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Private Schools Are Indefensible

By Caitlin Flanagan

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Cover Story

- **Private Schools Have Become Truly Obscene**
  Elite schools breed entitlement, entrench inequality—and then pretend to be engines of social change. -- Caitlin Flanagan

Private Schools Have Become Truly Obscene

Elite schools breed entitlement, entrench inequality—and then pretend to be engines of social change.

- Story by Caitlin Flanagan
- April 2021 Issue
  Ideas

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alton is one of the most selective private schools in Manhattan, in part because it knows the answer to an important question: What do hedge-

Dfunders want?

They want what no one else has. At Dalton, that means an "archaeologist in residence," a teaching kitchen, a rooftop greenhouse, and a theater proscenium lovingly restored after it was "destroyed by a previous renovation."

"Next it'll be a heliport," said a member of the local land-use committee after the school's most recent remodel, which added two floors—and 12,000 square feet—to one of its four buildings, in order to better prepare students "for the exciting world they will inherit." Today Dalton; tomorrow the world itself.

So it was a misstep when Jim Best, the head of school—relatively new, and with a salary of $700,000—said that Dalton parents couldn't have something they wanted. The school would not hold in-person classes in the fall. This might have gone over better if the other elite Manhattan schools were doing the same. But Trinity was opening. Ditto the fearsome girls' schools: Brearley, Nightingale-Bamford, Chapin, Spence.

How long could the Dalton parent—the $54,000-a-kid Dalton parent—watch her children slip behind their co-equals? More to the point, how long could she be expected to open *The New York Times* and see articles about one of the coronavirus pandemic's most savage inequalities: that private schools were allowed to open when so many public schools were closed, their students withering in front of computer screens and suffering all manner of neglect?

The Dalton parent is not supposed to be on the wrong side of a savage inequality. She is supposed to care about savage inequalities; she is supposed to murmur sympathetically about savage inequalities while scanning the news, her gentle concern muffled by the jet-engine roar of her morning blowout. But she isn't supposed to fall victim to one.

In early October, stern emails began arriving in Best's inbox. A group of 20 physicians with children at the school wrote that they were "frustrated and confused and better hope to understand the school's thought processes behind the virtual model it has adopted." This was not a group with a high

tolerance for frustration. “Please tell us what are the criteria for re-opening fully in person,” they wrote. And they dropped heavy artillery: “From our understanding, several of our peer schools are not just surviving but thriving.”

Shortly after the physicians weighed in, more than 70 parents with children at the lower school signed a petition asking for the school to open. “Our children are sad, confused and isolated,” they wrote, as though describing the charges of a Victorian orphanage. They were questioning why “everyone around them gets to go to school when they do not.”

Parents at elite private schools sometimes grumble about taking nothing from public schools yet having to support them via their tax dollars. But the reverse proposition is a more compelling argument. Why should public-school parents—why should anyone—be expected to support private schools? Exeter has 1,100 students and a $1.3 *billion* endowment. Andover, which has 1,150 students, is on track to take in $400 million in its current capital campaign. And all of this cash, glorious cash, comes pouring into the countinghouse 100 percent tax-free.

Read: Are private schools immoral? An interview with Nikole Hannah-Jones

These schools surround kids who have every possible advantage with a literal embarrassment of riches—and then their graduates hoover up spots in the best colleges. Less than 2 percent of the nation’s students attend so-called independent schools. But 24 percent of Yale’s class of 2024 attended an independent school. At Princeton, that figure is 25 percent. At Brown and Dartmouth, it is higher still: 29 percent.

The numbers are even more astonishing when you consider that they’re not distributed evenly across the country’s more than 1,600 independent schools but are concentrated in the most exclusive ones—and these are our focus here. In the past five years, Dalton has sent about a third of its graduates to the Ivy League. Ditto the Spence School. Harvard-Westlake, in Los Angeles, sent 45 kids to Harvard alone. Noble and Greenough School, in Massachusetts, did even better: 50 kids went on to Harvard.

However unintentionally, these schools pass on the values of our ruling class—chiefly, that a certain cutthroat approach to life is rewarded. True, they salve their consciences with generous financial aid. Like Lord and Lady Bountiful, the administrators page through the applications of the nonwealthy, deciding whom to favor with an opportunity to slip through the golden doors and have their life change forever.

But what makes these schools truly ludicrous is their recent insistence that they are engines of equity and even "inclusivity." A $50,000-a-year school can't be anything but a very expensive consumer product for the rich. If these schools really care about equity, all they need to do is get a chain and a padlock and close up shop.

I've been following these schools for many years, in part because I once taught at one. Before I got that job, I had no idea this type of education existed.

In very small classes, we read very good books and pressed the students to think deeply about the words on the page. A lesson plan was not a list of points for the teacher to make; it was a set of questions. Even better: a single question. I always joked that the perfect lesson plan would have been to wait until the students had assembled in the classroom, throw in a copy of *The Iliad*, and go to lunch. By senior year, it might have actually worked. By then, they knew what we were teaching them to do. "The seventh grader says *Macbeth* is weird," my department chair told me once. "The 12th grader says *Macbeth* is ambitious." Once students could make discernments like that, it was time for college.

In each department, there was one old black clunker of a phone, but it hardly ever rang. Very rarely, a mother might call to fret about her kid a bit, and you'd lean against the file cabinet muttering encouragement while looking at your colleagues with an expression that said, *Can you believe this shit?* It was then an all-boys school. We didn't have feelings and mothers. We had hard work and athletics. The idea was: Cut the cord! The idea was: We'll take it from here.

But my very first year, I came into the crosshairs of a mother who still flashes through my nightmares. Her kid was a strong student—a solid,

thorough student—but he was also aggressive and mean. Furthermore, I felt that his concerns did not lie with the muses and poets.

One day I gave him an A– on a creative-writing assignment. Soon after, the mom called, and she was pissed. I explained that this grade wouldn't lower his average, but she didn't care. She wanted to come to the school with her husband and meet with me. I assumed that I wouldn't have to agree to such a preposterous request but it turned out that I did. For 45 horrible minutes I sat in a borrowed office with the father (clearly mortified) and the mother (rageful) discussing the merits of this 10th grader's poem, each of us locked into the same kind of intractable positions (they wanted me to change the grade; I wanted them to drop dead) that led to the fall of Saigon. They were coming in with force, and I wouldn't budge.

The next year, I returned to school, took my class lists out of my mailbox, and discovered that I had the kid again. I raced to the division head and asked if I could move him to another section (something his parents were surely trying to do themselves), but no-go. Day after day, he sat solidly in his seat, pumping out his excellent close readings and in-class writing. One day, however, he didn't meet the mark, and earned another A–. I handed back the essays, and headed to the English-department office for some R&R. Not 10 minutes later the phone rang—it was the mother! Complaining about the grade! How was this possible? I'd just handed him the essay. As she carped away, an image materialized before me: the campus payphone, which was bolted to the side of an academic building, and rarely used. I hurried off the call.

"That little fucker called his mother from the payphone!" I said to my friend.

"What a *loser*!" she said supportively. (There were older teachers who mentored us, and who never called their students "fuckers" or "losers." But their lessons took a few years to sink in.)

Yet again I had to meet with the parents. Back to the borrowed office, back to the miserable dad and the steaming mother. But I knew I had graded the paper fairly. Once again they left unhappy.

Here’s how you know that this private-school story is a quarter century old: The school had my back. When I talk to today’s private-school teachers, they no longer feel so unilaterally supported. Many schools have administrators whose job it is to soothe parents—but who often suggest to teachers how they can help with that task. If the mom had called the brass (which I’m sure she did), no one told me about it. Nor did anyone at the school inform me that these parents were major donors. In those days there

was an understanding that the teachers kept the kids in line, and the administrators kept the parents in line.

But the meeting was also notable because of how unusual it was for parents to argue about grades. Back then parents still trusted schools like ours. They understood that—with some rare exceptions (see above)—we had a deep affection for these boys, cut them a break when they needed one, and found ways to nudge their grades upward at the end of each year, so that their work was rewarded. There was no better feeling than writing a college recommendation for a kid and a few months later having him burst into your office with the magic words: "I got in!"

I left the school in the mid-1990s, and in my final weeks, another strange thing happened, but to a different teacher. A father was so angry about his son's French grade that he demanded an audit, with the teacher reading out the boy's marks from her grade book while Dad angrily punched the numbers into his son's graphing calculator. That also seemed like something she should not have had to do, but things were shifting in the world of private schools. Parents were gaining an ugly new sense of power.

It was much easier to laugh at private-school parents before I became one. After teaching for seven years, I had seen what was possible at the secondary-school level, and I was determined to get that kind of education for my own children, whatever the cost. But it wasn't until I changed teams—from private-school teacher to private-school parent—that I really appreciated how overwrought these places were.

Read: Why I'm a public-school teacher but a private-school parent

Michael Thompson's 2005 book, *Understanding Independent School Parents* (co-written with Alison Fox Mazzola), gave me a clearer insight into the many dynamics of private schooling. Thompson, a psychologist, has visited or consulted at some 800 of these schools. In his view, high-powered parents don't realize that they're coming in like a ton of bricks, expecting to talk to a fifth-grade teacher the same way they talk to their own junior employees.

“The relationship between independent school parents and their children’s teachers has only grown more intense,” Thompson wrote in the introduction. “Administrators and teachers are spending more time focused on the demands and concerns of parents than they ever did in the past.”

A decade and a half later, the problem has gotten worse—so much so that Thompson is writing a new book, this time with Robert Evans, another psychologist. “What’s changed in the last few years is the *relentlessness* of parents,” Evans told me. “For the most part, they’re not abusive; it’s that they just won’t let up. Many of them cannot let go of their fears that somehow their child is being left behind.” They want constant reassurance.

By the time their kids get to the upper grades, parents want teachers, coaches, and counselors entirely focused on helping them create a transcript that Harvard can’t resist. “This kind of parent has an idea of the outcome they want; in their work life they can get it,” Evans told me. “They’re surrounded by employees; they can delegate things to their staff.” In their eyes, teachers *are* staff. But the teachers don’t work for them.

Why do these parents need so much reassurance? They “are finding that it’s harder and harder to get their children through the eye of the needle”—admitted into the best programs, all the way from kindergarten to college. But it’s more than that. The parents have a sense that their kids will be emerging into a bleaker landscape than they did. The brutal, winner-take-all economy won’t come for them—they’ve been grandfathered in. But they fear that it’s coming for their children, and that even a good education might not secure them a professional-class career.

Caitlin Flanagan: What the college-admissions scandal reveals

“Half of lawyers say their income doesn’t justify the tuition they spent on their degrees,” Evans told me. Getting into a top medical school has become shockingly difficult; in 2018, *U.S. News & World Report* found that the average admission rate among 118 ranked medical schools was 6.8 percent. For the very best ones? The rate is 2.4 percent.

Daniel Markovits, a professor at Yale Law School, coined the term *meritocracy trap*—a system that rewards an ever-growing share of society’s

riches to an ever-shrinking pool of winners. “Today’s meritocrats still claim to get ahead through talent and effort, using means open to anyone,” he has written in these pages. “In practice, however, meritocracy now excludes everyone outside of a narrow elite.” This is a system that screws the poor, hollows out the middle class, and turns rich kids into exhausted, anxious, and maximally stressed-out adolescents who believe their future depends on getting into one of a very small group of colleges that routinely reject upwards of 90 percent of their applicants.

From the September 2019 issue: Daniel Markovits on how meritocracy harms everyone

Pediatricians who see a lot of these kids tell me that they’re starting to crack, and that some parents try to help their kids keep it together by asking doctors for study drugs or even sleeping pills. The feeling that the child isn’t doing as well as she could—combined with the knowledge that with the requisite documentation, students can take their SATs and ACTs untimed—often has Mom calling her friends, locating the right educational psychologist, and subjecting the teenager to a battery of tests. The doctor almost always finds something.

The one thing the parents will not do is consider that perhaps this high-pressure school is itself the problem. The student must stay on track, take the drugs, inform her teachers of the disabilities that come “under her portfolio,” and keep her eyes on Stanford.

But the parents are also cracking up—and perhaps they, too, should be medicated. Two years ago, their anxieties led a group of them to rise up in an astonishing act of insurrection, storming a citadel of thwarted desire and presumed chicanery in Washington, D.C.: the college-counseling office of Sidwell Friends.

When a private school vaults over the rest of the pack, it is often because the school has attracted a famous parent, someone respected enough that the enrollment seems to be an endorsement. At Sidwell Friends, a Quaker school in Washington, D.C., there were four such parents: Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Barack and Michelle Obama. (Richard Nixon also sent his daughters to

the school, inciting no stampede. But today he would provide a little diversity to the parent body: He was an actual Quaker.)

The school is now so flush that its campus is a sort of Saks Fifth Avenue of Quakerism. Forget having Meeting in the smelly old gym. Now there is a meetinghouse of sumptuous plainness, created out of materials so good and simple and repurposed and expensive that surely only virtue and mercy will follow its benefactors all the days of their lives. The building's citation by the American Institute of Architects notes that the interior is lined with "oak from long-unused Maryland barns" and the exterior is "clad with black locust harvested from a single source in New Jersey."

Read: Private schools are becoming more elite

Like all Quaker schools, Sidwell aims to help children listen for and respond to the still, small voice of God. But it's safe to say the contemporary Sidwell parent cares more about college admissions than about Quakerism. And if she tells you the two go hand in hand, then she doesn't really understand college admissions (or, perhaps, Quakerism).

At this point there is no answer to the question "How do you get your kid into Sidwell?" Nobody knows. The best strategy might be to launch an improbable run for United States president and then—if successful—turn in the application and hope for the best.

Quakerism provides a kind of seawall, protecting its followers from the corrupting tides of money and power. But like all seawalls, it can be breached. Two years ago, parents at Sidwell Friends finally slipped the surly bonds of decent behavior and went wild. Some parents of the class of 2019, feeling the pressure of the college-admissions cycle, initiated a campaign of intimidation, surveillance, lurking on campus, and sabotage that bubbled up into the press and revealed Sidwell for what it had become. The still, small voice of God is no match for the psychic scream of Bethesda.

"Get hold of yourselves," a shaken Patrick Gallagher—then the director of the college-counseling office—wrote to the 12th-grade parents in a December email. You could tell what these people must have been up to by the new policies that Gallagher outlined. They included: not placing calls from blocked numbers or sending anonymous letters; not meeting with counselors to spread gossip about other students; not secretly recording counselors' conversations.

Read: High drama inside D.C.'s most elite private school

The most astonishing of Gallagher's admonitions was this: "While I often arrive at the office well before 8:00 a.m., that does not mean a parent should ever be waiting for me in the vestibule, parking lot, or outside my office door." This is what prosecutors in murder cases call "lying in wait."

Gallagher's email made it clear that parents had been trying to thwart others' college prospects in order to enhance their own children's odds. He sent his missive shortly before winter break, which in private schools is the equivalent of a Friday news dump. It was the kind of school communication that simultaneously put bad actors on notice and reassured the other parents that evil was not triumphing. Inevitably, every parent in the senior class was freaked out that their own children might have been targeted.

After the break, the school's head, Bryan Garman, sent a follow-up email reiterating the policies Gallagher had announced. He also reminded parents that the college counselors would not "respond to any inquiry for student records" for other people's kids. The parents' behavior, Garman said, had become "increasingly intense and inappropriate" and had included "the verbal assault of employees." But these transgressions were placed within a therapeutic context of acceptance and nonjudgment. College admissions, he wrote, "can stretch the patience and emotional capacity of parents." (If you want to know if you're rich, try behaving badly and see if someone in authority will apologize for stretching your patience and emotional capacity.) By the end of the school year, two of Sidwell's three college counselors had quit.

College admissions is one of the few situations in which rich people are forced to scramble for a scarce resource. What logic had led them to believe that it would help to antagonize the college counselors? Driven mad by the looming prospect of a Williams rejection, they had lost all reason.

Private schools regularly make decisions that parents don't understand. Like ancient peoples, the parents try to make sense of the clues. They decide that college admissions must be the god of private school—wrong—or that the god must be AP scores, or sports, or institutional reputation. Wrong, wrong, and wrong.

The god of private school is money.

At an independent school, there are no tax dollars, no municipal bonds, no petitions demanding additional funding for the district. Everything seen and unseen was paid for with funds the school raised itself: every blade of grass, smartboard, academic building, office hour, soccer ball, school psychologist, new paint job, and historic chapel with stained-glass windows spilling colored light onto honeyed pews.

Tuition dollars typically cover some, but not all, of the school's operating expenses. That's what they tell you, anyway, and they always have a pie chart to prove it. No matter which school, where it is located, or how rich the clientele, the administrators are always chasing the dragon of this "shortfall." Personally, I've come to doubt the whole premise. But it is apparently the best way to facilitate the shakedown called annual giving, the once-a-year fundraiser where new parents still gasping from the first payment on the $50,000 tuition find out that more is expected from them. The bread and butter of these schools is the two-career couple who care greatly about their children's education and can afford it, but not easily.

The really big money comes in through the capital campaigns. These are fundraising events dedicated to financing a major school project: paving the locker rooms with gold coins, annexing Slovakia, putting out a hit on a rival headmaster. The campaign gets some cockamamie name—"Imagine the Future" or "Quid Pro Quo"—and lasts several years. There has never in history been a private-school family that slid in and out of the institution without overlapping with one of these campaigns.

Consider Choate Rosemary Hall, in Connecticut, which in 2006 announced the "public phase" of its capital campaign "An Opportunity to Lead." The goal was $200 million—although when the campaign was grandly announced in November of that year, it turned out that the school had already earned more than $100 million during a two-year period of "silent," preliminary fundraising. The gifts included $12 million from the Walton family; $20 million from Herbert V. Kohler Jr., of the plumbing dynasty; and $6 million from a woman who had graduated from Rosemary Hall in 1927.

Two years after the campaign began, the worldwide financial crisis hit. That didn't slow down the campaign, which would eventually bring in $217 million. But—as a sign of sound stewardship—the school informed alumni

and other concerned members of the community that it had decided to freeze faculty salaries. This was a high school with a total enrollment of 850 students and in seven years it had raised almost $260,000 *per student*. And still the school wants more. Currently Choate is in the silent phase of its next capital campaign; in 2019, the school stated that its goal was to raise $300 million.

What forms of payment will these schools accept? You name it. No matter what your assets, they'll find a way to cash them out for you. The Spence School, in New York City, notes that you can make a donation by credit card, by check, or by a gift of securities—shares of stocks or mutual funds. You can designate money for the school in your will, or donate funds from your retirement plan, or make the school a beneficiary of your life-insurance plan, or form a charitable trust.

The inescapable truth is that money guides all sorts of decisions at these schools. Michael Thompson has observed that schools are investing more and more in the "parent-school relationship," which is excellent from the standpoint of fundraising but not necessarily from that of schooling.

Over the years, I've talked with many private-school kids who feel that there is a separate set of rules for the children of huge donors. And in my opinion, they're absolutely right. Private-school donations are the result of carefully developed personal relationships between the top employees at the school and individual donors. It's not unreasonable for a big donor to expect preferential treatment for his or her child. And it's not unusual for him to get it.

Last summer I spoke with a graduate of Princeton's class of 2020, Liam O'Connor, who had come to Princeton from a public school in the town of Wyoming, Delaware. He chose the prestigious college because, "out of all of the places I applied to, it came out as the cheapest one." Cheaper, even, than the University of Delaware, to which he would have paid in-state tuition.

In high school, O'Connor had spent two summers fulfilling his state-mandated physical-education requirement so that he could squeeze in more science classes during the school year. Even so, when he got to Princeton he

found that he was not nearly as prepared as the private-school kids, as well as those who had come from a select group of admissions-based public high schools. “It was like I was given a pair of binoculars, and I could see that there were many people far ahead of me,” he told me.

