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The Election That Could Break America

*By Barton
Gellman*



The Atlantic

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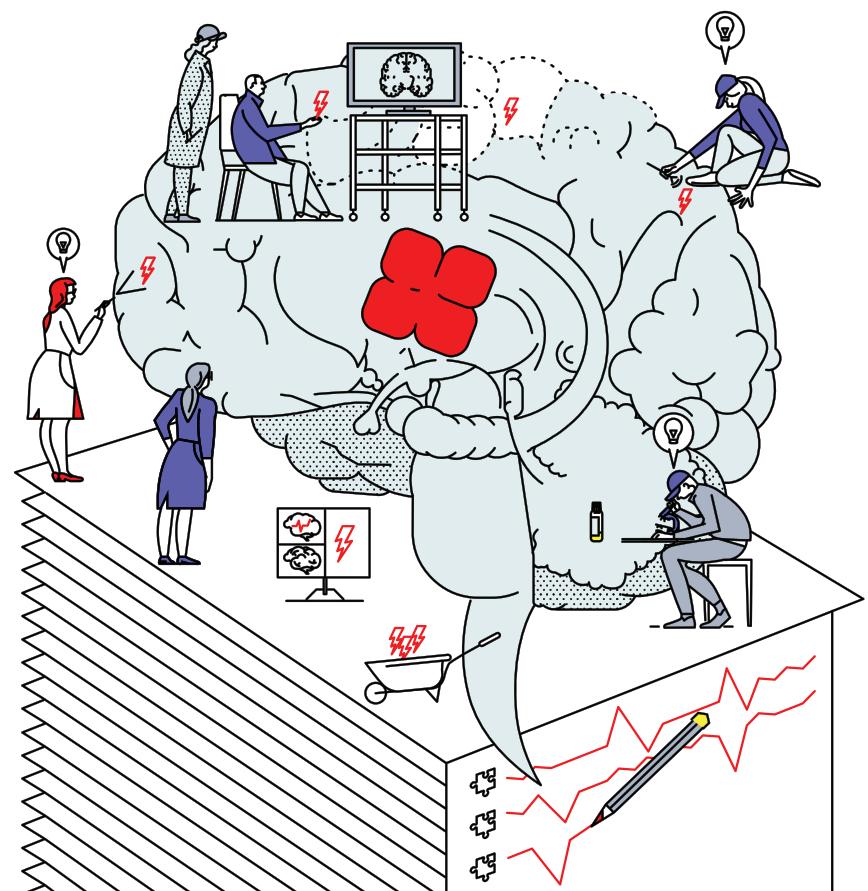


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Alzheimer's Is More Complicated Than We Thought

With a much-needed spike in research funding, scientists are transcending a one-size-fits-all approach to the disease and looking at multifaceted strategies for prevention and treatment.



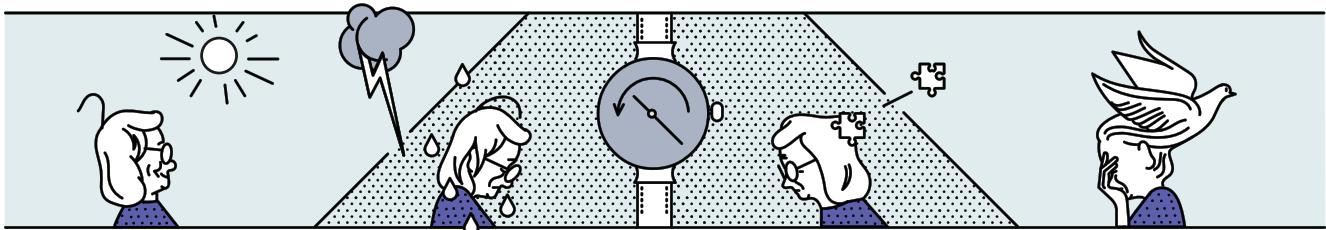
Illustrations by Eva Revolver

When Dr. Roberta Diaz Brinton first theorized that people with Alzheimer's disease could grow back the brain cells they'd lost, almost nobody believed her. It was the late 1980s, and Brinton sought funding to investigate whether the drug allopregnanolone—a naturally occurring brain steroid—could promote a process called neurogenesis, which triggers brain-cell growth and might restore cognitive function. But the idea was "a bit too bold" for scientific-grant reviewers, and she failed to attract research dollars, so she moved on to other areas of Alzheimer's research. "I literally put that idea away for 10 years," she says.

Now Brinton is finally putting her hypothesis to the test in a Phase 2a clinical trial, which is funded in part by a \$1 million grant from the Alzheimer's Association's Part the Cloud initiative and an award from the National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health. Although the trial is currently on pause because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brinton is eager to resume the work so she can determine whether the drug is safe and effective when administered through muscular injections. If the results are good, she'll be one step closer to bringing the world's first regenerative therapeutic drug for Alzheimer's to the millions of people living with the disease.

This is one sign of a remarkable reversal of fortune in a field that, just a few decades ago, was barely on the national radar. Until President Ronald Reagan disclosed his diagnosis in 1994, many members of the public mistakenly believed that Alzheimer's was simply a natural part of aging.

Before then, research dollars for Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia were scarce. The clinical trials that received the most funding largely focused on the most established strategy for fighting the disease: clearing plaques—and, to a lesser extent, tangles—from the brain. "Reviewers



who were looking at grant applications were incredibly conservative because they had so few dollars to spend," says Maria Carrillo, Ph.D., the Alzheimer's Association's chief science officer. "So they funded the sure thing."

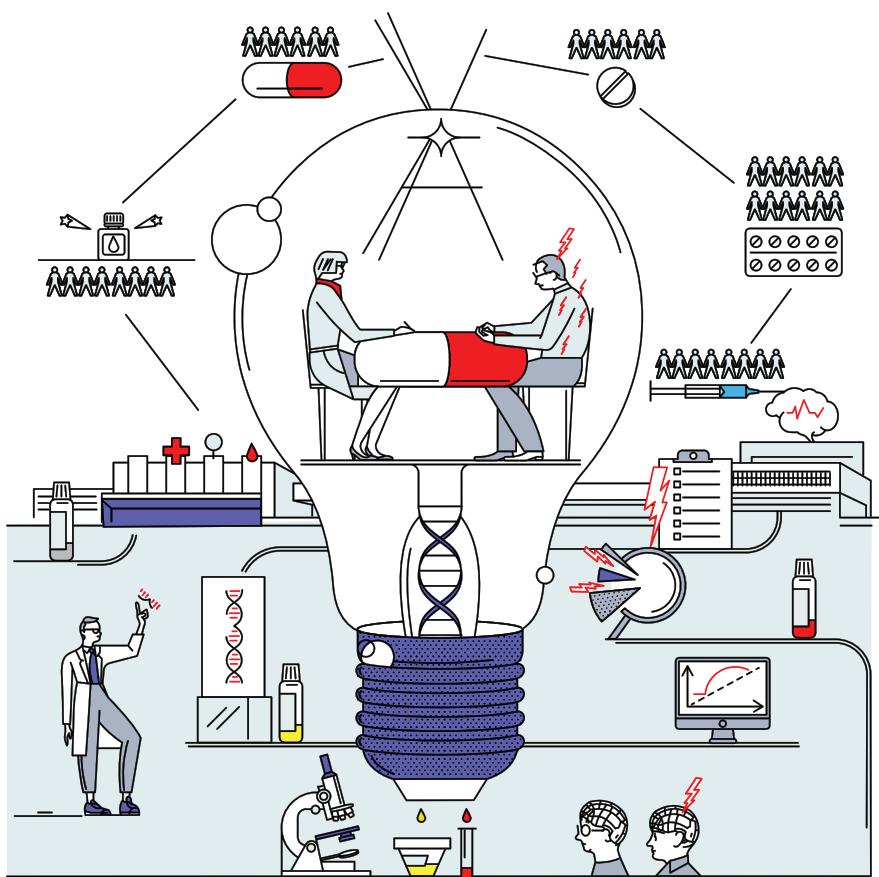
The seemingly safe bets, however, yielded disappointing results. From 1993 to 2003, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved just five drugs to treat Alzheimer's symptoms, and only one—a combination of two previously approved drugs—has been approved since. Meanwhile, the disease's devastating impact on American lives escalated: From 2000 to 2018, the number of Americans who died each year from Alzheimer's rose 146 percent. "We didn't have any more time for safe bets," says Michaela "Mikey" Hoag, a philanthropist who lost both her parents to the disease. "What we'd been doing the last 10 years wasn't enough."

To better understand the disease and develop more multifaceted treatments, Hoag figured, the scope of research needed to expand. But with limited federal research funds, progress was slow. That's why, in 2012, Hoag founded Part the Cloud, a philanthropic program designed to speedily get promising treatments into early clinical trials. Over the past eight years, it has awarded \$30 million to the kind of unconventional research, like Brinton's, that had long gone overlooked. At the same time, the Alzheimer's Association advocated for the federal government to increase research funding. Since the 2011 passage

of the National Alzheimer's Project Act, which the Alzheimer's Association championed, federal research funding for Alzheimer's and dementia has increased sixfold.

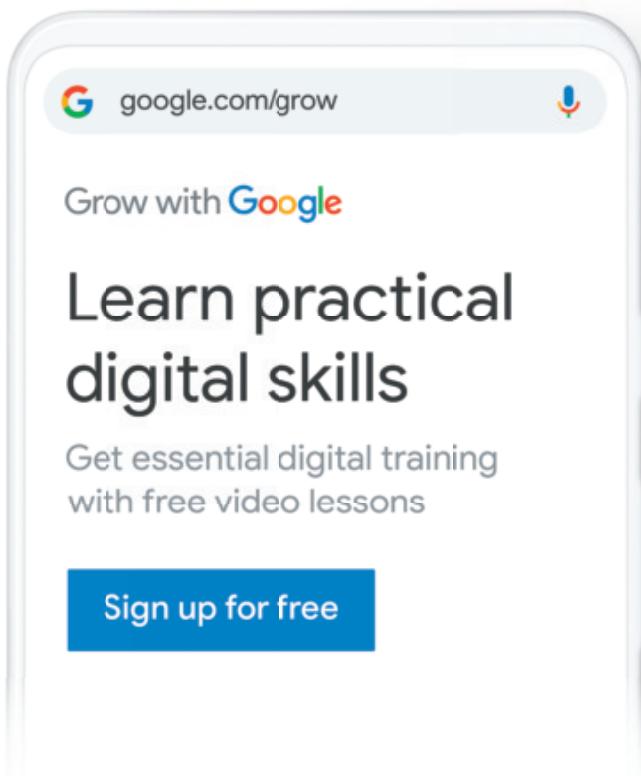
At the University of Arizona, Brinton thinks it's a better time than ever to join the fight against the disease. Research resources, she points out, will continue

to surge. Part the Cloud, for one, plans to double the number of clinical trials it funds next year. In that environment, Brinton believes, major breakthroughs are inevitable. "It is a phenomenally exciting time," she says. "Those of us on the front lines of the battle are not looking back. We're going forward and we're confident."





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In January, an estimated 22,000 gun-rights advocates protested outside the Virginia state capitol, in Richmond. This summer, militia musters were common throughout the state.

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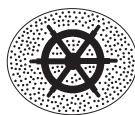
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THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

By Jeffrey Goldberg

In the January 1861 issue of this magazine, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of *The Atlantic's* founders, published what would become perhaps his most popular poem, the opening stanza of which is immortal: “Listen, my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.” But the past century or so has not been overly kind to “Paul Revere’s Ride,” or to the rest of the Longfellow canon. He’s been adjudicated by many critics to have been a purveyor of sentimental, manipulative doggerel. But stay with me for a minute, because beneath its putative literary failings, the work has hidden layers. Longfellow, like most of *The Atlantic's* founders—including Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—was an ardent abolitionist, and used funds raised from the sale of his poems to buy freedom for enslaved people in the South.

“Paul Revere’s Ride” should not be read as mythmaking patriotic twaddle. Longfellow wrote this poem to serve as a wake-up call to the sleeping North—a summons to join the great abolitionist struggle when the future of the Union itself was in doubt. It was animated by a belief that America was worth saving. “In the hour of darkness and peril and need, / The people will waken and listen to hear / The hurrying hoof-beat of that steed, / And the midnight-message of Paul Revere.”

The Atlantic of that era did its part in the fight for freedom and equality and union. A few months before the editors published “Paul Revere’s Ride,” they

endorsed Abraham Lincoln for president, and scored the debased ethos of the age:

Sordid and materialistic views of the true value and objects of society and government are professed more and more openly by the leaders of popular outcry, if it cannot be called public opinion. That side of human nature which it has been the object of all law-givers and moralists to repress and subjugate is flattered and caressed; whatever is profitable is right.

The current stewards of *The Atlantic* would not claim today’s magazine to be the moral or aesthetic equivalent of *The Atlantic* of the antebellum era. But we still believe America is worth saving. And in this moment of peril, in which a man uniquely unsuited for the presidency stands for reelection, and in which purveyors of sordid and materialistic views enable this man to demolish the institutions and ideas that make America—you should pardon the word—great, we have tried, and will continue to try, to bring you the truth of this crisis. Our cover story this month, by Barton Gellman, is a clear warning about what the coming months could bring. David Frum, who early on in these pages identified the encroaching danger of autocracy, warns that representative democracy in this country hangs in the balance. Over the past four years, *The Atlantic's* writers have exposed corruption, depredation, racism, and the fragility of our democratic experiment. We will continue to do this work, no matter what happens on November 3 and after.

We thank you for reading, and for joining us on our modest version of Paul Revere’s ride. *A*



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Behind the Cover: In the opening paragraph of Barton Gellman's cover story, an image emerges: a blinking red light. It's an apt metaphor for the essay, which offers a stark warning about all that could go wrong in this year's election and its

aftermath. Our cover art, by Elias Klingén, took the form of an emergency light, signaling the hazards to our democracy that lie ahead, and the dire importance of voting.

— Oliver Munday, *Senior Art Director*

THE

Anatomy of an American Failure

*In September,
Ed Yong
reported on how
the virus won.*

Letters

which hampered America's response from day one. Also, our American culture of rugged individualism—with its related thinking of “me and mine” and “survival of the fittest” as opposed to “we and ours” and “survival of us all together”—has contributed to the United States’ world leadership in cases and fatalities.

Frank G. Splitt
Mount Prospect, Ill.

I was riveted by Ed Yong's excellent and informative piece, until he veered off course to single out the president for ill-preparedness. I am not a Trump supporter—far from it—but I am compelled to see the coronavirus as presenting the sort of novel and calamitous crisis this nation hasn't faced since Pearl Harbor. It will be

easy for historians and analysts to look back one day at 2020 with 20/20 hindsight, spotlighting the failings and mistakes of our leaders, all of which likely made the situation worse than it would have been. Yet there is little reason to think governors, mayors, county executives, public-health officials, etc., did not have access to the warnings of health organizations and medical and scientific experts long before this silent and invisible enemy reached our shores. No state, city, or municipality seems to have taken steps to prepare for what health experts had been predicting for a long time. It was all about reaction, and for that we are all to blame.

Michael E. Zuller
Great Neck, N.Y.

Mr. Yong criticizes the World Health Organization unnecessarily harshly. As a retired physician, I followed news reports closely. From the beginning, the WHO said the novel coronavirus was dangerous and recommended that countries prepare. The WHO could not declare that the virus had reached pandemic proportions until that term's definition was met; perhaps that definition should be reexamined. It's not the WHO's role to play guessing games. Realistically, with the modern level of international travel, any new, highly contagious virus is likely to reach many countries before it's even recognized as a threat.

Gloria Kohut
Kentwood, Mich.

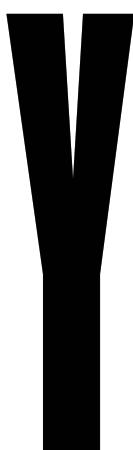
ED YONG REPLIES:

My article was primarily about America's broken systems and long-standing failures, which allowed the coronavirus to run wild. In discussing Donald Trump, I explicitly said that he “isn't solely responsible for America's fiasco, but he is central to it.” Subsequent reporting showing that he deliberately downplayed the risk of the virus only substantiates this analysis.

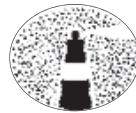
Looking for Frederick Douglass

In September, Clint Smith wrote about how a visit to the abolitionist's birthplace helped him understand this moment in America.

Yong's report hits all of the crucial points with the exception of the president's self-centered, myopic focus on his reelection,



COMMONS



DISCUSSION
&
DEBATE

Clint Smith's article reveals the enduring hypocrisy behind current efforts to preserve statues of Confederate soldiers. He notes that only in 2011 was a statue commemorating Frederick Douglass erected in front of the Talbot County Courthouse, in Maryland, not far from where Douglass was born. It was placed near a statue dedicated to the Talbot Boys, 84 local Confederate soldiers. That statue was erected in 1916, half a century after the end of the Civil War, during the Jim Crow period.

Local citizens attempted unsuccessfully in 2015 to have the Confederate statue removed. Smith notes that when he visited, the issue was pending once again before the Talbot county council. Unfortunately, the council majority once again rejected this effort to remove the statue, arguing that the coronavirus had prevented wider citizen input. It is truly ironic that these public officials would use the pandemic as an excuse for inaction, given that COVID-19 has harmed African Americans and other minorities disproportionately.

While we cannot reverse our nation's ugly racial history, we all have an obligation to correct harmful myths so that our nation can honestly discuss how to rectify its past.

James G. Cibulka
Newcomb, Md.

CLINT SMITH REPLIES:

Since the publication of my essay, Marylanders have reached out to me to share their own stories of growing up in the shadow of the Talbot Boys statue. Some wrote about how, prior to a few months ago, they had never considered what the statue, and others like it, meant. Others said that they have long seen it as a stain on the state they call home. The Talbot Boys statue is the last Confederate memorial on public property (outside of cemeteries and battlefields) in the state of Maryland, and many residents felt certain that after the killing of George Floyd and the nationwide protests that followed, it would finally come down. When I wrote the

essay, a resolution had been brought before the county council to remove the statue, but as James G. Cibulka notes, the council ultimately voted 3–2 to keep the statue in place, despite overwhelming calls from local residents for it to be taken down. Outside the council meeting after the vote, roughly 100 people protested the decision and vowed not to give up the fight; the protests have continued.

As I have written before, the Confederacy was a traitorous army that fought a war predicated on maintaining the institution of human bondage. Statues and memorials honoring Confederates on public property should be removed. Some questions of history

and memory require nuance and even compromise, but whether Confederate statues should remain lifted up on pedestals in public spaces is not, to my mind, one of them. According to the historian Kevin M. Levin, more than 75 Confederate monuments and memorials across the country have been taken down since protests began this summer. If the residents of Talbot County and the Marylanders who have written to me have their say, it is not a matter of if the Talbot Boys statue will come down, but when.

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

THE FACTS

What we learned fact-checking this issue

In "The Election That Could Break America" (p. 46), staff writer Barton Gellman describes the worst-case scenario for the November election: that Donald Trump could exploit the uncertainty of a close vote and use his power to prevent a decisive outcome against him. "Trump may win or lose, but he will never concede," Gellman writes.

It wouldn't be the first time an American election has ended in ambiguity. One example, from 1947, is known as the "Three Governors Controversy." After running a viciously racist campaign and winning Georgia's governorship, Eugene Talmadge died just weeks before his inauguration. Three other politicians then stepped in to claim the office: Herman Talmadge, Eugene's son; M. E. Thompson, the lieutenant governor—

elect; and Ellis Arnall, the outgoing governor, who declined to leave the position.

Knowing that the sickly Eugene might die before taking office, Herman Talmadge and his father's allies had secretly encouraged write-in votes for the candidate's son. He amassed only a few hundred, but he became governor based on an obscure part of the state's constitution that granted decision-making power to the legislature in the event that no candidate

received a majority of votes. At one point he shared the position with Arnall, who worked in an office 20 feet away. Talmadge had new locks installed, and Arnall eventually gave up the governorship.

But Talmadge's time in office was short—fewer than 70 days. The Georgia Supreme Court ultimately ruled that Thompson was the legitimate successor.

—Will Gordon,
Assistant Editor

NEW FROM PETE BUTTIGIEG AND LIVERIGHT PUBLISHING

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A Rhodes Scholar and Navy veteran,
Buttigieg was educated at Harvard and
Oxford. He and his husband, Chasten
Buttigieg, live in South Bend, Indiana.



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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

LAST EXIT

Donald Trump's first term was characterized by theft, lies, corruption, and the incitement of violence. A second term could spell the end of American democracy.

BY DAVID FRUM

The most important ballot question in 2020 is not Joe Biden versus Donald Trump, or Democrat versus Republican. The most important question is: Will Trump get away with his corruption—will his crooked and authoritarian tactics succeed?

If the answer is yes, be ready for more. Much more.

Americans have lavished enormous powers on the presidency. They have also sought to bind those powers by law. Yet the Founders of the republic understood that law alone could never eliminate the risks inherent in the power of the presidency. They worried ceaselessly about the prospect of a truly bad man in the office—a Caesar or a Cromwell, as Alexander Hamilton fretted

in “Federalist No. 21.” They built restraints: a complicated system for choosing the president, a Congress to constrain him, impeachment to remove him. Their solutions worked for two and a half centuries. In our time, the system failed.

Through the Trump years, institutions have failed again and again to check corruption, abuse of power, and even pro-Trump violence.

As Trump took office, I published a cover story in this magazine, arguing that his presidency could put the United States on the road to autocracy. “By all early indications,” I wrote, “the Trump presidency will corrode public integrity and the rule of law—and also do untold damage to American global leadership, the Western alliance, and democratic norms around the world. The damage has already begun, and it will not be soon or easily undone. Yet exactly how much damage is allowed to be done is an open question.”

We can now measure the damage done. As we near the 2020 vote, the Trump administration is attempting to cripple the Postal Service to alter the election’s outcome. The president has successfully refused to comply with subpoenas from congressional committees chaired by members of the opposing party. He has ignored ethics guidelines, junked rules on security clearances, and shut down two counterintelligence investigations of his Russian business links, one by the FBI, the other by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. He has assigned prison police and park police to new missions as street enforcers, bypassing the National Guard and the FBI. As in 2016, he is once again welcoming Russian help for his election campaign—only

this time, he controls the agencies that are refusing to answer the questions of Congress and the American people.

Those who would minimize the threat that Trump poses take solace in his personal weaknesses: his laziness, his ignorance of the mechanics of government. But the president is not acting alone. The Republican politicians who normally might have been expected to restrain Trump are instead enabling and empowering him.

Perhaps the most consequential change Trump has wrought is in the Republican Party’s attitude toward democracy. I worked in the administration of George W. Bush, who was the first president since the 1880s to win the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote. Bush recognized this outcome as an enormous political problem. After the Supreme Court ruled in his favor, on December 13, 2000, the president-elect promised to govern in a bipartisan and conciliatory fashion: “I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation,” he said in a speech at the Texas state capitol, where he was finishing his term as governor. “The president of the United States is the president of every single American, of every race and every background. Whether you voted for me or not, I will do my best to serve your interests, and I will work to earn your respect.”

You may believe that Bush failed in that promise—but he made that promise because he recognized a problem. Two decades later, Trump has normalized the minority rule that seemed so abnormal in December 2000.

Republicans in the Trump years have gotten used to competing under rules biased in

their favor. They have come to fear that unless the rules favor them, they will lose. And so they have learned to think of biased rules as necessary, proper, and just—and to view any effort to correct those rules as a direct attack on their survival.

What I wrote in 2017 has only become more true since: “We are living through the

TRUMP’S
SUPERPOWER
IS HIS
ABSOLUTE
SHAMELESSNESS.
THIS LEVEL OF
CORRUPTION
IN AMERICAN
LIFE IS UNPREC-
EDENTED.

most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered.”

To understand how the U.S. system failed in Trump’s first term—and how it could fail further across another four years—let’s look closer at some of Trump’s abuses and the direction they could trend in a second term.

Abuse of the Pardon Power

On July 10, 2020, Trump commuted the sentence of his long-time associate Roger Stone. As Stone’s own communications showed, he had acted as an intermediary between the Trump campaign and WikiLeaks in 2016. Had Stone cooperated with federal investigators, the revelations might have been dangerous to Trump. Instead, Stone lied to Congress and threatened other witnesses.

Just as Stone was supposed to go to prison, Trump commuted his sentence. Commutation was more useful to the cover-up than an outright pardon. A commuted person retains his Fifth Amendment right not to testify; a pardoned person loses that right.

Trump’s clemency to Stone reminded others who might hold guilty knowledge—people like Paul Manafort and Ghislaine Maxwell—of the potential benefits to them of staying silent about Trump.

How did Trump get away with using a public power for personal advantage in this way? There’s nothing to stop him. The Constitution vests the pardon power in the president. Long-established government practices have discouraged presidents from using it on a whim. But a second-term Trump could demand that associates break the law for him—and then protect them when they are caught and face punishment. He could pardon his relatives—and even try to pardon himself.

Abuse of Government Resources for Personal Gain

On August 28, 2020, after the president broke with precedent—and, if federal employees besides the president and vice president were involved in planning the event, possibly violated the law—by accepting the Republican nomination on White House grounds, *The New York Times* reported:

Mr. Trump’s aides said he enjoyed the frustration and anger he caused by holding a political event on the South Lawn of the White House, shattering conventional norms and raising questions about ethics law violations.

He relished the fact that no one could do anything to stop him, said the aides, who spoke anonymously to discuss internal conversations.

"No one could do anything to stop him." No one has stopped Trump from directing taxpayer dollars to his personal businesses. No one has stopped him from defying congressional subpoenas looking into whether he was violating tax and banking laws. No one has stopped him from hiring and promoting his relatives. No one has stopped him from using government resources for partisan purposes. No one has stopped him from pressuring and cajoling foreign governments to help his reelection campaign. No one has stopped him from using his power over the Postal Service to discourage voting that he thinks will hurt him.

Trump found it surprisingly easy to use the Justice Department as a shield against curtailment of his own wrongdoing. The Hatch Act forbids most uses of government resources for partisan purposes. By long-standing courtesy, however, enforcement of that law against senior presidential appointees is left to the president. It's just assumed that the president will want to comply. But what if he does not? The independent federal agency tasked with enforcing the Hatch Act, the Office of Special Counsel, has found nine senior Trump aides in violation of the law, and has recommended that Trump request their resignation. He has ignored that recommendation.

"No one could do anything to stop him." In his first term, Trump purged the inspectors general from Cabinet departments and punished whistleblowers. In a second Trump

term, the administration would operate ever more opaque to cover up corruption and breaches in national security. The Justice Department would be debauched ever more radically, becoming Trump's own law firm and spending taxpayer dollars to defend him against the consequences of his personal wrongdoing. The

before Trump had ever tried to direct public dollars to his own companies—so no Congress had ever bothered to specifically outlaw such activity. American ethics law instead relies heavily on disclosure. When the disclosure rules were instituted half a century ago, the assumption was that, if provided with the necessary

object. His party in Congress is acquiescent. This level of corruption in American life is unprecedented. Trump has actually pocketed more from the Republican Party than he has from the U.S. Treasury—money you would imagine that Republicans donated to elect other Republicans and enact their favored policies,



hyper-politicization of the Justice and Homeland Security Departments would spread to other agencies. The last vestiges of ethics and independence in the Republican Party would gutter out.

Directing Public Funds to Himself and His Companies

In the 230-year history of the United States, no president

information, the political system would police wrongdoing.

But that assumption originated in a time when the parties were less cohesive—and the public less polarized—than now. Trump's superpower is his absolute shamelessness. He steals in plain view. He accepts bribes in a hotel located smack in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue. His supporters do not

not to enrich Trump—yet the party and its candidates continue to book event after event at Trump properties, proving loyalty by allowing themselves to be pillaged. A willingness to line the Trump family's pockets has become a mark of obeisance and identity, like wearing cowboy boots during the George W. Bush administration.

The result of this almost-universal Republican complicity in Trump's personal corruption has been the neutering of Congress's ability to act when corruption is disclosed. In the past, a subpoena from Congress was a subpoena *from Congress*; all of its members shared an interest in seeing it obeyed. Now a subpoena is merely an invitation from whichever party happens to hold a majority in the chamber that issued it. Republicans in the House cheerfully support Trump when he defies subpoenas from Democratic chairs, setting a precedent that probably will someday be used against them.

Trump has a lot to hide, both as president and as a businessman. The price of his political and economic survival has been the destruction of oversight by Congress and the discrediting of honest reporting by responsible media. In a second Trump term, radical gerrymandering and ever more extreme voter suppression by Republican governors would become the party's only path to survival in a country where a majority of the electorate strongly opposes Trump and his party. The GOP would complete its transformation into an avowedly antidemocratic party.

Inciting Political Violence

Trump has used violence as a political resource since he first declared his candidacy, in the summer of 2015. But as his reelection prospects have dimmed in 2020, political violence has become central to Trump's message. He wants more of it. After video circulated that appeared to show Kyle Rittenhouse shooting and killing two people and wounding a third in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on August 25, Trump

liked a tweet declaring that "Kyle Rittenhouse is a good example of why I decided to vote for Trump." "The more chaos and anarchy and vandalism and violence reigns, the better it is for the very clear choice on who's best on public safety and law and order," Trump's adviser Kellyanne Conway said on *Fox & Friends* on August 27. Two nights later, a 600-vehicle caravan of Trump supporters headed into downtown Portland, Oregon, firing paintball guns and pepper spray, driving toward a confrontation during which one of them was shot dead.

The people best positioned to regulate the level of political violence in the country are local police, whom Trump has again and again urged to do their work in ways that support him, no matter how "tough" that requires them to be. The police are represented by unions often aligned with the Trump campaign. "I can tell you," Trump said in a March 2019 interview with *Breitbart News*, "I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump—I have the tough people, but they don't play it tough—until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad."

Trump's appeal is founded on a racial consciousness and a racial resentment that have stimulated white racist terrorism in the United States and the world, from the New Zealand mosque slaughter (whose perpetrator invoked Trump) to the Pittsburgh synagogue murders to mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Gilroy, California. In recent weeks, political violence has caused those deaths in Kenosha and Portland. A second Trump term will only incite more such horror.

THE MAN the Founders dreaded entered the high office they created—and proceeded to abuse that office in just the ways they feared. Now that man is seeking a second term, which would be even more abusive and dangerous. Trump's election strategy is to weaponize the Electoral College to re-secure the presidency of the United

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Yet that does not mean the authoritarian populist respects his followers. He is exploiting their prejudices for his own benefit, not theirs. Trump uses power to enrich himself and weaken any institution of law or ethics that gets in the way of his self-enrichment. He holds power by inflaming resentments and hatreds. A second term will mean more stealing, more institution-wrecking, more incitement of bigotry.

Legend has it that in the 1870s, "Boss" William Tweed, the famously corrupt New York City mayor, taunted his critics by saying, "What are you going to do about it?" Trump's relentless defiance of law and decency does the same. Congress has done nothing. So it's up to voters.

Voters in 2020 will go to the polls in the midst of a terrible economic recession, with millions out of work because of Trump's mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. But the country is facing a democratic recession too, a from-the-top squeeze on the freedom of ordinary people to influence their government. Will the president follow laws or ignore them? Will public money be used for public purposes—or be redirected to profit Trump and his cronies? Will elections be run fairly—or be manipulated by the president's party to prevent opposing votes from being cast and counted? Will majority rule remain the American way?

It's a trick of authoritarian populists like Trump to proclaim themselves leaders of "the people," even as large majorities of the electorate reject them. The authoritarian populist defines "the people" to exclude anyone who thinks differently. Only his followers count as legitimate citizens.

Or will minority rule become not a freak event but an enduring habit? These questions are on the ballot as Americans go into the voting booth. *A*

David Frum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

IF THIS AD DOESN'T CONVINCE YOU TO TRY OUR OATGURT, NOTHING WILL.

The problem with advertising these days is that it is too focused on sales. For an ad like this one to be considered successful, it has to first get your attention and then provide you with something so amazing — like a set of features or unique selling points or a solid promise — that you'll put down the magazine you are reading and rush to the store to purchase the product. To help increase the chances of this happening, some ads include a “call to action” feature, which is a gimmick so ridiculously

unbelievable — like buy one and get 197 free — that you don't have any choice but to put down

the magazine you are reading and rush to the store to purchase the product. Good thing that this ad for Oatgurt* isn't like all those modern ads. It's only interested in providing you with an oversized cute visual of the package, an over-

CALL TO ACTION



promising headline, a totally nonsensical call to action button and an asterisk with a side note to tell you what the product actually is.

*As a side note, Oatgurt is not yogurt, because yogurt is made with dairy and has no oats, while Oatgurt is made with oats and has no dairy.

AMERICAN CAUDILLO

Donald Trump is slowly making the U.S. into a likeness of the countries Latino refugees have been fleeing.

BY LUIS ALBERTO URREA

My father was a Mexican citizen until the day he died. He lived here in the U.S. on a green card. A former military man and federal agent under several Mexican presidents, he remained patriotic and deeply conservative. Though he had been chased out of his beloved Mexico City by the toxic whims of a presidential strongman, he stayed loyal.

He loved Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. He joked that if he were an American citizen, he would have tried to vote for Nixon twice in 1968. He used to boast that Nixon was the first Latin American-style president America had ever elected. My father was a law-and-order man—once a cop, always a cop. He might have fallen for Donald Trump if he'd lived long enough. But Trump would have talked him out of it in his first televised anti-Mexican rant. At least I think that's what would have happened.

DURING 2020's apocalyptic summer, photographs circulated of immigrant farmworkers toiling in fields amid walls of smoke and fire as California

burned around them. The pictures have visceral impact—they are frightening yet beautiful. But their effect on me was epiphanic: Here were perfect metaphors for the harvest of nearly four years of recklessly vicious rhetoric and policies, of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids and cruel family separations, of toxic propaganda and the relentless boondoggle of the border wall. Here was the theater burning down as the hypnotist kept working the mic, like Jim Jones calling us all into the delirious excitement of sheer nihilism. The Book of Revelation for Suckers.

From the moment Trump descended on his golden escalator, head full of cynical texts of racial threat, the die was cast. For his new idea of a resurgent Great America to take hold, there had to be sacrifices. Human sacrifices. And imaginary hordes of raping "bad hombres" and their chain-migrating families were the perfect targets. He must have had visions of Andrew Jackson churning in his head: A Trail of Tears would have sounded good to him, as long as it didn't point north.

Some four years later, as the new era that Trump promised

struggles to be born, nursed by fire and hurricane, flood and drought, violence and pestilence, falsehoods and greed, I turn to the pictures of those unseen human beings risking their lives and health every day so you and I can have tomatoes and strawberries. I suspect that none of the field-workers pictured is secretly hoping to rape, sell drugs, or

HOW MANY OF
THE CHILDREN
SEPARATED
FROM THEIR
FAMILIES AT
THE BORDER
WILL NEVER SEE
THEIR PARENTS
AGAIN? WHO IS
EVEN KEEPING
TRACK?

fever dreams; a steady flow of cash to round up and "house" our undocumented guests.

Buckets of money and megawatts of power pour out of the poor if you know how to get your needles and hooks into them.

THE HUDDLED MASSES face violent disdain everywhere. It's what Jesus alluded to when he said that the poor would always be with us. Tijuana has a robust Trumpian population. These Mexicans don't want any more new people heading north to them either. Not after the Salvadorans and Hondurans, the Guatemalans and Brazilians, the Nicaraguans and Haitians. Tijuana has thousands of Haitian refugees who fled earthquakes and hurricanes and made it to Brazil, then made their way to our border; always ready to evolve, the city's street vendors now make Haitian food to go with the carne asada tacos. Tijuana Trumpies have red hats, too. Theirs say MAKE TIJUANA GREAT AGAIN.

Do you remember the caravans? The terrifying hordes of diseased and criminal "illegals" threatening to cross our trembling border? Caravans were

a presidential favorite for a minute, back when he'd go on TV and tell us scary stories at night.

It gets lost among the other crises in the Trump hit parade, such as Pizzagate and Obama-gate. And the omnipresent danger of MS-13. And cancer from wind turbines. And very fine people on both sides. And that darned China virus that would, despite its nefarious origins, magically disappear so the administration wouldn't have to deal with it. Remember?

The caravans were so terrible that our country had no choice—we had to tear apart families seeking sanctuary and stick them in secretive ICE camps where children were

lost, perhaps forever, from their parents. Several of the secretive camps are private prisons, by the way, where thunder lizards with ties to the current administration can make a few tons of federal dollars off the backs of the little brown beneficiaries of our care. Some of these children were "placed" in the homes of Americans, and adopted by these families after their parents were deported.

South American right-wing governments, it's perhaps worth noting, also have a history of confiscating very young children and doling them out to fellow travelers. During Argentina's Dirty War, in the late 1970s and

early '80s, the disappeared were collected by men driving unmarked vehicles. It was later revealed that military officers had given the children of these removed citizens to childless couples, as rewards and loving gestures of the junta. Mothers protested in the squares of Buenos Aires; they still do today. All these years later, some of those parents are still separated from their children. How many of the children separated from their families at the American border will never see their parents again? And who is even keeping track?

Many people I talked with during the caravan panic were under the impression that

these invaders were all Mexicans, but in fact, most of those who fled north were Central Americans. They knew this much: The United States traditionally offered sanctuary to migrants seeking refuge from violence and oppression. The Statue of Liberty, not Trump Tower, is the symbol of the United States. She smiles upon the world like the mother of God herself to those facing extermination or starvation. Ironically, many of the refugees were fleeing the gangs that the president claimed they belonged to.

Mexico, like the U.S., was torn—the government and much of the populace didn't want strangers invading their



Many of the refugees who have arrived at the United States' southern border in recent years were fleeing the gangs that the president claimed they belonged to.

country. Echoing Trump, they portrayed the new arrivals as vermin, scuttling north. The migrants, for their part, had no organized leadership. These were ad hoc groups that fled on short notice, making plans each night as they went. Most of them walked hundreds of miles. Then hundreds of miles more. And some of them hopped on the death train.

YOU MAY HAVE heard of “La Bestia.” This freight train wends its way up through Mexico to the borderlands. Its sides and roof are the conveyance of the desperate—people who brave gangs and narco-s and *federales* and soldiers and the elements and fear and hunger and accidental dismemberment. People who could not walk all those miles.

In response to the migrant crisis, the railroad accelerated the train. It was already dangerous; the increased speed made it more deadly. The number of traumatic amputations for travelers who fell beneath the wheels increased. (The Mexican Red Cross now transfers some of the maimed to a pastor who runs a migrant shelter in the state of Guanajuato; he deals with the medical care and prosthetics there.) This train acceleration is a pure act of violent repression.

But a detail that astounds me more is the introduction of so-called security posts along the rail lines. They were installed at various points along the route some years ago. The posts are built close to the rails, to offer only narrow clearance as the train speeds through. And the hangers-on who have clambered aboard risk being efficaciously smashed off and scattered into the desert night.

The lucky ones find shelter and wait for artificial legs.

How do Mexicans protest? With humanitarian demonstrations, or law-and-order demonstrations? It is harder to offer human aid in Mexico than harsh cruelty. The government looks down on any extension of charity to migrants. Still, along the way, in many of the towns where the train stops, local people of little means gather along the tracks with tortillas and bread and fruit and water. American expats sometimes join them.

Some of the unwounded make it all the way to the border, where they are denied entry by the U.S. and pushed into Tijuana to live in COVID-breeding dumps—they can’t go home, or they will be killed. They can’t go forward, because they know what awaits their babies.

This is all in response to our administration’s actions and rhetoric. As are the Tijuana MAGA hats—MTGA, I suppose.

