

The Pandemic Endgame

Ed Yong on the
most consequential
science project of
our time

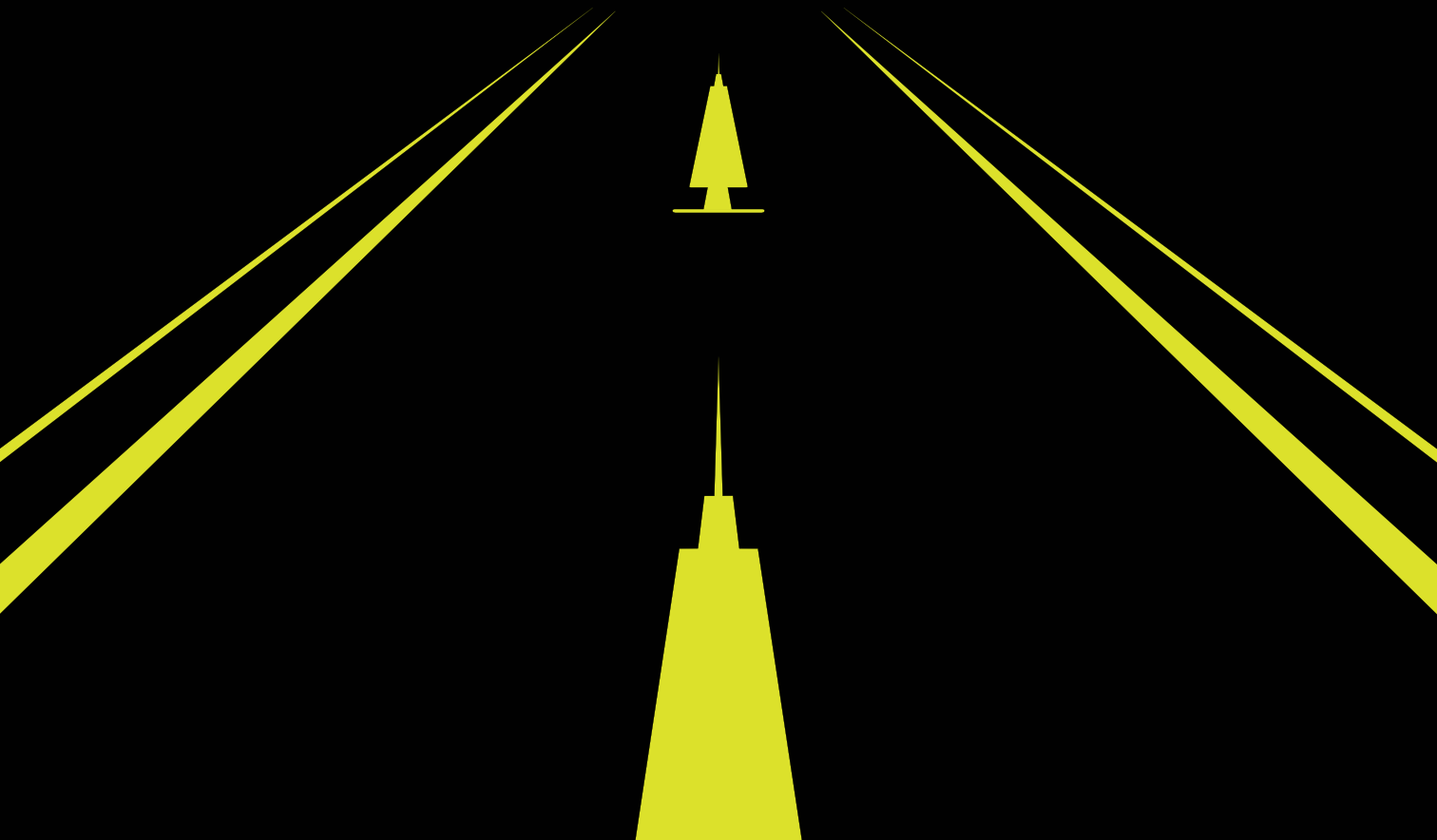
Jordan Kisner on who
should get the vaccine
first—and last

Plus:
The Most American Religion
By McKay Coppins



The Atlantic

EST. 1857



METHOD



MADNESS



PERFORMANCE, CRAFTED TO THE EXTREME.

