clips that contained misleading or inflammatory information about news events. After TIME contacted Google about these videos, the company said it would begin adding a visible watermark to videos generated with the tool.

**Read More:** [\*Google's New AI Tool Generates Convincing Deepfakes of Riots, Conflict, and Election Fraud\*](#)

When TIME tested many of the same prompts used with Google's model with Seedance through Capcut's Dreamina tool, it actually rejected many of them, on the grounds that they violated community guidelines. Still, the model, like its competitors, produced decently realistic footage that could conceivably be shared as misinformation on social media, like this video created via Seedance of U.S. soldiers delivering aid to Palestinian refugees. A representative for ByteDance did not respond to a request for comment.

[video id=10CaJXdh autostart="viewable"]

The realism of ByteDance's models also raises questions around copyright and likeness issues. Chinese scholars have [contended](#) that China has taken a regulatory approach of "moderate leniency" in terms of training models on copyrighted material. This shows up in the model outputs: One X user, for example, posted a Seedream image [showing](#) Heath Ledger's Joker, Margot

Robbie's Harley Quinn, and Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman together at a dive bar. Another created an [image](#) with Spider-Man, Batman, and Superman.

Lu, at Kapwing, says that Seedance and Seedream appear especially willing to recreate copyrighted characters, whether it be Mickey Mouse or the Minions. "I think that in the States, there's a lot more scrutiny on some of these big labs in terms where they're sourcing the content that they're training on," he says. "I think in China, there is an unrestricted ability of researchers to get the data that they need and train on that."

Selina Xu, China and AI Policy Lead in the Office of Eric Schmidt, says that it is "expected" that Bytedance and other Chinese companies train their models on the user-generated video data from their social media platforms. She adds that video generation models are a "growing revenue stream for AI companies."

TIME was able to create an image of a "young Brad Pitt and Leonardo DiCaprio shaking hands" through Seedream on Kapwing. Some members of Congress, including Marsha Blackburn, are [attempting](#) to pass legislation that would protect the voice and visual likenesses of individuals and creators from digital replicas created without their consent. But such legislation is still quite far from passing.

Meanwhile, American companies are beginning to pay attention to these Chinese AI giants, forcing them to grapple more publicly with copyright protections. In September, Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery and NBCUniversal [sued](#) the Chinese company MiniMax for "willful and brazen" copyright infringement.



## 'Heat to the fire'

American labs have [argued](#) that because their Chinese counterparts have a lax attitude toward copyright, they should also be able to train on copyrighted material, and that they are creating new images in a way that is transformative and protected under fair use. Earlier this year, OpenAI announced it would relax its rules around content moderation, leading to a wave of Studio Ghibli memes flooding the internet.

**Read More:** [\*How Those Studio Ghibli Memes Are a Sign of OpenAI's Trump-Era Shift\*](#)

"I'm not convinced this is being driven by Chinese companies. OpenAI opened the floodgates, to some extent, back in March," says Maribeth Rauh, an AI ethics researcher at the AI Accountability Lab at Trinity College Dublin. She says that the ability of Bytedance's models to create likenesses of copyrighted characters and real people "unfortunately adds heat to the fire of scrambling to get ahead at any cost, and regardless of any kind of law or ethical implications."

Rauh has many concerns about the spread of deepfake tools, including that they could lead to increased harassment and misinformation, and threaten users' data privacy. "People are having very revealing interactions with these models: the kind of images that they're interested in generating, how they tweak them, or if they're putting in images of likeness of real people," she says. "That's all data that would be at risk."

Katharine Trendacosta, director of policy and advocacy at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, argues that education is key to mitigating deepfake risks. "We've reached this weird point where simultaneously anything can be generated, but no one believes anything anymore," she says. "But we never solve the underlying problem. We just keep targeting the new technology, and not media literacy or teaching analytical skills or how to evaluate sources."

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# A Huntington's Disease Treatment Is Closer Than Ever

Park is a senior health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, new drug developments in cancer and Alzheimer's disease, mental health, HIV, CRISPR, and advances in gene therapy, among other issues in health and science. She also covers the Olympics and co-chaired TIME's inaugural TIME 100 Health Summit in 2019. Her work has won awards from the New York Press Club and recognition from the Deadline Club. In addition, she is the author of [\*The Stem Cell Hope: How Stem Cell Medicine Can Change Our Lives\*](#). Follow her on Instagram at [@aliceparktime](#).



Gene therapy is becoming a powerful way to treat challenging diseases that don't respond to traditional treatments, and researchers now report the first success in modifying genes to slow Huntington's disease.

In a study reported by Unique, which developed the experimental gene therapy, scientists found that it slowed progression of Huntington's disease by 75% over three years. The study has not yet been published in a scientific journal.

"I went into the trial cautiously optimistic but very anxious, as one does when starting a gene-therapy trial," says Dr. Sarah Tabrizi, director of the University College London Huntington's Disease Center and a lead investigator on the study. "I was blown away when I saw all of the data and it was very, very clear that the gene therapy worked."

The study involved 29 patients with Huntington's disease who were given one of two doses of gene therapy that targeted the huntingtin gene, which is mutated in the disease. The aberrant gene makes a form of the huntingtin protein that clumps into toxic aggregates, which prevent nerves from functioning normally. Eventually, nerve cells—particularly those in the part of the brain that regulates movement and cognitive skills like motivation, habit formation, and decision-making—degrade, leading to physical and cognitive symptoms.

**Read More:** [9 Things You Should Do for Your Brain Health Every Day, According to Neurologists](#)

Everyone in the trial was monitored for a number of biological and behavioral measures, including markers for degraded nerve proteins in spinal fluid and their ability to perform normal daily activities, manage their finances, and keep working. The gene therapy involved a 12- to 15-hour brain operation in which surgeons drill through the skull to access a deep part of the brain called the striatum, where nerve cells are most affected by the damaged huntingtin protein. The surgeons injected the gene therapy, which included DNA delivered by an inactivated virus vector, coding for instructions to turn off production of the huntingtin protein.

The 17 people who received the high dose showed a 75% slowing in the progression of their symptoms overall. The 12 people who got the lower dose—which was 10 times less concentrated—showed similar progression as placebo, although some of their symptoms improved.

Because the brain surgery was invasive and risky, the researchers had to find a reliable way to evaluate what effect the gene therapy was having without subjecting some patients to a sham surgery, says Dr. Walid Abi-Saab, Unique's chief medical officer. The participants who received the gene therapy were monitored for several years and compared to a group of about 2,000 untreated Huntington's patients—because there are currently no treatments for the disease—who were matched to the study patients getting the gene therapy by factors like age and stage of disease.

**Read More:** [7 Things to Do When Your Memory Starts Slipping](#)

The 75% slowing in the progression of the disease among those receiving the gene therapy is “huge,” says Tabrizi, who has been studying potential therapies for Huntington’s for two decades. “I have never seen anything that shows that [benefit],” she says. In Huntington’s patients, levels of neurofilament, which is produced by damaged nerve cells, in the spinal fluid increase by 30% to 45% in the early years of the disease, Tabrizi says. People receiving the gene therapy in the study actually showed drops in their levels—below their baseline levels, in some cases. “That tells you that neurons are being saved,” she says.

She says that the encouraging results are inspiring her to think about extending the benefits to people even earlier in their disease, with the hope that they might be able to prevent many of the disease’s worst symptoms from ever appearing. The patients in the trial were at Stage II or III, but, “when people who carry the Huntington’s gene are completely well, we might be able to prevent the disease from ever occurring and prevent the symptoms from ever occurring,” she says. “I personally want to start thinking about how we can get this therapy to people at Stage 0 or I to prevent this disease.”

Matt Kapusta, CEO of Unique, says the therapy is “transformational” and that giving patients more time with loved ones, with milder or fewer symptoms, is “priceless.” Unique plans to submit a request for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to grant accelerated approval of the gene therapy to treat Huntington’s in the first part of next year, and, if approved, is prepared to provide it to patients later in 2026.

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# Jimmy Kimmel is Back. But Corporate Media Won't Save Free Speech

Lizz Winstead is a comedian, co-creator of *The Daily Show*, and the founder of Abortion Access Front.



A week after ABC pulled Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show off the air for saying the "MAGA gang" was "desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them" and trying to "score political points from it," the network brought the show back. A

win, sure—but also a cautionary tale.

[Kimmel's suspension](#) wasn't a response to an audience backlash to the comments. Advertisers weren't threatening to bolt. And I highly doubt ABC was caught off guard. I know firsthand how network lawyers comb through every word of a script several times before it airs. If they objected, it never would have made it to your TV.

This happened because President Donald Trump is attempting to silence his critics, especially influential [critics with big platforms](#)—even if wielding his power to do so violates the [Constitution](#), according to [legal scholars](#). Kimmel's reinstatement doesn't change the fact that the government interference was real, and the network caved, albeit temporarily, when it was threatened.

The crackdown is part of a broader scheme. Over the past several decades, corporate media companies have gobbled up smaller media companies so they can control the information landscape and thus all the profits. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has to approve many of those mergers—and Trump stacked the FCC with [his supporters](#). Cue Trump's FCC chair, Brendan Carr, who publicly [threatened](#) Disney with consequences if it didn't "take action" against Kimmel. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," [said](#) Carr of Disney. "These companies can find ways to take action on Kimmel or there is going to be additional work for the FCC ahead."

That is not cancel culture. It's state censorship.

As the story unfolded, comic after comic offered support for Jimmy. But there was an eerie silence from the self-proclaimed [free speech warriors](#) like Dave Chappelle and Andrew Schultz. It took Joe Rogan nearly a week to address it. These guys will talk for hours about how "woke mobs" are destroying comedy by policing speech, but when the actual President of the United States and the FCC strong-arm a network over a late-night monologue, suddenly it's crickets. Free speech, it seems, only matters when you're punching down.

I've known Jimmy a long time—I was a producer on the pilot of “The Man Show” in 1999. Yes, me, the loudass feminist. I've never been shocked when I didn't get booked at a club or was cancelled from gigs because of what I dared mention on stage: abortion, homophobia, sexism, racism, fascism, really any of the ‘isms or the ‘phobias. As frustrating and sometimes maddening as it is, I know the difference between clubs not booking me or audiences deciding they don't like my material and the government blocking my right to tell those jokes.

Jimmy's quick return is not proof of corporate backbone—massive station groups Sinclair and NexStar [are still refusing](#) to air the show. What it does reiterate is the vulnerability of our freedoms. Disney blinked once and could just as easily blink again.

A parent company like Disney's investment in free speech has one driving economic principle: “Does it make us money?” When I perform as a comedian, I speak full-throated about abortion, audiences can boo, boycott, or bail—that's the free market of ideas. I cultivate my own audience, and I book theaters that align with my values. If, after all that, I still can't fill a room or get heckled—I live with the results.