M E A N W H I L E, the glorious Klondike of graft known as the border wall stumbles along, creating tens of miles of multimillion-dollar yard art. In the past few months, ICE and Border Patrol agents have been redeployed as Trump’s secret police, the shock troops sent to protests in American cities, driving unmarked vehicles to collect dissidents. Either the current government of the United States does not care about the “waves” of people invading the country, or the border may not be under siege after all.

Still, it is worth looking south as the U.S. presidential election nears—to those brown lands that have

law-and-order forces even more ironfisted than our president dares to be. Yet.

The thunder lizards of any shithole country Trump has insulted have an equal lust for lucre and power. They too look south to conjure “others”—why do they always look south, at poorer, more tattered countries than

WHEN YOU
MONETIZE
POWER,
THINGS SPIN
INTO
AN AMORAL
CHAOS.

their own? But they also look within, persecuting “others” in their own lands, even those who look just like them but are insufficiently subservient or merely inconvenient. Like we are starting to do with the antifa kids. Or with the Black Lives Matter protesters, those mothers who need to be pepper-sprayed for standing on the street.

Before he left Mexico, my father faced a crisis of political faith, and this led to his exile from Mexico’s power machine. He was given an order he could not, in good conscience, carry out. But he was still a conservative. He still believed in order. The San Diego suburbs where we finally landed made him comfortable and ruined him. He was now just a bowling-alley custodian, not a power broker with a black car and a Harley and a long military

coat. He became the dad of a Bob Dylan fan. And he had to watch, in 1968, on our new color TV, how his beloved government massacred kids like me in Tlatelolco for protesting during the Olympics and embarrassing the mighty men in the presidential palace. He could no longer take refuge in the belief that the system was righteous, despite those leaders who strayed. He saw American conservatism as a last bastion of hope. But he would have finally lost that hope under Trump. He would have recognized the darkness too well.

Do you see where I think this is all going? When you monetize power, when your politics no longer have room for empathy, things spin into an amoral chaos. Not only the desperate suffer. Who gets hurt and who stays safe becomes hard to predict.

In 1977, my father went back to Mexico to fetch his life savings as a graduation gift to me. Driving home, he died in a single-car accident that was never fully explained. When I tried to claim his corpse at the border, I was told he was still in custody and I would need to first pay his bail. His life savings, literally blood money, was still wet when I handed it over—all of it—so I could bring my father home.

Today, I find myself on that loading dock again with my father’s corpse and those men. I hear them tell me, “It’s just business, *mijo*. It’s the way things work.” And I fear that it is true. *A*

Luis Alberto Urrea is the author of *The Devil’s Highway* and *The House of Broken Angels*.



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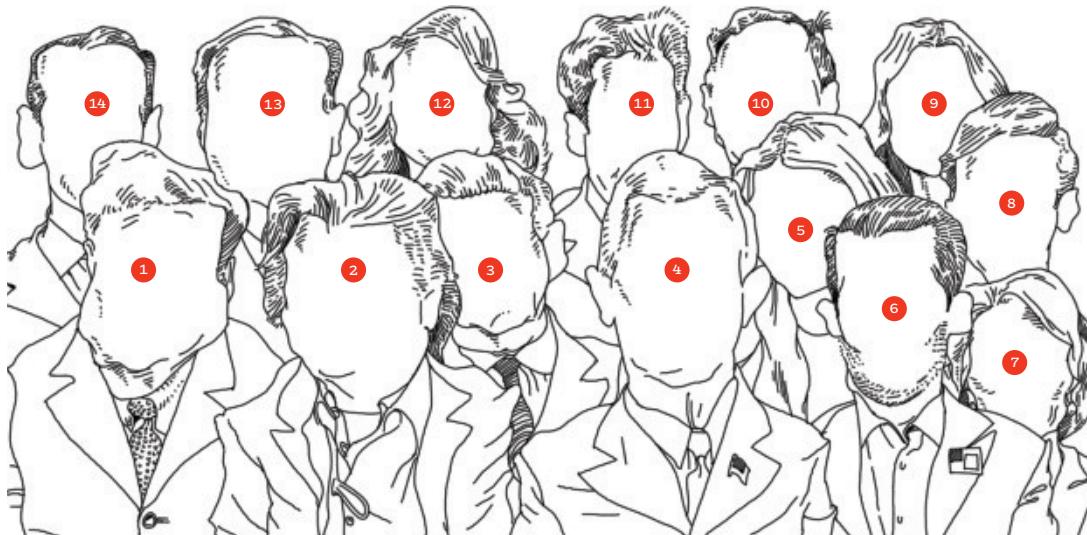
A group portrait



ILLUSTRATED BY JONATHAN TWINGLEY

Key on next page



**1. BILL BARR**

Cleared President Donald Trump of all obstruction-of-justice allegations in a letter summarizing the findings of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. Was accused by investigators on Mueller's team of inaccurately portraying the inquiry's findings. This year, a Republican-appointed federal judge questioned "whether Attorney General Barr's intent was to create a one-sided narrative ... that is clearly in some respects substantively at odds with the redacted version of the Mueller report."

Asked a federal judge to drop all charges against former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn in May. Fired Geoffrey Berman, the U.S. attorney in Manhattan, who oversaw the prosecution of several of Trump's associates, in June. Has made claims about the prevalence of voter fraud that his own office has conceded are flagrantly false.

2. STEVE BANNON

Charged in August with wire fraud and money laundering related to the organization We Build the Wall. Prosecutors claim that Bannon used nearly \$1 million from donations to the nonprofit for his personal expenses. (He pleaded not guilty.)

3. ROGER STONE

Self-proclaimed "dirty trickster" who encouraged Trump's racist birther conspiracy.

Indicted in 2019 by Mueller on one count of obstruction, five counts of making false statements,

and one count of witness tampering. Convicted on all counts. Sentenced to 40 months in prison; the president later commuted his sentence.

4. MIKE PENCE

As vice president, defied congressional subpoenas and failed to provide various documents requested by Congress during the 2019 impeachment inquiry.

Reportedly spent hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to attend an NFL football game; left before it began in order to register disapproval of players who were kneeling during the national anthem.

Published an error-riddled *Wall Street Journal* op-ed on June 16 titled "There Isn't a Coronavirus 'Second Wave,'" which claimed that the virus was waning. Shortly thereafter, cases, and death counts, exploded.

5. IVANKA TRUMP

Placed her company in a trust run by family members when she became an adviser to the president in 2017, and continued to receive a share of the profits.

Investigated by the FBI in 2018, according to CNN, for a business deal in Vancouver. Shut down her fashion brand in July 2018, following intense criticism about how she was profiting from her father's presidency.

6. DONALD TRUMP JR.

Met with Natalia Veselnitskaya, a Russian lawyer with connections to the Kremlin, in New York's Trump Tower in June 2016. Emails

between Don Jr. and another meeting participant suggested that Veselnitskaya had potentially damaging information about Hillary Clinton. (Mueller investigated the meeting, but found insufficient evidence to support a criminal conspiracy.)

Has promoted a great number of conspiracy theories, including one claiming that Joe Biden is a pedophile.

Along with Bannon and Jared Kushner, was part of a reported 2019 criminal referral by the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee, for potentially misleading the committee during testimony. (All three have denied that they misled the committee.)

7. BETSY DEVOS

Has tried (unsuccessfully) for three consecutive years to make cuts to the Special Olympics. Rescinded 72 documents outlining the rights of students with disabilities during her first year as secretary of education.

Was sued, in 2017, by 18 states and the District of Columbia for delaying the implementation of regulations meant to protect college students who took out loans from predatory lenders. Ignored the ruling. Was held in contempt of court in 2019, and the Department of Education was ordered to pay a fine of \$100,000. "At best it is gross negligence, at worst it's an intentional flouting of my order," the presiding federal judge said.

8. JARED KUSHNER

Until March of this year, owned a stake in Cadre, a real-estate investment firm that sought to benefit from large tax breaks by investing in Opportunity Zone projects, a program that Kushner (along with his wife, Ivanka Trump) had pushed for. Failed to include Cadre in his initial 2017 financial-disclosure form, submitted just after his appointment as a senior adviser to the president. Also omitted dozens of contacts with foreign leaders and officials, including Russians, from his security-clearance forms.

Initially received limited security clearance because of the previously unreported contacts with foreign officials and concerns about ties between his family's real-estate business and foreign governments—before his father-in-law ordered that he be granted full clearance. (Kushner's legal team said that his clearance "was handled in the regular process with no pressure from anyone.")

9. KAYLEIGH MCENANY

As White House press secretary, compared Trump's June appearance at St. John's Church amid Black Lives Matter protests to Winston Churchill's survey of World War II damage. When asked whether Trump

would accept the 2020 election result if he lost, said the president will "see what happens and make a determination in the aftermath."

10. STEVEN MNUCHIN

Failed to include \$95 million of his assets on Senate Finance Committee

disclosure forms during his confirmation as Treasury secretary, along with his role as the director of an investment fund located in a tax haven.

A leaked memo from the California attorney general's office suggested that OneWest Bank repeatedly broke California's foreclosure laws while Mnuchin was its CEO and chairman from 2009 to 2015. The memo identified more than 1,000 violations.

Was found last year by the Office of Government Ethics to be out of compliance with federal ethics rules regarding conflicts of interest.

11. MICHAEL COHEN

Pleaded guilty in August 2018 to eight criminal counts, including tax evasion, making false statements to a financial institution, and violating campaign-finance rules by making payments, as Trump's personal lawyer, to the adult-film star Stormy Daniels and another woman at the request of the then-candidate to keep them from speaking publicly about their alleged affairs. These payments were judged to be for the "principal purpose of influencing an election."

Helped Trump leak disinformation (including murder conspiracies) about his political opponents to the *National Enquirer*. (Trump has denied these claims and has denied having the alleged affairs.)

Pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about an abandoned deal to build a

Trump Tower in Moscow. Sentenced to three years in federal prison.

12. KELLYANNE CONWAY

As a counselor to the president, advised Fox News viewers to "Go buy Ivanka's stuff" in February 2017, triggering an inquiry by the Office of Government Ethics. (The White House declined to investigate or discipline Conway.)

Found by the Office of Special Counsel in 2018 to have violated the Hatch Act, which limits federal employees' political activity, on two occasions. Removal from public service was recommended in 2019 by Special Counsel Henry Kerner, Trump appointee, who found that Conway had repeatedly violated the Hatch Act.

13. MIKE POMPEO

Initially claimed little knowledge of the July 2019 call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which led to Trump's impeachment; it was later confirmed that the secretary of state was on the call.

Investigated by Steve Linick, then the State Department's inspector general, for having a political appointee perform personal tasks such as making restaurant reservations and walking his dog. (Pompeo dismissed the claims.) Linick was removed from his role this year, at Pompeo's recommendation.

Made secret visits to conservative donors while on official State Department trips, according to *The New York Times*. Promoted a conspiracy theory on ABC in May when he said, "There is a significant amount of evidence" that the coronavirus "came from that laboratory in Wuhan." Spoke at the Republican National Convention in August, in apparent violation of the Hatch Act.

14. STEPHEN MILLER

The chief architect of Trump's family-separation policy. Has frequently spoken falsely about alleged voter fraud.

Played a significant role in firing former FBI Director James Comey.



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The ATEM Mini Pro model has a built in hardware streaming engine for live streaming via its ethernet connection. This means you can live stream to YouTube, Facebook and Teams in much better quality and with perfectly smooth motion. You can even connect a hard disk or flash storage to the USB connection and record your stream for upload later!

Monitor all Video Inputs!

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FLUFFING YOUR OWN NEST

Can happiness be found in home improvement?

BY AMANDA MULL

It has come to my attention that my apartment sucks. Objectively, that might be too harsh an assessment, but it certainly feels true right now. Don't get me wrong: It has big, sunny windows; appliances that are functional, albeit old and ugly; and an amount of closet space that I would describe as "enough." But the many things the apartment leaves to be desired—cheap fixtures, landlord-beige walls, and an ancient tile kitchen floor that never quite looks clean—have become unavoidably obvious to me as I've sat inside of it for the better part of this year.

The longer I sit, the more the flaws taunt me. The shallow kitchen sink, combined with

the low slope of its faucet, makes it impossible to fill a pitcher straight from the tap, but most of my daily drinking water used to come from a machine at the office. The back wall of my kitchen, swathed in white paint, has borne the brunt of gurgling vats of spaghetti sauce and sputtering pans of fried-chicken grease, but I failed to notice the unscrubbable spots when I wasn't standing in front of the stove preparing three meals a day, every day. The dusty ledges and shelves, unsightly window-unit air conditioners, and scuffed, jaundiced paint job weren't so irritating when they weren't my whole world.

In May, when the novelty of quarantine baking began to wear off—one can make

only so many galettes out of frozen fruit originally bought for smoothies—my idle hands turned to the problems around me. Armed with my pathetic beginner's tool kit, I started small. I raised and leveled a shelf that had been crooked for, by my estimation, at least two years. I ordered frames for prints that had been stashed in my closet and charged my long-dead drill battery to hang them. I scrubbed my tiny kitchen with Ajax from top to bottom, and in the process realized that some of my stove's components weren't supposed to be the color they'd been since I moved in. I sharpened my chef's knife. I flipped and rotated my couch cushions. I ordered and assembled a new shoe rack, even though my feet don't go very far these days.

The sense of satisfaction I got from these projects grew as the weekends went by, along with my belief that I could do pretty much anything after watching a couple of instructional videos on YouTube. I couldn't control much in the pandemic, but I could control what happened in my own 450 square feet. As summer began to creep toward fall, my ambitions expanded: Install a new showerhead? Paint my cabinets? Put up a peel-and-stick tile backsplash? What couldn't I do with Google, a Home Depot credit card, and a total willingness to lose my security deposit?

I was stymied only by the popularity of my impulses. As I looked for cabinet paint, backsplash "tiles," and even a new kitchen faucet, "out of stock" warnings abounded. Gathered around a firepit in a Brooklyn backyard, a friend of a friend complained that the city's home-improvement stores appeared to be out of lumber, one of the many effects of skyrocketing demand atop shaky supply chains. Millions of Americans had simultaneously decided the same thing: If we're going to be inside, it might as well be the inside we want.

GRETCHEN SCHAUFFLER had been through this before. In 2008, she and her husband were running a business called Devine Color, which she started by selling customized paint shades to her Portland, Oregon, interior-design clients out of the trunk of her car. The couple was in the midst of selling the brand to Sherwin-Williams, she told me, when the economy collapsed, and with it, all talk of a deal. "The market crashed, and we were buried," Schauffler said. Homes were



being foreclosed upon, not freshly repainted.

In 2018, out of the paint business for years, Schauffler started Design Is Personal. The company makes products for the do-it-yourself projects that you might be inspired to undertake after an HGTV binge—sticky-back wallpaper in fun prints, easy-to-install carpet squares, and wall planks that give you the fixer-upper look, no nail gun required. In early March, as the United States' first pandemic hot spot blazed in neighboring Washington, Schauffler was terrified that the same thing was happening again—disaster had come, and it might take her company with it.

But in April, she realized that she had the opposite problem: Orders had started pouring in. Schauffler told me the company's sales are up 400 percent over last year, and her best sellers—sheets of peel-and-stick white subway "tiles" and metallic mosaics—had completely sold out twice already. "Everyone was at home, they had time, they looked at their environment, and they went online," she said. They started watching tutorials and ordering supplies.

Home Depot and Lowe's registered monster sales increases not long after the pandemic began, both on the internet and in their brick-and-mortar stores—which Home Depot lobbied local governments to label essential businesses. That's in spite of interruptions in residential construction and professional remodeling in many areas of the country.

At Apartment Therapy, a website about home improvement and design, editor in chief Laura Schocker viewed

the country's pandemic anxieties through the prism of her readership, which is 60 percent larger than last year compared with the same period in 2019. "Home, if we're lucky, is our safe place," she told me. "Customizing it to reflect back who you are as a person is something positive we can do right now." Early how-to-sanitize traffic gave way to people looking for tips on setting up home offices and workout nooks, then to those in search of ways to maximize tiny yards and balconies as summer set in. Now, as temperatures cool, people are settling in for the long haul, looking for more complicated DIY projects.

OF ALL THE THINGS that I've done to better my apartment, soothe my anxieties, or occupy my time during the pandemic, nothing has worked quite as well as replacing my kitchen faucet. The project cost \$75 and took about an hour—it would have been even faster if I hadn't needed to learn some tricks for removing bolt covers with needle-nose pliers and loosening a seized nut with a lighter. But those roadblocks made it all the more satisfying. Not only does the more functional faucet make my now-constant dishwashing less of a slog, but installing it was a reminder that there are still some problems that can be solved by one person wielding the right tool—or even the wrong one, if you can figure out the magic combination of search terms to punch into Google.

"Humans have a need to be competent, to feel like they have some control over their existence," says Sally Augustin, an environmental psychologist, especially when they're feeling emotionally tender and

isolated. "Nesting" is another way to describe the impulse that is likely driving many of the newly minted DIYers, she told me. It's a desire to eliminate your home's nuisances and aggravations in order to maximize comfort. One way that's done, Augustin said, is by moderating the complexity of your space. "We don't

"HUMANS
HAVE A
NEED TO BE
COMPETENT,
TO FEEL
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EXISTENCE."

realize we're doing it, but we're always sweeping our environment, visually, and when you have a lot going on, when there are many objects and colors and shapes in view, it makes you stressed." The same thing can happen when an environment is too spare. Humans tend to like soft lines, colors, and textures.

DIYing, as a pursuit, has some baked-in advantages in these bizarre times. Namely, it's just you, doing things by yourself in the safety of your own home, without the intervention of outside disease vectors—er, professionals—unless you screw something up. New technology has met the moment. Both Schauffler and Schocker told me that DIY-friendly products have improved substantially

in recent years, with adhesives and finishes that are more durable and affordable and less amateur-looking, which might make a weekend project more attractive to people who never would have done home repairs themselves in the past. Then, too, if you're one of the millions of newly unemployed Americans, finding a way to feel useful might help combat the depressing aimlessness of being out of work—and the internet is teeming with guides for free or low-cost home-improvement projects.

When it comes to the mostly young, mostly female consumers who buy renter-friendly home-upgrade products and read articles about how to make a some-assembly-required dresser look like a million bucks, there's probably an even simpler explanation for why they're investing in their environs this year: What else is there to do? The (somewhat shaky) conventional wisdom is that Millennials, who range in age from their early 20s to nearly 40, prefer to buy experiences instead of things. They supposedly rent in exciting cities, travel, go out to dinner, and spend money gallivanting. In a world in which almost all experiences have been precluded by a global disaster and an American passport is basically useless—and in which many of those young adults were striving for a lifestyle that their bank accounts could only occasionally support, anyway—maybe notions about what constitutes an experience will change. You can learn to do anything on YouTube. *A*

Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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OH, IT WAS NOTHING

Why Kamala Harris is caught between self-effacement and self-assertion

BY MEGAN GARBER

In her 2019 memoir, *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey*, Kamala Harris talks about how, during her first run for office—for San Francisco district attorney, in 2002—she taught herself to campaign. The lessons were partly about logistics (carry an ironing board in your car—the ideal portable podium for ad hoc campaign stops). But they were also about unlearning years' worth of conditioned humility. “I was always more than happy to talk about the work to be done,” Harris writes of her conversations on the trail. The voters, though, wanted to hear about her: her experiences, her principles, her accomplishments. “I’d been raised not to talk about myself,” she says. “I’d been raised with the belief that there was something narcissistic about doing so. Something vain.”

The political memoir is a literary genre that consists mostly of carefully coded humblebrags; here, though, was an insight about bragging itself. Reading it, I felt a pang. American culture is fluent by now in the easy language of female empowerment. One of the 50,485,942 or so pieces of evidence that the rhetoric has outpaced the reality is the

idea that women who achieve things aren’t supposed to say so. The sanction goes beyond general-purpose puritanism (self-confidence good! self-importance bad!). It has to do with the fact that, regardless of our own gender, we still tend to view women as self-sacrificial and self-effacing, first and foremost—mothers, basically, whether they have children or not. That’s how you get a situation where Target sells T-shirts that read SHE CAN/SHE WILL—and where you can also pretty safely assume that, if you compliment a woman about the thing she did, she’ll reply, “Oh, it was nothing.”

So it was deeply gratifying to watch Kamala Harris, on an evening late in August, make her personal ambition a matter of national interest: She accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination for the vice presidency of the United States. Harris is the first Black woman, and the first South Asian woman, to do so. And she is the first woman to step into the role not as a human version of a Hail Mary pass—not in an attempt, with apologies to Geraldine Ferraro and Sarah Palin, to revive a struggling presidential campaign—but as a fully vetted and viable contender for the White House. Come

2021, if Kamala Harris is one heartbeat away from the presidency, she will be prepared for the proximity.

In the speech she gave at the virtual Democratic National Convention, Harris praised the people who’d paved the way for her elevation: Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer

BITCH BECAME PART OF THE AMERICAN VERNACULAR DURING THE CAMPAIGN FOR FEMALE SUFFRAGE.

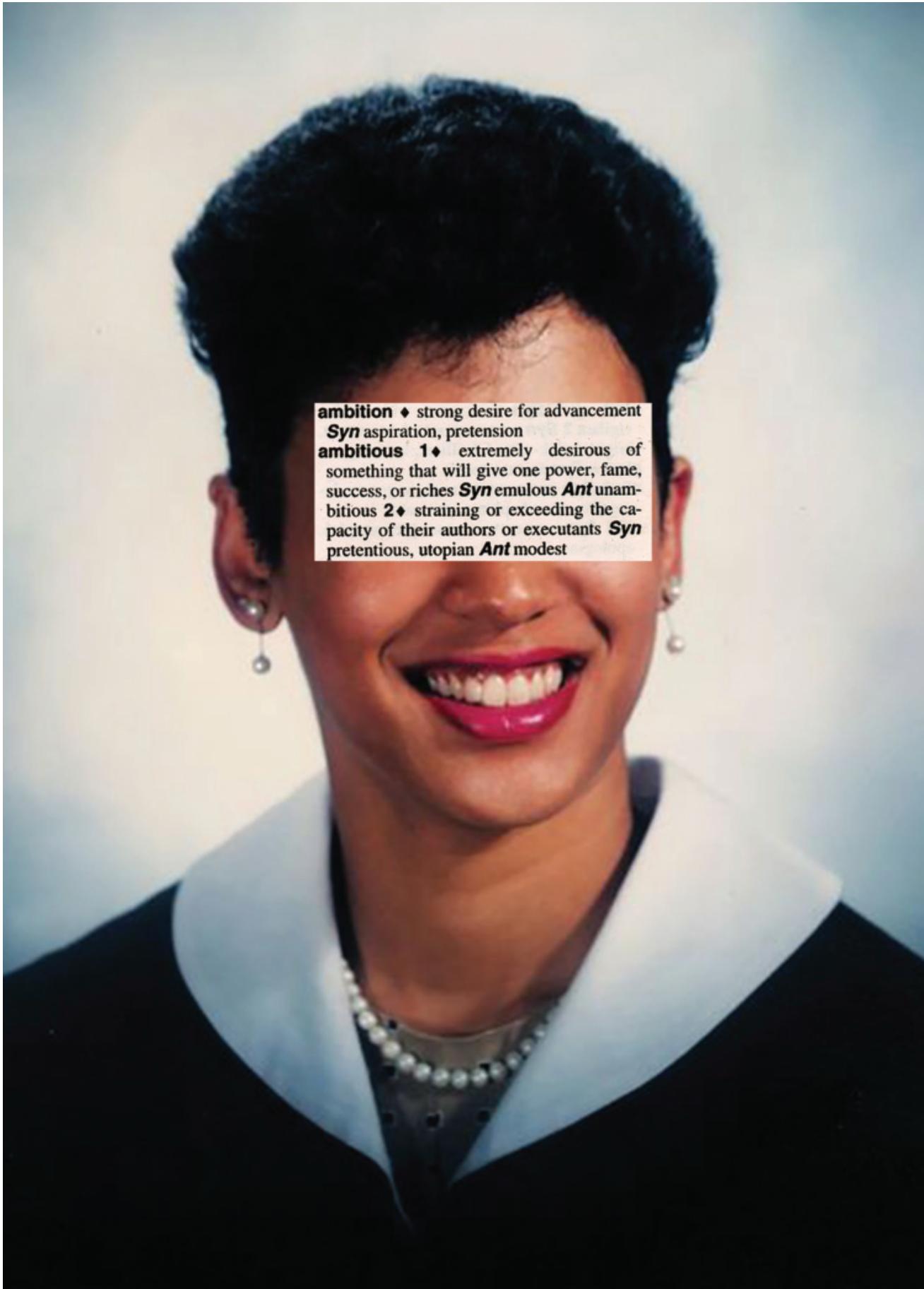
and Shirley Chisholm. She praised Joe Biden. She praised her mother. And she praised herself. “I’ve fought for children and survivors of sexual assault,” the former prosecutor said, introducing herself to the voters who were not yet familiar with her story. “I’ve fought against transnational gangs. I took on the biggest banks.”

Watching her speech, I felt another pang—this time, of joy. That evening, for the first time, millions of Americans were able to look at a candidate for the

White House and see someone who looked like them. New possibilities unfurled. Harris was selling herself as a leader to a country in dire need of one: The coronavirus pandemic was raging on, and the summer had throbbed with reminders that the phrase *Black lives matter* remains, for some, an argument rather than a statement of fact. But by talking about her qualifications for power without qualification, Harris embodied progress. She closed out her speech to the music of Mary J. Blige’s “Work That.”

There's so many-a girls
I hear you been running
From the beautiful queen
That you could be
becoming ...
Read the book of my life
And see I've overcome it.

The swaggering lyrics served as a tidy rebuke to the perverse flurry of news stories that had been written about Harris all summer—stories that treated her political successes as evidence against her elevation. “She seems not loyal at all and very opportunistic” (CNBC). She’s “a little too charismatic”; “she might be a little bit dominant with her personality” (Bloomberg). She can “rub people the wrong way” (CNN,



ambition ♦ strong desire for advancement
Syn aspiration, pretension
ambitious 1♦ extremely desirous of something that will give one power, fame, success, or riches *Syn* emulous *Ant* unambitious 2♦ straining or exceeding the capacity of their authors or executants *Syn* pretentious, utopian *Ant* modest

quoting Ed Rendell, the former governor of Pennsylvania and a close friend of Biden's). *Politico*, in a widely circulated piece, reported that Chris Dodd, a member of Biden's vice-presidential search committee, was miffed that Harris had shown "no remorse" about the primary-season debate in which she'd discussed the impact of Biden's opposition to school busing. "That little girl was me," Harris had said, creating one of those instantly iconic lines that politicians strive for. To *Politico*, this wasn't an example of one debater scoring a point on another—it was an "ambush."

EMPOWERMENT! say the shirts and the signs. *However!* says everything else. "Half the Men in the U.S. Are Uncomfortable With Female Political Leaders," a 2019 *HuffPost* headline reads. That stat helps explain why American media are out there claiming that the best measure of a woman who seeks the vice presidency is her lack of desire to be president. Representative Karen Bass of California, another Black woman whom Biden considered for VP, was lauded in the press as the "anti-Kamala Harris," and for allegedly harboring only "muted ambitions." A 2010 article in a psychology journal describes the process by which female ambition is weaponized: The pursuit of power "may signal to others that she is an aggressive and selfish woman who does not espouse prescribed feminine values of communalism." In another journal, two psychologists explained how they'd been inspired to write an article about the cultural enforcement of "modesty norms": They'd issued a call

asking fellow female faculty members to share their success stories for a planned campus publication—and did not receive a single personal story. Instead, women wrote to tell them about *other* women who deserved to be featured.

Oof. Another pang. Bragging—not just in politics, but in American society at large—is a foundational skill. To get the job, any job, you need to be able to speak well of yourself. To rise, you need a little hot air. Unsurprisingly, ambition-aspersions seem to be directed at women of color with special vehemence. At the Black Girls Lead conference this summer, Harris recounted the insults that have trailed her like exhaust as she's risen to power—and Haley Taylor Schlitz, a teenager who attended the conference, thinks she knows why. Pundits "do not fear Senator Harris for her ambitions," Taylor Schlitz wrote. "They fear her because of a generation of Black girls who are watching and [who] will follow her example to pursue excellence."

Not long after Harris told the young women at that conference, "I want you to be ambitious"—and not long after Representative Ted Yoho of Florida referred to his colleague Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a "fucking bitch" on the steps of the Capitol—Ocasio-Cortez shared a video with *Vogue*. The topic: her beauty routine. The purpose: to celebrate feminine self-confidence. "Our culture is so predicated on diminishing women and preying on our self-esteem," the New York congresswoman said as she dabbed on under-eye makeup. "And so it's quite a radical act—and it's almost like a mini-protest—to love yourself."

BITCH BECAME PART of the American vernacular to describe unruly women during the campaign for female suffrage. The use of the term more than doubled from 1915 to 1930, *Vice* reports, even as some suffragists strove to cast their quest for the vote not as a righteous crusade for equal political empowerment but as the logical extension of their social partnership with men. "You ask us to walk with you, dance with you, marry you," one poster put it. "Why don't you ask us to vote with you?"

The specter of the bitch has lived on in American politics. Geraldine Ferraro, Walter Mondale's running mate in 1984, found herself dismissed by George H. W. Bush's press secretary as "too bitchy" for the No. 2 job. The critiques of Ferraro, and of Sarah Palin during the 2008 election cycle, didn't always summon fears of Lady Macbeth—sometimes the goal just seemed to be to push the ladies back into their rightful place. Remember all the breathless stories about Palin's figure, and her glasses and wardrobe? Ferraro was asked, at a campaign stop, whether she could bake blueberry muffins. Even some of Mondale's aides, Ferraro later said, were so condescending to her that she suggested that whenever they looked at her, they should "pretend" that she was "a gray-haired southern gentleman, a senator from Texas."

The vice presidency is a job of complementary angles; its occupant serves at the pleasure of the person who inhabits the Oval Office. This is in large part why so many of the men in the role have resented it. John Adams, writing to his wife, Abigail, called the vice presidency

"the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived." The editor of *The Nation*, E. L. Godkin, derided the vice-presidential nomination of Chester A. Arthur, a machine politician trailed by allegations of corruption, on the following grounds: "There is no place in which his powers of mischief will be so small as in the Vice Presidency." Thomas R. Marshall, Woodrow Wilson's veep, likened the vice president to "a man in a cataleptic fit: He cannot speak; he cannot move; he suffers no pain; he is perfectly conscious of all that goes on, but has no part in it."

Here are some dudes, in other words, who have an inkling of what it can feel like to be a woman.

Consider again, then: Even as Kamala Harris sought a job that has been defined by its lack of power, people found ways to complain that she was seeking too much power. Forward movement can feel a lot like whiplash. Harris is the first woman of color to seek the White House on a major-party ticket; that is cause for celebration. But the milestone is also, at this point, cause for indignation: It took this long? Really? Harris, as it happened, accepted her party's nomination during the week that marked the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification. The coincidence was poignant. It provided an opportunity to contemplate how much has changed, over the long American century, and how much has not. The answer is: A lot. And, still, not enough. *A*

Megan Garber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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STILL FALLING FOR IT

*In 1957, Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* warned America that a populist demagogue could use mass media to accumulate dangerous quantities of power.*

BY JAKE TAPPER

For its evening programming on January 20, 2017, Turner Classic Movies, a network known for its commitment to the cinematic canon, not its politics,

made a pointed scheduling decision. The channel would be airing *A Face in the Crowd*.

On any other Friday evening, it would have been an

unremarkable choice. Though not a critical success in its own time, the 1957 film, written by Budd Schulberg and directed by Elia Kazan, has since been

heralded as a masterpiece, praised by François Truffaut and preserved by the National Film Registry. The movie tells the story of Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes (Andy Griffith), a charismatic, populist entertainer with a dark side, who uses the new medium of television to rise to the pinnacle of American power. TCM swore it had chosen the airdate simply to mark the birthday of Patricia Neal, who co-starred in the film. The fact that it was also Donald Trump's Inauguration Day had nothing to do with it.

The network would hardly have been the first to make the connection between Rhodes and Trump. Cinephiles and politicos alike saw Trump's political career foretold in Schulberg and Kazan's fable. Just a few months after Trump entered the race, the conservative writer Cal Thomas devoted an entire syndicated column to the resemblance between Griffith's demagogue and candidate Trump.

There's no denying that *A Face in the Crowd* captures aspects of Trump's character—Rhodes's vulgarity, his volatile mixture of ego and insecurity, and his instinctive mastery of mass media are all eerily familiar. Yet the similarities go only so far. Like Trump's, Rhodes's populism is a means to an end, but at least he comes by it more credibly, having walked the dusty byways of northeastern Arkansas and spent long nights in its drunk tanks.

Schulberg and Kazan's real achievement wasn't anticipating Trump. It was appreciating, at the dawn of the television era, how susceptible the American public would be to his pitch. As Trump's first term comes to a close, *A Face in the Crowd* is worth revisiting—less for what

it reveals about the president than for what it says about the rest of us.

POPULISM OF questionable authenticity was not invented in 2015, and no party has a monopoly on snake oil. As much as Lonesome Rhodes may remind contemporary Americans of Donald Trump, he was modeled on one of the nation's most famous Democrats: Will Rogers.

A famously down-home wit, Rogers was one of the highest-paid actors in Hollywood when his small plane crashed in Alaska in 1935. A few years later, Rogers's son Will Rogers Jr. was chatting one night with a fellow Hollywood scion, Schulberg, the son of a successful Paramount producer. Rogers Jr. was contemplating a congressional run in 1942.

Both men had served in the military during World War II and knew something of privilege, the real world, and phonies. Drinks were imbibed. Too many drinks. They were two princes reflecting on it all. Schulberg later recounted the conversation for the film critic Richard Schickel.

"My father was so full of shit, because he pretends he's just one of the people, just one of the guys," Rogers told Schulberg. "But in our house the only people that ever came as guests were the richest people in town, the bankers and the power-brokers of L.A. And those were his friends and that's where his heart is and he (was) really a goddamned reactionary."

"Jesus, Will," Schulberg replied. "You'd better keep your voice down, because you can't knock Will Rogers ... You can't win without Will Rogers."

Rogers Jr. did win the House seat, with the help of his father's

ghost. But his lament about his fraudulent papa stuck with his friend and inspired "Your Arkansas Traveler," the best story in Schulberg's 1953 collection, *Some Faces in the Crowd*.

The collection was published the year before Schulberg's Hollywood breakthrough, *On the Waterfront*. Directed by Kazan, the film was instantly hailed as a classic, winning Academy Awards for screenplay and director.

Following that success, Schulberg and Kazan teamed up again, this time to adapt "Your Arkansas Traveler" for the screen. On the page, Schulberg's story had been a cautionary tale about how television could warp the ego and make a man forget where he came from. The film, they decided, ought to deliver a more forceful condemnation of the medium and the power it could grant to a clever demagogue.

Schulberg and Kazan spent the summer of 1955 thick in research. "Five days a week, like a steady job, throughout the summer of '55, we sat in on product-group meetings, TV program conferences and rehearsals," Schulberg later wrote. "We lunched and dined and drank and talked with everybody we could induce to hold still for us." They interviewed network presidents, directors, writers, performers, account executives, technicians, electricians—anyone who could help them understand the changing landscape.

They also consulted politicians, who were busy trying to figure out the new medium. Schulberg and Kazan met with Senators Lyndon B. Johnson, Al Gore Sr., and Stuart Symington, who were proud of the new TV studio that had been set up in the basement of the old

Senate Office Building. "You have to watch your eyes now," LBJ told them. "That TV camera is right in your face ... If you don't hold your eyes steady, people will say, 'He's shifty.'"

The filmmakers paid particular attention to one of television's most popular personalities at the time, the folksy Arthur Godfrey, who in 1955 was hosting variety shows such as *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends* on CBS. A July 19 memo from Kazan to Schulberg, part

had ever heard of Oral Roberts, the charismatic preacher. They hadn't. Griffith grabbed Kazan's head in his hands and reenacted one of Roberts's faith-healing sessions. "HEAL!" he yelled at Kazan. He got the part.

THE FILM BEGINS with a young radio producer, Marcia Jeffries (Neal), discovering Griffith's Rhodes sleeping off a bender in the local jail. Jeffries is the host of a radio program called *A Face in the Crowd*, in which she hands a microphone to locals and lets them tell their stories. From an initially cranky Rhodes she coaxes an impromptu song that thrills her listening audience and earns him a regular slot on the station.

In short order, he has the entire town eating from his hand as he dispenses hard-earned wisdom and spins tall tales about his hometown of Riddle, Arkansas, which no one can seem to find on a map. His stories aren't true, but they *feel* true. They're not unlike what Trump, in *The Art of the Deal*, called "truthful hyperbole": "an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion."

Jeffries falls for the talent she has discovered, but she is not the film's love interest. As Kazan wrote to Schulberg in 1956,

THE FILM IS WORTH REVISITING LESS FOR WHAT IT REVEALS ABOUT DONALD TRUMP THAN FOR WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE REST OF US.

of Schulberg's papers at Dartmouth, reads like an opus on a political rival, detailing Godfrey's shift from cheap hamburgers to fine imported caviar as his star rose.

To play their own version of Godfrey, the filmmakers turned to Andy Griffith, a seemingly unlikely choice given the wholesome roles—Andy Taylor, Ben Matlock—that would later define his career. Even at the time, Griffith was a long shot; his résumé was thin, and competition for the part was fierce. But Schulberg and Kazan were willing to hear him out.

One night, at Gallagher's Steakhouse, on 52nd Street in Manhattan, Griffith met with the filmmakers. He asked if they

This story is of love and betrayal between LR and the people of the country. He speaks for them and at first is their partisan. So they fall in love with him. They reward him with their love and then their esteem and dollars. These spoil him. He begins to despise them ... This is the CENTRAL STORY, all the other stories are subordinate.

Rhodes soon jumps from local radio to national television, relying on the same combination of the homespun and the irreverent to charm and titillate. On his variety show he plays loud music, tells wild yarns, and generally rejoices in violating television's, and society's, rules of propriety. The network execs fear they've created a monster. But the viewers can't get enough of his act.

As his popularity soars, Rhodes becomes a sought-after pitchman. Asked to shill for Vitajex, an over-the-counter energy pill with sluggish sales, he rebrands it as a proto-Viagra that can turn any man into a Casanova. Soon Rhodes acquires a teen-beauty-queen wife—Miss Arkansas Drum Majorette 1957—and an unhealthy obsession with his numbers. “See the new ratings this morning?” he asks Jeffries. “Just picked up another million.”

Rhodes becomes so popular that a presidential candidate seeks his advice. “We’ve got to face it, politics have entered a new stage, a television stage,” an adviser has told the candidate. “The people want capsule slogans. ‘Time for a change.’ ‘The mess in Washington.’” Rhodes coaches the staid candidate through a populist pitch for entitlement reform. “Why, Daniel Boone wasn’t looking for unemployment insurance and old-age pension. All he needed was his ax and his gun and a chance to hew a living out of the forest with his own hands.” For his consulting work, Rhodes asks only that he be offered a newly created Cabinet position: secretary for national morale.

THE WRITER AND THE DIRECTOR were convinced they had another hit on their hands.

They didn’t. Critics shrugged, and the box office disappointed. (The film was so unsuccessful, in fact, that it effectively ended Griffith’s movie career, consigning him to the very medium *A Face in the Crowd* assailed.) “I thought it was going to tap a very responsive chord,” Kazan wrote to Schulberg. “Apparently I miscalculated.”

