

# Private Schools Are Indefensible

*By Caitlin Flanagan*



*The Atlantic*

EST. 1857



**The Internet  
Doesn't Have to  
Be Awful**

*By Anne  
Applebaum  
and Peter  
Pomerantsev*

**Unlocking the  
Mystery of  
Long COVID**

*By Meghan O'Rourke*

**What  
Happened  
to Jordan  
Peterson?**

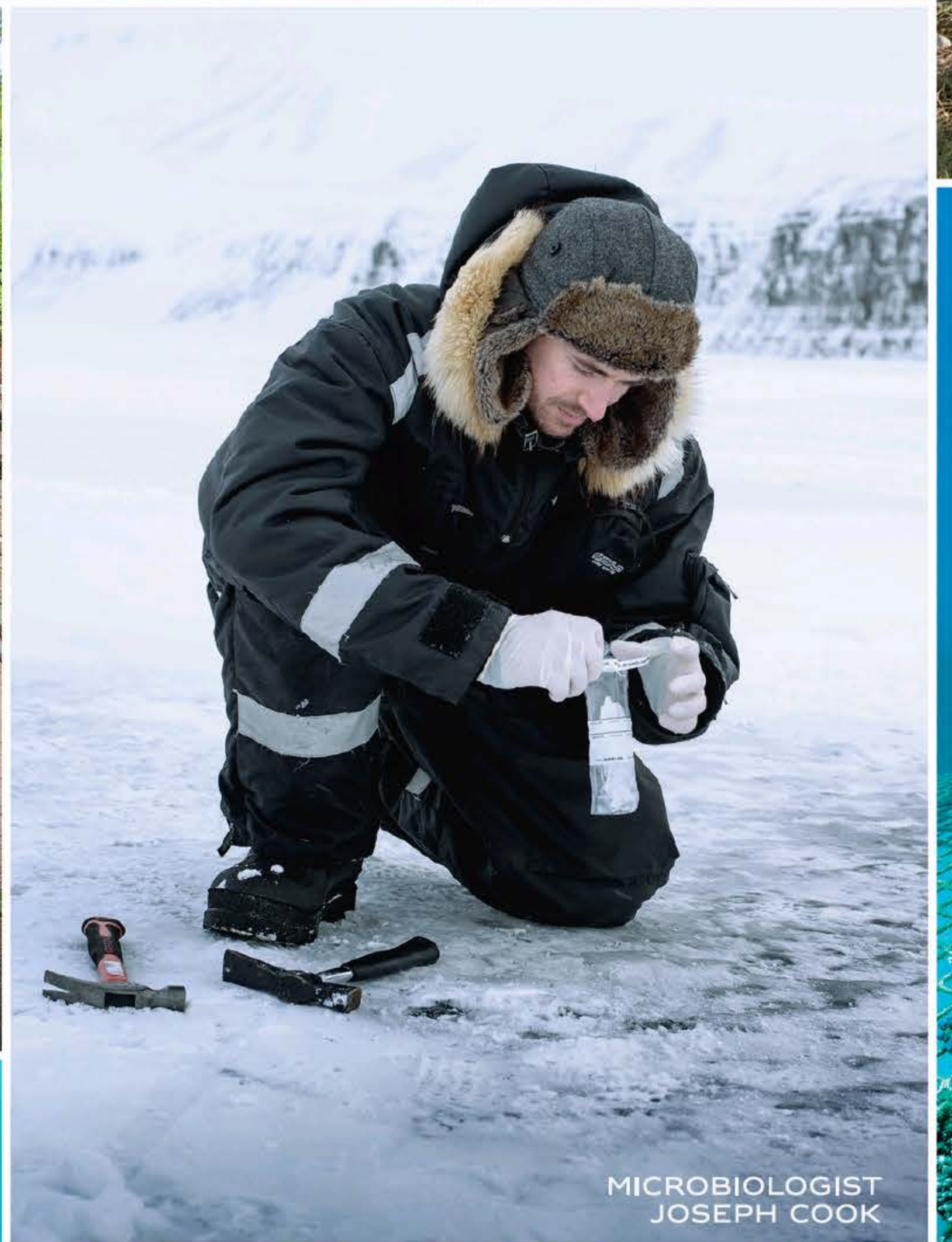
*By Helen Lewis*



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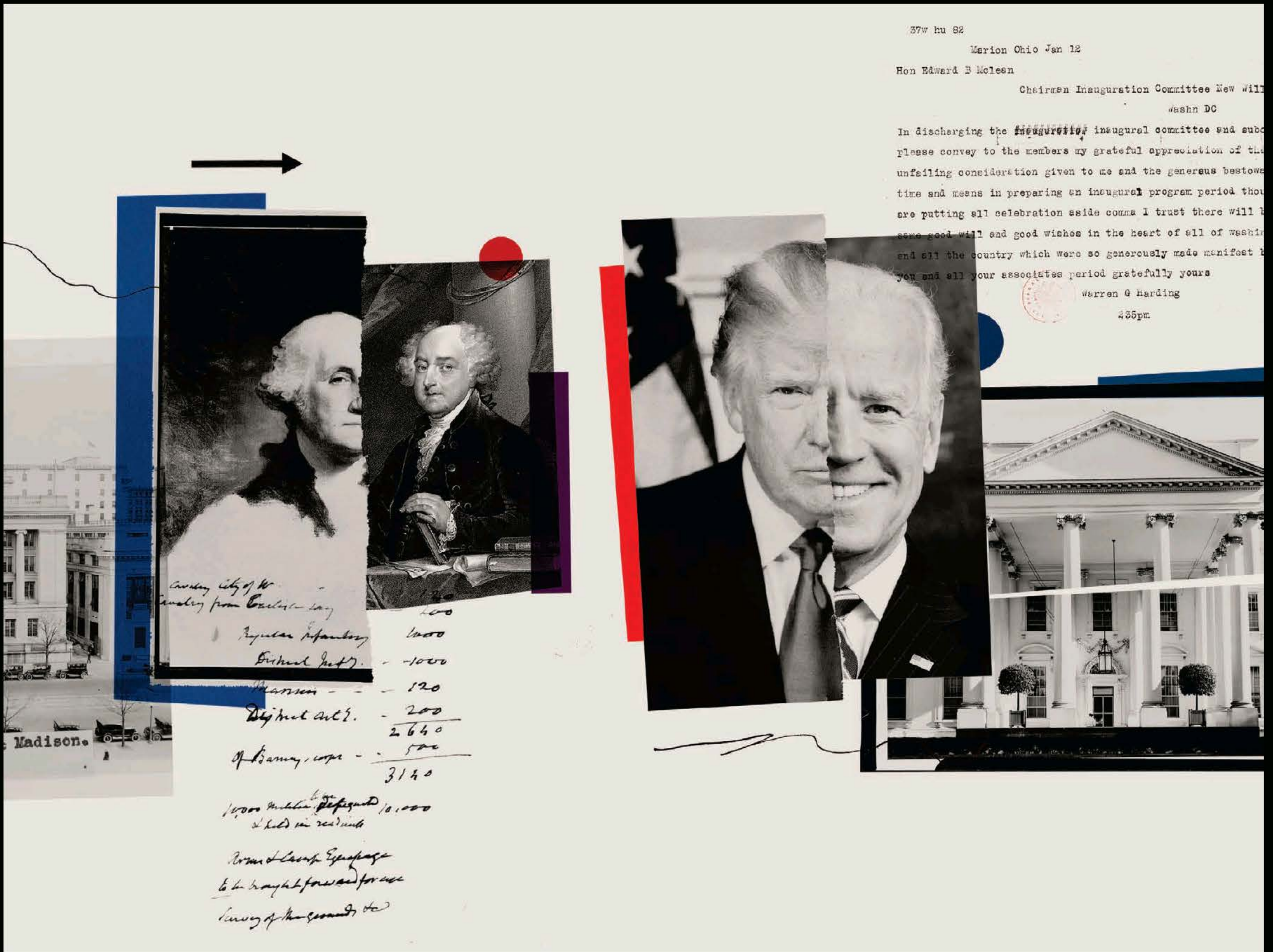
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*Behind the Cover:* The challenges of pandemic schooling have been widespread, but the burden of remote learning has fallen most heavily on public-school families. Caitlin Flanagan's cover story this month contrasts that reality with the angst of the affluent parents who spend tens of thousands of dollars on private-school tuition.

Flanagan argues that Americans have allowed public schools to fail while private schools shuttle students into the Ivy League. Our rendering of a school desk hammered from gold depicts this obscene inequality. The seat has been transformed into a throne, reserved for the rich.

— Arsh Raziuddin, *Associate Art Director*

# THE

## The Most American Religion

*Mormons spent 200 years assimilating to a certain national ideal—only to find their country in an identity crisis, McKay Coppins wrote in the January/February issue. What will the third century of the faith look like?*

I am certain that our communities would benefit from more engagement in the years ahead.

Jonathan Greenblatt  
CEO and National Director,  
Anti-Defamation League  
New York, N.Y.

Thank you for your frankness about our faith and the beauty and flaws that exist within our culture and history. Reading your article made me reflect on who I am and the decisions I have made for my family, faith, and career. I also struggle with the history of polygamy, the priesthood and temple ban for Black people, and the impact of our doctrine on LGBTQ members. This internal wrestle continues, but your article provided a sense of peace and comfort that I really needed.

Michael McNeil  
Memphis, Tenn.

I appreciate the perspective from one “born in the covenant” about a religion that is often skewered by outsiders. But the assertion that the Church moved toward a message of kindness and acceptance of its LGBTQ brothers and sisters after 2008 ignores some of the most exclusionary and hateful messaging from a modern Church in America. Your readers are owed the full historical picture when considering the LDS Church and its significant impact on American history and culture.

Adelyn Vickrey  
Berwyn, Pa.

I haven't been an active LDS member for more than 40 years.

### Letters

After I was named Mitt Romney's chief of staff, in 2002, a church leader asked me how I could work for a heretic. And then there was so much anti-Mormonism on the presidential-campaign trail.

One of my earliest best friends was a Latter-day Saint, so Mormonism has never been a weird religion to me. Now, thanks to the Romneys and others, I love so much about the Church and how my LDS friends live their lives. I was truly moved by your writing. Defending Mormonism has been part of my own spiritual journey.

Beth Myers  
Brookline, Mass.

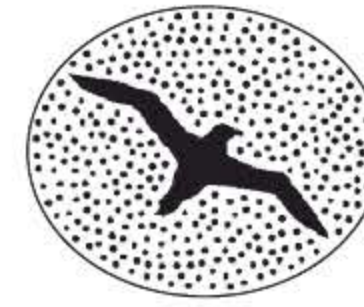
Your personal recollections felt familiar to me as an American

Jew. I feel blessed to have friends who belong to the Mormon Church. In my current role, I see hate all the time, but the bias against Mormons has always bothered me, in part because the community is so gracious and generous toward others.

For those reasons, I made it a point to reach out to the Church when I started as CEO at the Anti-Defamation League. In 2019 I spent three days in Salt Lake City as a guest of the Church. I used the visit to press the Church and elected officials to support a new hate-crimes bill that would protect Utah's LGBTQ community. The trip ended on a positive note when the Church announced it would do just that.

I'm a devout Episcopalian, but I spent many years dealing with an incomprehensible and not very subtle anti-Mormon bias.





I belong to a large family, and none of them, including my late father, has ever tried to persuade me to go back. My personal sticking point was that the Church pretty much wants all women to live just one life: that of wife and mom. I have never had the slightest desire to become either. Your article, though, sums up the reasons for the Church's success, and its appeal to so many. You've done a great service here for members and nonmembers alike.

Karen Bryan  
Salt Lake City, Utah

## The Making of a Model Minority

*Indian Americans rarely consider what they have in common with other nonwhite Americans, Arun Venugopal argued (January/February).*

I came to this country in 1980. Over the past 40 years, many Americans looking at our GPAs, our GRE scores, and our salaries have told me, "Indians are smart." And many Indians have believed this. But we know (as Venugopal points out) that we are an unrepresentative sample. I came, like many people, from one of the Indian Institutes of Technology, which seemed purpose-built to send students abroad for graduate study. Most of us never went back. We married, had children, and

sponsored our parents so that they could come and babysit.

And then, assimilation. We came from the power class of English-speaking middle-class Hindus. In America we assumed that our natural place was in the power class, with white Americans. There was no recognition that we were beneficiaries of protest and struggle by other minorities. We clung to white America's stereotypes of race. We sneered at Black Americans and feared them. Others—Native Americans, Latino Americans—were not part of our consciousness at all.

No question, we are a model minority. Our community's success has been primarily the success of people who came here in the '70s and '80s. Their children to some extent have imbibed their values. But once this model "bulge" passes through the system, will we still be a model minority? I seriously doubt it. We will look more and more like the rest of America.

Handanhal Ravinder  
Little Falls, N.J.

Venugopal writes, "My parents never had to give me 'the talk' that many Black teenagers receive." But just because Venugopal did not have this talk, or something similar, does not mean other Indian families do not. My family will matter-of-factly remind my brother not to wear his hood and to be

extra polite if approached by a police officer while driving. My mother and aunts tell their sons not to grow their beard too long for fear of being seen as threatening. I think it is fair to say that the second-generation Indian Americans who grew up in the '70s and '80s had a different set of circumstances than those who grew up post-9/11.

Venugopal has begun a conversation by offering his family's story in the larger context of Indian American history. We need more stories like this, with more nuanced experiences, to detangle and debunk the flawed "model minority" myth.

Kamna Shastri  
Seattle, Wash.

I appreciate Arun Venugopal's argument. However, his analysis neglects two crucial issues. Venugopal's summary of the immigration of educated, upper-caste Indians to America ignores the parallel history of South Asian immigrants who joined the American working class. Families such as my own include engineers and doctors on one side, and taxi and bus drivers on the other. Both of these classes typically shirk the possibility of social alliance with Black Americans.

The "divide and rule" principle that Venugopal suggests may have guided affluent Indian Americans to align with white social groups doesn't explain the

resistance of their working-class brethren to allying with struggling Black Americans. Therein lies a second overlooked issue: colorism, an insidious form of racism among South Asians. The subcontinental social psyche has yet to heal from the damages of colonialism; aspirations for "fair and lovely" skin are rampant.

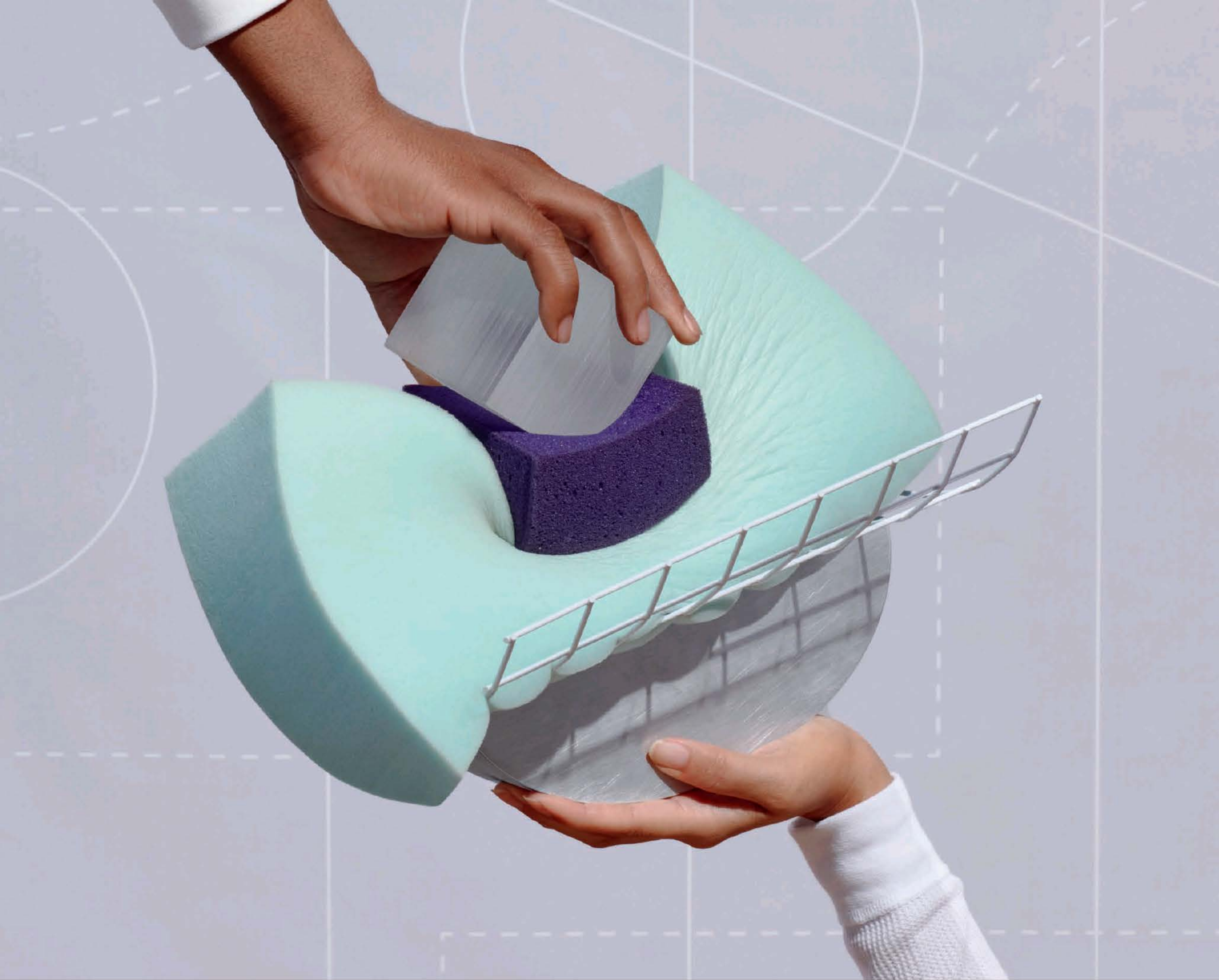
There are, still, some Indian American immigrants daring enough to confront and overcome the cultural barrier of colorism. (Shyamala Gopalan Harris, the mother of our current vice president, was one such critical thinker.) But in large part, the onus will be on our children and their children—those willing to abandon their comfortable berths in America's modern racial hierarchy—to reckon with colorism and leave it behind.

Sajan Saini  
Cambridge, Mass.

## Corrections:

The print version of "How Civilization Broke Our Brains" (January/February) used an incorrect subtitle for the American edition of James Suzman's book. The full title of that edition is *Work: A Deep History, From the Stone Age to the Age of Robots*. We regret the error. A caption in "Tom Stoppard's Double Life" (March) misidentified Stoppard's location in the accompanying photograph. Stoppard is pictured in London.

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



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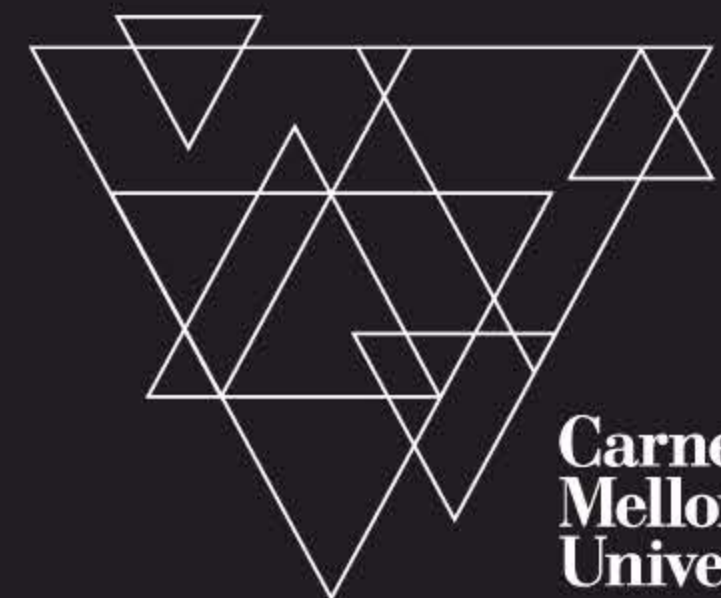
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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## AMERICA WITHOUT GOD

*As religious faith has  
declined, ideological  
intensity has risen.  
Will the quest for secular  
redemption through politics  
doom the American idea?*

BY SHADI HAMID

**T**he United States had long been a holdout among Western democracies, uniquely and perhaps even suspiciously devout. From 1937 to 1998, church membership remained relatively constant, hovering at about 70 percent. Then something happened. Over the past two decades, that number has dropped to less than 50 percent, the sharpest recorded decline in American history. Meanwhile, the “nones”—atheists, agnostics, and those claiming no

religion—have grown rapidly and today represent a quarter of the population.

But if secularists hoped that declining religiosity would make for more rational politics, drained of faith's inflaming passions, they are likely disappointed. As Christianity's hold, in particular, has weakened, ideological intensity and fragmentation have risen. American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once *religious* belief has now been channeled into *political* belief. Political debates over what America is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations. This is what religion without religion looks like.

Not so long ago, I could comfort American audiences with a contrast: Whereas in the Middle East, politics is war by other means—and sometimes is literal war—politics in America was less existentially fraught. During the Arab Spring, in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, debates weren't about health care or taxes—they were, with sometimes frightening intensity, about foundational questions: What does it mean to be a nation? What is the purpose of the state? What is the role of religion in public life? American politics in the Obama years had its moments of ferment—the Tea Party and tan suits—but was still relatively boring.

We didn't realize how lucky we were. Since the end of the Obama era, debates over what it means to be American have become suffused with a fervor that would be unimaginable in debates over, say, Belgianness or the "meaning" of Sweden. It's rare to hear someone accused of being un-Swedish or

un-British—but *un-American* is a common slur, slung by both left and right against the other. Being called un-American is like being called "un-Christian" or "un-Islamic," a charge akin to heresy.

This is because America itself is "almost a religion," as the Catholic philosopher Michael Novak once put it, particularly for immigrants who come to their new identity with the zeal of the converted. The American civic religion has its own founding myth, its prophets and processions, as well as its scripture—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist Papers*. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. wished that "one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed." The very idea that a nation might have a creed—a word associated primarily with religion—illustrates the uniqueness of American identity as well as its predicament.

**THE NOTION THAT** all deeply felt conviction is sublimated religion is not new. Abraham Kuyper, a theologian who served as the prime minister of the Netherlands at the dawn of the 20th century, when the nation was in the early throes of secularization, argued that all strongly held ideologies were effectively faith-based, and that no human being could survive long without some ultimate loyalty. If that loyalty didn't derive from traditional religion, it would find expression through secular commitments, such as nationalism, socialism, or liberalism. The political theorist Samuel Goldman calls this "the law of the

conservation of religion": In any given society, there is a relatively constant and finite supply of religious conviction. What varies is how and where it is expressed.

WITHOUT  
CHRISTIANITY,  
AMERICANS  
NO LONGER  
HAVE A  
COMMON  
CULTURE  
UPON WHICH  
TO FALL BACK.

No longer explicitly rooted in white, Protestant dominance, understandings of the American creed have become richer and more diverse—but also more fractious. As the creed fragments, each side seeks to exert exclusivist claims over the other. Conservatives believe that they are faithful to the American idea and that liberals are betraying it—but liberals believe, with equal certitude, that they are faithful to the American idea and that conservatives are betraying it. Without the common ground produced by a shared external enemy, as America had during the Cold War and briefly after the September 11 attacks, mutual antipathy grows, and each side becomes less intelligible to the other. Too often, the most bitter divides are those within families.

No wonder the newly ascendant American ideologies, having to fill the

vacuum where religion once was, are so divisive. They are *meant* to be divisive. On the left, the "woke" take religious notions such as original sin, atonement, ritual, and excommunication and repurpose them for secular ends. Adherents of wokeism see themselves as challenging the long-dominant narrative that emphasized the exceptionalism of the nation's founding. Whereas religion sees the promised land as being above, in God's kingdom, the utopian left sees it as being *ahead*, in the realization of a just society here on Earth. After Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September, droves of mourners gathered outside the Supreme Court—some kneeling, some holding candles—as though they were at the Western Wall.

On the right, adherents of a Trump-centric ethnonationalism still drape themselves in some of the trappings of organized religion, but the result is a movement that often looks like a tent revival stripped of Christian witness. Donald Trump's boisterous rallies were more focused on blood and soil than on the son of God. Trump himself played both savior and martyr, and it is easy to marvel at the hold that a man so imperfect can have on his soldiers. Many on the right find solace in conspiracy cults, such as QAnon, that tell a religious story of earthly corruption redeemed by a godlike force.