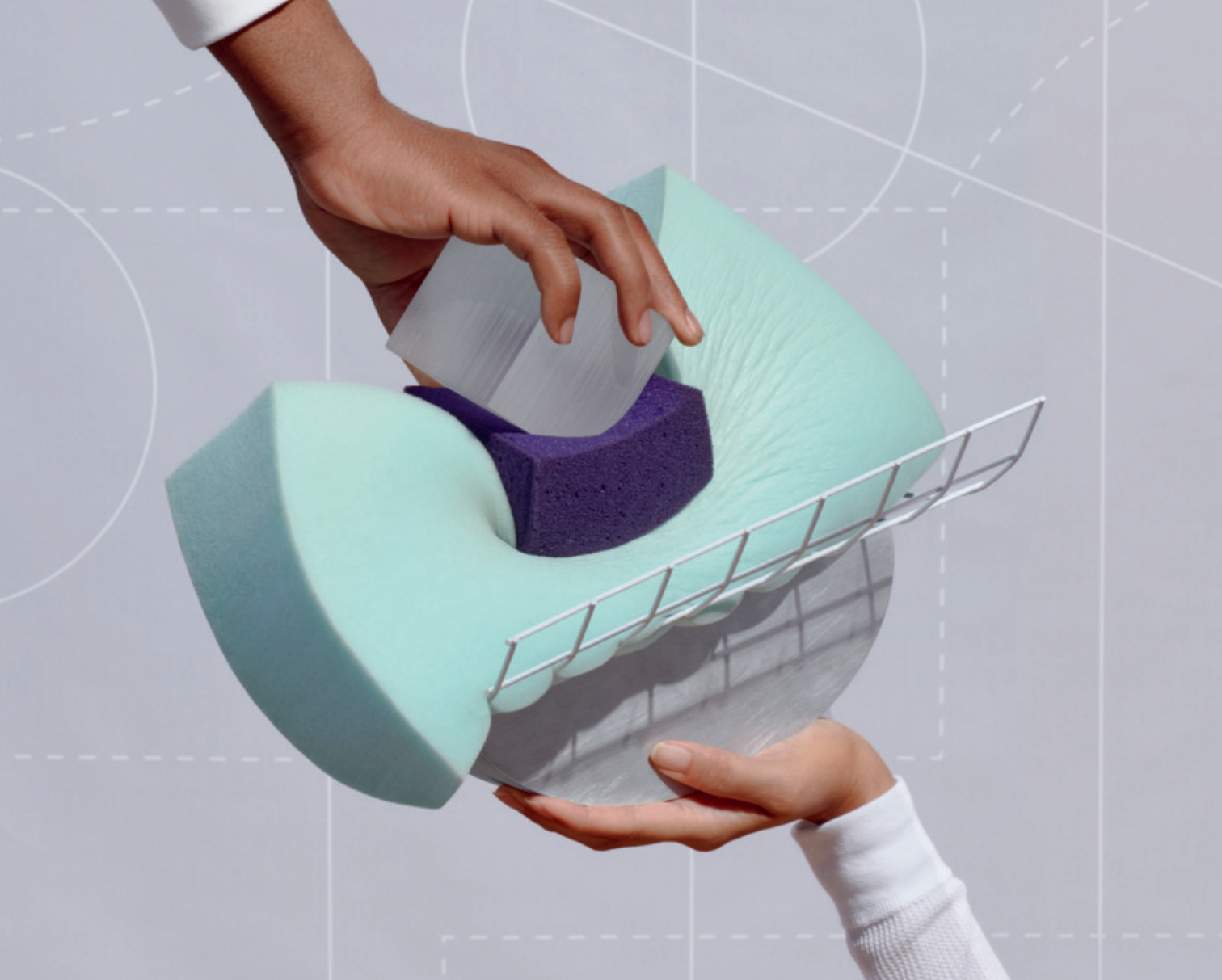
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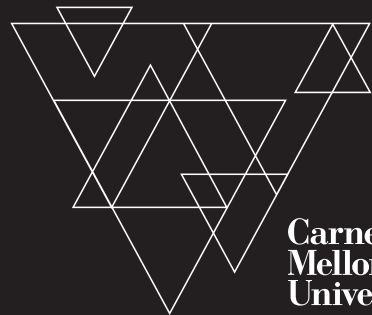
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By Jordan Kisner

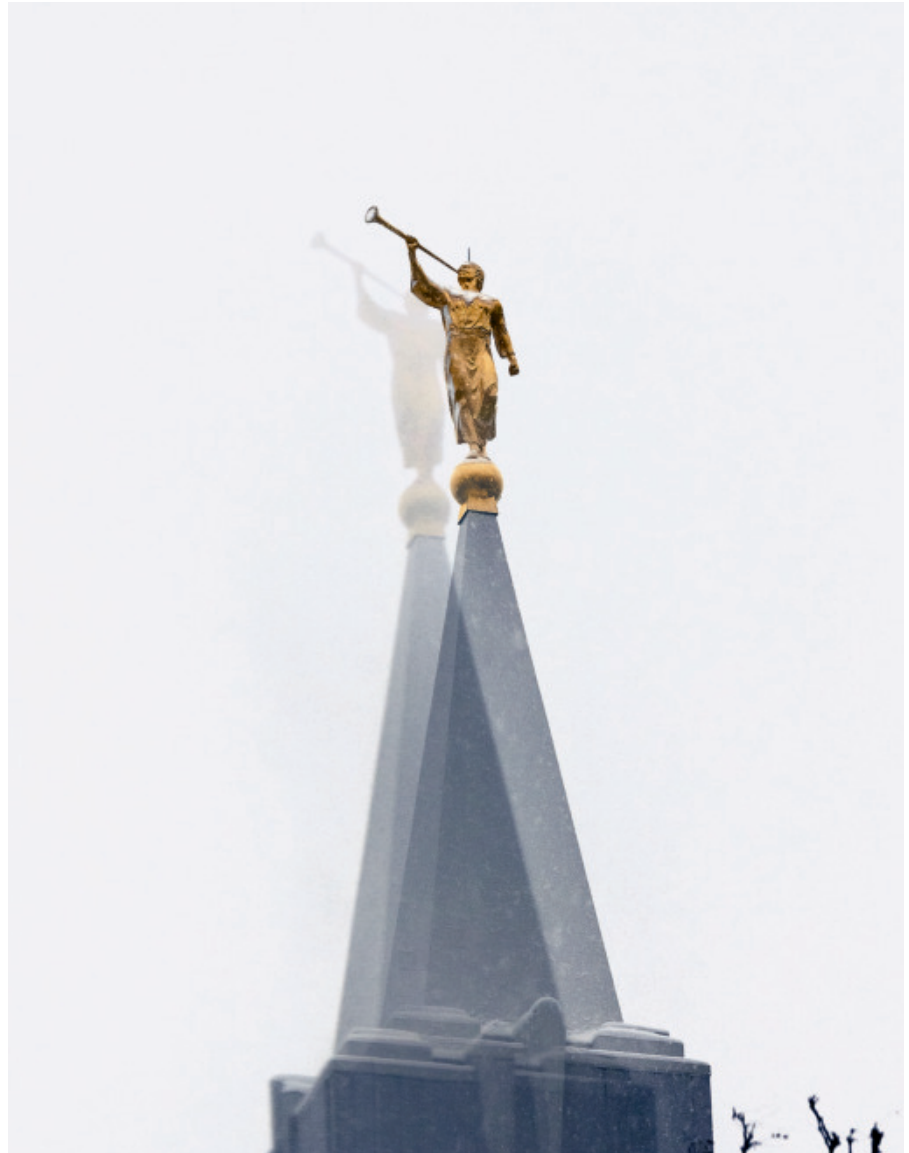
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COVER STORY