The problem, as diagnosed by *The New York Times’* Bosley Crowther, was that audiences

THE FILMMAKERS INTUITED HOW TELEVISION COULD CORRUPT THE NATION’S POLITICS.

found Rhodes unbelievable. The public, he wrote, would never be snowed that easily—they would be “finished with him” before a real-life Rhodes could do nearly so much damage.

Time, of course, would prove Crowther wrong and the filmmakers right. Though the film arrived just as television was saturating the country—in 1950, fewer than 10 percent of American households had a set; by the end of the decade, nearly 90 percent did—the two men intuited how susceptible the American public would be to this form of mass communication and the ways it could be used to corrupt the nation’s politics.

Indeed, to the extent the film got it wrong, it was by not

being cynical enough. “We came away with a feeling that television is neither monster nor panacea,” Schulberg wrote in *TV Guide* in 1957.

A demagog [sic] with a commanding rating could menace our democracy. But a moment of televised truth, a single shot of conspiratorial whispering behind hands, can prick the conscience of a nation more effectively than a dozen righteous editorials. Television is not a morality. It is an instrument—the most persuasive in the history of communication—for great good and great evil.

To demonstrate their finding, Kazan and Schulberg had to devise a fitting comeuppance for their antihero. In perhaps the most famous scene in the film, a hot mic captures Rhodes bragging on the set of his show about his hold over his easily duped audience.

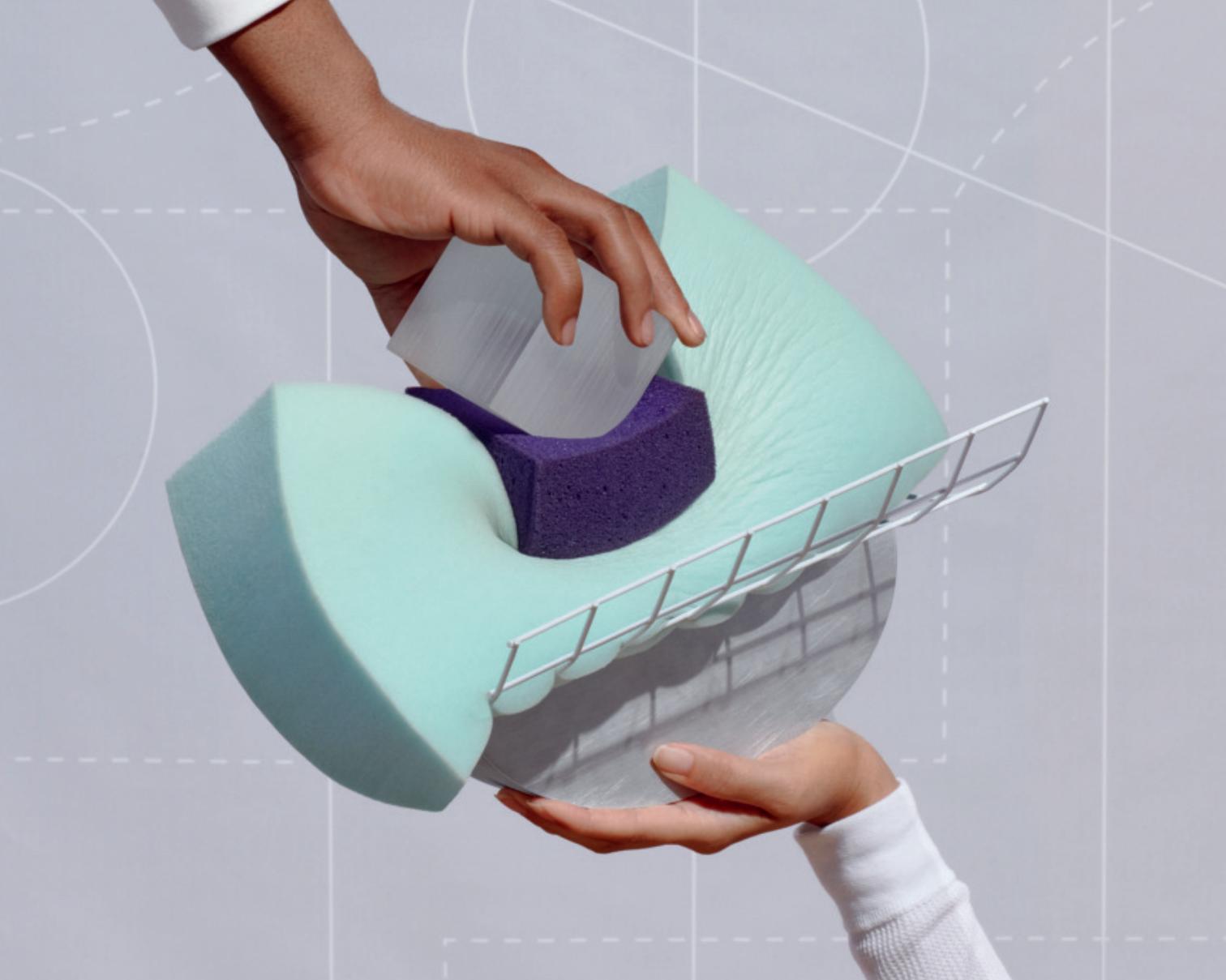
Those morons out there? Shucks, I can take chicken fertilizer and sell it to them for caviar. I can make them eat dog food and think it’s steak. Sure, I got ‘em like this ... You know what the public’s like? A cage full of guinea pigs. Good night, you stupid idiots. Good night, you miserable slobs. They’re a lot of trained seals. I toss ‘em a dead fish, and they’ll flap their flippers.

In the film, the reveal results in Rhodes’s downfall. As Kazan put it, “He is unmasked—irretrievably so—before the nation.” In real life, it’s not clear that demagogues are subject to the laws of physics.

Trump’s infamous boast that he “could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters”—while intended as a compliment to his loyal supporters—is not so different from calling them trained seals. And, of course, Trump had his own hot-mic moment, the *Access Hollywood* tape, on which the candidate bragged about grabbing women by their genitals. Many observers, including on the Trump campaign, thought the tape would be the end of his candidacy—surely the public would react as the vox populi did in *A Face in the Crowd*: “Why, he’s a monster!” “We’ll fix you, jerk.” The Trump campaign took a momentary hit, but the crowd eventually moved on to other distractions and entertainments.

A Face in the Crowd paints an unflattering portrait of the viewing public’s gullibility and distractibility, but it held out hope that the American people could be made to see through a figure like Lonesome Rhodes. Kazan recognized his mistake in retrospect. In the age of mass media, a skilled demagogue like Rhodes can rise to great heights and defy any easy moral arc as long as the public continues to sit back and enjoy the show. In a 1958 letter to Schulberg, Kazan wrote, “We conceived *Face in the Crowd* as a ‘warning to the American people.’” To that end, they made Lonesome Rhodes play the heavy and take the fall, letting the rest of us off the hook. “We should have been showing that LR was us.” *A*

Jake Tapper is an anchor and the chief Washington correspondent at CNN.



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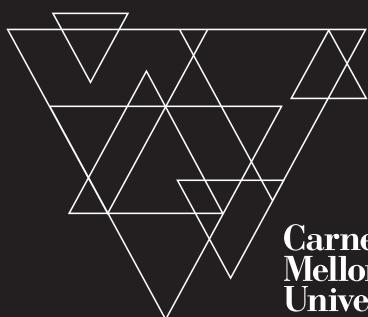
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Am I What You're Looking For?

Photographs by Endia Beal

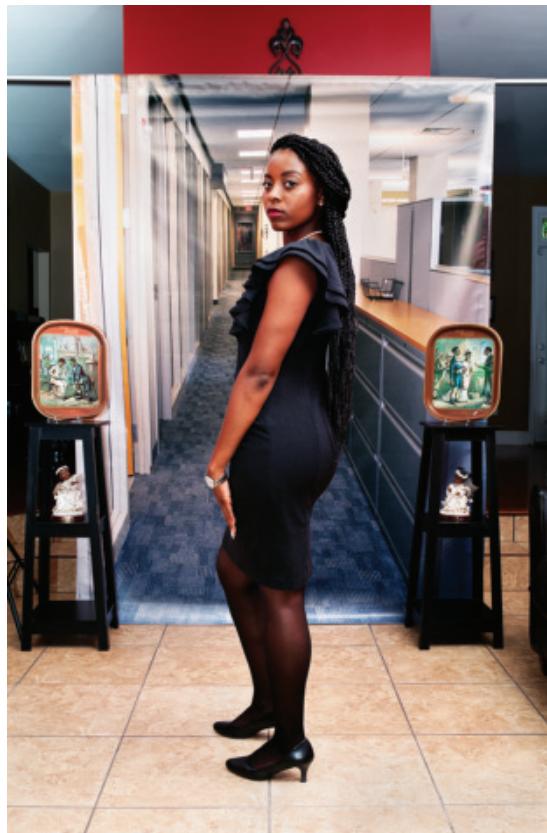
As a graduate student at Yale, Endia Beal studied photography. But her time working in the school's IT department provided another kind of inspiration for her career. In that office, the desire a co-worker expressed to touch her hair, a common and discomfiting experience for Black women, became fuel for artistic interrogation. In the eight years since, confronting the meaning of that query and others like it—"peeling back the layers of the onion," as Beal describes it—has yielded an array of visually compelling and intellectually provocative work. In one short film, Beal asks white men the questions Black women are often asked in interview settings: "How many children do you have?" "Do you always wear your hair like that?" "Would you be willing to change your name?" Beal's new book, *Performance Review* (published this month by Minor Matters Books), continues this exploration of how race, gender, and work intersect, with a particular focus on the lives of Black women.

The images shown here, all featured in *Performance Review*, are from the series "Am I What You're Looking For?" Attired for job interviews and photographed in front of a white-collar-office backdrop placed in their homes, the young women are elegant and yet, according to the professional culture of this society, out of place by virtue of their Black womanhood. "When you are not deemed professional," Beal told me, "your personal space becomes invaded" by touch, gaze, and entitlement. I told her that looking at the images, I felt a tension between the sartorial culture of Black American women—in which elegant grooming is a source of delight and pride—and the frequent messages that we are inherently unprofessional. Her work, Beal said, "is about having to conform to a space that wasn't made for people of color. Where we were never imagined at the table to begin with."

The book makes one of Beal's observations abundantly clear: "The history of Black women in photography is still being written." As one of the foremost contemporary authors of that history, Beal makes art that illuminates truths of human interaction.

—Imani Perry





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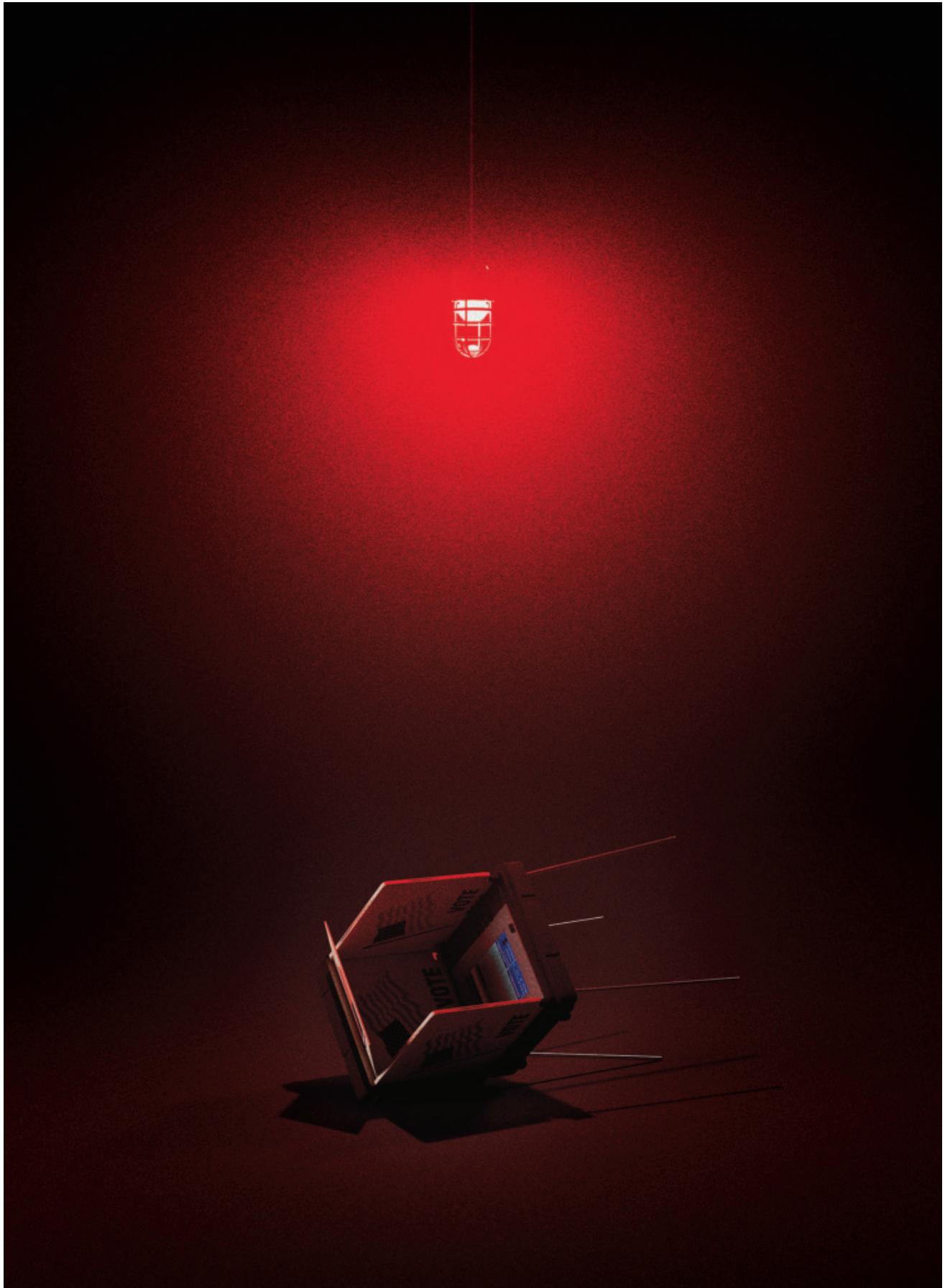
In the early 1970s, the manufacture of super compressors halted. As engineering improved, diving watches simply didn't need the mechanism anymore. But that didn't stop watch fans from buying them, with a buoyant (sorry) vintage market continuing up until the present day.

Then, a couple of years ago, a customer suggested we make a super-compressor watch of our own. And because we love a challenge—and are massive watch enthusiasts—we did just that: using the original drawings and a vintage super compressor to reverse-engineer the mechanism from scratch.

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**IF THE VOTE IS CLOSE, DONALD TRUMP COULD EASILY
THROW THE ELECTION INTO CHAOS. WHO WILL STOP HIM?**

THE ELECTION THAT COULD BREAK AMERICA BY BARTON GELLMAN

**There is a cohort
of close observers
of our presidential
elections, scholars
and lawyers and
political strategists,
who find themselves
in the uneasy position
of intelligence
analysts in the months
before 9/11.**

As November 3 approaches, their screens are blinking red, alight with warnings that the political system does not know how to absorb. They see the obvious signs that we all see, but they also know subtle things that most of us do not. Something dangerous has hove into view, and the nation is lurching into its path.

The danger is not merely that the 2020 election will bring discord. Those who fear something worse take turbulence and controversy for granted. The coronavirus pandemic, a reckless incumbent, a deluge of mail-in ballots, a vandalized Postal Service, a resurgent effort to suppress votes, and a trainload of lawsuits are bearing down on the nation's creaky electoral machinery.

Something has to give, and many things will, when the time comes for casting, canvassing, and certifying the ballots. Anything is possible, including a landslide that leaves no doubt on Election Night. But even if one side takes a commanding early lead, tabulation and litigation of the “overtime count”—millions of mail-in and provisional ballots—could keep the outcome unsettled for days or weeks.

If we are lucky, this fraught and dysfunctional election cycle will reach a conventional stopping point in time to meet crucial deadlines in December and January. The contest

will be decided with sufficient authority that the losing candidate will be forced to yield. Collectively we will have made our choice—a messy one, no doubt, but clear enough to arm the president-elect with a mandate to govern.

As a nation, we have never failed to clear that bar. But in this election year of plague and recession and catastrophized politics, the mechanisms of decision are at meaningful risk of breaking down. Close students of election law and procedure are warning that conditions are ripe for a constitutional crisis that would leave the nation without an authoritative result. We have no fail-safe against that calamity. Thus the blinking red lights.

“We could well see a protracted post-election struggle in the courts and the streets if the results are close,” says Richard L. Hasen, a professor at the UC Irvine School of Law. “The kind of election meltdown we could see would be much worse than 2000’s *Bush v. Gore* case.”

A lot of people, including Joe Biden, the Democratic Party nominee, have misconceived the nature of the threat. They frame it as a concern, unthinkable for presidents past, that Trump might refuse to vacate the Oval Office if he loses. They generally conclude, as Biden has, that in that event the proper authorities “will escort him from the White House with great dispatch.”

The worst case, however, is not that Trump rejects the election outcome. The worst case is that he uses his power to prevent a decisive outcome against him. If Trump sheds all restraint, and if his Republican allies play the parts he assigns them, he could obstruct the emergence of a legally unambiguous victory for Biden in the Electoral College and then in Congress. He could prevent the formation of consensus about whether there is any outcome at all. He could seize on that uncertainty to hold on to power.

Trump’s state and national legal teams are already laying the groundwork for postelection maneuvers that would circumvent the results of the vote count in battleground states. Ambiguities in the Constitution and logic bombs in the Electoral Count Act make it possible to extend the dispute all the way to Inauguration

Day, which would bring the nation to a precipice. The Twentieth Amendment is crystal clear that the president's term in office "shall end" at noon on January 20, but two men could show up to be sworn in. One of them would arrive with all the tools and power of the presidency already in hand.

"We are not prepared for this at all," Julian Zelizer, a Princeton professor of history and public affairs, told me. "We talk about it, some worry about it, and we imagine what it would be. But few people have actual answers to what happens if the machinery of democracy is used to prevent a legitimate resolution to the election."

Nineteen summers ago, when counterterrorism analysts warned of a coming attack by al-Qaeda, they could only guess at a date. This year, if election analysts are right, we know when the trouble is likely to come. Call it the Interregnum: the interval from Election Day to the next president's swearing-in. It is a temporal no-man's-land between the presidency of Donald Trump and an uncertain successor—a second term for Trump or a first for Biden. The transfer of power we usually take for granted has several intermediate steps, and they are fragile.

The Interregnum comprises 79 days, carefully bounded by law. Among them are "the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December," this year December 14, when the electors meet in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to cast their ballots for president; "the 3d day of January," when the newly elected Congress is seated; and "the sixth day of January," when the House and Senate meet jointly for a formal count of the electoral vote. In most modern elections these have been pro forma milestones, irrelevant to the outcome. This year, they may not be.

"Our Constitution does not secure the peaceful transition of power, but rather presupposes it," the legal scholar Lawrence Douglas wrote in a recent book titled simply *Will He Go?* The Interregnum we are about to enter will be accompanied by what Douglas, who teaches at Amherst, calls a "perfect storm" of adverse conditions. We cannot turn away from that storm. On November 3 we sail toward its center mass. If we emerge without trauma, it will not be an unbreakable ship that has saved us.

LET US NOT HEDGE about one thing. Donald Trump may win or lose, but he will never concede. Not under any circumstance. Not during the Interregnum and not afterward. If compelled in the end to vacate his office, Trump will insist from exile, as long as he draws breath, that the contest was rigged.

Trump's invincible commitment to this stance will be the most important fact about the coming Interregnum. It will deform the proceedings from beginning to end. We have not experienced anything like it before.

Maybe you hesitate. Is it a *fact* that if Trump loses, he will reject defeat, come what may? Do we *know* that? Technically, you feel obliged to point out, the proposition is framed in the future conditional, and prophecy is no man's gift, and so forth. With all due respect, that is pettifoggery. We know this man. We cannot afford to pretend.

Trump's behavior and declared intent leave no room to suppose that he will accept the public's verdict if the vote is going against him. He lies prodigiously—to manipulate events, to secure advantage, to dodge accountability, and to ward off injury to his pride. An election produces the perfect distillate of all those motives.

Pathology may exert the strongest influence on Trump's choices during the Interregnum. Well-supported arguments, some of them in this magazine, have made the case that Trump fits the diagnostic criteria for psychopathy and narcissism. Either disorder, by its medical definition, would render him all but incapable of accepting defeat.

Conventional commentary has trouble facing this issue squarely. Journalists and opinion makers feel obliged to add disclaimers when asking "what if" Trump loses and refuses to concede. "The scenarios all seem far-fetched," *Politico* wrote, quoting a source who compared them to science fiction. Former U.S. Attorney Barbara McQuade, writing in *The Atlantic* in February, could not bring herself to treat the risk as real: "That a president would defy the results of an election has long been unthinkable; it is now, if not an actual possibility, at the very least something Trump's supporters joke about."

But Trump's supporters aren't the only people who think extra-constitutional thoughts aloud. Trump has been asked directly, during both this campaign and the last, whether he will respect the election results. He left his options brazenly open. "What I'm saying is that I will tell you at the time. I'll keep you in suspense. Okay?" he told moderator Chris Wallace in the third presidential debate of 2016. Wallace took another crack at him in an interview for Fox News this past July. "I have to see," Trump said. "Look, you—I have to see. No, I'm not going to just say yes. I'm not going to say no."

How will he decide when the time comes? Trump has answered that, actually. At a rally in Delaware, Ohio, in the closing days of the 2016 campaign, he began his performance with a signal of breaking news. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to make a major announcement today. I would like to promise and pledge to all of my voters and supporters, and to all the people of the United

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States, that I will totally accept the results of this great and historic presidential election.” He paused, then made three sharp thrusts of his forefinger to punctuate the next words: “If … I … win!” Only then did he stretch his lips in a simulacrum of a smile.

The question is not strictly hypothetical. Trump’s respect for the ballot box has already been tested. In 2016, with the presidency in hand, having won the Electoral College, Trump baldly rejected the certified tallies that showed he had lost the popular vote by a margin of 2,868,692. He claimed, baselessly but not coincidentally, that at least 3 million undocumented immigrants had cast fraudulent votes for Hillary Clinton.

All of which is to say that there is no version of the Interregnum in which Trump congratulates Biden on his victory. He has told us so. “The only way they can take this election away from us is if this is a rigged election,” Trump said at the Republican National Convention on August 24. Unless he wins a bona fide victory in the Electoral College, Trump’s refusal to concede—his mere denial of defeat—will have cascading effects.

THE RITUAL that marks an election’s end took its contemporary form in 1896. On the Thursday evening after polls closed that year, unwelcome news reached the Democratic presidential nominee, William Jennings Bryan. A dispatch from Senator James K. Jones, the chair of the Democratic National Committee, informed him that “sufficient was known to make my defeat certain,” Bryan recalled in a memoir.

He composed a telegram to his Republican opponent, William McKinley. “Senator Jones has just informed me that the returns indicate your election, and I hasten to extend my congratulations,” Bryan wrote. “We have submitted the issue to the American people and their will is law.”

After Bryan, concession became a civic duty, performed by telegram or telephone call and then by public speech. Al Smith brought the concession speech to radio in 1928, and it migrated to television soon afterward.

Like other rituals, concessions developed a liturgy. The defeated candidate comes out first. He thanks supporters, declares that their cause will live on, and acknowledges that the other side has prevailed. The victor begins his own remarks by honoring the surrender.

Concessions employ a form of words that linguists call performative speech. The words do not describe or announce an act; the words themselves are the act. “The concession speech, then, is not merely a report of an election result or an admission of defeat,” the political scientist Paul E. Corcoran has written. “It is a constitutive enactment of the new president’s authority.”

In actual war, not the political kind, concession is optional. The winning side may take by force what the losing side refuses to surrender. If the weaker party will not sue for peace, its ramparts may be breached, its headquarters razed, and its leaders taken captive or put to death. There are places in the world where political combat still ends that way, but not here. The loser’s concession is therefore hard to replace.



Consider the 2000 election, which may appear at first glance to demonstrate otherwise. Al Gore conceded to George W. Bush on Election Night, then withdrew his concession and fought a recount battle in Florida until the Supreme Court shut it down. It is commonly said that the Court's 5–4 ruling decided the contest, but that's not quite right.

The Court handed down its ruling in *Bush v. Gore* on December 12, six days before the Electoral College would convene and weeks before Congress would certify the results. Even with canvassing halted in Florida, Gore had the constitutional means to fight on, and some advisers urged him to do so. If he had brought the dispute to Congress, he would have held high ground as the Senate's presiding officer.

Not until Gore addressed the nation on December 13, the day after the Court's decision, did the contest truly end. Speaking as a man with unexpended ammunition, Gore laid down his arms. "I accept the finality of this outcome, which will be ratified next Monday in the Electoral College," he said. "And tonight, for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession."

We have no precedent or procedure to end this election if Biden seems to carry the Electoral College but Trump refuses to concede. We will have to invent one.

T R U M P I S, by some measures, a weak authoritarian. He has the mouth but not the muscle to work his will with assurance. Trump denounced Special Counsel Robert Mueller but couldn't fire him. He accused his foes of treason but couldn't jail them. He has bent the bureaucracy and flouted the law but not broken free altogether of their restraints.

A proper despot would not risk the inconvenience of losing an election. He would fix his victory in advance, avoiding the need to overturn an incorrect outcome. Trump cannot do that.

But he's not powerless to skew the proceedings—first on Election Day and then during the Interregnum. He could disrupt the vote count where it's going badly, and if that does not work, try to bypass it altogether. On Election Day, Trump and his allies can begin by suppressing the Biden vote.

There is no truth to be found in dancing around this point, either: Trump does not want Black people to vote. (He said as much in 2017—on Martin Luther King Day, no less—to a voting-rights group co-founded by King, according to a recording leaked to *Politico*.) He does not want young people or poor people to vote. He believes, with reason, that he is less likely to win reelection if turnout is high at the polls. This is not a "both sides" phenomenon. In present-day politics, we have one party that consistently seeks advantage in depriving the other party's adherents of the right to vote.

Just under a year ago, Justin Clark gave a closed-door talk in Wisconsin to a select audience of Republican lawyers. He thought he was speaking privately, but someone had brought a recording device. He had a lot to say about Election Day operations, or "EDO."

At the time, Clark was a senior lieutenant with Trump's reelection campaign; in July, he was promoted to deputy

campaign manager. "Wisconsin's the state that is going to tip this one way or the other ... So it makes EDO really, really, really important," he said. He put the mission bluntly: "Traditionally it's always been Republicans suppressing votes ... [Democrats'] voters are all in one part of the state, so let's start playing offense a little bit. And that's what you're going to see in 2020. That's what's going to be markedly different. It's going to be a much bigger program, a much more aggressive program, a much better-funded program, and we're going to need all the help we can get." (Clark later claimed that his remarks had been misconstrued, but his explanation made no sense in context.)

Of all the favorable signs for Trump's Election Day operations, Clark explained, "first and foremost is the consent decree's gone." He was referring to a court order forbidding Republican operatives from using any of a long list of voter-purging and intimidation techniques. The expiration of that order was a "huge, huge, huge, huge deal," Clark said.

His audience of lawyers knew what he meant. The 2020 presidential election will be the first in 40 years to take place without a federal judge requiring the Republican National Committee to seek approval in advance for any "ballot security" operations at the polls. In 2018, a federal judge allowed the consent decree to expire, ruling that the plaintiffs had no proof of recent violations by Republicans. The consent decree, by this logic, was not needed, because it worked.

The order had its origins in the New Jersey gubernatorial election of 1981. According to the district court's opinion in *Democratic National Committee v. Republican National Committee*, the RNC allegedly tried to intimidate voters by hiring off-duty law-enforcement officers as members of a "National Ballot Security Task Force," some of them armed and carrying two-way radios. According to the plaintiffs, they stopped and questioned voters in minority neighborhoods, blocked voters from entering the polls, forcibly restrained poll workers, challenged people's eligibility to vote, warned of criminal charges for casting an illegal ballot, and generally did their best to frighten voters away from the polls. The power of these methods relied on well-founded fears among people of color about contact with police.

This year, with a judge no longer watching, the Republicans are recruiting 50,000 volunteers in 15 contested states to monitor polling places and challenge voters they deem suspicious-looking. Trump called in to Fox News on August 20 to tell Sean Hannity, "We're going to have sheriffs and we're going to have law enforcement and we're going to have, hopefully, U.S. attorneys" to keep close watch on the polls. For the first time in decades, according to Clark, Republicans are free to combat voter fraud in "places that are run by Democrats."

Voter fraud is a fictitious threat to the outcome of elections, a pretext that Republicans use to thwart or discard the ballots of likely opponents. An authoritative report by the Brennan Center for Justice, a nonpartisan think tank, calculated the rate of voter fraud in three elections at between 0.0003 percent and 0.0025 percent. Another investigation, from Justin Levitt at Loyola Law School, turned up 31 credible allegations of voter impersonation out of more than 1 billion votes cast in the United States from

2000 to 2014. Judges in voting-rights cases have made comparable findings of fact.

Nonetheless, Republicans and their allies have litigated scores of cases in the name of preventing fraud in this year's election. State by state, they have sought—with some success—to purge voter rolls, tighten rules on provisional votes, uphold voter-identification requirements, ban the use of ballot drop boxes, reduce eligibility to vote by mail, discard mail-in ballots with technical flaws, and outlaw the counting of ballots that are post-marked by Election Day but arrive afterward. The intent and effect is to throw away votes in large numbers.

These legal maneuvers are drawn from an old Republican playbook. What's different during this cycle, aside from the ferocity of the efforts, is the focus on voting by mail. The president has mounted a relentless assault on postal balloting at the exact moment when the coronavirus pandemic is driving tens of millions of voters to embrace it.

THIS YEAR'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION will see voting by mail on a scale unlike any before—some states are anticipating a tenfold increase in postal balloting. A 50-state survey by *The Washington Post* found that 198 million eligible voters, or at least 84 percent, will have the option to vote by mail.

Trump has denounced mail-in voting often and urgently, airing fantastical nightmares. One day he tweeted, "MAIL-IN VOTING WILL LEAD TO MASSIVE FRAUD AND ABUSE. IT WILL ALSO LEAD TO

TRUMP'S CRUSADE AGAINST VOTING BY MAIL IS THE STRATEGY OF A MAN WHO EXPECTS TO BE OUTVOTED AND MEANS TO HOBBLE THE COUNT.

THE END OF OUR GREAT REPUBLICAN PARTY. WE CAN NEVER LET THIS TRAGEDY BEFALL OUR NATION." Another day he pointed to an imaginary—and easily debunked—scenario of forgery from abroad: "RIGGED 2020 ELECTION: MILLIONS OF MAIL-IN BALLOTS WILL BE PRINTED BY FOREIGN COUNTRIES, AND OTHERS. IT WILL BE THE SCANDAL OF OUR TIMES."

By late summer Trump was declaiming against mail-in voting an average of nearly four times a day—a pace he had reserved in the past for existential dangers such as impeachment and the Mueller investigation: "Very dangerous for our country." "A catastrophe." "The greatest rigged election in history."

Summer also brought reports that the U.S. Postal Service, the government's most popular agency, was besieged from within by Louis DeJoy, Trump's new postmaster general and a major Republican donor. Service cuts, upper-management restructuring, and chaotic operational changes were producing long delays. At one sorting facility, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, "workers fell so far behind processing packages that by early August, gnats and rodents were swarming around containers of rotted fruit and meat, and baby chicks were dead inside their boxes."

In the name of efficiency, the Postal Service began decommissioning 10 percent of its mail-sorting machines. Then came word that the service would no longer treat ballots as first-class mail unless some states nearly tripled the postage they paid, from 20 to 55 cents an envelope. DeJoy denied any intent to slow down voting by mail, and the Postal Service withdrew the plan under fire from critics.

If there were doubts about where Trump stood on these changes, he resolved them at an August 12 news conference. Democrats were negotiating for a \$25 billion increase in postal funding and an additional \$3.6 billion in election assistance to states. "They don't have the money to do the universal mail-in voting. So therefore, they can't do it, I guess," Trump said. "It's very simple. How are they going to do it if they don't have the money to do it?"

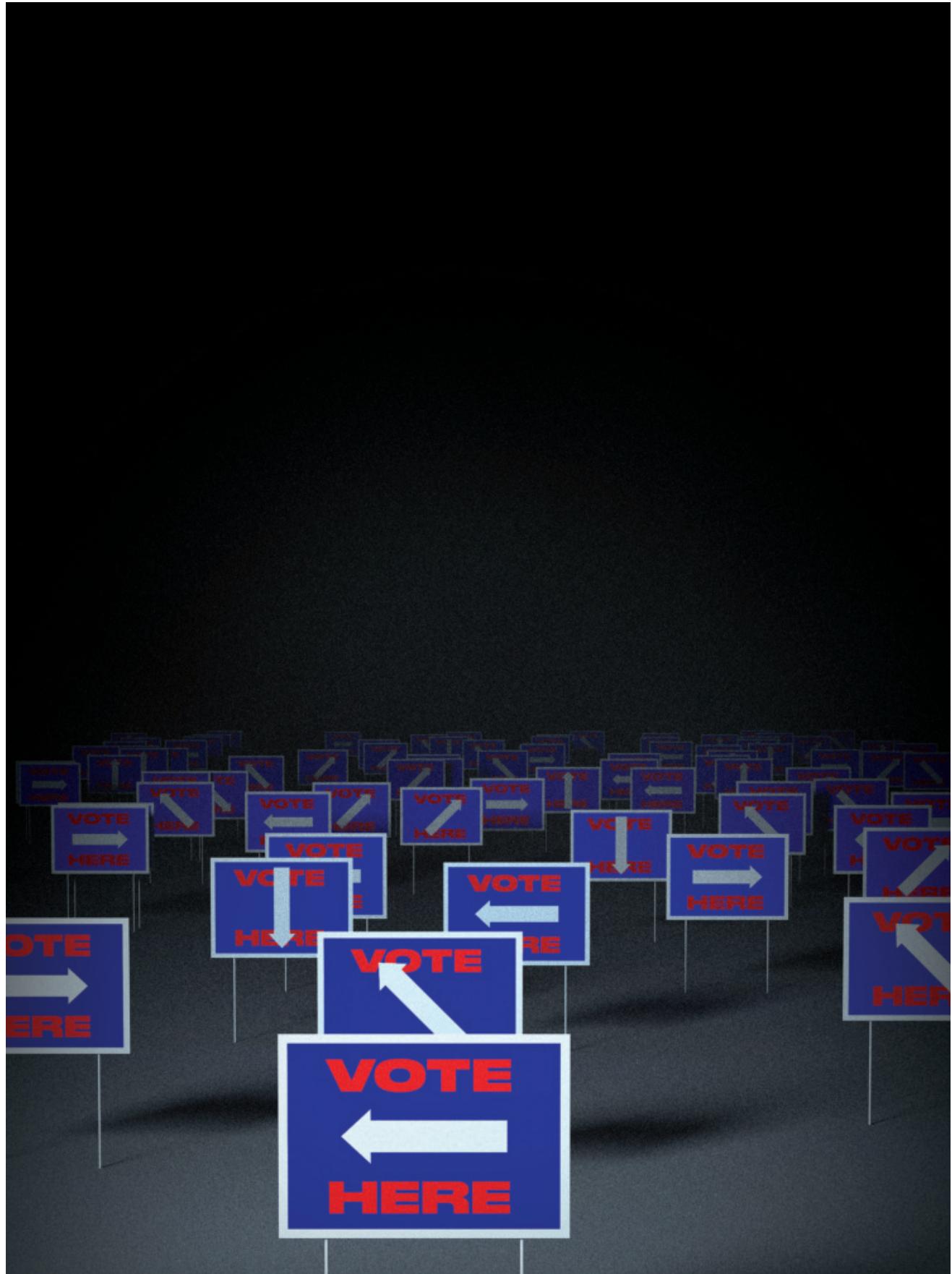
What are we to make of all this?

In part, Trump's hostility to voting by mail is a reflection of his belief that more voting is bad for him in general. Democrats, he said on *Fox & Friends* at the end of March, want "levels of voting that, if you ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again."

Some Republicans see Trump's vendetta as self-defeating. "It to me appears entirely irrational," Jeff Timmer, a former executive director of the Michigan Republican Party, told me. "The Trump campaign and RNC and by fiat their state party organizations are engaging in suppressing their own voter turnout," including Republican seniors who have voted by mail for years.

But Trump's crusade against voting by mail is a strategically sound expression of his plan for the Interregnum. The president is not actually trying to prevent mail-in balloting altogether, which he has no means to do. He is discrediting the practice and starving it of resources, signaling his supporters to vote in person, and preparing the ground for post-Election Night plans to contest the results. It is the strategy of a man who expects to be outvoted and means to hobble the count.

Voting by mail does not favor either party "during normal times," according to a team of researchers at Stanford, but that phrase does a lot of work. Their findings, which were published in June, did not take into account a president whose words alone could produce a partisan skew. Trump's systematic predictions of fraud appear to have had a powerful effect on Republican voting intentions. In Georgia, for example, a Monmouth University poll in late July found that 60 percent of Democrats but only 28 percent of Republicans were likely to vote by mail. In



the battleground states of Pennsylvania and North Carolina, hundreds of thousands more Democrats than Republicans have requested mail-in ballots.

Trump, in other words, has created a proxy to distinguish friend from foe. Republican lawyers around the country will find this useful when litigating the count. Playing by the numbers, they can treat ballots cast by mail as hostile, just as they do ballots cast in person by urban and college-town voters. Those are the ballots they will contest.

THE BATTLE SPACE of the Interregnum, if trends hold true, will be shaped by a phenomenon known as the “blue shift.”

Edward Foley, an Ohio State professor of constitutional law and a specialist in election law, pioneered research on the blue shift. He found a previously unremarked-upon pattern in the overtime count—the canvass after Election Night that tallies late-reporting precincts, unprocessed absentee votes, and provisional ballots cast by voters whose eligibility needed to be confirmed. For most of American history, the overtime count produced no predictably partisan effect. In any given election year, some states shifted red in the canvass after Election Day and some shifted blue, but the shifts were seldom large enough to matter.

Two things began to change about 20 years ago. The overtime count got bigger, and it trended more and more blue. In an updated paper this year, Foley and his co-author, Charles Stewart III of MIT, said they could not fully explain why the shift favors Democrats. (Some factors: Urban returns take longer to count, and most provisional ballots are cast by young, low-income, or mobile voters, who lean blue.) During overtime in 2012, Barack Obama strengthened his winning margins in swing states like Florida (with a net increase of 27,281 votes), Michigan (60,695), Ohio (65,459), and Pennsylvania (26,146). Obama would have won the presidency anyway, but shifts of that magnitude could have changed the outcomes of many a closer contest. Hillary Clinton picked up tens of thousands of overtime votes in 2016, but not enough to save her.

The blue shift has yet to decide a presidential election, but it upended the Arizona Senate race in 2018. Republican Martha McSally seemed to have victory in her grasp with a lead of 15,403 votes the day after Election Day. Canvassing in the days that followed swept the Democrat, Kyrsten Sinema, into the Senate with “a gigantic overtime gain of 71,303 votes,” Foley wrote.