O’Connor wrote a series of articles in *The Daily Princetonian* about the advantages that these students have at the university. Whereas the math curriculum at most American high schools tops out at Calculus I, he reported, “multivariable calculus and linear algebra—subjects normally reserved for college sophomores or juniors—are widespread among moneyed high schools.” Andover offers organic chemistry, as do several other top private schools.

All of this preparation doesn’t just help private-school kids get into elite colleges; it allows them to dominate once they get there. Over the past decade, O’Connor reported, two-thirds of Princeton’s Rhodes Scholars (excluding international students) came from private schools. So did more than half of the winners of the prestigious Sachs Scholarship, which provides two graduating students the opportunity to work, study, or travel abroad.* Forty-seven percent of the winners of “class legacy prizes”—academic awards given to students in each class—attended private schools. This is why wealthy parents think it’s life-and-death to get their kids into the right prep school—because they know that the winners keep winning.

Parents are obsessed with finding out which are the feeder schools to the best colleges. College counselors tell parents that times have changed and there are no longer schools that lead directly to one elite college or another. But they aren't being fully honest about that.

As a high-school senior, Sai To Yeung hadn't known many students who had gone on to highly competitive colleges, but he decided to "dream big" and was thrilled when he got into Harvard. He felt that the admissions process needed to be demystified. He told me that he'd decided to bring "order out of chaos" and tracked down information on which schools had sent students to three colleges: Harvard, Princeton, and MIT. I asked him how he had obtained it; he said he couldn't reveal his method. Liam O'Connor double-checked much of Yeung's data for Princeton and found that, except for "a few mistakes," the information was correct.

The result of Yeung's research is a website called PolarisList. Looking over the data for Princeton's classes of 2015 through 2018 is bracing. The list of sending schools is dominated by highly selective magnet schools, public schools in wealthy areas, and famous prep schools: the Lawrenceville School, Exeter, Delbarton, Andover, Deerfield Academy. Among the top 25 feeders to Princeton, only three are public schools where 15 percent or more of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

If you went to Lawrenceville, a boarding school not far from Princeton and the university's top sending school, your chances of going to Princeton were almost seven times greater than if you went to Stuyvesant High School, an ultra-selective public school in New York City and itself a top Princeton feeder, where 45 percent of the kids qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. But compared with an average American public school? You don't want to know.

Here is another big number that really needs to be investigated: More than 50 percent of the low-income Black students at elite colleges attended top private schools, according to Anthony Abraham Jack, the author of *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. This means that these schools, which collectively educate a tiny proportion of Black teenagers, have a huge influence on which of these kids get to attend the best colleges.

To some in education, this is a cause for celebration—the old route to social and professional success has within it some dedicated lanes for Black children from low-income families. To others, it is a cause for concern—if these children want to attend an elite college, their best bet by far is to spend their adolescence in a school where the experience of being Black is, for many, a painful one.

As part of last summer's protests, Black students and alumni of certain private schools began a powerful Instagram campaign in which they anonymously described racist encounters. Most of the posts detail recent experiences, but the older ones are often the most haunting. One post, by a man who graduated from Exeter in 1984, caught my attention. "I remember just minding my own business, a Black boy strolling through the gym on a Saturday afternoon. A gymnast was performing, and I could see her gracefully leap through the air, doing all kinds of motions I found very curious." A white woman came up to him and told him to mind his own business. "She implied that I was not appreciating an athletic feat, but simply ogling at a young white girl.

"To this day," he wrote, "I think of her shrill, demeaning voice when I see a gymnast perform on TV, even if that gymnast is Simone Biles."

Among the posts from more recent students, what's striking is that several kinds of experiences were related over and over: the expectation that Black kids would be excellent athletes (and possibly weaker students); insulting assumptions about Black students' family backgrounds; teachers repeatedly confusing the names of Black students; other students constantly reaching out and touching Black girls' hair; and non-Black students using the N-word. Read collectively, these posts are a damning statement about the schools.

Last summer, I spoke with Saidah Belo-Osagie, a graduate of Spence's class of 2014, who is Black. The school had put her on a straight path to the things she wants most in life: She went to Penn, where she realized she had a passion for television and movies. Now that is her field. In 2018, she worked on *When They See Us*, and got to watch Ava DuVernay direct a scene—someone who is telling exactly the kinds of stories she wants to tell, and doing it at the highest level.

We talked for more than an hour, and Belo-Osagie spoke fondly of friends she'd made at Spence and teachers who'd inspired her. But toward the end of the interview, I asked if there had been any negative aspects to the experience. She said that in all the prep-school diversity-and-inclusion programs, "there's always this preface of 'Okay, we're now welcoming you to the majority, where you should be'—with the white people, so to speak." But "inherently within that, you are sacrificing who you are as a person—and it's not like that would ever happen on the opposite end." There had been costs to going to Spence. One of those, she now realizes, was "sacrificing my Blackness."

Dalton has always considered itself progressive in every sense of the word, and it has long been regarded as a leader among private schools in addressing the concerns of its Black students. But the complaints expressed on the Black at Dalton Instagram account could not have been a surprise.

Over the summer, Jim Best, the school head, announced that he had "committed Dalton to becoming a visibly, vocally, structurally anti-racist institution." He issued plans for making this transformation. But the teachers had their own ideas.

In December, a document that 120 faculty and staff members had signed over the summer became public. It outlined a list of proposals: Half of all donations would have to be contributed to New York public schools if Dalton's demographics did not match the city's by 2025; the school would have to employ a total of 12 diversity officers (roughly one for every 100 students); all students would be required to take classes on Black liberation; and all adults at the school, including parent volunteers, would be required to complete annual anti-racist training. Tracked courses would have to be eliminated if Black students did not reach full parity by 2023.

Private-school parents have become so terrified of being called out as racists that they will say nothing on the record about their feelings regarding their schools' sudden embrace of new practices. They have chosen, instead, anonymous letters and press leaks. In December, someone from the Dalton community leaked the teachers' list to Scott Johnston, who writes often about elite education. He published it on his website, The Naked Dollar,

where it got enormous traction. *The Wall Street Journal* asked him to write an opinion piece, and he did—it ran under the attention-grabbing headline "Revolution Consumes New York's Elite Dalton School."

John McWhorter: Schools must resist destructive anti-racist demands

Best wrote to parents saying that the list was not of demands but of "conversation starters." However, a few weeks later, a group of anonymous parents—it's unclear how many—wrote a long, plaintive letter, which was also leaked, complaining about changes that had already taken place.

> It's quite clear that over the summer, when schools across the country were thinking deeply about how to reopen and teach students, the Dalton administration was on a crusade to radically transform the school's curriculum and pedagogy.

According to the letter, in science class there have been "racist cop" reenactments, art class has focused on "decentering whiteness," and health class has examined white supremacy. "Love of learning and teaching is now being abandoned in favor of an 'anti-racist curriculum,'" the parents wrote. "Every class this year has had an obsessive focus on race and identity."

The tensions at Dalton are fascinating: Are there enough wealthy white parents willing to pay $54,000 a year to have their kid play the part of Racist Cop in science class (or—the final insult—to have him cast as Racist Cop No. 2)?

The parents had demands of their own, including an immediate halt to curriculum changes. According to Scott Johnston, some board members feel the letter itself is racist, and the school has taken the extraordinary step of scrubbing the names of board members from its website.

The parent letter was gleefully mocked. But these aren't parents in the public-school system; they are consumers of a luxury product. If they are unhappy, they won't just write anonymous letters. They'll let the school know the old-fashioned way: by cutting down on their donations. Money is how rich people express their deepest feelings.

Over the summer, once Manhattan's private-school families had fled the city for their houses in the Hamptons—after they had called Citarella for a delivery, and told the gardeners to open up the pool and the cleaning women to air out the bedrooms—many of them settled down to read *White Fragility* (or at least to read about *White Fragility*). But it's one thing to feel chastened in the Hamptons; it's another to come back to the city and have your child casually ask if you're a white supremacist.

At Harvard-Westlake School—where I taught so long ago and from which one of my sons graduated—some faculty members have adopted a practice that has become common in colleges: acknowledging that the campus sits on Native lands. As one middle-school English teacher wrote on her syllabus: "We recognize the Kizh, Tongva, Chumash, Tataviam, Serrano, Cahuilla, Luiseño and other Native peoples as past, present, and future caretakers and stewards of this land. We honor them by also building a relationship with Mother Earth."

An Instagram account called Woke at Harvard-Westlake was created in response to the school's new anti-racist initiatives. One of its posts opines on the fraudulence of these pious acknowledgments, given that the school has pulled yet another fast one on Mother Earth. It has purchased even *more* presumably Native land, for $40 million—and is now shaking down parents to help refurbish the acquisition, a private tennis club located a mile from the upper-school campus.

Writes the administrator of the account:

> On the one hand we can laugh at this latest example of HW's comical embrace of Radical Chic. But on the other, our kids are being taught terrible values: that hypocrisy and dishonesty are fine so long as you virtue-signal the right fashionable politics. And that those fashionable politics are basically meaningless—they are just for show, a way to make being privileged and wealthy truly guilt-free.

The problems at these schools are endemic to their business model. Their existence depends on an unseemly closeness between the wealthiest parents and the most powerful administrators. The current system is devoted to excess—bigger, better, more. The

schools compete with one another over programs and campuses; many have such luxurious facilities that they're almost revolting.

The kind of changes that would solve their problems would involve not only limiting the amount of money that individual parents can give, but also accepting that schools don't need to be showplaces. In order to become more equitable, they would have to become less opulent—and risk missing out on a few rich parents. But in their typical way, they want the tennis club *and* to be regarded as hubs of social change.

In a just society, there wouldn't be a need for these expensive schools, or for private wealth to subsidize something as fundamental as an education. We wouldn't give rich kids and a tiny number of lottery winners an outstanding education while so many poor kids attend failing schools. In a just society, an education wouldn't be a luxury item.

We have become a country with vanishingly few paths out of poverty, or even out of the working class. We've allowed the majority of our public schools to founder, while expensive private schools play an outsize role in determining who gets to claim a coveted spot in the winners' circle. Many schools for the richest American kids have gates and security guards; the message is *you are precious to us*. Many schools for the poorest kids have metal detectors and police officers; the message is *you are a threat to us*.

Public-school education—the specific force that has helped generations of Americans transcend the circumstances of their birth—is profoundly, perhaps irreparably, broken. In my own state of California, only half of public-school students are at grade level in reading, and even fewer are in math. When a crisis goes on long enough, it no longer seems like a crisis. It is merely a fact.

Shouldn't the schools that serve poor children be the very best schools we have?

When I started teaching at Harvard School, it had not yet become the world-conquering Harvard-Westlake, with a second campus in the heart of Bel Air. I arrived in 1988 at age 26. There was wealth, but it wasn't as visible. The campus

was still a bit ramshackle, with outbuildings tucked into the hillside, some of them left to molder. An academic building leaked so badly during heavy rains that for a week or so we'd all have to squelch down the soaked industrial carpeting in the hallways, leaving wet footprints on the linoleum floors of the classrooms.

I could not have cared less.

In those innocent days, I thought of schools as places of actual transformation. You came in as one person and left as another. In the fall, the Valley heat was intense, and *Macbeth* was weird. In the spring, the jacaranda trees burst into flower and *Macbeth* was ambitious. And after that, it was time for the boys to leave. We didn't have anything else to give them.

This article appears in the April 2021 print edition with the headline "Private Schools Are Indefensible."

** This article originally stated that two-thirds of the winners of the Sachs Scholarship over the past decade came from private schools. In fact, more than half did.*

Caitlin Flanagan is a staff writer at The Atlantic. She is the author of Girl Land and To Hell With All That.

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Unlocking the Mysteries of Long COVID

A growing number of clinicians are on an urgent quest to find treatments for a frighteningly pervasive problem. They've had surprising early success.

Jonno Rattman

- Story by Meghan O'Rourke
- April 2021 Issue
  Health

Photographs by Jonno Rattman

Image above: Nearly a year after she was infected with the coronavirus, Caitlin Barber still uses a wheelchair outside.

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he quest at Mount Sinai began with a mystery. During the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in New York City, Zijian Chen, an endocrinologist, had been

T appointed medical director of the hospital's new Center for Post-COVID Care, dedicated both to research and to helping recovering patients "transition from hospital to home," as Mount Sinai put it. One day last spring, he turned to an online survey of COVID-19 patients who were more than a month past their initial infection but still experiencing symptoms. Because COVID-19 was thought to be a two-week respiratory illness, Chen anticipated that he would find only a small number of people who were still sick. That's not what he saw.

"I looked at the number of patients that were in the database and it was, I think, 1,800 patients," he told me. "I freaked out a little bit. *Oh my God, there's so many patients telling us that they still have symptoms.*" A realization dawned on him: America was not simply struggling to contain a once-in-a-century pandemic, caused by a virus far more dangerous than seasonal influenza. Many patients were, for unknown reasons, not recovering.

"We didn't expect this from a virus," he continued. "We expect that with viral infections as a whole, with few exceptions, you get better." Many patients who spend significant time in an ICU—whether battling an infection or recovering from a stroke—do require further treatment even after they are released, because they suffer from something called post–intensive care syndrome, often characterized by weakness and cognitive problems. But that didn't explain the group Chen was looking at. Startlingly, most had had mild cases of COVID-19—they had neither been hospitalized nor developed pneumonia. Before contracting the virus, many had had no known health issues. Yet they were reporting significant ongoing symptoms—"shortness of breath, heart palpitations, chest pain, fatigue, and brain fog," Chen told me.

Chen quickly convened a multidisciplinary group of clinicians. The team began triaging patients with ongoing symptoms, referring them to specialists and teasing apart the causes. There were patients of all ages and backgrounds, with a wide array of problems, from persistent loss of taste and smell to chest pain. Some patients had been seriously ill, and they typically had the lung scarring, or fibrosis, that comes with COVID pneumonia; they were referred to pulmonologists for follow-up care. Others had readily observable heart problems, including myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle, and were referred to cardiologists. Still others had blood clots. The extent of the damage COVID-19 had done to them was highly unusual for a respiratory virus—and deeply alarming. But, Chen told me, "those were actually the luckier patients, because we could target treatment toward that."

The unlucky remainder—more than 90 percent of the patients the center has seen—was a puzzling group "where we couldn't see what was wrong," Chen said. These tended to be the patients who had originally had mild to moderate symptoms. They were overwhelmingly women, even though men are typically hit harder by acute COVID-19. (*Acute COVID-19* refers to the distinct period of infection during which the immune system fights off the virus; the acute phase can range from mild to severe.) And they tended to be young, between the ages of 20 and 50—not an age group that, doctors had thought, suffered the worst effects of the disease. Most of the patients were white and relatively well-off, raising concern among clinicians that many people of color with ongoing symptoms were not getting the care they needed.

These patients' tests usually showed nothing obviously the matter with them. "Everything was coming back negative," says Dayna McCarthy, a rehabilitation-medicine physician and a lead clinician at the center. "So of course Western medicine wants to say, 'You're fine.'"

But the patients were self-evidently not fine. An international survey by Patient-Led Research for COVID-19, one of various groups drawing attention to persisting problems, asked nearly 3,800 patients with ongoing illness to describe their symptoms. A significant number—85.9 percent—reported having relapses in the months after their initial infection, usually triggered by mental or physical exertion. (Not all patients in this group had confirmed cases of COVID-19, given that tests were hard to come by last March and April.) Many patients were experiencing severe fatigue and brain fog. Other patients suffered from chest tightness and tachycardia—a condition in which the heart beats more than 100 times a minute—when they stood up or walked. Others had diarrhea and lost their appetite; some had terrible bone pain. Nearly a quarter said they were still unable to work; many had gone on disability or taken medical leave. Patient groups of COVID-19 "long-haulers" were springing up on Facebook and elsewhere online, where people shared data and compared notes about what they began to call "long COVID."

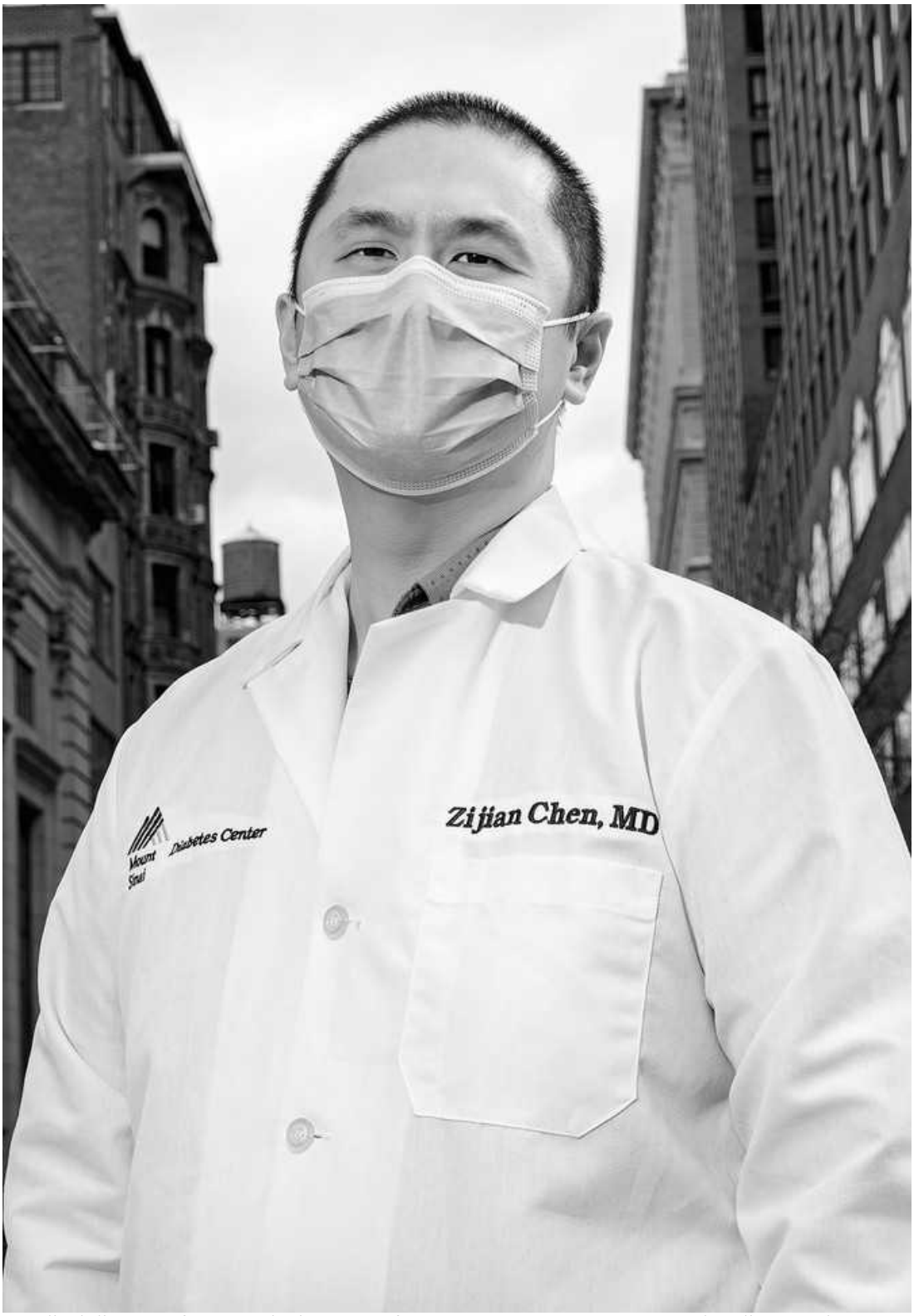
One such patient, Caitlin Barber—who wound up at the Mount Sinai Center for Post-COVID Care this past fall—caught the virus in late March of last year at the nursing home where she worked as a dietitian. Barber, who is 28, was newly married and living in upstate New York. She ran half-marathons competitively; after work every day she went to the gym for two hours. Then she came home, made dinner for her husband, relaxed, and went to bed. "Everybody knows, that's what I do every day," she told me, speaking in the present tense. She paused. "I had a great life, a perfect life."