Though the United States wasn't founded as a Christian nation, Christianity was always intertwined with America's self-definition. Without it, Americans—conservatives and liberals alike—no longer have a common culture upon which to fall back.

UNFORTUNATELY, the various strains of wokeism on the left and Trumpism on the right cannot truly fill the spiritual void—what the journalist Murtaza Hussain calls America’s “God-shaped hole.” Religion, in part, is about distancing yourself from the temporal world, with all its imperfection. At its best, religion confers relief by withholding final judgments until another time—perhaps until eternity. The new secular religions unleash dissatisfaction not toward the possibilities of divine grace or justice but toward one’s fellow citizens, who become embodiments of sin—“deplorables” or “enemies of the state.”

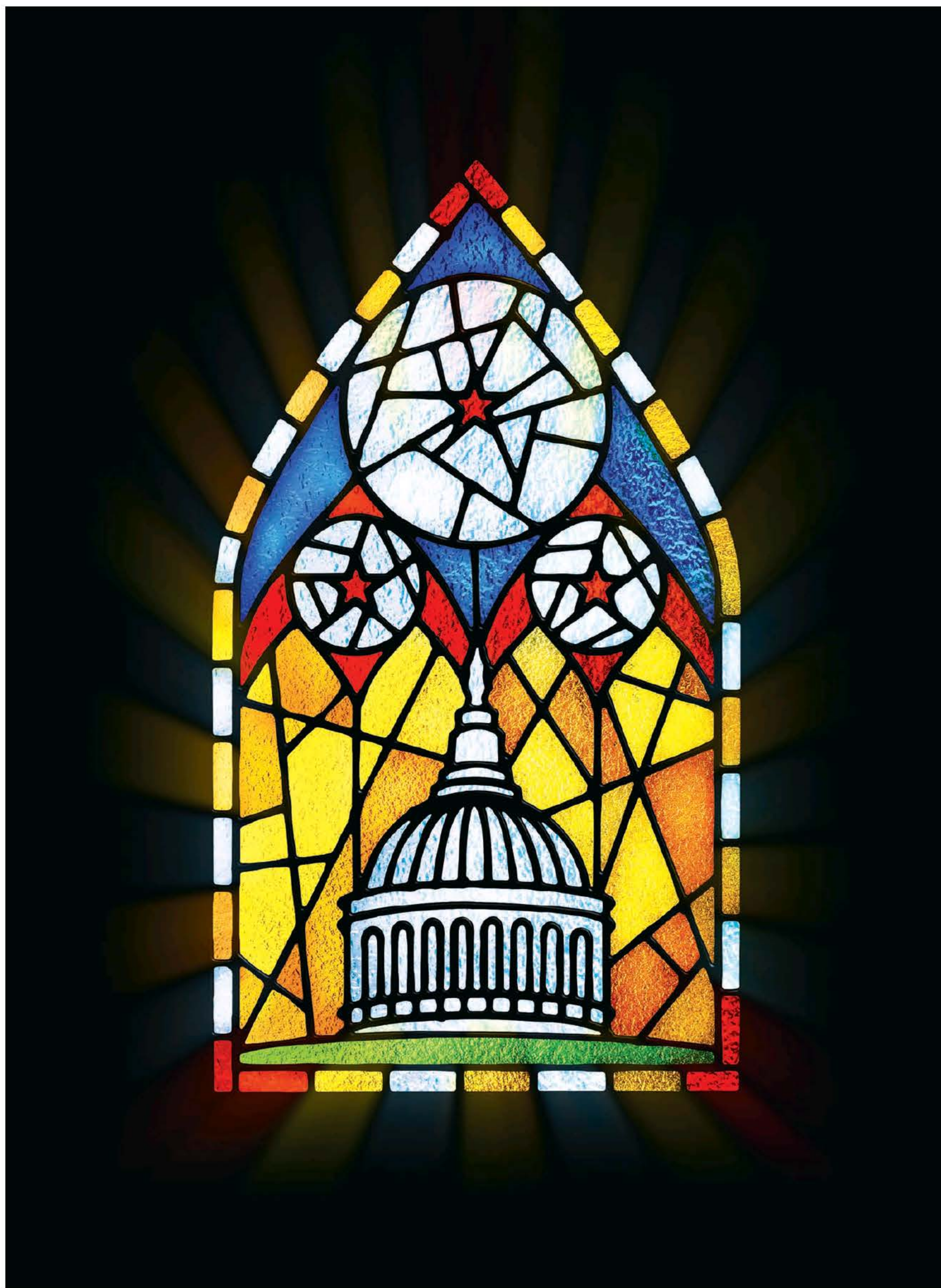
This is the danger in transforming mundane political debates into metaphysical questions. Political questions are not metaphysical; they are of this world and this world alone. “Some days are for dealing with your insurance documents or fighting in the mud with your political opponents,” the political philosopher Samuel Kimbriel recently told me, “but there are also days for solemnity, or fasting, or worship, or feasting—things that remind us that the world is bigger than itself.”

Absent some new religious awakening, what are we left with? One alternative to American intensity would be a world-weary European resignation. Violence has a way of taming passions, at least as long as it remains in active memory. In Europe, the terrors of the Second World War are not far away. But Americans must go back to the Civil War for violence of comparable scale—and for most Americans, the violence of the Civil War bolsters, rather than undermines, the national

myth of perpetual progress. The war was redemptive—it led to a place of promise, a place where slavery could be abolished and the nation made whole again. This, at least, is

may be the only country other than the United States that believes itself to be based on a unifying ideology that is both unique and universal—and avowedly secular. The French

persistent tensions regarding Islam’s presence in public life, the meaning of *laïcité* has become more controversial. But most French people still hold firm to their country’s



the narrative that makes the myth possible to sustain.

**FOR BETTER AND WORSE,** the United States really is nearly one of a kind. France

concept of *laïcité* requires religious conservatives to privilege being French over their religious commitments when the two are at odds. With the rise of the far right and

founding ideology: More than 80 percent favor banning religious displays in public, according to one recent poll.

In democracies without a pronounced ideological bent,

which is most of them, nationhood must instead rely on a shared sense of being a distinct people, forged over centuries. It can be hard for outsiders and immigrants to embrace a national identity steeped in ethnicity and history when it was never theirs.

Take postwar Germany. Germanness is considered a mere fact—an accident of birth rather than an aspiration. And because shame over the Holocaust is considered a national virtue, the country has at once a strong national identity and a weak one. There is pride in not being proud. So what would it mean for, say, Muslim immigrants to love a German language and culture tied to a history that is not theirs—and indeed a history that many Germans themselves hope to leave behind?

An American who moves to Germany, lives there for years, and learns the language remains an American—an “expat.” If America is a civil religion, it would make sense that it stays with you, unless you renounce it. As Jeff Gerdmin, the former head of the Aspen Institute in Berlin, described it to me: “You can eat strudel, speak fluent German, adapt to local culture, but many will still say of you *Er hat einen deutschen Pass*—‘He has a German passport.’ No one starts calling you German.” Many native-born Americans may live abroad for stretches, but few emigrate permanently. Immigrants to America tend to become American; emigrants to other countries from America tend to stay American.

The last time I came back to the United States after being abroad, the customs officer at Dulles airport, in

Virginia, glanced at my passport, looked at me, and said, “Welcome home.” For my customs officer, it went without saying that the United States was my home.

In *In the Light of What We Know*, a novel by the British Bangladeshi author Zia Haider Rahman, the protagonist, an enigmatic and troubled British citizen named Zafar, is envious of the narrator, who is American. “If an immigration officer at Heathrow had ever said ‘Welcome home’ to me,” Zafar says, “I would have given my life for England, for my country, there and then. I could kill for an England like that.” The narrator reflects later that this was “a bitter plea”:

Embedded in his remark, there was a longing for being a part of something. The force of the statement came from the juxtaposition of two apparent extremes: what Zafar was prepared to sacrifice, on the one hand, and, on the other, what he would have sacrificed it for—the casual remark of an immigration official.

When Americans have expressed disgust with their country, they have tended to frame it as fulfillment of a patriotic duty rather than its negation. As James Baldwin, the rare American who did leave for good, put it: “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” Americans who dislike America seem to dislike leaving it even more (witness all those liberals *not* leaving the country every time a Republican wins the presidency, despite their promises

to do so). And Americans who do leave still find a way, like Baldwin, to love it. This is the good news of America’s creedal nature, and may provide at least some hope for the future. But is love enough?



CONFLICTING NARRATIVES are more likely to coexist uneasily than to resolve themselves; the threat of disintegration will always lurk nearby.

On January 6, the threat became all too real when insurrectionary violence came to the Capitol. What was once in the realm of “dreampolitik” now had physical force. What can “unity” possibly mean after that?

Can religiosity be effectively channeled into political belief without the structures of actual religion to temper and postpone judgment? There is little sign, so far, that it can. If matters of good and evil are not to be resolved by an omniscient God in the future, then Americans will judge and render punishment now. We are a nation of believers. If only Americans could

begin believing in politics less fervently, realizing instead that life is elsewhere. But this would come at a cost—because to believe in politics also means believing we can, and probably should, be better.

In *History Has Begun*, the author, Bruno Maçães—Portugal’s former Europe minister—marvels that “perhaps alone among all contemporary civilizations, America regards reality as an enemy to be defeated.” This can obviously be a bad thing (consider our ineffectual fight against the coronavirus), but it can also be an engine of rejuvenation and creativity; it may not always be a good idea to accept the world as it is. Fantasy, like belief, is something that humans desire and need. A distinctive American innovation is to insist on believing even as our fantasies and dreams drift further out of reach.

This may mean that the United States will remain unique, torn between this world and the alternative worlds that secular and religious Americans alike seem to long for. If America is a creed, then as long as enough citizens say they believe, the civic faith can survive. Like all other faiths, America’s will continue to fragment and divide. Still, the American creed remains worth believing in, and that may be enough. If it isn’t, then the only hope might be to get down on our knees and pray. *A*

*Shadi Hamid is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a founding editor of Wisdom of Crowds. He is the author of Islamic Exceptionalism and Temptations of Power.*



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## OUR SAD SOUVENIRS OF THE PANDEMIC

*Americans can't go anywhere, but we're still buying the T-shirt.*

BY AMANDA MULL

Last May, when Connor Hitchcock decided to start a fundraiser for some out-of-work friends, he had modest expectations. Hitchcock and his wife, Christa, run Homefield Apparel, which licenses old collegiate sports logos to make vintage-inspired T-shirts and sweatshirts. They wanted to help out a handful of writers who had recently been furloughed from Vox Media's college-football website, Banner Society. The couple drew up some designs based on inside jokes from the site's two podcasts. Hitchcock didn't tell the writers what he was up to. "I thought maybe we could raise \$2,000 and help them buy some groceries," he told me.

The response was enormous. In a short presale, Homefield sold thousands of T-shirts that would make sense only to devoted listeners. People wrote

in asking to donate money on top of the price of the shirts; several pledged more than \$1,000. In a few days, Homefield had raised \$44,000. "It pointed to people's own personal generosity, but also the motivations of people when they feel connected to others," Hitchcock said. "Where you spend your money is, I think, ultimately the biggest sense of agency a lot of people have."

I am a fan of Banner Society and its podcasts (I was a guest on one of them several years ago). I ordered one of each T-shirt design. Over the next six months, I kept buying tops adorned with niche jokes from podcasts, the names of local restaurants and concert venues, or logos from indie clothing brands. Also: tote bags, stickers, coffee mugs, and, yes, one wine key. Some of these items were explicitly marketed as fundraisers for businesses whose cash flow had been dented by the pandemic.

Other purchases just struck me as a way to throw extra business to people who could probably use it.

In July, I ordered a \$38 T-shirt emblazoned with the nonsense word CHATTAHUCCI—an homage to the 1992 song "Chattahoochee," by Alan Jackson, and its deranged music video, in which the singer belts out his ode to the river that bisects metro Atlanta while water-skiing in jeans like an absolute legend. The name of the river was misspelled and printed in the style of Gucci's logo, which doesn't really have anything to do with the song, or the river. The shirt made me laugh—I was obsessed with the song as a kid growing up in Atlanta—and buying it felt like a good deed. I knew that its designer, the Texas-based indie music and apparel company Vinyl Ranch, could no longer stage the parties and performances that had been a big part of its business.

The Banner Society and CHATTAHUCCI T-shirt purchases were out of character for me, as I don't typically wear T-shirts. (Every time a new one arrived, I folded it up and tucked it away in a box under my bed.) Nor do I believe that merch alone can sustain businesses crippled by a deep economic crisis brought on by a global pandemic. But I wasn't sure how else to help, and everywhere I looked, I noticed other people doing the same thing: posting their new tees on social media, along with information about where their followers could get one.

Buying a T-shirt may seem like an odd way of pledging support for furloughed workers or a struggling small business, but the tee surge isn't entirely a product of the pandemic. For decades, Americans have been trained to see logos and slogans as a primary means of self-expression and even as a way of telegraphing values. Over the past 10 years, the practice has grown more pronounced; an increasing number of businesses—makeup brands, chain restaurants, museums, digital-media companies, exercise-equipment manufacturers—have urged their customers to wear their logos as if, say, Dunkin' were a favorite sports team. They've had considerable success: The beauty brand Glossier, for example, reports that its signature pink hoodie, rereleased this summer, once had a 10,000-person waitlist. But in the past year, as the pandemic put millions out of work and isolated us from our communities and local comforts, this behavior took a new form. Eager to help those in need, and nostalgic for our pre-COVID-19 freedoms, we bought souvenirs of the year we went nowhere.



FOR MOST APPAREL brands, 2020 was devastating. Office workers are among the people most likely to spend significant amounts of disposable income on clothes. They are also the people most able to work from home, which means they currently don't need much new clothing. Last spring, as such workers acclimated to the vagaries of Zoom, the market for virtually every kind of clothing but sweatpants and bike shorts evaporated. According to a Census Bureau analysis, the pandemic has hit clothing retailers even harder than bars and restaurants. Brooks Brothers filed for bankruptcy, as did the parent companies

of office-wear brands such as Ann Taylor, JoS. A. Bank, and Men's Wearhouse.

Adam Schwartz, a co-founder and the CEO of TeePublic, which custom-prints artist-submitted designs, initially braced for impact. "Sitting there in mid-March," he told me, "we were like, *What's going to happen? This could be really bad.*" Instead, TeePublic has seen its sales more than double. The site's quick introduction of customizable masks helped, Schwartz said, but most of the sales increase came from T-shirts, tote bags, mugs, and pins the company had been selling all along. New varieties of

these products have also proliferated. Suddenly, everyone seemed to have more time for creative work, and new people were joining the site. Schwartz described TeePublic's average artist as someone who spends most of her day doing freelance graphic design and sells her own work as a side hustle.

Meanwhile, some bars and restaurants have managed to sell merch to now-absent patrons, replacing a portion of lost revenue. Brandon Hoy, the owner of the Brooklyn-based pizza restaurant Roberta's, told me that customer support in the form of T-shirt, hat, and tote sales has been a vital source of cash flow during the pandemic. On its

GoFundMe page, the 40 Watt Club in Athens, Georgia, suggests that, short of a straight-up donation, the best way to support the legendary music hall is to buy a T-shirt or hat. "Look sharp and represent your favorite venue while we work our way back to entertaining our beloved community," reads a message from the manager, Jim Wilson.

That earnest calls to public action would come down to this—that in the middle of a pandemic, people would feel compelled to pledge allegiance via a T-shirt—makes a weird sort of sense. Almost from the moment that tees were embraced by the youth



culture of the 1950s, they have fused fashion and identity, politics and commerce, in complicated ways. In the '60s, they were used to signal affiliation with rebellious rock bands; by the '70s, popular T-shirt slogans were decrying war and censorship—turning bodies into billboards and protest signs.

Like many countercultural symbols, the T-shirt was eventually co-opted by corporate America. People had shown themselves eager to associate with a movement or cause by stamping its slogans across their chest. As the Vietnam War gave way to the excesses of the '80s, clothing companies made themselves the cause. An Esprit T-shirt evoked a gamine femininity. A Ralph Lauren polo, with its little embroidered pony, was a not-so-discreet marker of preppy wealth. Adidas gear indicated that you were clued into the nascent cultural power of hip-hop (or maybe that you just liked soccer).

More recently, as the country has experienced political and cultural upheaval on a scale unseen since the '60s, brands have tailored their messages to the moment. Nike, a pioneer in marketing social responsibility, very publicly supported Colin Kaepernick's campaign against police brutality, allowing those who care about the issue to feel, on some level, that their new Air Force 1s are a small rebuke to state violence. Other brands have struck similar poses, aligning themselves—and by extension, their logo-bedecked products—with the fights against racism, sexism, homophobia, or, in many cases, the public-relations-friendly catchall "inequality." The Glossier Girl in her pink hoodie isn't merely

attractive enough to look great in the brand's nearly invisible makeup—she also cares about gay rights. The Peloton Bro in his moisture-wicking tank isn't just interested in his body-fat percentage—he also takes an interest in ending racism.

Conditioned by these and other companies to see our merch as an expression of our values, we have naturally come to the aid of bartenders and line cooks by shelling out for T-shirts. Indeed, merch has a big advantage over a mere donation: It confers cachet on those who wear it, not just for being charitable, but also for knowing the right things to support. Altruism, but make it fashion.

EVEN BEFORE the pandemic began, Sarah Marshall and Michael Hobbes had thought a lot about merch. Together, they host the podcast *You're Wrong About*, which is part true crime, part history, and part media criticism. The show doesn't run ads and has no paywall—you can listen for free. To make it, the hosts rely on listeners loving *You're Wrong About* so much that they voluntarily kick in a few bucks a month via Patreon—or buy a T-shirt or tote bag.

At first, Marshall and Hobbes were hesitant to sell things to their listeners; their show is frequently critical of consumer culture and of capitalism more generally. But listeners kept sending them fan art and requests to put one-liners from popular episodes on *something* that they could buy to support the show. A few months before the pandemic began, the hosts relented—some of the listeners' designs were too cute to resist. Since then, *You're Wrong About* has continued to attract more and

more listeners, perhaps in part because its criticisms of America's inequities feel particularly urgent against the backdrop of the pandemic. It's also sold more and more merch.

"A big hurdle that I had to get over was the idea that you aren't necessarily attempting to cheat people just by agreeing to sell something to them," Marshall told me. She began to view *You're Wrong About*

NOT ALL  
BUSINESSES  
ARE EQUALLY  
SUITED TO  
PANDEMIC  
MERCH:  
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PROBABLY NOT  
GOING TO BUY  
HIS T-SHIRT.

merch in a new way when she thought about certain possessions of her own—objects she's collected that don't serve much practical purpose, but that give her joy or comfort because of their association with other, less ownable things. This was, in essence, why I ended up with a CHATTAHUCCI shirt I had no intention of wearing. Its existence—and the existence of someone else who loves the same weird combination of things I do—seemed worth the \$38, especially since it was going to a small business hard-hit by a pandemic.

Of course, there's only so much consumers can do to help; even in a best-case scenario, T-shirt sales can't get a business through a pandemic—that's what government subsidies should be

for. And some businesses and individuals will have more access to consumer largesse than others. As Homefield Apparel's Hitchcock noted to me, the T-shirt fundraiser was successful because Banner Society writers and podcasters had spent years building loyal audiences who were enthusiastic about helping when things went south. But not all businesses are equally suited to pandemic merch: Your local plumber may be beloved, but you're probably not going to buy his T-shirt. Likewise, of the restaurateurs I spoke with, those who have had the most success raising extra money were already well known in food media, with an existing inventory of T-shirts and tote bags and a heavy dose of cultural status to confer on those who wore and used them. "The economics are good if you're one of the top 10 percent of people" making podcasts or other types of content, Hobbes told me. "If you aren't, they're extremely bad." Popularity is not a resource that scales very well.

Everyone I spoke with for this story was moved by the generosity of strangers who cared about them and their livelihoods—and frustrated that one of the best ways to cover expenses in a national emergency is to have spent years cultivating an audience that hopefully likes you enough to buy your T-shirt. "I think our best-selling shirt is the one that says IT WAS CAPITALISM ALL ALONG," Marshall told me. "That's hilarious to me. I can't believe people don't make fun of us for that." *A*

*Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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## AFTER THE BLAST

*Last summer's explosion in Beirut killed hundreds of people and damaged much of the city. My efforts to repair my apartment reveal a lot about how Lebanon works—and doesn't.*

BY RANIA ABOUZEID

I had never really thought about my windows, about the thickness of the panes or the type of glass. Like so many things that I'll never again take for granted, they were simply there, and then they were gone. My apartment in the Lebanese capital is a brisk walk away from the city's now-infamous port, the site of a massive explosion on August 4. Shortly after 6 p.m., some 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, recklessly and improperly stored since 2014 in a facility called Warehouse 12, suddenly ignited. The explosion was one of the largest nonnuclear blasts ever recorded, with a force so great that it rattled windows in Cyprus, about 150 miles away

across the Mediterranean Sea. It sent a mushroom cloud into the sky and lethal shock waves mostly through the eastern half of the city, killing more than 200 people, injuring more than 6,000 others, and damaging 85,744 properties: schools, stores, hospitals, and homes—including mine.

I wasn't in my apartment at the time, and in an instant, I didn't know if I still had one. Hundreds of thousands of people were abruptly, violently rendered homeless by the blast. My neighborhood of restaurants, bars, and art galleries, many lodged in Ottoman-era buildings with elegant trifora windows, looked more like the war zones I've covered for years as a journalist. Several neighbors were injured by flying glass and

debris, requiring medical treatment, and all of the 21 apartments in my building were extensively damaged, as were all of the buildings nearby.

Where do you start? Whom do you turn to for help? In Lebanon, a small country of some 6.8 million, including more than 1.5 million refugees, the answer is: not the state. Since the end of the civil war in 1990, the country's affairs have been dominated by sectarian warlords turned sectarian politicians, and by dynastic political families. This entrenched political class provides little for its citizenry—not even the basics, such as 24-hour electricity and a clean, constant water supply in a land blessed with abundant natural springs. Lebanon is a

do-it-yourself country, where citizens resort to private generator networks to get around the daily power cuts, and to private water companies to make up for water shortages. Paying two bills for a basic utility is a way of life.

In October 2019, large numbers of Lebanese took part in nationwide protests against their political overlords, fed up with rampant corruption and decades of mismanagement. The government resigned; another was formed. The new government resigned days after the explosion.

It is generally considered a basic responsibility of a state to protect its people, but after the blast, local investigative journalists produced evidence that a number of high-level



ستانبوره قابله آره نه با بیلدن بو نه مسافه دن ایشرال بیدن بورک شیم لری

Beirut in the 1960s. Rebuilt after the civil war, the city's downtown, west of the port, suffered significant damage in the 2020 explosion.

COURTESY OF RANA SALAM

security, judicial, customs, and political figures, including the current president and the interim prime minister, knew about the dangerous material stored in Warehouse 12, and didn't remove it. Some two dozen low- and mid-level officials were detained as part of an ongoing investigation, but victims' families are demanding accountability for more senior figures. Some are calling for an international investigation. Lebanon's judiciary, full of political appointees, has not made any findings public or declared what caused the blast. Was it an accident, the result of negligence, a criminal act, terrorism? Without that verdict, most insurance companies won't pay out compensation. Citizens are on their own.

Which brings me back to my windows, or what remained of them.

**THE SHARDS WERE** everywhere, biting into my parquet floors, shredding the curtains, lodged in concrete walls like razor-sharp diamonds. Everything was coated with a finely ground glass powder. Splintered doors had been torn from their hinges, curtain rods ripped from cracked walls. A broken pipe leaked water. Ceramic tiles on my terrace were uprooted and broken and covered in drops of blood. The trail led to bloody handprints on a wall. An employee in the office beneath my apartment had been propelled by the force of the blast through a skylight that opened onto my terrace. Despite sustaining head injuries and a broken arm, he'd somehow managed to climb over my wall and seek help from passersby.

Beirut was a city shimmering with the remnants of people's

windows. Glass became the city's soundtrack. It crunched underfoot, it tinkled as it was swept up, it clinked like icicles as it was poured into bins. Volunteers descended from across the country, armed with brooms and spades they bought themselves, to help clear the debris. Restaurants and NGOs provided free meals. Aid groups as well as individuals donated cleaning supplies, drinking water, and food parcels, all in the midst of a devastating economic crisis.