But here's the crucial line: when the government threatens media outlets with regulatory punishment unless they silence dissent—that's not “the marketplace.” That's authoritarianism.

And Carr's hypocrisy makes it even more galling. In [2018](#), during an FCC oversight hearing, Carr told Senator Maggie Hassan, “The whole purpose of the First Amendment is to encourage strong, robust—perhaps rough—discourse. My job is to act consistent with the First Amendment in every single thing I do.” Fast-forward to today, and he's using his position to muzzle a comedian. So which is it, Brendan?

Late-night stars are getting the attention and the headlines, but it doesn't stop there. Vice President JD Vance has literally urged Americans to [report](#) neighbors and colleagues who criticized Kirk—even if those criticisms were just Kirk's own words repeated back. “Call them out, and hell, call their employer,” said Vance, conflating criticising Kirk with celebrating his death.

That's making MacCarthyism great again.

You wouldn't know it by the way this administration behaves, but the courts have been clear on the First Amendment for decades. In [\*Rankin v. McPherson\*](#) (1987), the U.S. Supreme Court said a government employee who joked she hoped Reagan's would-be assassin succeeded couldn't be fired. In [\*Hustler v. Falwell\*](#) (1988), the Court unanimously ruled that parody of public figures, no matter how outrageous, is protected. Free speech covers the jokes, the satire, the parodies—even the dumb, crass, or offensive ones. Our constitutional protections exist for this exact moment—for when the government tries to muzzle the people who challenge it.

No one has a right to a Netflix special or a network desk. If you can't build a reliable fan base and they cancel you—that's not censorship. But being suspended because the President's regulator leaned on your bosses? That's the very definition.

Authoritarians historically come for the comics first, and most recently under Putin, satirist [Idrak Mirzalizade](#) was jailed and deported for mocking Russian housing. And in Egypt, [Bassem Youssef](#)—dubbed the “Jon Stewart of the Arab world”—was forced off the air and into exile after satirizing leadership. Authoritarians are attacking these folks first because laughter is power.

The reason you see so many comedians banding together right now is that we understand that none of us are safe, even those who have an act that isn't “political.” When Stephen Colbert was [targeted](#) earlier this year, I [warned](#) this wasn't a one-off. Now they've come for Jimmy. There is no predicting what joke might set off this particular malignant narcissist in chief, so really, who's to say who is next? The answer is all of us. Any of us.

Even with Jimmy back, the lesson is clear: corporate media will never be our defenders of free speech. That burden falls on us—comics, audiences, citizens. This is not the time to keep your head down and wait it out. It's time to speak up for your freedom of speech. If you've got truth to tell, find a way to tell it.

People look to comedians as truth-tellers and it's our responsibility to show people how to defend not just your voice but their own. But it only works if we refuse to be silent.

The good news? Laughter is what gets us through dark times, and audiences won't let the government steal it.

If the First Amendment is going to survive, it'll be because we built and defended our own stages, our own platforms, and our own audiences. It'll be because the American people won't let our freedoms be taken away.

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# The New Gold Rush

Campbell is an editor at large at TIME, based in the Singapore bureau. He covers business, tech, and geopolitics across Asia. He was previously China bureau chief.



Drive an hour south of Kumasi, Ghana's bustling second city, and before long the dense jungle gives way to denuded hills peppered with rickety timber frames. On every slope, gumbooted workers shovel the tawny earth down to muddy pools in the furrows, from whence the sludge is pumped to the frame's zenith to gush down a shallow ramp lined with webbed plastic matting. At the base, more workers sweep the outflow with metal detectors.

Several times a day, the incessant din of diesel engines pauses while the mats are delicately removed and placed in outsize tubs for washing. It's only then that the glistening purpose of this toil materializes through the murky soup: gold—tiny flecks, yet with global prices breaching a record high of \$4,000 an ounce, valuable enough to render any other labor foolish by comparison.

"I've worked *galamsey* for 15 years," says dad of five Steven, using the local term for wildcat gold mining, as he rests wearily on his shovel. His work here earns 1,000 Ghanaian cedis (\$81) each week, he says, or eight times the national minimum wage, "I also work as a driver and grow plantain, cassava, and coconut on my family farm. But the money here is so much better."

Profitable, but illegal—which is why Steven requested TIME use only one name. Yet *galamsey* is no secret in Ghana, whose colonial name "Gold Coast" offers some measure of how this precious metal has long been interwoven with people's lives. Early Arab traders exulted in the extravagance of the Asante court in Kumasi, including royal guard dogs adorned in gold collars and officials whose wrists were hung with nuggets so large they had to be supported by boy attendants.

Today, Ghana remains Africa's top gold exporter and sixth largest globally. In recent years, however, what should be a boon has become spiked with burden. Independent of commercial mining operations, thousands of *galamsey* sites dot the emerald countryside of this West African nation of 34 million. But to isolate gold, *galamsey* workers typically use poisonous mercury, which pollutes drinking water and farmland and has been linked to serious illness and birth defects.

When Ghanaian President John Mahama returned to power in January, he made fighting *galamsey* a signature policy. He banned foreigners from

trading gold inside Ghana to crack down on smuggling networks and established a state regulator, GoldBod, to streamline revenue and supply chains. New police patrols raid illegal mines and seize equipment.

Still, “it’s a complicated fight,” Mahama tells TIME in his Accra office, highlighting that more than 1.5 million Ghanaians work in *galamsey*. “So there’s also an issue of livelihoods. If you just stop them, what alternatives are you giving?”

Ghana’s struggles are mirrored across the developing world, where sky-high commodity prices are warping livelihood choices by incentivizing illicit mineral extraction with little heed to environmental or social concerns. In Brazil, wildcat gold mining degrades the Amazon rainforest and imperils Indigenous groups. In Indonesia, Chinese-backed illegal gold mines are polluting arable land with cyanide. And in Sudan, access to gold reserves is one of the major drivers of a civil war that the U.N. has dubbed the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, having so far killed 150,000 people and forced 12 million more from their homes.

Geopolitics is fueling this new gold rush. Much of global demand comes from China, which is stockpiling gold to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar, develop the means to influence the international monetary system, and shield itself from potential U.S. punitive measures. Last year, the People’s Bank of China covertly bought 630 tons of gold, and it has now accumulated more than twice the 2,530 tons that it officially declares, according to Money Metals analyst Jan Nieuwenhuijs. China’s voracious appetite for gold has contributed to a spike in illicit gold mining across the Global South, prompting the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to warn in May that organized crime in gold supply chains posed a “serious global threat.” (Some 50,000 illegal Chinese gold prospectors are believed to work in Ghana alone.)



But China's superpower rival is also playing a part. The Trump Administration's tariff war sent markets reeling and investors around the globe buying gold as a hedge. In addition, recent cuts to U.S. foreign aid—the \$12.7 billion slashed from sub-Saharan Africa includes \$156 million to Ghana—means governments are scurrying to plug the funding gap.

Mineral wealth such as gold offers one solution—though diverting labor and resources from more sustainable industries could prove catastrophic if prices suddenly drop. The hope for gold-producing nations like Ghana is to responsibly leverage this bountiful natural resource without falling prey to environmental degradation and civil strife. “When gold prices are that attractive, it creates an El Dorado effect,” says Mahama. “So it’s a blessing and a curse.”

The conquistadors may have obsessed over El Dorado, but Ghana's historic kingdom of Asante makes the mythical land feel a little drab by comparison. West Africans have been extracting gold since the 10th century, and when British colonizers arrived they found young officers bedecked in leopard skins and brandishing gold-handled swords often adorned by a life-size ram's head of solid gold. The most sacred symbol in Asante culture remains the Golden Stool, which according to lore was conjured down from the heavens and symbolizes not only royal authority but also the people's collective soul.

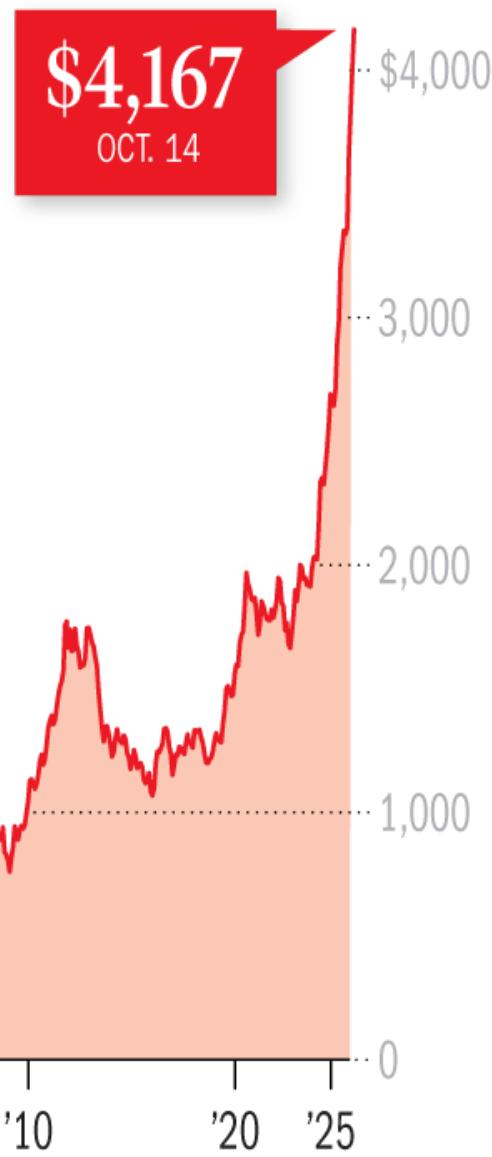
Gold remained a lifeblood of the nation into modern times. But following independence in 1957, Ghana's gold sector underwent a process of nationalization whereby underinvestment, mismanagement, and stagnant prices pushed it into steady decline. Production plunged from more than 28.5 tons in 1964 to just 6.8 by 1983 as Ghana fell out of the top 10 global producers for the first time.

By the mid-1980s Ghana was liberalizing its gold industry, and today foreign ownership is above 90%, with the biggest players Australian, Canadian, Chinese, and American firms—specifically Colorado-based Newmont, the world's biggest gold producer and among Ghana's top taxpayers. But in addition to liberalizing large-scale gold production, Ghana also legalized small-scale mining, which rose from just 5% of total output in 1991 to nearly

40% today. However, lax regulation meant the distinction between legal artisanal mining and illegal, destructive *galamsey* became increasingly blurred. But along with ready cash, the laissez-faire approach brought the banes of corruption, criminal infiltration, and rampant pollution.