Read: Long-haulers are redefining COVID-19

Barber's case of COVID-19 wasn't bad. "It was kind of like a cold for me; I got very lucky in that respect." Two weeks later, she went back to work. "Within three days, my world just crashed," she said. She had difficulty writing simple reports. In the middle of a routine feeding-tube procedure—"Dietitian 101," she told me—she found herself, tube in hand, unsure what to do next. She called her supervisor to take over. After a few such failed attempts to work, she went on medical leave.

Nearly a year later, Barber is mostly bedbound: "My symptoms change all the time. I'm happy if I can take a shower." She struggles to brush her teeth or prepare meals, because her heart races to 180 beats a minute. (A typical rate is 60 to 100.) Convulsions sent her to the emergency room in September. She is alone most of the day—her husband works long hours—and she has to plan carefully in order to use the bathroom and feed herself without collapsing. There are chairs placed strategically throughout her apartment for her to rest on. Her friends ask her what she does all day at home. "I feel like I am very busy," she told me drily. It can take her a whole day to wash her bedding, because of the spikes in her heart rate.

Early on, many doctors, predictably, dismissed these cases as the result of anxiety or hypochondria. But at Mount Sinai, Chen and others tried to figure out what was happening. Their interest was not just academic. Beyond the terrifying impact on individual lives, the scope of the problem immediately alarmed them. "My goodness, the economic implications of this," McCarthy told me. "You're talking a huge number of 20-to-40-year-olds—our workforce—who now can't work."



The medical director of Mount Sinai's Center for Post-COVID Care was stunned to discover that some 1,800 patients were still experiencing symptoms more than a month after being infected.

Today, informal estimates suggest that 10 to 30 percent of those infected with the novel coronavirus have long-term symptoms. “What people need to know is the pandemic’s toll is likely much higher than we are imagining,” Craig Spencer, the director of global health in emergency medicine at New York–Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center, told me. “It is an area that merits urgent attention. There will be people living with the impact of COVID long after the pandemic is over. This is not made up or in the minds of people who are sickly. This is real.”

And so, even as research scientists were developing the vaccines that will help bring an end to the acute phase of the pandemic later this year, the doctors at Mount Sinai and other academic medical centers began working to understand, and treat, the destruction that it is leaving behind. The unusual speed and scale of the effort are born of urgency. In many ways, the pace of progress has been remarkable, and innovations of a surprisingly low-tech sort are yielding results. But we still face a crisis of as-yet-unknown proportions that may change our medical system, our ideas about infectious disease—and the future of millions of Americans.

Last April, the quest became the consuming focus of another group of Mount Sinai clinicians, known for its novel approaches to problems for which medicine doesn’t have easy answers. David Putrino is the director of rehabilitation innovation for the Mount Sinai Health System. Putrino spends his time on questions that many doctors don’t think about, including “measuring things that are hard to measure,” he told me. Before the pandemic, he was treating professional baseball and basketball players in his “high performance” clinic and doing TEDx Talks about the brain’s remarkable ability to heal itself. After the pandemic hit, with ICUs full and the hospital overtaxed, Putrino’s team built a platform to remotely monitor patients with suspected coronavirus infections who at other times might have been admitted to the hospital. This triage helped many sick patients stay out of the ER while Putrino’s team watched their oxygen levels.

“And then my team started seeing these cases that weren’t getting better,” he told me. “My physical therapists were saying, ‘These symptoms are really different from those of acute COVID. We don’t know what to do with them.’”

When Putrino looked at the data, he saw the same symptoms that Chen saw. To Putrino, they looked like those of patients who suffer from a poorly understood and often misdiagnosed condition, one that he happens to know a lot about because his wife lives with it: dysautonomia, or impairment of the usual functioning of the autonomic nervous system, which controls blood pressure, temperature regulation,

and digestion. *Dysautonomia* is itself an umbrella term for a host of different conditions, many of whose causes have yet to be fully pinned down. In common manifestations of it, a patient's autonomic nervous system has trouble regulating the heart's response to exertion, changes in posture, or variations in temperature, sending the body into an inappropriate fight-or-flight response. Some patients' systems have trouble adjusting blood pressure or constricting blood vessels to send blood to the brain. Blood can pool in the legs and peripheries of the body; the heart might compensate by increasing its rate, while the body releases surges of adrenaline in a fruitless attempt to correct the problem. As a result, patients can experience some blend of fatigue, headaches, digestive problems, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, and cognitive issues such as brain fog.

By chance, Putrino had been working on a project for dysautonomia patients with Amy Kontorovich, a genetic cardiologist at Mount Sinai who studies the condition and has treated hundreds of patients with it. (After they met, Kontorovich ended up diagnosing and treating Putrino's wife, who has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a group of genetic disorders that affect the body's connective tissues; it is commonly associated with dysautonomia.) And so, as the team showed him the cases, Putrino told me, he felt a leap of recognition. "I looked at the symptoms and was like, 'Oh my God.' And I called Amy and said, 'Help.'"

Kontorovich was prepared for the call. A key clue had come her way: Two weeks earlier, she had received an email from a doctor she knew named Jessica Cohen, a 38-year-old who worked at a New York–area hospital. Cohen had tested positive for COVID-19 on March 8—at the start of the first wave in New York—a few days after her husband returned from a trip to Scotland feeling logy. The couple have two young children. "I told him to 'get over it,'" she says. "In retrospect, that may not have been the right thing to say."

At first her illness was relatively mild, like her husband's. Tracking her oxygen levels and heart rate with her smartwatch, she felt she had gotten lucky. But on the eighth day—March 16—she went to the bathroom, and her heart began to race, beating more than 140 times per minute. Worried she had a blood clot, she texted a colleague, who told her to go to the ER. No one yet had any idea what COVID-19 did to the heart.

Meghan O'Rourke: Americans have to accept uncertainty about the coronavirus

Cohen went to the Mount Sinai ER, where she was admitted so that doctors could observe her racing heart. But the tests that help identify risk of clots and heart attacks came back normal. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. They

told Cohen they thought she just needed “some more time”; she might be weakened from a week in bed. Thinking that she needed to start pushing herself, she went home.

That week, she forced herself to walk up the stairs in her house, only to collapse at the landing. She started having diarrhea and bouts of intense fatigue and severe headaches. One day she walked four blocks with her daughter to the store, where her heart began racing so fast that she had to sit down on the sidewalk until her husband came to pick them up.

Cohen began posting in a doctors’ group on Facebook, eager to find out whether any of her colleagues had patients whose symptoms resembled hers. On the afternoon of March 26, she sat up in bed, and her heart rate skyrocketed. “I had an epiphany,” she told me. “I thought, *Wait a second. Oh my God. This is like POTS*”—postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, one of the subtypes of dysautonomia. She began sleuthing—and turned up a paper that suggested a connection between POTS and an inflammatory immune response common in cases of COVID-19. Excited, she posted a question: Had anyone’s patients experienced dysautonomia after the virus? None had. But one friend wrote back: “You need to talk to Amy.”

Cohen shared her medical chart with Kontorovich. “She was the first post-COVID patient I had seen. At that point, she clearly fit a picture of dysautonomia,” Kontorovich told me. After they spoke, she had a sinking feeling: “If this is something that happens to a lot of people, we’re in trouble,” she remembers thinking, “because most doctors don’t recognize dysautonomia as a real entity.”

Amy Kontorovich saw patients whose profile suggested a condition, dysautonomia, that she had been treating for years.

When Putrino called Kontorovich, in May, the two began sharing their parallel experiences. Given the mounting evidence on his platform of the extent of ongoing illness, Putrino pulled together a group that started having weekly Zoom meetings. As a clinician who'd emigrated from Australia, Putrino still hadn't gotten used to the American health-care system's signature mode—"everything is very hyperspecialized, and professionals don't speak to one another." The group he assembled was, like Chen's, notably multidisciplinary. In addition to Putrino and Kontorovich, it included a physical therapist, a sports-medicine physician, a respiratory specialist, and a nutritionist—all of whom had been trained to work holistically to treat conditions for which clear-cut medical protocols don't exist.

Putrino and Chen connected, too. Because it conducts research, the Center for Post-COVID Care accepts only patients with positive COVID-19 tests, but in the early days of the pandemic, thousands of patients had never been able to get a test at all. Chen started sending some of those patients to Putrino's team.

Clues, initially, were sparse. "What we're seeing is an entirely distinct syndrome," Putrino told me, one that tends to be "way more debilitating and severe" than others like it, but similarly mysterious. No one knew exactly why the virus was throwing the autonomic nervous system out of whack—or causing all the other symptoms patients were reporting—but many suspected that the effect was likely to be "immune-incited," as Dayna McCarthy put it. Based on preliminary evidence, some theories speculate that long COVID is a result of a powerful immune reaction unleashed by the virus, leaving widespread damage in the body; others posit that the immune response to the virus triggers autoimmune disease; and still other theories suggest that the virus itself causes hard-to-observe damage in the nervous system and other parts of the body. Or perhaps a combination of these factors is at play in different patients.

But drawing on Jessica Cohen's case, and the reports of patients on the platform, Putrino and Kontorovich quickly developed a broad hypothesis: In a group of patients, they theorized, either the virus or the immune system's reaction to it had caused dramatic dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system. In the absence of clear data, Putrino told me, they decided to study how patients responded to treatment. Patients with cardiac or pulmonary problems typically react well to rehab that pushes them physically ("if you can take a little more, we'll push you a little more," as Putrino put it). But that push-through-it model can dramatically exacerbate dysautonomia patients' symptoms, causing exhaustion and a racing heart. So standard rehab usually doesn't work.

Read: The core lesson of the COVID-19 heart debate

Experimentation with POTS over the past decade has yielded a paradoxical axiom that the group used as a guiding principle: Very gentle rehab is important, if you can tolerate it. The regimen involves doing short bursts of cardiac exertion while lying down or seated (so as not to tax the nervous and cardiovascular systems), wearing compression garments (to reduce blood pooling), hydrating, and taking salt (to increase blood volume). Studies, including an ongoing one conducted by Kontorovich's lab, have found that in dysautonomia patients, the heart is smaller, and has less blood-volume capacity, than would be expected. No one knows if these patients' hearts have actually shrunk in response to illness or other stresses—the phenomenon turns up in endurance athletes who suddenly stop training—or if people with smaller hearts are just more vulnerable to dysautonomia and related conditions. But studies have shown that targeted rehab can safely help the heart increase in size, improving symptoms. Putrino and Kontorovich theorized that the same might be true for the patients they were seeing.

Their hypothesis was borne out in a preliminary study, which found that a majority of their patients' hearts were smaller than expected. And in rehab, people responded "more like we expected them to respond if they had autonomic issues than if they had cardiac or lung injuries," Putrino said.

The patients' symptoms were too varied to be lumped under an established label; in some ways the condition resembled dysautonomia, and POTS in particular—but it was not textbook. (Some clinicians began calling it post-COVID POTS.) In other ways, it closely resembled myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), in which people *also* demonstrate exercise intolerance and profound fatigue, but it was likewise not textbook. Same for autoimmune disorders. A commonality stood out: These are all poorly understood conditions that, evidence suggests, can be triggered by the body's response to infections, with clusters of system-roaming symptoms that get grouped under one name.

In conjunction with a group of physicians in the U.K., Putrino's team came up with a name, "post-acute COVID syndrome," to distinguish between this manifestation of long COVID and the ongoing symptoms caused by observable organ damage from the virus.

Putrino's team partnered with immunologists and researchers at Mount Sinai, as well as the National Institutes of Health and Yale, to try to identify the biological markers of post-acute COVID syndrome, and to understand the role the immune system was playing—but that kind of research takes months, if not years, to

complete. In the meantime, the Mount Sinai teams struggled to find treatment protocols that worked for everyone to whom the new label seemed to apply. Some of their patients were so sick that even gentle rehab worsened their symptoms (much as people with ME/CFS have long reported). In others, rehab worked, but only up to a point, or patients overexerted themselves and relapsed. In April, for instance, Kontorovich had given Cohen a set of guidelines that made her strong enough to go back to work at the height of the surge in New York. But after working a 12-hour shift at the hospital treating COVID-19 patients, Cohen ended up back in the ER and then at home, in bed.

David Putrino, working with his team, found that even gentle rehab could exacerbate symptoms.

MISSING PIECE of the puzzle, the Mount Sinai teams soon found, was right in front of them: breathing. Everyone knew, of course, about severely sick COVID-19

A patients on ventilators. What the researchers and doctors at Mount Sinai hadn't realized was that even mild cases might be affecting respiration after the acute phase of the disease. Evidence began to accrue that long-COVID patients were breathing shallowly through their mouths and into their upper chest. By contrast, a proper breath happens in the nose and goes deep into the diaphragm; it stimulates the vagus nerve along the way, helping regulate heart rate and the nervous system. Many of us breathe through our mouths, slightly compromising our respiration, but in patients with post-acute COVID syndrome, lung inflammation or another trigger appeared to have profoundly affected the process. In these cases, patients' breathing "is just completely off," McCarthy told me.

Over the summer months, Chen's and Putrino's teams refined their treatment approaches, observing and analyzing all the while. They addressed patients' disparate symptoms (such as new food sensitivities, or roaming pain) with dietary changes, stress-management techniques, and individually tailored rehab. In addition, they introduced a science-based breathwork program, designed by a new company called Stasis, to try to restore normal breathing patterns in the sickest patients. Jessica Cohen used it over the summer to help recover from her setback. For Caitlin Barber, breathwork came in the fall, more than half a year into her ordeal.

The Stasis program is deceptively simple and strikingly low-tech: It involves inhaling and exhaling through your nose in prescribed counts in the morning and at night. The protocol was developed by Josh Duntz, a Navy Special Operations veteran, and his co-founder, Dan Valdo. During a decade in the Navy—he left in December 2019—Duntz had become obsessed with physical and mental performance under stress. "It was quite literally the difference between life and death," he told me. Trying breathwork himself after a workout partner introduced him to it, Duntz noticed immediate improvement in his endurance runs: He could run for longer with a lower heart rate, and without getting tired. He dug into the emerging science of breathing and became a convert.

By luck, Duntz knew Putrino; the two had been working together on a project prior to the pandemic. In the spring, he heard about the persistent breathing problems of COVID long-haulers. One night in April, he woke up with an idea and scribbled "breathwork" in his bedside notebook. "So I reached out to David to say, 'I think this could work and here's why.'" A piece had clicked into place for Duntz: Similar symptoms (fatigue, shortness of breath, racing heart) occur in people who have low carbon-dioxide levels in their blood—a condition known as hypocapnia, which can be triggered by hyperventilation, or shallow, rapid breathing through the mouth.

Duntz wondered if perhaps these long-COVID patients, so many of whom suffered from dizziness and tachycardia, were also breathing shallowly, because of either lung inflammation even in mild cases or viral damage to the vagus nerve. The theory seemed plausible to Putrino: Oxygen is key to our health, but carbon dioxide plays an equally crucial role, by balancing the blood's pH level. Mount Sinai was able to launch a breathwork pilot program swiftly because of "how desperate people were—the hospital was so overwhelmed," Duntz said. The program also didn't have to pass FDA clearance.

After a week, everyone in the pilot program reported improvement in symptoms like shortness of breath and fatigue. (No double-blind randomized controlled trial has yet been conducted, so it is not possible to know what percentage of the improvement was due to the placebo effect.) The patients' responses were "game-changing," Putrino told me.

The key was the realization that the diaphragm and the nervous system had to be coached back to normal function before further reconditioning could start. "You cannot rehabilitate someone when their symptoms are completely out of control," Putrino said. Although patients still faced an unfolding array of unpredictable symptoms, breathwork helped get them to a "place where the healing can start."

That was Barber's experience. In early November, seven months after getting sick, she began doing the breathwork with her husband, inhaling through the nose for four counts and exhaling for six in the morning, and in the evening, inhaling for four, holding for four, and exhaling for four. (I tried these routines and found them surprisingly hard.) She immediately discovered that she could better calm herself during an episode when her heart began racing.

Dayna McCarthy saw that some patients' breathing was "completely off."

Dayna McCarthy at the Center for Post-COVID Care laid out the group's theories about why the treatment is so helpful. Through breathwork, patients can

consciously control their heart rate, she noted. In addition, modulating the nervous system's fight-or-flight response may help regulate the immune system. (Studies have shown that elevated stress hormones can lead to chronic inflammation.) And proper breathing is crucial to circulation in the lymphatic system, often described as the body's highway for immune cells, which plays a role in eliminating toxins and waste.

I talked with Barber a few weeks after she started the breathwork. She had noticed a dramatic decline in her heart rate. "It doesn't help with my mobility," she said. But "for some reason, my symptoms"—of breathlessness, dizziness, and brain fog—"have noticeably lessened." She had her period the week we talked, usually a time when her symptoms intensified, but that month they hadn't.

IF THERE IS any reason for hope in the growing epidemic of long COVID, it is that some academic medical centers are taking these patients seriously and tailoring treatment to them. Medicine's history with hard-to-identify chronic illnesses, particularly those that mainly affect women, has not been a good one. For decades now, marginalized patients who have felt mysteriously unwell—with ME/CFS, with post-treatment Lyme disease syndrome, with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, and more—have banded together into activist groups to try to legitimize their suffering. The same is happening online in the long-hauler groups, which are full of patients who have been met with disbelief by local physicians. But the Mount Sinai doctors (along with collaborative teams in various other academic centers) have responded promptly to the problem. Recently, the NIH and the World Health Organization recognized long COVID as a syndrome that warrants more research.

From the September 2019 issue: Meghan O'Rourke on why Lyme disease is so hard to understand

Why? Because of the sheer scope of the problem, to be sure. But also because when patient groups began calling attention to it, they were reaching out to clinicians who were primed to listen. After all, many of those who first reported the experience of relapses and persistent trouble are doctors, like Jessica Cohen. Another such doctor is Dayna McCarthy, who struggles with long-COVID symptoms. "These are doctors that we work alongside," Chen told me. "And we know that these aren't patients that are faking it. If my fellow doctor, whom I work with closely, is telling me that they can't get through the day because they can't think straight, I'm going to believe that."

In these places—most notably, Mount Sinai, UC San Francisco's post-COVID center, and Johns Hopkins—the people treating long-haulers were already champions of thinking in new ways about chronic illness. Amy Kontorovich, for instance, has been treating dysautonomia patients for almost a decade, and she's become passionate about advocating for patients whose conditions are dismissed. "Most of my patients were young women between the ages of 20 and 45. And the story was often one of a long diagnostic journey," Kontorovich told me. "Patients had been told symptoms were in their head or purely due to anxiety." Her patients epitomize the kind whom the medical system frequently fails—by contesting the reality of their illness, sending them from specialist to specialist, loading them up with drugs without getting to the root cause.

From the November 2014 issue: Meghan O'Rourke on how doctors and patients communicate

Doing better by these patients has been challenging because 20th-century medicine was not really built to treat hard-to-measure systemic illnesses—especially those, like dysautonomia, ME/CFS, and autoimmune diseases, that can be worsened by stress. Instead, it was based on the rather incredible notion that all bodies respond roughly the same way to infection or injury, and the immune system is a well-organized defense mechanism that never attacks the body. This perspective is turning out to be oversimplified.

The framework dates back to the embrace of germ theory in the late 19th century. The idea that many illnesses are caused by an observable pathogen, which produces distinct and predictable symptoms, had a dramatic clarity to it. It pushed Western medicine away from an earlier holistic emphasis on the role an individual's constitution played in illness. According to the new view, infection was determined by a specific and measurable entity. Focus had shifted from the soil to the seed, as it were.

This pivot increased survival rates from infectious diseases and gave us longer lives, on average. But it had one particularly negative consequence: Patients who reported inexplicable ongoing problems after an infection were largely ignored or dismissed by physicians if tests failed to turn up clear answers.