Starting in October 2019, the value of the Lebanese pound, long pegged to the dollar, had slipped and then nose-dived, effectively falling 80 percent. People's purchasing power eroded. The banks imposed strict monthly caps on withdrawals, preventing people from accessing more than a few hundred dollars of their rapidly depreciating funds, even as some \$6 billion was allegedly transferred overseas by members of the ruling circles. People lost their life savings. More than half of the population of a once middle-income country was plunged into poverty. These were the conditions when Warehouse 12 exploded.

The Lebanese diaspora, millions strong and spread across Australasia, Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East, quickly rallied—as it always does—to collect donations and channel relief supplies to Beirut. Engineers and architects went door to door (although many apartments no longer had doors) to assess the damage for free.

My cracked walls, the engineers told me, were an aesthetic, not a structural, issue, and so I moved the task of repairing them down my to-do list. My first priority, after clearing the

shattered glass and heavy debris with the help of a team of young volunteers, and after repairing the broken pipe, was to replace my windows. They had been virtually wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling in some rooms. Replacement glass was hard to find. The overwhelming demand had created shortages. The names and numbers of tradespeople who were volunteering their labor or supplying glass at cost circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook, but these vendors were soon overwhelmed. Some local NGOs and religious groups were offering to replace windows for free, but their waitlists were already months long.

Then a relative of mine told me he had a friend who imported glass and installed windows for a living. I had found my supplier. He had questions: What was the thickness of my panes, and did I want (in order of increasing cost) regular glass, the type that broke into jagged shards; tempered, which crumbled on impact and was less likely to kill me; or top-of-the-line laminated glass, which held together when shattered and, depending on its thickness, could even withstand a bullet? He also had demands: cash payment in dollars, or the black-market equivalent of the Lebanese pound. No bank checks. I opted for tempered glass.

Officially the currency remained pegged to the dollar at 1,507.50 pounds, but in practice the banks had a different exchange rate: 3,900 pounds to the dollar. At the time of the blast, the fluctuating black-market rate was about 7,500 pounds to the dollar. Companies also set their own arbitrary rates.

I had money in the bank, but the amount I needed to

repair my windows exceeded my monthly withdrawal limit. Some banks, including mine, offered to consider increasing withdrawal limits if clients provided detailed paperwork outlining exactly what they wanted to spend their own depreciated money on, along with evidence that their properties had in fact been damaged. In other words, they wouldn't *consider* giving us our money unless we begged for it. I wouldn't do that.

Instead, I tapped into the diaspora suitcase economy—the safety network of family and friends whom we rely on in order to obtain everything from cash to medicine to some brand of moisturizer you can't find in Lebanon. A friend was traveling from the United States and offered to bring me dollars. I transferred the equivalent amount from a new overseas account into hers, and paid for my windows.

**NEXT ON MY LIST:** curtains to cover the windows. I had bought my now-shredded curtains from Warde, a family-owned fabric business established in 1882, and that's where I went for replacements. Warde, it turns out, was replacing curtains for free in blast-ravaged neighborhoods, complete with rods, sewing, and installation, if you weren't fussy about the color and type of fabric. The store was also offering deep discounts if, like me, you were fussy. As a private company struggling with a roughly 36 percent downturn in yearly sales, Warde didn't have to help. But the company's CEO, André Warde, told me that not helping was never an option: "If you did nothing, you'd have a problem with your conscience. I don't have a problem at all with my conscience."

I did what I have to do.” So far, the company has distributed 41,000 meters of fabric free of charge, and helped 1,600 households. It hasn’t solicited donations in what is an ongoing effort. “Where is the state?” Warde asked me. “The state is not helping people.”

The World Bank has estimated the damage from the Beirut blast to total \$3.8 billion to \$4.6 billion. The Lebanese government has established a compensation fund that, based on the black-market dollar rate, is worth about \$18.7 million. The bulk of foreign relief money has bypassed the government and is being funneled to the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, the UN, and various NGOs, to avoid what French President Emmanuel Macron called “corrupt hands”—a comment he made during a tour of my neighborhood after the blast. (For decades, however, France, Lebanon’s former colonial master, had no problem shaking those same corrupt hands.)

The Lebanese state has tasked the army with surveying the damage for compensation purposes. Two teams of soldiers appraised my building, in August and September. Twelve of the 21 apartments in my building have numbers above their doors indicating that they’ve been approved for compensation. Mine isn’t one of them, even though the damage is pretty much the same everywhere. Repeated requests for clarification from the army went unanswered. Expecting transparency from any organ of the Lebanese state can be a futile exercise. I had other things to do.

I needed to replace the broken tiles on my terrace before

the winter rains, to prevent water from seeping into the office below. I found a tiler through an online resource, the Daleel Thawra, or “Directory of the Revolution,” established after the October 2019 protests. The site had set up a comprehensive relief page for those affected by the port blast. It listed tradespeople, health-care providers, legal services, and engineering services, among others, and explained how to get free glass collection and help with removing debris. It also provided information on how to donate money, time, and resources to what had become a massive citizen-driven relief effort.

The “disaster-stricken areas,” as the neighborhoods around the port were referred to, had become noisy hives of activity by day, and eerie ghost towns by night after the tradespeople went home. Security forces were stationed throughout to prevent the burglaries of empty, damaged properties, and for the first time in living memory, our neighborhoods had 24-hour electricity. No one knows why, and no one I know wants to tempt fate by asking.

I still needed to replace my doors. Given the difficulty of getting money out of the bank, I took a neighbor’s advice and called an NGO that had helped her, *Beb w’ Shebbek*, or “Door and Window.” The organization was established days after the explosion by two friends, Mariana Wehbe and Nancy Harfouche, whose own homes and offices had been damaged. They called it Door and Window because that’s what most people needed. “It wasn’t like, *Oh my God, what happened to us?*” Wehbe told me of the decision to help. “It was

more this instinct of *What do we need to do?*”

Wehbe, a logistics and supply-chain-management expert who owns a public-relations company, and Harfouche, a gallery owner, tapped into their network of friends and contacts in interior design and architecture to gather volunteers. Wehbe said she was fielding hundreds of messages from people offering

BEIRUT WAS A CITY SHIMMERING WITH THE REMNANTS OF PEOPLE’S WINDOWS. GLASS BECAME THE CITY’S SOUNDTRACK. IT CRUNCHED UNDERFOOT.

to donate money to the relief effort. “It literally happened in an hour. I don’t know if there was a higher power saying *You have the resources, you have the know-how, the street needs you—get your asses on the street and just run with it.*” To date, *Beb w’ Shebbek* has replaced doors and windows in 585 homes, replicating exactly what was lost down to the color and type of border accent.

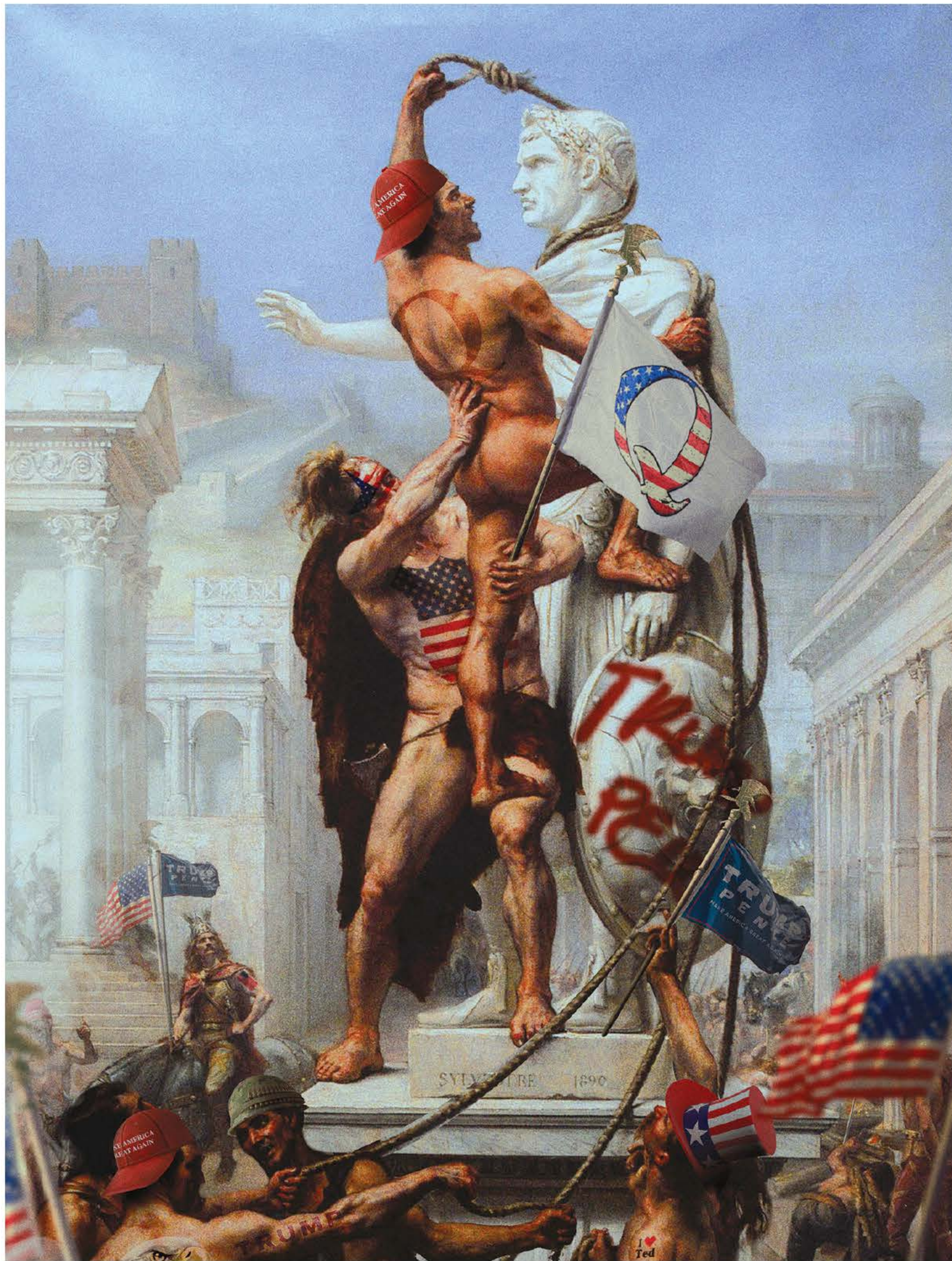
CITYWIDE, NO ONE really knows how much of the destruction remains undressed. The scale of the catastrophe is hard to convey. Take my own modest situation, multiply it by the number of damaged properties, then factor in the more

specialized and expensive restoration work needed to fix fragile, centuries-old heritage homes, not to mention the larger-scale repairs to hospitals, schools, and businesses. On top of all this, superimpose the economic crisis, the loss of people’s savings, the mental agony of losing homes and loved ones, and the pampered arrogance of doing-nothing leaders, and you’ll have an idea of what the Lebanese are dealing with. Then add the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the same local NGOs that crowdsourced donations for repairs following the explosion are now crowdsourcing donations for ventilators and oxygen tanks to help pandemic victims.

Some tasks, such as disaster recovery, shouldn’t be citizen-driven, do-it-yourself projects. There is much that government can and should do. But Beirut’s brutal experiment in the absence of government means that, for many, confidence in the state’s ability and willingness to help and protect its people is about as brittle as my windows.

I haven’t fixed my cracked walls, and maybe I won’t. The cracks are ugly, but the walls won’t fall down. I don’t expect state compensation, but I am lucky and grateful. I didn’t lose anything that can’t be replaced. Too many people in Beirut did. *A*

*Rania Abouzeid is an award-winning journalist and the author of No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria (2018), and Sisters of the War: Two Remarkable True Stories of Survival and Hope in Syria (2020). She is a former Nieman Fellow.*



## NO, REALLY, ARE WE ROME?

*The sack of the Capitol was thwarted. But history suggests that corrosive change can be hard to see while it's happening.*

BY CULLEN MURPHY

# T

The scenes at the Capitol on January 6 were remarkable for all sorts of reasons, but a distinctive fall-of-Rome flavor was one of them, and it was hard to miss. Photographs of the Capitol's debris-strewn marble portico might have been images from eons ago, at a plundered Temple of Jupiter. Some of the attackers had painted their bodies, and one wore a horned helmet. The invaders occupied the Senate chamber, where Latin inscriptions crown the east and west doorways. Commentators who remembered Cicero invoked the senatorial Catiline conspiracy. Headlines referred to the violent swarming of Capitol Hill as a "sack."

Outside, a pandemic raged, recalling the waves of plague that periodically swept across the Roman empire. As the nation reeled, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the role of a *magister militum* addressing the legions, issued an unprecedented advisory that put the sitting ruler on notice, condemning "sedition and insurrection" and noting that the inauguration of a new ruler would proceed. Amid all this came a *New York Times* report on the discovery and display of artifacts from the gardens of Caligula, an erratic and vengeful emperor, one of whose wives was named Milonia.

Ever since Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the prospect of a Rome-inflected apocalypse has cast its chilling spell. Britain's former American colonies, which declared their

JOSEPH-NOËL SYLVESTRE, THE SACK OF ROME IN 410 BY THE VANDALS (1890). FINE ART IMAGES / GETTY.



independence the year Gibbon's first volume was published, have been especially troubled by the parallels they discerned. The Founders feared the stealthy creep of tyranny. Half a century later, the narrative progression of *The Course of Empire*, Thomas Cole's allegorical series of paintings, depicted the consequences of overweening ambition and national hubris. Today, as ever, observers are on the alert for portents of the Last Days, and have been quick, like Cato, to hurl warnings. And of course there are some Americans—including the January 6 attackers—who would find national collapse momentarily satisfying. “Sack Rome?” a barbarian wife says to her husband in an old *New Yorker* cartoon. “That’s your answer to *everything*.”

The comparisons, of course, can be facile. A Roman state of some sort lasted so long—well over a millennium—and changed so continuously that its history touches on any imaginable type of human occurrence, serves up parallels for any modern event, and provides contradictory answers to any question posed. Still, I am not immune to preoccupation with the Roman past. A decade and a half ago, I published a book called *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, which looked closely at the age-old Rome-and-America comparison. The focus was mainly on themes that transcend partisan politics, but it was also written at a particular moment, and reflected certain brute realities: The country was mired in Iraq and Afghanistan; fear and suspicion of foreigners were on the rise; and public functions of all kinds (maintaining highways, operating prisons, providing

security) were being privatized. All of this had echoes in Rome's long story.

It's not as if the themes I wrote about then are obsolete. But they have a new context. The comparisons that come to mind now are not only about realities on the ground but about unrealities in our heads. The debasement of truth, the cruelty and moral squalor of many leaders, the corruption of basic institutions—signs of rot were proliferating well before January 6, and they remain, though the horde has been repelled.

IF I WERE writing *Are We Rome?* today, one new theme I'd emphasize emerges from a phrase we heard over and over during the Trump administration: “adults in the room.” The basic idea—a delusion with a long history—was that an unfit and childish chief executive could be kept in check by the seasoned advisers around him, and if not by them, then by the competent career professionals throughout the government. The administration official who anonymously published a famous op-ed in *The New York Times* in 2018 offered explicit reassurance: “Americans should know that there are adults in the room.” Various individuals were given adult-in-the-room designation, including the White House counsel Don McGahn and Chief of Staff John Kelly. I sometimes imagined these adults, who included distinguished military veterans, wearing special ribbons. The obvious flaw in the arrangement was that the child could summarily dismiss the adults with an intemperate tweet.

For long periods in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the Roman empire was

literally in the hands of children, as reigning emperors died unexpectedly and sons as young as 4 and 8 ascended to the most exalted rank. Adults in the room were appointed to serve them—often capable generals such as Stilicho (who served Honorius) and Aetius (who served Valentinian III). The idea was to acknowledge imperial authority as sacrosanct but at the same time have people in charge who could handle the job. And often it worked, for a while. The diplomat and historian Priscus described what happened when Valentinian grew up. The emperor's intemperate tweet took this form:

As Aetius was explaining the finances and calculating tax revenues, with a shout Valentinian suddenly leaped up from his throne and cried out that he would no longer endure to be abused by such treacheries ... While Aetius was stunned by this unexpected rage and was attempting to calm his irrational outburst, Valentinian drew his sword from his scabbard and together with Heracleius, who was carrying the cleaver ready under his cloak (for he was a head chamberlain), fell upon him.

There is no substitute, it turns out, for actual leadership at the top. Even so, when the adults are gone, the next line of defense is bureaucratic heroism. A civil service is one reason entities as large as the Roman empire—or the British or American one—have had staying power. Watch the behavior of imperial functionaries in the fifth century, when much of the Roman world was falling apart, and

you see the ability of bureaucratic procedure and administrative competence—food goes here, gold goes there—to hold bits of the rickety scaffolding together when no one seems to be in charge. I'm not aware of ancient references to a *civitas profunda*, but the “deep state” is neither a modern nor a malevolent invention.

YET THESE behind-the-scenes efforts at preserving normalcy do eventually falter, and a second new theme might be the dangers that apparent continuity, including symbolic continuity, can conceal. Corrosive change—in values, behavior, infrastructure—is often hard to observe; things look the same, until they don't. Even before January 6—or November 3—many worried that the outward forms of American democracy might prove more robust than the thing itself. Inaugurations lift the spirit, but among Millennials in the U.S., fewer than a third believe that it is “essential” to live in a democracy (this from findings reported by the political scientists Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk). Congress has ceded authority to the president across a wide front, preserving mainly its capacity to hinder, acclaim, and conspire. The power to declare war survives only as an artfully arranged fig leaf; it was in fact relinquished decades ago. For all that, the Capitol is still revered as “the people's house.”

Octavian, Julius Caesar's adopted son, made himself Rome's first emperor, ruling under the name Augustus. But he understood the utility of make-believe, maintaining the fiction that he had preserved republican government.

Augustus did not proclaim himself an autocrat; the title *princeps* would do—the “first man.” In the manner of Donald Trump’s 1776 Project, but adroitly, he invoked the blessing of ancient sentiment to conceal radical intentions. The Senate would go on meeting, enjoying what the Roman historian Tacitus called “pretenses of freedom” long after it ceased to play any important role; in fact, it went on meeting after the empire was gone. Tacitus is always a delight:

This was a tainted, meanly obsequious age. The greatest figures had to protect their positions by subserviency; and, in addition to them, all ex-consuls, most ex-praetors, even many junior senators competed with each other’s offensively sycophantic proposals.

Form endures when substance is gone. In time, the city of Rome became as much a fiction as the vestiges of the old republic. Augustus adorned the capital not only with temples but also with election facilities. (And he showed up in person to vote, though the process was a charade.) Centuries later, Rome continued to look like an imperial capital, and extract wealth like one, even after becoming an empty shell. The real action and power had shifted elsewhere. Generals and armies roamed the provinces, responding to emergencies (and the ambitions of one another). Rival cities rose. But grain shipments to Rome continued. Monuments were cherished as touchstones of enduring greatness. Distinguished families lived in splendor. Senators plotted.

A third new theme might take up the idea of “alternative

facts.” The term was coined by the Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway to put a gloss on one set of lies; it soon became shorthand for all of them. The administration’s reliance on falsehood needs no belaboring. It gave life to conspiracy theories, undermined faith in a national election, and stoked acts of insurrection. Allies on television and on social media helped all of that along. The Romans had a word for such allies: *panegyrists*.

Social media in ancient Rome was of the old-fashioned kind—word of mouth. While serving overseas as a provincial governor, Cicero designated an associate named Caelius to keep him up-to-date about rumors back home. Caelius informed Cicero that he was paying special attention to the *susurratores* (“whisperers”), the political gossips who lurked in the Forum. There were truth-tellers throughout Roman history, but as the centuries wore on, the telling of official lies became a recognized art form. Panegyrists were paid performers, subsidized by those they celebrated. The narrative arcs—about the prosperity of the empire, about success in battle—bend toward glory. The panegyrist Mamertinus evokes the glowing nimbus of Maximian’s hair. The panegyrist Claudian describes how Honorius will make Rome great again:

Oak groves shall drip with honey; streams of wine well up on every side, lakes of olive oil abound. No price shall be asked for fleeces dyed scarlet, but of themselves shall the flocks grow red to the astonishment of the shepherd, and in every sea the green seaweed will laugh with flashing jewels.

We will be tired of so much winning. The fulsome phrases of the panegyrists made Edward Gibbon squirm. But by empire’s end, giving praise to the ruler was the dominant form of rhetoric. And to many

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eyes, Gibbon knew, the portrait painted by the panegyrist was synonymous with history.

I SUBSCRIBE TO an academic news feed that drops research about Rome into my inbox—a history-book version of the beer-of-the-month club. Scholars engage in heated arguments about the Roman empire, but one thing we know for sure is that it is gone. And, unlike Brexit, no one was aware of the “end” as it was happening. Rome was sacked, as were other cities, and armed conflict at times brought turmoil, but decay occurred over centuries, and for many the transition from one thing to another was not stark. The human life span puts blinders on perception.

But that same life span concentrates human concerns in a useful way. Think of it as the inertia of the ordinary, a final new theme. For all the images of Roman calamity,

the makings of a quieter set of images sit on a table near my desk—mundane odds and ends from the ancient world, given to me over the years. Most of them are from imperial Rome: a clay oil lamp, a delicate glass vase, colored marble from a villa’s floor, curved white limestone from a window’s arch, a grinding stone, a writing stylus, a key in the shape of a ring, a votive figurine. And coins—a silver denarius from the reign of Marcus Aurelius, for instance, and another from the reign of his unfortunate son, Commodus.

What the antiquities represent are not triumph and glory, but basic human needs—food, shelter, safety, knowledge, commerce, beauty, the life of the spirit—and the organized activities that secure them. These activities have, so far, always survived calamity—a bridge from every past to every future. Human society is resilient. And tending to basic needs can be a source of aspiration. America’s Constitution defined the promotion of “general welfare” and “domestic tranquility” as part of the country’s very purpose.

But resilience does not prevent calamity. And being blindsided in slow motion is the hardest fate to avoid. The historian Ramsay MacMullen once distilled the long arc of the Roman empire into three words—“fewer have more”—but only the time-lapse perspective of a millennium and a half allows us to understand such a thing with brutal clarity. The sack of Washington unfolded suddenly, in a way no one could miss. The greater dangers come in stealth. *A*

*Cullen Murphy is The Atlantic’s editor at large.*

*"Since losing my mother to pancreatic cancer, my goal has been to ensure that everyone facing a pancreatic cancer diagnosis knows about the option of clinical trials and the progress being made."*

*-Keesha Sharp*



Photo By Brett Erickson

Stand Up To Cancer and Lustgarten Foundation are working together to make every person diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a long-term survivor.

To learn more about the latest research, including clinical trials that may be right for you or a loved one, visit [PancreaticCancerCollective.org](https://PancreaticCancerCollective.org).







PHOTOGRAPH VIA INSTITUTE

## Looking Up

*Photograph by Tine Poppe*

When 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 your 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.