# Gold surge

*Investors seeking safety from market turmoil caused by Trump's tariffs have pushed the price of gold to record highs*



**Gold price per troy oz.**

Sources: Bloomberg, Datastream,  
ICE Benchmark Administration, World Gold Council

TIME

A half-hour drive from Steven's *galamsey* mine, Sicilia Frimpong, 45, lives in a mud-brick house with a rusting iron roof next to her family's 30 acres of cocoa trees. But the adjacent plot straddling the riverbed has been taken over by *galamsey* workers after her brother leased his land to an Asian businessman. "I'm very angry with my brother," she tells TIME, sitting on her stoop. "I'm worried about my kids, but what can we do? Pollution from *galamsey* is like mosquitoes," she shrugs. "It's just something you have to live with."

Last year, hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets of Ghana's sprawling capital Accra to demand the government take action, with hashtags #stopgalamseynow and #freethecitizens proliferating on social media. Some protesters brandished bottles of contaminated water from drinking wells. Dozens were arrested by police on charges of holding an illegal gathering but released after public outrage to their detention grew.



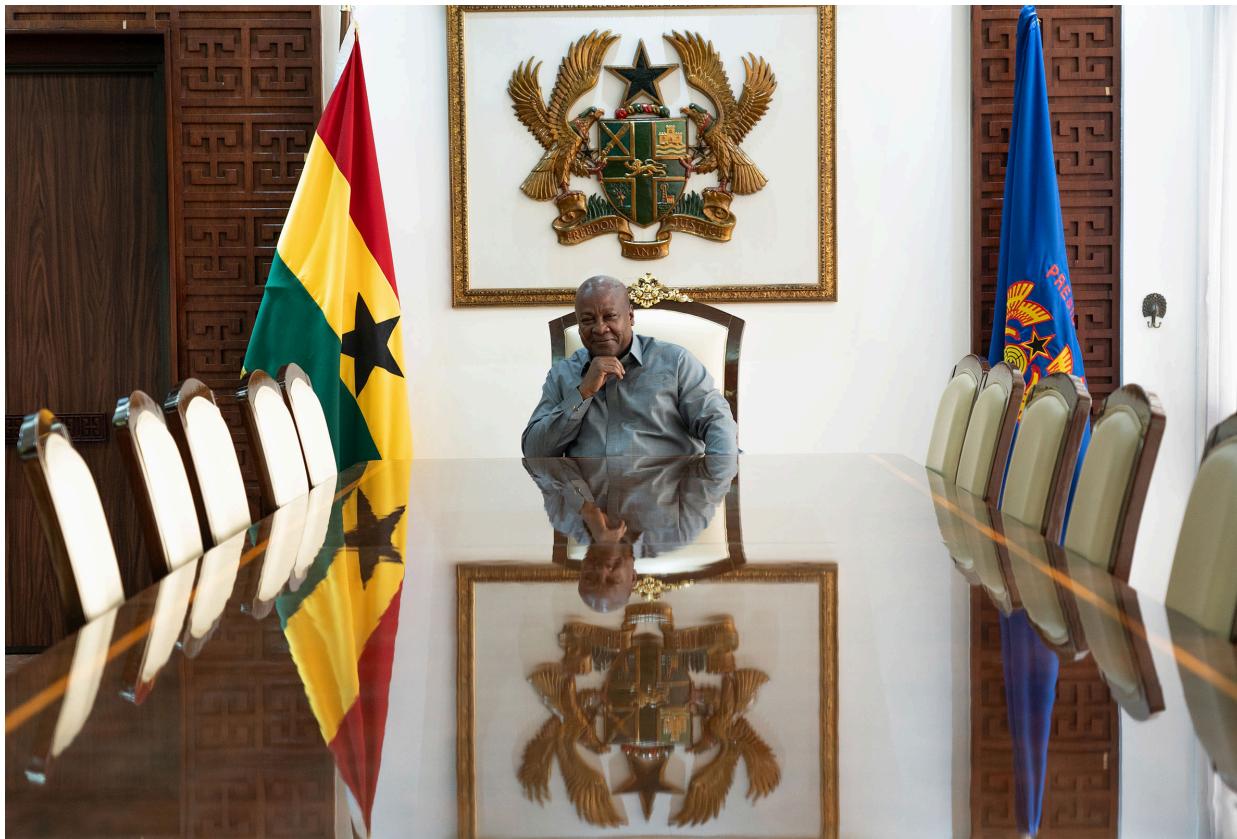
In an interview with local radio, George Manful, a former senior official in Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency, highlighted that mercury can

stay in waterways for 1,000 years and affects the entire food chain by accumulating in crops, livestock, and fish. “The water in these rivers is so turbid that it is undrinkable,” he said. “We are slowly poisoning ourselves.”

Mahama calls this unacceptable. He came to power aiming to tweak the regulatory dial back to harness more of Ghana’s gold wealth without casting a pall over the industry. The most radical change has been the launch of GoldBod, which sets gold prices, issues licenses to domestic traders, provides equipment and training to artisanal miners, and is the only entity allowed to sell gold for export. However, being both regulator and commercial arm entails “structural conflicts,” says Bright Simons, head of research at the IMANI Centre for Policy and Education, an Accra-based think tank. He points to how GoldBod’s remit to prevent illicit gold from entering the market “is in tension” with its role sourcing as much gold as possible to maximize state revenues. “It’s a really unwieldy beast in that regard.”

Mahama plays down any conflict, pointing to recent arrests of foreign gold smugglers while official gold exports almost doubled year-over-year to \$5.1 billion during the first six months of 2025. Meanwhile, the gold reserves of Ghana’s central bank reached a record high of 39.7 tons in August 2025—a fourfold increase in just two years—helping the Ghanaian cedi strengthen 30% since he took power to assuage a cost-of-living crisis.

Law enforcement is bolder too. Previously, foreign nationals caught illegally trading in gold were simply deported. However, 10 Chinese nationals were arrested in July for illegal gold trading, and if convicted “they’ll be imprisoned in Ghana,” says GoldBod spokesman Prince Kwame Minkah resolutely. “We are moving heaven and earth so that they dance to the music of Ghanaian law.”



Mahama also wants his country to reap more of the downstream benefits of gold. In August 2024, Ghana opened its first commercial gold refinery and hopes to become only the second nation on the continent after South Africa to have a refinery certified by the benchmark London Bullion Market Association (LBMA) Good Delivery List—a credential necessary to access the world's largest gold market in the U.K. capital, which trades some \$165 billion worth of the yellow metal every day. “There’s no fast track when it comes to meeting these standards,” LBMA CEO Ruth Crowell tells TIME in her London office. “They need to do the work ... but it is promising.”

The cuts to U.S. aid add pressure as well. Rolf Olson, acting chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Ghana, insists that reorienting “away from aid and toward investment and commercial partnerships ... is in the best interests of both the U.S. and African nations, including Ghana.”

Still, the trade-over-aid pitch might be more persuasive had the U.S. not just slapped a 15% tariff on Ghana's exports. For Mahama, Washington's mercantilist tilt “takes away U.S. soft power. Everybody is looking for

opportunities in Africa, so it just makes Africa pivot to other countries that are willing to cooperate with us.”

And not just China. In July, Narendra Modi arrived in Ghana for the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 30 years, and just days later London Mayor Sadiq Khan came to Accra as part of the first-ever African trade mission by a holder of his office. Speaking to TIME, Khan explicitly cited the Trump Administration’s nativist turn as an opportunity for the U.K. “It’s really important to recognize that by providing a helping hand to those in the Global South, in the future there’s a better chance of doing trade with these countries.”

Yet the reality is that the U.S. isn’t shunning the Global South wholesale but becoming more selective and transactional—with minerals often a decisive factor. President Donald Trump’s desire to broker an end to the three-decade conflict between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda seemed like an odd priority until he revealed that the U.S. would receive “a lot of mineral rights” from the DRC as part of June’s peace deal, with the implicit understanding that these would be granted at Beijing’s expense.

In November, Chinese defense and industrial giant Norinco was blocked from buying DRC copper and cobalt mine Chemaf despite the sale having been agreed on for months. In August, the U.S. sanctioned two Hong Kong-based firms for illegal mining in the country. Some 60 tons of gold worth \$7 billion is smuggled annually out of the DRC, whose government hopes U.S. investment and security can help wrest back control of enormous deposits from rebel groups, including those aligned with the Islamic State. “The U.S. and DRC are building stronger ties all the time,” says Charlie Chase-Gardener, co-CEO of Horizon Corp., a London-based mining-investment firm with projects in both countries.



It's another example of how gold production is increasingly a battleground. Gold has been a prized asset for over 5,000 years and today is seen as a hedge against inflation, currency devaluation, and geopolitical shocks. Global demand rose to a record 5,483 tons in 2024, driven by increased mine output and recycling. As legendary financier J.P. Morgan put it: "Gold is money; everything else is debt."

Central banks have been on a gold-buying spree, snapping up over 1,000 tons of the metal for the third straight year in 2024. "Central banks are holding gold because it's a diversification away from the U.S. dollar, partly as the U.S. role in the global economy and geopolitics has fundamentally changed with the latest Administration," says Crowell.

Over the past few years, Beijing has been shedding U.S. Treasury bills and buying gold, whose untraceable and fungible characteristics offer many of the benefits of modern crypto-currencies. While the LBMA sets the globally recognized benchmark gold price, so much of the action has shifted to China these days that insiders whisper that the true global standard is set 5,700 miles east of London in Shanghai.

Gold's utility also has soared with recent U.S. sanctions on Russia and Iran, providing a way for pariahs to trade outside the dollar-denominated financial system. China uses gold to buy oil from Saudi Arabia, building enormous gold vaults in Hong Kong and Riyadh that facilitate gold-backed transactions without the physical movement of bullion.

China itself is the world's biggest gold producer, refining 418 tons last year, and is also the top purchaser, importing 1,350 tons over the same period. Meanwhile, Beijing forbids any export of gold without a special license, spurring analysts to conclude that the official figure of 2,530 tons held by the People's Bank of China is farcically low. "There's no way that's real," says Quentin Mai, CEO of West Point Gold, a Vancouver-based mining company. "There's something going on there that no one's been able to figure out."

One theory is that Beijing is secretly stockpiling gold in case relations with the U.S. spiral. By suddenly disclosing its true holdings, China could drive

up gold prices while signaling stronger backing for the renminbi, thus weakening the dollar's global clout.

Whatever the reason, the U.S. is concerned and making its own moves to secure gold reserves. In March, Trump issued an Executive Order to declare gold a critical mineral—a category deemed essential for national security and economic prosperity—which should help fast-track permitting of new domestic gold mines. (The U.S. ranks fifth in global gold production.)