It was Florida, however, that seized Trump’s attention that year. On Election Night, Republicans were leading in tight contests for governor and U.S. senator. As the blue shift took effect, Ron DeSantis watched his lead shrink by 18,416 votes in the governor’s race. Rick Scott’s Senate margin fell by 20,231. By early morning on November 12, six days after Election Day, Trump had seen enough. “The Florida Election should be called in favor of Rick Scott and Ron DeSantis in that large numbers of new ballots showed up out of nowhere, and many ballots are missing or forged,” he tweeted, baselessly. “An honest vote count is no longer possible—ballots massively infected. Must go with Election Night!”

Trump was panicked enough by the blue shift in somebody else’s election to fabricate allegations of fraud. In this election, when

his own name is on the ballot, the blue shift could be the largest ever observed. Mail-in votes require more time to count even in a normal year, and this year there will be tens of millions more of them than in any election before. Many states forbid the processing of early-arriving mail ballots before Election Day; some allow late-arriving ballots to be counted.

Trump’s instinct as a spectator in 2018—to stop the count—looks more like strategy this year. “There are results that come in Election Night,” a legal adviser to Trump’s national campaign, who would not agree to be quoted by name, told me. “There’s an expectation in the country that there will be winners and losers called. If the Election Night results get changed because of the ballots counted after Election Day, you have the basic ingredients for a shitstorm.”

There is no “if” about it, I said. The count is bound to change. “Yeah,” the adviser agreed, and canvassing will produce more votes for Biden than for Trump. Democrats will insist on dragging out the canvass for as long as it takes to count every vote. The resulting conflict, the adviser said, will be on their heads.

“They are asking for it,” he said. “They’re trying to maximize their electoral turnout, and they think there are no downsides to that.” He added, “There will be a count on Election Night, that count will shift over time, and the results when the final count is given will be challenged as being inaccurate, fraudulent—pick your word.”

The worst case for an orderly count is also considered by some election modelers the likeliest: that Trump will jump ahead on Election Night, based on in-person returns, but his lead will slowly give way to a Biden victory as mail-in votes are tabulated. Josh Mendelsohn, the CEO of the Democratic data-modeling firm Hawkfish, calls this scenario “the red mirage.” The turbulence of that interval, fed by street protests, social media, and Trump’s desperate struggles to lock in his lead, can only be imagined. “Any scenario that you come up with will not be as weird as the reality of it,” the Trump legal adviser said.

ELECTION LAWYERS SPEAK of a “margin of litigation” in close races. The tighter the count in early reports, and the more votes remaining to count, the greater the incentive to fight in court. If there were such a thing as an Election Administrator’s Prayer, as some of them say only half in jest, it would go, “Lord, let there be a landslide.”

Could a landslide spare us conflict in the Interregnum? In theory, yes. But the odds are not promising.

It is hard to imagine a Trump lead so immense on Election Night that it places him out of Biden’s reach. Unless the swing states manage to count most of their mail-in ballots that night, which will be all but impossible for some of them, the expectation of a blue shift will keep Biden fighting on. A really big Biden lead on Election Night, on the other hand, could leave Trump without plausible hope of catching up. If this happens, we may see it first in Florida. But this scenario is awfully optimistic for Biden, considering the GOP advantage among in-person voters, and in any case Trump will not concede defeat. This early in the Interregnum, he will have practical options to keep the contest alive.

Both parties are bracing for a torrent of emergency motions in state and federal courts. They have already been skirmishing from courthouse to courthouse all year in more than 40 states, and Election Day will begin a culminating phase of legal combat.

Mail-in ballots will have plenty of flaws for the Trump lawyers to seize upon. Voting by mail is more complicated than voting in person, and technical errors are commonplace at each step. If voters supply a new address, or if they write a different version of their name (for example, by shortening Benjamin to Ben), or if their

"ANY SCENARIO THAT YOU COME UP WITH WILL NOT BE AS WEIRD AS THE REALITY OF IT," A TRUMP LEGAL ADVISER SAYS.

signature has changed over the years, or if they print their name on the signature line, or if they fail to seal the ballot inside an inner security envelope, their votes may not count. With in-person voting, a poll worker in the precinct can resolve small errors like these, for instance by directing a voter to the correct signature line, but people voting by mail may have no opportunity to address them.

During the primaries this spring, Republican lawyers did dry runs for the November vote at county election offices around the country. An internal memo prepared by an attorney named J. Matthew Wolfe for the Pennsylvania Republican Party in June reported on one such exercise. Wolfe, along with another Republican lawyer and a member of the Trump campaign, watched closely but did not intervene as election commissioners in Philadelphia canvassed mail-in and provisional votes. Wolfe cataloged imperfections, taking note of objections that his party could have raised.

There were missing signatures and partial signatures and signatures placed in the wrong spot. There were names on the inner security envelopes, which are supposed to be unmarked, and ballots without security envelopes at all. Some envelopes arrived "without a postmark or with an illegible postmark," Wolfe wrote. (Watch for postmarks to become the hanging chads of 2020.) Some voters wrote their birthdate where a signature date belonged, and others put down "an impossible date, like a date after the primary election."

Some of the commissioners' decisions "were clear violations of the direction in and language of the election code," Wolfe wrote. He recommended that "someone connected with the party review each application and each mail ballot envelope" in November. That is exactly the plan.

Legal teams on both sides are planning for simultaneous litigation, on the scale of Florida during the 2000 election, in multiple battleground states. "My money would be on Texas, Georgia, and Florida" to be trouble spots, Myrna Pérez, the director of voting rights and elections at the Brennan Center, told me.

There are endless happenstances in any election for lawyers to exploit. In Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, not far from Wolfe's Philadelphia experiment, the county Republican committee gathered surveillance-style photographs of purportedly suspicious goings-on at a ballot drop box during the primary. In one sequence, a county employee is described as placing "unsecured ballots" in the trunk of a car. In another, a security guard is said to be "disconnecting the generator which supplies power to the security cameras." The photos could mean anything—it's impossible to tell, out of context—but they are exactly the kind of ersatz evidence that is sure to go viral in the early days of the Interregnum.

The electoral combat will not confine itself to the courtroom. Local election adjudicators can expect to be named and doxed and pilloried as agents of George Soros or antifa. Aggressive crowds of self-proclaimed ballot guardians will be spoiling to reenact the "Brooks Brothers riot" of the *Bush v. Gore* Florida recount, when demonstrators paid by the Bush campaign staged a violent protest that physically prevented canvassers from completing a recount in Miami-Dade County.

Things like this have already happened, albeit on a smaller scale than we can expect in November. With Trump we must also ask: What might a ruthless incumbent do that has never been tried before?

Suppose that caravans of Trump supporters, adorned in Second Amendment accessories, converge on big-city polling places on Election Day. They have come, they say, to investigate reports on social media of voter fraud. Counterprotesters arrive, fistfights break out, shots are fired, and voters flee or cannot reach the polls.

Then suppose the president declares an emergency. Federal personnel in battle dress, staged nearby in advance, move in to restore law and order and secure the balloting. Amid ongoing clashes, they stay to monitor the canvass. They close the streets that lead to the polls. They take custody of uncounted ballots in order to preserve evidence of fraud.

"The president can't cancel the election, but what if he says, 'We're in an emergency, and we're shutting down this area for a period of time because of the violence taking place?'" says Norm Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute. If you are in Trump's camp and heedless of boundaries, he said, "what I would expect is you're not going to do one or two of these things—you'll do as many as you can."

There are variations of the nightmare. The venues of intervention could be post offices. The predicate could be a putative intelligence report on forged ballots sent from China.

This is speculation, of course. But none of these scenarios is far removed from things the president has already done or threatened

to do. Trump dispatched the National Guard to Washington, D.C., and sent Department of Homeland Security forces to Portland, Oregon, and Seattle during summertime protests for racial justice, on the slender pretext of protecting federal buildings. He said he might invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and “deploy the United States military” to “Democrat-run cities” in order to protect “life and property.” The federal government has little basis to intercede during elections, which are largely governed by state law and administered by about 10,500 local jurisdictions, but no one familiar with Attorney General Bill Barr’s view of presidential power should doubt that he can find authority for Trump.

With every day that passes after November 3, the president and his allies can hammer home the message that the legitimate tabulation is over and the Democrats are refusing to honor the results. Trump has been flogging this horse already for months. In July he tweeted, “Must know Election results on the night of the Election, not days, months, or even years later!”

Does it matter what Trump says? It is tempting to liken a vote count to the score at a sporting event. The losing coach can bellyache all he likes, but when the umpire makes the call, the game is over. An important thing to know about the Interregnum is that there is no umpire—no singular authority who can decide the contest and lay it to rest. There is a series of lesser officiants, each confined in jurisdiction and tangled in opaque rules.

Trump’s strategy for this phase of the Interregnum will be a play for time as much as a concerted attempt to squelch the count and disqualify Biden votes. The courts may eventually weigh in. But by then, the forum of decision may already have moved elsewhere.

THE INTERREGNUM ALLOTS 35 days for the count and its attendant lawsuits to be resolved. On the 36th day, December 8, an important deadline arrives.

At this stage, the actual tabulation of the vote becomes less salient to the outcome. That sounds as though it can’t be right, but it is: The combatants, especially Trump, will now shift their attention to the appointment of presidential electors.

December 8 is known as the “safe harbor” deadline for appointing the 538 men and women who make up the Electoral College. The electors do not meet until six days later, December 14, but each state must appoint them by the safe-harbor date to guarantee that Congress will accept their credentials. The controlling statute says that if “any controversy or contest” remains after that, then Congress will decide which electors, if any, may cast the state’s ballots for president.

We are accustomed to choosing electors by popular vote, but nothing in the Constitution says it has to be that way. Article II provides that each state shall appoint electors “in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct.” Since the late 19th century, every state has ceded the decision to its voters. Even so, the Supreme Court affirmed in *Bush v. Gore* that a state “can take back the power to appoint electors.” How and when a state might do so has not been tested for well over a century.

Trump may test this. According to sources in the Republican Party at the state and national levels, the Trump campaign is discussing contingency plans to bypass election results and appoint

loyal electors in battleground states where Republicans hold the legislative majority. With a justification based on claims of rampant fraud, Trump would ask state legislators to set aside the popular vote and exercise their power to choose a slate of electors directly. The longer Trump succeeds in keeping the vote count in doubt, the more pressure legislators will feel to act before the safe-harbor deadline expires.

To a modern democratic sensibility, discarding the popular vote for partisan gain looks uncomfortably like a coup, whatever license may be found for it in law. Would Republicans find that position disturbing enough to resist? Would they cede the election before resorting to such a ploy? Trump’s base would exact a high price for that betrayal, and by this point party officials would be invested in a narrative of fraud.

The Trump-campaign legal adviser I spoke with told me the push to appoint electors would be framed in terms of protecting the people’s will. Once committed to the position that the overtime count has been rigged, the adviser said, state lawmakers will want to judge for themselves what the voters intended.

“The state legislatures will say, ‘All right, we’ve been given this constitutional power. We don’t think the results of our own state are accurate, so here’s our slate of electors that we think properly reflect the results of our state,’” the adviser said. Democrats, he added, have exposed themselves to this stratagem by creating the conditions for a lengthy overtime.

“If you have this notion,” the adviser said, “that ballots can come in for I don’t know how many days—in some states a week, 10 days—then that onslaught of ballots just gets pushed back and pushed back and pushed back. So pick your poison. Is it worse to have electors named by legislators or to have votes received by Election Day?”

When *The Atlantic* asked the Trump campaign about plans to circumvent the vote and appoint loyal electors, and about other strategies discussed in the article, the deputy national press secretary did not directly address the questions. “It’s outrageous that President Trump and his team are being villainized for upholding the rule of law and transparently fighting for a free and fair election,” Thea McDonald said in an email. “The mainstream media are giving the Democrats a free pass for their attempts to completely uproot the system and throw our election into chaos.” Trump is fighting for a trustworthy election, she wrote, “and any argument otherwise is a conspiracy theory intended to muddy the waters.”

In Pennsylvania, three Republican leaders told me they had already discussed the direct appointment of electors among themselves, and one said he had discussed it with Trump’s national campaign.

“I’ve mentioned it to them, and I hope they’re thinking about it too,” Lawrence Tabas, the Pennsylvania Republican Party’s chairman, told me. “I just don’t think this is the right time for me to be discussing those strategies and approaches, but [direct appointment of electors] is one of the options. It is one of the available legal options set forth in the Constitution.” He added that everyone’s preference is to get a swift and accurate count. “If the process, though, is flawed, and has significant flaws, our public may lose faith and confidence” in the election’s integrity.



of ascertainment,” dispatched to the National Archives, would say that their states had appointed electors committed to Biden. Each competing set of electors would have the imprimatur of one branch of state government.

In Arizona, Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, who oversees elections, is a Democrat. She could assert her own power to certify the voting results and forward a slate of Biden electors. Even in Florida, which has unified Republican rule, electors pledged to Biden could meet and certify their own votes in hope of triggering a “controversy or contest” that would leave their state’s outcome to Congress. Much the same thing almost happened during the Florida recount battle of 2000. Republican Governor Jeb Bush certified electors for his brother, George W. Bush, on November 26 of that year, while litigation of the recount was still under way. Gore’s chief lawyer, Ronald Klain, responded by booking a room in the old Florida capitol building for Democratic electors to cast rival ballots for Gore. Only Gore’s concession, five days before the Electoral College vote, mooted that plan.

In any of these scenarios, the Electoral College would convene on December 14 without a consensus on who had legitimate claims to cast the deciding votes.

Rival slates of electors could hold mirror-image meetings in Harrisburg, Lansing, Tallahassee, or Phoenix, casting the same electoral votes on opposite sides. Each slate would transmit its ballots, as the Constitution provides, “to the seat of the government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate.” The next move would belong to Vice President Mike Pence.

This would be a genuine constitutional crisis, the first but not the last of the Interregnum. “Then we get thrown into a world where anything could happen,” Norm Ornstein says.

TWO MEN ARE CLAIMING the presidency. The next occasion to settle the matter is more than three weeks away.

January 6 comes just after the new Congress is sworn in. Control of the Senate will be crucial to the presidency now.

Pence, as president of the Senate, would hold in his hands two conflicting electoral certificates from each of several swing states. The Twelfth Amendment says only this about what happens next: “The President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and the House of Representatives, open all the certificates and the votes shall then be counted.”

Jake Corman, the state’s Senate majority leader, preferred to change the subject, emphasizing that he hoped a clean vote count would produce a final tally on Election Night. “The longer it goes on, the more opinions and the more theories and the more conspiracies [are] created,” he told me. If controversy persists as the safe-harbor date nears, he allowed, the legislature will have no choice but to appoint electors. “We don’t want to go down that road, but we understand where the law takes us, and we’ll follow the law.”

Republicans control both legislative chambers in the six most closely contested battleground states. Of those, Arizona and Florida have Republican governors, too. In Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, the governors are Democrats.

Foley, the Ohio State election scholar, has mapped the ripple effects if Republican legislators were to appoint Trump electors in defiance of the vote in states like Pennsylvania and Michigan. The Democratic governors would respond by certifying the official count, a routine exercise of their authority, and they would argue that legislators could not lawfully choose different electors after the vote had taken place. Their “certificates

Note the passive voice. Who does the counting? Which certificates are counted?

The Trump team would take the position that the constitutional language leaves those questions to the vice president. This means that Pence has the unilateral power to announce his own reelection, and a second term for Trump. Democrats and legal scholars would denounce the self-dealing and point out that Congress filled the gaps in the Twelfth Amendment with the Electoral Count Act, which provides instructions for how to resolve this

and the White House. But Pence pounds his gavel and rules against this reading of the law, instead favoring another, which holds that Congress must discard both contested slates of electors. The garbled statute can plausibly be read either way.

With Pennsylvania's electors disqualified, 518 electoral votes remain. If Biden holds a narrow lead among them, he again claims the presidency, because he has "the greatest number of votes," as the Twelfth Amendment prescribes. But Republicans point out that the same amendment requires "a majority of the whole number of electors." The whole number of electors, Pence rules, is 538, and Biden is short of the required 270.

On this argument, no one has attained the presidency, and the decision is thrown to the House, with one vote per state. If the current partisan balance holds, 26 out of 50 votes will be for Trump.

Before Pence can move on from Pennsylvania to Rhode Island, which is next on the alphabetical list as Congress counts the vote, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi expels all senators from the floor of her chamber. Now Pence is prevented from completing the count "in the presence of" the House, as the Constitution requires. Pelosi announces plans to stall indefinitely. If the count is still incomplete on Inauguration Day, the speaker herself will become acting president.

Pelosi prepares to be sworn in on January 20 unless Pence reverses his ruling and accepts that Biden won. Pence does not budge. He reconvenes the Senate in another venue, with House Republicans squeezing in, and purports to complete the count, making Trump the president-elect. Three people now have supportable claims to the Oval Office.

There are other paths in the labyrinth. Many lead to dead ends.

This is the next constitutional crisis, graver than the one three weeks before, because the law and the Constitution provide for no other authority to consult. The Supreme Court may yet intervene, but it may also shy away from another traumatizing encounter with a fundamentally political question.

Sixty-four days have passed since the election. Stalemate reigns. Two weeks remain until Inauguration Day.

FOLEY, WHO FORESAW THIS IMPASSE, knows of no solution. He cannot tell you how we avoid it under current law, or how it ends. It is not so much, at this point, a question of law. It is a question of power. Trump has possession of the White House. How far will he push boundaries to keep it, and who will push back? It is the same question the president has posed since the day he took office.

I hoped to gain some insight from a series of exercises conducted this summer by a group of former elected officials, academics, political strategists, and lawyers. In four days of simulations, the Transition Integrity Project modeled the election and its aftermath in an effort to find pivot points where things could fall apart.

They found plenty. Some of the scenarios included dueling slates of electors of the kind I have described. In one version it

**IF YOU ARE A VOTER, THINK
ABOUT VOTING IN PERSON.
IF YOU ARE AT LOW RISK
FOR COVID-19, VOLUNTEER
TO WORK AT THE POLLS.**

kind of dispute. The trouble with the instructions is that they are widely considered, in Foley's words, to be "convoluted and impenetrable," "confusing and ugly," and "one of the strangest pieces of statutory language ever enacted by Congress."

If the Interregnum is a contest in search of an umpire, it now has 535 of them, and a rule book that no one is sure how to read. The presiding officer is one of the players on the field.

Foley has produced a 25,000-word study in the *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* that maps out the paths the ensuing fight could take if only *one* state's electoral votes are in play.

If Democrats win back the Senate and hold the House, then all roads laid out in the Electoral Count Act lead eventually to a Biden presidency. The reverse applies if Republicans hold the Senate and unexpectedly win back the House. But if Congress remains split, there are conditions in which no decisive outcome is possible—no result that has clear force of law. Each party could cite a plausible reading of the rules in which its candidate has won. There is no tie-breaking vote.

How can it be that Congress slips into unbreakable deadlock? The law is a labyrinth in these parts, too intricate to map in a magazine article, but I can sketch one path.

Suppose Pennsylvania alone sends rival slates of electors, and their 20 votes will decide the presidency.

One reading of the Electoral Count Act says that Congress must recognize the electors certified by the governor, who is a Democrat, unless the House and Senate agree otherwise. The House will not agree otherwise, and so Biden wins Pennsylvania

was the Democratic governor of Michigan who first resorted to appointing electors, after Trump ordered the National Guard to halt the vote count and a Trump-friendly guardsman destroyed mail-in ballots. John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chair in 2016, led a Biden team in another scenario that was prepared to follow Trump to the edge of civil war, encouraging three blue states to threaten secession. Norm-breaking begat norm-breaking. (Clinton herself, in an August interview for Showtime's *The Circus*, caught the same spirit. "Joe Biden should not concede under any circumstances," she said.)

A great deal has been written about the proceedings, including a firsthand account from my colleague David Frum. But the coverage had a puzzling gap. None of the stories fully explained how the contest ended. I wanted to know who took the oath of office.

I called Rosa Brooks, a Georgetown professor who co-founded the project. Unnervingly, she had no answers for me. She did not know how the story turned out. In half of the simulations, the participants did not make it as far as Inauguration Day.

"We got to points in the scenarios where there was a constitutional impasse, no clear means of resolution in sight, street-level violence," she said. "I think in one of them we had Trump invoking the Insurrection Act and we had troops in the streets ... Five hours had gone by and we sort of said, 'Okay, we're done.'" She added: "Once things were clearly off the rails, there was no particular benefit to seeing exactly how far off they would go."

"Our goal in doing this was to try to identify intervention moments, to identify moments where we could then look back and say, 'What would have changed this? What would have kept it from getting this bad?'" Brooks said. The project didn't make much progress there. No lessons were learned about how to restrain a lawless president once a conflict was under way, no alternative moves devised to stave off disaster. "I suppose you could say we were in terra incognita: no one could predict what would happen anymore," Brooks told me in a follow-up email.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM may no longer be strong enough to preserve its integrity. It's a mistake to take for granted that election boards and state legislatures and Congress are capable of drawing lines that ensure a legitimate vote and an orderly transfer of power. We may have to find a way to draw those lines ourselves.

There are reforms to consider some other day, when an election is not upon us. Small ones, like clearing up the murky parts of the Electoral Count Act. Big ones, like doing away with the Electoral College. Obvious ones, like appropriating money to help cash-starved election authorities upgrade their operations in order to speed up and secure the count on Election Day.

Right now, the best we can do is an ad hoc defense of democracy. Begin by rejecting the temptation to think that this election will carry on as elections usually do. Something far out of the norm is likely to happen. Probably more than one thing. Expecting otherwise will dull our reflexes. It will lull us into spurious hope that Trump is tractable to forces that constrain normal incumbents.

If you are a voter, think about voting in person after all. More than half a million postal votes were rejected in this

year's primaries, even without Trump trying to suppress them. If you are at relatively low risk for COVID-19, volunteer to work at the polls. If you know people who are open to reason, spread word that it is normal for the results to keep changing after Election Night. If you manage news coverage, anticipate extraconstitutional measures, and position reporters and crews to respond to them. If you are an election administrator, plan for contingencies you never had to imagine before. If you are a mayor, consider how to deploy your police to ward off interlopers with bad intent. If you are a law-enforcement officer, protect the freedom to vote. If you are a legislator, choose not to participate in chicanery. If you are a judge on the bench in a battleground state, refresh your acquaintance with election case law. If you have a place in the military chain of command, remember your duty to turn aside unlawful orders. If you are a civil servant, know that your country needs you more than ever to do the right thing when you're asked to do otherwise.

Take agency. An election cannot be stolen unless the American people, at some level, acquiesce. One thing Brooks has been thinking about since her exercise came to an end is the power of peaceful protest on a grand scale. "We had players on both sides attempting to mobilize their supporters to turn out in large numbers, and we didn't really have a good mechanism for deciding, did that make a difference? What kind of difference did that make?" she said. "It left some with some big questions about what if you had Orange Revolution-style mass protest sustained over weeks. What effects would that have?"

ONLY ONCE, IN 1877, has the Interregnum brought the country to the brink of true collapse. We will find no model in that episode for us now.

Four states sent rival slates of electors to Congress in the 1876 presidential race between Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes. When a special tribunal blessed the electors for Hayes, Democrats began parliamentary maneuvers to obstruct the electoral count in Congress. Their plan was to run out the clock all the way to Inauguration Day, when the Republican incumbent, Ulysses S. Grant, would have to step down.

Not until two days before Grant's term expired did Tilden give in. His concession was based on a repugnant deal for the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, where they were protecting the rights of emancipated Black people. But that was not Tilden's only inducement.

The threat of military force was in the air. Grant let it be known that he was prepared to declare martial law in New York, where rumor had it that Tilden planned to be sworn in, and to back the inauguration of Hayes with uniformed troops.

That is an unsettling precedent for 2021. If our political institutions fail to produce a legitimate president, and if Trump maintains the stalemate into the new year, the chaos candidate and the commander in chief will be one and the same. *A*

Barton Gellman is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of Dark Mirror: Edward Snowden and the American Surveillance State.

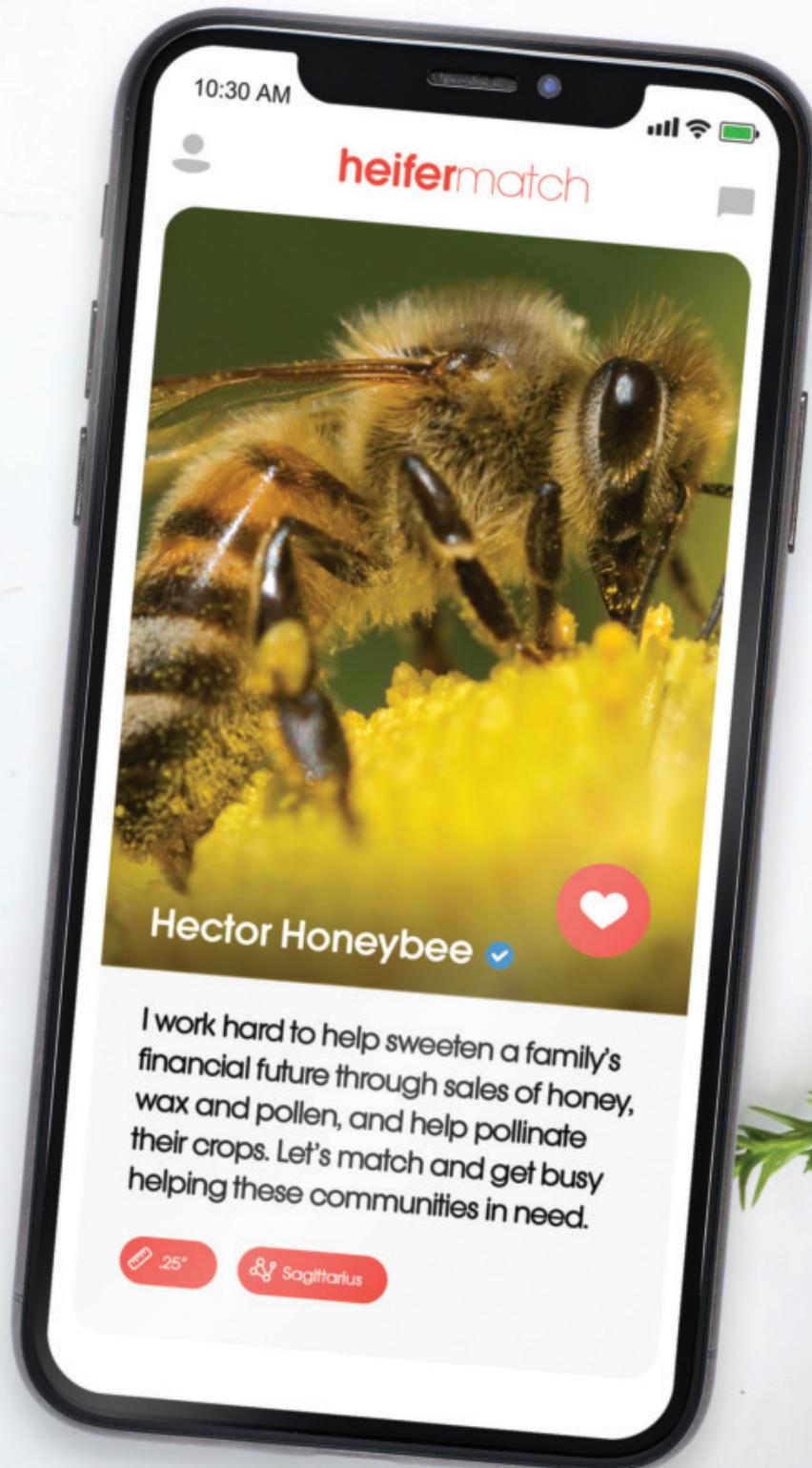


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PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

Stewart Rhodes, the founder of the Oath Keepers

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Stewart Rhodes was living his vision of the future. On television, American cities were burning, while on the internet, rumors warned that antifa bands were coming to terrorize the suburbs. Rhodes was driving around South Texas, getting ready for them. He answered his phone. “Let’s not fuck around,” he said. “We’ve descended into civil war.”

It was a Friday evening in June. Rhodes, 55, is a stocky man with a gray buzz cut, a wardrobe of tactical-casual attire, and a black eye patch. With him in his pickup were a pistol and a dusty black hat with the gold logo of the Oath Keepers, a militant group that has drawn in thousands of people from the military and law-enforcement communities.

Rhodes had been talking about civil war since he founded the Oath Keepers, in 2009. But now more people were listening. And whereas Rhodes had once cast himself as a revolutionary in waiting, he now saw his role as defending the president. He had put out a call for his followers to protect the country against what he was calling an “insurrection.” The unrest, he told me, was the latest attempt to undermine Donald Trump.

Over the summer, Rhodes’s warnings of conflict only grew louder. In August, when a teenager was charged with shooting and killing two people at protests over police brutality in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Rhodes called him “a Hero, a Patriot” on Twitter. And when a Trump supporter was killed later that week in Portland, Oregon, Rhodes declared that there was no going back. “Civil war is here, right now,” he wrote, before being banned from the platform for inciting violence.

By then, I’d spent months interviewing current and former Oath Keepers, attempting to determine whether they would really take part in violence. Many of their worst fears had been realized in quick succession: government lockdowns, riots, a movement to abolish police, and leftist groups arming themselves and seizing part of a city. They saw all of it as a precursor to the 2020 election.

As Trump spent the year warning about voter fraud, the Oath Keepers were listening. What would happen, I wondered, if Trump lost, said the election had been stolen, and refused to concede? Or the flip side: What if he won and his opponents poured into the streets in protest? The U.S. was already seeing a surge in political violence, and in August the FBI put out a bulletin that warned of a possible escalation heading into the election. How much worse would things get if trained professionals took up arms?

I’d been asking a version of these questions since 2017, when I met a researcher from the Southern Poverty Law Center who told me about Rhodes and the Oath Keepers. She’d received a leaked database with information about the group, and she said it might contain some answers.

RHODES WAS A little-known libertarian blogger when he launched the Oath Keepers in early 2009. It was a moment of anxiety on the American right: As the Great Recession raged, protesters met the new president with accusations of socialism and tyranny. “The greatest threats to our liberty do not come from without,” Rhodes wrote online, “but from within.” Republicans had spent eight years amassing power in an executive branch now occupied by Barack Obama. The time for politics was ending. “Our would-be slave masters are greatly underestimating the resolve and military capability of the people,” Rhodes wrote.

Rhodes had joined the military just out of high school, hoping to become a Green Beret, but his career was cut short when he fractured his spine during a parachute training jump. After his discharge, he worked as a firearms instructor and parked cars as a valet. In 1993, he dropped a loaded handgun and it shot him in the face, blinding him in his left eye. The brush with death inspired him, at 28, to enroll in community college. He went on to the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, where he graduated summa cum laude, and then to Yale Law School, where he won a prize for a paper arguing that the Bush administration’s enemy-combatant doctrine violated the Constitution.

He married a fellow libertarian, started a family, and hung out a shingle as a lawyer in Montana—“Ivy League quality … without Ivy League expense,” read a classified ad in 2008. He volunteered for Ron Paul’s presidential campaign that year. But after the election, he veered from politics toward something darker.

His blog post was both a manifesto and a recruiting pitch. He based it on the oath that soldiers take when they enlist—minimizing the vow to obey the president and focusing on the one that comes before it, to “support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Law-enforcement officers swear a similar oath, and Rhodes wrote that both groups could refuse orders, including those related to gun control, that would enable tyranny. And, if necessary, they could fight.

Responses poured in, and Rhodes published them on his blog: “Your message is spreading and I will make sure it gets to more Marines.”

“Not only will I refuse any unlawful order that violates the Constitution I will fight the tyrants that give the orders. Rest assured that me and my brothers in Law Enforcement talk about this subject on a regular basis.”

“I fully support you and what you stand for and I do talk about these things with some of my subordinates,” an Air Force officer wrote. “Those who I trust that is.”

Rhodes kept the nature of the Oath Keepers ambiguous—the group was officially nonpartisan and was not, as a later post on the blog put it, a militia “per se.” Even so, he cautioned that its members would be painted as extremists and said they could

remain anonymous. “We don’t ask current-serving law enforcement and military to sign up on any kind of membership list,” he said in a radio interview. “We think that’d be foolish.”

But eventually he did create such a list. It collected members’ names, home and email addresses, phone numbers, and service histories, along with answers to a question about how they could help the Oath Keepers. Last year, the Southern Poverty Law Center passed the entries for nearly 25,000 people along to me.

ON APRIL 19, 2009, Rhodes traveled to Lexington Green, in Massachusetts, for the anniversary of the first shots of the American Revolution. Standing before a crowd of new members, he led a reaffirmation of their oaths. With him were two heroes of the militant right: Richard Mack, who popularized the idea that county sheriffs are the highest law in the land, and Mike Vanderboegh, the founder of the Three Percenters, an umbrella militia based on the myth that it took just 3 percent of the population to fight and win the Revolutionary War.

With his Ivy League law degree, Rhodes’s background was unusual. One of the first cases he’d taken on after law school was helping with the pro bono defense of a militia leader jailed for making machine guns. His early writings on his blog, and on a web forum where he used the handle Stewart the Yalie, reveal a fixation on the rise of the hundreds of militia groups that, in the early 1990s, loosely coalesced under the banner of the Patriot movement.

Rhodes was deeply affected by the 1993 government siege outside Waco, Texas, which ended in the deaths of more than 70 members of an armed Christian sect, which to him showed the danger of government power. But the Patriot movement became notorious for its connections to white nationalists—and it fell apart after Timothy McVeigh, who’d attended militia meetings, bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

Rhodes wanted to avoid repeating these earlier groups’ mistakes, and he showed a talent for giving fringe ideas more

WHEN TRUMP WARNED
OF CIVIL WAR, RHODES
VOICED HIS ASSENT.
“THIS IS THE TRUTH,”
HE WROTE. “THIS IS
WHERE WE ARE.”

mainstream appeal. His refusal to call the Oath Keepers a militia helped, as did the fact that he put a disavowal of racism on his blog and warned members not to make overt threats of violence. He insisted that the Oath Keepers would fight only as a last resort.

Rhodes believed that the militia groups of the past had been too secretive, which made the public suspicious and gave authorities more leeway to crack down. He established the Oath Keepers as a registered nonprofit with a board of directors; members did relief work after hurricanes and spoke at local Republican events. They could walk into police stations or stand outside military bases with leaflets; they could meet with sheriffs and petition lawmakers.

Rhodes wrote a creed listing 10 types of orders that members vow to resist. Gun-control laws are first among them. Then come libertarian concerns such as subjecting American citizens to military tribunals and warrantless search and seizure. After those come more conspiratorial fears—blockades of cities, foreign troops on U.S. soil, putting Americans in detention camps. Here Rhodes was drawing from the “New World Order” theory, a worldview that is central to the Patriot movement—and that can be traced back to what the historian Richard Hofstadter, writing in the 1960s, called the paranoid style in American politics. It linked fears of globalism, a deep distrust of elites, and the idea that a ballooning federal government could become tyrannical.

Rhodes appeared on *Hardball* and *The O'Reilly Factor*, where his ideas were called dangerous; on conservative talk radio, where they were met more favorably; and on *The Alex Jones Show*, where he was featured so often that he and Jones became friends. He kept the Oath Keepers at the vanguard of the Patriot movement, which was seeing a resurgence, and traded his blog for a website that sold branded body armor and a Facebook page that reached half a million followers before it was shut down in August.

In 2014, Rhodes and the Oath Keepers joined an armed standoff between Patriot groups and federal authorities in Nevada on behalf of the cattle rancher Cliven Bundy. The next year, they led another standoff, at the Sugar Pine Mine in Josephine County, Oregon. Both times, what started as a dispute over land-use issues became a rallying cry on the militant right. Both times, the authorities backed down. In 2014, Rhodes sent teams to Ferguson, Missouri, to protect businesses during the unrest over police brutality after Michael Brown’s killing. Images of Oath Keepers standing guard on rooftops with semiautomatic rifles became symbols of an America beginning to turn on itself.

In Trump, the Patriot movement believed it had an ally in the White House for the first time. In 2016, when Trump had warned of election fraud, Rhodes put out a call for members to quietly monitor polling stations. When Trump warned of an invasion by undocumented immigrants, Rhodes traveled to the southern border with an Oath Keepers patrol. He sent members to “protect” Trump supporters from the protesters at his rallies and appeared in the VIP section at one of them, standing in the front row in a black Oath Keepers shirt. When Trump warned of the potential for civil war at the start of the impeachment inquiry last fall, Rhodes voiced his assent on Twitter. “This is the truth,” he wrote. “This is where we are.”

EVEN WHILE he courted publicity, Rhodes maintained secrecy around his rank and file. Monitoring groups couldn't say for sure how many members the Oath Keepers had or what kind of people were joining.

But the leaked database laid everything out. It had been compiled by Rhodes's deputies as new members signed up at recruiting events or on the Oath Keepers website. They hailed from every state. About two-thirds had a background in the military or law enforcement. About 10 percent of these members were active-duty. There was a sheriff in Colorado, a SWAT-team member in Indiana, a police patrolman in Miami, the chief of a small police department in Illinois. There were members of the Special Forces, private military contractors, an Army psyops sergeant major, a cavalry scout instructor in Texas, a grunt in Afghanistan. There were Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, a 20-year special agent in the Secret Service, and two people who said they were in the FBI.

"I will not go quietly into this dark night that is facing MY beloved America," a Marine veteran from Wisconsin wrote; an officer in the Los Angeles Police Department said he'd enlist his colleagues "to fight the tyranny our country is facing." Similar pledges came from a police captain in Texas, an Army recruiter in Oregon, and a Border Patrol agent in Arizona, among many others. "Funny story," wrote a police sergeant in a St. Louis suburb. "I stopped a speeding truck driver, who had your decal on the side of his truck, I asked about it, he went on and on, I said, 'Damn I'm all about this.'" He listed skills as a firearms and tactical instructor and said he would forward the membership application to his fellow officers. A special agent in the New York City Police Department's intelligence bureau recalled that he'd been heading to work one day when he saw a window decal with the Oath Keepers logo and jotted down the name on his hand. He vowed to be ready "if the balloon ever goes up."

Many answers to the question of how new members could help the Oath Keepers were innocuous: "I make videos!" and "Not much but my big mouth! Too old for much else!" People offered to show up at protests, hand out flyers, and post on Facebook. Others provided résumés with skills suited for conflict. A soldier with a U.S. Army email address detailed a background in battlefield intelligence, writing, "I am willing to use any skills you identify as helpful," and an Iraq War veteran pledged "any talents available to a former infantry team leader." Still others listed skills in marksmanship, SWAT tactics, interrogation. A Texas businessman offered his ranch "for training or defensive purposes," and a Michigan cop, retired from the Special Forces, volunteered as a "tactical/political leader when occasion arrives in near future."

As I pored through the entries, I began to see them as a window into something much larger than the Oath Keepers. Membership in the group was often fleeting—some people had signed up on a whim and forgotten about it. The Oath Keepers did not have 25,000 soldiers at the ready. But the files showed that Rhodes had tapped into a deep current of anxiety, one that could cause a surprisingly large contingent of people with real police and military experience to consider armed political violence. He was like a fisherman who sinks a beacon into the sea at night, drawing his catch toward the light.





A militia muster in Front Royal, Virginia, in August

The entries dated from 2009 until 2015, not long before the start of Trump's presidential campaign. I used them as a starting point for conversations with dozens of current and former members. The dominant mood was foreboding. I found people far along in deliberations about the prospect of civil conflict, bracing for it and afflicted by the sense that they were being pushed toward it by forces outside their control. Many said they didn't want to fight but feared they'd have no choice.