— Sabrina Imbler



Illustrations by Daniel Liévano

Photographs by Jonno Rattman

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

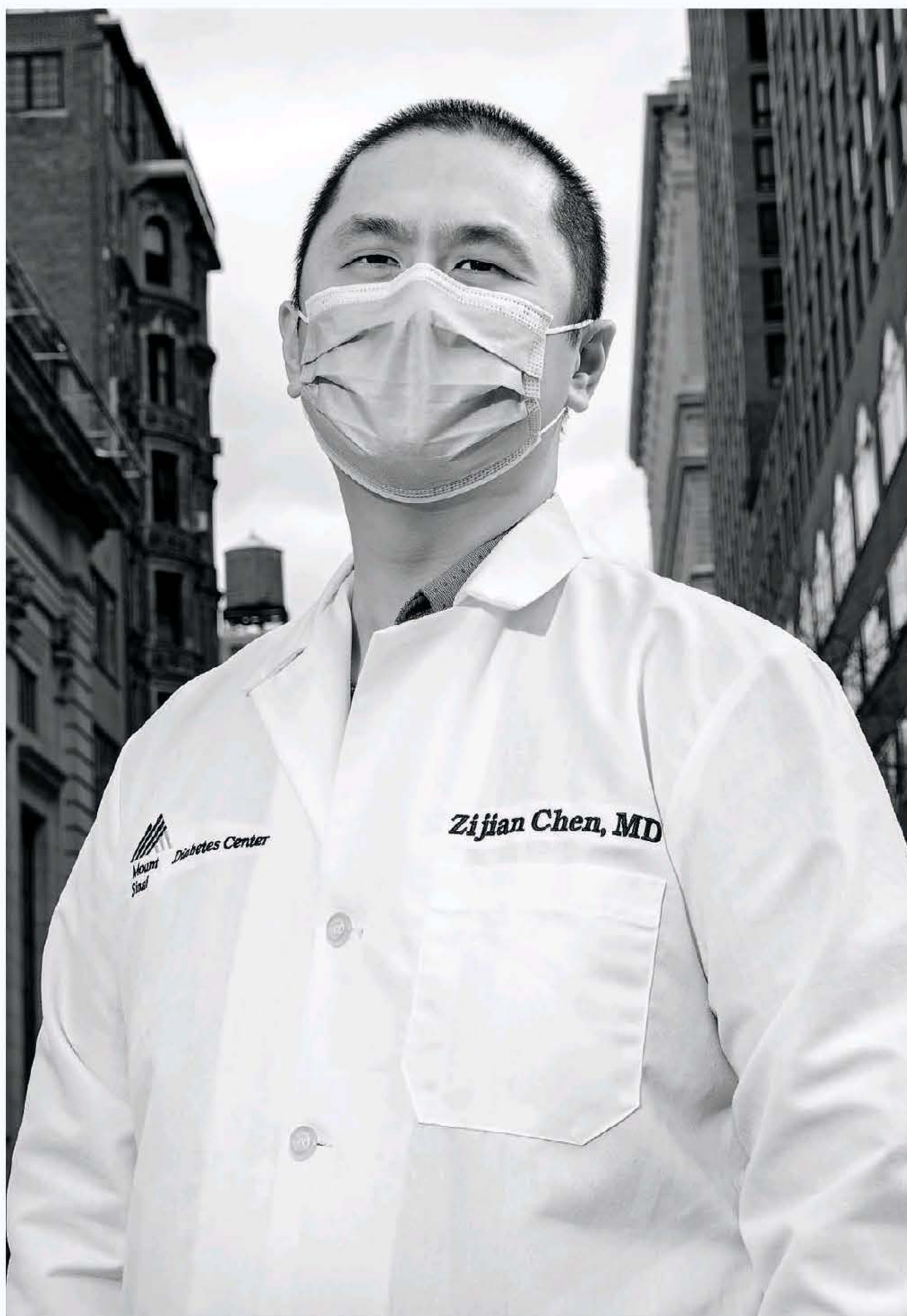
*Unlocking  
the  
Mysteries  
of  
Long  
COVID*

THE 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 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."



Above: *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. Previous spread: Nearly a year after she was infected with the coronavirus, Caitlin Barber still uses a wheelchair outside.*

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.”

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.”

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.

**Perhaps 10 to 30 percent of those infected have long-term symptoms. “What people need to know is the pandemic’s toll is likely much higher than we are imagining.”**

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 lousy. 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.”

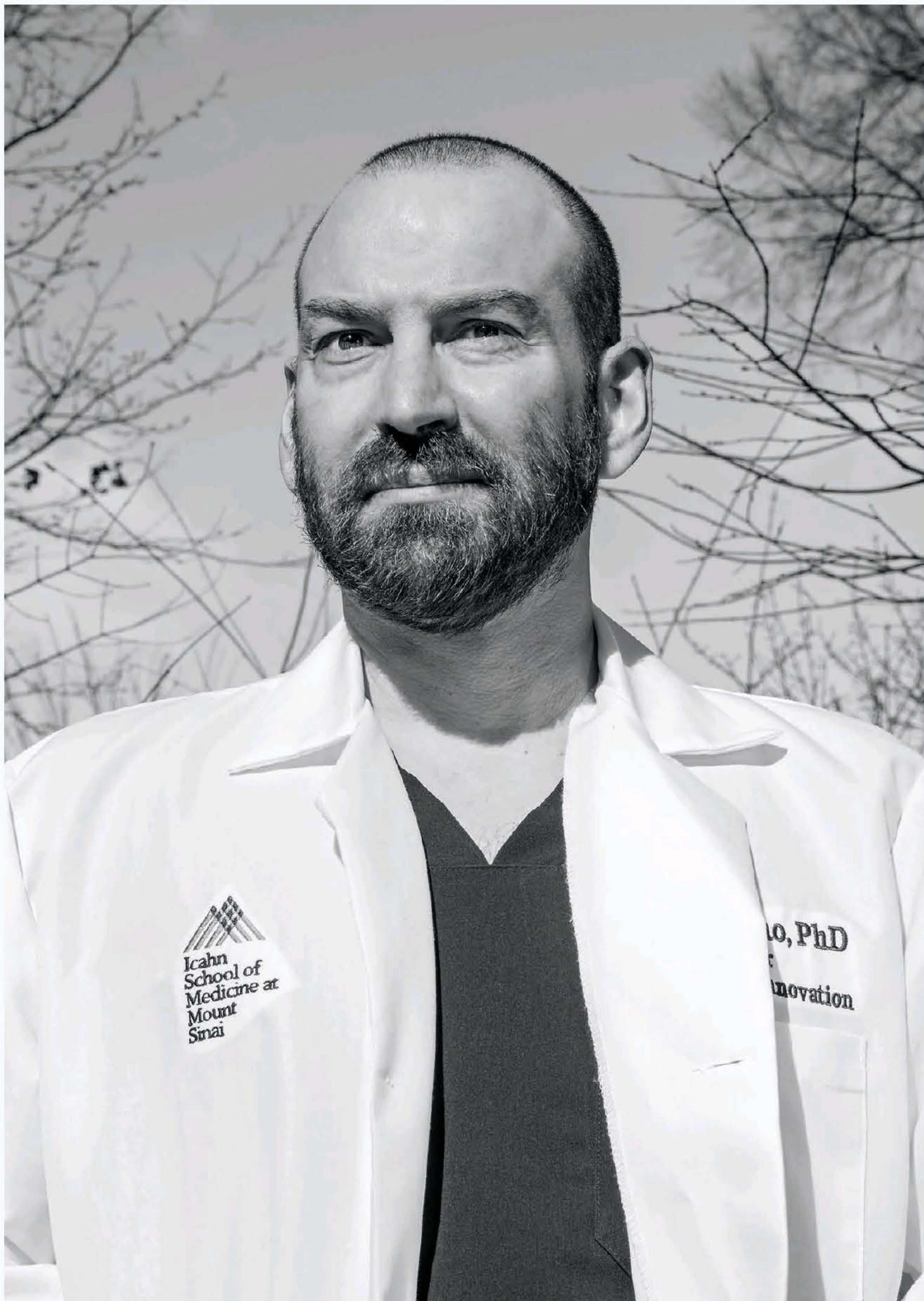
At first her illness was relatively mild, like her husband’s. Tracking her oxygen levels and heart rate with her smartwatch, she felt she had gotten lucky. But on the eighth day—March 16—she went to the bathroom, and her heart began to race, beating more than 140 times per minute. Worried she had a blood 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.



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



Above: David Putrino, working with his team, found that even gentle rehab could exacerbate symptoms. Opposite page: Amy Kontorovich saw patients whose profile suggested a condition, dysautonomia, that she had been treating for years.

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.”

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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.

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.

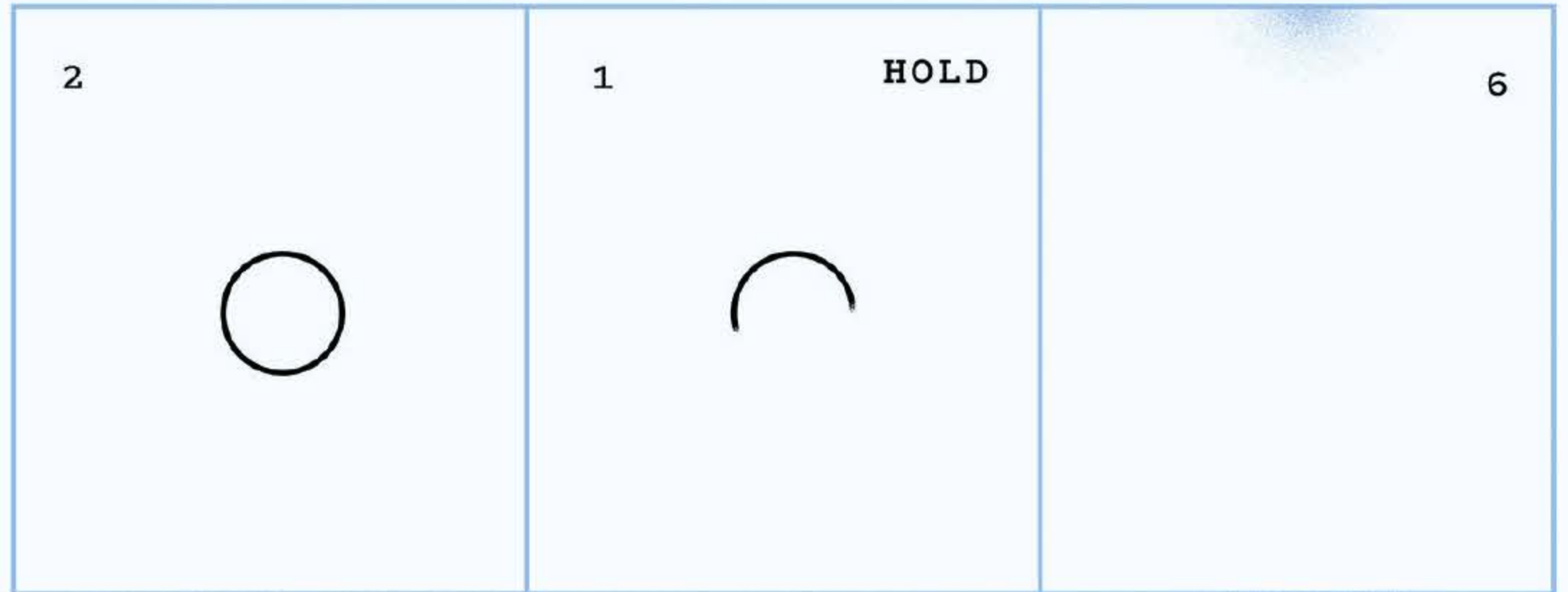
**One night in April,  
Josh Duntz woke  
up with an idea  
and scribbled  
“breathwork” in his  
bedside notebook.  
He reached out to  
David Putrino.**












A 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 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

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

Border: A visualization of the breathing exercise that Barber has been doing portrays the timed inhalation and exhalation it prescribes.



INHALE 1 					5 
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HOLD 1 					2 

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 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.



Dayna McCarthy saw that some patients’ breathing was “completely off.”

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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.

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.

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.

"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.

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!"

◆  
**Barber 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. 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.*

"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."

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**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 CO<sub>2</sub> levels when they first came to be treated.

After doing the breathwork exercises, patients' symptoms abated; the team plans to measure whether their CO<sub>2</sub> 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. *A*

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> THE INTERNET DOESN'T HAVE TO BE AWFUL



*The civic habits necessary for a functioning republic have been killed off by an internet kleptocracy that profits from disinformation, polarization, and rage. Here's how to fix that.*

By Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev

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.

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.

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.

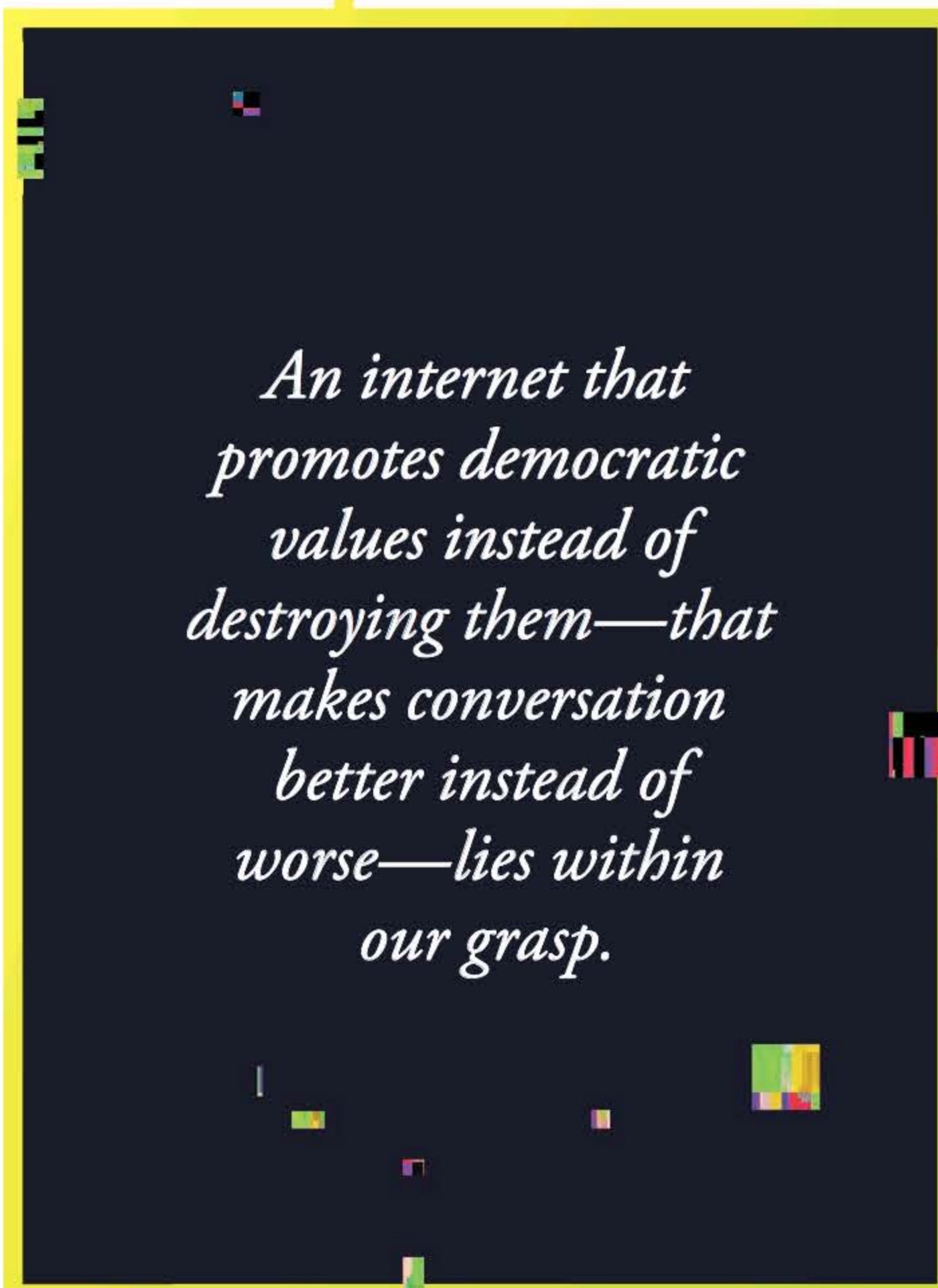
#### > HOW SOCIAL MEDIA MADE THE WORLD CRAZIER

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



*An internet that promotes democratic values instead of destroying them—that makes conversation better instead of worse—lies within our grasp.*

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 told us. “They have led to narrower and crazier views of the world.”

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.

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.

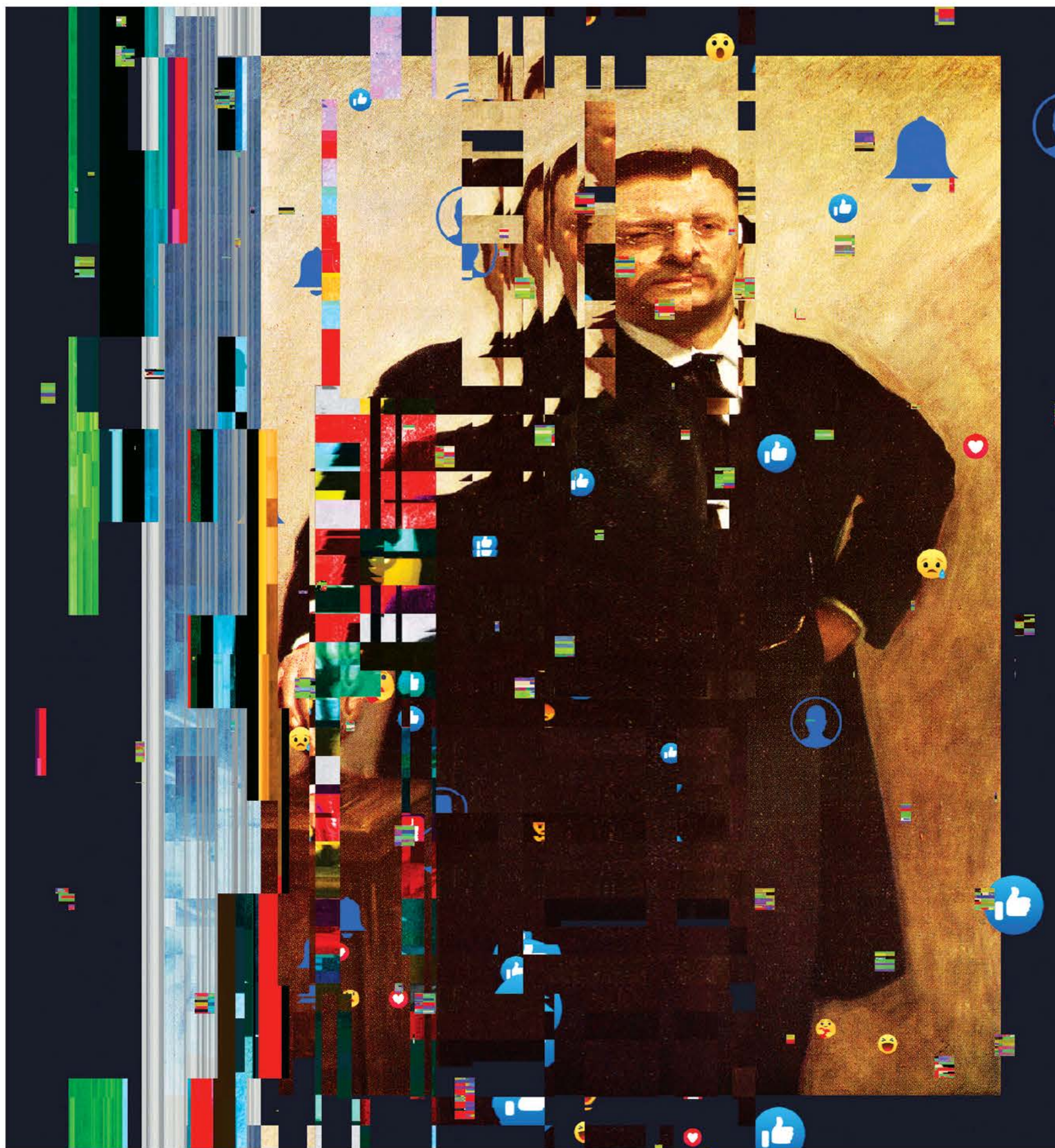
All of that began to change with the mass-market arrival of smartphones and a shift in the tactics of the major platforms. What the Harvard Law professor Jonathan Zittrain calls the “generative” model of the internet—an open system in which anyone could introduce unexpected innovations—gave way to a 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.

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.

#### > THEODORE ROOSEVELT 2.0

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



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

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

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.

*"If Facebook is forced to divest WhatsApp and Instagram, 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."*



## > RECONSTRUCTING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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 transistor set, 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.”

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,

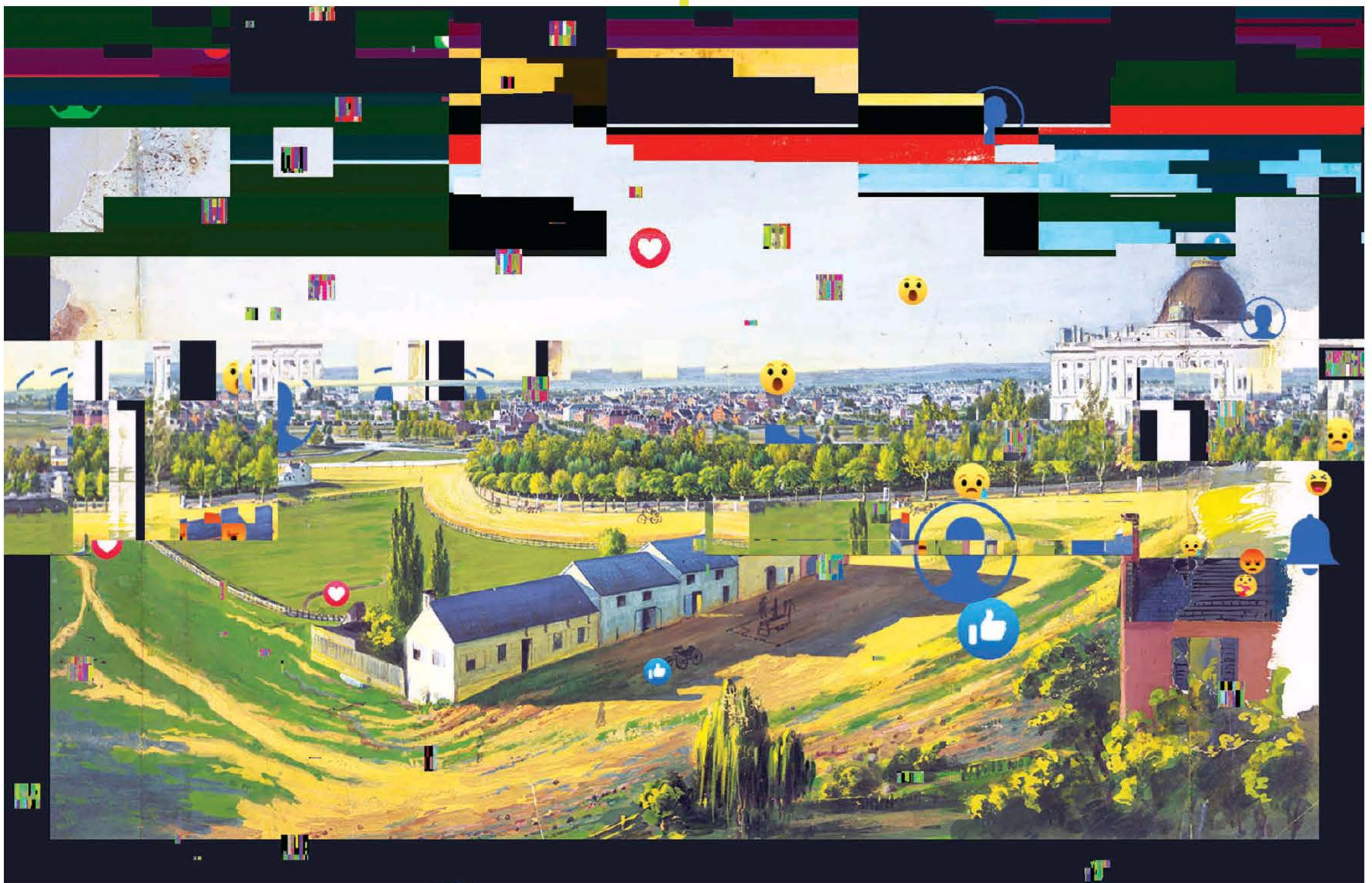
promised to offer better services. It's possible to imagine a world in which local governments hold such online consultations regularly, thereby increasing participation in politics and giving people some influence over their society and environment.

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



UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE / GETTY

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 recreate 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.