The COVID-19 Manhattan Project

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THE MOST AMERICAN RELIGION

By McKay Coppins

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A temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, outside Salt Lake City. The Church averages nearly 700 converts a day and has temples in 66 countries.

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ILLUSTRATION BY
OLIVER MUNDAY



Introducing ATEM Mini

The compact television studio that lets you create presentation videos and live streams!

Blackmagic Design is a leader in video for the television industry, and now you can create your own streaming videos with ATEM Mini. Simply connect HDMI cameras, computers or even microphones. Then push the buttons on the panel to switch video sources just like a professional broadcaster! You can even add titles, picture in picture overlays and mix audio! Then live stream to Zoom, Skype or YouTube!

Create Training and Educational Videos

ATEM Mini's includes everything you need. All the buttons are positioned on the front panel so it's very easy to learn. There are 4 HDMI video inputs for connecting cameras and computers, plus a USB output that looks like a webcam so you can connect to Zoom or Skype. ATEM Software Control for Mac and PC is also included, which allows access to more advanced "broadcast" features!

Use Professional Video Effects

ATEM Mini is really a professional broadcast switcher used by television stations. This means it has professional effects such as a DVE for picture in picture effects commonly used for commentating over a computer slide show. There are titles for presenter names, wipe effects for transitioning between sources and a green screen keyer for replacing backgrounds with graphics.

Live Stream Training and Conferences

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

Monitor all Video Inputs!

With so many cameras, computers and effects, things can get busy fast! The ATEM Mini Pro model features a "multiview" that lets you see all cameras, titles and program, plus streaming and recording status all on a single TV or monitor. There are even tally indicators to show when a camera is on air! Only ATEM Mini is a true professional television studio in a small compact design!

ATEM Mini.....\$295*
ATEM Mini Pro.....\$595*
ATEM Software Control.....Free



Behind the Art: When Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Li Zhensheng was a photojournalist for a local newspaper in Harbin. Wearing a “Red-Color News Soldier” armband, Li gained unfettered access to the revolutionary movement, but only the “positive” images were published at the time. Li stashed the

“negative” images under his floorboards until 1988, when they were finally revealed to the world. Li’s work, which accompanies Barbara Demick’s review, “China’s Rebel Historians” (p. 78), remains one of the most complete visual archives of the Cultural Revolution. Li died in 2020.

—Emily Jan, *Art Director*

THE

Editor’s Note

In the November issue, *The Atlantic* published “The Mad, Mad World of Niche Sports Among Ivy League–Obsessed Parents.” After we published this article, new information emerged that raised serious concerns about its accuracy, and about the credibility of the author, Ruth Shalit Barrett.

As we shared with our readers on TheAtlantic.com on November 1, we have decided to retract this article. We cannot attest to the trustworthiness and credibility of the author, and therefore we cannot attest to the veracity of the piece in its entirety.

We have established that Barrett deceived *The Atlantic* and its readers about a section of the story that concerns a person referred to as “Sloane.” The article (a PDF of which you can access on our website) stated that Sloane has a son. Before publication, Sloane confirmed this detail with *The Atlantic*’s fact-checking department. After publication, when a *Washington Post* media critic asked us about the accuracy of portions of the article, our fact-checking department reached out to Sloane to recheck certain details. Through her attorney, Sloane informed us that she does not have a son, a fact we then independently corroborated.

Sloane’s attorney told *The Atlantic* that Sloane had misled the magazine because she had wanted to make herself less readily

identifiable—and that Barrett had proposed the invention of a son as a way to protect her anonymity.

When we asked Barrett about these allegations, she eventually admitted that she was “complicit” in “compounding the deception” and that “it would not be fair to Sloane” to blame her alone for deceiving *The Atlantic*. Barrett denies that the invention of a son was her idea, and denies advising Sloane to mislead *The Atlantic*’s fact-checkers, but told us that “on some level I did know that it was BS” and “I do take responsibility.”

Sloane’s attorney claimed that there are several other errors about Sloane in the article but declined to provide examples. Barrett says that the fabricated son is the only detail about which she deceived our fact-checkers and editors.