In recent years, though, medical pioneers have pushed past the "if we can't measure it, it doesn't exist" view, bringing the individual constitution—the soil—back into consideration, and articulating a more current idea: that the immune system's response to a pathogen could be what does much of the damage to our bodies. This new paradigm holds that disease is a multipronged phenomenon—an interaction

among pathogens (whether viruses or bacteria), the immune system, and "environment," a term that can refer to one's microbiome or one's exposure to such things as toxic chemicals and trauma. (Both have been shown to affect the immune system.) At the vanguard of an emerging personalized medicine, the new view of postviral illness takes into account the variety of individual immune responses to infections, which, we now know, are influenced by the social and genetic determinants of health, among them the stresses of poverty and systemic racism.

This paradigm suggests that in fact—though Chen had expressed initial surprise to see a virus acting this way—a wide array of infections may routinely trigger long-term illness in certain patients. A 2018 study conducted by researchers at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital showed that Epstein-Barr virus, which develops into mononucleosis, increases the risk of lupus in a genetically susceptible group of people. Researchers at Stanford are exploring immune pathways by which certain infections (for example, strep throat) can trigger pediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric syndrome in some children.

COVID-19 seems like a test case for this new model of thinking about infection as a trigger of immune dysfunction: One of the disease's great mysteries is why some 30-year-olds die from it while others barely notice they have it, and still others initially have a mild acute case but end up unable to manage a flight of stairs. This pandemic has vividly dramatized the variability—and lingering complexity—of the human host's response to a pathogen.

Caitlin Barber occasionally relies on her husband to carry her up the front steps to their home.

“This is something that has been going on forever,” said Craig Spencer, the director of emergency medicine at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Spencer understands something about postviral conditions, because he contracted Ebola while working in Guinea and fell ill upon his return to New York City, where he then also struggled with its aftereffects.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if people are walking about with long Epstein-Barr virus, or long influenza. We all know someone who is low energy, who’s told to work harder. We have all heard about chronic-Lyme sufferers, and those with ME/CFS. But they get written off,” Spencer told me. The difference now is that it is happening “on such a huge scale—unlike anything we’ve seen before. It is harder for the medical community to write off.” Indeed, many researchers I spoke with believe that the race to understand long COVID will advance our understanding of chronic conditions that follow infection, transforming medicine in the process.

A GREAT DEAL REMAINS to be discovered about long COVID—about why more women than men seem to suffer from it (estrogen, genetics, and differences in the immune response are all being explored); about why some men experience erectile dysfunction; about how it affects taste and appetite, as well as mental health; about why some people respond to exercise-based rehab and others don’t. Proof of the virus’s destructive power keeps

accumulating. One study found that a significant number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients developed antibodies to their own tissue. Some research suggests that the virus persists in immunocompromised patients for many weeks. Evidence is also mounting that the virus infiltrates and damages not just the lungs and the heart, and possibly the vagus nerve, but also the brain, vocal cords, esophagus, and more. Doctors are experimentally treating long-COVID patients with a variety of pharmaceuticals, among them antihistamines, Pepcid AC, and an antiparasitic drug called ivermectin.

Medicine's prompt attention to these patients has mattered, because successful management of post-acute COVID syndrome, whatever its specific catalyst, seems to be tied to timely treatment of it. As Putrino told me, "What we know from these sorts of conditions is the longer that you persist with the symptoms without having them managed, the longer it takes to eventually rehabilitate them." In March, Jessica Cohen couldn't walk up two flights of stairs. Today, she is back at work full-time, feeling lucky that much of her job is administrative and she can sit at a desk; even this much effort means managing flares that leave her depleted, her heart pounding when she tries to walk more than a short distance.

By contrast, by the time Caitlin Barber finally got into the Mount Sinai Center in mid-September—having learned about it from a patient Facebook group—"I had been dismissed and turned down and completely gaslighted by doctors for months," she recalled. During that time, she got sicker and sicker. At the center, where Barber saw an intake doctor and was given a full cardiac evaluation, the doctors told her that her condition would not have become so severe if it hadn't gone untreated for so long. They also told her that they now understood, five months in, that her symptoms resembled those of thousands of others, which few physicians had realized back in April. They believed her, and they could help, though they didn't yet know what the path toward recovery might look like.


Caitlin Barber uses a pulse oximeter to ensure that she doesn't overexert herself.

When I first spoke with her, in late October, Barber explained that she believed she was unlikely to make a full recovery, though she hoped for better quality of life.

Four weeks later, in late November, when we talked for a third time, the breathwork had led to some dramatic improvements, ameliorating the most debilitating of her symptoms: She could sit up without feeling dizzy. She had been cleared for physical therapy, which consisted of gentle strengthening of key muscle groups. The first rounds—done virtually with a therapist over videoconference—would take place with her lying down, so as not to stress her heart or nervous system.

In December, she and her husband went for a series of follow-up appointments at the center, one of them with her cardiologist, Ruwanthi Titano. Her husband FaceTimed me so I could watch. "How are you doing?" Titano asked. Perched on the exam table, Barber explained that she was taking the prescribed salt and doing the PT diligently. "I have made a little progress," she said, with evident enthusiasm. Three months had passed since her first Mount Sinai visit; nearly eight months had passed since she was first infected.

"I don't need the wheelchair in the house. I can shower and I can care for myself when he's at work," she said, turning toward her husband.

“She is able to go up and down the stairs now very slowly,” he broke in.

“That’s huge!” Titano exclaimed.

The excitement in the room was palpable even through the pixels of my screen. The treatment was working—if slowly and incrementally. Titano discussed the results of Barber’s latest tests; structurally, her heart looked fine. It was the autonomic issues that she had to keep working on. Barber explained that even a minor stressor like sitting in traffic while cars honked at her husband could still make her body shake with tremors.

“That goes with the POTS. You have all this circulating adrenaline,” Titano reassured her. “As we go on, we expect this to get better and better.”

They discussed plateaus, medications, and sticking to the exercises and her new diet over the holidays. Throughout, Titano listened closely as Barber discussed her ups and downs, supportively reiterating the kind of stress and lifestyle management required.

At the end, Barber asked Titano if she could actually expect to get better. Just six weeks earlier, I had had the sense that she was trying to close the door on such a prospect in order to adjust to her new life. But it is human to hope, and she had made so much progress.

Titano replied carefully: “On the spectrum of symptoms, you were on the more severe end when we started. But you’re definitely improving, and I can’t see a reason why you wouldn’t.” She paused. “But running might not come anytime soon!”

“I’m okay with that,” Barber said. “What we have going is working, so I’m okay with that.”

Barber, who has an athlete’s determined temperament, was putting a positive spin on the situation. “I am making progress. But the progress is not that I can walk two miles instead of one,” she later clarified to me. “It’s that I can walk for 20 seconds across a room.”

In March 2020, Jessica Cohen couldn’t walk up two flights of stairs; today, though still managing flares, she’s back at work as a physician.

THE WAY Jessica Cohen and Caitlin Barber are being treated at Mount Sinai is a model for the care of patients with post-acute COVID syndrome. But Barber's coordinated day of appointments was a far cry from the bare-bones 10-minute appointments that many of us are used to having with specialists who don't speak with one another. In many places in the country, high-level medical care is hard to come by; underserved communities—whether their members are primarily rural, low-income, or people of color—have historically been less able to access such care. (Comprehensive statistics on long COVID's impact on different ethnic and socioeconomic groups have yet to be gathered.) All of this raises the question of how—or if—we will have the resources to treat everyone in need. Hospitals make money by getting more patients in the door and out again. The care that long COVID demands may not be high-tech, but it is time-consuming and attention-intensive; clinicians need to tailor care to patients in ways that "our health-care system is not set up for," as Dayna McCarthy put it. (This is one of the reasons that Mount Sinai's waitlist has ballooned.) Medicine is used to the quick fix. This kind of syndrome, which can't be treated with a pill and stubbornly resists straightforward rehab, "is not one that doctors like treating," I heard from another doctor. As Putrino told me, many of Mount Sinai's post-acute COVID patients are "on a road to recovery. But I would not say a single one of our patients feels like they did before they got sick."

Researchers said that the CDC and the NIH need to take the lead on funding research into long COVID and educating doctors about its severity. But education and reform aren't easy, even if the pandemic has delivered an unprecedented jolt to a generation of doctors. Cohen told me that in the past she had treated patients with POTS and found herself wondering, "What am I supposed to do for you? You've had this your whole life." She had been taught very little about dysautonomia in school. Now she told me it was clear to her that ignorance "shouldn't have been an acceptable answer."

Back at Mount Sinai, the push for answers continued. Preliminary observations were yielding more data to support the theories about the role that breathing issues and autonomic dysfunction played for some patients. When Putrino's team looked at patients' carbon-dioxide levels, it found that *all* the patients had low CO2 levels when they first came to be treated. After doing the breathwork exercises, patients' symptoms abated; the team plans to measure whether their CO2 levels rose. Seeing clinical reasoning pay off was reassuring.

The clock, though, is ticking for patients whose illness continues to defy tidy categorization and treatment. The hurdles are profound. "A lot of clinicians want the algorithm," Putrino said. "There is no algorithm. There is listening to your

patient, identifying symptoms, finding a way to measure the severity of the symptoms, applying interventions to them, and then seeing if those symptoms resolve. That is the way that medicine should be." In the meantime, the human toll expands, and the long haul gets longer.

Meghan O'Rourke is the editor of The Yale Review and the author of The Long Goodbye and the forthcoming The Night Side: Notes From a Misunderstood Illness.

How to Put Out Democracy's Dumpster Fire

Our democratic habits have been killed off by an internet kleptocracy that profits from disinformation, polarization, and rage. Here's how to fix that.

Illustration by Yoshi Sodeoka; images from Universal History Archive / Getty

- Story by Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev

- April 2021 Issue
  Ideas

Illustrations by Yoshi Sodeoka

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To read the diary of Gustave de Beaumont, the traveling companion of Alexis de Tocqueville, is to understand just how primitive the American wilderness once seemed to visiting Frenchmen. In a single month, December 1831, Tocqueville and Beaumont were on a steamship that crashed; rode a stagecoach that broke an axle; and took shelter in a cabin—one of them bedridden from an unidentified illness—while the nearest doctor was a two-day hike away. Yet they kept meeting people whose resourcefulness they admired, and they kept collecting the observations that eventually led Tocqueville to write *Democracy in America*—the classic account of the ordering principles, behaviors, and institutions that made democracy function within this sprawling country.

Tocqueville's interest in American institutions reflected more than mere curiosity: In his native France, a revolution launched with similarly high ideals about equality and democracy had ended badly. His parents had nearly been guillotined during the wave of violence that followed the momentous

events of 1789. By contrast, American democracy worked—and he wanted to understand why.

Famously, he found many of the answers in state, local, and even neighborhood institutions. He wrote approvingly of American federalism, which "permits the Union to enjoy the power of a great republic and the security of a small one." He liked the traditions of local democracy too, the "township institutions" that "give the people the taste for freedom and the art of being free." Despite the vast empty spaces of their country, Americans met one another, made decisions together, carried out projects together. Americans were good at democracy because they *practiced* democracy. They formed what he called "associations," the myriad organizations that we now call "civil society," and they did so everywhere:

> Not only do [Americans] have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools … Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.

Tocqueville reckoned that the true success of democracy in America rested not on the grand ideals expressed on public monuments or even in the language of the Constitution, but in these habits and practices. In France, philosophes in grand salons discussed abstract principles of democracy, yet ordinary Frenchmen had no special links to one another. By contrast, Americans worked together: "As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce in the world, they seek each other out; and when they have found each other, they unite."

In the nearly two centuries that have passed since Tocqueville wrote these words, many of those institutions and habits have deteriorated or disappeared. Most Americans no longer have much experience of "township" democracy. Some no longer have much experience of

associations, in the Tocquevillian sense, either. Twenty-five years ago, the political scientist Robert Putnam was already describing the decline of what he called "social capital" in the U.S.: the disappearance of clubs and committees, community and solidarity. As internet platforms allow Americans to experience the world through a lonely, personalized lens, this problem has morphed into something altogether different.

With the wholesale transfer of so much entertainment, social interaction, education, commerce, and politics from the real world to the virtual world—a process recently accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic—many Americans have come to live in a nightmarish inversion of the Tocquevillian dream, a new sort of wilderness. Many modern Americans now seek camaraderie online, in a world defined not by friendship but by anomie and alienation. Instead of participating in civic organizations that give them a sense of community as well as practical experience in tolerance and consensus-building, Americans join internet mobs, in which they are submerged in the logic of the crowd, clicking Like or Share and then moving on. Instead of entering a real-life public square, they drift anonymously into digital spaces where they rarely meet opponents; when they do, it is only to vilify them.

Read: How memes, lulz, and "ironic" bigotry won the internet

Conversation in this new American public sphere is governed not by established customs and traditions in service of democracy but by rules set by a few for-profit companies in service of their needs and revenues. Instead of the procedural regulations that guide a real-life town meeting, conversation is ruled by algorithms that are designed to capture attention, harvest data, and sell advertising. The voices of the angriest, most emotional, most divisive—and often the most duplicitous—participants are amplified. Reasonable, rational, and nuanced voices are much harder to hear; radicalization spreads quickly. Americans feel powerless because they are.

In this new wilderness, democracy is becoming impossible. If one half of the country can't hear the other, then Americans can no longer have shared institutions, apolitical courts, a professional civil service, or a bipartisan foreign policy. We can't compromise. We can't make collective decisions—

we can't even agree on what we're deciding. No wonder millions of Americans refuse to accept the results of the most recent presidential election, despite the verdicts of state electoral committees, elected Republican officials, courts, and Congress. We no longer are the America Tocqueville admired, but have become the enfeebled democracy he feared, a place where each person,

> withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him; as for dwelling with his fellow citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them; he touches them and does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if a family still remains for him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country.

The world's autocracies have long understood the possibilities afforded by the tools tech companies have created, and have made use of them. China's leaders have built an internet based on censorship, intimidation, entertainment, and surveillance; Iran bans Western websites; Russian security services have the legal right to obtain personal data from Kremlin-friendly social-media platforms, while Kremlin-friendly troll farms swamp the world with disinformation. Autocrats, both aspiring and actual, manipulate algorithms and use fake accounts to distort, harass, and spread "alternative facts." The United States has no real answer to these challenges, and no wonder: We don't have an internet based on our democratic values of openness, accountability, and respect for human rights. An online system controlled by a tiny number of secretive companies in Silicon Valley is not democratic but rather oligopolistic, even oligarchic.

From the September 2020 issue: Ross Andersen on China's surveillance state

And yet even as America's national conversation reaches new levels of vitriol, we could be close to a turning point. Even as our polity deteriorates, an internet that promotes democratic values instead of destroying them—that makes conversation better instead of worse—lies within our grasp. Once upon a time, digital idealists were dreamers. In 1996, John Perry Barlow, a lyricist for the Grateful Dead and an early internet utopian, predicted that a new dawn of democracy was about to break: "Governments of the Industrial

World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind," he declared, a place where "the dreams of Jefferson, Washington, Mill, Madison, DeToqueville [*sic*], and Brandeis … must now be born anew."

Those ideas sound quaint—as outdated as that other 1990s idea, the inevitability of liberal democracy. Yet they don't have to. A new generation of internet activists, lawyers, designers, regulators, and philosophers is offering us that vision, but now grounded in modern technology, legal scholarship, and social science. They want to resurrect the habits and customs that Tocqueville admired, to bring them online, not only in America but all across the democratic world.

In the surreal interregnum that followed the 2020 election, the price of America's refusal to reform its internet suddenly became very high. Then-President Donald Trump and his supporters pushed out an entirely false narrative of electoral fraud. Those claims were reinforced on extreme-right television channels, then repeated and amplified in cyberspace, creating an alternative reality inhabited by millions of people where Trump had indeed won. QAnon—a conspiracy theory that had burst out of the subterranean internet and flooded onto platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, convincing millions that political elites are a cabal of globalist pedophiles—spilled into the real world and helped inspire the mobs that stormed the Capitol. Twitter made the extraordinary decision to ban the U.S. president for encouraging violence; the amount of election disinformation in circulation immediately dropped.

Could these platforms have done more? As a matter of fact, Facebook keeps careful tabs on the toxicity of American discourse. Long before the election, the company, which conducts frequent, secret tests on its News Feed algorithm, had begun to play with different ways to promote more reliable information. Among other things, it created a new ranking system, designed to demote spurious, hyper-partisan sources and to boost "authoritative news content." Shortly after Election Day, the ranking system was given greater weight in the platform's algorithm, resulting in a purportedly "nicer News Feed"—one more grounded in reality. The change was part of a series of "break-glass measures" that the company announced would be put in place in periods of "heightened tension." Then, a few weeks later, it was undone.

After the Capitol insurrection, on January 6, the change was restored, in advance of Joe Biden's inauguration. A Facebook spokesperson would not explain to us exactly when or why the company made those decisions, how it defines "heightened tension," or how many of the other "break-glass measures" are still in place. Its published description of the ranking system does not explain how its metrics for reliable news are weighted, and of course there is no outside oversight of the Facebook employees who are making decisions about them. Nor will Facebook reveal anything about the impact of this change. Did conversation on the site become calmer? Did the flow of disinformation cease or slow down as a result? We don't know.

The very fact that this kind of shift is possible points to a brutal truth: Facebook can make its site "nicer," not just after an election but all the time. It can do more to encourage civil conversation, discourage disinformation, and reveal its own thinking about these things. But it doesn't, because Facebook's interests are not necessarily the same as the interests of the American public, or any democratic public. Although the company does have policies designed to fight disinformation, and although it has been willing to make adjustments to improve discourse, it is a for-profit organization that wants users to stay on Facebook as long as possible and keep coming back. Sometimes that goal may lead the company in a "nicer" direction, but not always, especially if users stay on the site to connect to fellow extremists, or to hear their prejudices reinforced. Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist at Google who now leads the Center for Humane Technology, put it more bluntly. "News feeds on Facebook or Twitter operate on a business model of commodifying the attention of billions of people per day," he wrote recently.* "They have led to narrower and crazier views of the world."

From the November 2016 issue: Tristan Harris on being addicted to your phone

Not that Facebook bears sole responsibility. Hyper-partisanship and conspiracy thinking predate social media, and message manipulation is as old as politics. But the current design of the internet makes it easier than ever to target vulnerable audiences with propaganda, and gives conspiracy thinking more prominence.