The first person I contacted, in January, was David Solomita, an Iraq War veteran in Florida whose entry said that a police officer had recruited him to the Oath Keepers while he was out to dinner with his wife. I didn't mention civil war when I emailed, yet he replied, "I want to make this clear, I am a libertarian and was in Iraq when it became a civil war, I want no part of one."

Later, Solomita said that he'd been an Oath Keeper for a year before leaving because Rhodes "wanted to be at the center of the circus when [civil war] kicked off." America's political breakdown, he added, reminded him too much of what he'd seen overseas.

ON MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY,
I walked into downtown Richmond, Virginia, behind a group of white men in jeans with rifles on their shoulders and pistols at their waists. A mother pulled her toddler away, whispering, "Those men have guns." Semitrucks paraded down the street, flying Trump flags. They blared their horns, and the men cheered. Soon I was at the state capitol, surrounded by 22,000 people, many of them carrying AR-15s and political signs. **OPPOSE TYRANNY. GUNS SAVE LIVES. TRUMP 2020.**

In Virginia, the holiday is the occasion for an annual event called Lobby Day, when citizens petition lawmakers about any issue they like. This year, the atmosphere was charged. The state legislature had just sworn in its first Democratic majority in two decades, and lawmakers had advanced a raft of gun-control measures. Rural counties were declaring themselves "Second Amendment sanctuaries" as sheriffs vowed not to enforce new gun laws. Virginia is an open-carry state, and armed protesters from across the country had turned the day into a rally for gun rights.

Rhodes was there, along with some other Oath Keepers. On a Facebook page called "The Militias March on Richmond," an

organizer of the event declared that he'd sworn an oath to defend the Constitution against enemies foreign and domestic when he joined the military and the police—and now a militia. He called Virginia the scene of "a great awakening."

Virginia was a microcosm of the far right's fears for the 2020 election: a swing to the left followed by an immediate push for gun control that would be the starting point for a wider assault

A gun-rights rally in Richmond, Virginia, on Martin Luther King Day



on American freedoms. Many current and former Oath Keepers told me that gun rights were what had inspired them to join the group; some dismissed the more lurid parts of Rhodes's list of 10 orders to defy.

David Hines, a conservative writer, has called guns the right's most successful organizing platform. The issue demands local involvement, to closely track not just federal but state and

municipal laws and politics. Guns are also social. To shoot them, you'll likely head to a range, and to buy them, you'll likely visit a store or a gun show where you'll find people who share your mindset. "Guns," Hines writes, "are onramps to activism."

I couldn't find Rhodes or any other Oath Keepers as I squeezed through the crowd. Instead I met protesters like Daniel McClure, a 23-year-old working as a contractor for the Tennessee Valley

Before the rally, the FBI had arrested alleged white supremacists who planned to fire on the crowd to incite a wider conflict, according to prosecutors, and social media had been filled with not-so-veiled threats against Virginia's Democratic lawmakers. I was struck by how commonplace talk of violence had become. Liberals had been invoking it, too. "Your little AR-15 isn't going to do shit to protect you from the government—who has tanks and nuclear weapons. That is a pathetic fantasy," the top aide to a Virginia lawmaker had written in a viral tweet a few months earlier.

In the crowd, I noticed men muttering into walkie-talkies, their eyes hidden behind wraparound shades. To me they had the aspect of children playing at war, only their guns were real. There was a loud bang, and I whirled around as hands moved toward triggers. But someone had only knocked a metal sign onto the pavement.

The rally ended peacefully. Protesters picked up trash as the men with walkie-talkies faded into the city.

“THAT’S A NICE TRANSITION, ISIS to us," Rhodes said when I first called him, in February, and told him what had led me to the Oath Keepers. It wasn't just the membership files. In 2016, I'd been reporting on the fall of the Islamic State in Mosul when I noticed that Americans were threatening civil conflict at home and wondered if any of them were really serious.

I told him there's nothing worse than civil war. "I beg to differ," he replied. He ticked off dictators: Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao. "I think what was done by them was far worse," he said. "If you're going to slide into a nightmare like that, you need to fight." He referenced a passage from *The Gulag Archipelago*, by the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn:

And how we burned in the camps later, thinking: What would things have been like if every Security opera-

tive, when he went out at night to make an arrest, had been uncertain whether he would return alive and had to say goodbye to his family?

People on the militant right often cite these lines or a similar passage from an acclaimed 1955 book about Germany's descent into Nazism, *They Thought They Were Free*:



Authority, who stood with his dad near the capitol lawn. He was pleased by the turnout, he told me, but also willing to abandon peaceful protest if democracy stopped working. His idea of responsible citizenship meant keeping the prospect of insurrection in reserve. He repeated a maxim I heard often: Gun rights are the rights that protect all the rest. "If speaking softly won't work," he said, lifting the butt of his rifle, "the stick will come."

Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow ... But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds or thousands will join with you, never comes.

For people like Rhodes, the message of both passages is the same. Americans are sleepwalking toward an abyss. Patriots need to wake up and resist.

"It's not just about guns," Rhodes said. But guns were at the heart of it. Trump was stoking the idea that conservatives are a minority threatened by a demographic tide that will let liberal cities dictate the terms for the rest of the country. When I asked Rhodes and other people on the militant right to name concerns beyond gun rights, they mentioned how history is taught in schools, or how the Green New Deal would threaten land use, agriculture, single-family homes. They stressed that America is a republic, not a democracy. Liberals, Rhodes told me, want to see "a narrow majority trampling on our rights. The only way to do that is to disarm us first."

I asked whether the Oath Keepers were white nationalists. The group had participated in events with the Proud Boys, a group of self-described "Western chauvinists," and provided security at a so-called free-speech rally headlined by the alt-right activist Kyle Chapman. "We're not fucking white nationalists," Rhodes said, pointing out that the Oath Keepers have disavowed the Proud Boys and that their vice president is Black. "That's the new smear. Everybody on the right is a white nationalist. And when you have that drumbeat of demonization, then what are we supposed to think?"

Like Trump, Rhodes relentlessly demonizes Black Lives Matter activists as "Marxists"—a foreign enemy. And he dwells on imagined threats from undocumented immigrants and Muslims that fit his ideas about a globalist push to undermine Western values. His mother is from a family of Mexican migrant laborers; as a child, he spent summers picking fruit and vegetables alongside them. But he told me that his relatives were conservative Christians and that they—the key word—"assimilated."

Rhodes said I should investigate militant groups on the left such as the John Brown Gun Club, and seemed obsessed with antifa, which he said the Oath Keepers had faced down while providing security at right-wing rallies. "If Trump wins, guess who's going to show up," he said. "The left will be in the streets rioting."

He added that he'd been using liberals' "drumbeat of anti-cop sentiment" in his outreach to police. "That's what we tell them: 'Come on, guys. They hate your guts.'"

THE MOST FAMOUS Oath Keeper after Rhodes is John Karriman, a pastor and former police trainer from Missouri who participated in the Ferguson operation. Critics saw the Oath Keepers' presence in Ferguson as inflammatory, an attempt to intimidate protesters. But to Karriman, the operation was a success: They'd helped protect the community, including a Black-owned business,

RHODES HAD BEEN USING LIBERALS' "DRUMBEAT OF ANTI-COP SENTIMENT" IN HIS OUTREACH TO POLICE.
"THAT'S WHAT WE TELL THEM: 'COME ON, GUYS. THEY HATE YOUR GUTS.'"

and left without raising their weapons. It was an example of what he wanted the Oath Keepers to be—a group that could "keep our country free and keep our fellow travelers honest and not step a foot over the line," he told me. "I had high hopes that the Oath Keepers could be the brand that other groups could rally around."

But behind the scenes, Karriman and others who were close to Rhodes told me, the Oath Keepers were plagued by dysfunction. Rhodes would disappear for long stretches and stall on initiatives—such as a national program to offer community training in firearm safety, first aid, and disaster relief—that would have been a boon to recruiting. Wealthy donors offered money, Karriman said, but when they asked to see the group's books, Rhodes declined. In 2017, a blogger published allegations of embezzlement by the group's IT administrator and accused Rhodes of covering it up, citing documents and recordings. Karriman demanded reforms but was ultimately pushed out. Other board members resigned, chapters dissolved, and the membership files were leaked to the Southern Poverty Law Center. (Rhodes denies these accusations and attributes them to a "coup attempt" by people with whom he has ideological differences.)

Several former deputies to Rhodes told me his behavior had grown erratic. At the Bundy-ranch standoff in 2014, he'd claimed to have intelligence that the Obama administration was planning a drone strike on the Patriot encampment. The Oath Keepers pulled back as militiamen from other groups accused them of desertion. The next year, he said in a speech that John McCain should be tried and hanged for treason because he supported the indefinite detention of American citizens suspected of terrorism. Afterward, he told me, he began facing heightened scrutiny at airports. In 2015, he was disbarred. In 2018, his wife petitioned for an order of protection during divorce proceedings, alleging that Rhodes had once grabbed their daughter by the throat and had a habit, during marital arguments, of waving a pistol in the air before pointing it at his head. (Rhodes denies these allegations. The petition was not granted.)

He was also pushing the Oath Keepers in a direction that clashed with the quieter mode some of his members favored. In the files, I found a note appended to the entry of an Air Force officer asking that his name be stricken from the rolls. The officer “will still be with us,” the note read, but he wanted to protect his 15-year career in the military. The note was from Steve Homan, a Vietnam veteran from Nebraska and a former vice president of the Oath Keepers. When I called him, he recounted how he’d focused on recruiting people with military skills while trying not to draw too much attention. He weeded out the “wild hats.” He wanted people willing and able to “slug back” against the government if necessary but levelheaded enough not to start the fight. He referred to them as “quiet patriots,” his version of the militant right’s Gray Man trope, a silent majority that will come to his side in a conflict.

This description fit a Special Operations soldier I found in the files who told me he’d never appeared at an event but was ready to step in if needed. He has an Oath Keepers bumper sticker on his vehicle at the base, so that other soldiers will ask him about it. The question of violence, he said, “definitely comes up, and my response is that it absolutely could include armed conflict. I like to use the Revolutionary War as an example. The militias were there, well armed and organized, not looking to pick a fight but ready when it happened.”

Homan’s approach required subtlety, and gathering a band of gray men in the shadows was difficult when Oath Keepers were toting weapons on the national news. Appended to several entries, I found letters of resignation in which people complained that the group was becoming too militiatile. But I also noted spikes in new members—each paying a \$50 annual fee—when Rhodes made headlines. “The publicity and the money, it was feeding him,” Homan recalled. Eventually he resigned.

One Marine veteran told me that when he signed up in 2013, he’d recently retired after seven years as a military contractor, during which he’d trained indigenous forces in Afghanistan. Senior Oath Keepers asked him to provide members with paramilitary training. He warned Rhodes that training the wrong people could lead to trouble; they might even turn on him. But he agreed after Rhodes said he could do the vetting himself.

He kept a lookout for people who displayed red flags such as talking about making explosives or silencers. “There were guys who wanted to go full-blown militia. And there were people like myself who just wanted to support the community in case of a breakdown in order,” he said. Eventually he felt that Rhodes was adopting an “offensive mindset”—almost pushing for a fight, especially after the Bundy standoff. He resigned, became a sheriff’s deputy, and is now training as a priest.

IN APRIL, a group called the Michigan Liberty Militia appeared with semiautomatic rifles at a rally in the state capitol, where protesters were demanding an end to coronavirus lockdowns and calling the governor a Nazi. The militiamen looked down from a second-floor balcony as lawmakers wearing body armor pushed through the crowd below. Images of the scene went viral. Afterward, I called one of the militia’s leaders, Phil Robinson, at his

home in a small town west of Lansing. “I’m not going to lie to you, man,” he told me. “I feel like a movie star.”

Rhodes, meanwhile, was struggling to find his place in the anti-lockdown movement. He initially worried about the pandemic, and wrote an early post urging shutdown measures before facing a backlash; one prominent Oath Keeper accused him of being “controlled opposition” and resigned. Soon Rhodes was in the unmasked crowds himself, echoing Trump’s claims that the hysteria about the virus was part of a plot against him.

But the ideas that Rhodes had helped popularize were spreading. Robinson told me he’d never been in the police or military—then noted that joining his group meant swearing an oath to protect the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Other militias simply pasted Rhodes’s 10 orders on their websites without attribution. Videos circulated of uniformed police officers calling the lockdown measures tyrannical, emphasizing their oaths, and telling their fellow officers to wake up.

Then the Black Lives Matter protests erupted. Armed men surfaced amid the unrest, carrying out Ferguson-style operations. Rhodes tried to organize vigilante teams of his own on the social-networking site Discord, but he made little progress before the forum he created was shut down and the participants banned.

Newer groups were calling openly for civil war, saying they wanted to get on with it already. Members of the so-called boogaloo movement wore aloha shirts when they appeared in the crowds with semiautomatic weapons, suggesting that they saw the outbreak of violence as something like a party. Many in the new generation dismissed older leaders like Rhodes as too tame. On gun rights and other issues, they resented their forebears for giving up so much already.

The moment lacked the clarity of the era in which Rhodes had gained prominence, when Patriot groups positioned themselves against Obama and the federal government. Some “boog boi” were white supremacists. Yet when police tried to separate the protesters into opposing sides, some of the young men in aloha shirts insisted on standing with Black Lives Matter. There were alleged shootings by white supremacists and also by people who’d come out to protest against police brutality. Patriot groups became obsessed with a new Black militia called the Not Fucking Around Coalition; the two sides confronted each other at a march honoring Breonna Taylor, and police had to intervene. Sales of guns and ammo were surging.

One afternoon, I received an email from an Army veteran and former Oath Keeper named Adam Boyle, who said he’d been protecting a shopping center in Missouri with a former Marine special operator named Nick. Boyle’s story had the dreamlike logic of nonlinear conflict. “Myself and Nick established a defensive security position in front of Pepperoni Bill’s Pizza,” he wrote, and then protesters arrived. The duo braced themselves, detecting an agitator among the protesters, who appeared to have a knife, but the protesters drove him away. Boyle and his friend began talking with the protesters and realized that they shared some common ground.

Then a new enemy emerged: Two white men drove up, and Nick saw that they had a pistol in the car. When two Black women tried to leave, the men in the car chased after them. “Nick

jumped into my truck, armed himself at a low-ready with his AR-15, and we aggressively pursued the men,” Boyle wrote. The men retreated, and the vigilantes embraced the rally’s organizer. “We had bridged a political gap and come together for a common cause of peace,” Boyle wrote. I noted the almost desperate attempt to reestablish goodwill—and the myriad ways the night could have turned into a catastrophe. While Rhodes was invoking the glory of Lexington Green, a grim reality could have played out in the confusion at Pepperoni Bill’s.

ONE EVENING IN JULY, I walked into a VFW hall outside Nashville, past a bar crowded with maskless patrons and into a windowless room with a dance floor. A couple dozen people sat at tables on one side. Next to the door was a sign-in sheet that asked for the same information that appeared in the leaked files: name and contact information, what skills people could offer.

Rhodes had called the meeting as part of a new organizing push. He’d been driving around the South—attending a militia rally in Virginia one day, visiting members in North Carolina another—and agreed to let me join him in Tennessee. He was late. Some Three Percenters sat in one corner, looking impatient. I sat with a pair of Oath Keepers in another.

One was an older man in an Australian-outback hat. The other was an Iraq War combat veteran who had recently joined the Oath Keepers. He began talking about his experience overseas, and how in the chaos of war, U.S. soldiers had faced the horrible prospect of killing children, who might charge at them strapped with IEDs. “I prefer that to the alternative,” the man in the hat said, “of being splattered against the wall.”

Finally Rhodes walked in and put his dusty Oath Keepers hat on a table. “Why are you all sitting so far apart?” he asked. “Let’s get everyone together.”

Rhodes spoke like an errant professor, intent on explaining an idea: that it’s the people themselves, not any one group, who are the real militia. This, he said, was what the Founders had had in mind. He suggested that the attendees organize locally. The Oath Keepers would act like the Special Forces do overseas, training people and serving as a force multiplier. “Don’t call yourselves Oath Keepers or Three Percenters,” he said. “Call yourselves the militia of Rutherford County.”

As Rhodes told the people in the crowd to be ready for war, I sized them up. Some looked hardened, but many more did not. One man rested a hand on a cane. When Rhodes asked what their concerns were, several said they feared that rioters would show up in their neighborhoods.

His comments became more inflammatory as he began to warn about antifa and protesters. “They are insurrectionists, and we have to suppress that insurrection,” he said. “Eventually they’re going to be using IEDs.”

“Us old vets and younger ones are going to end up having to kill these young kids,” he concluded. “And they’re going to die believing they were fighting Nazis.”

Afterward, Rhodes traveled through Kentucky, meeting Oath Keepers at their homes, where the conversations stretched for hours, always winding around the same question—what if?—and

always coming back to the election. A man named James, a new member, told me people would accept the result—“as long as we believe the vote was fair. And if both sides can’t come to an agreement, then you’re going to have a conflict.”

It could start with a protest gone wrong, he said, or shots from a provocateur. Someone mentioned a young mother in Indiana who’d been shot and killed after reportedly shouting “All lives matter” during an argument with strangers.

“We talk about being attacked,” another man said. “Now, I have a question. What if you’re attacked in subtle and consistent ways over a period of time?”

I DROVE FROM Kentucky into the mountains of Carroll County, Virginia, and, in a field along a winding road, parked at the end of a long row of pickup trucks and SUVs. A hundred people, most of them armed, were looking up at a man giving a speech from the back of a flatbed truck that was painted in camouflage. Between the crowd and me were two young men with semiautomatic rifles. They stopped me in a manner—neither friendly nor unfriendly—that I’d encountered at checkpoints in other parts of the world.

So-called militia musters like this one had been quietly happening all over the state. The legislature was still pushing ahead with gun-control measures, and people were preparing for the possibility of more riots, and for the election. Rhodes was scheduled to give remarks but, as usual, he was late.

One of the young men said something into a walkie-talkie, and a muscular Iraq War veteran named Will joined me and explained the reason for the guards and the men posted in the woods on the far side of the field. They weren’t worried about law enforcement—a deputy from the sheriff’s department stood not far from me, leaning against his cruiser. It was leftists, antifa, who might record your license plate, dox you, show up at your home.

This was a different kind of crowd than Rhodes had drawn to the VFW hall. Many were in their 20s and 30s and had come in uniforms—some Three Percenters wore black T-shirts and camouflage pants, and members of another group stood together in matching woodland fatigues. From the latter, a man climbed onto the flatbed and introduced himself as Joe Klemm, the leader of a new militia called the Ridge Runners.

He was a 29-year-old former marine and spoke with a boom that brought the crowd to attention. “I’ve seen this coming since I was in the military,” he said. “For far too long, we’ve given a little bit here and there in the interest of peace. But I will tell you that peace is not that sweet. Life is not that dear. I’d rather die than not live free.”

“Hoo-ah,” some people cheered.

“It’s going to change in November,” Klemm continued. “I follow the Constitution. We demand that the rest of you do the same. We demand that our police officers do the same. We’re going to make these people fear us again. We should have been shooting a long time ago instead of standing off to the side.”

“Are you willing to lose your lives?” he asked. “Are you willing to lose the lives of your loved ones—maybe see one of your loved ones ripped apart right next to you?”



Militia musters have been quietly occurring across Virginia as the state legislature has advanced new gun-control laws.

After he finished, Rhodes rolled up in his rented Dodge Ram and parked in the grass beside me. He walked to the flatbed but didn't climb it. Then he turned and faced the crowd. His speech meandered back to revolutionary times, evoking the traditions of a country founded in bloodshed. He urged them to build a militia for their community.

Rhodes stayed at the muster long after most people had left, meeting every last person, his history lessons stretching on and on. Eventually the conversation turned to the problems in the area—the drug overdoses and mental-health crises and the desperate state of the local economy. The people there seemed to believe that taking up arms would somehow stave off the country's unraveling rather than speed it along.

When the protests erupted in Kenosha a month later, many of the demonstrators brought guns, and vigilante groups quickly formed on the other side. They called themselves the Kenosha

Guard. There was a confrontation near a gas station like the one at Pepperoni Bill's, and a teenager allegedly opened fire and killed two people. A man affiliated with antifa allegedly gunned down a Trump supporter in Portland later that week, and Rhodes declared that "the first shot has been fired."

By then, some writers popular on the militant right had been warning that wars don't always start with a clear, decisive event—an attack, a coup, an invasion—and that you might not realize you're in one until it's under way. Civil conflict is gradual. The path to it, I thought, might begin with brooding over it. It could start with opening your mind. *A*

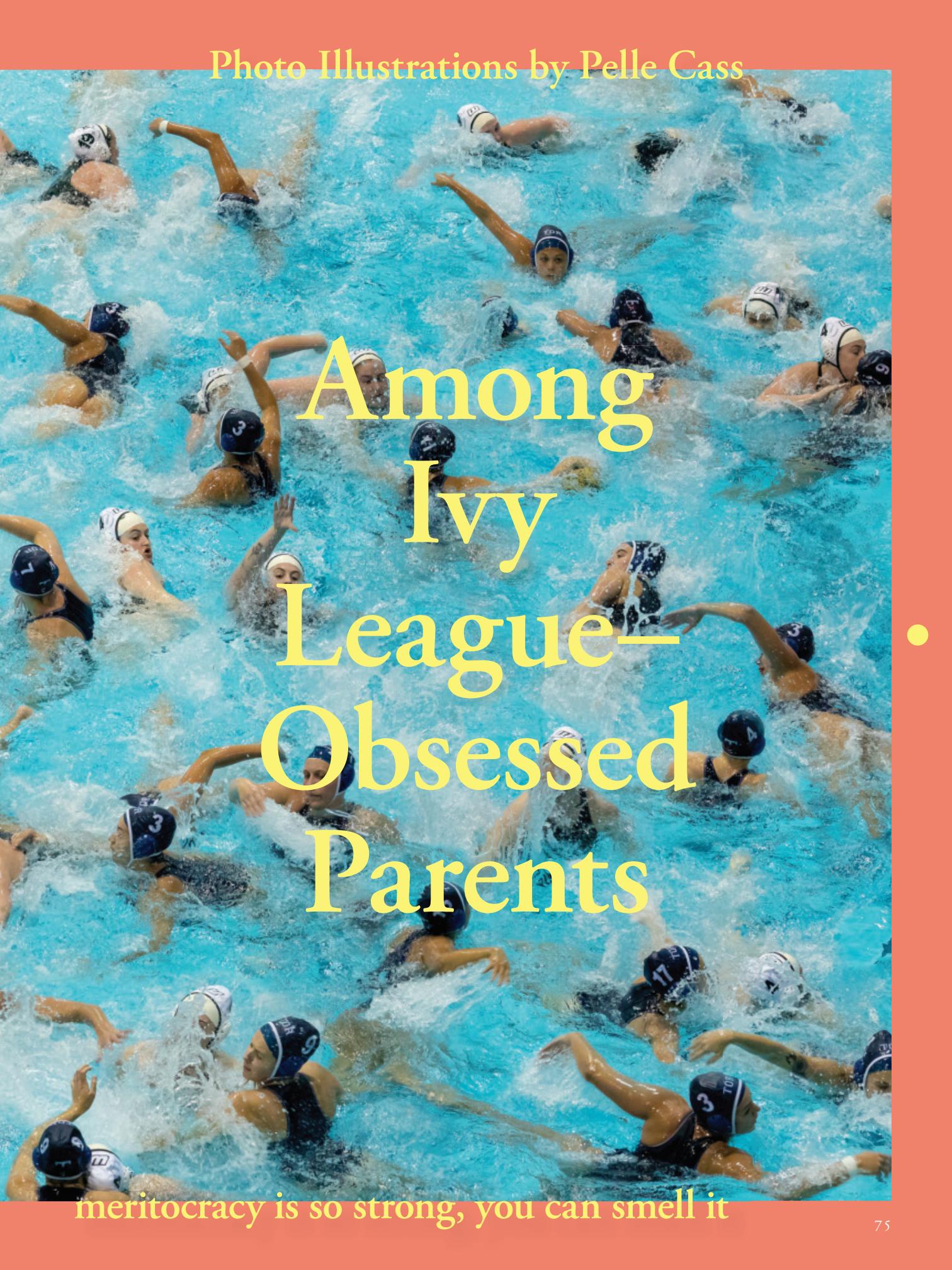
Mike Giglio is the author of Shatter the Nations: ISIS and the War for the Caliphate.

By Ruth S. Barrett

The Mad, Mad World of Niche Sports

Where the desperation of late-stage

Photo Illustrations by Pelle Cass



Among Ivy League— Obsessed Parents

meritocracy is so strong, you can smell it

On paper, Sloane, a buoyant, chatty, stay-at-home mom from Fairfield County, Connecticut, seems almost unbelievably well prepared to shepherd her three daughters through the roiling world of competitive youth sports.

She played tennis and ran track in high school and has an advanced degree in behavioral medicine. She wrote her master's thesis on the connection between increased aerobic activity and attention span. She is also versed in statistics, which comes in handy when she's analyzing her eldest daughter's junior-squash rating—and whiteboarding the consequences if she doesn't step up her game. "She needs at least a 5.0 rating, or she's going to Ohio State," Sloane told me.

She laughed: "I don't mean to throw Ohio State under the bus. It's an amazing school with amazing school spirit."

But a little over a year ago, during the Fourth of July weekend, Sloane began to think that maybe it was time to call it quits. She was crouched in the vestibule of the Bay Club in Redwood City, strategizing on the phone with her husband about a "malicious refereeing" dispute that had victimized her daughter at the California Summer Gold tournament. He had his own problem. In Columbus, Ohio, at the junior-fencing nationals with the couple's two younger girls and son, he reported that their middle daughter, a 12-year-old saber fencer, had been stabbed in the jugular during her first bout. The wound was right next to the carotid artery, and he was withdrawing her from the tournament and flying home.

She'd been hurt before while fencing—on one occasion gashed so deeply in the thigh that blood seeped through her pants—but this was the first time a blade had jabbed her in the throat. It was a Fourth of July massacre.

"I thought, *What are we doing?*" said Sloane, who asked to be identified by her middle name to protect her daughters' privacy and college-recruitment chances. "It's the Fourth of July. You're in Ohio; I'm in California. What are we doing to our family? We're torturing our kids ridiculously. They're not succeeding. We're using all our resources and emotional bandwidth for a fool's folly."

Yet Sloane found that she didn't know how to make the folly stop. The practices, clinics, and private lessons continued to pile up, pushing everything else off the calendar (except for homework; Sloane knew her girls had to be outstanding athletes *and* outstanding students to get into the right school). "We just got caught up in it," she said. "We thought this is what good parents do. They fight for opportunities for their kids."

In 1988, the University of California sociologist Harry Edwards published an indictment of the "single-minded pursuit of sports" in Black communities. The "tragic" overemphasis on athletics at the expense of school and family, he wrote in *Ebony* magazine, was leaving "thousands and thousands of Black youths in obsessive pursuit of sports goals foredoomed to elude the vast and overwhelming majority of them." In a plea to his fellow Black people, Edwards declared, "We can simply no longer permit many among our most competitive and gifted youths to sacrifice a wealth of human potential on the altar of athletic aspiration."

Thirty years later, in a twist worthy of a Jordan Peele movie, Fairfield County has come to resemble Compton in the monomaniacal focus on sports. “There’s no more school,” a parent from the town of Darien told me flatly. (She, like Sloane and several other parents, did not want to be identified for privacy and recruitment reasons.) “There’s no more church. No more friends. We gave it all up for squash.” She says she is working on a memoir that she intends to self-publish, titled *Squashed*.

A story published last fall by *The Daily Princetonian* found that the Gold Coast of Connecticut pumps more athletic recruits into Ivy League schools than any other region in the nation. Kids’ sports look a little different here—as they do in upscale neighborhoods across America. Backyards feature batting cages, pitching tunnels, fencing pistes, Olympic-size hockey rinks complete with floodlights and generators. Hotly debated zoning-board topics include building codes for at-home squash courts and storm-drainage plans to mitigate runoff from private ice rinks. Whereas the *Hoop Dreamers* of the Chicago projects pursued sports as a path out of poverty and hardship, the kids of Fairfield County aren’t gunning for the scholarship money. It’s more about status maintenance, by any means necessary.

Or, as the Darien parent told me, they’re using athletics to escape “the penalty that comes from being from an advantaged zip code.” She continued: “Being who you are is not enough. It might be enough in Kansas. But not here.”

The special boost for recruited athletes, known as preferential admission, can be equivalent to hundreds of SAT points. According to *The Washington Post*, Harvard, which typically admits approximately 5 percent of its applicants, reports acceptance rates as high as 88 percent for athletes endorsed by its coaches. “Parents see the numbers,” says Luke Walton, an Olympic rower and the founder of Rower Academy, a San Diego-based recruiting consultancy for high-school crew athletes. “They see that if their child can get the backing of a coach, they are likely to get in. That’s a shiny object—a fishing lure for parents. They look at that and say: ‘That’s the answer. Sports is the answer.’”

Except now it isn’t, and maybe it never quite was. Even before the coronavirus pandemic brought all sports to a halt, a pall was settling over the phthalate-free turf fields of Greenwich, Connecticut, and Palo Alto, California. Over the past decade, the for-profit ecosystem that has sprouted up around athletic recruiting at top-rung universities has grown so excessively ornate, so circular in its logic, that it’s become self-defeating. More and more entrants are chasing an unchanging number of prizes. The Varsity Blues scandal exposed how hedge-funders and Hollywood B-listers were turning their progeny into football kickers and coxswains through the magic of Photoshop. But more commonly, alpha sports parents followed the rules—at least those of the meritocracy—only to discover that they’d built the 80th- or 90th-best lacrosse midfielder in the country. Which, it turns out, barely qualifies you for a spot at the bottom of the roster at Bates.

Dan Walsh, a two-time Olympian who runs a crew consultancy in Norwalk, Connecticut, says the upward spiral of competitiveness in recherché sports like fencing, squash, crew,

water polo, and lacrosse has been remarkable to witness. “If you’re trying to figure out what it takes to get in wherever you want, no matter what, don’t be a cusp athlete,” he says. “Be a Clark Dean. Be a once-in-a-generation rower who won the junior world championship as a 17-year-old and missed his sophomore year at Harvard to train for the Olympics.”

But not every kid can be a Clark Dean. That may seem obvious, but as a water-polo mom from Stamford, Connecticut, told me, her fellow parents have refused to accept it. Racked by admissions anxiety and the perceived injustices of “environmental dashboards” and “adversity scores”—two methods colleges use to increase racial and economic diversity—they’ve ignored, or failed to grasp, the concept of what this mother, an economist by training, calls “fixed constraints.”

In March, COVID-19 arrived—the ultimate fixed constraint. The rackets were put away, the fencing blades sheathed, all tournaments canceled. There would be no Easter Extravaganza, no Beak of the Chick, no Lax by the Sea. Squash on Fire went down in flames. Nobody could schmooze, outwit, or buy their way around the virus.

For a time, Sloane fought it. She reconfigured the basement so that her younger two could fence. She created a fencing strip using floor-marking tape, bought headless dummies to give the girls a target. She reached out to a friend with a private squash court so



In a twist worthy
of a Jordan Peele movie,
Fairfield County has come
to resemble Compton in
the monomaniacal focus
on sports.

that her eldest daughter could work on her ground strokes. Her husband dusted off the beach-house blender and began making vitamin-packed smoothies. “We all started drinking the shakes with the spinach,” she told me. “We were going to start working out as a family. Weights, pull-ups, all of it. We were trying to keep the girls engaged.”

Eventually, though, she gave up. “The girls didn’t want to fence against headless mannequins, and they didn’t want to fight each other,” she said. “There was no one to ref it. They were suffering, snapping at each other. One morning I woke up and I said, ‘This stops right now.’”





THE PANDEMIC HIT the high-school class of 2021 quickest and hardest. Student athletes struggled to process it all, as their college plans blew up and their beloved squash courts were redefined as boxes of super-spread, their fields blocked by yellow police tape. “They’ll always wonder what would’ve happened—and who they could have wowed,” *Inside Lacrosse* CEO Terry Foy told me, referring to the high-school seniors. “To have that opportunity lost ...” His voice trailed off, before he picked up again, mournfully: “The kid who would have gone to Yale now goes to Georgetown. The kid who would have gone to Georgetown now goes to Loyola. On and on. And then eventually you get down to Wentworth. And then you just don’t play college sports.”

The bad news got worse as spring turned into summer. In May, Brown announced the permanent elimination of fencing and squash. In July, the Ivy League conference officially canceled fall sports and warned that the spring season could be next. In a press release, Harvard said its department of athletics, a sprawling fiefdom that includes 42 varsity sports, would temporarily pivot to “wellness programming.” Soon after, Stanford dropped 11 varsity programs, including fencing, squash, and men’s crew, citing factors such as gender equity, potential savings, and fan interest.

That was disheartening enough, but the bigger worry, says David Poolman, the executive director of the College Squash Association, is that “the door is now open for other athletic directors to do the same.” Taken to the extreme, the fear is that the coronavirus will become a mass-extinction event for squash and fencing and their ilk. But in truth, these niche sports passed their saturation point long before the pandemic hit. There are simply too many kids competing for too few spots.

Within the past decade, the number of high-school participants in U.S. Squash–accredited tournaments more than tripled, while the spots available on college teams barely budged. On the girls’ side, there were 383 openings in 2008; 10 years later, there were 436. For the boys, the comparable figures are 464 and 487. Not to mention the fact that last year at Harvard, for example, two-thirds of the squash roster was made up of international players.

In water polo, high-school participation has risen from 36,000 to 45,000 kids over the past five years. During that same time, 21 men’s college spots were added, for a total of 1,072, while the number of women’s spots increased by 16, to 1,217. As with squash, many dominant teams fill out their rosters with international players—from countries as disparate as Australia and Montenegro. Dan Sharadin, the commissioner of the Collegiate Water Polo Association, matter-of-factly sums up the state of affairs: “If every varsity program has an incoming class of 10 water-polo athletes, that leaves about 9,000 high-schoolers with no place to go.”

But, he told me, he’s got this. Pre-pandemic, he was barnstorming the country, setting up meetings with the athletic directors of small, midwestern Division II and III schools. He came armed

To make the images that appear in this story, the photographer Pelle Cass locked his camera onto a tripod for the duration of an event, capturing up to 1,000 photographs from one spot. The images were then layered and compiled into a single digital file to create a kind of time-lapse still photo.

with sheaves of data on the elevated socioeconomic status of the typical high-school water-polo player, along with a rebranding campaign and a catchy new slogan: “Just add water polo.”

“I got a few bites,” Sharadin said. “They can see that these families will pay full freight. For tuition-driven schools, adding water polo can actually be a revenue increase. What’s great is that water-polo athletes tend to graduate at a much higher rate than the average college student.”

And the schools like that because it shows that water-polo kids are serious, committed students?

“Yes,” Sharadin said. “And it’s also like, *Hey, this means we’re going to be certain of four years of tuition payments.* As opposed to two or three.”

Will the swanky water-polo families, who may be holding out hope for Harvard, Stanford, USC, go along with any of this?

“Parents need to open their minds,” Sharadin said. “They’re not likely to be as excited about Millersville University or Bloomsburg as Penn or Columbia. I get that. But that’s something that these families will have to come to grips with.”

“Sorry, but there’s no way in hell,” said the water-polo mom from Stamford. “What parent wants to have a child who’s going to be playing for a bottom-tier school with bottom-tier academics in the armpit of the United States? I want to be polite. But there’s no way in hell.”

Look at fencing or crew, and the trends are the same: a doubling of junior players, and flatlining collegiate openings. For lacrosse, the situation is perhaps worse, if only because the absolute number of kids playing the game is higher. Lacrosse has topped the list of the most-added high-school sports for the past seven years, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations, but again, its growth at high-status colleges has been anemic.

Before the pandemic, determined lacrosse families from New Canaan, Greenwich, and Darien had put their heads together to try to address the dearth of college-lacrosse spots, with a twist on Sharadin’s approach to water polo. Their inspiration: the JetBlue founder and New Canaan resident David Neeleman, whose \$15.6 million donation helped establish a Division I lacrosse team at the University of Utah—his son Seth is a star defender and team captain. “We’ve been looking into what is the ticket price to start a men’s [varsity lacrosse] program” at Stanford, one parent told me. “We could create lacrosse at Stanford with \$20 million. If we could just find \$20 million, we could make this work.”

One Greenwich parent told me she believes that, far from being a glide path to the Ivies, lacrosse had actually hurt her older son’s college prospects. As team captain and a straight-A student with stellar test scores, he would have been a credible applicant to NYU or Columbia—but these schools lack varsity-lacrosse programs, and he’d fallen in love with his sport. “There were eight or 10 strong academic schools we couldn’t even look at, because they didn’t have varsity lacrosse,” she said.

Her kid just completed his freshman year at a not-so-fancy college in the South, and, according to his mom, he’s happy enough. But she feels bitter, and wonders if her younger boy should quit club lacrosse. “The guys who get recruited to the

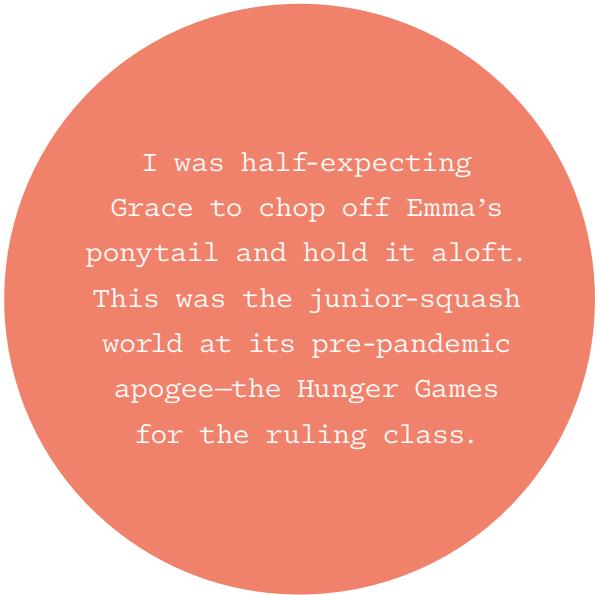
Ivies—it turns out these guys are beasts,” she said. “I saw them at showcases. They were like stallions.”

She and her husband feel hoodwinked by the directors of her son’s club-lacrosse program, which happily stoked her fantasies while stockpiling her money: \$10,000 a year for 11 years. “They were talking Notre Dame for him,” she said. “Our eyes were glistening … We went to 16 showcases last year. I can’t believe the money we spent to see our son rejected 16 times.”

Similar tales of woe flowed through neighborhood gossip channels and chat boards across Fairfield County. The junior-Olympic fencing champion and straight-A student who was recruited by Notre Dame and signed a National Letter of Intent, only to have his application rejected at the last minute because he didn’t take enough AP classes. A top-25 squash player with a perfect SAT score who didn’t even get a reach-out from Amherst. The rower who committed to Yale without properly decommitting from Brown—and was dropped by both. Were elite youth sports working out for anyone? Or was it all a regatta to nowhere?

“I understand the frustration,” says Jeff Brameier, who is entering his 36th year as the lacrosse coach at Darien High School, consistently one of the highest-ranked public-school lacrosse teams in the country. “I’ve had a few team captains who were among my best defensive kids ever. Near-perfect GPAs. I couldn’t get them into an Ivy. I tried.”