During the initial fact-checking process, we corroborated many details of Sloane’s story with sources other than Sloane. But the checking of some details of Sloane’s story relied solely on interviews and other communications with Sloane or her husband or both of them.

In reviewing the article again after publication, before we retracted it, our fact-checking department identified several additional errors: We corrected the characterization of a thigh injury (originally described as a deep gash but more

accurately described as a skin rupture that bled through a fencing uniform); the location of a lacrosse family mentioned in the article (they do not live in Greenwich, Connecticut, but in another town in Fairfield County); and a characterization of backyard hockey rinks as “Olympic-size” (the private rinks are large, but not Olympic-size).

Originally, we referred to the author of the article as Ruth S. Barrett. When writing recently for other magazines, Barrett was typically identified by her full name, Ruth Shalit Barrett. (Barrett is her married name.) In 1999, when she was known by Ruth Shalit, she left *The New Republic* after plagiarism and inaccurate reporting were discovered in her work. We typically defer to authors on how their byline appears. We referred to Barrett as Ruth S. Barrett at her request, but in the interest of transparency, we should have included the name that she used as her byline in the 1990s. On our website, we have changed the byline on this article to Ruth Shalit Barrett.

We decided to assign Barrett this freelance story in part because more than two decades had separated her from her journalistic malpractice at *The New Republic* and because in recent years her work has appeared in reputable magazines. We took into consideration the argument that Barrett deserved a second chance. We were wrong to make this assignment, however. It reflects poor judgment on our part, and we regret our decision.

Our fact-checking department thoroughly checked this piece, speaking with more than 40 sources and independently corroborating information. But we now know that the author misled our fact-checkers, lied to our editors, and is accused of inducing a source to lie to our fact-checking department. We believe that these actions fatally undermined the effectiveness of the fact-checking process. It is impossible for us to vouch for the accuracy of this article. This is what necessitated a full retraction. We apologize to our readers.



LAST EXIT

Donald Trump's first term was characterized by theft, lies, corruption, and the incitement of violence. A second term, David Frum warned in the November issue, might have spelled the end of American democracy.

Letters

D

David Frum was right when, almost four years ago, he forecast what President Donald Trump would do. But is it right to put all the blame on Trump? As Frum concedes, the president may flout this convention or that tradition, but he is invariably operating within his powers under the Constitution.

The United States has had a president without a popular mandate, a Supreme Court appointed along party lines, gerrymandered districts, disrespect for human life through the death penalty and lack of strict gun control,

and unaccountable and discretionary executive power. This falls far short of what democracy means to many people today.

Mike Norris
Dublin, Ireland

Mr. Frum's insights are much appreciated. My question is, given the institutionalization of corruption and the very conservative Supreme Court, what constitutional amendments are necessary to preserve democracy, even after Trump?

Bruce Riddle
White River Junction, Vt.

Why British Police Shows Are Better

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

British police shows tend to have fewer, longer episodes than American police shows. They play like mini-movies. *Hinterland* and *Shetland* are beautifully filmed, and that quality is easier to sustain over a shorter season. The longer episodes also allow more character development. While I agree that the focus of the shows is usually different from that of American series, the structure of the shows is also a key difference in their ability to portray characters and convey mood.

Stuart Safford
Rockville, Md.

The one glaring omission in Christopher Orr's reasons for loving British police shows is the actors: They look like real people, not 20-somethings with glowing white teeth and flowing hair. They are a pleasure indeed to watch.

Kathryn Wert
Cambridge, Idaho

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE LEGACY OF DONALD TRUMP

*His reign of lies
poisoned our minds and
our politics, with effects
that will long linger.
But democracy survived.*

BY GEORGE PACKER

To assess the legacy of Donald Trump's presidency, start by quantifying it. Since last February, more than a quarter of a million Americans have died from COVID-19—a fifth of the world's deaths from the disease, the highest number of any country. In the three years before the pandemic, 2.3 million Americans lost their health insurance, accounting for up to 10,000 “excess deaths”; millions more lost coverage during the pandemic. The United States' score on the human-rights organization Freedom House's annual index dropped from 90 out of 100 under President Barack Obama to 86 under Trump, below that of Greece and

Mauritius. Trump withdrew the U.S. from 13 international organizations, agreements, and treaties. The number of refugees admitted into the country annually fell from 85,000 to 12,000. About 400 miles of barrier were built along the southern border. The whereabouts of the parents of 666 children seized at the border by U.S. officials remain unknown.

Trump reversed 80 environmental rules and regulations. He appointed more than 220 judges to the federal bench, including three to the Supreme Court—24 percent female, 4 percent Black, and 100 percent conservative, with more rated “not qualified” by the American Bar Association than under any other president in the past half century. The national debt increased by \$7 trillion, or 37 percent. In Trump’s last year, the trade deficit was on track to exceed \$600 billion, the largest gap since 2008. Trump signed just one major piece of legislation, the 2017 tax law, which, according to one study, for the first time brought the total tax rate of the wealthiest 400 Americans below that of every other income group. In Trump’s first year as president, he paid \$750 in taxes. While he was in office, taxpayers and campaign donors handed over at least \$8 million to his family business.

America under Trump became less free, less equal, more divided, more alone, deeper in debt, swampier, dirtier, meaner, sicker, and deader. It also became more delusional. No number from Trump’s years in power will be more lastingly destructive than his 25,000 false or misleading statements. Super-spread by social media and cable news, they contaminated the minds of tens of millions of people.