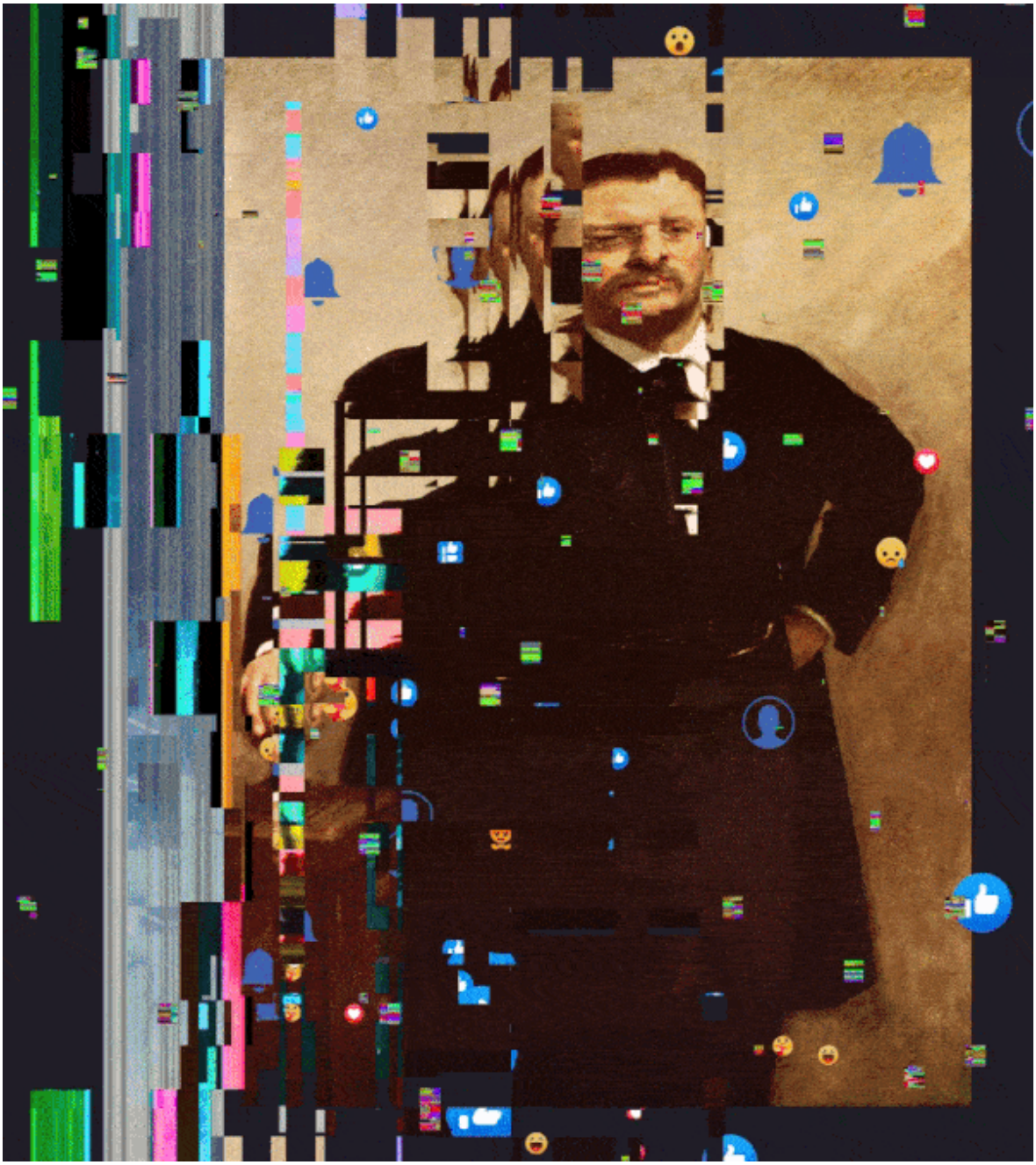

Illustration by Yoshi Sodeoka; image from Culture Club / Getty

The buttons we press and the statements we make online are turned into data, which are then fed back into algorithms that can be used to profile and target us through advertising. Self-expression no longer necessarily leads to emancipation: The more we speak, click, and swipe online, the less powerful we are. Shoshana Zuboff, a professor emerita at Harvard Business School, coined the term *surveillance capitalism* to describe this system. The scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias have called it "data colonialism," a term

that reflects our inability to stop our data from being unwittingly extracted. When we spoke recently with Věra Jourová, who—as the wonderfully titled vice president for values and transparency—is the European Union official directly responsible for thinking about online democracy, she told us that when she first understood that "people in the online sphere are losing their freedoms by providing their private data that are used in an opaque way, by becoming objects and not subjects, it was a strong reminder of my life before 1989 in Czechoslovakia." As everything in our homes and lives goes online—not just our phones but our fridges and stationary bikes, our family photos and parking fines—every bit of our behavior gets turned into bytes and used by artificial-intelligence systems that we do not control but that can dictate what we see, read, and buy. If Tocqueville were to visit cyberspace, it would be as if he had arrived in pre-1776 America and found a people who were essentially powerless.

We know alternatives are possible, because we used to have them. Before private commercial platforms definitively took over, online public-interest projects briefly flourished. Some of the fruits of that moment live on. In 2002, the Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig helped create the Creative Commons license, allowing programmers to make their inventions available to anyone online; Wikipedia—which for all the mockery once directed its way has emerged as a widely used and mostly unbiased source of information—still operates under one. Wikipedia is a glimpse of the internet that might have been: a not-for-profit, collaborative space where disparate people follow a common set of norms as to what constitutes evidence and truth, helped along by public-spirited moderators. Online collaboration was also put to impressive use from 2007 to 2014, when a Brazilian lawyer named Ronaldo Lemos used a simple tool, a WordPress plug-in, to allow Brazilians from all classes and professions to help write an "internet bill of rights." The document was eventually inscribed in Brazilian law, guaranteeing people freedom of speech and privacy from government intrusion online.

All of that began to change with the mass-market arrival of smartphones and a shift in the tactics of the major platforms. What the Harvard Law professor Jonathan Zittrain calls the "generative" model of the internet—an open system in which anyone could introduce unexpected innovations—gave way to a model that was controlled, top-down, and homogeneous. The experience

of using the internet shifted from active to passive; after Facebook introduced its News Feed, for example, users no longer simply searched the site but were provided a constant stream of information, tailored to what the algorithm thought they wanted to read. As a few companies came to control the market, they used their monopoly power to undermine competitors, track users across the internet, collect massive troves of data, and dominate advertising.

From the July/August 2020 issue: Franklin Foer on what Big Tech wants out of the pandemic

It's a grim story, and yet not entirely unfamiliar. Americans should recognize it from their own history. After all, only a few decades after Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*, the U.S. economy came to be controlled by just a few very large companies. By the end of the 19th century, the country seemed condemned to monopoly capitalism, financial crisis, deep inequality, a loss of trust in institutions, and political violence. After the 25th president, William McKinley, was murdered by an anarchist, his successor, Theodore Roosevelt—who denounced the "unfair money-getting" that created a "small class of enormously wealthy and economically powerful men, whose chief object is to hold and increase their power"—rewrote the rules. He broke up monopolies to make the economy more fair, returning power to small businesses and entrepreneurs. He enacted protections for working people. And he created the national parks, public spaces for all to enjoy.

In this sense, the internet has taken us back to the 1890s: Once again, we have a small class of enormously wealthy and economically powerful people whose obligations are to themselves, and perhaps to their shareholders, but not to the greater good. But Americans didn't accept this reality in the 1890s, and we don't need to accept it now. We are a democracy; we can change the rules again. This is not just a matter of taking down content or even of removing a president's Twitter account—decisions that should be determined by a public process, not a lone company's discretion. We must alter the design and structure of online spaces so that citizens, businesses, and political actors have better incentives, more choices, and more rights.

Tom Malinowski knows that algorithms can cause real-world harm. Last year, the U.S. representative from New Jersey introduced a bill, the

Protecting Americans From Dangerous Algorithms Act, that would, among other things, hold companies liable if their algorithms promoted content tied to acts of terrorism. The legislation was partly inspired by a 2016 lawsuit claiming that Facebook had provided "material support" to the terrorist group Hamas—its algorithm allegedly helped steer potential recruits Hamas's way. The courts held that Facebook wasn't liable for Hamas's activity, a legal shield that Malinowski hopes to chip away at. Regulators, he told us, need to "get under the hood" of companies, and not become caught up in arguments about this or that website or blog. Others in Congress have demanded investigations of possibly illegal racial biases perpetuated by algorithms that, for example, show Black people and white people different advertisements. These ideas represent the beginning of an understanding of just how different internet regulation will need to be from anything we have tried previously.

This way of thinking has some distinct advantages. Right now companies fight intensely to retain their exemption from "intermediary liability," guaranteed to them by the now-infamous Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. This frees them from legal responsibility for nearly all content posted on their platform. Yet striking down Section 230 could mean that the companies will either be sued out of existence or start taking down swaths of content to avoid being sued. Focusing on regulating algorithms, by contrast, would mean that companies wouldn't be liable for each tiny piece of content, but would have legal responsibility for how their products distribute and amplify material. This is, after all, what these companies actually do: organize, target, and magnify other people's content and data. Shouldn't they take responsibility for that?

Other countries are already focusing their regulatory efforts on engineering and design. France has discussed appointing an algorithm auditor, who would oversee the effects of platform engineering on the French public. The U.K. has proposed that companies assess the impact of algorithms on illegal content distribution and illegal activity on their platforms. Europe is heading in that direction too. The EU doesn't want to create a *1984*-style "Ministry of Truth," Věra Jourová has said, but it cannot ignore the existence of "organized structures aimed at sowing mistrust, undermining democratic stability." Action must be taken against "inauthentic use" and "automated exploitation" if they harm "civic discourse," according to the EU's Digital

Services Act, which seeks to update the legal framework for policing platforms. The regulatory focus in Europe is on monitoring scale and distribution, not content moderation. One person writing a tweet would still qualify for free-speech protections—but a million bot accounts pretending to be real people and distorting debate in the public square would not. Facebook and other platforms already track and dismantle inauthentic disinformation and amplification campaigns—they all have invested heavily in staff and software to carry out this job—but there is hardly any way to audit their success. European governments are seeking ways that they and other civic-minded actors can at least monitor what the platforms are doing.

Still, some of the conceptual challenges here are large. What qualifies as "legal but harmful" content, as the U.K. government calls it? Who will draw the line between *disinformation* and *civic discourse*? Some think that agreeing on these definitions in America will be impossible. It's a "chimera" to imagine otherwise, says Francis Fukuyama, one of America's leading philosophers of democracy; "you cannot prevent people from believing really crazy stuff, as we've seen in the past month," he told us in December. What Fukuyama and a team of thinkers at Stanford have proposed instead is a means of introducing competition into the system through "middleware," software that allows people to choose an algorithm that, say, prioritizes content from news sites with high editorial standards. Conspiracy theories and hate campaigns would still exist on the internet, but they would not end up dominating the digital public square the way they do now.

A deeper problem, though, is the ingrained attitudes we bring to this debate. Most of us treat algorithms as if they constitute a recognizable evil that can be defined and controlled. What if they're not? J. Nathan Matias, a scholar who has migrated from the humanities to the study of online behavior, argues that algorithms are totally unlike any other product devised by human beings. "If you buy a car from Pennsylvania and drive it to Connecticut," he told us, "you know that it will work the same way in both places. And when someone else takes the driver's seat, the engine is going to do what it always did." Algorithms, by contrast, change as human behavior changes. They resemble not the cars or coal mines we have regulated in the past, but something more like the bacteria in our intestines, living organisms that interact with us. In one experiment, for example, Matias observed that when users on Reddit worked together to promote news from reliable sources, the

Reddit algorithm itself began to prioritize higher-quality content. That observation could point us in a better direction for internet governance.

Matias has his own lab, the Citizens and Technology Lab at Cornell, dedicated to making digital technologies that serve the public and not just private companies. He reckons labs like his could be part of internet governance in the future, supporting a new generation of citizen-scientists who could work with the companies to understand how their algorithms function, find ways of holding them accountable if they refuse to cooperate, and experiment with fresh approaches to governing them. This idea, he argues, is nothing new: As far back as the 19th century, independent scientists and consumer-rights advocates have tested such factors as the strength of light bulbs and the effects of pharmaceuticals, even inventing elaborate machines to test the durability of socks. In response, companies have improved their products accordingly. Maybe it's time to let independent researchers test the impact of algorithms, share the results, and —with the public's participation—decide which ones are most useful.

This project should engage anyone who cares about the health of our democracy. Matias sees the behavior of the tech platforms as essentially authoritarian; in some ways, they sound far more like the Chinese state than we usually assume. Both American tech platforms and Chinese bureaucrats conduct social-engineering experiments in the dark; both have aims that differ from those of the public. Inspired by the philosopher Karl Popper, the doyen of "open society" and a critic of untransparent social engineering, Matias thinks we have to not just take control of our own data, but also help oversee the design of algorithmic experiments, with "individual participation and consent at all decision levels possible." For example, victims of prejudice should be able to help create experiments that explore how algorithms can reduce racism. Rohingya in Myanmar should be able to insist on social-media design that doesn't facilitate their oppression. Russians, and for that matter non-Russians, should be able to limit the amount of government propaganda they see.

This kind of dynamic regulation would solve one of the most embarrassing problems for would-be regulators: At the moment, they lag years behind the science. The EU's first attempt to regulate Google Shopping using antitrust law proved a giant waste of time; by the time regulators handed down their

judgment, the technology in question had become irrelevant. Other attempts are too focused on simply breaking up the platforms, as if that alone will solve the problem. Dozens of U.S. states and the Justice Department are already suing Google for cornering the markets in search and digital advertising, which is not surprising, because the breakup of the oil and railroad companies is the Progressive regulation everyone learned about in school. Yet the parallels to the early 20th century are not exact. Historically, antitrust regulation sought to break up price-setting cartels and to lower costs for consumers. But in this case the products are free—consumers don't pay to use Google or Facebook. And while breaking up the big companies could help diversify the online economy, it won't automatically be good for democracy. Why would 20 data-sucking disinformation machines be better than one? "If Facebook is forced to divest WhatsApp and Instagram," Fukuyama told us, "that's not going to solve the core issue—the ability of these large platforms to either amplify or suppress certain kinds of political information in a way that potentially could sway a democratic election."

Perhaps the most apt historical model for algorithmic regulation is not trust-busting, but environmental protection. To improve the ecology around a river, it isn't enough to simply regulate companies' pollution. Nor will it help to just break up the polluting companies. You need to think about how the river is used by citizens—what sort of residential buildings are constructed along the banks, what is transported up and down the river—and the fish that swim in the water. Fishermen, yachtsmen, ecologists, property developers, and area residents all need a say. Apply that metaphor to the online world: Politicians, citizen-scientists, activists, and ordinary people will all have to work together to co-govern a technology whose impact is dependent on everyone's behavior, and that will be as integral to our lives and our economies as rivers once were to the emergence of early civilizations.

The internet is not the first promising technology to have quickly turned dystopian. In the early 20th century, radio was greeted with as much enthusiasm as the internet was in the early 21st. Radio will "fuse together all mankind" wrote Velimir Khlebnikov, a Russian futurist poet, in the 1920s. Radio would connect people, end war, promote peace!

Almost immediately, a generation of authoritarians learned how to use radio for hate propaganda and social control. In the Soviet Union, radio speakers in apartments and on street corners blared Communist agitprop. The Nazis introduced the Volksempfänger, a cheap wireless radio, to broadcast Hitler's speeches; in the 1930s, Germany had more radios per capita than anywhere else in the world.** In America, the new information sphere was taken over not by the state but by private media companies chasing ratings—and one of the best ways to get ratings was to promote hatred. Every week, more than 30 million would tune in to the pro-Hitler, anti-Semitic radio broadcasts of Father Charles Coughlin, the Detroit priest who eventually turned against American democracy itself.

In Britain, John Reith, the visionary son of a Scottish clergyman, began to look for an alternative: radio that was controlled neither by the state, as it was in dictatorships, nor by polarizing, profit-seeking companies. Reith's idea was *public* radio, funded by taxpayers but independent of the government. It would not only "inform, educate and entertain"; it would facilitate democracy by bringing society together: "The voice of the leaders of thought or action coming to the fireside; the news of the world at the ear of the rustic … the facts of great issues, hitherto distorted by partisan interpretation, now put directly and clearly before them; a return of the City-State of old." This vision of a radio broadcaster that could create a cohesive yet pluralistic national conversation eventually became the BBC, where Reith was the first director-general.

Reith's legacy lives on in a new generation of thinkers, among them Ethan Zuckerman, the director of the Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a tech wizard who wrote the code that underlies the pop-up ad, one of the biggest milestones in the growth of online advertising. Partly as penance, Zuckerman now dedicates his time to thinking about nonprofit online spaces that could compete with the online commercial world he helped create. Social media, he told us, is broken: "I helped break it. Now I am interested in building new systems from scratch. And part of what we should be building are networks that have explicit social promise."

Invoking the example of Reith's BBC, Zuckerman imagines social-media sites designed deliberately in the public interest that could promote civil

discourse, not just absorb your attention and data, and that would help reduce the angry tone of American debate. As proof that polarization really can be reduced, Zuckerman, borrowing from a colleague, cited the example of Quebec, the Canadian province that had been deeply polarized between French speakers who wanted independence and English speakers who wanted to remain part of Canada. Nowadays, Quebec is pleasingly dull. “It took an enormous amount of work to get politics to be that boring,” Zuckerman said. “It involved putting real issues on the table that forced people to work together and compromise.” He reckons that if at least a part of the internet becomes a place where partisan groups argue about specific problems, not a place where people show off and parade their identities, it too can become usefully boring. Instead of making people angry, participation in online forums can give them the same civic thrill that town halls or social clubs once did. “Elks Club meetings were what gave us experience in democracy,” he said. “We learned how to run an organization. We learned how to handle disagreement. We learned how to be civilized people who don’t storm out of an argument.”

Illustration by Yoshi Sodeoka; image from Universal History Archive / Getty

Versions of this idea already exist. A Vermont-based site, Front Porch Forum, is used by roughly a quarter of the state's residents for all sorts of community activity, from natural-disaster response to job-hunting, as well as civic discussion. Instead of encouraging users to interact as much and as fast as possible, Front Porch slows the conversation down: Your posts come online 24 hours after you've written them. Sometimes, people reach out to the moderators to retract something said in anger. Everyone on the forum is real, and they have to sign up using real Vermont addresses. When you go on the site, you interact with your actual neighbors, not online avatars.

Of course, moderated public-service social media can't be created for free. It needs funding, just like the BBC. Zuckerman suggests raising the money through a tax on online advertising that collects lots of user data—perhaps a 2 percent levy to start: "That money is going to go into a fund that is analogous to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. And it's going to be available for people who want to try different ideas of what online communities, online spaces could look like." The idea is to then let a thousand flowers bloom—let people apply to use the money to create different types of communities—and see which ones flourish.

Larger-scale versions of community forums already exist too, most notably in Taiwan, where they have been pioneered by Audrey Tang, a child prodigy who became a high-school dropout who became a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who became a political activist who became the digital minister of Taiwan, the role she occupies today. Tang prefers to say that she works *with* the government, not *for* the government; her co-workers are "given a space to form a rough consensus." She publishes transcripts of all of her conversations with almost everybody, including us, because "the state needs to be transparent to its citizens."

Among many other experimental projects, Tang has sponsored the use of software called Polis, invented in Seattle. This is a platform that lets people make tweet-like, 140-character statements, and lets others vote on them. There is no "reply" function, and thus no trolling or personal attacks. As statements are made, the system identifies those that generate the most agreement among different groups. Instead of favoring outrageous or shocking views, the Polis algorithm highlights consensus.

Polis is often used to produce recommendations for government action. For example, when the Taiwanese government designed a Polis debate around the subject of Uber, participants included people from the company itself, as well as from the Taiwanese taxi associations, which were angered by some of Uber's behavior—and yet a consensus was reached. Uber agreed to train its drivers and pay transport taxes; Taiwan Taxi, one of the country's largest fleets, promised to offer better services. It's possible to imagine a world in which local governments hold such online consultations regularly, thereby increasing participation in politics and giving people some influence over their society and environment.

Of course, this system works only if real people—not bots—join these debates. Anonymity does have its place online, just as in real life: It allows dissidents in repressive countries a way of speaking. Anonymity also has a long and distinguished history in American politics, going back to *The Federalist Papers*, which were signed with a collective pseudonym, "Publius." But Publius never conceived of a world in which anonymous accounts promoting the hashtag #stopthesteal could convince millions of Americans that Donald Trump won the 2020 election.

One possible solution to the anonymity problem comes from Ronaldo Lemos, the Brazilian lawyer who crowdsourced his country's internet bill of rights. Lemos advocates for a system known as "self-sovereign identity," which would accrue through the symbols of trust built up through different activities—your diploma, your driver's license, your work record—to create a connective tissue of trusted sources that proves you are real. A self-sovereign identity would still allow you to use pseudonyms online, but it would assure everyone else that you are an actual human, making it possible for platforms to screen out bots. The relative prominence of various ideas in our public conversation would more accurately reflect what real people really think, and not what an army of bots and trolls is promulgating. Solving the online-identity problem is also, of course, one of the keys to fighting organized disinformation campaigns.