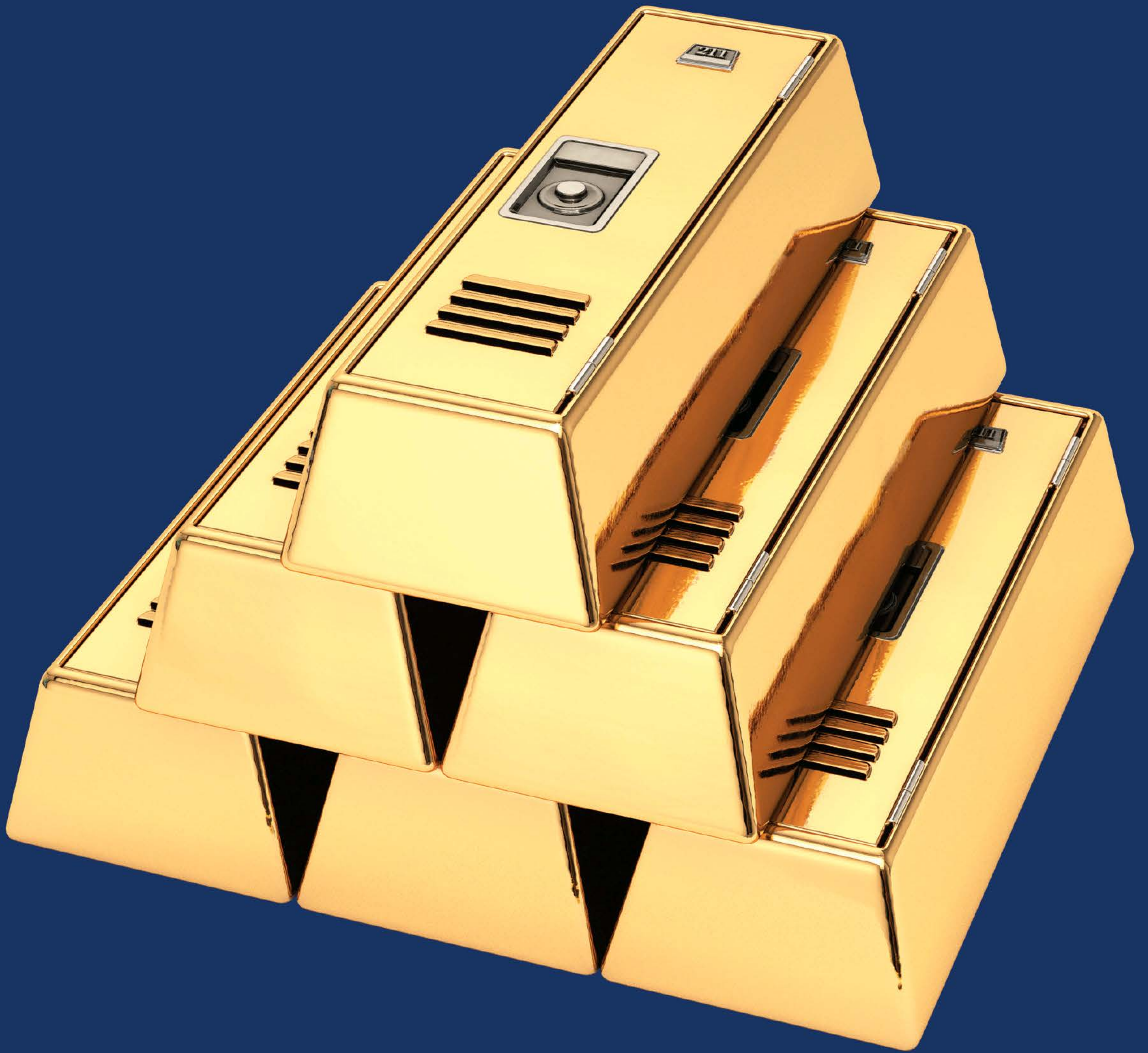
But these are problems democracies have solved before. The solutions are in our history, in our DNA, in our own memories of how we have fixed broken systems in other eras. The internet was the future once, and it can be again, if we remember Reith and Roosevelt, Popper and Jacobs—if we apply the best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

*Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic. Her latest book is 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.*

**PRIVATE  
SCHOOLS**  
*Are*  
**INDEFENSIBLE**

*THE GULF BETWEEN HOW  
RICH KIDS and POOR KIDS  
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AMERICA IS OBSCENE.*

*By* **CAITLIN  
FLANAGAN**



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Oliver Munday and  
Arsh Raziuddin  
Renderings by Justin Metz*

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# D

DALTON IS ONE of the most selective private schools in Manhattan, in part because it knows the answer to an important question: What do hedge-funders 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 reopening 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 counting-house 100 percent tax-free.

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

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**THINGS WERE SHIFTING IN THE WORLD OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS. PARENTS WERE GAINING AN UGLY NEW SENSE OF POWER.**

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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.

Michael Thompson's 2005 book, *Understanding Independent School Parents* (co-written with Alison Fox Mazola), 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.

"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.

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 meeting-house 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."

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.

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

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

**“GET HOLD OF YOURSELVES,” THE DIRECTOR OF COLLEGE COUNSELING AT SIDWELL FRIENDS WROTE TO 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

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 two-thirds 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, Debarton, 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-Osage 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."

## THE PARENTS HAD DEMANDS, INCLUDING AN IMMEDIATE HALT TO CURRICULUM CHANGES.

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, Ser-rano, Cahuilla, Luiseño and other Native peoples as past, present, and future care-takers 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

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. *A*

*Caitlin Flanagan is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

## IN A JUST SOCIETY, AN EDUCATION WOULDN'T BE A LUXURY ITEM.

winner 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 outsized role in determining who gets to claim a coveted spot in the winners’ circle. Many schools for the richest American



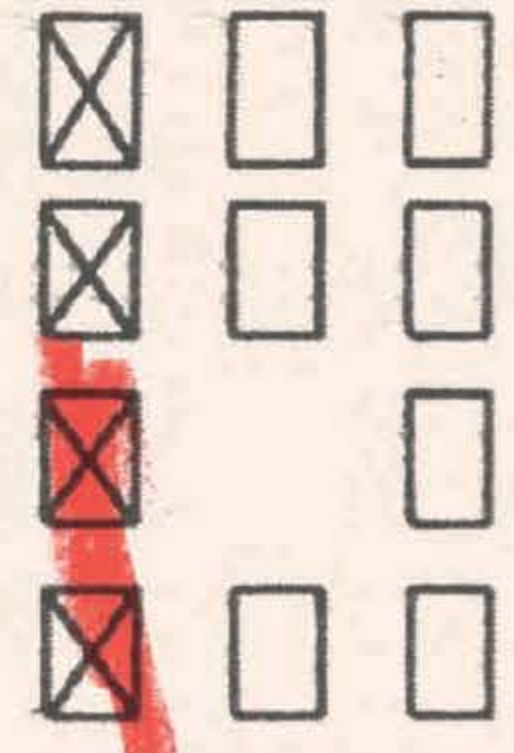
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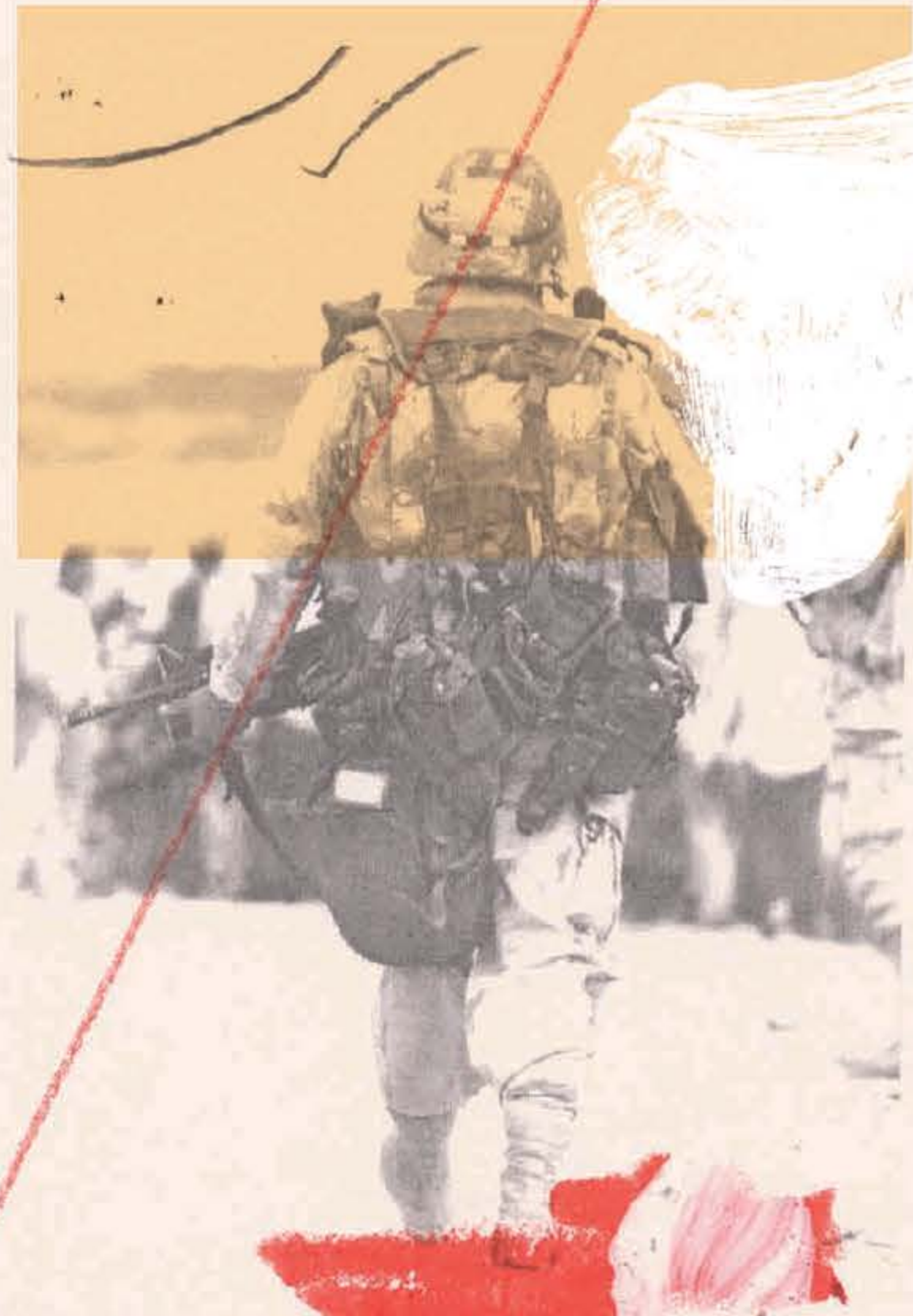
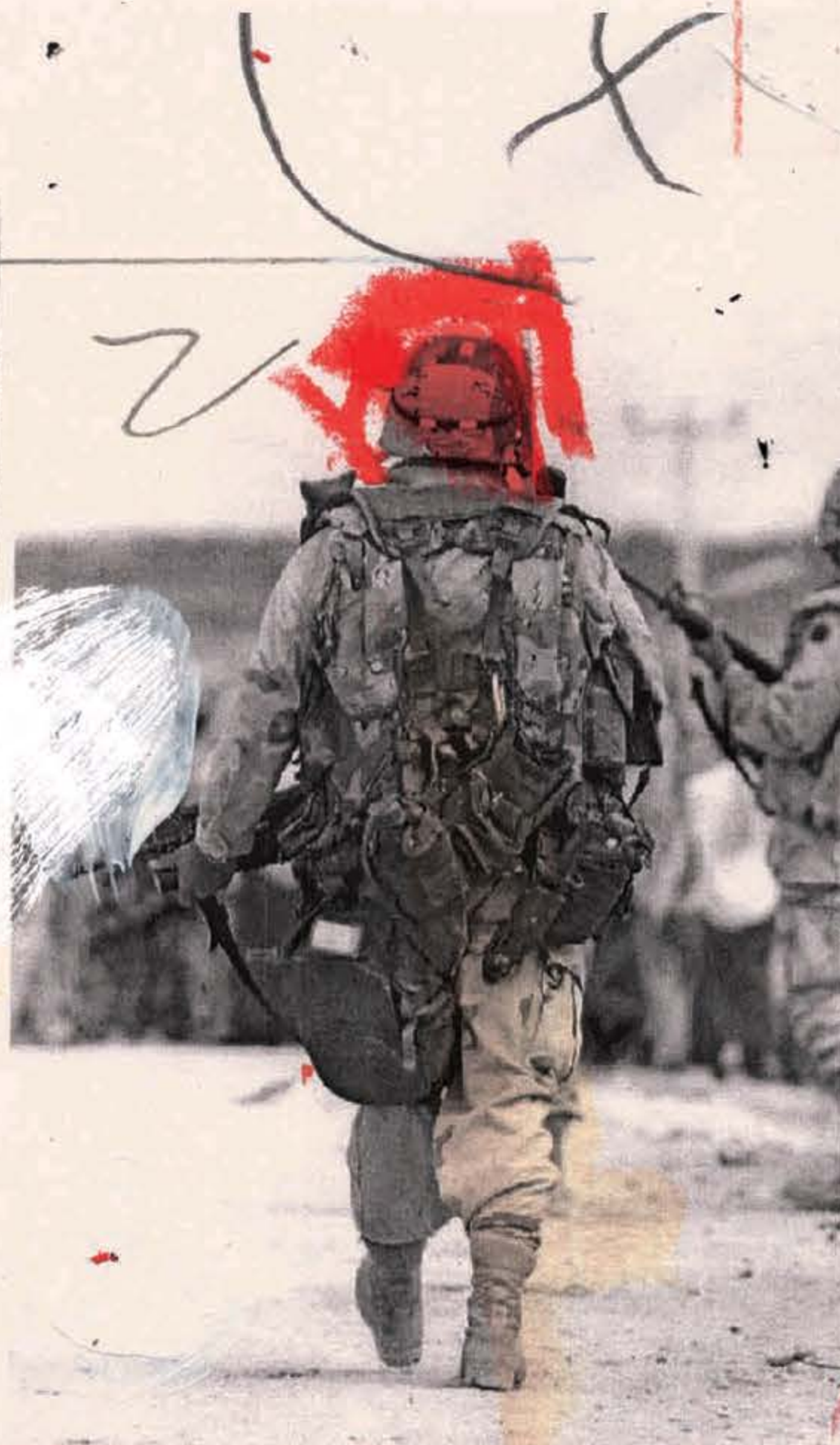
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ALPHA

BRAVO

DELTA



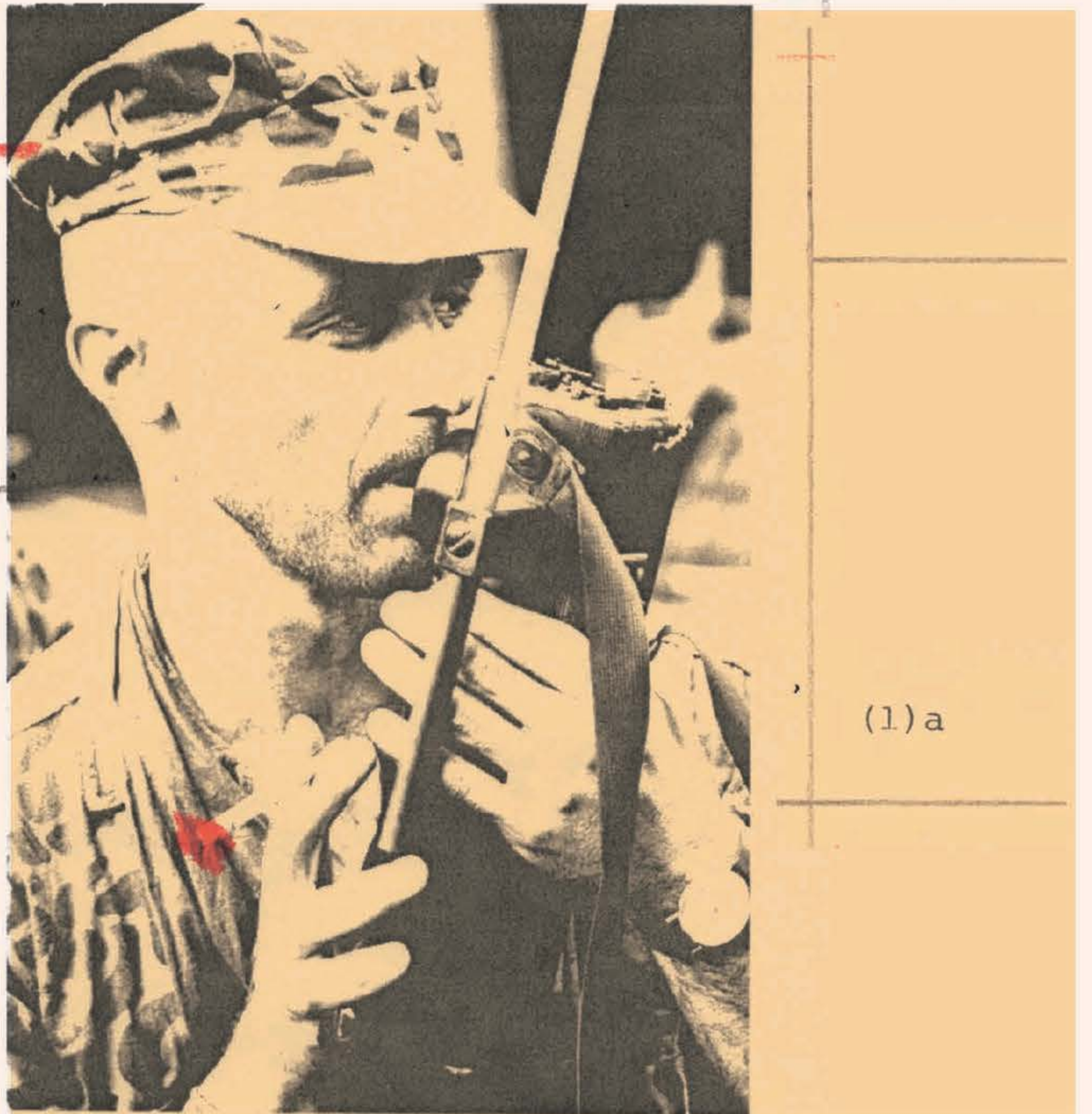


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**HOW SPECIAL OPS BECAME THE SOLUTION TO EVERYTHING**

**AMERICA'S ELITE FORCES HAVE SOLVED A LOT OF NATIONAL-SECURITY PROBLEMS, AND THEY'VE GROWN AND GROWN. BUT THE COUNTRY'S RELIANCE ON THEM IS BECOMING A PROBLEM IN ITSELF.**

**BY MARK BOWDEN**

# 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 longstanding institutional distaste for a separate elite force, one that siphons off experience and talent and that is first in line for

Opening spread, 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.

OPENING SPREAD: LEIF SKOOGFORS; ROLLS PRESS / POPPERFOTO; CORBIS; LARRY BURROWS / LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION; JOEL ROBINE / AFP / GETTY

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 a hijacked airliner on the tarmac in Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976, rescuing more than 100 passengers. 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.*

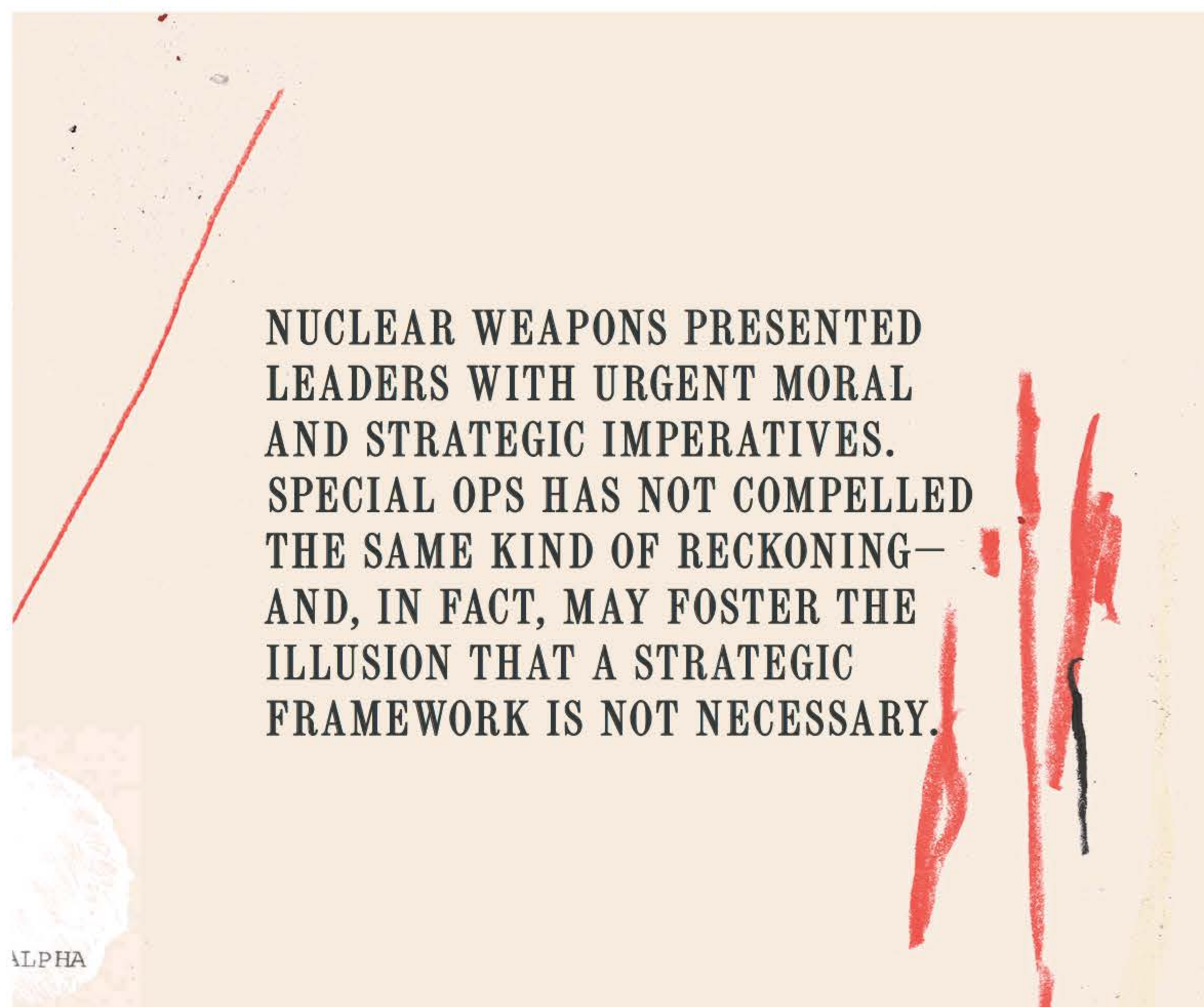
Months later, they had to be; Carter was desperate. A new plan had been drawn up, only marginally more plausible. Choppers would deliver the Delta team to Tehran and then would pluck the team and the rescued hostages from a stadium near the embassy. They would all be flown to an airfield secured by a 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 telecommunications would transform war-fighting.

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Opposite page, 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.