Trump’s lies will linger for years, poisoning the atmosphere like radioactive dust.

PRESIDENTS LIE routinely, about everything from war to sex to their health. When the lies are consequential enough, they have a corrosive effect on democracy. Lyndon B. Johnson deceived Americans about the Gulf of Tonkin incident and everything else concerning the Vietnam War. Richard Nixon’s lifelong habit of prevaricating gave him the nickname “Tricky Dick.” After Vietnam and Watergate, Americans never fully recovered their trust in government. But these cases of presidential lying came from a time when the purpose was limited and rational: to cover up a scandal, make a disaster disappear, mislead the public in service of a particular goal. In a sense, Americans expected a degree of fabrication from their leaders. After Jimmy Carter, in his 1976 campaign, promised, “I’ll never lie to you,” and then pretty much kept his word, voters sent him back to Georgia. Ronald Reagan’s gauzy fictions were far more popular.

Trump’s lies were different. They belonged to the post-modern era. They were assaults against not this or that fact, but reality itself. They spread beyond public policy to invade private life, clouding the mental faculties of everyone who had to breathe his air, dissolving the very distinction between truth and falsehood. Their purpose was never the conventional desire to conceal something shameful from the public. He was stunningly forthright about things that other presidents would have gone to great lengths to keep secret: his true feelings about Senator John McCain and other war heroes;

his eagerness to get rid of disloyal underlings; his desire for law enforcement to protect his friends and hurt his enemies; his effort to extort a foreign leader for dirt on a political adversary; his affection for Kim Jong Un and admiration for Vladimir Putin; his positive view of white nationalists; his hostility toward racial and religious minorities; and his contempt for women.

AMERICA
UNDER TRUMP
BECAME LESS
FREE, LESS
EQUAL, MORE
DIVIDED,
MORE ALONE,
DEEPER IN DEBT,
SWAMPIER,
DIRTIER,
MEANER,
SICKER, AND
DEADER.

The most mendacious of Trump’s predecessors would have been careful to limit these thoughts to private recording systems. Trump spoke them openly, not because he couldn’t control his impulses, but intentionally, even systematically, in order to demolish the norms that would otherwise have constrained his power. To his supporters, his shamelessness became a badge of honesty and strength. They grasped the message that they, too, could say whatever they wanted without apology. To his opponents, fighting by the rules—even in as small a way as calling him “President Trump”—seemed like a sucker’s game. So the level of American political language

was everywhere dragged down, leaving a gaping shame deficit.

Trump’s barrage of falsehoods—as many as 50 daily in the last fevered months of the 2020 campaign—complemented his unconcealed brutality. Lying was another variety of shamelessness. Just as he said aloud what he was supposed to keep to himself, he lied again and again about matters of settled fact—the more brazen and frequent the lie, the better. Two days after the polls closed, with the returns showing him almost certain to lose, Trump stood at the White House podium and declared himself the winner of an election that his opponent was trying to steal.

This crowning conspiracy theory of Trump’s presidency activated his entitled children, compliant staff, and sycophants in Congress and the media to issue dozens of statements declaring that the election was fraudulent. Following the mechanism of every big lie of the Trump years, the Republican Party establishment fell in line. Within a week of Election Day, false claims of voter fraud in swing states had received almost 5 million mentions in the press and on social media. In one poll, 70 percent of Republican voters concluded that the election hadn’t been free or fair.

So a stab-in-the-back narrative was buried in the minds of millions of Americans, where it burns away, as imperishable as a carbon isotope, consuming whatever is left of their trust in democratic institutions and values. This narrative will widen the gap between Trump believers and their compatriots who might live in the same town, but a different universe. And that was Trump’s purpose—to



keep us locked in a mental prison where reality was unknowable so that he could go on wielding power, whether in or out of office, including the power to destroy.

For his opponents, the lies were intended to be profoundly demoralizing. Neither counting them nor checking facts nor debunking conspiracies made any difference. Trump demonstrated again and again that the truth doesn't matter. In rational people this provoked incredulity, outrage, exhaustion, and finally an impulse to crawl away and abandon the field of politics to the fantasists.

For believers, the consequences were worse. They surrendered the ability to make basic judgments about facts, exiling themselves from the common framework of self-government. They became litter swirling in the wind of any preposterous claim that blew from @realDonaldTrump. Truth was whatever made the world whole again by hurting their enemies—the more far-fetched, the more potent and thrilling. After the election, as charges of voter fraud began to pile up, Matthew Sheffield, a reformed right-wing media activist, tweeted: “Truth for conservative journalists is anything that harms ‘the left.’ It doesn't even have to be a fact. Trump's numerous lies about any subject under the sun are thus justified because his deceptions point to a larger truth: that liberals are evil.”

HOW DID HALF the country—practical, hands-on, self-reliant Americans, still balancing family budgets and following complex repair manuals—slip into such cognitive decline when it came to politics? Blaming ignorance

or stupidity would be a mistake. You have to summon an act of will, a certain energy and imagination, to replace truth with the authority of a con man like Trump. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, describes the susceptibility to propaganda of the atomized modern masses, “obsessed by a desire to escape from reality because in their essential homelessness they can no longer bear its accidental, incomprehensible aspects.” They seek refuge in “a man-made pattern of relative consistency” that bears little relation to reality. Though the U.S. is still a democratic republic, not a totalitarian regime, and Trump was an all-American demagogue, not a fascist dictator, his followers abandoned common sense and found their guide to the world in him. Defeat won't change that.