But once real humans have provable identities, once governments or online activists have created the groups and set the rules, how many people will really want to participate in worthy online civic discussions? Even in Taiwan, where Tang encourages what she calls the "social sector" to get involved in governing, it's not easy. Ttcat, a Taiwanese "hacktivist" whose work involves countering disinformation campaigns, and who has collaborated extensively with Tang, told us he worries that the number of people using Polis remains too low. Most people still have their political discussions on Facebook. Tiago C. Peixoto, a Mozambique-based political scientist who promotes online participatory democracy around the world, thinks that the issues will have to be higher-stakes if people are to join the forums. Peixoto has developed projects that could, for example, allow citizens to help put together a city budget. But those would require politicians to cede real power, which is not something many politicians like to do. Even beyond that, some skepticism about the attraction of the forums

is surely warranted: Aren't we all addicted to the rage and culture wars available on social media? Don't we use social media to perform, or to virtue signal, or to express identity—and don't we like it that way?

Maybe. Or maybe we think that way only because we lack the imagination to think differently. That's the conclusion drawn by Eli Pariser, a co-founder of Avaaz and Upworthy, two websites designed to foster online political engagement, and Talia Stroud, the director of the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. Pariser and Stroud have spent the past few years running polls and focus groups across 20 countries, trying to find out what people actually want from their internet, and how that matches up to what they have. Among other things, they found that Twitter super-users—people who use Twitter more than other social media—rate the platform highly for making them "feel connected," but give it low marks for "encouraging the humanization of others," ensuring people's safety, and producing reliable information. YouTube super-users care about "inviting everyone to participate," and they like that the platform does that, but they don't think it does a good job of providing reliable information. Facebook super-users have the same fear, and aren't convinced that the platform keeps their personal information secure, although Facebook contends that it has numerous tools in place to protect its users' information, and says that it does not share this information without users' permission. Pariser and Stroud's research suggests that the current menu of options does not completely satisfy us. People are eager for alternatives—and they want to help invent them.

In early January, while America was convulsed by a lurid crisis perpetrated by people who had absorbed paranoid conspiracy theories online, Pariser and Stroud hosted a virtual festival they described as a "dispatch from the future of digital public space." Designers who build ad-free social media that don't extract your data chatted with engineers who design apps that filter out harassment on Twitter. Even as men in paramilitary costumes posted pictures of themselves smashing up the Capitol, Pariser and Stroud were hosting discussions about how to build algorithms that favor online connection, empathy, and understanding, and how to design online communities that favor evidence, calm, and respect over disinformation, outrage, and vitriol. One of the festival speakers was Deb Roy, a former chief media scientist at Twitter, who is now a professor at MIT. In January,

he launched a new center aimed at creating technology that fosters "constructive communication"—such as algorithms designed to overcome divides.

None of these initiatives will ever be "the new Facebook"—but that's exactly the point. They are intended to solve specific problems, not to create another monolithic mega-platform. This is the heart of Pariser and Stroud's vision, the one shared by Zuckerman and Tang. Just as John Reith once looked at radio as a way to re-create the "City-State of old," Pariser and Stroud argue that we should think of cyberspace as an urban environment. Nobody wants to live in a city where everything is owned by a few giant corporations, consisting of nothing but malls and billboards—yet that is essentially what the internet has become. To flourish, democratic cities need parks and libraries, department stores and street markets, schools and police stations, sidewalks and art galleries. As the great urban thinker Jane Jacobs wrote, the best urban design helps people interact with one another, and the best architecture facilitates the best conversation. The same is true of the internet.

If we were to visit this online democratic city of the future, what might it be like? It would not be anarchy, or a wilderness. Rather, we might find, as Tocqueville wrote in describing the America of the 1830s, not only "commercial and industrial associations in which all take part," but also "a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small." We might discover thousands of participatory "township institutions" of the sort pioneered by Tang, inhabited by real people using the secure identities proposed by Lemos—all of them sharing ideas and opinions free of digital manipulation or distortion, thanks to the citizen-scientists Matias has taught to work with the algorithms. In this city, government would cede power to citizens who use digital tools to get involved in budgets and building projects, schools and the environment.

Let your imagination loose: What would it really mean to have human rights online? Instead of giving private companies the ultimate decision about whose accounts—whether yours or the president's—should be deleted, it might mean online citizens could have recourse to a court that would examine whether they violated their terms of service. It would also mean

being in charge of your own data. You could give medics all the information they need to help fight diseases, for example, but would also be guaranteed that these data couldn't be repurposed. If you were to see advertising, political or otherwise, you would have the right to know not only who was behind it, but how your data were used to target you specifically.

There are other possible benefits too. Rebuilding a civically healthier internet would give us common cause with our old alliances, and help build new ones. Our relationships with Europe and with the democracies of Asia, which so often feel obsolete, would have a new center and focus: Together we could create this technology, and together we could offer it to the world as an empowering alternative to China's closed internet, and to Russia's distorted disinformation machine. We would have something to offer beleaguered democrats, from Moscow to Minsk to Hong Kong: the hope of a more democratic public space.

Happily, this future democratic city is not some far-off utopia. Its features derive not from an abstract grand theory, but from harsh experience. We often forget that the U.S. Constitution was the product of a decade of failure. By 1789, its authors knew exactly how bad confederation had been, and they understood what needed to be fixed. Our new internet would also embrace all of the lessons we have so bitterly learned, not only in the past 20 years but in the almost two centuries since Tocqueville wrote his famous book. We now know that cyberspace did not, in the end, escape the legacy of John Perry Barlow's "weary giants of flesh and steel." It just recapitulated the pathologies of the past: financial bubbles, exploitative commercialization, vicious polarization, attacks from dictatorships, crime.

But these are problems democracies have solved before. The solutions are in our history, in our DNA, in our own memories of how we have fixed broken systems in other eras. The internet was the future once, and it can be again, if we remember Reith and Roosevelt, Popper and Jacobs—if we apply the best of the past to the present.

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* *Due to an editing error, this article originally stated that Tristan Harris's quotation came from an interview with the authors. In fact, Harris wrote it in a recent essay.*

** *This article previously stated that the Volksempfänger radio was transistor-based. In fact, it was tube-based.*

This article appears in the April 2021 print edition with the headline "The Internet Doesn't Have to Be Awful."

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic, a fellow at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, and the author of Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism.

Peter Pomerantsev is a fellow at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University and the author, most recently, of This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality.

American Special Ops Forces Are Everywhere

They've become a major military player—and maybe a substitute for strategic thinking.

- Story by Mark Bowden
- April 2021 Issue
  Global

Illustrations by Mike McQuade

Image above, clockwise from top left: A U.S. Army Special Forces sniper, 1991; the aftermath of Operation Eagle Claw, the failed U.S. rescue operation in Iran, 1980; a marine during the invasion of Grenada, 1983; Captain Vernon Gillespie Jr. in Vietnam, 1964; soldiers on patrol at Camp Victory, in Somalia, 10 days after 18 Americans were killed during the Delta-led Battle of Mogadishu, 1993.*

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Updated at 7:17 p.m. ET on March 12, 2021.

Within the span of a few decades, the United States has utterly transformed its military, or at least the military that is actively fighting. This has taken place with little fanfare and little public scrutiny. But without any conscious plan, I have seen some of the evolution firsthand. One of my early books, *Black Hawk Down*, was about a disastrous U.S. Special Ops mission in Somalia. Another, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, about the Iran hostage crisis, detailed an abortive but pivotal Special Ops rescue mission. U.S. Special Operators were involved in the successful hunt for the drug lord Pablo Escobar, the subject of *Killing Pablo*, and they conducted the raid that ended the career of Osama bin Laden, the subject of *The Finish*. By seeking out dramatic military missions, I have chronicled the movement of Special Ops from the wings to center stage.

Big ships, strategic bombers, nuclear submarines, flaring missiles, mass armies—these still represent the conventional imagery of American power, and they absorb about 98 percent of the Pentagon's budget. Special Ops forces, in contrast, are astonishingly small. And yet they are now responsible for much of the military's on-the-ground engagement in real or potential trouble spots around the world. Special Ops is lodged today under the Special Operations Command, or SOCOM, a "combatant command" that reports directly to the secretary of defense. It has acquired its central role despite initially stiff resistance from the conventional military branches, and without most of us even noticing.

It happened out of necessity. We now live in an open-ended world of "competition short of conflict," to use a phrase from military doctrine. "There's the continuum of absolute peace, which has never existed on the planet, up to toe-to-toe full-scale warfare," General Raymond A. "Tony" Thomas, a former head of SOCOM, told me last year. "Then there's that difficult in-between space."

SOCOM, whose genealogy can be traced to a small hostage-rescue team in 1979, has grown to fully inhabit the in-between space. Made up of elite soldiers pulled from each of the main military branches—Navy SEALs, the Army's Delta Force and Green Berets, Air Force Combat Controllers,

Marine Raiders—it is active in more than 80 countries and has swelled to a force of 75,000, including civilian contractors. It conducts raids like the one in Syria in 2019 that killed the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and carries out drone strikes like the one in Iraq in 2020 that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani. It works to locate hidden nuclear-missile sites in North Korea.

Using conventional forces is like wielding a sledgehammer. Special Ops forces are more like a Swiss Army knife. Over the years, the U.S. has found out just how versatile that knife can be; the flexibility and competence of Special Ops have proved invaluable. At the same time, the insularity and elitism of these units have bred a culture with elements that some of their own leaders, to their credit, have described as troubling, and that have, in certain instances, evidenced contempt for the traditional values of America's armed forces. Much of SOCOM's action takes place in secret. Most Americans are unaware that it has been active in a country until the announcement that its forces are being withdrawn. Or until something goes wrong—as in Niger in 2017, when four Special Ops soldiers were killed in an ambush.

Notably, its continued growth has been spurred by both success and failure. And perhaps because Special Ops is such a flexible tool, that growth has enabled the U.S. to multiply the way it uses force abroad without much consideration of overarching strategy. The advent of nuclear weapons, in the 1940s, presented leaders with urgent ethical and strategic imperatives. Defining the purpose of such weapons automatically demanded fresh thinking about the bedrock values of a democracy, the nature of multilateral alliances, the morality of warfare, and the scope of U.S. ambitions in the world. Because of its sub-rosa nature, Special Ops has not compelled the same kind of reckoning—and, in fact, may foster the illusion that a strategic framework is not necessary. It's good to have a Swiss Army knife. And yet even a versatile knife can do only so much.

How did Special Ops come to occupy such a central role in American military operations—and even foreign policy?

The history of its rise is telling. In a defense establishment where each branch already sells itself as one of a kind—"The few. The

proud"—there has been long-standing institutional distaste for a separate elite force, one that siphons off experience and talent and that is first in line for difficult missions. President John F. Kennedy bucked this convention when he stood up the Green Berets. It was a bright idea that burned out in Vietnam, where an initial commitment of Green Beret advisers—who did more than advise—escalated into a full-blown war, with more than 500,000 American troops deployed at its peak. The Green Berets survived as an elite unit, but many ambitious Army officers considered a berth in Special Forces a career-killer.

Then came the Iran hostage crisis, in November 1979. Two days after Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, America's top brass convened in the "Tank," a subterranean conference room at the Pentagon, to consider how the military might respond if President Jimmy Carter ordered it to act.

Something called the Delta Force already existed on paper. It was the brainchild of Colonel Charlie Beckwith, a profane, hard-drinking, stubbornly tenacious Army officer who had served briefly with the British Special Air Service in Malaya. He had agitated so long to create a similar multipurpose commando unit within the U.S. military that he had alienated many up the chain, which helped explain why he was still a colonel when he retired. But in the mid-1970s, two spectacular rescue missions captured the headlines. A special Israeli unit stormed an airport in Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976, rescuing more than 100 passengers who had been taken from a hijacked airliner.* A year later, a special German unit did much the same in Mogadishu, Somalia. Beckwith's stock abruptly rose.

When the Tehran embassy was seized, Delta Force had yet to undertake a mission, and the challenge posed was beyond any imagined for it. Rescuing scores of American hostages from a city of hostile millions who gathered regularly to chant "Death to America," situated hundreds of miles from any potential staging area, was nothing like storming a parked airliner. But Carter wanted a military option.

"Obviously, we don't want to do this," said Major Lewis "Bucky" Burruss, Beckwith's operations officer, as he briefed the brass in the Tank. The "if we

must" plan he outlined was a bold and daring Rube Goldberg scenario. The bottom line was plain: *We're not ready*.

Months later, they had to be; Carter was desperate. A new plan had been drawn up, only marginally more plausible. Choppers would deliver the Delta team to Tehran and then would pluck the team and the rescued hostages from a stadium near the embassy. They would all be flown to an airfield secured by a company of Rangers. Eagle Claw, as the mission was called, never cleared the first hurdle—getting to Tehran. The only helicopters large enough for the job couldn't be refueled in-flight, so the choppers had to perform a complex nighttime rendezvous in the Iranian desert with tanker aircraft. An accident at the landing site ignited a fireball that killed eight servicemen. The mission remains one of the most humiliating failures in American military annals—a failure that became the impetus for expanding Special Ops.

In the aftermath of Eagle Claw, an investigation known as the Holloway Commission found the Pentagon woefully unprepared for daring, joint, pinpoint missions. It revealed a crippling lack of interservice and intergovernmental cooperation. Mission planners had had to plead to obtain blueprints of the embassy compound in Tehran. The Navy pilots flying the helicopters across the desert had not even conducted the practice runs the planners had requested.

As a remedy, the Holloway Commission recommended the creation of a Joint Special Operations Command—JSOC, as it would be known. The service branches hated the idea. Admiral James Stavridis, a former U.S. supreme allied commander in Europe and a man who spent his entire career in the conventional ranks, told me, "The Navy didn't want to give up the SEALs, and the Army didn't want to give up the Ranger battalions, and the Marine Corps wouldn't even talk about it. The services fought it and fought it and fought it, at every level."

Once created, JSOC was treated like a poor stepchild. In the end, a staff of 70 was dispatched to Fort Bragg to handle administrative chores. The group was given Delta Force, a SEAL team, and a rotating Ranger battalion for specific missions. A Special Ops helicopter unit was created. But JSOC

depended on haphazard funding and relied on a grudging chain of command for missions.

That is how things stood in October 1983, when the U.S. invaded Grenada, a tiny island in the Caribbean. Its Cuba-aligned Communist government had collapsed, and its leader, Maurice Bishop, had been murdered. Saying he feared for the safety of 600 American medical students at the island's St. George's University, President Ronald Reagan had ordered the military to seize control of Grenada and bring the students home. Rescuing hostages being its prime focus, JSOC was a key player in the invasion, which was over fast. It was celebrated as a rousing success by the Reagan White House. But within the military, it was seen as an embarrassment.

General Thomas, now 62, was then a lieutenant who went in with the first wave. He had been a West Point cadet when the disaster in Iran had unfolded, and had no idea then how important that episode would prove to be for the military or for himself. But in fact he would be present for nearly every major U.S. military action of the next four decades.

The Grenada invasion, he said, was "a clown show." JSOC had to rely on tourist maps for the most part, because military topographic maps were not available. Four SEALs drowned on a preinvasion reconnaissance mission. Cuban and Grenadian military personnel were known to be on the island, but no one knew exactly where or how many, or what kind of arms they had. Teams meant to be working together were unable to communicate because radio frequencies had not been coordinated. "We were lucky we were not up against the A team," Thomas acknowledged.

Thomas's platoon was part of an assault on the Calivigny barracks, where several hundred Cuban and Grenadian forces had reportedly retreated for a last stand. The attackers were crammed into four Black Hawks, as many as 15 Rangers in each helicopter—"I mean, just ridiculous loads," Thomas recalled.

"We came skimming in over the ocean and had three out of the four helicopters crash," Thomas said. Three more people died. No Cubans or Grenadians were at the barracks.

Major General Richard Scholtes, who had been the JSOC commander at the time of the operation, testified about these and other failures in a closed session of a Senate Armed Services subcommittee in August 1986. Senator Sam Nunn called the testimony "profoundly disturbing, to say the least." And then he did something about it.

The disaster in Iran had led to JSOC. The mistakes in Grenada led to SOCOM. Thanks to an amendment sponsored by Nunn and Senator William Cohen, Special Ops got its own management and its own budget. Its annual budget today is about $13 billion, which is a sacrosanct 2 percent of all military outlays (and roughly what it costs to build an aircraft carrier). The Nunn-Cohen amendment also gave SOCOM clout. From now on, Special Ops would be headed by a four-star general or admiral, and its mission began to expand.

In 1987, Stavridis was a lieutenant commander on a cruiser stationed in the Persian Gulf as part of Operation Earnest Will, the largest naval-convoy mission since World War II. It was guarding Kuwaiti oil tankers, which were a lifeline for Saddam Hussein, who was then locked in a seven-year war with Iran—and being supported by the United States, his future enemy. The tankers were being preyed upon by Iranian forces. Special Ops teams used American ships as platforms to disrupt and counter Iranian attacks. Stavridis was impressed.

"It was the first time that we really started to see them in the field," he recalled. The Kuwaiti ships had to be boarded and protected, which was not the kind of work the regular Navy did. "We, the Navy—Big Navy—hadn't boarded a ship in a century," Stavridis said. "These guys were trained to do that … as opposed to me trying to grab a bunch of boatswain's mates and hand them a .45 and say, 'Follow me!'"

Special Ops was the star of the 1989 invasion of Panama, an operation that went as smoothly as Grenada had gone badly. A Delta team located the dictator Manuel Noriega, and helped capture and bring him to the United States for prosecution as a drug trafficker and money launderer. Thomas was then a Ranger company commander. He called Panama JSOC's "graduation event." Leaders began to find new uses for Special Ops.

When Saddam invaded Kuwait, in 1990, President George H. W. Bush gathered an allied coalition to drive the Iraqis out. That effort, Desert Storm, would be a throwback to conventional warfare—a clash of big armies. But an opportunity for Special Ops quickly arose. In a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, the chairman, handed a report to General Wayne Downing, a former Ranger and then JSOC's commander. Powell said, "This just in from the Israelis." Iraq had begun firing Scud missiles at Israel from mobile launchers in the vast western-Iraqi desert. The Israelis were preparing an effort to find and destroy them, something Powell wanted to forestall. If the Israelis entered the war, it would offend Arab states and possibly cripple the coalition.

"Can you do that?" Powell asked Downing. Could he take out the Scuds?