Ensuring responsible sourcing is a major headache given how easily illicit gold can be disguised as recycled bullion or jewelry. Beyond setting the global gold price, the LBMA is charged with overseeing the transparency and sustainability of supply chains via its Good Delivery List, which has 66 certified gold refineries around the world. Yet several refiners have been delisted in recent years, and in April last year the NGO Swissaid wrote an open letter saying that “many” LBMA refiners continue to be linked to money laundering, land and water pollution, or human-rights abuses.

Crowell insists that the LBMA’s systems of reporting and audits are “not a guarantee” but “a strong measure and a strong stick.”

“There’s still an enormous amount of gold that funds conflict,” she says. “We put the controls in place, but it doesn’t mean that the gold doesn’t get sold somewhere as long as other centers are happy to turn a blind eye.”

Nestled in Dubai’s **Deira district**, the city’s Gold Souk is reputed to be the largest and cheapest gold market in the world. Back in the early 1900s, before the United Arab Emirates was even a country, merchants from India and Iran began hawking gems and precious metals by the twisting waterway known as Dubai Creek. Today, more than 500 stores line the Gold Souk’s narrow alleys, crammed with pearls, platinum rings, silver earrings, and diamond-encrusted necklaces—as well as its namesake yellow metal, which can be bought as jewelry, coins, or biscuits.



Traders at Dubai Gold Souk insist their wares are responsibly sourced. But the numbers tell a different story. According to a Swissaid report last year, some 40% of all African gold exports are undeclared, of which 93% goes to the UAE.

The UAE's alleged role in laundering gold is nothing new. In 2016, the UAE declared gold imports worth \$7.4 billion from 25 African countries that had not declared any exports to the UAE, according to analysis by Reuters. The UAE also declared an additional \$3.9 billion more in gold from the 21 other source countries than was declared in their exports.

It's a no-questions-asked approach that has cast the UAE as a key player in the civil war in Sudan. The conflict erupted in April 2023 when a vicious power struggle boiled over between leaders of Sudan's armed forces and its powerful Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group. But the war is also a proxy conflict between Middle East rivals, with Qatar and Iran major backers of the Sudanese government, and the UAE, despite its denials, accused by U.N. sanctions monitors of bankrolling the RSF.

Sudan has a storied tradition of gold mining. The territory's northern civilization of Nubia supplied much of the gold for ancient Babylon and Egypt, including for Tutankhamen's tomb. Gold is still the top commodity of Sudan, accounting for 70% of exports, with a record 70 tons worth \$1.57 billion shipped in 2024. But a comparable amount is also smuggled out via Chad, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, and Egypt—nearly all destined for the UAE.

In addition, Russia's Wagner militia is also heavily involved in the trade, helping funnel some \$2.5 billion of African gold to Vladimir Putin's war of choice in Ukraine, according to the 2023 Blood Gold Report. Both sides have been fighting mercilessly over Sudanese gold mines.

"Minerals and gold in particular are exacerbating the war," says Muhammad Hassan, a Sudanese former aid worker in the Darfur region who has fled to Ethiopia. "These things are very visible."

The quest for nations that produce gold is to ensure it serves as a stabilizing rather than disruptive influence—and for ordinary people to harness the benefits.

Working alongside Steven in Ghana, 21-year-old Sarah had been doing *galamsey* for only a week when TIME visited and says she intends to use her earnings to put herself through tailoring college. "The money is good, but I don't want to do this forever," she says. "Hopefully I can make a good living from dressmaking."

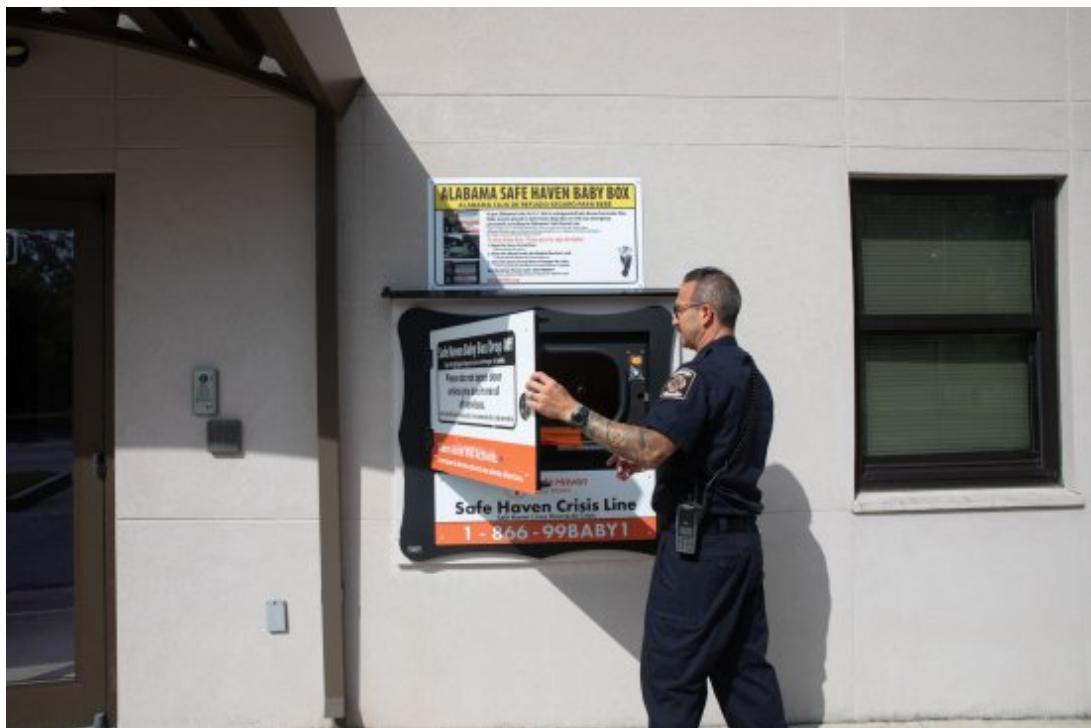
As Sarah speaks, the tiny splatters of yellow mud on her face catch the afternoon sun, making it seem for a moment as if she herself has been lightly gilded. Perhaps one more symptom of a gold fever sweeping the earth.

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# Why Baby Boxes Are Suddenly Everywhere

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.



DAPHNE, ALA.—The dozens of people gathered at the fire station one June afternoon quieted when the battalion chief dressed in a heavy blue uniform approached the podium. He was there to bless the fire station's new baby box, a temperature-controlled bassinet installed in the side of the building where parents could safely and anonymously surrender infants that they felt they could not care for. He led the crowd, sweltering in the 90°F heat, in praying over the box: the 18th in Alabama and 344th in the nation.

“Heavenly Father, we come before you to dedicate this safe haven,” he began. “We know that each and every child placed not only in this cradle, but similar cradles across the country, are children you formed in the womb, and we know that you have a special plan for all of them.”

Afterward, people gathered to take pictures in front of the box, where signs note that a silent alert will activate if a baby is placed in it. A few people discussed the baby boxes that would soon open in the nearby towns of Spanish Fort and Foley, which, like this one, were funded by private donations.

In the wake of the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* Supreme Court decision that gave states the ability to essentially outlaw abortion, communities and nonprofits are installing these baby boxes, which cost more than \$16,000 each, in hopes of reducing dangerous infant-abandonment rates and giving more options to women who must carry pregnancies to term. They say the alternative is that mothers will break the law and abandon their infants somewhere unsafe. So far, 22 infants have been abandoned in 2025, according to the National Safe Haven Alliance; 11 were found alive, and 11 were deceased.

In the past two decades, nearly two dozen mostly red states have amended their safe-haven laws, which allow people to anonymously give up their infants for adoption through face-to-face surrenders at hospitals and fire stations, to also permit people to surrender babies in these boxes. The trend has picked up in the past few years.



Mississippi, for instance, passed a [law](#) in 2023 that changed its safe-haven law to allow infants to be dropped off in a “baby safety device,” and Alabama [followed shortly after](#), allowing the installation of baby boxes at hospitals and fire stations. Now, baby boxes have been approved in more than 18 states, largely ones with near total bans on abortion, including Oklahoma, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Texas, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Idaho, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Florida, South Dakota, and North Dakota. They’re [supported by antiabortion groups](#), which say they provide another safe way for mothers in crisis to surrender their babies.

For politicians, the legislation is a low-cost way to seemingly solve a bipartisan issue. “I saw this as a threefold bill: saving a baby’s life, keeping a young lady from making the worst decision of her life and being charged with manslaughter, and giving more of those who want to be parents the opportunity for a baby,” Representative Donna Givens, the Republican freshman legislator who sponsored the bill in Alabama, told me at the ceremony.

Some places are even spending public funds for these boxes. In 2022, Indiana [set aside \\$1 million](#) to install and promote safe-haven boxes, and San Antonio budgeted \$500,000 in 2024. In a May bill, [Missouri earmarked \\$250,000](#) to help install at least 25 more baby boxes. Lawmakers in states including Tennessee and Arkansas have introduced legislation that would ensure that every county in the state has a baby box. “It’s just growing like wildfire,” Givens says.

But as baby boxes spread, other people are questioning whether this is the best way to support women in crisis. Dozens of doctors, politicians, adoption advocates, ethicists, and lawyers wrote a [letter](#) in November 2024 to the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services arguing that the boxes “are fraught with unintended harms and negative consequences.” The letter argues that the boxes are unregulated and uninspected by the government, which means they could potentially endanger infants; that the lack of face-to-face interaction in a baby-box surrender deprives mothers of any counseling or medical help after the difficult task of birthing the baby alone and then giving it away; that the anonymous nature of the boxes means that children won’t have any way to know their family or medical history; and that the boxes may also help conceal crimes like rape, incest, or human trafficking.

**Read More:** [Mississippi Declares a Public Health Emergency Over Infant Deaths](#)

Lori Bruce, a professor of bioethics at Yale University and one of the letter’s main signatories, says the proliferation of baby boxes and the fanfare surrounding them—most are featured in local news when they open—might lead women to feel as if abandoning their infants is the only choice with support or investment behind it.



“The signs on these boxes don’t provide options; they don’t say you can go to a hospital, where there may be funds to help you keep your baby,” Bruce says. In many ways, the boxes overlook the trauma of surrendering a child, she says, even though “the absolute vast majority of parents who feel that they have to relinquish their child experience unrelenting grief and trauma that never goes away.”

Some critics also argue that the money being spent on boxes would be better spent on giving women the financial and emotional support they need to raise their children. Gretchen Sisson, a sociologist at the University of California, San Francisco, and the author of the 2024 book *Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood*, interviewed dozens of mothers who gave up their newborns for adoption between 2000 and 2020. Most said they would have kept their babies had they had things like a car seat, for example, or an extra \$1,000 to spend on the child’s care. Most regretted giving their babies up for adoption and went through a long period of depression after the relinquishment.