Trump damaged the rest of us, too. He got as far as he did by appealing to the perennial hostility of popular masses toward elites. In a democracy, who gets to say what is true—the experts or the people? The historian Sophia Rosenfeld, author of *Democracy and Truth*, traces this conflict back to the Enlightenment, when modern democracy overthrew the authority of kings and priests: “The ideal of the democratic truth process has been threatened repeatedly ever since the late eighteenth century by the efforts of one or the other of these epistemic cohorts, expert or popular, to monopolize it.”

Monopoly of public policy by experts—trade negotiators, government bureaucrats, think tankers, professors, journalists—helped create the populist backlash that empowered Trump. His reign of lies drove educated

Americans to place their faith, and even their identity, all the more certainly in experts, who didn't always deserve it (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, election pollsters). The war between populists and experts relieved both sides of the democratic imperative to persuade. The standoff turned them into caricatures.

THIS WAS
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Trump's legacy includes an extremist Republican Party that tries to hold on to power by flagrantly undemocratic means, and an opposition pushed toward its own version of extremism. He leaves behind a society in which the bonds of trust are degraded, in which his example licenses everyone to cheat on taxes and mock affliction. Many of his policies can be reversed or mitigated. It will be much harder to clear our minds of his lies and restore the shared understanding of reality—the agreement, however inconvenient, that A is A and not B—on which a democracy depends.

But we now have the chance, because two events in Trump's last year in office broke the spell of his sinister perversion of the truth. The first was the

coronavirus. The beginning of the end of Trump's presidency arrived on March 11, 2020, when he addressed the nation for the first time on the subject of the pandemic and showed himself to be completely out of his depth. The virus was a fact that Trump couldn't lie into oblivion or forge into a political weapon—it was too personal and frightening, too real. As hundreds of thousands of Americans died, many of them needlessly, and the administration flailed between fantasy, partisan incitement, and criminal negligence, a crucial number of Americans realized that Trump's lies could get someone they love killed.

The second event came on November 3. For months Trump had tried frantically to destroy Americans' trust in the election—the essence of the democratic system, the one lever of power that belongs undeniably to the people. His effort consisted of nonstop lies about the fraudulence of mail-in ballots. But the ballots flooded into election offices, and people lined up before dawn on the first day of early voting, and some of them waited 10 hours to vote, and by the end of Election Day, despite the soaring threat of the virus, more than 150 million Americans had cast ballots—the highest turnout rate since at least 1900. The defeated president tried again to soil our faith, by taking away our votes. The election didn't end his lies—nothing will—or the deeper conflicts that the lies revealed. But we learned that we still want democracy. This, too, is the legacy of Donald Trump. *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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THE SECOND CAREER OF MARTELLUS BENNETT

The former NFL tight end writes the kind of children's books he would have loved as a kid.

BY HOWARD BRYANT

Martellus Bennett was in Japan when Bill Belichick called. The legendary New England Patriots head coach wasn't surprised to find Bennett in such a far-flung locale. "You're always somewhere," Bennett recalls a bemused Belichick telling him. It was February 2018, and the veteran tight end had just reached his second straight Super Bowl with the Patriots; Belichick, Bennett says, was calling to talk about his plans for the next season. Most players would have seized the opportunity to make a pitch for playing time. Bennett told his coach he'd have to get back to him. Something was happening.

Bennett had undertaken the solitary, 10-day trip to Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka in search of illumination. His tumultuous 2017 season had begun with a new team, the Packers. Green Bay is a famous football town, but Bennett found it worse than inhospitable. "The way you feel the coldness when you walk into a freezer, you could feel the racism there," he told me recently. He finished the season back in New England, but injury kept him off the field during the team's playoff run, which ended in a loss to the Philadelphia Eagles. Now, as he toured Tokyo (with a guide who had been recommended by the Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, who, even in Japan, knew a guy) and explored the Tenryuji Temple and Shinto shrines, Bennett found the clarity he sought. "It hit me," he said. "I do not love everything that I do. In fact, I hate more about it than I love." Rather than continue playing, Bennett hung up his cleats.

In recent years, fellow tight ends Jason Witten and Rob Gronkowski have retired from football only to find themselves

unsatisfied with their second acts; both quickly returned to the familiarity of the game. Bennett, by contrast, hasn't missed it for a moment. He had laid the groundwork for a second career while still in the NFL. For all of the speed and brutality of the sport, the life of a professional football player is marked by long stretches of tedium. During endless team meetings, Bennett was never without his sketchbook, in which he would invent characters and build universes for them to inhabit. "I had to learn how to play football, how to run routes, how to catch," he said. "No one has ever taught me how to be creative. It's just who I am."

It's a testament to Bennett's talent—on the field, and in his sketchbook—that such an avocation was permitted inside Belichick's famously all-business locker room. Bennett presented some of his sketches and storyboards to the entire Patriots roster; Chris Long, a former teammate, told me he's "a big admirer of his creativity."

Bennett was also known on the team for his commitment to social justice. Beginning in 2016, he was one of a cohort of players who advocated for police accountability, a group that included Colin Kaepernick as well as Bennett's older brother, Michael. The issue has since gained traction, but at the time it was a lonely cause, and one that came with real costs.