Amid the shifting norms, there’s a growing sense of unease among suburban parents in niche-sport hubs—a dread that they went too far, failed to read the room. And they’re not wrong. “It’s easy to stereotype the Fairfield County player,” says Lars Tiffany, the men’s varsity-lacrosse coach at the University of Virginia. “The Fairfield County player is the rich kid who still has his umbilical



I was half-expecting Grace to chop off Emma’s ponytail and hold it aloft. This was the junior-squash world at its pre-pandemic apogee—the Hunger Games for the ruling class.

cord connected: the kid who doesn’t really have to take ownership of his mistakes or actions.” Tiffany insists he doesn’t buy in to such broad-brush stereotypes. “We try not to care where they’re from,” he says. And yet, “if they’re from a hotbed, there’s an expectation level.”

He elaborates: “Do I hold the Fairfield County lacrosse player to a higher standard? Of course. You just know he’s been coached up. So flash-forward to me watching a [high school] junior on the lacrosse field. The thought is going through my brain that I like his skill set but there’s room for growth. But then I think, *Wait*. He’s already had a lot of people working on these things. He’s a little tapped out. Maybe I’ll take a player from Northern California or Texas. Someone who hasn’t been exposed to such elite coaching. Someone whose best lacrosse could be ahead of him. You try to tell yourself not to overanalyze, but you do.”

UPPER-CRUST SPORTS such as rowing and fencing have a storied tradition at the Ivies, dating back to the 1852 Harvard-versus-Yale regatta held at Lake Winnipesaukee, New Hampshire, considered to be the first intercollegiate sporting event in the United States. Recent cutbacks notwithstanding, Ivy League schools are top-heavy with athletic recruits. Of Princeton’s 5,300 undergraduates, approximately 930—or 17.5 percent—are recruited players; by comparison, 650—or less than 2 percent—of the University of Alabama’s 33,000 students fall into that category.

Steve Dittmore, a sports-management professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, told me that the proliferation of relatively obscure sports at prestigious schools harkens back to the classical-Greek model of the scholar-athlete, a person expected to seek excellence in both body and mind. “In the past, schools like Brown and Dartmouth have offered more athletic opportunities because they believe that athletics are a key part of the growth of students,” Dittmore said. “But, of course, not every school is obligated to provide squash and fencing.”

Indeed. And as spots dwindle—as Clark Dean fantasies are dashed on the rocks of scarcity and austerity—the culture of these formerly genteel sports has frayed. “In small sports, the parents figure out quickly whom their child is competing with for college positions,” says Tim Morehouse, an Olympic silver-medal fencer and the founder of the Tim Morehouse Fencing Club, in the New York metro area. “Instead of letting their child develop, you have parents trying to compete behind the scenes, to the point of trashing other athletes.”

Morehouse knows of a situation in which a fencer received a “likely” letter from an Ivy. Shortly thereafter, the university’s admissions department began to get letters saying that the athlete was a bad person and had faked competition results. The fencer’s high-school guidance department contacted the university to correct the falsehood—and what the department heard back was jarring, Morehouse told me: “They said, ‘You have nothing to worry about. This actually happens all the time.’”

Morehouse and his coaches now advise junior fencers to keep their lips zipped. “I tell my kids, ‘Let’s keep it close to the vest. Don’t talk to anybody about where you are applying. People might try to get you.’”

A squash parent told me that he worries the kids are “starting to hurt each other” during matches. “I’ve noticed that my child and another player have a suspiciously high accident rate. The director knows not to put them on the court together. It must be subintentional resentment.”

This ethos of spirited competition was on full display at the Connecticut Junior Championships, held at Chelsea Piers in Stamford in January. The squash complex was toward the back of the building, past the hockey rink and snack shack. There were two parallel rows of transparent glass boxes. Inside each box, sweaty young squash players competed in front of a viewing area of parent spectators. It was like Foucault’s panopticon, except for private-school kids in Dri-Fit.

On an adjacent practice court, a dad warmed up his daughter. “Do you love your sport?” he yelled. “Then give me 500 straight rails hit along the line, toward the back.”

On a black-leather sofa in the lounge, another player moaned and clutched his side. “Did you move the wrong way?” his coach asked. “Any pain when you breathe in and out?”

Inside the complex, tournament play had already commenced. On Court 6, two high-school juniors in flippy skirts dashed around, waving their rackets like wands.

“That’s it, Emma!” shouted a tall, slender blond woman in a quilted Moncler puffer jacket, rising to her feet.

“Keep up the tempo, Grace,” hollered a stout man in the front row wearing a grape-purple polo shirt.

The two girls played with determination, smashing shot after shot, muscling the ball out of the corners and slicing it back and forth with brutal force. Improbably, both were perfectly tan in the dead of winter, their whipping ponytails the same shade of buttered-toast blond. They collided, bumping hips, but played through the interference, pausing only to glower at each other and raise a hand in mute warning.

From the bleachers, parents swiveled their heads left and right. “Why did she make that shot?” a dad said. “It was a well-executed dumb shot.”

“Great eyeball control,” another dad observed.

“She doesn’t move well, but her hands are amazing,” said a third.

Between games, the players were allotted 90 seconds for swigs of water and a quick check-in with a coach or parent. “I don’t care how tired and freaked out you are!” Emma’s coach told her. “She’s more tired and freaked out! Remember that.” Flush-faced, Emma gulped her water and nodded vigorously.

When the break was over, the conversation in the bleachers turned to college prospects. “Georgetown has gone cold,” a parent said. “But he may get the last spot at Columbia.”

“Did you see that kid Mohammed? … No, the *other* Mohammed. His academics aren’t strong, but his squash is unbelievable.”

Grace ultimately won the match. Afterward, the woman sitting next to me filled me in. “Okay, so that was not typical. Emma and Grace were both playing tight. Making uncharacteristic mistakes. It’s because this was a big match. Both girls are uncommitted. And, obviously, they have their eye on the same college spots.”

The two girls met at center court and shook hands. Grace tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling, breathing hard. The vibe was primal and strange. I was half-expecting Grace to chop off Emma’s ponytail and hold it aloft. This was the junior-squash world at its pre-pandemic apogee—the Hunger Games for the ruling class.

TO PROGRESS THROUGH the U.S. Squash pipeline, the families of young players shell out up to \$400 for a 45-minute lesson with a top pro at least once a week, and in many cases two or three times a week during the off-season. Participants are expected to fly all over the country—sometimes with only a week's notice—to compete in age-group invitatorials that cost \$125 to \$250 to enter, not including airfare and hotels. Then there are the extras. In 2018, Natalie Grainger, who at the time was the director of squash at Chelsea Piers, put together an optional two-week trip to South Africa for its junior athletes. The kids played tournaments in Johannesburg and Cape Town, then decompressed with a three-night luxury safari and shark-diving off the coast of Gansbaai. Cost: \$9,000, flights not included. She had 15 takers.

The ultrarich squash families go even further, installing pros off tour in their guest homes or in-law suites, to be available for private instruction on demand. “We’ve emptied out the U.K. of all their squash coaches,” one parent told me. “They all live here in Fairfield County, in people’s homes, teaching their kids on their private courts.”

Home courts—and even what one Greenwich squash mom calls “architecturally significant” home courts—no longer provoke gasps of amazement. “It’s really just a simple box,” she says. “Our court was actually not a huge expense. Of course, there is this beautiful structure around it that was rather costly.”

To manufacture an Ivy-recruitable squash athlete, some families devise “a long-term plan, almost like a business plan,” says the pro Egyptian player Wael El Hindi, a former World No. 8 and the 2010 U.S. Open winner, who now works as a private instructor for American juniors. Not that he’s opposed to this approach: “If a kid learns squash the right way, it will build strong character. When you deliver a kid to Harvard at the end of the day, what matters is their character.”

El Hindi now lives in Palm Beach, Florida, where he works as the personal coach for the teenage daughter of the billionaire asset manager Chris Shumway. The founder and managing partner of Shumway Capital, Shumway sold his Greenwich home for \$48 million in 2019 and decamped to South Florida—in part, one acquaintance speculated, because he wanted to lift his daughter’s squash game and “was completely exhausted by Connecticut’s nonsense.”

Although Florida has not traditionally been known as a seedbed of squash, Shumway moved quickly to create a microclimate around his child: snapping up El Hindi, and embarking on a project to build a premier squash facility in the area. “He’s been a risk-taker all his life,” El Hindi says. “He’s passionate. He thinks it’s not fair to have squash centered in one place ... He knows exactly what this is going to take.” (Shumway declined to comment.)

Before the Shumways, El Hindi worked as the private coach for the daughter and son of former American Express CEO Jim Robinson and his wife, Linda Robinson, a PR maven and board member of U.S. Squash, as well as of the Harlem-based StreetSquash. “Linda was really involved in her kids’ squash,” El Hindi says. “She wanted to make sure everything was done the right way. Maybe you take risks in business, but you don’t take risks with your kids.”

In 2015, El Hindi was joined at the Robinsons’ by Imran Khan, a 39-year-old former top-10 pro-squash player who hails from a legendary Pakistani squash family. Khan’s job: part-time tournament coach. “For me, it was anthropology,” Khan told me. “It was an experiment I undertook in order to understand this kind of family.” The money





was good, too. “The whole thing was like a paid vacation at a five-star hotel,” he said. “I lived large.”

Khan accompanied the family to competitions and for about half a year gave the children twice-a-week lessons on a small court squirreled away on the 54th floor of a residential building in Midtown Manhattan. The fact that the Robinsons lived in New York City and Khan lived in Philadelphia wasn’t a problem, Khan says. His employer covered the cost of his round-trip train ride from Philly to NYC on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and his car service to and from the squash court.

The scene on the 54th floor was high-pressure, Khan says. If the kids had a lot of homework, or a big test the next day, they’d hit the books during the breaks in practice. “The nannies would be waiting with an equation or a math problem for them to solve while they drank their water,” Khan recalled. “They needed to solve the equation before they headed back onto the court. I couldn’t believe it.” The nannies also sometimes ferried meals in coolers to the 54th floor, he says. “I’d ask what was inside, and the nannies would say, ‘This is the kids’ dinner.’”

In March 2017, Khan accompanied Linda and her children on a private-jet trip to a squash tournament. “We flew out of Teterboro to San Diego,” he said. “I’d never flown private. I was excited. I thought I was going to kick back, maybe listen to some music, enjoy a drink.” Instead, a half hour into the flight, “I saw a plethora of paperwork come out of the nannies’ bag.” The Robinsons had instructed the nannies to compile opposition-research dossiers for the upcoming tourney. “They had other coaches in other cities find out details on the other kids,” Khan said: Did they have an attacking style or a defensive style? Were they physically fit, or could you run them around and wear them down? Khan says that while it’s not unheard-of to do informal intelligence-gathering for an upcoming match, it was unusual to assemble these sorts of exhaustive portfolios. “I was supposed to go through it all and then sit down with the kids and explain the game plan. I was like, *Are you out of your fucking mind?* It all seemed so unfair.” (Linda Robinson declined to comment on behalf of herself and her children.)

Nevertheless, Khan continued to work with the Robinsons on and off for another six months. His stint with the family ended in late 2017, when the family brought on Shaun Moxham, the former coach of the two-time world champion David Palmer. The Robinson kids were both recruited by Ivy League schools.

THERE IS A NAME for the youth athlete who has too many coaches, too much training, and who treats sports as a full-time job: the overserved athlete. And many of the players in this category are suffering physically and emotionally.

Ann Kitt Carpenetti, who runs operations for U.S. Lacrosse, says that when a consortium of college-lacrosse coaches recently asked her organization for a closed-door meeting, she assumed that they wanted to discuss the rules for a large tournament. “They said, ‘No, we’re trying to help our student athletes navigate life.’ They’re not equipped. Growing up, they had everything organized for them, and now they don’t know how to take initiative.” Another topic raised by the coaches: the latest NCAA survey documenting binge-drinking, marijuana use, and other drug abuse. “The

lacrosse rates are currently off the charts,” Carpenetti told me. “This is how our students are choosing to cope with physical and mental strain. It’s gotten so much worse. It makes me tear up.”

Mike Way, the Gregory Lee ’87 and Russell Ball ’88 Endowed Coach for Squash at Harvard, agrees that these days, the student athletes he brings in to assess and interview seem to lack things that he called “concerning.” “I get kids every year who withdraw from competition at my camps because they lose a match to a kid whom they beat last time. Of course, this triggers an SOS from Mom and Dad: *Does he need a sports psychologist? Does he need a new private coach?*”

Way, a wiry, elegant British man in his mid-60s, rises from his Herman Miller chair and begins pacing the floor of his office, talking further about Mom and Dad. “I don’t care if they’re well-meaning. I don’t care if the bad parenting is accidental! They take the passion and enthusiasm out of it for the kid. It depresses the crap out of me. And you know what? It backfires.”

Way says that burnout is the No. 1 reason he passes on a recruit. “Now, the interesting thing is that many of these kids think they can hide it. But they can’t. We see right through the masquerade. We can see burnout, and we can smell it.”

Way’s radar isn’t perfect. He always ends up with a few over-served souls in his program: “We have to get mental-health services to help them.” He points to three names scrawled in green ink near the top of his giant dry-erase board. “These are the students who are having a hard time currently. I check in on them first thing, middle of the day, and last thing at night. Multiple touchpoints throughout the day.”

Katie Andersen, who runs an Orange County, California-based college-advising company called College Fit, says that among the moral dilemmas the families she works with face is whether to come clean with a college coach about their kids’ multiple concussions. “Parents will be sitting in my office debating whether it makes sense to tell, and I want to scream.” Instead, she tries to play nice: “I say, ‘Can we please step back and think about your child? He’s had three concussions, multiple overuse injuries, multiple surgeries—and he’s playing soccer in college? There’s not even a question of him *not* playing?’”

Ben Prentiss, the go-to strength and conditioning trainer for Fairfield County’s adolescent-athlete set, gets similarly incensed as he talks about the young clients who visit his facility in Stamford. “We’ve rehabilitated high-level rowers who couldn’t walk because of back problems,” he says. “We see herniated disks. Soft-tissue overuse. Overuse patterns in the hip flexors and lower back. These kids are hurting. Meanwhile, the parents have this crazy, beady-eyed look. They’re not even really listening to me.”

“We say to the rowers, ‘You’ve got to get out of the rowing position. You need relaxation techniques; you need diaphragmatic stretching.’ And the dad says, ‘Well, we have to get her back on the [rowing machine]. We need to shave three seconds off her erg time or Georgetown doesn’t want her.’”

I N JUNE, Sloane told me her family was reveling in a sense of restored balance and peace. “Last night the girls were lying on the trampoline, finding shapes in the maple trees. I realized that I’d



The stampede of the affluent into grim-faced, highly competitive sports has been a tragicomedy of perverse incentives.

never seen them doing that—just lying down on the trampoline together, giggling about different things. I think they’re going to look back on this period as one of the happiest times of their youth. It feels so good to get off that hamster wheel.”

But by late July she was back on again—contemplating one daughter’s switch from saber to foil fencing; installing another on a secret bunker court secured ahead of time by a far-seeing coach who prophesied that someday, a global pandemic would come along and shut down the squash world. “It’s very under the radar,” she told me. “I can’t say too much more about it. We have to park down the block. If people find out, they’ll get really mad.”

It’s a haunting vision: the ponytailed girls in hidden glass boxes training harder and harder, hitting straight rails along the line, faster and faster, even as the college spots melt away and the cultural sands shift beneath their feet.

“Let’s be honest, there’s no way Stanford’s decision was financial,” a Darien squash mom confided to me after the university cut the sport. “I have a sinking certainty there are other strong invisible forces at work.” She was referring to something the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Melissa Korn noted in an article in July, though it’s hardly a mysterious plot. The “optics” of “country-club staples” such as squash and golf help explain why these sports got slashed. “At a time when racial justice and diversity have become a more open national conversation,” Korn wrote, “the sports being eliminated are the ones that tend to draw overwhelmingly white, often wealthy players.”

The squash establishment is trying to fix this. The first so-called urban-squash program, SquashBusters, was founded 25 years ago in Boston, with the aim of connecting “two seemingly different worlds.” Since then, the sport has been brought to more than 20 inner-city enclaves, including New York City, Baltimore, Oakland, and Detroit—hooking up 2,500-plus public-school kids with tutoring, training, camps, travel subsidies, and scholarships. The \$20 million annual budget for these programs sluices in mostly through private donations, and top squash families like the Robinsons are fixtures on the urban-squash gala circuit.

And yet, according to figures compiled by the Squash and Education Alliance, an umbrella group for these programs, each year only approximately 50 of their students play on college varsity teams. Although several graduates of squash-access programs have reached the pinnacle of the sport—Reyna Pacheco of Access Youth Academy in San Diego became a top-100 world pro; the Bronx player Jessenia Pacheco (no relation) was a two-time All-American at Cornell—no player from an SEA program is currently represented among the top 30 juniors at any age level. Bryan Patterson, the director of CitySquash in the Bronx, says the odds are stacked against his athletes. “My kids have the talent, but they don’t have the means,” he told me. “These wealthy kids are getting a minimum of an hour and a half, five days a week. That’s verging on a pro schedule. We can only do things in groups. We don’t have the ability to do things one-on-one.” In other words, the same squash luminaries who underwrite squash-access programs have installed training regimens for their own children that make it difficult for regular kids to crack the system. There may be no better allegory for our era.

The stampede of the affluent into grim-faced, highly competitive sports has been a tragicomedy of perverse incentives and social evolution in unequal times: a Darwinian parable of the mayhem that can ensue following the discovery of even a minor advantage. Like a peacock rendered nearly flightless by gaudy tail feathers, the overserved athlete is the product of a process that has become maladaptive, and is now harming the very blue-chip demographic it was supposed to help.

It’s hard not to feel at least a jot of sympathy for these parents who earnestly believed they were doing right by their children, and especially for the young athletes—who, like Lewis Carroll’s oysters, were brought out so far, and made to trot so quick—and who now must think that the world is conspiring against them. Sports wasn’t the golden ticket after all. As the summer gave way to fall, and the Greenwich Academy squash courts were repurposed as math classrooms, the desperation of late-stage meritocracy was so palpable that, in the words of Harvard’s Mike Way, you could smell it.

Sloane is still trying to figure it out. As an insurance policy, she’s decided to add rowing to her oldest girl’s sports schedule. “My daughter is 5 foot 11,” she said. “That’s not the optimum body for squash. She has the frame for rowing. I’ve always had it in the back of my head. Rowing moves the needle way more.”

In July, she put the girl in a single scull. “When she gets to a regatta, that’s when the other shoe will drop,” Sloane told me cheerfully. “She doesn’t know that she’s going to row so hard that she throws up. She doesn’t know that she’s going to have to train twice a day and that she’s going to give up a lot. This sport has some intensities and some struggles that are unreal.”

“All she knows is that it’s a beautiful day. We found this coach, a lovely dynamo, who’s interested in her. The sun is shining on the water. She’s in heaven.” *A*

Ruth S. Barrett is a writer in Westport, Connecticut.

American Surrender



*By Anne
Applebaum*

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Truong*

The U.S. is wantonly abandoning international institutions like the World Health Organization. China and other authoritarian nations are stepping into the vacuum, and quickly writing the rules that will govern the 21st century.

B

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Back in May, when President Donald Trump called for America to stop funding the World Health Organization, he presented a list of the WHO's recent failures: the organization's initial failure to flag the spread of the novel coronavirus; its initial failure to follow up when Taiwan—a country excluded from the WHO because of Chinese objections—enquired about evidence that seemed to indicate that the virus could be transmitted from one human to another; its initial failure to press China to accept an international investigation into the source of the virus. At the beginning of the pandemic, the WHO, which operates as a specialized agency of the United Nations, seemed to be one beat behind. It also seemed overly reliant upon biased information provided by the government of China.

Trump did not make this list because he hopes to fix or improve the world's most important guardian of public health. This, along with his administration's announcement in September of its intention to begin withdrawing money and personnel

from the WHO, was just electoral politics. Given his own administration's failure to react adequately to warnings from the WHO when they did finally arrive, Trump needed a scapegoat. What could be better than an unfamiliar organization whose acronym looks like a pronoun?

But although much of what the WHO does is of no interest to Trump, its achievements are real. Aside from its role in pandemics, the organization facilitates scientific exchange, compiling and distributing the results of international research. It provides medicines, vaccines, and health advice to the developing world, and is especially important in countries that don't have their own pharmaceutical industry. It has had many genuine successes—the elimination of smallpox is probably the most famous—and wields enormous influence and prestige. The removal of American funding would damage its ability to help countries cope with the new coronavirus and fight many other diseases.

American withdrawal from the WHO will have another impact: China's influence

will grow. And America will lose yet another battle in an ideological war that most of us don't even know we are fighting. For more than a decade, while we've been distracted by other things, the Chinese government has made the gradual rewriting of international rules—all kinds of rules, in many realms, including commerce and politics—one of the central pillars of its foreign policy. At a Communist Party congress in 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping openly declared this to be a "new era" of "great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics." And in this new era—a time of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"—China is seeking to "take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system." Stated plainly, this is an attempt to rewrite the operating language of the international system so that it benefits autocracies instead of democracies.

In this effort, Xi has had assistance from other authoritarians, most notably in Russia and Iran but also in some African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian states. Since 2017, he has also had assistance from the Trump administration. "Helping China" does not, of course, describe what the administration's leading members think they are doing. Former Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and others have been robustly critical of Chinese behavior at the UN and elsewhere.

But the anti-Chinese rhetoric of leading Republicans has hidden a deeper truth: A part of America's foreign-policy establishment—and not just the part affiliated with Trump—has abandoned the language of democracy and human rights that America once used at the UN. It has also given up on international institutions that much of the rest of the world continues to respect—institutions that should, in theory, be able to hold nations like China, Russia, and Iran to account. It has offered no alternatives. Instead of building stronger coalitions—or even new organizations—around common values, this part of the establishment talks about realpolitik and "America First," using the same nationalist and authoritarian language as the autocrats whose company Trump clearly prefers. It alienates allies,

and offends the countries whose support we will need to push back against authoritarian influence in the decades to come.

Trump's announced withdrawal from the WHO amounts to a kind of playground taunt directed at China: "You are cheating, so we'll take our ball and go home." But flouncing off will have the same result on the international stage that it does on the playground. The game will continue, but with different players.

LIKE EVERY REVOLUTIONARY movement, China's assault on the UN system began with an attack on its language. Ever since the United Nations was founded, in 1945, its members have been arguing over the words used in its treaties and documents, especially those that concern political rights. With great fanfare, a remarkable, polyglot cohort of international lawyers and philosophers—French, Lebanese, Chinese, Canadian, all under the leadership of the former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt—set out to write the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But when it came time to vote on the declaration, in 1948, Saudi Arabia abstained because the document supported everyone's right to "change his religion or belief." The Soviet Union and its allies, along with apartheid South Africa, also refused to vote for any declaration—even one with no teeth—that began with the phrase "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

That was just the beginning. Throughout the Cold War, Communist countries and their allies in the developing world always sought to replace all references to universal civic and political rights with the language of "economic rights," the better to escape accusations of political oppression. As the Communist world grew poorer and the democratic world exponentially more prosperous, their arguments grew weaker. Still, for many years the UN was the backdrop for famous ideological confrontations. Many remember that the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev banged his shoe on a table at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in 1960. Few remember why: He was responding to a Filipino delegate who had expressed sympathy for "the peoples of Eastern Europe and elsewhere

which have been deprived of the free exercise of their civil and political rights."

This ideological conflict abated in the '90s. The West had won the Cold War; the Soviet Union disappeared. Briefly, the UN system, though creaky and out of date, seemed as though it might really become a source of international stability. But over the past decade, China has launched a new ideological battle in UN forums. As the Soviets did, the Chinese are arguing that "economic rights" are more important than civic and political rights. But their argument is stronger than their predecessors': As proof, they offer the story of their own economic rise. It is, of course, a twisted version of the story, because China's economic growth began only after its system became open and more free. Nevertheless, China is now marketing the idea that dictatorship produces faster economic growth than democracy does—the "Beijing consensus," as opposed to the old Washington consensus.

To make its argument, China relies heavily on the word *sovereignty*, which has many connotations, some of them positive. But in the context of the UN, it means something very specific. *Sovereignty* is the word that dictators use when they want to push back against criticism, whether it comes from UN bodies, independent human-rights monitors, or even their own citizens. When anyone protests the Iranian regime's extrajudicial murders, the Iranian mullahs shout "sovereignty." When anyone objects to the Chinese government's repression of the people of Hong Kong, China shouts "sovereignty" too. When anyone quotes the phrase from Article I of the UN declaration—"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"—authoritarian advocates of "sovereignty" dismiss this language as evidence of Western imperialism.

China seeks to change other kinds of language too. Instead of "political rights" or "human rights," for example, the Chinese want the UN and other international organizations to talk about "win-win cooperation"—by which they mean that everyone will benefit if each country maintains its own political system. They also want everyone to use the phrase *mutual*

respect—by which they mean that no one should criticize anyone else. This vocabulary is deliberately dull and pleasant: Who is against "win-win cooperation" or "mutual respect"? But the Chinese work extremely hard—tellingly hard—to get this boring language into UN documents, especially those that have anything to do with human rights. That's because they want to water down any form of accountability, to anyone, for themselves and for other autocratic governments; to weaken the role of independent human-rights advocates; to prevent any public criticism of Chinese policy in Tibet or Xinjiang, where a majority of the country's Uighur Muslims live; and to undermine the Human Rights Council's already limited ability to investigate UN member states. The legal scholar and China expert Andréa Worden has described

IF THE U.S. WITHDRAWS FROM THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, IT WILL LOSE YET ANOTHER BATTLE IN AN IDEOLOGICAL WAR MOST AMERICANS DON'T EVEN KNOW THEY ARE FIGHTING.

these efforts as an attempt to turn the UN Human Rights Council into “a shell, emptied of universal values … a body in which individuals and civil society organizations seeking to hold governments to account for human rights violations have no place.”

ALONGSIDE ITS ATTEMPT to change the language of our global operating system, China has sought to master and control the international bureaucracy, in part by creating institutions of its own. Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan (Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia have observer status)—all agree to recognize one another’s “sovereignty,” not to criticize one another’s autocratic behavior, and not to intervene in one another’s internal politics. China has also just launched an initiative on data security—to formulate global rules and norms that reflect the aspiration and interests of the majority of countries,” according to a draft version of the proposal—that aims to compete directly with American efforts to do the same. But Chinese ambitions now reach

into the UN system too. Whereas many of the Western diplomats who end up working at its alphabet soup of international agencies are those who couldn’t secure a more interesting posting, China has for the past decade sent its very best and most talented diplomats. Partly as a result, Chinese nationals now run four major UN agencies: the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Telecommunication Union, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the UN Industrial Development Organization. Chinese diplomats have also run the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs since 2007, and the country has expanded its participation in UN peacekeeping operations.

Many of these organizations aren’t familiar to most Americans, but some of them, like the WHO, quietly play an important role in setting international standards and promoting economic development, especially in poorer countries. The International Telecommunication Union, for example, is responsible for allocating radio-frequency bands and coordinating the world’s satellites so that they don’t interfere with one another. It also holds seminars and training sessions to help poorer states regulate new technologies. At the moment, that often means that the ITU looks on benignly as China sells its model of “cyber sovereignty”—meaning tight state control over online media and activity—around the world. Chinese universities have established close relationships with the ITU, so that whatever standards are set will be good for Chinese commerce.

Although the holders of jobs in these kinds of organizations are meant to be politically neutral, some don’t hide their interests. Appearing on Chinese television in 2018, Wu Hongbo, a former undersecretary-general for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, told a studio audience that although he was an “international civil servant” who couldn’t take orders directly from his own country’s government, that rule had exceptions: “When it comes to Chinese national sovereignty and security, we will undoubtedly defend our country’s interests.” As an example, he told the story of how he got UN security to throw a representative of

China’s repressed Uighur Muslim minority out of a seminar held in a UN building.

When China can’t get one of its own nationals into a job, it seeks to get someone who its leadership feels is pro-Chinese, or who is at least sympathetic to the language of sovereignty, win-win cooperation, and mutual respect. Back in 2017, when UN members were choosing a new director-general for the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, a former health minister and foreign minister of Ethiopia, paid a visit to China before the election, as did a main competitor for the job. Tedros was seen as more supportive of the “One China” policy, and in fact, the day after he was elected, he told the Chinese government that the WHO would continue its support of the policy—implying that he approved of Taiwan’s exclusion from the organization.

China also uses financial tools—investments, loans, and allegedly bribes—to persuade other autocracies to vote its way, in the UN and elsewhere; to confirm its candidates; and more generally to build a circle of friends. The main formal vehicle for the distribution of money is China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a Eurasian infrastructure-investment plan. Under its aegis, China plans to invest in roads, railways, pipelines, and ports, from Rome to Beijing, as well as digital infrastructure; more than 60 countries have said they are interested in joining. Much of this money is distributed without the kind of transparency that the World Bank and other development institutions traditionally demand. In practice, one UN insider told me, this means that if some of the money is “skimmed off” by local officials, no one necessarily objects.

Chinese diplomats also do their best to wrangle the language of Belt and Road into UN documents. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs works assiduously to align UN development projects with Belt and Road projects, for example. The current department leader, Liu Zhenmin, formerly China’s vice minister for foreign affairs, speaks of the Belt and Road Initiative and the UN’s own Sustainable Development Goals as almost interchangeable: “Both of them serve the purposes and principles of the charter of the United Nations,” he has said, not

A PART OF AMERICA’S FOREIGN-POLICY ESTABLISHMENT HAS ABANDONED THE LANGUAGE OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS.



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least because they “aim to promote win-win cooperation,” in a world where “sovereignty” is the ruling principle.

Any one of these elements of authoritarian foreign policy, by itself, might not amount to much. But when combined, all of these tools—ideological, bureaucratic, financial—can be quite a powerful force. China is now the de facto leader of a bloc of countries that believe not in the “rule of law” but in “rule by law”—countries, that is, whose governments believe that “law” is whatever the current dictator says it is. “Rule by law” doesn’t apply just to Chinese citizens living in China. In 2018 two American citizens, Victor and Cynthia Liu, came to China to visit a sick grandparent. They are still there, because Chinese authorities, who are seeking to arrest their estranged Chinese father, have prevented them from leaving. The arbitrary detention of foreigners—Americans, British, Germans, Dutch, and others—is also an Iranian specialty, and the Russians occasionally try it as well.

“Rule by law” can also be used against Chinese dissidents living abroad. Uighur Muslims in China are severely repressed; many are imprisoned in concentration camps. In years past, laws on political asylum would have protected Uighurs who managed to flee the country, but Chinese pressure now makes that more difficult. Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have agreed to jointly fight “terrorism, separatism and extremism”; each state also agrees to recognize the others’ definitions of what those words mean, so if China says a dissident is a terrorist, then Russia, Kazakhstan, or any of the rest will have him deported back to China.

These new norms are spreading. Thailand, which is not a Shanghai Cooperation Organization member, has bowed to pressure from Beijing and deported Uighurs who had fled the country. So has Egypt. Turkey, a country that until recently expressed support for the Uighurs out of a sense of kinship—they speak a Turkic

language—has begun to arrest and deport them too. Even Uighurs in Europe report being harassed by Chinese agents and diplomats. “When you stand against China,” one Uighur dissident told NPR, “you are a threat wherever you are.”

Even those who are not members of a repressed minority can now feel the weight of the country’s influence. In June, a Chinese-born soccer player was kicked off his Serbian professional team after his father, also a soccer star, made critical remarks about the regime on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. We have grown accustomed to Chinese pressure on big multinational companies like Facebook or the teleconferencing company Zoom, which agreed to shut down the accounts of three democracy activists outside China who had planned events to mark the anniversary of Tiananmen Square. But Chinese pressure can now shape the management of a Serbian soccer club too. Step by step, in one region

of the world after the next, rule by law is replacing rule of law.

Some Western countries do try to fight back. Human-rights organizations document the forced deportations of Uighurs. European leaders stood strongly behind the U.K. when a British citizen was killed by a team of Russian assassins who were trying to murder a former Russian spy. American politicians have protested against the detainment of the Liu siblings. Trump himself mentioned their story to Xi—although, according to his former national security adviser John Bolton, he dropped the subject immediately when Xi pushed back.

Inside the UN system, the rickety human-rights apparatus continues to function. Many volumes could be written about the flaws of the UN Human Rights Council, a body whose authority has been marred by its rotating membership. Authoritarian states compete hard to get on the council; seats are distributed according to geographical criteria that have allowed obvious human-rights abusers such as Cuba and Saudi Arabia to become members in the past; Venezuela is a member right now. Nevertheless, the council does have some small ability to hold member countries accountable, and to magnify the voices of citizens in regimes that would otherwise have no transparency and no public debate. Coalitions of democracies still band together to put pressure on specific countries. For nearly a decade, for example, the council has repeatedly renewed the mandate of a special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, an official who produces periodic studies that provide evidence of Iranian violation of numerous international laws.

It's not ideal. Still, Roya Boroumand, an Iranian activist who documents the regime's crimes, particularly executions, told me that the Islamic Republic has battled hard to save face and undermine the UN human-rights reports. "If this was useless, why would they bother?" she said. The council requires Iran to report and respond to violations, which flusters officials—and sometimes even persuades the government to shift its policies. Boroumand, who runs the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (on whose board I serve), reckons that lives have been saved

by this process. It is in great part thanks to UN pressure, for example, that Iran has reformed its laws and reduced the number of crimes for which it imposes the death penalty on juveniles.

Democratic countries do continue to use the UN and the international human-rights apparatus to embarrass the Iranians, the Venezuelans, and indeed the Chinese. But the U.S. is absent. In 2018, Mike Pompeo—angered because the council had criticized Israel—decided to pull the U.S. out of the Human Rights Council altogether. Nikki Haley promised to "pursue the advancement of human rights" elsewhere. But where? And with what tools? It's true that Pompeo has issued fiery statements against Venezuela and China for human-rights abuses, but neither he nor any other American official sounds any longer as if they are speaking on behalf of the democratic world; they sound as if they are speaking for Trump. And everyone knows that Trump might turn around tomorrow and decide Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro or Xi Jinping is his new best friend, alongside North Korea's Kim Jong Un and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

In truth, the Trump administration is uniquely unqualified to speak on behalf of victims of authoritarianism around the world. Since the 1970s, all American presidents have used the language of universal rights. Ronald Reagan once said, "A belief in the dignity of man and government by the consent of the people lies at the heart of our national character and the soul of our foreign policy." Bill Clinton said that America's commitment to human rights was important because "it's the right thing to do and the surest path to a world that is safe, democratic, and free." Trump, by contrast, dislikes the language of universal rights and neutral, nonpartisan justice because he personally fears the verdicts of neutral, nonpartisan courts. He prefers the company of dictators because he admires power and cruelty. He dislikes America's alliances because he has little understanding of how, historically, they have helped build American power.

He is not alone. Though Trump himself does not think ideologically—he operates

by instinct—he is surrounded by people who are more systematic in their dislike of universal rights. In a 2019 speech to the UN, written by his advisers, Trump spoke about sovereignty using language that could have come from a Chinese or Russian dictator. "The future does not belong to globalists," he said, using a word popularized by the so-called alt-right. "The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique." Every clause of that sentence was music to the ears of the Chinese and Iranian diplomats who want all criticism of their respective countries shut down. *Respect neighbors* is what the Chinese say when they want to silence critics of their autocratic policies in Hong Kong. *Honor differences* is what the Iranians say when they want to torture women who refuse to wear a headscarf.

Unsurprisingly, an administration uninterested in international institutions or even international engagement has found it impossible to push back as China seeks to dominate those institutions. As China puts

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more money and soldiers into UN peacekeeping missions, the U.S. scales back its own contributions. As China promotes its Belt and Road Initiative, the U.S. offers no alternative. The Obama administration did have a different plan for Eurasia: a pair of trade deals—the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Trans-Pacific Partnership—that were designed to lock U.S. allies and partners in Europe and Asia into closer relationships. The Trump administration has scrapped both.

While the Shanghai Cooperation Organization consolidates, American decisions—to withdraw troops from Germany, for example—weaken NATO. The G7 is on life support. The U.S.–European Union alliance is moribund. It took a few years for European leaders to finally understand that the U.S. president really does consider them to be “foes,” to use Trump’s language, but that fact has now sunk in. On a recent transatlantic call, when a Trump-administration official exhorted European colleagues to join America in pushing back against the spread of Chinese technology, the initial response was a cynical “Oh, so now we are friends again?”

That doesn’t mean America won’t find some allies in the coming ideological struggle against China; other countries are also worried about the implications of “rule by law.” But it does mean those allies no longer feel loyal to the U.S. on the grounds of shared ideals. Instead, when Pompeo asks them to join his anti-Chinese political and economic coalition, they will weigh the costs and benefits and make their decision accordingly. Some nations will reckon that they need the U.S. more than they need China. Some will reckon that they need China more than they need the U.S. No principles will be involved, no conversations about democracy or shared values—just hard commercial or security calculations. As China’s economic and military power grows, those calculations will continue to change—and not in America’s favor.

I BEGAN BY OBSERVING that the WHO’s faults are real. Let me end by asking whether its faults can be fixed. As China has become more powerful, as China campaigns for “sovereignty” and “win-win

cooperation,” as China’s clout grows within the UN, the leadership of the WHO, like the leadership of so many international organizations, is no longer able to hold China to account. American withdrawal will not solve this problem; it will make the problem far worse.

Post-Trump, whether in 2021 or 2025, some will argue for a return to the status quo—for the U.S. to rejoin the Human Rights Council and the WHO; to sign on once again to the Paris Agreement; and to recommit to the old language of universal rights, transparency, and accountability. But the next administration may well discover that some of the UN’s institutions, created for another era, cannot be saved. Authoritarian influence is too strong now, bureaucratic stasis too powerful. Besides, once burned, our foreign friends will be twice shy. Even if a President Joe Biden chants the old mantras, everyone now knows that his successors might not. Maybe someday President Mike Pompeo, or President Tom Cotton, or President Tucker Carlson will flip everything up in the air again. Knowing this is still possible, our allies will be wary of committing to any cause that we back.

Are there other models of international cooperation? It is notable that as politicians have squabbled during the COVID-19 crisis, the scientific community has worked together with remarkable efficiency. Andrew Pekosz, a virologist at Johns Hopkins University, told me that from the very beginning of the pandemic, scientists in multiple countries managed to share data, genetic sequences, and more. “Networks of like-minded scientists developed quickly,” he said; out of the lime-light, there has even been some low-key, successful grassroots collaboration between the U.S. and China. Maybe other kinds of international cooperation could work like this too. Maybe spontaneous coalitions of countries that have an interest in achieving a particular goal and working together could make things happen more efficiently outside the UN system.