There's little evidence that these boxes actually reduce infant-abandonment rates, especially since all U.S. states already allow women to anonymously surrender their newborns at hospitals and fire stations. In Germany, where the first baby boxes appeared around 2000, studies showed they led to [no reduction](#) in infant death or abandonment.

Yet since the vast majority of women can't get abortions anymore in places like Alabama, which passed a near total abortion ban in June 2022, many local politicians are settling on baby boxes as a solution.

"To be a pro-life state, you have to give options," Matt Simpson, an Alabama state Republican representative who voted for the 2023 state bill that allowed baby boxes, told me at the ceremony. "You have to give that next step. It can't just be, 'Well, we're antiabortion.'"

## The history of newborn relinquishment

Figuring out what to do with a newborn a mom doesn't feel equipped to raise is a centuries-old problem. Some medieval churches in Europe had devices called foundling wheels that would allow people to anonymously leave an infant inside a hatch that would rotate into the building and alert someone waiting on the other side. But in the U.S., abandoning an infant under any circumstances was largely illegal until the late 1990s.

Then, after a few incidents in which infants were found abandoned and dead, Texas passed the country's first safe-haven law, also known as the Baby Moses law, in 1999. It allowed parents to anonymously surrender an unharmed newborn to staff at designated locations. The rest of the country soon followed.

Though the details of safe-haven laws vary by state, most say that during a short window of time—often up to 30 to 45 days after a baby is born—a parent can anonymously relinquish an infant without fear of prosecution if certain requirements are upheld. (The baby must be alive and healthy, for instance.) The laws establish safe-haven locations and stipulate that the baby be turned over to the state, though in some states, private adoption agencies

are allowed to take custody of the child. Most states allow parents to try to reclaim their child if they change their mind within 30 days or so.

**Read More:** [\*'An Exodus of OB-GYNs': How the Dobbs Decision Has Shaken the Reproductive Health Landscape\*](#)

Safe-haven laws were pushed by the antiabortion movement, which held that for some women without access to social and economic resources, relinquishing that newborn is the most noble thing she can do, says Laury Oaks, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of *Giving Up Baby: Safe Haven Laws, Motherhood, and Reproductive Justice*. It's not a coincidence that these laws were passed right after the end of traditional welfare, which was eliminated in 1996, in an era when women had less support and had to work in order to receive benefits, she says.



Oaks argues that safe-haven laws signal a problem with how a society operates and are not a solution to unplanned pregnancies. They create a dichotomy, she says, in which poor women may feel that they have to do the “right thing”: give up their child. Otherwise they risk being a “bad” mother.

“My interests are in turning it around and saying, ‘What safety nets are we missing from our society?’” she says. “I don’t want to be in a society where it is condoned for a person to give birth alone, then be responsible for getting the newborn to a certain place in order not to be prosecuted.”

Still, people appear to be using safe-haven laws. In 2024, 156 babies in the U.S. were relinquished under safe-haven laws, according to the National Safe Haven Alliance. By contrast, 39 babies were illegally or unsafely abandoned—a 70% decrease from 2004, when more safe-haven laws started going into effect. Infant homicides decreased by 67% in the decade or so after safe-haven laws were introduced, [according to](#) the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Safe-haven laws surfaced in the *Dobbs* Supreme Court case, when Justice Amy Coney Barrett [asked why](#) these laws would not be a solution for people to relieve themselves of the “burdens of parenting.” In the final *Dobbs* decision, the majority Justices argued that today, women have “little reason to fear” that their babies will not find a suitable home, in part because of safe-haven laws.

## The company that’s cornered the baby-box market

In the U.S., almost every baby box is sold by a single Indiana nonprofit: Safe Haven Baby Boxes. The device is essentially a big temperature-controlled drawer installed on the side of a building with a lot of information printed on the outside, including the phone number for a crisis line run by Safe Haven Baby Boxes that helps guide people through the process of surrendering a child. When a person opens the drawer and places a baby in the bassinet inside, three separate alarms sound to alert first responders, and an orange bag falls out with information about what rights a parent has, and what a mother’s body experiences after birth.

Safe Haven Baby Boxes are the brainchild of Monica Kelsey, a former medic who founded the company after seeing a baby box on a [trip to South Africa in 2015](#). Kelsey, who was adopted as an infant, sketched out the design for her boxes on an airplane napkin.

Kelsey's idea hit a nerve. In June 2020, there were [just 29 baby boxes](#) throughout the country, and now there are more than 10 times as many. Baby boxes are spreading in large part because of Kelsey, who has an active presence on TikTok. She was [abandoned at birth](#) at an Ohio hospital in 1973 (and later learned, when she tracked down her birth mother, that she had been conceived after her mother was raped). She says that she wants to stand up for other children who were relinquished at birth. "This is my legacy," she said in one [TikTok video](#) as she blessed a baby box. "I will forever walk with these moms as they choose something safe for their child, and I will forever walk with these kids and show them their worth."

Caitlin Kelly, a Mississippi nurse, says she lobbied for baby-box legislation to be passed in Mississippi after a friend showed her Kelsey's videos on TikTok. "I said, 'Well, why don't we have that here?'" says Kelly, who has four children, including two who are adopted, and who is a representative for the company.

There are certainly families ready to adopt the babies surrendered in these boxes. In 2024, eight babies were surrendered to Alabama, for instance, four of whom were hospital surrenders and four of whom were left in baby boxes. The state found families for all of them.



Adoptions can occur quickly. The National Safe Haven Alliance [recommends](#) that parents be allowed to reclaim their parental rights within at

least 30 days after relinquishment. But that's not allowed in some states, including Alabama. "There's no take-backs, no changing your mind," says Amanda Mancuso, deputy director of children and family services for the Alabama department of human resources.

### **Read More: [Why So Many Women Are Quitting the Workforce](#)**

In Alabama, adoptive parents can get permanent custody of the child within six weeks, says Mancuso. That's a rapid timeline in a country where most adoptions can take a year or longer.

Still, for many, baby boxes are not a reminder of a tragedy for a woman who carried a baby, gave birth alone, and then abandoned that child. Instead, they're seen with joy.

"It's a fun thing for our foster and adoptive workers," Mancuso says. Families who want to adopt usually want babies, and through these surrenders, care workers can make a family's dream come true. "We have a lot of families who are interested in these children," she says, "and we want to serve those families and serve those children."

## **The downside to baby boxes**

Compared with other safe-haven options, the value of baby boxes is an open question. Micah Orliss, a psychologist and founder of the Safe Surrender Clinic at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, argues that leaving a baby in a box does not add any benefit to the current safe-haven system in many states, in which a mother engages in a "warm handoff," surrendering her baby to a medical professional or EMT.

California, for instance, has dramatically lowered infant-abandonment rates through public-awareness campaigns, he says; the state does not have baby boxes. "The baby-box approach needlessly raises the risk of a child being unattended or overlooked if the system fails in some way," Orliss said in [testimony](#) opposing a 2025 Connecticut law that would have authorized such devices. (The bill [did not pass](#).) "It also prevents any scrutiny in the circumstances of surrender, in which the mother may be coerced into relinquishing their baby."

Nationally, baby boxes are not used nearly as frequently as face-to-face surrenders. Kelsey's group has facilitated 234 face-to-face surrenders through its hotline, which counsels women who might want to surrender their babies, but just about 62 babies have been left in boxes since Kelsey started the organization, according to Kelly, the nurse and company representative.

Even many safe-haven groups oppose baby boxes, arguing that the boxes don't deal with the root issues that would force a woman to abandon her baby. The National Safe Haven Alliance, for instance, says it tries to keep families together and provide as many resources to a woman as possible while she's pregnant and after she gives birth. "There's a place for anonymous surrender, but is that what we want to push?" says Leah Kipley, assistant director of the National Safe Haven Alliance. "That's what's been around since the Middle Ages."

Sometimes new parents just need someone to listen, says Nick Silverio, founder of the Florida nonprofit A Safe Haven for Newborns, which helps women who are considering surrendering their infants (and which opposes baby boxes). Last year, Silverio received a call through his organization's [24/7 hotline](#) from a weeping mother who had gone to a fire station to surrender her baby and found the station empty. He calmed her down by talking about her baby, he says, and eventually sent her diapers and wipes and helped her come to the decision to keep it.

Even moms who surrender their babies can have second thoughts, he says. Over the course of two decades, his organization has helped six moms who surrendered their babies and came back for them in a short period of time after learning a family member would help, he says.

By bypassing the face-to-face meeting, boxes make it much harder for a trained professional to check in on the mother and make sure she had time to think through her decision and doesn't want the baby back. "Placing a baby in a box eliminates all contact with the surrendering parents and probably reduces the health care professional's ability to determine if the baby is sick, injured, abused, neglected, trafficked, or if the mother needs help," Silverio says.

**Read More:** [Why So Many Childcare Centers Are Closing](#)

There can also be consequences down the line, say adoptee-rights groups, who argue the complete anonymity of baby boxes makes it nearly impossible for adoptees to gain any information about their birth parents and extended families. “It’s unethical, it denies civil rights to adopted people, it denies the right of the non-relinquishing parent,” says Marley Greiner, the co-founder of Bastard Nation, an adoptee-rights group, who writes the blog [Stop Baby Boxes Now!](#)



Baby boxes in other countries often facilitate the face-to-face interaction missing in the U.S. model. In Germany, for instance, the organization that sponsors baby boxes puts an ad in the paper when a baby gets dropped off offering to help the mother. About half of the time, the mother goes back to the facility to pick up the child, according to one 2018 [analysis](#) of the German program.

Yet Safe Haven Baby Boxes [says](#) that it offers an option women need—that it was “never intended to be a replacement for face-to-face relinquishments

or any other safe-surrender options.” The organization says that “relinquishment in a baby box is only intended to expand the options for a mother in crisis.” The group also runs a 24/7 crisis line that it says offers mothers “every possible supporting service and option including a parenting plan, adoption plan, referrals to pregnancy resource centers, face to face surrenders, and, as a last resort, assistance with a [safe surrender in a Safe Haven Baby Box.](#)”

The organization says that there are still mothers who want anonymity because they feel judged, have arrest warrants, or are involved with child services for their other children. “The anonymous option takes away the fear and judgment and stigma that might come along with a face-to-face safe-haven surrender,” says Kelly.

## An alternative approach

Other countries offer an alternative to baby boxes that many advocates say is better for both mother and child. It’s called confidential birth, and it allows a woman to remain anonymous while receiving prenatal care, giving birth in a hospital, and learning her options, including temporarily placing her baby elsewhere or surrendering it to a third-party organization that will take care of it while she recovers. This helps protect the mother’s mental and physical health while letting her decide what is best for her and her child, advocates say.