Bennett, who is now 33, remains a critic of the NFL, a league he regards as infected by racism, even as it has belatedly made a show of embracing social-justice issues. But in his second career, he's trying to address racial disparities in a different industry: children's entertainment.

Bennett is the author of four books for children, which he writes as well as illustrates. His goal is to tell the kinds of stories he struggled to find during his own childhood: stories about Black characters going off on fantastical adventures, which too often have been the exclusive province of white characters written by white authors. In June, Bennett signed a deal with Disney to create an animated series based on his *Hey A.J.* series, which follows the escapades of his daughter, Austyn Jett Rose. It was a coup for Bennett's still fledgling enterprise, and a meaningful one, given the scope of his ambition. "I don't ever want to be remembered for playing sports," he told me. "I don't want anyone to bring up Super Bowls. I want them to say, 'Oh, *and* he played football.'"

GROWING UP IN HOUSTON, Bennett was a standout athlete, excelling at both basketball (he briefly considered the NBA, and was talented enough to have been drafted) and football (as a senior at Alief Taylor High School, he was ranked the best tight end in football-rich Texas). But Bennett was also big-brained and quick-witted, with interests that stretched well beyond athletics. His mother, Pennie, was a middle-school teacher. His father, Michael, was an IT tech at Enron. Martellus was an honor student and a first-chair trombonist in the school band. As a hobby, he and his father would build computers from scratch.

Despite his diverse interests, Bennett felt he was inevitably seen as an athlete first. Senior year, he stood 6 foot 6 and weighed 240 pounds. For most kids, being considered NFL material would be the

ultimate compliment. Yet even as an adolescent, Bennett saw sports less for what they offered and more for what they took away. His brother was already on track for a career in the NFL; several star athletes from the area would reach the

"I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO BRING UP SUPER BOWLS," BENNETT TOLD ME. "I WANT THEM TO SAY, 'OH, *AND* HE PLAYED FOOTBALL.'"

professional ranks. Bennett observed the way that, in America, Black ability could mean only athletic ability: What else could a guy that big, that rich, and that Black possibly be?

"The value we place on the athlete is greater than the value we place on the scholar," Bennett told me. "Two kids walk into the barbershop, and one is a pretty good basketball player. People will be like, 'You gotta watch him. He's got a jumper. He's got a shot at the NBA.' And if a kid comes in and has won two science fairs in a row and got a grant? No one says, 'That's the next Mark Zuckerberg.' Or 'He's going to be Bill Gates.' They don't celebrate him."

Bennett was one of the lucky ones: Like Michael, he possessed world-class athletic talent and went on to a high-earning career in professional sports. His book *Dear Black Boy*, which he began writing while he was still in the NFL, was addressed to the 99.9 percent of children who *won't* be

able to make a living playing sports. As a kid, even one growing up with certain middle-class advantages, Bennett felt the weight of the pernicious American idea that a Black boy who can't play ball will end up either dead or in jail. He wants these boys to see another path. He exhorts his young readers to exercise their mind, in preparation for a different kind of contest. "We must lace up our shoes to do more than run another sprint, dunk another ball, catch another pass, or swing at another pitch," he writes. "We must lace our shoes and run toward freedom."

Dear Black Boy was an extension of Bennett's activism; he was inspired to write it by the 2016 killings of Philando Castile, shot by a police officer during a traffic stop in a Minneapolis suburb, and Alton Sterling, who was shot at close range by an officer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. More recently, his writing for children has taken a new approach: His goal is to tell stories that a young Martellus Bennett would have loved. "A lot of my work is me subconsciously trying to validate my childhood, because the childhood I had as a Black boy does not exist in media today," he said. "I was more like *The Goonies* than *Boyz n the Hood*."

Bennett worries that Black kids aren't afforded the same opportunities to imagine their way into mischief that white kids are. Surveying the children's-entertainment landscape, he sees stories in which Black characters either don't exist or exist merely to satisfy some goal of representation. Black authors are rarer still: According to data collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, at the University

of Wisconsin at Madison, less than 5 percent of children's books published in 2019 were written by Black authors.

To make his point about the scarcity of Black heroes for young readers, Bennett asked me a seemingly simple question: "Who is the most universally known Black character of your lifetime? Off the top of your head. The Black Mickey Mouse. The Black Spiderman. Who immediately comes to mind?" I was stumped. The most obvious answer, Black Panther, was created at the height of the civil-rights movement, but the character wasn't even American, and for decades the African king remained a minor character in the Marvel Comics universe. In 2016, Ta-Nehisi Coates took over the title, but even his efforts—and the blockbuster success of the movie adaptation—have hardly changed the landscape. "Go to a comic-book store and ask for a comic with a Black lead that's not Black Panther," Bennett said. "It's a struggle."

When Black characters do show up as protagonists in children's entertainment, too often it's in service of recounting a tragedy, their Blackness inevitably rooted in pain. Bennett said he doesn't want his daughter to read books like *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas's young-adult novel centered on a police shooting: "I'm sure it's a fascinating book, but why do I want my kids to see more racism, or kids dealing with racism?" White kids are constantly invited to escape into universes bearing no resemblance to our own. Why aren't Black kids?