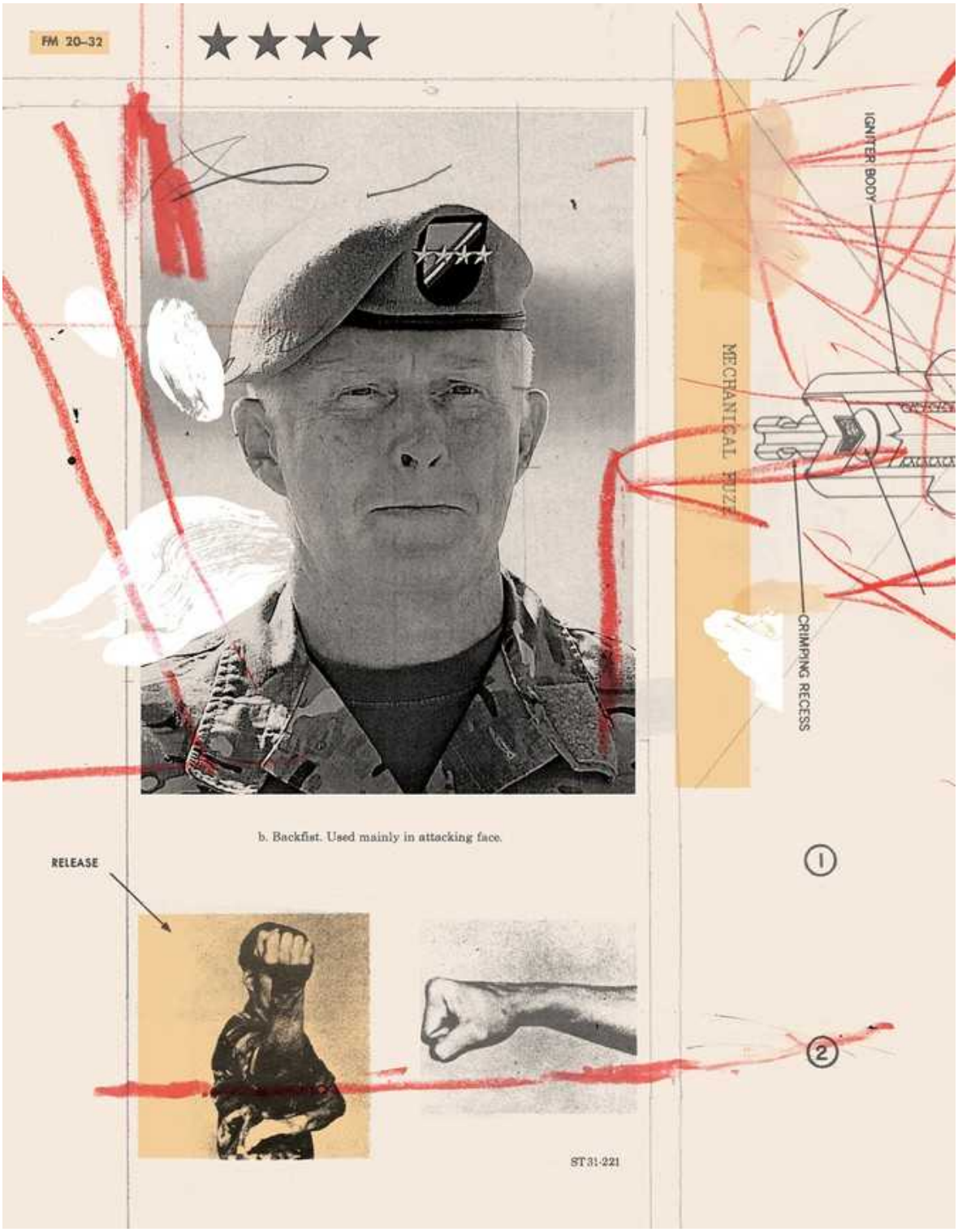
Within days, JSOC teams were camped in remote desert observation posts, launching attacks on Iraqi missile columns from the air or swooping in across the sand in six-wheeled combat vehicles, looking like the pirate gangs of *Mad Max*. Questions would be raised later about whether these attacks were taking out real missile launchers or decoys fielded by Saddam, but there's no doubt that the results achieved were fast and dramatic, and kept Israel off the battlefield.

The results were also on film. "We lucked out and came right on a Scud launcher two or three days after we started," Thomas recalled. The assault was filmed from a helicopter, which flew lower and slower than the jets that provided most of the footage viewed at headquarters. JSOC's imagery was as intimate and vivid as a video game's. After the first Scud launcher was destroyed, Downing played the tape at a briefing for General Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander of allied forces, who was struck by the immediacy and detail. "Norm said, 'Whoa, whoa, is this a training tape from back at Bragg?'" Thomas recounted. "And Downing said, 'No, this was up by al-Qa'im last night in northern Iraq.'" Search-and-destroy became another SOCOM specialty.

Experienced SOCOM soldiers were early adopters of new technology, often buying equipment off the shelf that was not available through normal supply lines. As in most other fields, modern telecoms would transform war-fighting.

In December 1998, Thomas had what he called a “sensor-to-shooter epiphany” in the closed back of a truck near Vrsani, a village in northeastern Bosnia. Then a lieutenant colonel, he was in command of a JSOC Delta squadron. The mission was manhunting. Thomas and the squadron had been tracking Radislav Krstić, a one-legged Serbian commander in the Yugoslav wars who had been indicted a month prior by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, in The Hague.

Thomas’s unit had been watching Krstić for days. Surveillance drones were still in the future, but Thomas did have a helicopter with a high-speed camera. It fed a live picture to a Sony television that Thomas held on his lap. His truck was hidden in a thicket about 200 yards from a road he knew Krstić would use. German special forces had provided a snare—a net made of sturdy elastic that could capture even a speeding vehicle.



Top: Former SOCOM Commander General Raymond A. “Tony” Thomas, at MacDill Air Force Base, in Tampa, Florida, 2017.
Bottom: Images from “Hand-to-Hand Fighting,” a U.S. Army Special Forces manual. (Mandel Ngan / AFP / Getty; U.S. Army Institute for Military Assistance)

Gunplay was a possibility, so Thomas had a list of strict no-go scenarios, among them the presence of local police, Russian troops, or children. As Krstić's vehicle neared, first a Russian convoy approached, then a local military-police vehicle. Both passed by. Finally a school bus rolled into the picture. The effort seemed snakebit. At last, on the screen, Thomas watched the school bus clear the zone, with only seconds to spare. "Execute!" he ordered. Krstić's vehicle was caught in the net, and he was taken without incident.

Thomas would be teased about the episode: an entire Delta squad to capture a one-legged Serbian? What stuck with him was how much more useful the screen had been than his own two eyes. Without the overhead view covering the whole stretch of road, he would have aborted the mission. It occurred to him: *This is where we are going in the future*.

Live video feeds were just the beginning. When Stanley McChrystal took over JSOC, in 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was eight months old. Special Ops teams were still hunting Saddam and other "high-value targets" when a new enemy arose: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a jihadist known as "The Sheikh of the Slaughterers." His followers were setting off bombs in crowded places, attacking American soldiers, and kidnapping "infidels" and beheading them in horrific videos posted online.

McChrystal was known as a relentless striver. Gaunt, hollow-eyed, and intense, he was famous for his ascetic discipline. He turned his task force into the most efficient hunter-killer force in the world, and a model for the entire command. McChrystal is not Sun Tzu. But in sizing up his adversary and responding creatively, he remade JSOC, and ultimately SOCOM itself. He recognized that the ability to digitize information—audio files, video files, maps, texts, emails, phone calls, documents—could steer him rapidly to targets.

Like most innovations, McChrystal's was resisted, including by SOCOM itself. He wanted to expand and alter his mission, adding an array of expertise—in some cases, requiring civilian contractors—that had nothing to do with traditional soldiering. He explained the situation to me in a way that both made his position understandable and underlined the institutional

imperatives that push in one direction only. “Inside my command, there were a bunch of people saying, ‘We need to pull back to the States and wait until there’s a hostage rescue or something like that, and we’ll do our specialized mission,’” McChrystal said. “And I told them, ‘Hey, if we’re not here doing a significant part of this, we’re not going to be able to claim our elite status and be first in line for resources and priority.’” There was also resistance from agencies whose support he needed, notably the CIA, which balked at moving interrogators, analysts, software engineers, and imagery experts out from under their direct control. But McChrystal got what he wanted.

His refurbished, tech-assisted team found, fixed, and finished Zarqawi himself with an air strike at one of his hideouts north of Baghdad in June 2006. By that time, his terror network had been decimated. His death was important in the moment, but it also illustrated the limits of even a highly skillful application of force. The insurgency persisted and ultimately morphed into ISIS. McChrystal’s remarkably successful efforts were less of a factor in reversing the war’s direction than General David Petraeus’s “surge,” in 2007. What McChrystal had done was give SOCOM an amazingly potent new tool.

And people noticed. Money, McChrystal recalled, was available for whatever he needed. The very definition of JSOC changed, again. It was no longer just elite “operators” or “shooters” descending from silent choppers; it had become what a business-school case study might call a fully integrated intelligence-and-assault network. But as McChrystal acknowledged, there would always be skeptics, within SOCOM and elsewhere, who believed that “we ought to go back to being a tiny group of people.” And, as he also acknowledged, a revolution in Special Ops tactics isn’t the same thing as strategic wisdom, or success.

Hostage rescue, manhunting, search-and-destroy missions—these had become the U.S. military’s active pursuits worldwide. Other events secured SOCOM’s status. The most dramatic was the killing of Osama bin Laden, in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011. After the CIA traced his location, a SEAL team penetrated Pakistan’s air defenses and hit his compound. Thomas was second in command on that mission, under JSOC’s Admiral William McRaven, who became SOCOM commander later that year. Despite his

background leading shooters, McRaven promoted the softer side of the command, long a major part of its portfolio—the Green Beret teams of people who were familiar with local languages and cultures, knew how to build ties with communities, and had the diplomatic skills to serve as advisers rather than call all the shots.

That approach found a receptive audience in President Barack Obama, who was trying to crush emerging terror threats while at the same time lower American troop levels overseas. SOCOM's small units would steer the battle against Islamist networks in Africa and Asia, working primarily through local armed forces. Its intelligence network and aerial assets would give Kurdish, Iraqi, and Syrian fighters an overwhelming advantage against ISIS. Utilizing SOCOM, the U.S. was still in the fight, just not openly in the lead, and no longer carrying the full load. This opened Obama to political attacks for "leading from behind," which revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the change under way. Happy to keep American forces below the radar, Obama was eager to act when the occasion was ripe. Thomas described Obama as "a junkyard dog" when it came to national security.

SOCOM was so active during Obama's tenure—in addition to the large deployments in the Middle East, there were smaller units in Niger, Chad, Mali, South Korea, the Philippines, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, and dozens of other countries—that the Pentagon was leery of opening major new fronts. When al-Shabaab, the militant Islamist group in Somalia, showed signs of mounting strength, there was some worry that Obama might want to go in heavy. Thomas was in the room when Pentagon commanders laid out the options, expecting the president to expand the mission. At the conclusion of the briefing, he recalled, Obama made two points: "One, 'We don't know enough about the problem.' And two, 'Maybe the best thing we can do is mow the grass'"—meaning, manage the problem around its edges, quietly. SOCOM gave him the option of mowing the grass, at least for a time.

Special Ops forces are popular for two reasons, McChrystal explained: "One, because they're sexy, and two, because they are viewed as a way to do things on the cheap, meaning you could send 10 brave people in to do a job instead of 100,000 soldiers, which has political costs and casualties." The reality, he went on, is that the nonsexy parts of Special Ops are the ones that may have more lasting impact. Killing or capturing a murderous foe appeals

to a sense of justice and provides momentary satisfaction, but eliminating a terrorist leader is not victory. It is, in Obama's words, just mowing the grass.

As Obama explained when I spoke with him after the bin Laden mission: "Ultimately, none of this stuff works if we're not partnering effectively with other countries, if we're not engaging in smart diplomacy, if we're not trying to change our image in the Muslim world to reduce recruits" to extremism. The targeting engine itself, he said, "is not an end-all, be-all. I'm sure glad we have it, though."

There is a risk in being admired by those in charge. During Thomas's tenure as SOCOM commander, from 2016 to 2019, the scope of his responsibility grew at a pace he calls "frantic." New tasks were given to his already swollen organization, grafted on like afterthoughts, even as Obama's successor as president made several dramatic troop reductions or withdrawals, notably in Syria and Afghanistan. Donald Trump's words and policies were unpredictable, but SOCOM's mission continued to enlarge.

Fighting violent extremism remained an active priority—combatting groups such as the Taliban, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and al-Shabaab. SOCOM was also tasked with developing contingencies for conflict with Iran and North Korea. Thomas was already fielding units in virtually every European country bordering Russia and developing plans to deter China. In 2017, responsibility for policing weapons of mass destruction worldwide was handed from U.S. Strategic Command to SOCOM, which was given information operations at about the same time. To compete on the computer-assisted modern battlefield, SOCOM has taken the lead in employing artificial intelligence. And then there are all those "open," or unclassified, missions around the world—training local militaries, and building relationships and intelligence.

Thomas admits that he fought a losing battle to keep his command from becoming bigger and more bureaucratic. Despite his requests for guidance from Secretary of Defense James Mattis—for more carefully sorted priorities—the new missions just kept coming. He never did get direction from the top. And his own input was not avidly sought. "We weren't even involved in the National Defense Strategy discussions," Thomas told me. He

recalled asking General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, "Hey, why am I not in the Tank?" Dunford replied, "Tony, you're not a real service. You're a 'service-like entity.'"

Thomas believes that his former command ought to be designated an official branch of the military, and so does James Stavridis. William McRaven disagrees, arguing that SOCOM's strength is the "joint" flavor of it: "You get diversity of thought, you get diversity of background, and there's nothing better to creating a good decision than having diversity." General Joseph Votel, who followed McRaven as SOCOM commander, is ambivalent about formal status, but believes that the SOCOM commander ought to be a member of the Joint Chiefs.

Clearly the key player in U.S. military operations worldwide should have a seat at the planning table. Barring the outbreak of a catastrophic war between major powers, SOCOM will likely remain a primary way America projects force, one that is well suited to the global, varied, and collaborative nature of war in the 21st century. This itself prompts questions about whether America's vast outlays for the traditional military services are being well spent, and whether they could be reduced. But SOCOM's own growth should also make us wary. The power to order pinpoint strikes and killings, often cloaked in secrecy, enables a president to act with minimal public scrutiny, and can tempt a president to substitute a few small, dramatic exploits for a more sustained strategy. As SOCOM's leaders recognize, one cannot defeat a culturally rooted movement, such as al-Shabaab, by occasionally bumping off its leaders. Moreover, once you start mowing the grass, where and when do you stop?

Even beyond all that, bigness may, in the long run, challenge SOCOM's effectiveness. It has become a central actor in today's military because of its rapid adaptability and because of the expertise and experience of its forces. As it grows ever larger, it risks losing more than just its elite status. It risks evolving into the very self-justifying, calcified bureaucracy that it was designed to supersede.

This is already happening. The early Delta Force's administrative staff was skeletal. Today, SOCOM's central command, at MacDill Air Force Base, in Tampa, Florida, is large and complex. "People often accuse the military of

throwing money at problems," Bucky Burruss, the former Delta Force officer, told me. "We don't do that. We throw *headquarters* at problems. And another headquarters eventually becomes just another layer you have to get through."

McChrystal saw it coming. He remembers attending a military conference in 2007. He ran into another predawn gym rat, a retired Navy SEAL, who lamented, "It's just not like the old days, is it?"

"No," McChrystal agreed. Then he asked, "What do you mean?"

"These guys just aren't—" McChrystal thought he was about to say "heroes" but had stopped himself. "They're not like we were."

"What are you talking about?" McChrystal replied. "These guys are doing a hundred times more than we ever dreamed of doing, and doing it better."

His friend seemed disappointed by the response, so McChrystal explained further: "It's not just a few, you know, burly men anymore. Shit, this is a machine now. You and I don't even know how to run it."

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* *Lead image credit:* Illustration by Mike McQuade; images from Leif Skoogfors; Rolls Press / Popperfoto; Corbis; Larry Burrows / Life Picture Collection; Joel Robine / AFP / Getty

* *This article originally stated that a special Israeli unit stormed a hijacked airliner on the tarmac in Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976, to rescue hostages. In fact, the hostages were rescued from an airport in Entebbe.*

This article appears in the April 2021 print edition with the headline "How Special Ops Became the Solution to Everything."

Mark Bowden is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of Black Hawk Down, Hué 1968, and The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden.

Fiction

- **Person of Korea**
  A short story -- Paul Yoon

Person of Korea

A short story

Asako Narahashi

- Story by Paul Yoon
- April 2021 Issue
  Fiction

Editor's Note: Read an interview with Paul Yoon about his writing process.

This story was published online on March 13, 2021.

He waits three weeks for his father to respond. During that time, whenever he checks the mail, the dog follows him. She eyes the birds on the telephone wires. Then the migrant workers in the fields.

One day, the payphone near the mailboxes rings. He hurries to the booth. But it is a woman from Vladivostok conducting a survey of the Korean

communities in the Russian Far East.

The surveyors have been calling ever since Russia's first president was elected. He usually hangs up, but today he doesn't. The dog lies down beside him as he answers all her questions.

No, I don't work on the barley farm. No, we rent the house.

Yes, the electricity goes out often. Yes, the water tastes tinny. Yes, we have a store for basic groceries, but the nearest town is an hour south.

Yes, he lies. *I go to school.*

No, I don't use the payphone often.

"Why?" the surveyor says.

"Because you have to pay."

He hears her writing. Listening to her voice, he tries to remember the voice of his father.

"What's your name?" the surveyor asks.

"Maksim."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"How many people are in your household, Maksim?"

Maksim begins to count the people who live in the row of houses next to the farm until he realizes the woman is referring to only his family.

Maksim says, "Two in our household," knowing that is no longer true.

He hangs up. The noise startles the dog awake. The dog follows Maksim back to the house, and once he is safely inside, she bolts into the field toward the far woods. She is no one's dog, but for the past few weeks she

has followed only him. He leaves the door open for her. His uncle would have never allowed that, but his uncle is three weeks dead, so what does it matter now?

Maksim is like the dog. He does what he wants. He wears what he wants to wear and eats when he wants to eat. He doesn't make up the mattress on the floor, and it doesn't matter if he knocks over a glass, waking himself up from a dream he keeps having in which people are speaking to him in different languages he has never heard before. There is no one to explain the dream or to chastise him or to tell him to go to the corner store and see if there is work so that he can earn some money for the house.

There are only his uncle's things everywhere: his baseball cap on the wall hook, his tin mug and his stack of car magazines in this one-room house Maksim has lived in for longer than his father has been away. There is the door always swinging open from the wind that comes at the end of summer, and outside the barley that hasn't had rain in a long time, long enough for Maksim to know that it has been a bad year; a bad year after several and there is talk of the migrant workers not returning.

Through the doorframe, he can still see the tire tracks of his uncle's taxicab. The company came the other day and towed it. As his neighbors watched, the truck driver tossed a road map to Maksim and told him it had been in the taxi's glove compartment. Maksim waited until he was alone before opening the map, wondering if by chance something else was folded in it, some secret message for him. But it was only a map, one his uncle hardly ever used because he knew the roads.

In the mailbox yesterday was a letter telling Maksim that his uncle owes money for the cab. Next month, Maksim will owe rent for the house. For the fourth time this week, he heads out to the corner store to ask the owner if he can do anything today. The owner ignores him and opens boxes of instant ramen as the newscaster on the television describes a skirmish at the border with Chechnya.

Then the man tosses Maksim a ramen pack and says, "Why do you all keep eating only this shit?"

Later, Maksim opens the map again, but Chechnya isn't there. Sakhalin Island is there. East of where he is, next to the Sea of Japan. It is 950 kilometers long and 160 kilometers wide. It is like a giant, leaping fish. He draws a route from the mainland coast to the island coast, 100 kilometers back and forth, he reckons, and then spots a town called Terney on the mainland that he can get to in a few hours.

Maksim doesn't know if his father still works on Sakhalin or if he got the letter telling him that his brother, Maksim's uncle, is dead. He doesn't know what his father's favorite food is anymore. Whether he is fat or thin or speaks in Russian or Korean most days.

Maksim's father left for the island five years ago. Or was told to leave. Maksim has not seen him since.

The wind blows in. He cooks the ramen in the microwave, staring at the calendar marked up with his uncle's handwriting, unable to decipher it. Today is the last day of August.

The month ends. The mailbox stays empty. Two days later, shutting the door behind him, Maksim walks to where the migrant workers are climbing onto the bed of a pickup truck and asks whether he can catch a ride with them. The workers are Koreans from Uzbekistan, and they have been coming here for years. They are heading east, he knows, to another farm, before they head south for the winter.

Maksim is standing on the road with a backpack on his shoulders. He is wearing a denim jacket and his uncle's baseball cap. Maksim holds out some money he had been keeping under his mattress, but the Uzbek closest to him says to keep it. In Korean, the Uzbek says they were sorry to hear about Maksim's uncle, that the man used to give them free rides. Then the workers help Maksim up and ask where he wants to go.