After lawmakers in Germany determined that anonymous surrenders deprived children of the chance to learn anything about their parentage, Germany passed a confidential-birth law in 2014. (A German ethics council had [also found](#) that baby boxes are a “one-sided” response that does not ensure medical care for the mother or child.) Under the law, a pregnant woman can pursue a confidential birth by calling a 24/7 hotline and getting referred to a nearby counselor. She shares her real name with the counselor and gets access to prenatal and pregnancy care. The counselor does not share her name with anybody else, but her child can, [upon turning 16](#), access the mother’s personal details and contact her. The law also provides a pathway for a woman to regain custody of her child.



Confidential birth is also available in Japan, which has strict abortion regulations and [high stigma](#) around single parenting. Studies have shown that almost 40% of women in Japan using confidential birth ultimately decided to keep their children, Bruce says. And in Austria, during the first 10 years of a law that allowed anonymous birth, 90% of women using the country's safe-haven law gave birth in a hospital.

#### **Read More:** [Why So Many Seniors Can't Afford Long-Term Care](#)

In the U.S., one of the big obstacles to confidential birth is that birth services must be billed to someone, whether private insurance or Medicaid. That might mean that bills, or other correspondence about the birth, could be sent to a woman's home, where an abusive partner, for instance, might find them.

But advocates call confidential birth a key way to reprioritize mothers in birth discussions. "We don't want to acknowledge the mother, or think about the birth mom in crisis," says Grace Howard, a professor at San José State University and the author of *The Pregnancy Police: Conceiving Crime, Arresting Personhood*, which follows state attempts to criminalize and

surveil pregnant women. “If we acknowledge the mother, then we look at the people adopting these brand-new infants, and it’s not romantic anymore. It’s a tragedy.”

One irony of baby-box laws is that they purportedly guarantee freedom for mothers at the same time that many states are taking control over women’s reproductive health in other ways. Alabama, for instance, has made it hard for women without insurance to get [access to birth control](#); its attorney general has vowed to [prosecute people](#) who help women cross state lines to get an abortion; its ban on abortion has [made it difficult](#) for women to get treated when they’re having a miscarriage.

For all the attempts to control what women are doing during pregnancy, less attention is paid to how they do after birth. The state’s focus shifts, lightning fast, to the baby, and resources for the mothers fade away.

At the baby-box blessing in Daphne, Ala., none of the speakers mentioned the struggles of mothers during and after pregnancy, or the trauma that can follow them after relinquishing a child. Their tone was upbeat, and their focus was on the happy life a child could have—would have, they were sure—should they ever end up in this device.

“We hope this is never used, but if it is, it gives a choice to someone in need,” Daphne’s Mayor Robin LeJeune told me inside the fire station. “If that choice is life, you can’t go wrong.”

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# Ben Stiller Set Out to Make a Film About His Parents. He Didn't Realize It Was About Himself, Too

Zuckerman is a contributor for TIME.



[Ben Stiller](#) didn't want to insert himself into his documentary *Stiller & Meara: Nothing Is Lost*.

The actor and director intended to make a movie about his parents, the revered comedic duo of Jerry Stiller and [Anne Meara](#), and at first felt "self-conscious" about his own presence. But when he started to show friends the film—which is set to premiere at the New York Film Festival before debuting in theaters Oct. 17 and on Apple TV+ Oct. 24—he heard a similar refrain: "I'm not really seeing that much of you in it."

He realized he had a role to play.

“The thing that was missing was probably my perspective on my parents, but also my perspective on my own relationships as affected by growing up with them,” he said in a phone call while on a break from shooting the fourth *Meet the Parents* movie.

If he was exposing his parents, he also had to expose himself: “It became clear that it would feel weird or disingenuous to open up these private moments that my parents had and, as a filmmaker, not be looking at my own stuff, and including that in some way, because it felt like I would be judging them.”

As such, *Stiller & Meara: Nothing Is Lost* is a complicated look at generations of Stillers. It functions, perhaps primarily, as a tribute to Jerry and Anne and their legacy. But through the inclusion of intimate recordings that Jerry made, it demonstrates how their comedic bickering on stage was mirrored by genuine tension in prior moments. Meanwhile, Stiller interviews his wife Christine Taylor, and their children, Ella and Quin, to understand what he inherited from his famous parents in terms of both his talent and personal shortcomings.

“I think the deeper that you go into learning about your parents, and not about them as parents but just as people, always gives you a different perspective on your own life. I really do feel like the experience of delving in gave me more empathy for them,” Stiller says.

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## Following in his father's footsteps



The backbone of the movie is the wealth of material that Jerry left behind when he died in 2020, five years after Meara in 2015. On screen, Stiller documents how he and his sister Amy were responsible for combing through family memorabilia as they cleaned up Jerry and Anne's longtime apartment on the Upper West Side so it could be sold.

But behind the scenes, Stiller was listening to the more than 100 hours of recordings that his father had made. He describes the experience as a "strange thing, to get transported back into these moments in time."

These tapes would start as a record of his and Anne's rehearsal or writing process, but Jerry would leave them running even when the conversation devolved into real-life arguments, some of which we hear in the film.

Stiller, at first, was surprised to hear those moments of argument, but they also unlocked an angle on his parents' narrative for him: He could chronicle the ups and downs of a creative partnership and how that bled into their personal relationship. From there, he ended up exploring how, despite his own frustration with his parents' absence for periods in his youth, he too [became an intense workaholic](#) like his dad in ways that resonated with his own children.

## **Finding the root of the relationship**



*Stiller & Meara: Nothing Is Lost* offers a standard bio-doc look at how a Jewish boy and Catholic girl fell in love and became the most prominent American couple in comedy in the 1960s, with a slot on [The Ed Sullivan Show](#). Amy and Stiller were born into their parents' fame and were trotted out for talk show segments at young ages, immediately grandfathered into the act.

Along the way, Stiller traces how his mother longed to be a dramatic actress, eventually getting to explore her chops on the stage in plays like *The House of Blue Leaves*, and how his father had a late-in-life revival thanks to [Seinfeld](#). But the film is also raw and sometimes dark, as the son grapples with Meara's struggles with alcohol and how this longtime marriage, which lasted over 60 years, wasn't always so rosy.

"I had to kind of guess or intuit what my parents might feel about this, knowing them. I think what I got to was this version of the movie that hopefully represented, in terms of the balance of it, what their relationship

was always about, which, for me, was based in this deep love and caring for each other,” Stiller says.

Making the movie was a five-year process for Stiller, during which he and Taylor reunited after a period of separation. Ultimately, Taylor as well as her and Stiller’s children were very open to talking about their own sometimes complex feelings about Stiller’s own dedication to his work at the expense of his time at home. At the same time, *Stiller & Meara: Nothing Is Lost* makes the case that show business is, inevitably, a family enterprise.



“When people see the movie, you can see how organic it was for my sister and I to be a part of this world,” Stiller says. (His sister would also grow up to become an actor, once appearing opposite her mother on *King of Queens*.) “It was our reality and it’s what we grew up in and we loved it when we were kids. The flip side was, it took our parents away from us, which any creative endeavor does. You have a creative parent, part of them is going to be dedicated to their creativity, if they’re a real artist. They can’t deny that.”

Now, Stiller’s own children are feeling that pull to follow in their parents’ and grandparents’ footsteps. Ella is a Juilliard graduate who is joining the upcoming season of *The Comeback* following a stint off-Broadway. Both younger Stillers had roles in *Happy Gilmore 2*. Stiller recognizes that the movie enters an ongoing conversation about nepotism in Hollywood, but he hopes it makes viewers understand what it means to come from a world of performers.

“For me, this really was like, hey, this is what our lives are, this is what it’s about,” Stiller says.



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# Kathryn Bigelow's A House of Dynamite Is Skillful, Stressful, and Urgent

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.



Sometimes movies reach us in a place beyond mere assessment: you walk away from the thing you've just seen not really knowing if you'd call it good or bad, or even great, but you know something has shifted inside you. That's the effect of *A House of Dynamite*, directed by [Kathryn Bigelow](#) and premiering at the [Venice Film Festival](#). The picture is precise, potent, and ingeniously constructed. But even though it focuses on the nuts and bolts of how the United States government might respond to a nuclear attack, there's something ghostly and unreal about it too. Without spelling anything out in

detail, it lays bare all sorts of global realities we don't want to think about. Who wants to contemplate the unthinkable? Bigelow has made a modern-day real-world horror movie that's unsettling for all that it *doesn't* show.

There are no heroes in *A House of Dynamite*, but there are no definable villains, either, which is what makes this film so unmooring. The premise is straightforward and sleek: a nuclear missile is headed for the American Midwest, but no one knows which country launched it. If it's not intercepted, it will hit its target in roughly 20 minutes. The film unfolds within that time frame, its events relayed from multiple points of view, including that of a young major stationed in the Pacific ([Anthony Ramos](#)), a disillusioned deputy advisor who's forced to fill shoes he's not ready for (Gabriel Basso), a Secretary of Defense who can barely reckon with the reality of what's unfolding before him (Jared Harris), and, finally, the President himself ([Idris Elba](#)), a man who, it's signaled to us, is fairly new to the job when the crisis hits. Nearly every one of these people has a family or loved one at home. As they try to stave off impending catastrophe, they're also making discreet, clipped phone calls to people they care about. If this is the beginning of the end of the world, they need to touch base, if only for a few seconds, with the people who matter in *their* world.

Ramos' Major Daniel Gonzales and his crew notice the missile, launched from somewhere in the Pacific, and spring to action, hoping to intercept it. In Washington, Captain Olivia Walker ([Rebecca Ferguson](#)), gets his report and responds with concern but not alarm—the belief, at the beginning, is that somehow this is a misreading or a mistake. Harris's Secretary of Defense Reid Baker eventually shows up on a video call, cantankerously alert but not yet panicked, though his demeanor shifts when he learns that the missile just may hit Chicago, where his daughter lives. Bits of information about each character are telegraphed economically: We learn that Basso's deputy security advisor Jack Baerington is dissatisfied with his job, feeling his skills are underutilized, until he's pressed into service to answer consequential questions for his boss, who's traveling and can't be reached. And for several seemingly interminable minutes, POTUS is absent, his video screen in the Situation Room a blank square. Where is he? The quiet bustle of the room heightens to a low-level buzz of stress. A cantankerous general, Tracy Letts's Anthony Brady, braces himself for orders: Will the President decide to

counterattack? And how will he know what to do, when no one knows who's responsible?