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

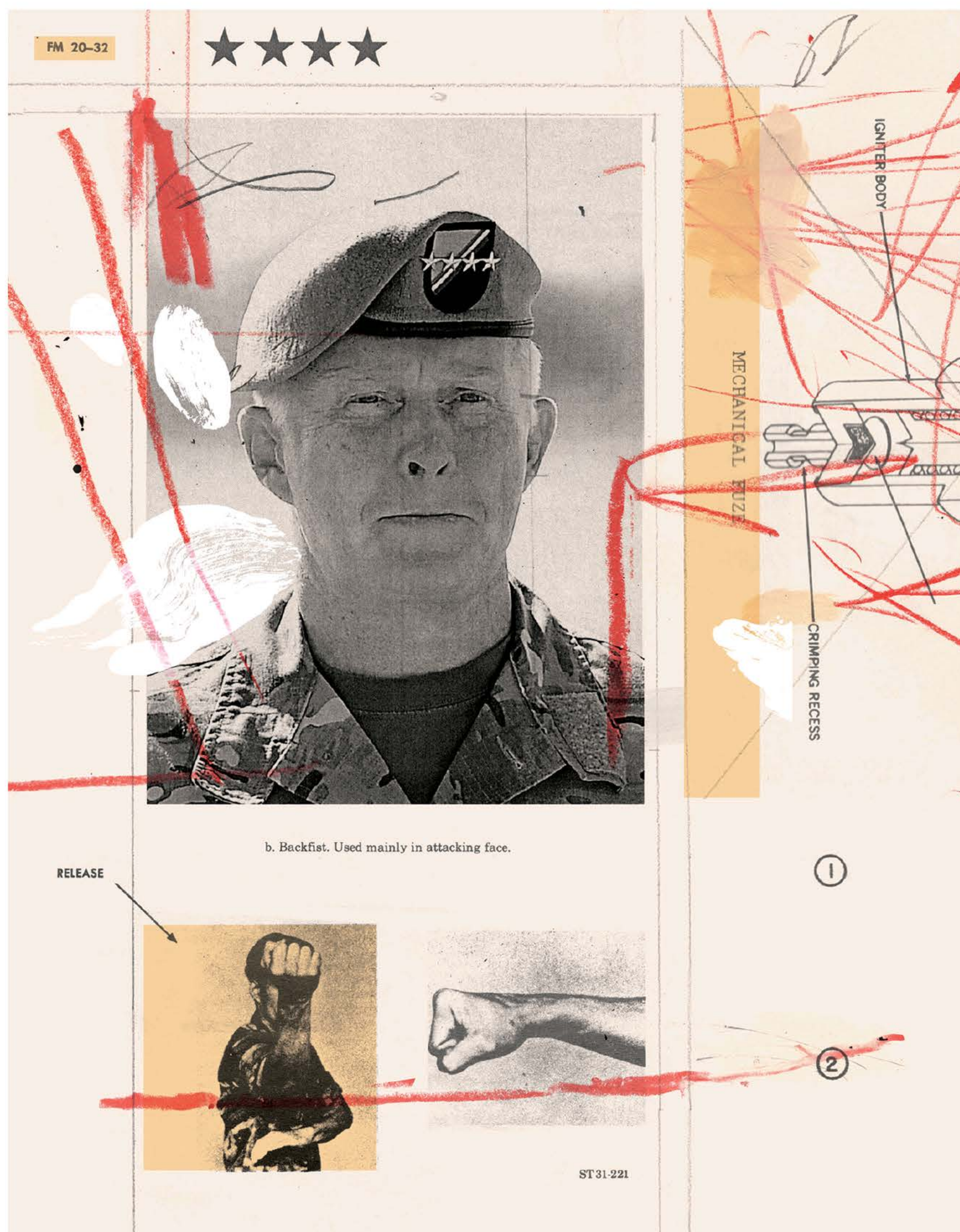
a helicopter with a high-speed camera. It fed a live picture to a Sony television that Thomas held on his lap. His truck was hidden in a thicket about 200 yards from a road he knew Krstić would use. German special forces had provided a snare—a net made of sturdy elastic that could capture even a speeding vehicle.

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.*

MANDEL NGAN / AFP / GETTY; U.S. ARMY INSTITUTE FOR MILITARY ASSISTANCE



**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.

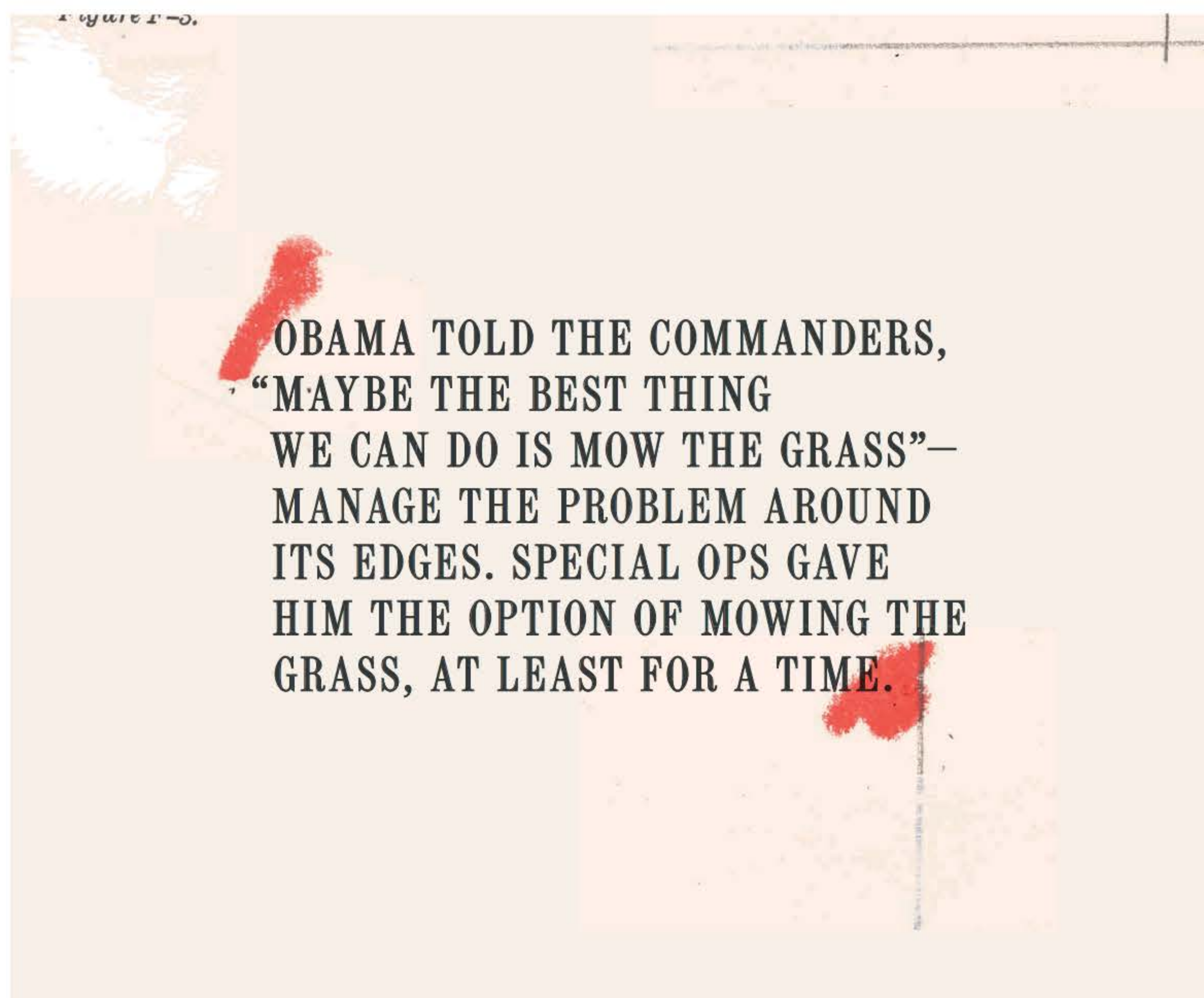
McChrystal was known as a relentless striver. Gaunt, hollow-eyed, and intense, he was famous for his ascetic discipline. He turned his task force into the most efficient hunter-killer force in the world, and a model for the entire command. McChrystal is not Sun Tzu. But in sizing up his adversary and 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.” *A*

*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.*

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# Culture & Critics



Was there ever a novelist who was more of a novelist than Philip Roth? More of a long-haul moralist, more of a titanic grump, more of a sex fiend, more of an industrial reality-processor, more of a deskbound hero, more of a get-up-early-and-feed-your-life-into-the-grinder (even if your back is killing you) type of guy? His prose is prose, definitively prose, anti-felicitous and slightly barbarous. No Updikean grace notes, no heavenly Bellowisms, no glassy Cheeveresque rhapsodies. When it's bad, it's mechanical. When it's good, it's biblical: stacked clauses and surging power and a shaking of fists at the skies.

Thirty-one books. A 55-year career that basically turned himself and everyone around him inside out. The questions to which he sought answers, the questions of the mighty novelist—*why? why? why?*—were primordial and inexhaustible. The agonized alter egos who rotated through his books, the Zuckermans, the Kepeshes, the “Philip Roths,” were not experimental fiddles or metafictional gimmicks: They were ways of coming at it, ways of getting into it, ways of being real. How to crowbar as much of himself into the novel as possible, and then do it again—*that* was the experiment.

And now we have the authorized biography, appropriately massive (900 pages). Blake Bailey's *Philip Roth* comes flapping at us like a magnificent albatross through the mist, a heavy, feathery projectile from beyond the rim of time. Roth's been dead only three years, but already his writer's world of big advances, big divorces, big controversies, big houses in Connecticut, and big reviews in *The New York Times* feels as remote as Elizabethan England.

Bailey is a very good writer and a very good literary biographer. A double- or triple-natured subject is not beyond him. (See 2009's superb *Cheever: A Life*.) In 2012, Roth interviewed Bailey, sternly demanding by what authority “a gentile from Oklahoma” would presume to tell the story of one of the century's most explosive literary Jews. Bailey got the gig; Roth gave him the run of his archive, and the run of his memory.

OMNIVORE

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## The Relentless Philip Roth

*In his life as in his fiction, the author pursued the shameful, the libidinous, the repellent.*

By James Parker



What a story. Out of Newark, New Jersey, foaming with talent, comes wacky little Philip, son of Bess and Herman, child of the '40s, obsessed with baseball, obsessed with girls, "savagely beating off" in the bushes near his high school to ease the hydraulics of another unconsummated date. At Fort Dix, on the last night of basic training, he does his back in while hefting a kettle of potatoes: The switch is flipped on a grimacing lifetime of pills, braces, and operations. He publishes caustic, notably irreligious short stories in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*; the rabbis begin to howl. ("What is being done to silence this man?")

*Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) is the breakthrough—the best-selling novel in the history of Random House, Bailey writes. So much masturbation, so much self-involvement. "I am the Raskolnikov of jerking off," declares its narrator, Alex Portnoy. The howling of the rabbis becomes deafening, and now they are joined by the intellectuals. "This is just the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying," pronounces Gershom Scholem. Roth is famous overnight, naughtiness is victorious, but still he does not feel that he has extirpated the "nice Jewish boy" within. Will he ever shake off "that ghastly stinking bastard, that son of a bitch, Shame"?

Well, no. Nobody does. "When such as I cast out remorse," wrote Yeats, "so great a sweetness flows into the breast." Strictly temporary. As we breathe, we mortify ourselves. So what do you do? You *embrace* the remorse—you dig into the ore of the shameful. "Let the repellent in" becomes Roth's mantra. Henceforth the quest, the hero's journey, is to write what has to be written, without compunction. Working on *Operation Shylock* in the early '90s, he makes some rules for himself: "DO NOT JUDGE IT / DO NOT TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT / DO NOT CENSOR IT." The heavy-metal under-realm of desire, fury, ambition, obsession, compulsion—that's where he wants to be. Combine this with the moral pressure of his prose, "the need," in the words of Mickey Sabbath, from *Sabbath's Theater*, "to find a strand of significance that will hold together everything that isn't on TV," and you have the Philip Roth effect.

Entering academe for a spell in the late '80s, Roth designed and taught two courses at Hunter College: "The Literature of Extreme Situations" and "The Consciousness Industry." His body of work in a nutshell, really. The novels drive relentlessly toward extremes, while the narrators pick their own psychologies apart. And what the books arrive at, generally, is some manifestation of the distracted, churning libido of America itself. *The Human Stain* (2000) begins in the thick of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, "the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn't stop . . . when men and women alike, upon awakening in the morning, discovered that during the night, in a state

of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton."

Sex, of course, is the great manhole to the under-realm. Roth, in *Philip Roth*, has a ferocious amount of it. He pursues, he propositions, he fornicates, he cheats. ("God, I'm fond of adultery.") More than once he makes his move in an elevator. "Inga," the model for the wondrously licentious Drenka in *Sabbath's Theater*, almost matches Roth in what he calls his "endowment of self-abandonment." But not quite. When he calls her at her job and masturbates over the line, she is uncharmed. And when the affair is over, it's time to start fictionalizing, to start working it up. "The butcher, imagination, wastes no time with niceties." Who but Philip Roth, in his bloody novelist's apron, could have written that?

A biography is always somehow a travesty, and Roth was probably resigned to misinterpretation. "The fact remains," reflects Nathan Zuckerman in *American Pastoral*, "that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again." I think it's unlikely that *Philip Roth* gets Philip Roth wrong. Bailey certainly lets the repellent in, and along with it comes the man in his wholeness. He loves jokes; he loathes Woody Allen. He can be unfeeling, but also sensitive to the point of neurasthenia: One of his girlfriends leaves him and his legs stop working. He distrusts shrinks, but he sees one, Dr. Kleinschmidt, who bragged about being the model for the psychiatrist in Roth's Kafkaesque lark, *The Breast*.

His work habits, throughout, are magnificent: total isolation, a telephone that doesn't take incoming calls. ("Malamud has already been at it for two hours," he chides himself as he clocks in at nine in the morning.) There are whole years when he doesn't know what he's writing about; he keeps going. Good reviews, bad reviews, hostile reviews, stupid reviews. "I didn't come here to be insulted," his second wife tells him at one point, taking exception to some everyday Rothian banter. Roth laughs. "But of course you did. We all did. That's what I want carved on my gravestone. 'Philip Roth. He came here to be insulted.'"

By the (very moving) end of *Philip Roth*, the sex drive and the writing drive both having finally ebbed, Roth is ready to go: "Boy, am I getting tired of my resilience." And now, for us, the life and the work seem to be offering the same challenge: How close are *you*, reader, to the wellsprings of your life? Because they're down there, those torrents, still boiling out of the rock that split at your birth. Can you manage them, harness them, make them work for you? Do you have the Philip Rothness, day after day, for that? *A*

*The rabbis began to howl: "What is being done to silence this man?"*

PHILIP ROTH:  
THE BIOGRAPHY

Blake Bailey

W. W. NORTON

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## BOOKS

## What Happened to Jordan Peterson?

*The mysterious disappearance, and resurrection, of an adored guru and reviled provocateur*

By Helen Lewis

One day in early 2020, Jordan B. Peterson rose from the dead. The Canadian academic, then 57, had been placed in a nine-day coma by doctors in a Russian clinic, after becoming addicted to benzodiazepines, a class of drug that includes Xanax and Valium. The coma kept him unconscious as his body went through the terrible effects of withdrawal; he awoke strapped to the bed, having tried to rip out the catheters in his arms and leave the intensive-care unit.

When the story of his detox became public, in February 2020, it provided an answer to a mystery: *Whatever happened to Jordan Peterson?* In the three years before he disappeared from view in the summer of 2019, this formerly obscure psychology professor's name had been a constant presence in op-ed columns, internet forums, and culture-war arguments. His book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*,

published in 2018, sold millions of copies, and he had conducted a 160-city speaking tour, drawing crowds of up to 3,000 a night; premium tickets included the chance to be photographed with him. For \$90, his website offered an online course to better understand your “unique personality.” An “official merchandise store” sold Peterson paraphernalia: mugs, stickers, posters, phone cases, tote bags. He had created an entirely new model of the public intellectual, halfway between Marcus Aurelius and Martha Stewart.

The price of these rewards was living in a maelstrom of other people’s opinions. Peterson was, depending on whom you believed, either a stern but kindly shepherd to a generation of lost young men, or a reactionary loudmouth whose ideas fueled the alt-right and a backlash to feminism. He was revered as a guru, condemned as a dangerous charlatan, adored and reviled by millions. Peterson has now returned to the public sphere, and the psyche-splitting ordeal of modern celebrity, with a new book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*—an intriguing title, in light of his recent experiences. The mystery deepens: What really happened to Jordan Peterson, and why has he come back for more?

**GROWING UP** in Fairview, Alberta, Peterson was small for his age, which fostered both a quick wit and a fascination with the power and violence of traditional masculinity. He once recounted in a Facebook post how he’d overheard a neighbor named Tammy Roberts joking with another girl that she wanted to keep her surname, so she would have to marry “some wimp.” Then she turned around and proposed to the teenage Jordan. He spent a youthful summer working on a railroad in Saskatchewan, with an all-male group that nicknamed him Howdy Doody, after the freckle-faced puppet. As a student, he visited a maximum-security prison, where he was particularly struck by a convict with a vicious scar right down his chest, which he surmised might have come from surgery or an ax wound: “The injury would have killed a lesser man, anyway—someone like me.”

How to be a greater man was very much on Peterson’s mind. Raised in a mildly Christian household, he decided as a teenager that “religion was for the ignorant, weak and superstitious.” He yearned for a left-wing revolution, an urge that lasted until he met some left-wing activists in college. Then, rejecting all ideology, he decided that the threat of the Cold War made it vital to understand the human impulse toward destruction. He began to study psychology.

Alongside pursuing his doctorate, teaching at Harvard and then the University of Toronto, and raising a family—he married Tammy in 1989, and yes, she took his surname—Peterson started work on his first

book, a survey of the origins of belief. Its ambition was nothing less than to explain, well, everything—in essence, how the story of humanity has been shaped by humanity’s love of stories. *Maps of Meaning*, published in 1999, built on the work of academics like Joseph Campbell, the literature and religion scholar who argued that all mythic narratives are variations of a single archetypal quest. (Campbell’s “monomyth” inspired the arc of *Star Wars*.) On this “hero’s journey,” a young man sets out from his humdrum life, confronts monsters, resists temptation, stares into the abyss, and claims a great victory. Returning home with what Campbell calls “the power to bestow boons on his fellow men,” the hero can also claim the freedom to live at peace with himself.

In the fall of 2016, Peterson seized the chance to embark on his own quest. A Canadian Parliament bill called C-16 proposed adding “gender identity or expression” to the list of protected characteristics in the country’s Human Rights Act, alongside sex, race, religion, and so on. For Peterson, the bill was proof that the cultural left had captured public-policy making and was imposing its fashionable diktats by law. In a YouTube video titled “Professor Against Political Correctness,” he claimed that he could be brought before a government tribunal if he refused to use recently coined pronouns such as *zhe*. In the first of several appearances on Joe Rogan’s blockbuster podcast, he made clear that he was prepared to become a martyr for his principles, if necessary. His intensity won over Rogan—a former mixed-martial-arts commentator with a huge young male fan base and eclectic political views (a frequent critic of the left, he endorsed Bernie Sanders in 2020). “You are one of the very few academics,” Rogan told Peterson, “who have fought against some of these ideas that are not just being promoted but are being enforced.”

The fight over C-16, which became law in 2017, was a paradigmatic culture-war battle. Each side overstated the other side’s argument to bolster its own: Either you hated transgender people, or you hated free speech. In Peterson’s view, the bill exposed the larger agenda of postmodernism, which he portrayed as an ideology that, in denying the existence of objective truth, “leaves its practitioners without an ethic.” (This is not how theorists of postmodernism define it, and if you have a few hours to spare, do ask one of them to explain.) He was on the side of science and rationality, he proclaimed, and against identity politics. Feminists were wrong to argue that traditional gender roles were limiting and outdated, because centuries of evolution had turned men into strong, able providers and women into warm, emotionally sensitive nurturers. “The people who hold that our culture is an oppressive patriarchy, they don’t want to admit that the current

*He created an entirely new model of the public intellectual, halfway between Marcus Aurelius and Martha Stewart.*

hierarchy might be predicated on competence” is how he later phrased it. (This was during Donald Trump’s presidency.) The founding stories of the world’s great religions backed him up, as did the hero’s journey: It is men who fight monsters, while women are temptresses or helpmates.

The mainstream media began to pay attention. Peterson had posted some advice on the Q&A site Quora, which he turned into his second book, *12 Rules for Life*, a mashup of folksy wisdom, evolutionary biology, and digressions on the evils of Soviet Communism. (His daughter, Mikhaila, is named after Mikhail Gorbachev.) It stresses the conservative principles of self-reliance and responsibility, encouraging readers to tidy their bedrooms and smarten themselves up to compete for female attention—a message reinforced by a questionable analogy involving lobsters, which fight by squirting urine from their faces to establish their place in the mating hierarchy. “Parents, universities and the elders of society have utterly failed to give many young men realistic and demanding practical wisdom on how to live,” David Brooks wrote in a *New York Times* column. “Peterson has filled the gap.” He offered self-help for a demographic that wouldn’t dream of reading Goop.

Yet the relentless demands of modern celebrity—more content, more access, more authenticity—were already tearing the psychologist’s public persona in two. One Peterson was the father figure beloved by the normie readers of *12 Rules*, who stood in long lines to hear him speak and left touching messages on internet forums, testifying that he had turned their lives around. The other Peterson was a fearsome debater, the gladiator who crowed “Gotcha!” at the British television interviewer Cathy Newman after a series of testy exchanges about the gender pay gap and the freedom to give offense. His debates were clipped and remixed, then posted on YouTube with titles announcing that he had “DESTROYED” his interlocutors.

I know this because one of them was me: Our interview for *British GQ*, which has garnered more than 23 million views, is easily the most viral moment I’ve ever had. While dozens of acquaintances emailed and texted me to praise my performance and compare Peterson’s stern affect to Hannibal Lecter with a Ph.D., mean comments piled up like a snowdrift below the video itself. I was “biased and utterly intellectually bankrupt,” “dishonest and malicious,” and “like a petulant child who walked into an adult conversation.” What kind of man, several wondered, would marry a dumb, whiny, shrill feminist like this? (Quite a nice one, thanks for asking.)

Peterson lived in this split-screen reality all the time. Even as he basked in adoration, a thousand internet piranhas ripped through his every utterance, looking for

evidence against him. One week, Bari Weiss anointed him a leading culture warrior, including him in a *New York Times* feature as a member of the “Intellectual Dark Web.” Ten days later, the newspaper published a mocking profile of him, reporting that his house was decorated with Soviet propaganda and quoting him speculating about the benefits of “enforced monogamy” in controlling young men’s animal instincts. After he was accused of pining after Margaret Atwood’s Gilead, he quickly posted a note on his website arguing that he meant only the “social enforcement of monogamy.”

The negative publicity affected him deeply, and it was endless. After the Indian essayist Pankaj Mishra charged him with peddling “fascist mysticism,” Peterson tweeted that Mishra was an “arrogant, racist son of a bitch” and a “sanctimonious prick.” He added: “If you were in my room at the moment, I’d slap you happily.” Even sleep brought no relief. Peterson is a believer in dream analysis, and after one particularly ill-tempered interview in October 2018, he blogged about a nightmare that followed. In his dream, he met a man who “simply would not shut up.” The man reminded him, he wrote, of an acquaintance at university in Canada he calls Sam, who drove around in a Mercedes with swastikas on the doors, saying the worst things he could, unable to resist inviting attacks. “I can’t help myself,” Sam had told Peterson. “I have a target drawn on my back.” Eventually, at a party, Sam overstepped the line; he was about to be assaulted by a mob until another acquaintance “felled him with a single punch.” Peterson never saw Sam again. In his dream, the Sam-like man talked and talked and “finally pushed me beyond my limit of tolerance . . . I bent his wrists to force his knuckles into his mouth. His arms bent like rubber and, even though I managed the task, he did not stop babbling. I woke up.”

It is hard to resist reading the subtext like this: Peterson had spent months being casually described as a Nazi and associated with the alt-right, labels he always rejected. He had metaphorical swastikas on his car door. He couldn’t resist putting a target on his own back, and he, too, couldn’t stop talking. Indeed, in May 2019, after railing against left-wing censoriousness—now widely called “cancel culture”—he met with Viktor Orbán, the proudly illiberal prime minister of Hungary, whose government has closed gender-studies programs, waged a campaign to evict Central European University from the country, and harassed independent journalists. Orbán’s state-backed version of cancel culture—or, to use the correct word, authoritarianism—apparently didn’t come up in their meeting. Peterson had previously told an interviewer to describe politicians like Orbán not as “strongmen,” but as “dictator wannabes.” Nonetheless, the visit—and the posed photograph of the men in conversation,

*The relentless demands of modern celebrity—more content, more access, more authenticity—were tearing his public persona in two.*



released to friendly media outlets—gave intellectual cover to Orbán’s repressive government.

All that time, the two Petersons were pulling away from each other. As the arguments over his message raged across YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and traditional media, he became an avatar of our polarized media climate. People were consuming completely different Petersons, depending on their news sources. When I saw him on his speaking tour at a theater on Long Island, the first question he was asked was not about pronouns or the decline of Western civilization; it was *When was the last time you got drunk?* The second was a heartfelt plea that will be familiar to any new parent: *How can I get my baby to sleep?*

**THE PAST TWO YEARS** have clearly been hell for Peterson. In a June 2020 video interview with his daughter, he looked gaunt and restless as he described his struggle with drug dependency, a torment that he revisits in the “Overture” to *Beyond Order*, his new book. As he describes it, an allergic reaction during the 2016 Christmas holiday manifested as intense anxiety, leading his family doctor to prescribe benzodiazepines. He also started following what Mikhaila calls the “lion diet,” consuming only meat, salt, and water. In 2019, “the tumultuous reality of [being] a public figure” was

exacerbated by a series of family health crises culminating in his wife’s diagnosis, in April, of what was thought to be terminal cancer. (She has since recovered.) Peterson—who notes that he had been plagued for years by “a tendency toward depression”—had his tranquilizer dosage upped, only to experience rising anxiety, followed by the ravages of attempted withdrawal. He was at the edge of the abyss—“anxiety far beyond what I had ever experienced, an uncontrollable restlessness and need to move . . . overwhelming thoughts of self-destruction, and the complete absence of any happiness whatsoever.”