"Terney," he says.

As the truck begins to move, the dog leaps up onto the bed. The Uzbeks laugh. The dog looks up again at the birds on the wires as they all leave the farm.

“Your father still on the island?” The Uzbek beside him is shouting over the wind. They are speeding through a forest with a high canopy. “Is he still at the camp?”

Maksim isn’t sure what they think of his father, so he just nods, holding the dog as the truck shakes.

Maksim’s father is a prison guard. Or the last time they spoke he was, working at the prison on the island. The older people call it “the camp” because it was a labor camp run by the Japanese, when the Japanese claimed the southern half of the island. They rounded up thousands of Koreans during wartime and brought them there to log, pulp paper, mine coal. Maksim’s grandfather had been one of the laborers when he was in his 20s. When the war ended, many of them, including Maksim’s grandfather, never went back home. They took a boat west, first to Vladivostok, then eventually headed inland, north, where they settled.

That is their family story. That is the story of almost all the families who rent on the farm.

Maksim has always been aware of the strangeness of his father going to work where his own father had been imprisoned. He once asked his uncle about it, but his uncle only said, “Better your father there than here,” and left it at that.

They ride the rest of the way in silence. The forest turns into meadows and then into hills and dunes. Then, suddenly, the smell of the sea. Seabirds. When they pull into Terney, the Uzbek he was talking to hands him a piece of paper with an address near Vladivostok. He tells Maksim that they aren’t sure there will be work at the farm next year—and that if things don’t work out for Maksim, he should come to them.

“We will see each other again,” the Uzbek says.

The dog leaps down, following Maksim. Together they enter the hill town, heading directly to the coast. The afternoon air is sandy and cold and full of a heavy sound he doesn’t yet realize is the movement of water. He has been on the road for only two hours and already he feels a world away. He grips

the straps of his backpack and feels a rush of relief that the dog is here. He ducks under clotheslines. The dog steals some water from a bucket. Other dogs eye her, then vanish into alleys. He avoids looking at the windows.

It occurs to Maksim that he doesn't know the route his father took to the island. For many years now, he has imagined him in a guard uniform gripping a club and has wondered how the club has changed the way he strikes men. Maksim's greatest fear as a child was that his father would one day use a kitchen knife.

He finds a path to the beach. The dog is elated. She bounds into the water and back as Maksim walks on the sand, listening, watching. He comes upon some wooden houses, a restaurant, and then a garage in which surfboards lie stacked on a rack. He returns to the restaurant. A gray-haired woman stands behind the bar, wiping the counter. Her eyes have a steadiness that makes him feel at ease, and so he asks, in Russian, whether she knows of anyone with a boat. She considers him and then points out toward the cliff and says that if he keeps going, he'll find the fishermen.

So he keeps going. He walks past some large rocks sticking up out of the water like miniature islands. When he reaches the base of the cliff, he spots the motorboats pulled up on the beach. In the shadow of the cliff is a cluster of shacks. The ocean sound is louder here, and everywhere. If someone were behind him, he wouldn't know. He turns. When he turns again, a group of people is approaching him from the shacks.

"That your dog?"

"She's no one's dog," Maksim says.

"Then I guess we can take her," a man says.

Maksim is silent. The dog stands rigid and is also silent. A woman is standing behind the group of men, smoking a cigarette, looking bored. Maksim asks if these are their boats. When the men don't respond, Maksim asks if one of them could take him to Sakhalin.

"I can pay," Maksim says.

Another man asks if he is Japanese. That the Japanese keep coming here with their surfboards and Jet Skis. “We don’t want your Japanese money,” they say. But then a moment later they say, “Prove you’ve got the money.”

The dog snarls. Maksim quickly turns and hurries away. He counts to 30. For every number he takes a step. Twenty-eight … step … 29 … step … He spins around, his hands clenched. The group hasn’t moved, but they’ve lost interest in him.

Now he is alone. He and the dog. He approaches the large rocks he passed and begins to walk out into the water. From the shore, the dog watches. The rocks are slippery, but Maksim keeps going, treading carefully. He goes as far as he can without the waves splashing all over him and squints out into the vast nothing, searching for the island or even Japan.

Maybe he will try heading farther down the beach in the opposite direction and ask someone else. Or maybe he will try another town on the coast. He thinks of his uncle trying to teach him to swim one year but can’t remember which beach they were on. Only that his uncle ended up swimming on his own and Maksim stayed on the sand, following him.

He thinks of moving here. Working at a restaurant. Buying a club and beating those fishermen one at a time, the others tied up and forced to watch.

He smiles. He hops back toward the sand where the dog is waiting, wagging her tail. Otherwise, the beach is empty. Stars are now visible and the sunset water is thick and undulating. He feels the strange pull of it. He asks the dog, “What next?”

He finds himself back at the restaurant. He steps onto the deck and peers in. The glass doors are locked, the lights off, and no one is inside. He sits on the steps facing the water and reaches inside his jacket pocket. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes that belonged to his uncle and smokes one. It helps his hunger. Then he realizes he has not fed the dog, has brought nothing for the dog. What a stupid thing to forget. He opens up his backpack as though food might magically appear. But by now, the dog has fallen asleep, and Maksim tucks his feet under her body to keep warm.

He matches his breathing with the dog's. His eyes begin to close; the ocean comes and moves over him.

He jerks awake to someone lifting the brim of his baseball cap. The woman from the bar is leaning down. He has no idea what time it is—late enough that the water is lit by the night. He can see her there in the silver light. Then he wonders why the dog didn't bark and turns.

"Where's my dog?"

"No dog," the woman says. "Did you find your boat?"

He shakes his head. He searches around him for tracks in the sand.

"You could try looking for a boat again in two days."

"Two days?"

"Rain tomorrow. Fog. Not good to see the sights, yes?"

"I'm not seeing the sights," Maksim says, and gets up.

Again, she considers him. "Come on," she says.

He says he needs to look for the dog, but she says, "The dog will come back."

She brings him inside the restaurant to the bar. She hands him a blanket and a glass of water and brings out a bowl for the dog, which she leaves outside. He asks if she has any food for the dog. She takes out a jar full of pretzels and peanuts.

"That's for you both," she says.

He twists open the gray lid and eats fistfuls of the snack. The salt wakes him. He drinks more water. She opens two beers and gives him one. He drinks it fast enough that it goes to his head. She sips hers and watches the television. Yeltsin is talking about Chechnya. She glances at him, presses mute, and switches the channel to a soccer game.

“I’m Sofia,” she says.

“Maksim.”

“How old are you, Maksim?”

He lies. “Eighteen. You?”

She chuckles. She tells Maksim it was her husband’s restaurant, but doesn’t go on.

“I wouldn’t mind working at a restaurant,” Maksim says.

“You might,” Sofia says, and taps her fingernails against her beer.

He walks to the deck, looking for the dog. For the first time, Sofia asks what he is doing here, and he explains. He takes out the money, too.

Sofia counts the money, returns it to him, and then says, “I know someone with a boat.”

“You didn’t say that earlier,” Maksim says.

“I didn’t know you earlier,” Sofia says.

He tries to give her the money again but she refuses. On the television, a goalie dives and catches the ball. Sofia tells him to get some sleep, that she will see him tomorrow, and she turns the lights off and steps out.

Maksim lies down against the bar. The floor is sticky and smells of old beer. But a tiredness that is much greater than the trip today settles inside him. He concentrates on the ocean swell, thinking again of his uncle in the water.

Asako Narahashi

The dog does not come back the next day. Sofia arrives in the morning and brings him to an old, tiny fishing trawler on the dock. She says it is her nephew's boat, and that she will take him herself. He hasn't told her that he has never been on a boat before.

A curtain of fog has settled on the coast. The air sticks to him. Soon, they are off, pushing away from land and heading east into the Sea of Japan, into a fog that grows denser the farther they go. He sits on the floor beside her, his knees to his chest and his eyes closed, waiting for the nausea that has hit him to pass.

The trip takes hours. At first he keeps his eyes closed. Then he grows used to the rhythm of the boat and the engine noise, and as the nausea recedes, he stands, peering over Sofia's shoulder. He cannot see the island, because of the fog. Then glimpses of it appear, and he spots the port and the tall green hills near the water. The port is busier than he thought it would be. He can see fishermen on the dock and a cargo ship a little farther down, everything vanishing and then reappearing in the fog.

They find an empty space for her to dock quickly. She asks how long he needs.

He hasn't thought about that. But he feels a new energy as he picks up his backpack. His heart beats fast.

"I can't stay here," she says. "So I'll come back tomorrow at noon. And if you're not here tomorrow, I'm calling the police. Deal?"

He nods. He almost asks her to come. He jumps off and turns. "My dog," Maksim says.

"Yes," Sofia says. "I'll find the dog."

He tightens the straps of his backpack and hurries through the fog down the dock. Seabirds have flocked to the main street, eating crumbs in the middle of the road. Every time a car races out of the fog, the birds startle and scatter.

Maksim takes a trail up a hill. He knows the prison isn't far from the dock; he wants to reach high ground, above the fog. But the higher he goes, the less he can see. A wind gusts over him. Rounding a bend, he stumbles upon two men kneeling beside a boulder. One of them is placing something into a duffel bag. He retreats, unsure if they have noticed him, but the language they are speaking to each other catches his ear. He has never heard it before. Then he hears the men calling him over.

In Russian, Maksim asks if they know where the prison is.

"You turning yourself in?" The man closer to him grins.

"My father," Maksim says. "He's a guard."

The man's grin doesn't break. He says the trail will end soon, at an intersection where three roads go three ways. "Take the far right," he says. "It'll get you there. But stay on the curb. People speed here."

Maksim thanks them. Before he goes, he asks what language they were speaking.

Instead of answering, the man says, “You are *Koryo Saram*, yes?”

Koryo Saram. Person of Korea.

“Yes,” Maksim says.

“We were here long before you, my friend.”

The man keeps grinning. “So long,” he says. His companion lifts the duffel bag and they both take the trail down and vanish into the fog.

Maksim finds the three roads, takes the far-right one. He keeps to the side as the man said, following an empty field that reminds him of the farm. Almost half an hour later, the prison appears: high walls, barbed wire, and a tower. By the main entrance stands a booth with a guard inside.

When the guard notices him, Maksim says his father’s name. He says his father is also a guard and that he is looking for him and that it is important. He says if the guard doesn’t believe him, he should ask around.

The guard puts down the magazine he has been reading and leans forward. “You’re Vasily’s boy?”

Maksim nods.

The man checks a clipboard and says Vasily’s shift hasn’t started yet. “He’s home,” the guard says. “Go there.”

Maksim doesn’t know where that is.

The guard hesitates, then says, “Walk back to the road. Take a right and keep walking until you reach a hill where a cluster of houses overlooks the prison. If it weren’t for the fog, you’d see the houses from here. You’re really Vasily’s boy?”

Maksim doesn’t answer. He has been on the island now for over an hour. He pictures Sofia’s trawler well on its way back to the mainland. The more tired his legs grow, the more the fog is like an ocean and the land is floating on it.

He reaches the houses. They are well built, with sturdy, new roofs—the kind he would like to live in one day. He wonders which one is his father's when almost at once, Maksim spots him behind the window of the first one. Vasily then steps out the back, lights a cigarette, and turns toward the road.

"Maksim!"

They stand facing each other. Maksim's eyes do not leave his father as Vasily sits on a bench beside a picnic table in the backyard, facing the prison below, though it is barely visible right now.

Five years. All those days seem to collapse. He cannot remember a single one.

Maksim sits across from him on the other bench. From here, he can see the back of the house, where a woman is staring at them through the doorway. She is wearing a bathrobe and when she steps out, his father tells her to go back inside. She doesn't listen. She is Vasily's age and has very long hair that she has washed and blow-dried. The cigarette smell around them mixes with the smell of her shampoo.

She says, "That your boy?" but Vasily doesn't respond. Maksim doesn't either. He is looking at his father, who is clean-shaven for the first time he can recall and wearing a pressed shirt.

"He doesn't look like you at all," the woman says.

"He's better looking than I am," Vasily says.

"That's the truth."

"You staying for a bit?" his father says.

The woman leans toward Vasily's ear. "I don't want no boy," she says, and walks back inside, taking the shampoo smell with her.

"You hungry? You want a beer?" his father says. Then he says, "How old are you now?"

A wind pushes over them, bringing the fog, erasing his father for a moment.

“It’s a nice house,” Maksim says.

“It’s a good job. A steady one. Like I told you.”

“You’ve lived here the whole time?”

Vasily shakes his head: He used to live farther away in an apartment complex. The houses here were built by the new government. A lottery was set up for guards who were interested; he was one of the winners and moved here last year.

Maksim pictures his father winning a house. He tries to think if they ever won anything. “That’s some luck,” Maksim says, and his father takes a drag of his cigarette, shutting one of his eyes so the smoke doesn’t go in.

“I remember that hat,” Vasily says.

Maksim takes off his uncle’s baseball cap and places it on the tabletop.

“He knew nothing about baseball,” his father says. “He just liked the hat.”

“He knew a little,” Maksim says.

His father looks down as though he is recalling something and then asks how the house is, who is living there these days on that farm road, and Maksim considers how to answer. He wants to say there have been bad years at the farm. The corner store isn’t making enough money to hire him, and he can’t pay next month’s rent. He wants to say he isn’t sure he will be there anymore and is thinking of going somewhere else, except he doesn’t know where to go.

“Did you get the letter?” Maksim says.

“I did.”

“You didn’t come to the funeral.”

“I didn’t know if he would’ve wanted me there,” Vasily says. “I didn’t know if you would’ve, either.”

Maksim breaks away from his stare, turns to the hillside. He points down below. “Was any of that the camp?” he says.

“The what?”

“The labor camp. Grandad.”

His father doesn’t know.

“Do you think of him?” Maksim says. “When you’re working in there? I would think of him all the time. If I was working there.”

“Then I’m glad you aren’t working there,” Vasily says. After a pause, he softens his voice and says there’s too much going on inside the prison to think of much.

“Do you know why Grandad ended up where he did?” Maksim says. “Why he stayed in this country?”

“Yeah,” Vasily says. “He got on the wrong boat.”

He can’t tell if his father is joking. Then his father laughs. Maksim is startled. He can’t remember the last time he heard his father laugh. It is like ash being thrown over a small fire inside him.

“Do you remember a dog?” Maksim says. “At the farm?”

“I’ve got no use for dogs,” his father says.

“It’s a Rhodesian ridgeback. The breed came from Africa. The workers told me that. I caught a ride with them.”

“What’s Africa got to do with me? Or you?”

“I’d like to go to Africa,” Maksim says.

Vasily stubs out his cigarette. “You came all this way to ask if I got your letter, to talk about your grandfather, and to tell me you’re going to Africa?”

“No,” Maksim says. “I came to say two other things.”

His father waits.

Maksim’s throat tightens. He looks down and grips the edge of the tabletop. He says, “I don’t know if you were planning on coming back to check on me. But if you were, I don’t need you to.”

“You don’t need me to, yeah?” his father says.

“Yeah,” Maksim says. “I’m okay. I’m okay on my own.”

His father reaches across and Maksim flinches. His father laughs some more and then, to Maksim’s surprise, he reaches across more carefully and takes Maksim’s hand. He takes his hand gently, as though they are praying together. Maksim fixes his gaze down at the fog slipping in under him. The way it floats there around his legs like something ancient and alien.

“Do you use a club?” Maksim says.

He says it quietly, but Vasily hears.

“What?”

“At the prison. Do you use a club?”

He feels the pressure of his father’s hand against his own. He waits for the break in the silence, for his breath to be knocked away, for that sudden crack in the world, and it is like he wants it to happen. He doesn’t understand why he would want that. It is like the way the dog bounds across the barley fields into the woods, as though being drawn there by something the dog can’t control.

But nothing happens. His father does nothing. He lets go of Maksim’s hand, and the wanting vanishes as quickly as it came. All of a sudden, the air fills with a foreign noise. A siren. An alarm. It fills this corner of the island.

Maksim thinks perhaps it is an airplane, but then bright lights flicker down below at the prison.

From inside the house the telephone rings, and the woman appears, waving the receiver.

His father goes inside. He comes back out a few minutes later, buttoning up his uniform.

“Someone broke out,” he says. “It’s all right. It’s nothing to worry about. It happens a few times a year.”

Maksim watches as below a pickup truck comes out of the prison and approaches the house.

“You know who it is?” Vasily says. “It’s always those Nivkhs. They break the law and get punished for it and they think they can just walk out. Because they think it’s their island and they can do whatever they want. We try, you know? We try to be good to them. We even hire some as guards. Then all they do is break one of their friends out.”

Maksim has stopped listening to his father. He is thinking of the two men he ran into on the trail. The duffel bag. One of the men grinning at him. The cadence of their language. Nivkh.

The truck pulls up out front. Maksim walks around with his father. Vasily goes on: “Do you know? All they ever do is go home. The world changes, it will always change, and they will always stay the same. Why do you think that is? Stubborn fools.”

Before Maksim can say anything back, his father says: “Maksim, what was the second thing?”

“The second thing?”

“That you wanted to say to me,” his father says. “You said you came to say two things. What is the second thing?”

Two guards with rifles are in the cab, staring at Maksim.

“Is there anyone else?” Maksim says.

“Anyone else?”

“In our family,” Maksim says. “Is there anyone else, somewhere else?”

“Hell if I know,” Vasily says, and jumps onto the bed of the pickup.

The truck speeds away. The woman is by the front door, but Maksim ignores her. He feels a lingering heat where his father held his hand, focused there in his palm. He keeps feeling it as he passes the prison and gets back on the trail. At the port, he searches for Sofia’s trawler, in case she never left. Some fishermen are staring up at the hills, at the noise.

It is then that he realizes he forgot his uncle’s baseball cap on the picnic table. For a moment, the air goes quiet. He sees nothing in the fog but panning light—the dog in the field, his uncle swimming. He reaches out. Then a car rushes by, swift and dark, almost touching him as the alarm continues to sound, louder now, across the island.

Paul Yoon’s most recent novel, Run Me to Earth, was longlisted for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

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A Bug's Life

A walk in the park on a miniature scale

Tine Poppe; Institute

- Story by Sabrina Imbler
- April 2021 Issue
  Viewfinder

Photographs by Tine Poppe

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hen you are an ant, the stakes are always high. There are those who would eat you—birds, snakes, bigger bugs—and those who could trample you and

Wyour environment in a single sneakered step. These enormous beings may not mean you any harm, but it is impact, not intention, that matters most.

To envision how an ant might see its world, the Norwegian photographer Tine Poppe places her camera in the dirt of a meadow, lens pointing up. Poppe can never see what the photo will look like; even while she's lying in the grass, her eyes are still too far from the earth. But she can imagine it: green-stemmed flowers erupting toward the clouds, a weed whorling like a spiral staircase, blades of grass bending like the Gateway Arch. Sometimes there are even unexpected visitors that escape Poppe's notice until she returns to Oslo and discovers, in the corner of the image, an orblike snail nestled in a leaf.

Poppe took these photos for three summers, driving around Norway in search of open fields with no trees overhead to block the view. Sometimes, while she rooted around in the weeds to place her camera, the meadow resisted—thorns scratched her arm and insects bit her fingers. But it was worthwhile, Poppe told me. “It was like moving into another universe,” she said. “One that we are sharing, only we can’t see it.” If an ant sees a field this way, so lofty and pinnacled, how might it perceive a forest?

Poppe’s work elevates the miniature, unseen worlds around us and the creatures that depend on them. Her images ask us, on a planet we have degraded, to reconsider trampling the flowers.

This article appears in the April 2021 print edition with the headline “Looking Up.”

Sabrina Imbler is a writer based in Brooklyn. Their essay collection about sea creatures is forthcoming from Little, Brown in 2022.

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