As the minutes tick by, more urgent calls go out to various specialists and experts: Ana Park (Greta Lee), an authority on North Korean politics, is annoyed when her cellphone buzzes on her day off. (She's spending it with her kid at a Battle of Gettysburg re-enactment.) A FEMA official, played by Moses Ingram's Cathy Rogers, receives news that she's going to be hustled to safety in a bunker—beyond that, she has no idea what's going on, because no one has any clarity on the situation. The movie is divided into sections, each showing this unsettling turn of events—remember, it's only 20 or so minutes of time—from a different character's perspective. Lines of dialogue are repeated from section to section; sometimes we'll see a character saying something we'd previously heard only as part of a phone call, and the context shifts slightly. A seemingly nondescript snippet of information—as when a character says, "One minute to intercept"—becomes more tense, not less, each time you hear it. It's all part of a shifting mosaic that changes shape and tone from second to second.



*A House of Dynamite* is one of the most stressful viewing experiences I've had in years. It's a movie with a seemingly endless number of moving parts, cut with diamond precision. (Kirk Baxter is the editor.) In researching the movie, screenwriter Noah Oppenheim—who was president of NBC News before he began writing for film—interviewed current and former military specialists and others who have spent decades preparing for a catastrophic nuclear event, even as the rest of us go about our day-to-day stuff. Ignorance is bliss, but how much of that can we afford?

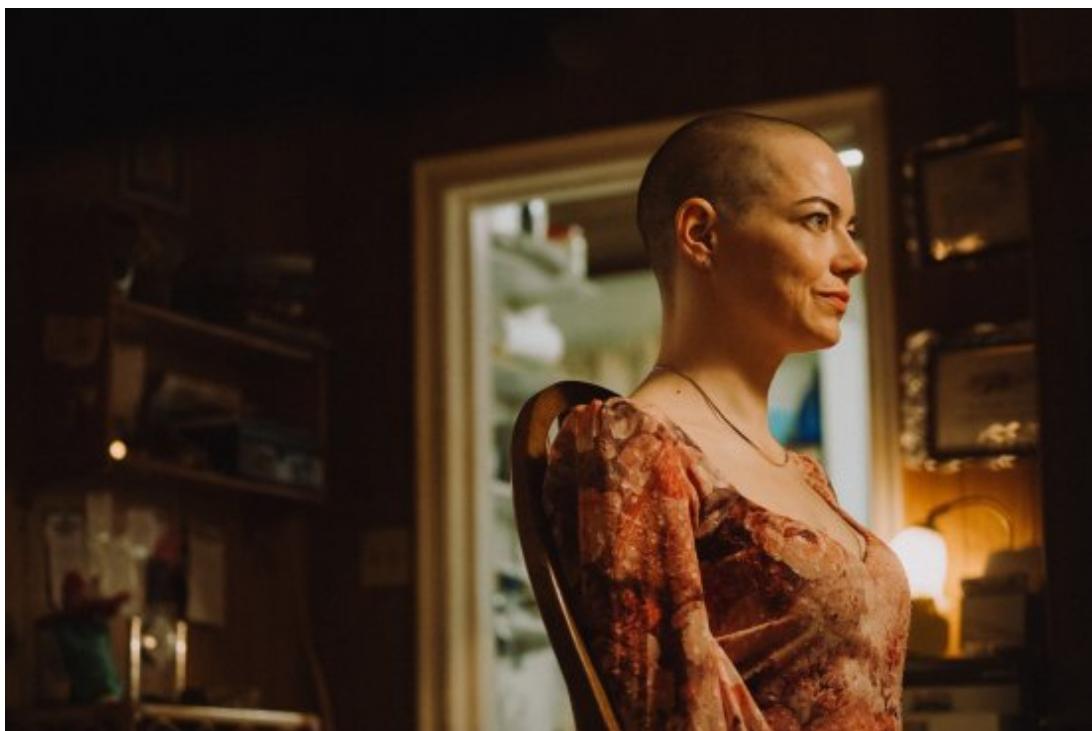
Bigelow pulls the film together with the exactitude of a fighter pilot. It sometimes seems incomprehensible that this is only her 11th full-length feature film; she's one of those filmmakers who chooses and executes her projects with care, and this one feels particularly urgent. In the years after the U.S. bombed [Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#), Americans were haunted by the possibility of nuclear warfare. Our fears showed up in the movies, too, in Cold War dramas like Sidney Lumet's 1964 *Fail Safe* or apocalyptic thrillers like Stanley Kramer's 1959 *On the Beach*. Yet somehow, even though the chances of nuclear destruction have only increased in the decades since, we now think about it less. Bigelow wanted to make the film, she says in the movie's press notes, as a way of reckoning with the reality that the world could end in the space of a few heartbeats: "Multiple nations possess enough nuclear weapons to end civilization within minutes, and yet there's a kind of collective numbness, a quiet normalization of the unthinkable." *A House of Dynamite* lays out one particularly terrifying possibility. What if you, your family, and your community were wiped out in a flash or, probably worse, left to survive in a scorched, barren world? And if the scenario of *A House of Dynamite* were to play out in real life, whom would you want at the helm of the government, making potentially world-ending decisions? Bigelow takes the unthinkable and puts it right in front of us. We can ignore the alarm if we want. But that doesn't mean it's not blasting.

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# Yorgos Lanthimos' *Bugonia* Is Punishing, But Emma Stone Can Do No Wrong

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.



The human race is in a sorry state, and here comes [Yorgos Lanthimos](#) with an aggressively wicked black comedy, *Bugonia*—premiering at the Venice Film Festival—to tell us all about it. Haven't you heard? Many of us no longer get our news from “the news.” We embrace conspiracy theories, the weirder the better, to justify our own beliefs. We blindly trust our corporate overlords even as they drain our lifeblood. Previously sane human beings are getting crazier and crazier. That, and the bees—who, the movie informs us, pollinate one-third of the world’s food supply—are dying. These are all good

reasons to feel bummed out about humanity, but leave it to Lanthimos to express his dismay in the most arch and self-congratulatory way possible. To paraphrase an old *Peanuts* cartoon, Lanthimos loves mankind; it's people he can't stand.

*Bugonia* begins with a plot and a duo of plotters: [Jesse Plemons](#) plays Teddy, a sad-eyed individual with a soul-deadening menial job and a fondness for bees, which he keeps in the yard of his mildly shabby house. He's a guy who knows the truth about things—he's *researched* it all on the Internet—and he's schooling his naïve, possibly mentally challenged cousin, Donny (Aidan Delbis), in his findings.

Teddy is a man in pain: he has watched his ailing mother (played, in a few brief scenes, by [Alicia Silverstone](#)) suffer through a supposed cure that has in fact put her in a coma, and seeing her in agony has sent him round the bend. But he has a plan to make things right. Together, Teddy tells Donny, they'll save the world. He leads Donny through a grueling physical exercise routine for strength, and subjects him to a kind of pharmaceutical castration, explaining that neither of them must be distracted from their mission by normal sexual urges. Donny, hoping he might one day "be with someone," is bummed out about that, but he goes along with the scheme anyway.



Teddy's plan is to kidnap [Emma Stone](#)'s Michelle Fuller, the soulless head of a giant technocorporation that quite obviously puts profits over people. But he's not motivated by garden-variety vengeance. Teddy believes that Michelle is an alien being from Andromeda, sent to Earth to destroy it. Once he and Donny have her chained up in their basement—after first shaving her head, so the Andromedans won't be able to use their fancy technology to locate her via the DNA in her hair—all Teddy has to do is coerce her into summoning her mothership so he can gain entrance and negotiate Earth's freedom with her overlords.

Maybe that makes *Bugonia* sound sort of fun—and the movie does contain some ridiculously over-the-top exploding-bodies gore—but Lanthimos goes out of his way to amp up the story's ugly, brutish qualities. *Bugonia* is a reimagining of Jang Joon-hwan's 2003 science-fiction comedy *Save the Green Planet*. (Its script is by Will Tracy, who has written for shows like *Succession* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*; he also wrote the screenplay for the 2022 foodie satire *The Menu*.) And Lanthimos is working with actors he clearly likes, for good reason: Plemons and Stone both

appeared in his last film, 2024's tedious bummerama triptych *[Kinds of Kindness](#)*. They're gifted performers who know what they're doing.

But in *Bugonia*, Lanthimos lets his poker-faced sadism run free. It's probably supposed to be grimly funny to watch Teddy send 400 volts of electricity coursing through the body of the bound-and-gagged Michelle, after putting on Green Day's "Basket Case," cranked up to 11 to drown out her screams. Lanthimos and ace cinematographer Robbie Ryan shoot the sequence discreetly, so you hear more than you see. But do we really want to watch any character played by Stone—or by any actor, really—be brutalized that way? Lanthimos just can't help himself.



There are people who will tell you that you either get Lanthimos or you don't, but the subtext is that if you recoil from his films, you're just not sophisticated enough to get them. Don't ever buy that argument. Lanthimos' movies are rarely as deep or meaningful as he seems to think they are. And yet, he's not a filmmaker you can write off entirely. Every once in a while, he can surprise you with a movie like *[The Lobster](#)*, which sidles up to some

mournful truths about human loneliness with the wayward agility of a hermit crab looking for a home, or the strange and fanciful *Poor Things*, a grand showcase for Emma Stone's intelligence and physical ingenuity.

Stone is a bold, creative performer. She can do anything—but that doesn't mean she should. She's terrific in *Bugonia*, laceratingly funny in cold-blooded-executive mode as she rushes impatiently through the recording of a diversity-training video, and bracingly convincing, with her nubbly shaven head, as a wily Joan of Arc determined to outwit her captors. She gets her true shining moment in the movie's surprise ending, which, largely because of her, feels tender and mournful. But Lanthimos allows us the grace of that ending only after he's put us through the wringer, maybe even boring us a little along the way. The world isn't pretty, and Lanthimos is sounding the alarm. If only he would tell us something we don't already know.

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# Tim Robinson's The Chair Company Is Curb Your Enthusiasm for the Conspiracy Dad

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.



Ron Trosper is losing it. *The Chair Company*, an HBO comedy that premieres on Oct. 12, traces the unraveling of this suburban family man, played by co-creator Tim Robinson, who believes he's stumbled upon a criminal conspiracy following a minor workplace humiliation. But that conspiracy tends to manifest in the form of universal contemporary annoyances. “You can’t get a hold of anybody,” Ron rants after his

investigation leads him into customer-service hell. “That’s the problem with the world today. People make *garbage*, and you can’t talk to anybody. You can’t complain, you can’t get an apology. I wanna scream at ’em!”

The character will be familiar to anyone who knows Robinson’s work. In his Netflix sketch show [I Think You Should Leave](#) and recent feature [Friendship](#), the comedian portrays men who are hilariously, uncontrollably angry for reasons they don’t seem to fully understand. In his nitpicking and narcissism, the relatability of his grievances and his unhinged methods of redressing them, Ron also resembles a younger, Middle American version of [Larry David’s Curb Your Enthusiasm antihero](#). He’s a great character—one portrayed with the explosive mix of awkwardness and rage Robinson has perfected and placed in situations that are funny because they’re absurd, but also because, despite their surreal trappings, they speak to modern discontents. It’s all just entertaining enough to make up for the show’s scattershot storytelling.