Throughout this turbulent time, Peterson was working on *Beyond Order*. He makes no claims that his suffering provided a teachable moment (particularly, he notes, when a pandemic has upended lives everywhere). He also declines the opportunity to place his addiction in the context of the prescription-drug-abuse crisis. Peterson seems to have softened his disdain for religion, and as for Tammy, “passing so near to death motivated my wife to attend to some issues regarding her own spiritual and creative development.” Notably, Peterson is not ready to give up on the hero’s journey, despite the terror he has endured. “All of that misfortune is only the bitter half of the tale of existence,” he writes, “without taking note of the heroic element of redemption or the nobility of the human spirit requiring a certain responsibility to shoulder.”

This book is humbler than its predecessor, and more balanced between liberalism and conservatism—but it offers a similar blend of the highbrow and the banal. Readers get a few glimpses of the fiery online polemicist, but the Peterson of *Beyond Order* tends instead to two other modes. The first is a grounded clinician, describing his clients’ troubles and the tough-love counsel he gives them. The other is a stoned college freshman telling you that the Golden Snitch is, like, a metaphor for “‘round chaos’ . . . the initial container of the primordial element.” Some sentences beg to be prefaced with *Dude*, like these: “If Queen Elizabeth II suddenly turned into a giant fire-breathing lizard in the midst of one of her endless galas, a certain amount of consternation would be both appropriate and expected . . . But if it happens within the context of a story, then we accept it.” Reading Peterson the clinician can be illuminating; reading his mystic twin is like slogging through wet sand. His fans love the former; his critics mock the latter.

The prose swirls like mist, and his great insight appears to be little more than the unthreatening observation that life is complicated. (If the first book hadn’t been written like this too, you’d guess that he was trying to escape the butterfly pins of his harshest detractors.) After nearly 400 pages, we learn that married people should have sex at least once a week,

BEYOND ORDER:  
12 MORE RULES  
FOR LIFE

Jordan  
B. Peterson

PORTFOLIO

that heat and pressure turn coal into diamonds, that having a social life is good for your mental health, and that, for a man in his 50s, Peterson knows a surprising amount about Quidditch. The chapter inviting readers to “make one room in your home as beautiful as possible” is typically discursive, but unusually enjoyable: Peterson knows his Wordsworth. (It is not free from weirdness, however. At one point, he claims to have looked at 1.2 million paintings on eBay while selecting his living-room decor.) His prose also lights up when he describes the wonder of watching his granddaughter encounter the world.

On the rare occasion that *Beyond Order* strays overtly into politics, Peterson still can't resist fighting straw men. What Peterson sees as healthy ambition “needs to be encouraged in every possible manner,” he writes.

It is for this reason, among many others, that the increasingly reflexive identification of the striving of boys and men for victory with the “patriarchal tyranny” that hypothetically characterizes our modern, productive, and comparatively free societies is so stunningly counterproductive (and, it must be said, cruel: there is almost nothing worse than treating someone striving for competence as a tyrant in training).

But who is reflexively identifying *all* male ambition as innately harmful? If any mainstream feminist writers are in fact arguing that the West is a “patriarchal tyranny”—as opposed to simply a “patriarchy” or male-dominated society—he should do the reader the favor of citing them. Is he arguing with Gloria Steinem or princess\_sparklehorse99 on Tumblr? A tenured professor should embrace academic rigor.

Peterson writes an entire chapter against ideologies—feminism, anti-capitalism, environmentalism, basically anything ending in *ism*—declaring that life is too complex to be described by such intellectual frameworks. Funny story: There's an academic movement devoted to skepticism of grand historical narratives. It's called ... postmodernism. That chapter concludes by advising readers to put their own lives in order before trying to change the world. This is not only a rehash of one of the previous 12 rules—“Clean up your bedroom,” he writes, because fans love it when you play the hits—but also ferocious chutzpah coming from a man who was on a lecture tour well after he should have gone to rehab.

The Peterson of *Beyond Order*, that preacher of personal responsibility, dances around the question of whether his own behavior might have contributed to his breakdown. Was it really wise to agree to all those brutal interviews, drag himself to all those international speaking events, send all those tweets that set the internet

on fire? Like a rock star spiraling into burnout, he was consumed by the pyramid scheme of fame, parceling himself out, faster and faster, to everyone who wanted a piece. Perhaps he didn't want to let people down, and he loved to feel needed. Perhaps he enjoyed having an online army glorying in his triumphs and pursuing his enemies. In our frenzied media culture, can a hero ever return home victorious and resume his normal life, or does the lure of another adventure, another dragon to slay, another “lib” to “own” always call out to him?

Either way, he gazed into the culture-war abyss, and the abyss stared right back at him. He is every one of us who couldn't resist that pointless Facebook argument, who felt the sugar rush of the self-righteous Twitter dunk, who exulted in the defeat of an opposing political tribe, or even an adjacent portion of our own. That kind of unhealthy behavior, furiously lashing out while knowing that counterattacks will follow, is a very modern form of self-harm. And yet in *Beyond Order*, the blame is placed solely on “the hypothetically safe but truly dangerous benzodiazepine anti-anxiety medication” he was prescribed by his family doctor. The book leaves you wishing that Peterson the tough therapist would ask hard questions of Peterson the public intellectual.

To imagine that Peterson is popular in spite of his contradictions and human frailties—the things that drive his critics mad—is a mistake: He is popular *because of* them. For a generation that has lost its faith in religion and politics, he is one of notably few prominent figures willing to confront the most fundamental questions of existence: What's the point of being alive? What kind of personal journey endows our existence with meaning? He is, in many ways, countercultural. He doesn't offer get-rich-quick schemes, or pick-up techniques. He is not libertine or libertarian. He promises that life is a struggle, but that it is ultimately worthwhile.

Yet Peterson's elevation to guru status has come at great personal cost, a cascade of suffering you wouldn't wish on anybody. It has made him rich and famous, but not happy. “We compete for attention, personally, socially, and economically,” he writes in *Beyond Order*. “No currency has a value that exceeds it.” But attention is a perilous drug: The more we receive, the more we desire. It is the culture war's greatest reward, yet it started Jordan Peterson on a journey that turned a respected but unknown professor into the man strapped into the Russian hospital bed, ripping the tubes from his arms, desperate for another fix. *A*

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*This kind of behavior, furiously lashing out while knowing that counterattacks will follow, is a very modern form of self-harm.*

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## BOOKS

## The Radiant Inner Life of a Robot

*Kazuo Ishiguro returns to masters and servants with a story of love between a machine and the girl she belongs to.*

By Judith Shulevitz



Girl AF Klara, an Artificial Friend sold as a children's companion, lives in a store. On lucky days, Klara gets to spend time in the store window, where she can see and be seen and soak up the solar energy on which she runs. Not needing human food, Klara hungers and thirsts for the Sun (she capitalizes it) and what he (she also personifies it) allows her to see. She tracks his passage along the floorboards and the buildings across the street and drinks in the scenes he illuminates. Klara registers details that most people miss and interprets them with an accuracy astonishing for an android out of the box. A passing Boy AF lags a few steps behind his child, and his weary gait makes her wonder what it would be like "to know that your child didn't want you." She keeps watch over a beggar and his dog, who lie so still in a doorway that they look like garbage bags. They must have died, she thinks. "I felt sadness then," she says, "despite it being a good thing that they'd died together, holding each other and trying to help one another."

Klara is the narrator and hero of *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro's eighth novel. Ishiguro is known for skipping from one genre to the next, although he subordinates whatever genre he chooses to his own concerns and gives his narrators character-appropriate versions of his singular, lightly formal diction. I guess you could call this novel science fiction. It certainly makes a contribution to the centuries-old disputation over whether machines have the potential to feel. This debate has picked up speed as the artificially intelligent agents built by actual engineers close in on the ones made up by writers and TV, film, and theater directors, the latest round in the game of tag between science and science fiction that has been going on at least since *Frankenstein*. Klara is Alexa, super-enhanced. She's the product that roboticists in a field called affective computing (also known as artificial emotional intelligence) have spent the past two decades trying to invent. Engineers have written software that can detect fine shades of feeling in human voices and faces, but so far they have failed to contrive machines that can simulate emotions convincingly.

What makes Klara an imaginary entity, at least until reality catches up with her, is



that her feelings are not simulated. They're real. We know this because she experiences pathos, a quality still seemingly impervious to computational analysis—although as a naive young robot, she does have to break it down before she can understand it. A disheveled old man stands on the far side of the street, waving and calling to an old woman on the near side. The woman goes stock-still, then crosses tentatively to him, and they cling to each other. Klara can tell that the man's tightly shut eyes convey contradictory emotions. "They seem so happy," she says to the store manager, or as Klara fondly calls this kindly woman, Manager. "But it's strange because they also seem upset."

"Oh, Klara," Manager says. "You never miss a thing, do you?" Perhaps the man and woman hadn't seen each other in a long time, she says. "Do you mean, Manager, that they lost each other?" Klara asks. Girl AF Rosa, Klara's best friend, is bewildered. What are they talking about? But Klara considers it her duty to empathize. If she doesn't, she thinks, "I'd never be able to help my child as well as I should." And so she gives herself the task of imagining loss. If she lost and then found Rosa, would she feel the same joy mixed with pain?

She would and she will, and not just with respect to Rosa. The nonhuman Klara is more human than most humans. She has, you might say, a superhuman humanity. She's also Ishiguro's most luminous character, literally a creature of light, dependent on the Sun. Her very name means "brightness." But mainly, Klara is incandescently good. She's like the kind, wise beasts endowed with speech at the dawn of creation in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia*. Or, with her capacity for selfless love, like a character in a Hans Christian Andersen story.

To be clear, Klara is no shrinking mermaid. Her voice is very much her own. It may strike the ear as childlike, but she speaks in prose poetry. As the Sun goes on his "journey," the sky assumes the hues of the mood in the house that Klara winds up in. It's "the color of the lemons in the fruit bowl," or "the gray of the slate chopping boards," or the mottled shades of vomit or diarrhea or streaks of blood. The Sun peers through the floor-to-ceiling windows in a living room and pours his nourishment on the children sprawled there. When he sinks behind a barn, Klara asks if that's where the stairs to the underworld are. Klara has gaps in her vocabulary, so she invents names and adjectives that speak unwitting truths. Outfits aren't stylish; they're "high-ranking." Humans stare into "oblongs," an aptly leaden term for our stupefying devices. Klara's descriptive passages have a strange and lovely geometry. Her visual system processes stimuli by "partitioning" them, that is, mapping them onto a two-dimensional grid before resolving them into objects in three-dimensional space. At moments of high emotion, her partitioning becomes disjointed and expressive, a robot cubism.

*Parents want to believe they are devoted, but wind up monstrous instead.*

IN KEEPING WITH the novel's fairy-tale logic, a girl named Josie stops in front of the window, and where other children see a fancy toy, she recognizes a kindred spirit. She begs her mother to buy Klara, but her mother resists. Klara is a B2 model, fast growing obsolete. A shipment of B3s has already arrived at the store. B2s are known for empathy, Manager says. Still, wouldn't Josie prefer the latest model? the mother asks. The answer is no, and Klara happily joins the family.

Klara's sojourn in Josie's home gives the novel room to explore Ishiguro's abiding preoccupations. One of these is service—what it does to the souls of those who give it and those who receive it, how power deforms and powerlessness cripples. In *The Remains of the Day*, for instance, Stevens, a butler in one of England's great houses, worships his former master in the face of damning truths about the man's character. Stevens grows so adept at quashing doubts about the value of a life spent in his master's employ that he seems too numb to recognize love when it is offered to him, or to realize that he loves in return.

An adjacent leitmotif in Ishiguro's fiction subjects the parent-child relationship to scrutiny. What are children for? Do their begetters care for them, or expect to be cared for by them, or both at once? The answers are clear in *Never Let Me Go*, a novel about clones given a quasi-normal childhood in a shabby-genteel boarding school cum gulag, then killed for their organs. *Klara and the Sun* resists conclusions. Parents are at once domineering and dependent. They want to believe they are devoted, but wind up monstrous instead. Children are grateful and forgiving, even though they know, perhaps without knowing that they know, that they're on their own. Josie is lucky to have Klara, who acts like a parent as well as a beloved friend. But who will take care of Klara when and if she's no longer needed?

Ishiguro's theme of themes, however, is love. The redemptive power of true love comes under direct discussion here and in *Never Let Me Go*, but crops up in his other novels too. Does such love exist? Can it really save us?

Critics often note Ishiguro's use of dramatic irony, which allows readers to know more than his characters do. And it can seem as if his narrators fail to grasp the enormity of the injustices whose details they so meticulously describe. But I don't believe that his characters suffer from limited consciousness. I think they have dignity. Confronted by a complete indifference to their humanity, they choose stoicism over complaint. We think we grieve for them more than they grieve for themselves, but more heartbreaking is the possibility that they're not sure we differ enough from their overlords to understand their true sorrow.

And maybe we don't, and maybe we can't. Maybe that's the real irony, the way Ishiguro sticks in the shiv.

Girl AF Klara is both the embodiment of the dehumanized server and its refutation. On the one hand, she's a thing, an appliance. "Are you a guest at all? Or do I treat you like a vacuum cleaner?" asks a woman whose home she enters. On the other hand, Klara overlooks nothing, feels everything, and, like her predecessors among Ishiguro's protagonists, leaves us to guess at the breadth of her understanding. Her thoughts are both transparent and opaque. She either withholds or is simply not engineered to pass judgment on humans. After all, she is categorically other. Her personality is algorithmic, not neurological.

She does perceive that something bad is happening to Josie. The girl is wasting away. It turns out that she is suffering from the side effects of being "lifted," a Panglossian term for genetic editing, done to boost intelligence, or at least academic performance. Among the many pleasures of *Klara and the Sun* is the savagery of its satire of the modern meritocracy. Inside Josie's bubble of privilege, being lifted is the norm. Parents who can afford to do it do, because unlifted children have a less than 2 percent chance of getting into a decent university. The lifted study at home. Old-fashioned schools aren't advanced enough; at 13, Josie does mathematical physics and other college-level subjects with a rotating cast of "oblong tutors." Josie's neighbor and best friend, Rick, who has shown signs of genius in his home engineering experiments, has not been lifted, which means he will not be encouraged to cultivate his talent and is already a pariah. At one point, Josie persuades Rick to accompany her to the "interaction meeting" that homeschooled children are required to attend to develop their social skills, of which they have few. Unsurprisingly, the augmented children bully the non-augmented one. Meanwhile, out in the hall, their mothers discuss the servant problem ("The best housekeepers still come from Europe") and cluck about Rick's parents. Why didn't they do it? Did they lose their nerve?

Josie's and Rick's parents leave Klara to perform the emotional labor they aren't up to. Rick's mother suffers from a mysterious condition, possibly alcoholism, that requires him to take care of her. Josie's father is not around. He and her mother have divorced; he has been "substituted"—another euphemism, meaning "lost his job"—and has abandoned the upper-middle class to join what sounds like an anarchist community. Josie's mother pursues her career and devotes her remaining energy to a blinding self-pity. She feels guilt about what she's done to Josie and resents having to feel it; she's already working on a scheme that will lessen her grief should Josie die. (This involves a more malign form of robotics.)

KLARA AND  
THE SUN

Kazuo  
Ishiguro

KNOPF

We can tell that she makes Klara uncomfortable, because every time Klara senses that things are not as they should be, she starts partitioning like mad. At one point, Klara and "the Mother," as Klara calls her—the definite article keeps the woman at arm's length—undertake an expedition to a waterfall, leaving Josie behind because she's too weak to go. Being alone with the Mother is disconcerting enough, but when they arrive at their destination, the Mother leans in close to make a disturbing request. Suddenly her face breaks into eight large boxes, while the waterfall recedes into a grid at the edge of Klara's vision. Each box of eyes expresses a different emotion. "In one, for instance, her eyes were laughing cruelly, but in the next they were filled with sadness," Klara reports.

Klara's optical responses to right and wrong are the affective computer's version of an innate morality—her unnatural natural law. They're also another way that Ishiguro turns robot stereotypes on their head. Many hands have been wrung (including mine) about nanny bots and animatronic pets or pals, which will be, or so we prognosticators have fretted, soulless and servile. They'll spoil the children. But Klara does nothing of the sort. She'll carry out orders if they're reasonable and issued politely, but she does not respond to rude commands, and she is anything but spineless. No one instructs her to try to find a cure for Josie; she does that on her own. Everyone except Klara and Rick seems resigned to the girl's decline. The problem is that the plan of action Klara comes up with is so bizarre that the reader may suspect her software is glitching.

ODDLY ENOUGH, given its subject matter, *Klara and the Sun* doesn't induce the shuddery, uncanny-valley sensation that makes *Never Let Me Go* such a satisfying horror story. For one thing, although Klara never describes her own appearance, we deduce from the fact that humans immediately know she's an AF that she isn't humanoid enough to be creepy. (Clones, by contrast, pass for human, because they *are* human.) Moreover, this novel's alternate universe isn't all that alternate. Yes, lifting has made the body more cyborgian while androids have become more anthropoid, but we've been experiencing that role reversal for some time now. Otherwise, the setting parallels our own: It has the same extreme inequalities of wealth and opportunity, the same despoiled environment, the same deteriorating urban space. Even the sacrifice of children to parental fears about loss of status seems sadly familiar.

And *Klara and the Sun* doesn't strive for uncanniness. It aspires to enchantment, or to put it another way, reenchantment, the restoration of magic to a disenchanting world. Ishiguro drapes realism like a thin cloth over a primordial cosmos. Every so often, the cloth slips, revealing the old gods, the terrible beasts,

the warring forces of light and darkness. The custom of performing possibly lethal prosthetic procedures on one's own offspring bears a family resemblance to immolating them on behalf of the god Moloch.

We can perceive monstrosity (or fail to perceive it), but Klara can see monsters. Crossing a field on the way to the waterfall with the Mother, Klara spots a bull, and grows so alarmed that she cries out. Not that she hadn't seen photos of bulls before, but this creature

gave, all at once, so many signals of anger and the wish to destroy. Its face, its horns, its cold eyes watching me all brought fear into my mind, but I felt something more, something stranger and deeper. At that moment it felt to me some great error had been made that the creature should be allowed to stand in the Sun's pattern at all, that this bull belonged somewhere deep in the ground far within the mud and darkness, and its presence on the grass could only have awful consequences.

Klara *is* allowed to stand in the pattern of the Sun. Ishiguro has anointed her, a high-tech consumer product, the improbable priestess of something very like an ancient nature cult. Gifted with a rare capacity for reverence, she tries always to remember to thank the Sun for sustaining her. Her faith in him is total. When Klara needs help, she goes to the barn where she believes he sets, and there she has the AI equivalent of visions. Old images of the store jostle against the barn's interior walls. So do new ones: Rosa lies on the ground in distress. Klara fears that her petition may have angered the Sun, but then the glow of the sunset takes on "an almost gentle aspect." A piece of furniture from the store, the Glass Display Trolley, rises before her, as if assumed into the sky. The robot has spoken with her god, and he has answered: "I could tell that the Sun was smiling towards me kindly as he went down for his rest."

All fiction is an exercise in world-building, but science fiction lays new foundations, and that means shattering the old ones. It partakes of creation, but also of destruction. Klara trails a radiance that calls to mind the radiance also shed by Victor Frankenstein's creature. He is another intelligent newborn in awe of God's splendence, until a vengeful rage at his abusive creator overcomes him. In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro leaves us suspended over a rift in the presumptive order of things. Whose consciousness is limited, ours or a machine's? Whose love is more true? If we ever do give robots the power to feel the beauty and anguish of the world we bring them into, will they murder us for it or lead us toward the light? *A*

*Judith Shulevitz is the author of The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time.*

## *Cowbell*

By Robert Morgan

We come across a ridge and hear  
a cowbell in the cove beyond,  
a tinkle sweetening the air  
with vague rubato as the breeze  
erases tones and then the notes  
resume like echoes from the past  
or from a cave inside the cliff,  
a still, calm voice in dialect  
and keeping its own company,  
both out of time and long as time,  
both here and from a higher sphere,  
as if the voice of history  
were intimate as memory.

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*Robert Morgan's recent books include the novel Chasing the North Star (2017) and the poetry collection Dark Energy (2015).*



BOOKS

## When Did Following Recipes Become a Personal Failure?

*Sam Sifton's exciting, but daunting, invitation to improvise in the kitchen*

By Laura Shapiro

Last spring, early in the pandemic, the host of a radio food program called to ask whether I thought the lockdown would catapult women back to the 1950s. That sure looked likely: Families were home demanding three meals a day, and most of that food was coming from their own kitchens. I started wondering whether the pandemic would succeed where years of cajoling on the part of cookbook writers had failed. Maybe we really had been launched into a new era of cooking from scratch, and would see people joyfully plying their families with homemade grain bowls long after the return of recognizable daily life.

At this point I realized I was conjuring the Happy Housewife, that busy icon of the '50s often seen transforming leftovers into attractive molded salads to be served on lettuce leaves. She wore high heels when she cooked, she kept two blond children by her side, and she was very, very happy at all times. So is she back?

Only as a refrigerator magnet, thank goodness. But I did sense a familiar presence hovering over the pages of Sam Sifton's new cookbook, in which he declares right at the outset that he's going to "make the act of cooking fun when it sometimes seems like a chore." Fun? It's a promise that has Happy Housewife written all over it. Not last century's version, of course—the one I'm detecting in this book is a distinctly contemporary icon of unspecified gender, a casual figure in sweatpants and bedroom slippers. Eager to experiment with unfamiliar ingredients, the new home cook is wonderfully adept at tasting and tweaking until any mistakes with a recipe have been remedied. Actually, there's no such thing anymore as making a mistake with a recipe. This enviable creature cooks with abandon, recipes optional.

Sifton, the *New York Times* editor who masterminds NYT Cooking, the paper's hugely popular site for recipes and culinary chat, has long campaigned for what he calls "no-recipe recipes," featuring them every

Wednesday in his What to Cook newsletter. Now he's gathered them into a cookbook called *The New York Times Cooking No-Recipe Recipes*—an unwieldy title, but his intentions are clear. Conventional recipes that spell out each step are useful, he says, and if you follow them correctly, you'll arrive at the destination planned for you. But that's not the only way to get dinner on the table, and here he evokes the great jazz masters who wouldn't dream of relying on a printed score. Each "no-recipe recipe," Sifton explains, is "an invitation for you to improvise," a skill that will turn you into an imaginative, stress-free cook able to wing it through the preparation of any meal. To this end, Sifton has ditched the time-honored recipe format that starts with a list of measured ingredients, followed by a list of instructions. Instead, he sets out his directions in the form of a conversational paragraph, like this one for "Teriyaki Salmon With Mixed Greens":

Turn your oven to 400°F or so, and while it heats, make a teriyaki sauce with soy sauce cut with mirin, plus a healthy scattering of minced garlic and ginger. It should be salty-sweet. Then put your salmon fillets on a lightly oiled, foil-lined baking sheet, skin-side down. Paint them with the sauce and roast them in the top of the oven for 10 to 12 minutes, painting them again with the sauce at least once along the way. Slide the finished salmon onto piles of mixed greens and drizzle with remaining sauce. Cooking's not difficult. It's just a practice.

Apart from that sudden leap to zen in the last sentence, what's most striking about this no-recipe recipe is that it is, unmistakably, a recipe. It's clear and detailed; all that's missing are the measurements. But if we're being told how hot to make the oven, how the sauce should taste, how to prepare the pan, how long to cook the fish, and how to serve it—why not tell us how much soy sauce, mirin, garlic, and ginger we're going to need? What's so uncool about measuring? Okay, okay, so packing minced ginger into a spoon labeled "1 tablespoon" means we're never going to cook like Coltrane. Schubert isn't good enough?

**CUPS AND SPOONS** manufactured in standardized sizes for cooking have been ubiquitous in American kitchens for more than a century. Fannie Farmer, who was the principal of the Boston Cooking School in the 1890s, was the first culinary authority to insist on their use. She herself had grown up with such recipe locutions as "butter the size of an egg" and "a heaping spoonful," but as a teacher she found them far too impressionistic to be practical. Standardized

measurements, she believed, were indispensable to good cooking: They would guarantee correct results no matter who was reading the recipe.