We already have one example of how that might work. At an online meeting convened by the European Union in May, representatives of more than three dozen countries and international organizations

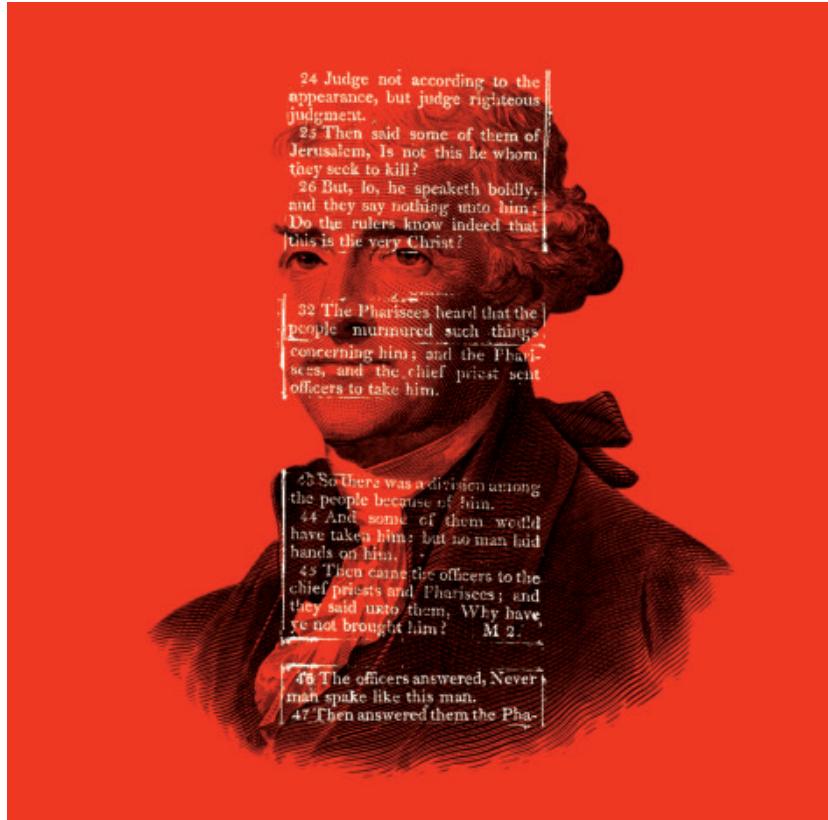
pledged more than 9 billion dollars to develop vaccines, treatments, and new ways of diagnosing COVID-19. They also agreed to help make these medical advances accessible not just to their citizens but to the entire world. The governments of most EU member states were present; eventually, the list included the U.K., South Africa, South Korea, Australia, Israel, Canada, and Japan. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, along with some other big donors, have made pledges. So have a few non-democracies: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and yes, China. The event was a good reminder of the wealth and power of the world’s democracies, and of what they can achieve when they work together.

The United States—hitherto the most important funder of the World Health Organization, and the leading source of doctors and medical innovation—was nowhere to be seen. Nor has the U.S. joined the COVAX alliance, an international coalition formed to ensure that poorer countries get access to vaccines. But perhaps some future American administration will once again see the point of joining or even leading the rest of the democratic world, the countries that share our values, in joint projects. Maybe the U.S. can help create “coalitions of the willing” that will be more effective than the old international institutions in fields like health, the environment, even human rights.

But what will make other nations want to join these new coalitions? The WHO, like the rest of the UN, has authority and legitimacy because every nation of the world belongs to it. The authority and legitimacy of new institutions would have to come from something else: the power of their language, the example of their members, the strength of their commitment, and of course, thoughtful American leadership. A revival of our dedication to universal values is necessary, and a reform of the international system is possible. We just have to be led by people who want to do it. *A*

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Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

The Bible Without Miracles

Thomas Jefferson preferred Jesus's teachings to his supernatural acts—and edited his copy of the New Testament accordingly.

By James Parker

Was Thomas Jefferson an atheist? Plenty of people thought so. Jefferson never identified himself as such, of course. But it was his microscopes, his French friends, his whole swinging, freethinking Enlightenment vibe ... “I hope he is not an unbeliever, as he has been represented,” worried the Nonconformist English clergyman (and chemist) Joseph Priestley, after Jefferson came to hear him speak in Philadelphia in 1797. Others could smell the godlessness like brimstone; if Jefferson became president, thundered a Federalist opponent in 1798, “the Bible would be cast into a bonfire, our holy worship changed into a dance of Jacobin phrensy, our wives and daughters dishonored, and our sons converted into the disciples of Voltaire and the dragoons of Marat.” Two years later, as news of Jefferson’s election victory spread, there were reports that pious housewives in New England were burying their family Bibles for protection, or hiding them down wells.

As it turned out, Jefferson attacked only one copy of the Bible: his own. Not with fire, but with a razor. And not in an act of dizzy desecration, but with a kind of serrated—slightly crazed?—reasonableness. He cut and he pasted. He edited and he redacted. He called the resulting text—a collage of verses from the New Testament—*The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. We know it as the Jefferson Bible.

Peter Manseau’s fluent and instructive *The Jefferson Bible: A Biography* arrives to celebrate the 200th anniversary of this patchwork Gospel, which Jefferson completed, after many years of fiddling, in 1820. Manseau, the curator of American religious history at the National Museum of American History, carefully traces Jefferson’s pilgrimage into the non-miraculous, from the Anglicanism in which he was raised, via exposure to Locke and Newton and the polemics of the roaring infidel Henry Saint John, the first Viscount Bolingbroke, to the point where he writes to his nephew in 1787: “Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because,

if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”

The message minus the mumbo jumbo: that’s what Jefferson was after. The teachings—the “precepts,” he called them—without the supernatural baggage. Jesus the *ethicist*, Jesus the *philosopher*, author of “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.” Of this Jesus Jefferson was indeed a fan. Of Jesus the dusty thaumaturge, the wandering soul-zapper and self-styled son of God, less so. Jefferson esteemed Jesus as he esteemed Socrates and “our master Epicurus”—as a beautiful mind. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John: cringing rustics who had fumbled the story, “forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him … giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves.” Time to dig the real Jesus out from under “the dross of his biographers.” Cut away the walking on water, kicking-out of demons, laying-on of hands, teleportation, claims of divinity, resurrection, etc. Preserve only, in a thousand or so verses, the bare details and pure utterance of a dead-on moralist. “It is as easy to separate those parts,” wrote Jefferson to John Adams in 1814, “as to pick out diamonds from dunghills.”

It was the hobbyhorse of his old age, undertaken in retirement at Monticello, largely for his own satisfaction: the Jeffersonian equivalent of pottering around the garden shed. But Manseau makes the point that *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*—in technical terms—was quite as radical artistically as it was theologically: “The Dadaists might have recognized it as a *découpé*. Had it come from the desk of William Burroughs a generation later, it would have been called a cut-up. Today, the most appropriate analogue for what Jefferson accomplished might be music sampling.”

So: work of art, or humanist hit job? It doesn’t exactly move, the Jefferson Bible. To the poetry of the Gospels, their sensation of metaphor pressing at the hinge of reality, of Word becoming flesh, Jefferson was utterly impervious, or he wasn’t interested. Mark is the evangelist of whom he makes the least use (31 extracts, compared with 90 from the Gospel according to Matthew), perhaps because the Markan Jesus simply cannot be extracted from the whirlwind of healing and supercharged speech in which he moves. The demons who know his name, who cry out in fearful recognition, and whom he ejects from their possessed hosts with the undemonstrative firmness of a bouncer mid-shift; the centurion at the foot of the cross, awestruck at the last cry—these are Mark’s witnesses to the nature of Jesus. John’s Gospel is featured slightly more (33 times), but with, of course, none of the John-ness: the *In the beginning*—ness, his droning light-tunnel back to the first syllable of Creation.

Mystery, if you’re a rationalist, is not a radiant depth, still less a spiritual invitation; it’s just something that hasn’t

been explained yet. So Jefferson’s narrative rumbles along at ground level, on square wheels—no baptismal shock of light from above, no dove descending. And no risen Jesus. The Jefferson Bible ends with Jesus snug in the tomb, the cave mouth securely plugged, gobstopped, by the not-to-be-moved stone. No more words. Resurrection foreclosed. And it’s odd: As a regular, somewhat inspired guru-human, Jesus makes less sense than before. *My yoke is easy and my burden light … I am the good shepherd …* Stripped of their divine warrant, these weird claims make the Jeffersonian Jesus sound like Charles Manson.

White-haired Jefferson kept his Bible to himself and his immediate intellectual circle, heeding perhaps the concerns of friends like the Reverend Charles Clay, who wrote to him hand-wringingly in 1814: “My fears are … that your Name will be degraded from the Venerable Council of true, genuine, Useful Philosophy; & Condemned to be Ranked with the wild Sophisters of Jacobinism the Theosophies of Masonry, With Martinists, Swedenborgers, & Rosecrusians, with the Epopts & Magi of Illuminism &c.”

That didn’t happen. Ambiguous as his legacy might be, nobody classes Jefferson with the epopts of Illuminism. By 1895 the big red ledger into which he glued his scriptural slicings was in the United States National Museum. After an act of Congress in 1904, every new member of both houses was issued a government-printed copy of the Jefferson Bible, a practice that would continue for half a century. Representative John Fletcher Lacey, who put forward the bill, called the Bible “a consolidation of the beautiful, pure teachings of the Saviour in a compact form, mingled with only so much of narrative as a Virginia lawyer would hold to be credible in those matter-of-fact days.”

And today? With disinformation fizzing in the ether, and nonsense ascendant, and reason tottering on its throne? Surely we need the Jefferson Bible more than ever: an exemplary demonstration of rationalism and intellectual autonomy. Calmly the sage bends over the text; calmly he carves away what doesn’t make sense. But a text like this produces its own anti-text, made of everything that’s been left out: a Jefferson Bible in negative, with a just-the-miracles Jesus hurtling wordlessly from one holy disruption to the next. Censorship by matter-of-factness is censorship all the same: The repressed, the removed, doesn’t go away. Personally, not being Thomas Jefferson, I need Jesus *and* his miracles *and* his divine nature—I need the celestial reverberation they give to his words. Mystery, wonder, confusion—they’re the essence. Like the yeast that leavens the bread, like the treasure buried in the field. Take a razor to that, and you’re in trouble. ↗

*Is the Jefferson
Bible a work
of art, or
a humanist
hit job?*

THE
JEFFERSON BIBLE:
A BIOGRAPHY

Peter Manseau

PRINCETON
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The WeWork Guy's Guide to Striking It Rich

Adam Neumann may be out of a job, but his wild rise is standard operating procedure in Silicon Valley.

By Vauhini Vara

HBO's *Silicon Valley* aired its final episode last year, the tech world's realities having gotten too dystopian to be fictionalized, in good conscience, for laughs. When a reporter asked what material the show had left on the table, the showrunners, Mike Judge and Alec Berg, admitted, "We missed the WeWork guy." That guy—WeWork's telegenic co-founder and former CEO, Adam Neumann—had once been known for turning an upscale co-working business into America's most valuable private start-up, peddling vague kumbayas like *This decade is the decade of "We."* But then WeWork filed paperwork to go public, revealing that the company had lost billions of dollars while enriching Neumann.

Among other extraordinary disclosures, it turned out that he had bought *we*-related trademarks, then charged WeWork \$5.9 million to buy them. The press soon uncovered other details to fill out the portrait of a terrible little richling: Neumann's practice of hotboxing chartered jets, whether his co-passengers liked it or not; his musings about becoming president of the world; his company-wide ban on meat that left executives puzzling over how to implement it.

When life transcends art, tell it straight. That's what Reeves Wiedeman, a *New York* contributing editor since 2016, has done with *Billion Dollar Loser*, the



propulsive tale of WeWork's, and Neumann's, rise and fall. Neumann is clearly not the first founder to enrich and empower himself while claiming to do the same for the masses. At a congressional hearing this summer about tech companies' enormous wealth and influence, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg explained that his company is "giving every person a voice." And while Neumann's eccentricities are undeniable, Elon Musk, of Tesla and SpaceX, has a mind-reading start-up and a son named X Æ A-Xii. What sets Neumann apart is the flagrancy with which he exploited investors, employees, and customers for his own benefit. His innovation was, in the terms of the trade, one of scale.

NEUMANN SPUN an origin myth about growing up on a kibbutz in Israel, where he appreciated the community but bristled at how everyone was rewarded the same regardless of how much work they put in. He envisioned WeWork, he said, as a "capitalist kibbutz"—a "community," but the kind where "you eat what you kill."

Wiedeman (with whom I overlapped while working at *The New Yorker*) presents a more nuanced portrait of the founder as a young man. Neumann was born in 1979 in Beersheba, Israel, to physician parents who shuttled Neumann and his sister around desert towns before moving to the suburbs of Tel Aviv. When he was in the second grade, his grandmother realized that he couldn't read the menu at a restaurant; he was dyslexic. "He had become skilled at fooling his teachers and coaxing others to do what he needed," Wiedeman writes. After his parents divorced when he was 9, his mother moved, with him and his sister, to Indianapolis, where he struggled emotionally at first. Only later did the family live on a kibbutz, after they'd returned to Israel. Neumann went on to serve in the Israeli navy, and then moved to New York, where he enrolled at Baruch College, before launching a series of businesses—making collapsible high heels, then baby clothes with kneepads—and dropping out. In 2010, he and a friend, Miguel McKelvey, unveiled WeWork.

At the time, co-working spaces were already common. The business model was straightforward: Entrepreneurs "leased space, cut it up, and rented out each slice with an upcharge for hip design, flexibility, and regular happy hours," Wiedeman writes. But those in charge typically ran no more than a few locations apiece, in part because operating multiple spaces required spending a lot of money, up front, on leases. What distinguished Neumann, along with his ambition, was "his connection to capital," Wiedeman writes. Neumann had married Rebekah Paltrow, a wealthy cousin of Gwyneth Paltrow and a kabbalah devotee. She invested part of a \$1 million nest egg in WeWork and introduced her husband to Manhattan's

Kabbalah Centre, where he met other well-off backers. By January 2012, he had raised almost \$7 million.

Neumann's approach to fundraising seems rooted in a simple tenet: Find out what investors want—then say whatever is needed to convince them that their desires are yours. Heavily reliant on support from the kabbalists, Neumann told a real-estate publication that WeWork had in fact been inspired by kabbalah: "I noticed that in the Kabbalah community, people were really helping each other. I wanted to translate that to business." His chameleonic tendencies as a child and young man, it turned out, had been good training.

Later, as he began courting Silicon Valley's venture-capital firms—which tend to invest in fast-growing tech companies—Neumann described WeWork as a "physical social network," and promptly raised \$16.5 million from Benchmark. Investors surely also liked his message about his company's position in the Silicon Valley ecosystem: Work had come to feel alienating; WeWork would make it social again, while at the same time empowering independent-minded entrepreneurs to fulfill their individual dreams. As venture-capital funding poured in—seven more rounds followed—Neumann hired engineers to work on techie-sounding projects, such as building an exclusive social-networking platform for WeWork members. More significant, with investors encouraging fast growth, he leased hundreds of new spaces around the world, splurging on perks such as free beer and a bacchanalian retreat called Summer Camp, so as to fill them. At the same time, in the name of efficiency—which Silicon Valley investors appreciate almost as much as growth—he kept certain costs down. Neumann used nonunion laborers for construction, and many of WeWork's employees put in long, poorly compensated hours. "I can hire a bunch of young people and pay them nothing," he once said. Attendance at a "Thank God It's Monday" pep rally, held after hours, was required.

*Attendance at
a "Thank God
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pep rally, held
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Then, in August 2017, came the apotheosis. Neumann convinced Masayoshi Son, the proudly offbeat CEO of the Japanese technology conglomerate SoftBank, that his company and its Vision Fund should invest \$4.4 billion in WeWork—bringing its valuation to \$20 billion and making it the fourth-most-valuable start-up in the U.S. Subsequent funding from SoftBank raised the company's valuation to \$47 billion in 2019, moving it into first place. Even some employees questioned the math. Neumann's bespoke social-networking platform and other tech projects hadn't panned out; an employee of a data-analytics start-up with a WeWork office discovered, through a security loophole, that only a fifth of WeWork members had posted at all. WeWork remained an upscale office-leasing business. But Son found Neumann charming. He asked him who would win in a fight, "the

smart guy or the crazy guy?" The crazy one, Neumann replied—the right answer, according to Son.

Neumann acquired five companies in quick succession and, inexplicably, bought a significant stake in a company that makes wave pools. He leased enough additional real estate that WeWork became New York's biggest office tenant, and he launched WeGrow, a private school run by Rebekah, whom WeWork had begun listing as a third co-founder. Dedicated to "unleashing every person's superpower," it charged up to \$42,000 per student. At Summer Camp, Rebekah shared with attendees her dream of building "communities around the world where children who are not in the right situation could come and live forever, basically." Neumann chimed in: "There are 150 million orphans in this world today. If we do the work right, we could wake up one day and say, 'We want to solve the problem of children without parents in this world.'" Meanwhile, ahead of that event, the Neumanns had compiled a three-and-a-half-page list of items to be stocked at their campsite, including two bottles of \$1,000 Highland Park scotch and a "Signature Range Rover for Rebekah/Adam use."

No one could accuse Neumann of pursuing a plan that was too smart, or not crazy enough. As it had done almost every year since its start, WeWork was spending far more than it brought in. In April 2019, four months before everything fell apart, Wiedeman asked Neumann what his superpower was. "Change," Neumann answered. "It's the best superpower to have."

AFTER WEWORK'S mismanagement became apparent, public investors swiftly lost interest in the IPO. Thinking a little shake-up might help, the board persuaded Neumann to step down as CEO, in return for an exit package worth nearly \$1.7 billion, including the option of selling \$970 million in shares to SoftBank. (Neumann had leverage because he had negotiated outsize voting power in the company.) But a year later, the recovery plan clearly has not been successful. WeWork, now run by a veteran real-estate executive, has indefinitely postponed its IPO. The beer no longer flows freely. Much of Neumann's exit package is at risk of evaporating, after SoftBank reneged on the buyout it had promised. (Neumann has sued SoftBank, and the case is in the courts.) Even so, Neumann will have squeezed hundreds of millions of dollars out of the situation. While there are plenty of losers here, he can't really be said to be one of them.

Wiedeman writes that it is "hard to figure out what lesson Adam, or the entrepreneurs of the future, should learn from his rise and fall." Is it, though? In fact, any future entrepreneur who hopes to get rich fast can draw a straightforward directive from Neumann's experience: Emulate it. More relevant is what the rest of us should

learn. We have a habit of demonizing corporate figureheads much more than the investors who technically own the companies. For all of the books devoted to the Zuckerbergs, Musks, and Neumanns of the world, who can name their companies' biggest shareholders? Yet the most important lesson in the rise and fall of WeWork has less to do with Neumann than with the ecosystem that nurtured him. "They're trying to make this about Adam being a lunatic," a real-estate executive told Wiedeman shortly after Neumann's resignation. "These people invested, they knew the terms, they knew about the governance issues, and they told this guy, 'Be you, but be ten times you.' What did they expect?"

To be fair, the fact that no one saw Neumann coming might have something to do with the relative newness of the landscape in which WeWork's odyssey took place. For decades, venture capitalists have tossed money at lots of unprofitable, fast-growing tech companies on the assumption that at least one of them would make it big. But in recent years, a staggering amount of funding has become available through the private market. To make a return, early investors don't need an IPO—they just need some other private fund to come along later and buy their shares for more than they spent, a process through which founders can also cash out. (When SoftBank first invested in WeWork, Benchmark quietly sold more than \$129 million in shares; Neumann sold \$361 million worth.) Unsurprisingly, that has encouraged startups to stay private as long as they can, given that being public comes with more regulation and scrutiny. The number of U.S. "unicorns"—private companies worth at least \$1 billion—has risen more than tenfold since WeWork's founding, to more than 200.

The result is a perverse set of incentives for founders. There's the push to keep their companies growing at any cost. But there's also another quirk, one that Neumann exploited particularly well: Everyday investors in public companies aren't likely to meet CEOs one-on-one, whereas private deals are still negotiated in person—between CEOs and venture capitalists—leaving the investors vulnerable to individual charisma. "The nature of the private markets is that if nine smart investors pass, it only takes one relatively dumber investor, and suddenly we're valued at \$16 billion," one member of WeWork's finance team told Wiedeman.

And how, exactly, did a college dropout from the Israeli desert charm all those investors in the first place? While Wiedeman emphasizes Neumann's persuasiveness, he doesn't spend a lot of time deconstructing what makes him so persuasive. But what if the answer is directly tied to the WeWork message—the one about capitalist community-spiritedness—that, in retrospect, sounds so lame?

BILLION
DOLLAR LOSER:
THE EPIC
RISE AND
SPECTACULAR
FALL OF ADAM
NEUMANN AND
WEWORK

Reeves
Wiedeman

LITTLE, BROWN

“Every human society must justify its inequalities,” Thomas Piketty writes in *Capital and Ideology*. “Unless reasons for them are found, the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse.” *Billion Dollar Loser* doesn’t dwell on the experiences of WeWork’s tenants, but many of them belong to an expanding class of workers—those making their own way as freelancers. More and more U.S. taxpayers have been reporting independent-contractor income; an IRS study published last year found evidence suggesting that an increasing share of companies have been hiring new workers under this status—which keeps them from being entitled to a minimum wage or unemployment insurance—instead of as employees. This sort of freelancing grew more slowly during the recovery from the Great Recession, which seems to suggest that, given the option, people would rather be employed.

But over the past decade, Silicon Valley has been at the center of an energetic campaign to convince people that this insecure status is, in fact, desirable—that an independent contractor is a member of the “sharing economy” or even, like Zuckerberg or Musk, an entrepreneur. The riches of investors, such as the ones who funded WeWork, depend on this myth; another major Benchmark and SoftBank investment is Uber, which classifies its drivers as independent contractors rather than employees.

All that marketing about making people feel happier about working—in the end, maybe it was directed less at the public than at the venture capitalists Neumann was really wooing all along. If workers are insecure, the message suggested, the solution doesn’t have to be fairer wages, better job protections, or a transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor. WeWork could address the problem—and do so for hundreds of thousands of workers—with parties and beer.

Now Neumann is out. Yet SoftBank is doing just fine. It reported a historic loss of \$13 billion in its last fiscal year, partly because of the WeWork debacle, but has since turned around, posting a \$12 billion profit in its first quarter alone. One of its prized investments is DoorDash, the food-delivery service, whose website describes ambitions of “connecting people with possibility—easier evenings, happier days, bigger savings accounts, wider nets and stronger communities.” DoorDash is reportedly losing money, regulators have targeted it for its pricing and employment practices, and delivery workers have sued it for skimming their tips. “We created a monster,” Son admits to investors, toward the end of *Billion Dollar Loser*—evidently not a market niche to abandon. *A*

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Homage to Bashō

By David Lehman

The butterfly dips
its wings in aroma of
violet wild orchid.

Red plums of summer,
first green figs, so many ears
of corn eaten raw.

Leaves that left the trees
are litter now on the ground
in orange and yellow.

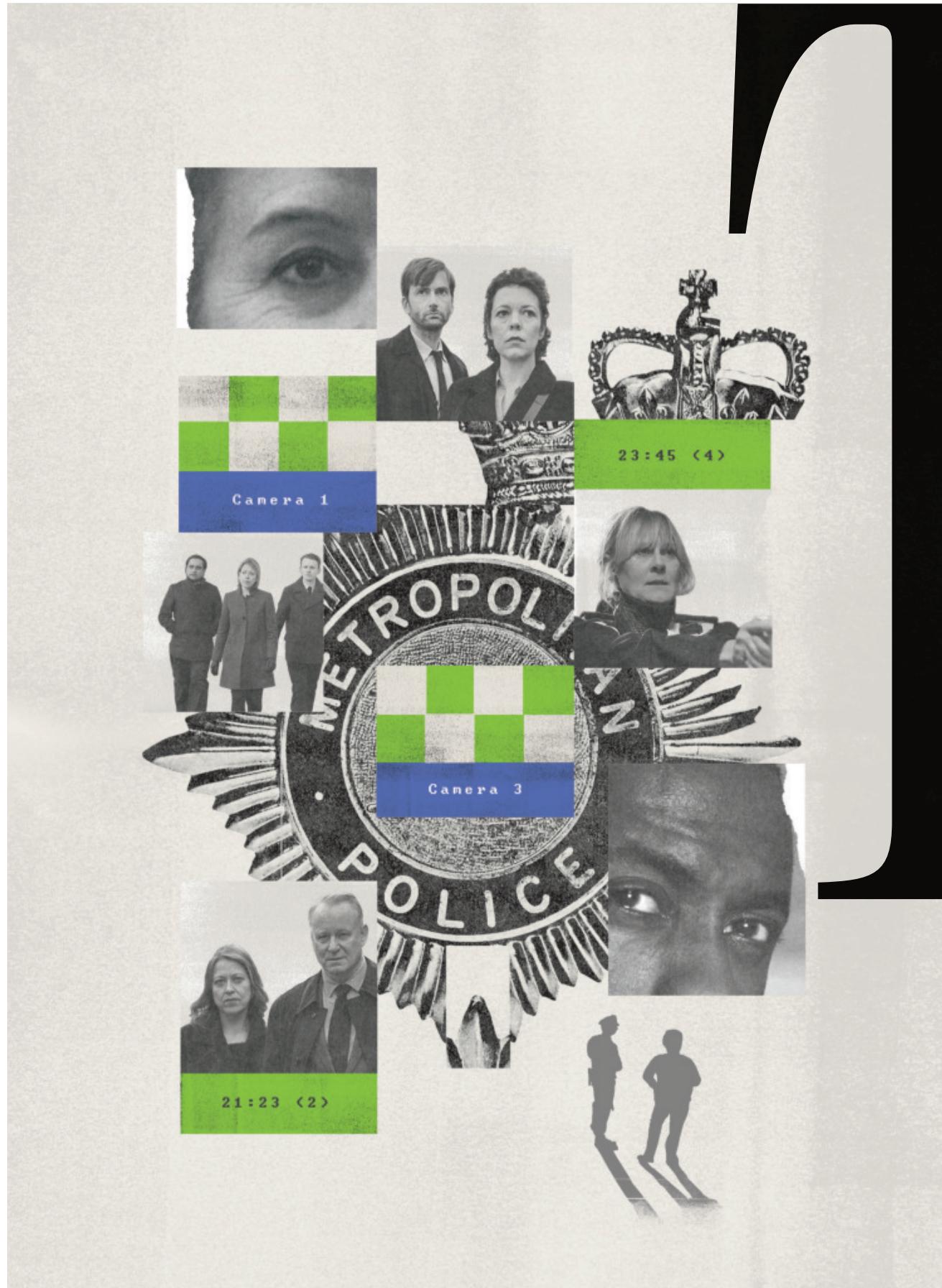
No one on this road
but me: It must be autumn
in the dark country.

Comes the freeze, and rain
falls all through the night and soaks
the morning paper.

Winter blows its white
storms across the hills: Even
monkeys need raincoats.

The spring night vanished
while we talked among cherry
blossoms and petals.

David Lehman’s recent books include *One Hundred Autobiographies: A Memoir* (2019) and *Poems in the Manner Of...* (2017).



Why British Police Shows Are Better

When you take away guns and shootings, you have more time to explore grief, guilt, and the psychological complexity of crime.

By Christopher Orr

The British detective story is enjoying a golden age unparalleled since the days of Agatha Christie or perhaps even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The heroes of the current era are not the preternaturally gifted, idiosyncratic dabblers of old—not, as Sherlock Holmes preferred to describe himself, “consulting detectives.” They are professional detectives—or to be more precise, detective sergeants, detective inspectors, detective chief inspectors, and so on. And they are principally found not on the written page, but on the small screen.

While American viewers shake off the hangover from our long bender of forensic TV franchises (did I only imagine *Law & Order: Special Veterinary Unit* and *CSI: Wichita?*), Britain has been doing a booming export business in tidy, ruminative detective series: *Broadchurch*, *Happy Valley*, *Shetland*, *Unforgotten*, *River Vera*, *The Loch*, *Hinterland*, and more. Reliable viewership numbers are hard to come by, but if you begin questioning friends and family, before long you’re likely to discover a semi-fanatical devotee of the genre among them.

These series are police-centered, featuring one or two officers operating within a larger departmental structure of (mostly) able lieutenants and (frequently) obstructive higher-ups. Many of them are concerned with the ugliest of crimes—murder, forced prostitution, pedophilia. Yet what makes them distinctive is their refusal to wallow in grimness, instead stepping back to make room for emotions such as grief and guilt and faith and redemption in a manner not at all typical of American cop fare. To watch these shows during a period of real-life police turmoil has only made the transatlantic contrast more vivid.

Common to the British imports is a leisurely pacing that usually means each case unfolds over the course of a season. Many series focus intently on a particular out-of-the-way locale. *Shetland* takes place in the northernmost isles of Scotland, *Broadchurch*

on the Jurassic Coast of Dorset, *Hinterland* in Mid Wales. These communities—and the ties within them that bind and fray—can be as important as any individual character.

Notably, the principal investigator is more often than not a woman. The ur-text of these programs is *Prime Suspect*, starring Helen Mirren as Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison, which launched in 1991 to a British audience of 14 million, and continued on and off until 2006, garnering awards along the way. In *Esquire*, David Denby called Mirren’s performance as Tennison—driven, ambitious, sharp-elbowed—“the most sustained example of great acting in the history of television.” The program was a biting cross-examination of sexism in an overwhelmingly male profession. And although it also explored subjects such as racism, homophobia, child abuse, immigration, and alcoholism over its long run, the gendered undertow was ever present, tugging at Tennison in spite of her successes.

Prime Suspect has been followed by a remarkable array of British police dramas that are gritty but not heartless, realistic without being nihilistic. The best-known is *Broadchurch*, an exceptional program that ran for three seasons from 2013 to 2017. The show stars Olivia Colman in an unguarded, occasionally heartbreaking performance as Ellie Miller, a local cop in a cliffside vacation town, and David Tennant as Alec Hardy, the out-of-town officer who swooped in to steal the promotion she thought was hers. Opening with the discovery of the body of an 11-year-old boy—the former best friend, it so happens, of Ellie’s son—the tale quickly expands beyond the specifics of the investigation into a portrait of a village wracked by grief. The victim’s family, Ellie and her husband, the local priest and the tiny newspaper staff, the proprietors of the tobacco shop and the bed-and-breakfast—all harbor mutual suspicions as the town’s bonds of trust begin to unravel.

Like Tennison in *Prime Suspect*, Ellie—she hates being called “Miller”—faces sexism at work, though thankfully far less, a couple of decades of institutional diversification having done some of their intended work. Her gender is presented as a humanizing influence, especially on her partner, who requires frequent reminders that the suspects he’s grilling are townsfolk experiencing extreme trauma.

This heightened sensitivity is still more evident in Cassie Stuart, the principal detective in the superb series *Unforgotten*, which has run for three seasons with a fourth in the works. Played by Nicola Walker, Stuart handles cold-case murders decades old, and displays a rare attentiveness both to the victims’ long-bereft loved ones and to the now-middle-aged or older suspects. (What’s more, I don’t believe I’ve seen another show on any subject in which a boss is

so committed to offering positive feedback to subordinates.) This aptitude for empathy enriches the themes of the show: Does grief fade over time? Does guilt? Does justice have an expiration date? Should it?

WATCHING THESE SHOWS—as well as police series from elsewhere around the globe, such as New Zealand's *Top of the Lake* and Scandinavia's *The Killing* and *The Bridge*—one can't help but note that the tonal contrast with American police series reflects a very different law-enforcement reality. Specifically, in the British shows, closed-circuit television surveillance is everywhere, and handguns are nowhere to be found.

Crime shows set in Britain may offer the best way—apart from actually moving there—to appreciate how much the nation has become a quasi-benevolent surveillance state. If the police need to determine someone's whereabouts at a particular hour on a particular night, they will dutifully interview witnesses, check phone records, and otherwise establish alibis much as they would in the United States. But they will also—as any fan of these shows can readily attest—check the CCTV. (According to the BBC, Britain has one CCTV camera for every 11 inhabitants.) That's true even on *Shetland*, which follows Detective Inspector Jimmy Perez (Douglas Henshall) as he and his team bring justice to the tiny sub-Arctic islands (population 23,000), more than 100 miles north of the Scottish mainland. Those distant hamlets and lonely roads sit under the watchful eye of CCTV, too.

This pervasive video footage is an obvious boon not only to British police, but to the writers of British police dramas as well. Is your plot missing a link in the chain of evidence, a way from narrative Point A to narrative Point B? Just check the CCTV footage, and discover a familiar face exiting a pub or a telltale license plate on the highway. More notably, this pan-optical scrutiny changes the atmosphere of the shows. The awareness of supervision lends British series a greater sense of control, of order, relative to the urban chaos that prevails on American television. Crime is experienced as a deviation from the norm—something that fell into the cracks between the cameras—rather than the norm itself.

The more glaring contrast between American and British law enforcement—both real and fictive—is the near-total absence of handguns in Britain. (In 2018, for example, London—home to 9 million people—reported just 15 gun homicides.) There are a few American-style TV exceptions that deal with terrorism (*Bodyguard*) or serial killers (*Luther*), in which guns are prevalent. The anti-corruption team in *Line of Duty* sees its share of trigger-happy “authorized firearms officers”—although even they are required

to sign their guns back in after each assignment. But on TV as in life, the prospect of gun violence, either by or against the police, is remote.

The cumulative effect on British police shows can't be overstated. Everyone weaned on American cop dramas, for instance, knows the right way to approach a door behind which a suspect might be waiting: His gun drawn, an officer stands to one side before knocking and declaring himself loudly. The anticipation of violence is so primal that it dominates almost every interaction that involves the police. In your typical British police show, by contrast, a visit to a suspect can resemble a social errand, as unarmed detectives wait patiently in front of a door after ringing the bell. The absence of gunfire—and, more important, of concern about the possibility of gunfire—almost invariably leads to more actual detective work.

At times, British crime shows can seem quaint to an American viewer. The tragic incident that kicks off the excellent miniseries *River* (starring the magnificent Stellan Skarsgård and, as his partner, *Unforgotten*'s Walker) would hardly cause a stir on a show on this side of the Atlantic; on *River*, it creates a use-of-force issue. Skarsgård, on foot and unarmed, chases a suspect who makes an unsuccessful leap from a balcony and falls to his death. This will be treated not only as a police scandal, but as a genuine ethical quandary. Did the cop really have to chase this suspect? Couldn't he have waited for backup?

American police shows, of course, have their own distinctive strengths. But they tend to play in a different key altogether, raising moral questions that are more flagrant—and, often, more systemic. One of the central themes of HBO's *The Wire*, the greatest crime series of all time, is the ubiquity of gun violence. For the first four seasons of the show, the anti-heroic stickup man Omar Little is portrayed as the most lethal, invulnerable criminal in all of Baltimore, famous for his taunt “You come at the king, you best not miss.” Then, in Season 5, he is shot and killed in a convenience store by a prepubescent boy whom he'd scarcely noticed. An accidental fall is a tragic exception in the London of *River*; a deliberate killing is the tragic rule in the Baltimore of *The Wire*.

A nation's crime shows are bound to reflect the nation itself. So it is perhaps little wonder that at a moment of police-abuse videos and spikes in gun violence, American viewers are eager for alternative visions—ones as concerned with the victims of violence and their communities as with the perpetrators. Who isn't hungry for a more humane depiction of law enforcement? *A*

Christopher Orr is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.



Why We're Afraid of Bats

*On how we know—and how we learn—
what to fear*

By Rebecca Giggs

If you grew up in a land of potentially dangerous animals, as I did, much of your outdoors education might have entailed learning to recognize and avoid the settings in which you were most likely to encounter them. Dawn after a streak of hot, rainless, overcast days? Shark weather, according to the local wisdom. A smooth clearing in otherwise tangled bushland, its topside granulated like cane sugar? A tell-tale sign of Australian bulldog ants below, prickling with venom. The wisest way to flip a rock: Reach over and pull the farthest edge up toward you. Now anything coiled beneath it escapes in an away direction. Coming to understand oneself as, if not prey, at the very least a legible target for other creatures' defensive instincts was a timeworn rite of passage. Still, shrewd (and possibly life-preserving) though it was to jump back from a shiver sliding through the long grass, I remember being most afraid of animals that posed little immediate threat to my life or well-being. What terrified me—and in this, I feel sure I am not alone—were bats.

For context, let me describe the Nocturnal House at the Perth Zoo, a brown-brick outbuilding tucked behind bamboo in a far corner of the grounds. On entering, a person leaves daylight behind, passing through a blackened corridor into a space flooded with red light. I know now that the lighting design has less to do with macabre theatricality than with the zoologists' intent to display nighttime animals at their most wakeful: The large-eyed mammals and birds inside, aglow in crimson, are not spooked by the low, red luminance of the space, and so they behave as they might under cloak of darkness. But absent this explanation, the ambience did much to transpose the fauna of the Nocturnal House into a child's gathering nightmares.

As I remember it, the bats hung in pairs, like velvety boxing gloves, from a grate in the roof of their enclosure. These were ghost bats, a carnivorous species, colonies of which cluster in caves and disused mine shafts in the north of Australia. True to their spectral name, the bats are an ashy white and have transparent wings laced with red veins so that, while roosting, each encloses itself in a cauldron of its own ticking blood work. When they chittered, you

both heard and *felt* it, like a trickle of ice water running down the back of your head. The bats' mouths were full of needle-fine teeth. Their long ears—thin as glassine paper—made me think of a bishop's miter. Their noses were lobed, their chins were cleft; the light made all of this worse.

In the wild, ghost bats favor the flesh of the native budgerigar, an endearing parakeet that many households keep as a pet. After one fatal bite to the bird's neck while it sleeps in a tree, the bat will carry it off to eat—starting with the head—as it hangs by its claws from a rock face. And perhaps it is this very invertedness—the silver bat in the black night, returning to its stony underworld to chew on feathers upside down—that makes you believe, however fleetingly, that every animal in the world might be accompanied by its own, bespoke devil. The colorful, trilling budgie above. Belowground, a ghost bat. Looking to nature, who doesn't begin compiling these sorts of binaries? Here, the hunted; there, the hunters. Animals that fear; animals to be feared. Serendipitous symbols partitioned from cursed ones. If the bats in the Nocturnal House turned and quivered, surely that was because they recognized the fright skittering in your eyes and were pulled—by some predatory impulse within—to beat against the wire, hungry to meet the fear.

I KEPT COMING BACK to the memory of those ghost bats, their trembling and my own, while reading a new book by Daniel T. Blumstein, an ecologist at UCLA. In *The Nature of Fear: Survival Lessons From the Wild*, he offers a natural history of an emotion. Looking at how different animal populations apprehend and respond to alarming stimuli in their environment (the paw prints of a rapacious meat eater, say), Blumstein argues that fear itself represents an evolutionary high-wire act. To thrive, animals need to be adequately alert to perilous dangers, but not so terrified that their foraging, rest, and social relations are unduly impaired.

Foolhardy animals perish, but overly trepidatious individuals can likewise fail to pass on their genes, because of starvation, stress, and isolation. The ability to identify the right things to be afraid of is a heritable trait in some species. Across the animal kingdom, Blumstein emphasizes, the experience of being afraid shares physical commonalities, including chemical pathways in the body and muscular reflexes. Terror makes wildlife of us all: Adrenalized, with pupils dilating and the midbrain trained on escape, we share with other mammals the *heiliger Schauer*, or “holy shiver,” of prey that has fallen into a predator’s line of sight.

Clearly, *The Nature of Fear* is a book for this moment. Dread is all around, manifold and constant during the coronavirus pandemic, of course.

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But a particular theme of our escalating anxieties comes to the fore with Blumstein’s book in hand: the fear of belonging to nature. City dwellers we may be, denizens of culture and technology, and envoys of the economy, but SARS-CoV-2 undoes the illusion that we live elevated lives, disconnected from the planet’s animals and the subtending universe of microbes sprinkled within and around them. We transmit the virus by virtue of being warm-blooded hosts—vulnerable, as animals, to one another. As the pandemic brings into focus our biological fragility, the time seems apt to examine the nature of human fear through the lens of, well, nature.

In recent months, many more people than me have come to fear bats for a new reason. SARS-CoV-2 is a “zoonotic virus”—which is to say, a virus that emerged from contact with animals—and is widely theorized to have arisen from a kindred coronavirus circulating in groups of horseshoe bats, perhaps those in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan, or elsewhere, in Myanmar, Laos, or Vietnam. Though the genetic pathway of the virus seems highly likely to have devolved from a specific, ancestral bat virus, SARS-CoV-2 mutated before being transmitted to humans—to date, no bat has been found carrying the virus that infects people.