Ron is, at once, an average guy and a mess of insecurities. At home, he’s overshadowed by an impressive wife ([Lake Bell](#)) and teenage son (Will Price), as well as his daughter’s (Sophia Lillis) upcoming wedding. (She and her wife-to-be want to marry in a “haunted barn.”) Now that his dream business venture has failed, he has returned to a stressful job at a construction company. All it takes is one blip to send him down the rabbit hole. Sometimes his quest for the truth takes the shape of a prototypical thriller—rendezvous at dive bars, threats issued by shadowy goons in parking lots. Other times, Ron is a terminally online Larry, typing screeds into customer support forms and cursing out chatbots.



Robinson's style of comedy may not be best suited to longform narrative. Writer-director Andrew DeYoung's *Friendship*, which cast him as a lonely guy who befriends, alienates, then becomes fixated on a cool neighbor ([Paul Rudd](#)), has some great moments but falters midway through due to a predictable plot. In the six *Chair Company* episodes I screened (out of eight), Robinson and co-creator Zach Kanin don't make the conspiracy thriller funny so much as they use its tropes to connect characters and situations that are, in themselves, very funny.

Robinson has a genius for channeling society's ambient toxic vibes, in abstract but eerily evocative ways, through his odd alter egos. *Friendship* is a funhouse mirror of the male loneliness crisis. Yet his sensibility is most potent in the concise scenarios of *I Think You Should Leave*. From the guy who won't stop making filthy comments on an "adult" ghost tour to the one in the hot dog costume who insists he had nothing to do with the crash of a hot-dog-shaped car, these characters embody the anger, mendacity, immaturity, and allergy to accountability that define so many of today's most powerful men without explicitly addressing politics.

*The Chair Company's* hero is the other side of that coin, a disempowered man whose earnestness brings him only embarrassment and whose attempts to find someone to blame for his misery only dig him deeper into it. Ron's crusade against corporate shadiness (and shoddiness) never generates much suspense. But whether he strikes you as an everyman Larry David or as a modern-day David taking on a faceless Goliath, his plight is bound to resonate.

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# Jacinda Ardern on Empathy, World Leaders Today, and Her Intimate New Documentary

Luscombe is an editor at large at TIME, where she has covered a wide swath of topics but specializes in interviews, profiles, and essays. In 2010, she won the Council on Contemporary Families Media Award for her stories on the ways marriage is changing. She is also author of [\*Marriageology: the Art and Science of Staying Together.\*](#)



**The Brief September 30, 2025**

**Trump and Netanyahu's proposed Gaza deal, a U.S. government shutdown is looming, and more**

Podcast ID – Short Length: 718ecd2c-26f4-4b00-ad91-779a5e8664ef

Podcast ID – Long Length: 718ecd2c-26f4-4b00-ad91-779a5e8664ef

Jacinda Ardern, who was plucked from obscurity, even within New Zealand, to lead her country when she was 37, resigned in exhaustion just over five years later in early 2023. It's not entirely surprising she was worn out. She came to global prominence for her sympathetic and effective response to a mass shooting in Christchurch in 2019, after which she had to deal with a volcanic eruption that killed 22 people, and then a global pandemic, during which she quickly shut the country's borders. Fewer than 5,000 people died of COVID-19 in New Zealand (less than 0.1% of the population), but there was deep unrest and lasting protests.

Also, in June 2018, about eight months after assuming office, she had a baby.

Her then partner, now husband Clark Gayford, who was a well-known national television and radio broadcaster before Ardern came to prominence, started to catch some of their private and public moments on camera as her star rose. Those snippets are among the historical footage that makes up the backbone of *Prime Minister*, a close-up look of what it was like to be a young female leader in a time of global turbulence. It won an Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival when it premiered there in January, had a small theatrical release earlier in the year, and will start streaming on HBO on Sept. 30.

[video id=W4icAi6y autostart="viewable"]

Ardern, who champions a more empathetic and less autocratic style of leadership, sat down with TIME to talk about whether those kinds of leaders still have a role, what advice she'd give to current heads of state, and her odd choice of hero.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity*

**The new HBO documentary, *Prime Minister*, is about your style of leadership, which emphasizes compassion and humanity. Does it feel**

**like your approach is not winning right now?**

Certainly the alternative approach is very dominant, no question. But it is not the only approach. There are examples of leaders around the world who have at their core the values of empathy and kindness. [Mark Carney](#) [of Canada] and [Anthony Albanese](#) [of Australia], two recently elected Prime Ministers, both used that critical election-night speech, where you set out your agenda and your vision, to talk about kindness.

**You made this movie with your now husband Clark Gayford. He caught a lot of intimate moments, including when you're about to resign and wondering what to wear. Was there a plan to make a documentary from the beginning?**

Clark started picking up his camera, because he's a broadcaster. I imagine in his mind was, "I'm seeing moments that no one else is seeing, that might end up being important or it might just be good for our family." And so, no, there wasn't that set plan; it was just, "I'm gonna catch the moment." He had to be pretty resilient, because I chastised him, and I ignored him, and I told him off because I'd be working, and then he'd interrupt me with questions, or he'd just have the camera there, and I did treat it as an irritant. I really credit him for persevering.

**There's a moment in the film where it's clear you're feeling the weight of the job. And he asks why you don't delegate more. And you respond in a way that suggests that was not constructive feedback. Did you have a rule about what interactions made into the final cut?**

He was the director of photography and a producer. But there's a reason that he's not the editor and he's not the director. The first time I saw the film in full was after it was submitted to Sundance. You just have to trust that if they're just using footage of you in real life, then it's going to tell the story.

**Would a guy have cared less about what people were saying about them? Is that why more guys go into leadership?**

I think it's actually more a question of personality than strictly gender, what type of leader you want to be and how sensitive you are to the feedback of

voters. And nor do

I believe, therefore, that empathetic leadership is the domain of women. We don't just say, I'll only teach my daughter kindness, generosity, and curiosity. The values of being a good human should be the values of being a good leader.

**You had global attention for a brief period. Most leaders do not have as much road still in front of them after it fades as you do. A. Do you miss the attention or any part of it? And B. How do you figure out what to do next?**

Being out of the spotlight is something I'm quite delighted by. However, as time has passed and I've looked to what is the next useful thing to do, I've discovered I still need to use my albeit small spotlight to talk about the alternatives to the type of leadership we're seeing now, and to keep trying to be useful on things like climate change and violent extremism and issues that women in public life face. Public profiles and being useful, I've discovered, go together.

**You had to face and help a country face a horrific shooting. When you hear about the many shootings in the U.S., does it take you back to Christchurch? Where are your thoughts going?**

There are very few things that I read about in the political space that don't take me back in some way. It's still very fresh—I've been gone two years—whether it's dealing with gun violence or trade negotiations or taking positions on global conflict like Ukraine or Gaza. I don't regret my decision to leave, but that doesn't make me stop thinking about what I would do if I was still there.

**Is there something you would say to current world leaders?**

We all have different domestic issues, but at the core you see a deep sense of uncertainty and fear among citizens. A lot of that's probably driven by financial uncertainty, incredibly difficult economic times for many Western liberal democracies coming off the back of an incredibly difficult pandemic. In a period of fear and uncertainty, politicians have the choice of either

capitalizing on that, stoking it, and driving it towards someone to blame that isn't the system, because that means that they're not responsible for fixing it. Or they take the harder road, but the right long-term road, which is being open about the issues people face, working really hard to find the solutions, being honest about how long it will take to make a difference. I think it's obvious which mode most leaders are taking at the moment.

**You say that during the pandemic you wanted to save as many lives as possible, and you wanted to keep people together, and that you succeeded in one of those—saving lives. Do you think that the divisions that we are seeing in many countries are a swing back from that era, when we had to all really pull together?**

I'd really love to understand more about the psychology of the period that we're in. Edelman does the survey of public sentiments towards leadership in political institutions, and also private institutions. And I think what they've seen is really interesting: Public trust at the moment is low, but it's actually about a sense of grievance. People are experiencing hardship, and they have grievances towards those of political leadership and those in leadership in the private sector that they haven't seen a resolution to the issues that they face. And that then links to their view of what they're justified doing in response to the grievances.

**How do you feel the organizations that fight against violence on social media, one of which you helped found in the wake of the Christchurch shooting, are going?**

[The Christchurch Call to Action on Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online](#) is a body of tech companies, government, and those who work in the NGO sector and others who have an interest in freedom of expression online, human rights, civil liberties, and so on. It's got roughly more than 130 organizations that are part of it. It is as important now as it ever was. We didn't want to just remove extreme violence online. We wanted to address radicalization, and so there's a lot of work to try and better understand what's happening to users. We see it, we know what's happening, but we need more collective action to address it. It is very hard going.

**Videos of [Charlie Kirk's shooting](#), which the mainstream media would not show, were everywhere on social media...**

Surely we can agree that publishing standards are there for a reason: to prevent harm, to acknowledge the harm of seeing such horrific acts of violence, to stop the perpetuation of violence. I believe those same standards that apply to mainstream media should apply to social media platforms. I do not believe they are postmen. I believe they are publishers. Can we apply that consistent approach when it comes to fighting extremism?

**You were given access to \$20 million by [Melinda French Gates'](#) Pivotal Ventures to delegate to causes of your choice. Have you found anything?**

One of the projects we're funding is ending maternal mortality in humanitarian crises. Postpartum hemorrhaging is the most common cause of women losing their lives in birth. It is entirely preventable. In areas of conflict and crisis, relatively straightforward measures are not reaching women who need it the most.

**What does the future hold for you? Do you have a five-year plan?**

Never have, never will. I'm currently at the University of Oxford. Some of the work there is on empathetic leadership. But I'm [COP30's](#) special envoy for Oceania this year. I'm still doing the work with Pivotal. I'm still doing the work with the Christchurch Call to Action on Violent Extremism Online, and I still have the [Field](#) fellowship.

**The explorer Ernest Shackleton is a hero of yours. He died heavily in debt, he often failed to pay his crew, and was a [borderline alcoholic](#)...**

He also attempted, badly, to enter into politics. Not a perfect human.

**Why him?**

Anyone who possessed this overwhelming desire to face near certain death on a regular basis is going to be unusual. The elements of him that I admire

are around his leadership in the face of extremely difficult circumstances. He did not succeed at most of the things he set out to do, but in dark times, he never lost sight of the priority of bringing people together, unifying them around a common purpose and maintaining their optimism. He said true optimism is true moral courage, and that it is a courageous act to be optimistic in dark times.

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