She was wrong about her favorite tools being indispensable—the European practice of weighing dry ingredients on a kitchen scale works beautifully—but she was right about American cooks. Few of us have ever wanted to fuss around with scales when cups and spoons are quicker and tidier. Thanks to the immortal instructions Farmer set down in her best-selling *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (1896)—"A cupful is measured level . . . A tablespoonful is measured level. A teaspoonful is measured level"—millions of home cooks across the country still heap flour into a measuring cup and then level it off with a knife. The aura of precision that accompanies this ceremony has reassured nervous cooks for generations.

That calming effect was one of the reasons Farmer was such a success as a teacher, lecturer, and writer. Plenty of women were relieved not to be left helpless on the battlefield. Whether or not they were born with a good palate, they could measure half a teaspoon of cinnamon and be reasonably certain it was the right thing to do. Well-meaning but uninspired cooks—and believe me, we have been legion since the dawn of time—long for specifics. Our least favorite phrase in the English language is *season to taste*.

Since Farmer's day, the inviolable rule for cookbook writers aiming to reach a wide audience has been to leave nothing to chance, especially measurements. Irma Rombauer, who launched *The Joy of Cooking* in 1931 with a page-one recipe for a gin cocktail, laced her book with a deft, personable sense of humor that made it unique among kitchen bibles—but on the topic of measuring, she was all business. "The recipes in this book call for standard measuring cups and spoons," she said flatly. *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book*, published in 1950 with an unheard-of first printing of 950,000 copies, gave a full two pages to measuring instructions, including illustrations and a poem:

Cooking success is up to you!  
If you'll take pains to measure true,  
Use *Standard* cups and spoons all the way,  
And then level off—it'll always pay!

By the '60s, even M. F. K. Fisher, the goddess of American food writing who drenched her prose in sensuality and romance, declared that she couldn't stand recipes that took liberties with the conventional format. "The ingredients should be listed in one column or two, rather than in a running sentence, according to the order of their use, and with the exact amount of each ingredient given before its name," she ruled.

*Well-meaning  
but uninspired  
cooks long  
for specifics.  
Our least  
favorite phrase  
in the English  
language is  
"season to taste."*

**BUT CAREFUL MEASURING**, which originated simply as a way to make home cooking easier and more predictable, over time developed a more distinctive identity. It acquired gender—at the very moment the postwar kitchen was going upscale. Suddenly a fondness for measuring was discovered to be intrinsically female, practically a secondary sex characteristic, like small brains, shrill voices, and no sense of humor. Female cooks follow recipes “to the last decimal point,” complained the New York restaurateur Leonard Jan Mitchell in 1952, whereas a male cook “experiments, embellishes and is no slave to the cookbook.”

This insight flourished just as newly affluent Americans were learning to spend money on food more liberally than they ever had before. Newspapers and magazines ran splashy features about how to choose wine, serve a properly ripe Camembert, set fire to the crêpes suzette, and toss the salad in a big wooden bowl you must never, ever wash. Once a humble space for housewives, the kitchen started to sport fancy new equipment and a little European glamour. In other words, cue the men. A wave of ambitious male writers sprang up, eager to colonize the food world. Some were chefs, others cooked at home, still others just ate a lot, but they all agreed on what defined greatness in the kitchen: You had to be male. After all, women—the poor fools—measured their ingredients.

Malcolm LaPrade, the author of *That Man in the Kitchen* (1946), said he cooked in such a “free-and-easy fashion” that it was difficult to write down his recipes at all. His measurements were approximate; “I hope no man will feel bound to follow them.” Raymond Oliver, the chef and owner of Le Grand Véfour in Paris, said he generally omitted “exact quantities and proportions” from the recipes in *A Man’s Cookbook* (1961) because men, who cooked “in a spirit of joy,” were beyond such constraints. “If you had asked Renoir or Van Gogh ... to set down in grams the colors used to paint one or another of their canvases, could you thereupon reproduce the same canvas?”

Sifton can’t fairly be placed in this lineage, despite his devotion to the use-your-imagination school of cooking. He never assigns greatness solely to men; he never even claims that improvisation in the kitchen will produce better meals. On the contrary, he’s designed the simple, brightly flavored dishes in this book so that they’ll work whether the cook is an artist riffing freely on the idea, or a drudge poring over every word. I made the teriyaki salmon, irritated at even the modest amount of guesswork I had to do, and it came out fine—because sure enough, the recipe told me nine-tenths of what I was desperate to know.

This left me wondering what the point of the exercise was. It wasn’t about the food—the food was going to be good whether I added a generous dose of garlic

or a minuscule one. I think Sifton isn’t all that fixated on dinner. I think he’s fixated on us—or rather, who we are when we cook.

Every visionary cookbook writer is a bit of a missionary, and Sifton is no exception. In the friendliest way possible, he’s out to win converts. Throw away your crutches, he’s saying, and start cooking by faith alone. Soon you’ll be able to wander into the kitchen at 6 p.m. and emerge with a splendid meal. The message is appealing, all right, but I’m not sure who’s in the congregation. Many people who regularly cook from scratch nowadays—like the readers who flood his column with comments on the recipes—are already expert improvisers. They love explaining how they skipped the harissa, doubled the thyme, added this and didn’t bother with that, and everything came out perfectly. With this crowd, Sifton is preaching to the choir.

That leaves the rest of us. Some cooks will be delighted to know that they can jettison all those fussy details. But others cling to those very details. We cook from scratch doggedly, on principle. It’s a chore for us, not a romp, but it’s the only affordable way to eat well and avoid total domination by the food industry. Sifton knows we’re out here; he knows our occasionally lunatic dependence on exactitude. We’re the folks he had in mind when he chose a prose style dotted with rhetorical flourishes meant to dispel our fears and relax our death grip on the printed page. “Add a few glugs of olive oil,” he likes to say. “Hit that mixture with some ketchup and a splash of soy sauce.” “Rip apart a roast chicken from the supermarket.” “Hungry cats may grill a couple of sausages and add them to the plate.” “Kooky fantastic.” “Boy howdy.” “Yowza.”

Sifton has written a good book, and it’s not his fault that I’m going to give my copy away. The last thing I want is an enthusiastic jazz master looking over my shoulder while I make dinner, inevitably reminding me what a bore I am when I cook. Surely the day will come when boring is the new cool. Until then, I’ll keep my favorite kitchen bible on hand, though I consult it for moral support rather than dinner ideas: Peg Bracken’s *The I Hate to Cook Book*, which appeared in 1960 and sold 3 million copies before retiring to a well-earned place in the pantheon. Bracken didn’t hate to cook, but she hated being told how much fun it was. “Do you know the really basic trouble here?” she asked in a chapter on the danger of creativity when dealing with leftovers. “It is your guilt complex. This is the thing you have to lick.” Yowza. *A*

*Laura Shapiro is the author, most recently, of What She Ate: Six Remarkable Women and the Food That Tells Their Stories.*

THE NEW  
YORK TIMES  
COOKING  
NO-RECIPE  
RECIPES

Sam Sifton

TEN SPEED PRESS

# "How do I become something I don't see?"

From this simple question, The Delta Project was born.

The Delta Project exists to break the generational cycle of incarceration by reconnecting youth of color and their families to community relationships through mentorship, coaching and storytelling.

**Help young men see what they can become.**

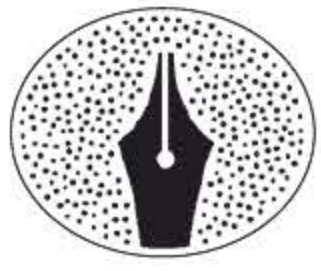
**Take action.**

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# FICTION



Person of Korea

By  
Paul Yoon

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.

*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.*

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.

**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

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unsure if they  
have noticed  
him, but the  
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to each other  
catches his ear.  
He has never  
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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

*The more tired  
his legs grow,  
the more the fog  
is like an ocean  
and the land is  
floating on it.*

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. *A*  
  
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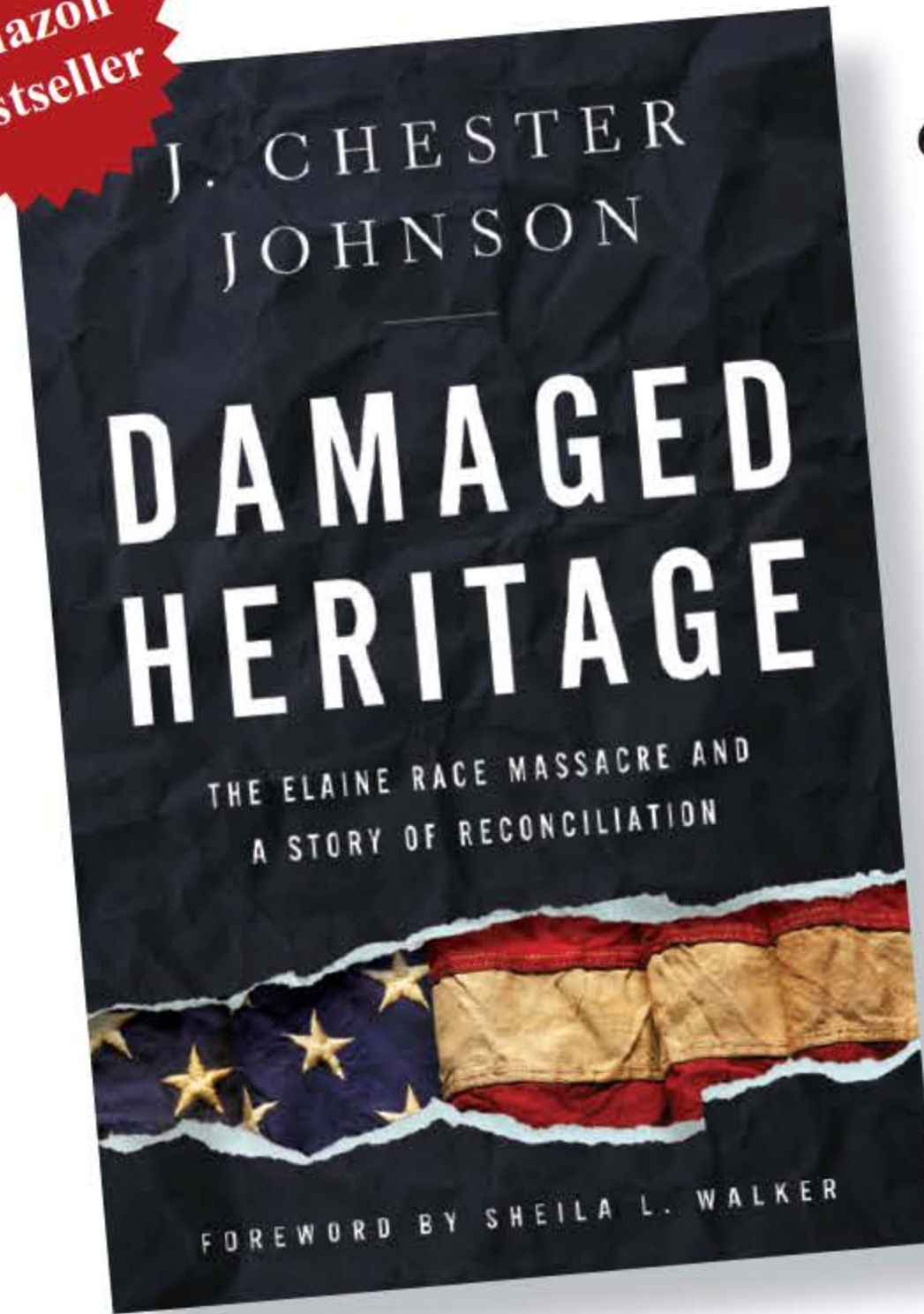
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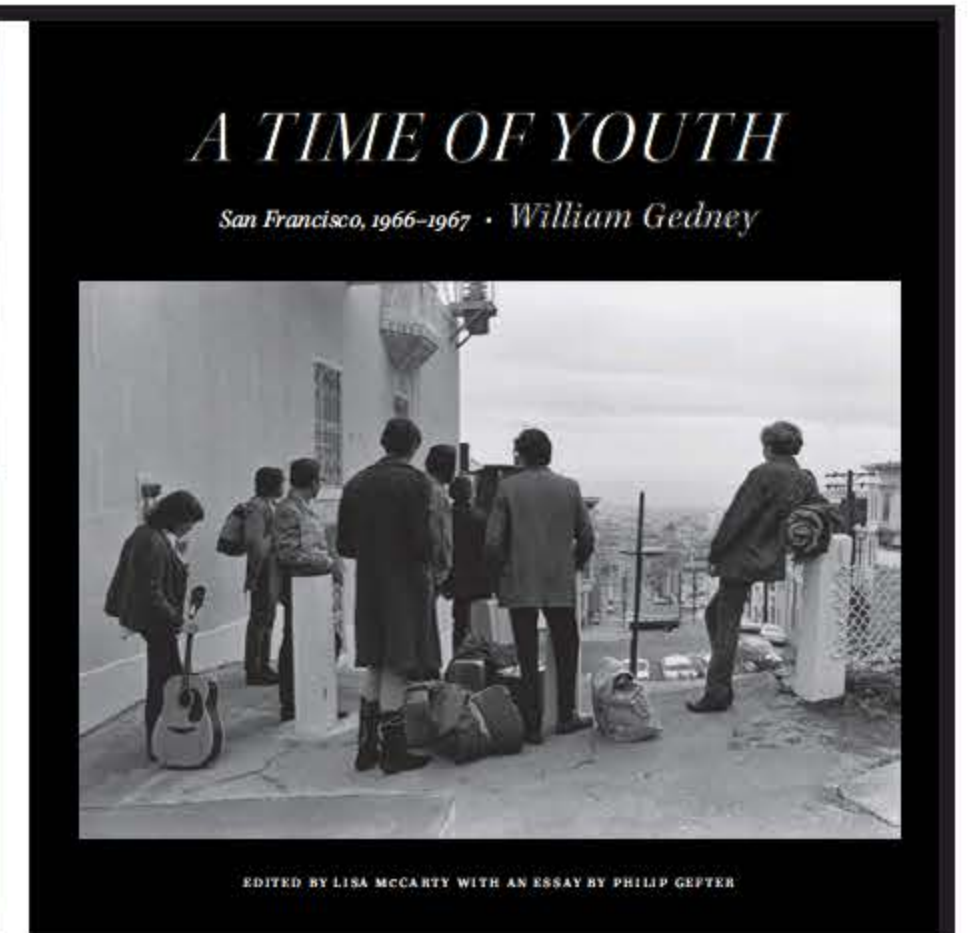
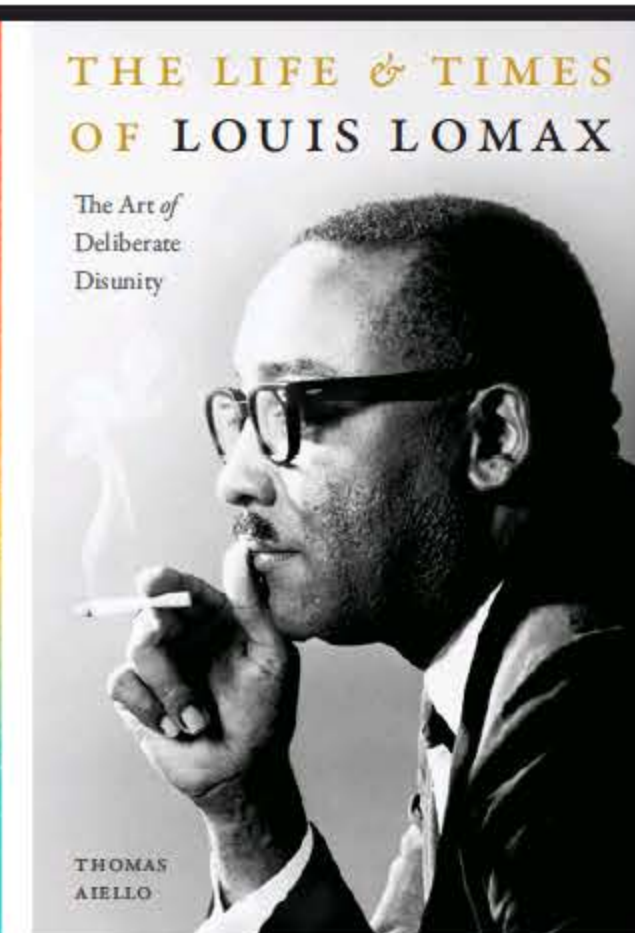
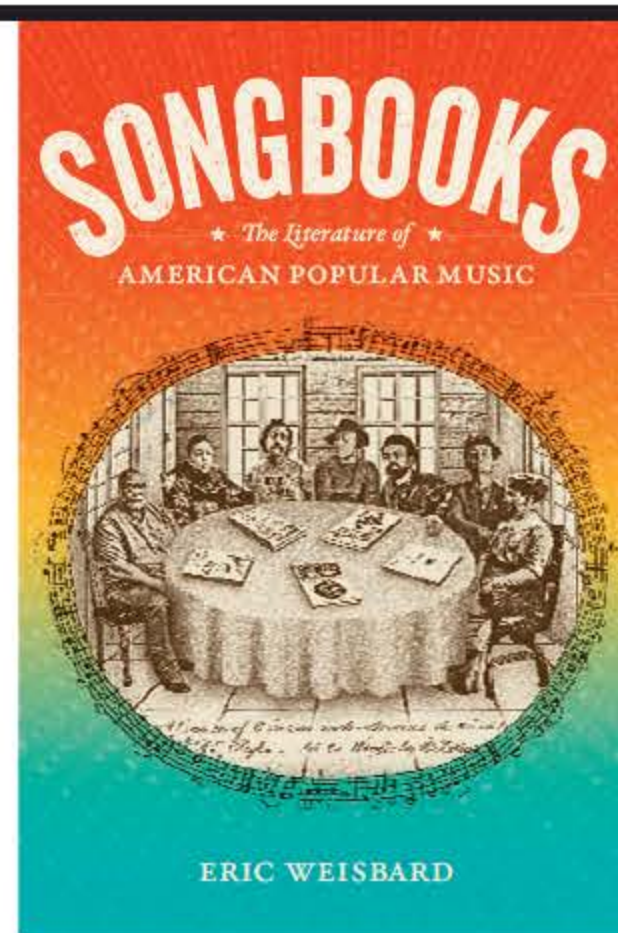
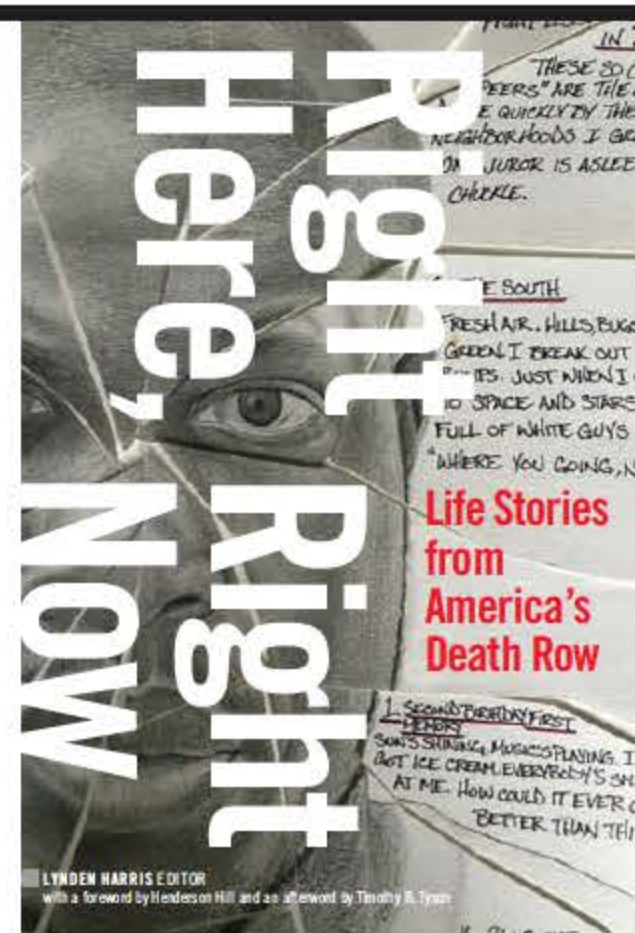
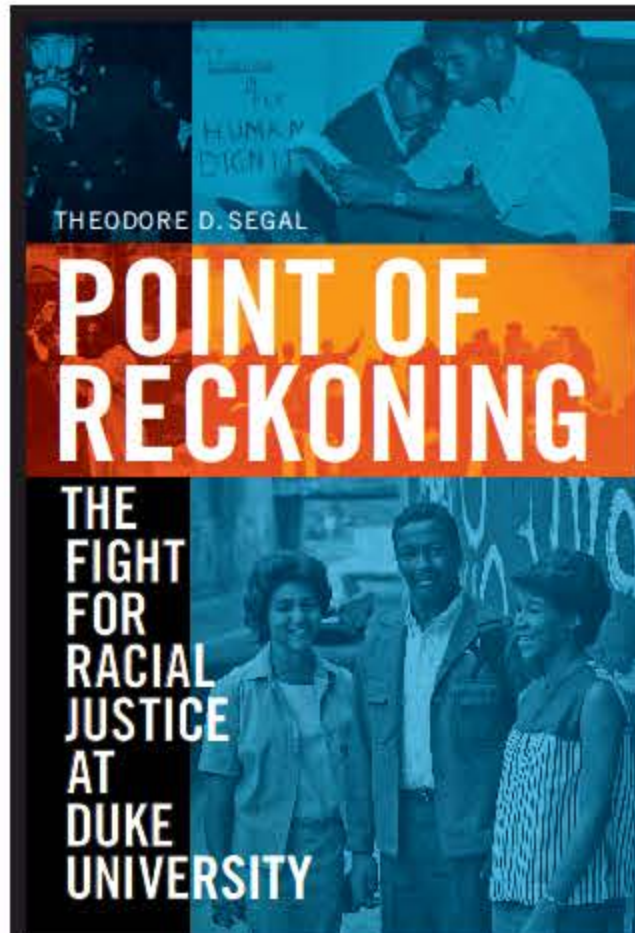
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*I know,  
I know:  
It's good  
for you.*

It's good for *us*, damn it. Good for the nation. You're not going to open your blissfully defocused eyes after 20 minutes of meditation, sigh, rise slowly to your feet, and then go charging off to sack the Capitol. Not immediately, anyway.

And I also know that a serious meditation practice is ... serious. It's not about gongs and white blankets. It's not about smooth vibes. It's not even about spiritual hygiene. What you get, instead, when you start to meditate—when you first sit with yourself—is a rather stunning immersion in the rawness and chaos of your own nature: the whirling thoughts, the howling needs, the funky wiring, the sacked Capitols, etc., etc. Light that stick of incense, by all means, but it's the hell-smoke of your personality that you'll be smelling.

I know all this because I sat with myself (and sometimes with other people, also sitting with themselves) for a number of years. It helped

me enormously. It calmed me down. But now I've stopped. And I have to tell you, I think I prefer myself as a nonmeditator.

The feeling is not unrelated to the pandemic, probably, because nothing is unrelated to the bloody pandemic. As the world went flat as a pancake, I became less interested in leveling myself out. No steady drone of mental health for me, no thank you, not today. Let's have the spikes, let's have the troughs. But there's more to it than that. The practice of not meditating, as I have pursued it over these past few months—not meditating first thing in the morning, not meditating during the day, and taking particular care not to meditate in the evening—has brought me home. Sensations, nice and nasty, possess me. Moods run me. I'm not observing my thoughts as they arise one by one, unbidden, from the ever-bubbling bed of the brain; I'm *thinking* my thoughts. I'm not groping toward the white light of nothingness that irradiates all phenomena; I'm stewing in the somethingness. Am I a tad less tranquil? Uh, probably. But it's worth it.

So: Uncross those aching legs, solemn sitter. Open up. To the grand sensory flux, to the enthralling, windshield-filling present tense, to the zillion emotional-psychological tangles, to the distractions and inundations and (most glorious) to the plain fact of your incorrigible, temporary you-ness. Give it a shot. You can always ride them again, those glossy theta waves of deep meditation. They keep rolling; they roll forever. You, on the other hand, do not. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# ODE

— to —

## NOT MEDITATING

*By James Parker*





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