Nonetheless, the Humane Society International reports that in Australia, “paramedics are being overwhelmed by calls about bats during the COVID-19 crisis,” as people mistakenly perceive native flying foxes as a viral hazard. Indonesian authorities have gassed and burned caged bats in markets. Bats in India have been dislodged from their roosts. Likewise, they’ve been culled in Cuba, while in Kigali, Rwanda, government workers have trained water cannons on colonies of straw-colored fruit bats, intending to drive them away. Bats have been demonized. Little wonder, given their storied, superstitious past (see: vampires, Halloween, and *Macbeth*’s witches, mixing “wool of bat” with eye of newt in their hexing cauldron). Bat-fear already had a template.

Where does the line fall between instinctive fears and those acquired via culture? In one fascinating chapter of *The Nature of Fear*, we discover that certain shapes and objects sharpen attention and arouse innate fears in a variety of animals, even if the distinct threats represented by those contours have never been encountered. Humans pick out the serpentine squiggle of a snake from fuzzy images, for example, far more accurately than they can pinpoint other camouflaged creatures. Other primates can be born watchful of snakes even if they spend their entire life in a laboratory. And some species of arboreal frog are so finely attuned to predatory snakes that if their eggs are jiggled by the unique vibrations of a snake slithering

along a bough, the spawn will spontaneously hatch, in a matter of seconds, to give the underdeveloped tadpoles the chance to scatter. These amphibian fears are embryonic.

READING ALL of this put me in mind of Rorschach blots, a now outmoded psychological test wherein subjects are shown a series of ambiguous ink spots and asked to characterize them. The first and fifth ink blots in the series are typically seen as bats, or black butterflies; Hermann Rorschach considered these “normal,” unconscious associations. But isn’t our fear of bats largely rooted in how well they *elude* our sight? At night we can’t follow a small bat zipping to and fro; we perceive it as a blurred flitter, or else identify the creature from its sounds, faint squeals on the edge of human hearing. Bats huddle away from scrutiny in the shadowed corners, the highest archways.

A layered horror: The realization that our vision can scarcely seize upon a bat in the gloom suggests, more broadly, that the nighttime world, as bats apprehend it, is concealed from us. Likely they make us out with an acuity greater than what we bring to our perception of them. We do know that much of what bats hear, we cannot; some are able to pick up ultrasonic sound. Their ears, like orchids, come in a staggering array of shapes, ornamented with curls, frills, and ribbing, delicate and monstrous. Yet if what we deem a monster hinges on grotesque anatomy—a body freakish to our eyes—then science suggests that one definition of the monstrous might merely be an animal that navigates a sensory world that is different from the one we inhabit.

As to the bats themselves: Do we know if they would startle and feel instinctively scared if they were shown ink-blotted silhouettes of people? Who can tell what human-focused terrors lie in the heart of a bat? Though no one has yet been able to run that test, as far as I know, Blumstein leads me to ask whether all the fear in the Nocturnal House was circulating on my side of the glass.

Whatever feelings bats may have toward people, humans have used bats’ other fears against them. The Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney, concerned about swarms of flying foxes destroying heritage-listed trees, has smeared python excrement on branches and deployed a device called the Phoenix Wailer to generate reverberant, discomfiting sounds in order to drive off the bats. As Blumstein notes, certain sounds consistently panic a variety of species, including humans. Acoustically, “noisy” sounds are the most frightening; their dynamics are chaotic, and, to us, they seem raspy and discordant, with rapidly fluctuating frequencies. Distinct from volume, it is this dissonance (called “nonlinearity”) that brings on wide-eyed alarm in our

kind and appears, likewise, to distress some other animals. One day, as Blumstein is holding a baby marmot captured as part of a study, the pup emits a “nonlinear” scream. The scientist writes that in decades of fieldwork, he’d “never heard such a horrible sound.” That the bloodcurdling pup scream is utterly unlike the marmots’ customary chirps and chucks intensifies the shock. When animals make dissonant noises, they can seem possessed of voices that don’t quite come from nature at all.

Though the Phoenix Wailer at the Royal Botanic Garden may not alarm us as it does bats, the sound is audible to both of us—and its deployment is occasioned by a newfound mingling that unnerves us humans. The reason the Royal Botanic Garden found itself trying to ward off flying foxes: In the past 20 years, flying-fox populations in Australia have become urbanized, as major brush fires and agricultural clearing have erased more and more of the animals’ habitat. Flying foxes are not shy cave dwellers. Weighing up to two pounds, the bats’ bodies are as big as milk cartons, and their wingspans can be more than a meter. Today they roost by the tens of thousands in city parklands. Usually we think of environmental degradation leading to shrinking animal populations, but accumulations of displaced flying foxes in cities are another result.

If people fear bats most en masse, as a darkening cloud, might it be because large groupings of bats sometimes gesture to a change in the ecology? Whatever the source of the unease, at a point when the pandemic has heightened fears of bat encounters, more Australians are seeing more bats—and those bats have been more distressed because of summer heat waves. Earlier this year, a rescue helicopter headed for a hospital in Queensland had to be diverted because thousands of mobbing bats made landing too difficult. Stressed bats are known to shed more viruses, perhaps as a strategy to challenge the species they compete with for food and habitat. A fear of the bat not in the sky but nearby may indeed serve some evolutionary purpose.

“As if terrified and fleeing from itself,” the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of the bat, “it zigzags through the air, the way a crack runs through a teacup.” Rilke’s evocation of an animal scared of itself could easily have been the epigraph to Blumstein’s book. Fear is very close during the pandemic. Yet the time is also at hand to reflect on what it means to be, in a very real sense, one another’s environment. Right now, to be walled off from one another is not an expression of fear, but of our connectedness to one another, and to animal life. *A*

THE NATURE
OF FEAR:
SURVIVAL
LESSONS FROM
THE WILD

By Daniel T.
Blumstein

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Rebecca Giggs, a writer from Perth, Australia, is the author of *Fathoms: The World in the Whale*.

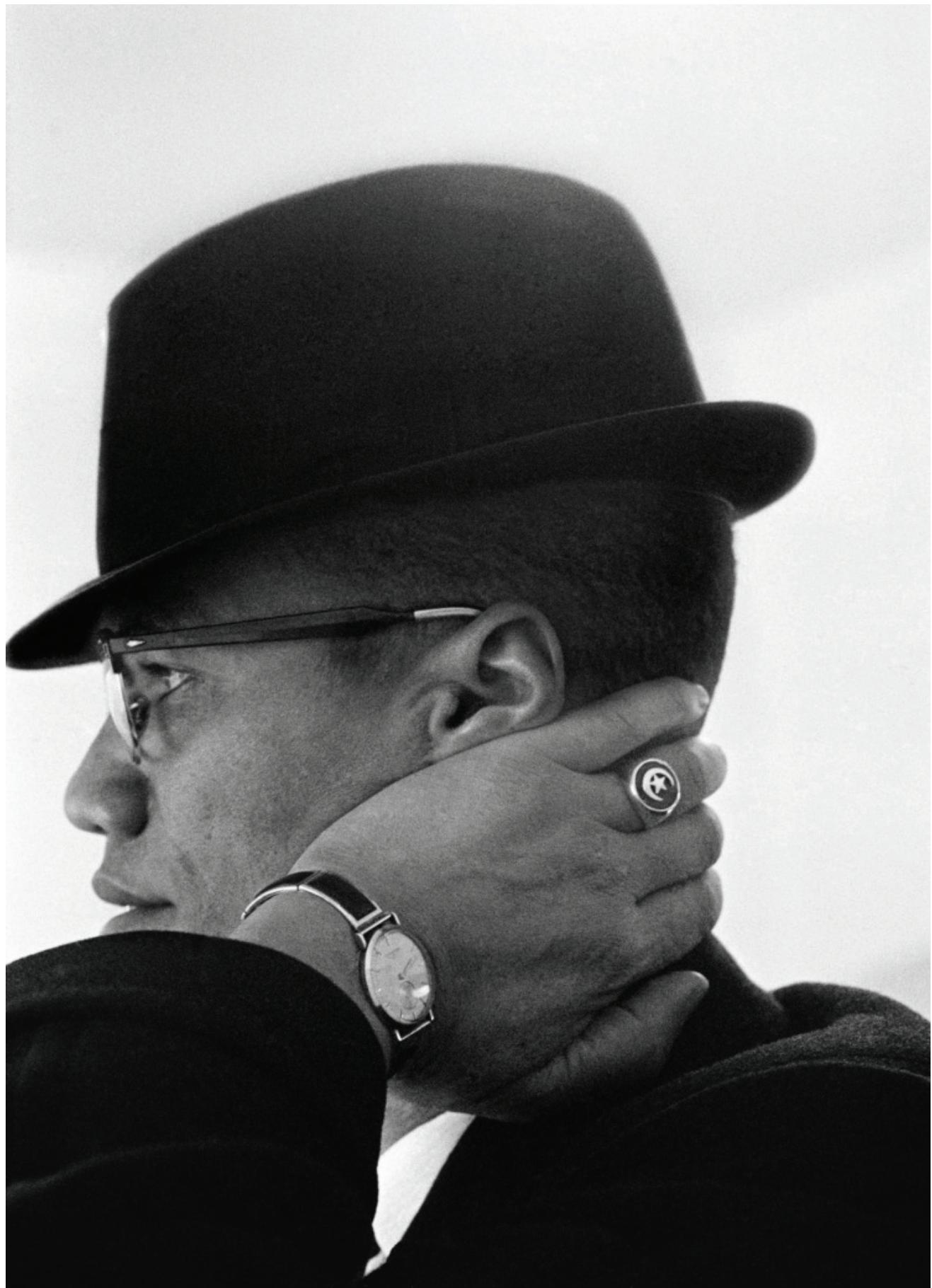
ESSAY

The Making of Malcolm X

Understanding the brilliant, troubled, selfish, generous, sincere, ugly, and beautiful Black radical who helped make the current movement possible

By
Kerri
Greenidge

To anyone walking through Roxbury, Massachusetts, the sounds that waft over Dale Street are far away—the fart of buses on Washington Street to the west and on Warren Street to the east. The sidewalk that abuts the bowfront brick rowhouses and wood-frame two-families with porch railings and multiple mailboxes feels comfortably quiet. And it is possible to forget that the recently renamed



EVE ARNOLD / MAGNUM

Nubian Square—Roxbury’s central business district—is less than a 10-minute walk away.

In the early 1940s, when Boston’s El towered over what was then called Dudley Square, Ella Mae Little-Collins purchased a two-and-a-half-story house at 72 Dale Street, not far from Washington Park, and invited her 15-year-old half brother, Malcolm, to move in with her. Over the next five years, until he was arrested in January 1946 on charges of larceny, breaking and entering, and illegal possession of a firearm, Malcolm Little lived off and on at No. 72, walking the streets of Roxbury and the South End in his wide-brimmed hats and zoot suits.

When he described 1940s Black Boston to Alex Haley as they worked together on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, two decades of distance had left him with barely concealed disdain for the Dale Street neighborhood. The cocky teenager had once marveled at the number of Black people in Dudley Square and the upper South End. But the man known variously as “East Lansing Red,” Prisoner 22843, Malcolm X, and Malik el-Shabazz told Haley that the enclave where he and Ella once lived was a bastion of middle-class Black pretension and snobbery. Yet despite this disavowal, Black Boston had a profound effect on the figure whom the artist-activist Shirley Graham Du Bois later referred to as “the most promising and effective leader of American Negroes in this century.”

At the city’s jazz clubs—the Hi-Hat, the Savoy, and Wally’s Paradise—East Lansing Red fell in love with Cab Calloway, Tommy Dorsey, and Ella Fitzgerald. As a shoe-shine boy, he arranged sexual dalliances between white people and those he referred to as “Negro streetwalkers,” and went on to court a pious Black teenager at Townsend Drugstore on Humboldt Avenue, smoke copious amounts of weed, and fraternize with his Armenian American lover on Beacon Hill. When Malcolm performed his own crooner act at various South End clubs, he went by J.C., borrowed from the stage name Jimmy Carlton, used by his talented half brother, Earl Little Jr. The original J.C. had died of tuberculosis shortly after Malcolm’s

arrival in Boston, and Malcolm used the nickname throughout his life.

Today, with the exception of Wally’s on Massachusetts Avenue, few of these landmarks of Malcolm Little’s Boston remain. Gentrification has turned the skeletons of mid-20th-century Black Boston into condos and restaurants, and 72 Dale Street is no longer the worn house with the overgrown lawn that I remember seeing as a child in the 1980s, when my grandparents pointed it out to me on the way home from my cello recital. Back then, in the age of Ronald Reagan and deindustrialization and crack cocaine, the neighborhood was frequently mentioned with the dismissive sigh that political pundits reserve for the “inner city.” Then, too, the area was riddled with the broken promises made by the Massachusetts liberal establishment: The 1970s busing crisis and the failed 1983 mayoral campaign of the Black community activist Mel King had left Black Boston with neither the quality public schools nor the representative political power that its residents demanded.

Today, No. 72, which has been designated a historical landmark by the Boston Landmarks Commission, is still in need of paint, but its lawn is freshly mowed, its porch decorated with banners announcing the Malcolm X–Ella Little-Collins House. It is owned by Rodnell Collins, Ella Collins’s son and Malcolm X’s nephew, and is marked by a weathered plaque on a stand in the grass.

Like his early childhood in Omaha, Nebraska; his troubled preadolescence in Lansing, Michigan; and his immersion in street-corner politics in 1950s Harlem, Malcolm’s coming-of-age in Boston shaped his radicalism as profoundly as the Nation of Islam and his 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca did. And yet, in our current political moment, as Black scholars and activists demand that America reckon with the structural and institutional mechanisms that threaten Black existence, it is easy to forget the complexities of community, of place, of Blackness itself that shape Black lives. In order for Black lives to matter in the radical ways that we demand, we must reckon, honestly and humbly, with the personal histories of those who have made our present movement possible.

Precisely this kind of textured attention to Black life and community, whether in Omaha or Boston, Atlanta or Accra, distinguishes Les Payne’s masterful biography, *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X*. Payne takes as a given that Malcolm was neither the propagator of hate that his critics claimed—a radical messiah manipulated by an extremist cult, as many Black leaders at the time considered him to be—nor the tragic transnational revolutionary assassinated before he could be fully redeemed. Rather, *The Dead Are Arising* is a meticulously researched, compassionately rendered, and fiercely analytical examination of the radical revolutionary as a human being.

Haley’s 1965 *Autobiography* asked us to truly see the passion that Malcolm had for Black people, to meditate on his willingness to die, as Ossie Davis said at his funeral, “because he loved us so.” Manning Marable’s *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011) dissected Malcolm’s personal and intellectual relationship with the Black radical tradition, providing new revelations about his sexuality and constant political reinvention. Payne has combed this scholarship, yet draws above all on thousands of hours of interviews with Malcolm’s family, friends, enemies, and converts. Completed after his death by his daughter, Tamara Payne, whose research was crucial all along, Payne’s biography forces us to understand Malcolm X as his various communities experienced him—as a brilliant, troubled, selfish, generous, sincere, ugly, and beautiful Black radical whose faith in working-class Black folk was surpassed only by his compassion for the communities from whence they came.

LIKE MOST Black teenagers in the early 1990s, I was obsessed with Malcolm X even before I watched Spike Lee’s 1992 film over and over again. I read *The Autobiography* at least once every summer and wore out my cheap CD player playing Arrested Development’s “Revolution” on repeat. I listened to his speeches on my Walkman, on a grainy cassette recording that skipped whenever Malcolm said “tee” in the rhetorical “the Honorable Elijah Muhammad *tee-ches* us.” I wrote most of my 10th-grade Shakespeare paper sitting at my desk beneath a crooked poster of Malcolm and Martin Luther

King Jr. shaking hands in 1964. And like most of the young Black people I grew up with, I never understood Malcolm as a foil to Martin but as an affirmation that our lives—Black lives—were far more nuanced than white people allowed.

My grandparents—the same well-heeled, proud, and unselfconsciously cultured couple who drove me, in their silver Cadillac, to see 72 Dale Street one afternoon in the early '80s—were activists in the mold of King and the theologian Howard Thurman, an influential mentor of his. They kept two versions of Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* and a mimeographed, neatly stapled copy of "Letter From Birmingham Jail" among my grandmother's *Progressive Architecture* magazines and wilted copies of *Ebony*. They joined my mother, sisters, and me every January in lighting a cake and singing "Happy Birthday" long before Martin Luther King Day became a national holiday. They taught me to see Ella Baker, Coretta Scott King, Flo Kennedy, and Shirley Chisholm as the logical heirs of King's dream in that Technicolor way that middle-class Black families talked about the 1960s in the post-movement '70s and '80s. Yet some version of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was always there, too—either the black-covered one with Malcolm's pointing finger, or the one with a picture of Malcolm mid-speech, wearing a thin black tie, a press microphone in front of him.

These books didn't keep my grandmother, the most beautiful and glamorous woman I've ever known, from pursing her lips disapprovingly and ignoring my adolescent fascination whenever I asked about her encounters with Malcolm X. She remembered Malcolm Little as "rifraff," the hoodlum teenager who robbed brownstones in the South End in the 1940s, when she and my grandfather first moved there. As newlyweds after my grandfather left the Navy, my grandparents purchased property on Columbus Avenue, which they rented to Black and brown tenants who never stole or cheated or pimped, many of whom became stock characters in my mother's stories of her New England childhood. King stayed with a friend of one of these tenants when he was a theology student at Boston University; the future Senator Edward Brooke

was just another pretty college boy who went to house parties with another tenant's relatives in the late '40s.

These Black people, my grandmother knew, were deeply political in ways that can easily be taken for granted—as poll workers, as literacy teachers, as organizers of school boycotts and volunteers for community legislative campaigns. And because of that, my grandmother could never understand how a Black boy who stole and pimped—whom she remembered as being decidedly apolitical—could reinvent himself as a pious messenger of global Black revolution. Malcolm's infamy was probably deeply personal

uncle refused to let his children associate with those he called integrationists.

Malcolm X's difficult legacy—the fact that his rhetoric could radicalize Black communities even as the Nation of Islam fractured some families—was rarely acknowledged at the height of Malcolm X hagiography, during the 1990s. Malcolm was not a real person for those, like myself, who were born long after his assassination. And so I, like many in my generation, searched his speeches for the sentences that explained my experience. Hungry for more, I peppered my grandmother with questions about Malcolm in Boston, but she pursed her lips still tighter in that way that old, beautiful Black women have of telling you they are done.

Undeterred, I badgered my mother too, with questions about what Boston was like when Malcolm X lived there, whether he looked at all like Denzel Washington, and whether she agreed that, as Malcolm said, "it's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism." No doubt weary from leaving an abusive marriage, raising three daughters in sudden poverty, and fighting with bill collectors who blamed her Blackness, not racism or capitalism, for her inability to pay, my mother always listened to me patiently. She then sighed and said, "Probably, honey, but race and politics are always more complicated than that. Even Malcolm X could admit that."

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for her, too: One of her brothers, another brilliant Black man shamed and exploited in ways I will never know, joined the Nation of Islam, moved his wife and kids to a tiny apartment in Dudley Square, stopped visiting my grandparents, and sold bean pies and *Muhammad Speaks* outside the train station. Nobody in my family can tell me exactly when this uncle joined the Nation or why, but they recall the trauma of being one of only a few Black families in a predominantly white Boston suburb, and the shock of that brother's defection. My mother still remembers visiting her favorite girl cousin through a car window, because this suddenly militant

THE DEAD ARE ARISING embraces this complexity. Payne sets Malcolm's intellectual and political precocity alongside what many, like my grandmother, experienced as his disingenuousness—as an ambitious petty criminal turned Nation of Islam proselytizer who converted thousands of young Black people during the 1950s, only to disavow the group's leader and champion global Black revolution in the 1960s. The result is a portrait that pushes us beyond the adolescent hero worship that many in my generation cling to in our current political moment as we reread Malcolm X, C. L. R. James, Angela Davis, and other Black thinkers. We demand of our radical intellectual icons far more than any human being is capable of giving, even as their reconception of Blackness and global power fuels our radical calls for justice.



When Malcolm X held this Nation of Islam rally in Harlem in 1963, his loyalty to the group's leader was weakening. The man who had once punctuated his speeches with "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us ..." now did so less often. Disillusioned by Muhammad's political strategy and personal morals, he began to share the doubts of followers who were leaving the Nation.



BRUCE DAVIDSON / MAGNUM

The Dead Are Arising refuses to do this. With new information gleaned from decades of research, Payne sheds fresh light on key moments in Malcolm's political journey. He reassesses the racial traumas of Malcolm's childhood, his disillusionment with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, and the details of Malcolm's 1965 assassination. In the process, Payne portrays the Black revolutionary as a flawed and ever-evolving man, and evokes the ambivalence toward revolutionary leaders that Black communities experience in their own time.

The Little family, Payne shows, vacillated between remembering Malcolm as the chosen seventh son (as his nephew Rodnell Collins put it) and claiming that his childhood incorrigibility contributed to his mother's mental anguish. Louise Little famously suffered a mental breakdown after the death of her husband, Malcolm's father, in 1931. Earl Little Sr.'s death, and the subsequent collapse of the Little children's home life, occurred just a couple of years after white terrorists burned the family's house to the ground in Lansing, Michigan.

In *The Autobiography*, Malcolm tells Haley that his father was lynched: Earl and Louise were members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the most significant 20th-century pan-African movement of the Black working class until the Black Power movement of the '60s. Earl Little's racial pride, and his belief in Black economic independence, enraged the white-supremacist Black Legion, which haunted Malcolm's early childhood as the family moved across the racially violent Midwest.

White fury over the Littles' Garveyism, Malcolm insisted, led directly to his father's murder. The event is a defining moment in *The Autobiography*, and a recurring scene in Spike Lee's 1992 film: Earl Little (played by Tommy Hollis), caught in the headlights of a barreling train, screaming as it bears down on his body. In *A Life*, Marable repeats the story, although with less certainty than Haley: He allows for the possibility that Little was murdered, but he also situates Little's death in the context of the violent racist harassment that the family encountered as they moved from one predominantly white midwestern state to another. Payne's meticulous digging and countless

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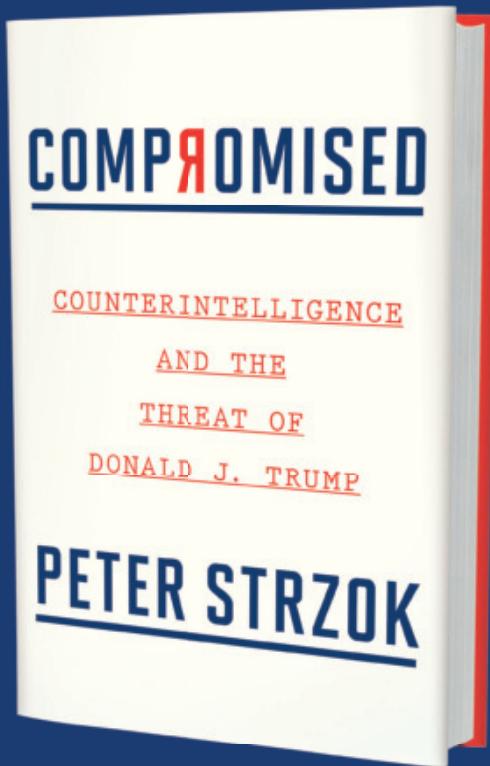
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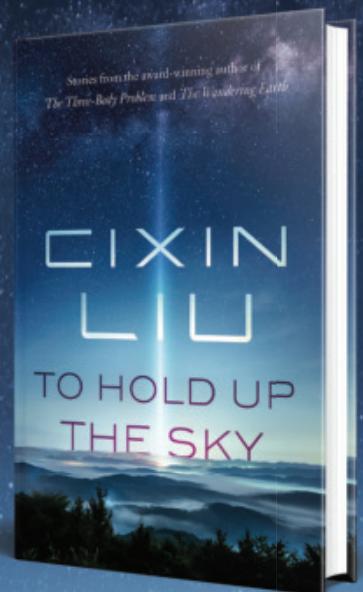
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interviews, however, reveal that Earl Little was likely run over by a streetcar.

The fact that Malcolm X's father was not lynched will surely disappoint readers searching for a simple origin story of Malcolm's radical politics. But the actual catastrophe, in Payne's rich and careful telling, was no less formative. He insists that even if Earl Little's death was a terrible accident, it was racially traumatic for Malcolm, then 6, and his siblings, given the realities of organized white terrorism during the 1920s. Although family members never believed that Earl Little was lynched, white children told Malcolm what their own parents told them—that the proud patriarch was "lynched" by the Ku Klux Klan. As Payne shows and as Malcolm forced the world to admit, living under constant white-supremacist violence and contempt can feel as devastating as being 6 years old and hearing that a parent was lynched. Racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness are systemic, but within these systems are real Black people—people for whom, Payne demonstrates, these systems are far more personal than academic and sociological discussion might suggest.

PAYNE'S PORTRAYAL of Black communities negotiating with, defying, and dismantling systemic white supremacy in ways that transform the personal into the radically political has a powerful effect: It challenges the popular notion that Malcolm single-handedly brought a potentially revolutionary Black cosmology to unsophisticated yet sincere communities of working people. Released from prison in 1952, Malcolm formally joined the Nation of Islam in Detroit and quickly became the group's most charismatic and visible spokesman, and a favorite of Elijah Muhammad's. In 1955, Muhammad sent Malcolm to Hartford, Connecticut, where he helped a local resident, Rosalie Bey Glover, create one of the most durable NOI communities in all of New England.

Payne interviewed Glover and her family, as well as others who were members of Hartford's NOI community during the 1950s, and their memories of Malcolm and the Nation convey the dissatisfaction that Black America felt in the aftermath

of *Brown v. Board of Education*. In Hartford, Glover found work and respite after a young neighbor's brutal lynching in her native Florida, an incident that Payne renders in horrifying detail. Yet even as Glover, like most Black migrants, built a life for herself and her nine children in Hartford, discriminatory federal housing loans and real-estate covenants kept Black residents segregated and underemployed.

The University of Texas at Austin professor Peniel Joseph has recently challenged the "neat juxtaposition" in popular culture between Malcolm's fiery appeal to working-class northerners and King's nonviolence in the South—a revisionist thesis that Payne takes as a given: His vivid description of Glover's community captures the mood of New England Black folk who were disconnected, both personally and culturally, from King's nonviolence, yet also skeptical of the nationalistic Moorish Science Temple, a predecessor to the Nation. Weary of legislative efforts made by the National Urban League and the local chapter of the NAACP, Black Hartford shaped Malcolm's political translation of the Nation's teachings, Payne suggests, as much as Malcolm galvanized the communities in which he organized.

Although Malcolm took credit for the NOI's success in Connecticut's capital—"The East Coast has many rough spots," Payne quotes from a letter Malcolm sent in 1956 to Muhammad, "but overall the dead there are rising"—Payne's extensive research revises the image of Malcolm as an all-wise radical messiah. The communities that Malcolm interacted with were already "woke"—as proved by the fact that Rosalie Glover brought Malcolm to Hartford after hearing him speak in Springfield, Massachusetts—but Malcolm channeled that wokeness into a radical reconception of Black possibility.

Malcolm's role was on full display in Hartford's North End "barracks," the rented floors in adjacent apartment buildings where the Nation of Islam housed Malcolm's initiates. Payne's interviews with some of these early converts provide rarely revealed details of NOI discipline during the 1950s: cooperative (all-male) living, mandatory house cleaning, adherence to the Nation's dietary restrictions.

Payne shows that Malcolm was not paternalistic; rather, he had a gift for inspiring those whom the Nation referred to as "the lost-found"—Black Christians disenchanted by the piety, forgiveness, and humility preached by the Protestant tradition in which they'd been raised. These "lost-found" were not asleep—their disenchantment was part of the understandable Black impatience in the aftermath of *Brown*—and they were hungry for someone to articulate the racial reality that they knew. As one initiate told Payne, "I had seen white people do some terrible things in the South. Malcolm made me feel like a man for the first time in my life."

Because Payne takes the memories and views of Black communities seriously—because he never assumes that Malcolm's Black contemporaries experienced him in the same way that we describe him in the present—*The Dead Are Arising* provides an invaluable glimpse into the mechanics of community mobilization led by Black women. One of Payne's real contributions (which is indebted to the work of Black scholars like Ashley Farmer at UT Austin and Keisha Blain at the University of Pittsburgh) is to situate Malcolm's insurgent radicalism within Black women's communities without apologizing for Malcolm's misogyny. As Payne shows, most of his earliest supporters and fellow organizers were, like Glover, working-class Black women. Yet NOI discourse was gendered—a fact that was very much on display at an early meeting in the Grovers' apartment. Glover's teenage daughter and namesake, clad in short shorts, was enthralled by Malcolm's charisma, then publicly shamed when he disparaged what he deemed to be her skimpy clothes. Decades later she still recalled Malcolm's declaration that although Black men need "to respect our women and to protect our women," Black women had to earn their respect. Malcolm X might have helped usher in an era of arising Black dead, Payne suggests, but if we are to take Black lives and Black communities seriously, we have to reckon with his ever-changing place within these communities.

Malcolm's complicated relationship to the Black communities that he loved is also the basis for one of Payne's most

painful revelations—that the NOI and Malcolm sought covert cooperation with the Georgia Ku Klux Klan in 1961, even as white segregationists terrorized non-violent Black protesters across the South. Muhammad had sent the Philadelphia NOI leader Jeremiah X to Atlanta in 1957, and four years later the partnership between nonviolent protesters and local civil-rights organizations was strong enough that a court case, *Holmes v. Danner*, ruled segregation at the University of Georgia unconstitutional. But Muhammad wanted to build an independent Black state in the South, and when Jeremiah received a telegram from the Georgia KKK, Muhammad urged Malcolm—in town to preach at Atlanta’s Temple No. 15—to meet with the terrorist organization.

With a screenwriter’s flair, Payne depicts the lazy drawl of the white Klansman talking to Malcolm and Jeremiah, and conveys Malcolm’s gift for intellectually dexterous debate without trivializing the meeting’s significance. Malcolm aimed to show the Klansmen (and the Black Muslims in the room, too) that Black separatism, as propounded by Muhammad, was economically and racially opposed to Klan-style segregation. Yet Muhammad encouraged Malcolm to pitch the Klan on helping the NOI acquire land for its independent Black state—and to accept the Klan’s offer to allow Black Muslims free movement throughout the South.

Malcolm, his faith in his leader already shaken by word of Muhammad’s infidelities, emerged from the meeting even more disillusioned with the Nation and its prophet—a disdain, Payne shows, that led Muhammad to ban Malcolm from building temples in the South. Malcolm was led in turn to reflect on the Klan’s murderous rage toward King and the nonviolent civil-rights movement. During the meeting, the

Klan suggested that the Fruit of Islam, the NOI’s army, track King’s movements across the South—a chilling request that exposed just how much more threatened the violent white supremacists were by King and non-violent direct action than by Black separationists, whom the group perceived (however wrongly) as sympathetic to segregation. “The national spokesman continued to answer—although less blindly so—to a religious leader more willing to work with the Ku Klux Klan than with Negro leaders of the civil rights movement. This thundering contradiction,” Payne concludes, “began to raise serious doubt in Malcolm’s mind about the efficacy of his cult leader’s program and indeed his personal ethics and commitment.”

DURING THE HEIGHT of my Malcolm X obsession as a teenager, my grandmother took to answering my badgering indirectly: She sent me gift certificates to various Harvard Square bookstores, wallet-size card stock folded in pastel envelopes, inscribed with a handwritten list of titles by Black women historians and scholars. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Paula Giddings, bell hooks—the caliber of Black women humbled me almost as much as the realization that my grandmother, who had only a high-school education and had spent decades as the secretary for white Harvard men less clever and intellectually curious than she was, seemed to read and study and understand historical nuance in a way that the authors of my history textbooks never could.

I used her gift certificates and purchased most of the titles that she suggested, but we talked about her reading recommendations only once. She and my grandfather were at our house for Sunday dinner, and I was splayed out on the living-room couch, reading one of the books that she’d suggested—Angela Davis’s *Women,*

Culture, & Politics. She came in to watch me, arms neatly folded, ankles crossed in that way that older Black women have when they study people with barely concealed bemusement. When I attempted to hide Davis’s book behind the cover of my *People* magazine, feigning indifference like the insufferable teenager I was, my grandmother laughed. She said, “How sophomoric, don’t you think, to mythologize our people until we become fans rather than thinkers?” When I didn’t answer she added, almost conspiratorially, “My, my, my, just think of all the places and countries and contexts from which our people come.”

My grandmother passed in 2007, so she will never get to read *The Dead Are Arising*. But I think that she would appreciate the multiple interpretations that readers will likely have of Payne’s most damning revelation—that Malcolm’s assassination, authorized by the NOI, was tolerated by many in law enforcement, including the FBI. For Malcolm X scholars, and those who study government repression of Black radical movements during the ’60s and ’70s, this exposé (based on Payne’s interviews with many involved in the killing) will come as no surprise. But what is heart-breaking is the notion that, for all of his love for Black communities, for all of his radical sincerity—for all of the contexts from which he came, as my grandmother put it—Malcolm was still a man whose intelligence and passion enraged those, Black and white, who couldn’t control him. This reality is the reason that Payne’s description of the communities that Malcolm engaged with is so important: *The Dead Are Arising* forces us to ask deeper, more complicated questions about the Black people and places from which our heroes come. *A*

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What will it be,

the thing that finally makes me write to an advice columnist?

A quandary of the heart? An out-of-control kink? A high-stakes issue involving wedding invitations? Deeply schooled as I am in the lore of the problem page, I still don't know which of the standard cries for help I'll end up emitting.

Because they're all standard—that's the point. The problems are the same, now and forever. The same dilemmas, the same misunderstandings. Is my boss a pig? Why won't my stepdaughter say thank you? I married a frog—I thought he was a prince! They loop around, they rhythmically recur, albeit touched with the flavor of the times ("Help, My Pandemic Crush Feels So Real!"). And the problem of all problems, the old chestnut: Why am I doing what I'm doing, when it's so obviously bad for me? Saint Paul put this one best in his letter to the Romans: "For what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."

Agony aunts, we call them in England, and I've been reading them forever. I first encountered them in my mother's magazines: *Woman's Own*, *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman's Realm*. Virginia Ironside—what a counselor. With what insight and asperity she sliced into the 200-word soap operettas laid before her, four or

five to a page. Remotely, a boy at the keyhole as it were, I took it all in. I became a short-trousered expert in adulterous longing, erotic disharmony, soul-death at the kitchen table. They were an education to me, a widening of my eyes. This world of complication, this world of *problems*—I couldn't get enough.

And I still can't. "Ask Polly," "Dear Prudence" ... Some of the letters I read with icy snobbery, some with a gush of fellow feeling. How tangled we get. How impossible it is, apparently, to be alive without sitting on somebody, or being sat on. Is it freedom you want? The swingers have their problems too ("I Love My Poly Lifestyle, but the Constant Sex Has One Big Drawback").

And then, in a different tone, in a different font, the problem is solved. The advice is given. Setup, punch line. Tension, release. One of the purest thrills for the problem-page addict is the discovery of an unreliable narrator: an advice seeker whose own flaws, glaringly revealed in their letter, are somehow obscure to them. We can barely wait for the columnist to straighten them out (*Your sister is quite right; you behaved disgracefully*).

Voyeurism and schadenfreude—we know our own baseness, we who lurk in the problem pages. But we're also holding out, childlike, for something beautiful: the idea of a consummately wise person who can take us in hand. Who has all the answers. Who will know what to do when the weight of our situation exceeds the load-bearing capacity of our psychological frame. Because it's much to be anticipated, much to be wished for—the day when our problems are over. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

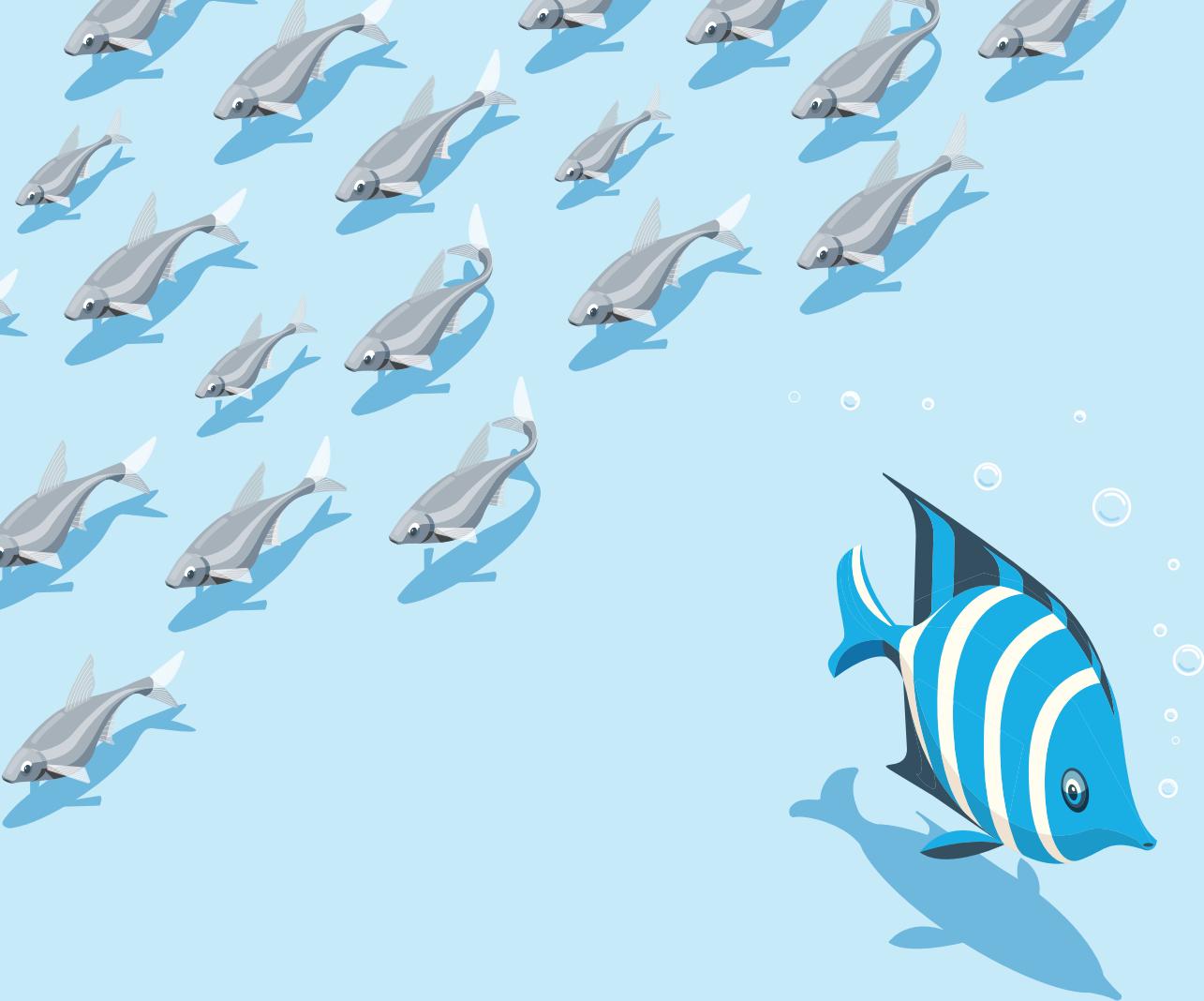
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