Even Black creators like Thomas, Bennett said, can't help but freight their stories about Black kids with the horrors of racial injustice. He pointed to

the Netflix movie *See You Yesterday*, directed by Stefon Bristol and produced by Spike Lee. "I was so excited to see this movie," he said. "They had these smart Black kids in New York City, and they built a time machine, and I'm like, *This is about to be the Black version of Back to the Future!*" The plot, however, takes a violent turn. "You know what this genius Black girl had to do?" he asked me. "Her brother gets shot by the cops, and she has to go back in time to stop her brother from getting shot by the cops." To Bennett, such narratives only reinforce the old dead-or-in-jail idea. Black trauma has become the de facto Black culture.

"Black people are treated as second-class citizens in reality and fantasy," he said. "I want to build worlds where kids and families of color can come and know that they own it, they belong there, and it's a magical place." Put another way: "If you get a time machine in my world, you're going someplace amazing."

As a boy, Bennett loved roaming the candy-coated halls of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, and there's something of Roald Dahl in his own work—flights of wild imagination cut with wry humor. In *Hey A.J., It's Bedtime!*, a bedroom full of toys comes alive the moment A.J.'s parents turn out the light: Mermaids watch an action movie, dinosaurs order pizza, and zombies dance. A.J. has a difficult decision to make: get some sleep, or join the fun. She finds a way to do both, by partying for a while before retreating to her parents' room when things get a bit *too* raucous. In the end, A.J. collapses in a blissful post-adventure slumber, her right foot planted firmly in her father's sleepless face.

WHEN I SPOKE with Bennett this summer, over Zoom, he was at his home in Los Angeles. Behind him was a mural he had painted, called *The Little Brown Girl*. Bennett's visual style is heavily influenced by the spiritual undercurrents of the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki; his approach has also been shaped by the Japanese concept of *heta-uma*, which

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finds meaning in blemished lines. "It's ugly and pretty at the same time," Bennett told me. "It's not supposed to be perfect. I want you to see the human in my art."

In *The Little Brown Girl*, an ominous whirlwind carries a curiously unafraid little girl aloft as she holds on to the stem of a red umbrella. The mural suggests an adventure about to unfold, and it perhaps reveals something about its restless creator, who always seems to be in pursuit of some new fantasy. Back when he would build computers with his father, the activity was fueled by tubs of rocky-road ice cream. Nostalgia for those sessions inspired Bennett to partner with Odd-Fellows, a Brooklyn ice-cream maker, on a concoction called "The Happy Flavor by Marty." Then there was a collaboration with the Brooklyn chocolatier Fine & Raw, on a trio of chocolate bars (raspberry, lucuma and vanilla, and sea salt) that

came wrapped in gold foil and packaging illustrated by Bennett. Bennett doesn't want to be Willy Wonka—but like the fictional candy man, he sees no reason why his wildest ideas can't be brought to life.

This summer, Bennett settled on a name for his post-football enterprise: Browniversal. He thinks the name, which was his wife, Siggie's, idea, captures his audacious ambition, which includes not just books but apps, games, even theme parks. "Black kids 6 to 13 are largely forgotten," he said. "They have to jump to sports, because they don't see themselves [anywhere else]. Cartoon Network having Black characters on the afternoon block isn't change. I imagine a world where all the characters are brown."

Bennett is well aware of the challenges he's facing. He has to persuade the monolith of mainstream publishing and media distribution to see Black kids as he does. He also understands the grim realities faced by his intended audience. Seventy-five percent of Black boys in the United States aren't at reading level in fourth grade. Remedying that problem will require the structural societal reforms for which Bennett has been advocating since his days as a football player. "I do know my task is hard," he told me. "But I keep my head down and do the work, and never look at the finish line." As he writes in *Dear Black Boy*, prodding his young readers to join the race, "freedom is still a giraffe and a half away." *A*

Howard Bryant is a senior writer at ESPN and the author of Full Dissidence: Notes From an Uneven Playing Field.

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JEANS NOW, PAY LATER

Are the new online services that allow you to buy just about anything in installments—interest-free—too good to be true?

BY AMANDA MULL

Everyone is born with a mark, and you have to hope you wise up from there. Getting purposefully and repeatedly fooled is one of the fundamental experiences of childhood—by peekaboo, by Santa Claus, by the idea that you'll grow a watermelon in your tummy if you swallow the seeds. The more kids realize they've been fooled, first by caregivers doing some good-natured baby trickery and then by peers at school, the wiser they theoretically get to situations in which they should be wary.

When high school spits kids out into adulthood, they'd better have learned those lessons well—the stakes of being a mark ratchet up considerably

along with the legal rights of being a grown-up. Suddenly banks, lenders, student-loan underwriters, and any store hyping a 20 percent discount for opening a new credit card would like to show you your options. The pitches are pretty good, too: No one trying to shake you down at recess was dangling the carrot of shopping sprees or class mobility. If you need to pay for college, rent an apartment, or just buy some jeans, the entire field of credit and lending unfurls before you.

Yet few Americans hit the age of majority with more than a rudimentary understanding of their finances, and the country's banks are poorly regulated. From 2004 to 2020, student-loan debt metastasized from \$250 billion to \$1.5 trillion,

as the costs of higher education increased but wages in many fields didn't rise to meet them. Also putting young people into arrears during the aughts: carnival barkers in the quad hawking Visa, Mastercard, and the like alongside free T-shirts and pizza, until the federal government kicked credit-card companies off campus in 2009 and barred them from sending sign-up pitches offering prizes to those living in college housing.

The new protections, combined with an ambient fear of debt in a country still reeling from a loan-induced economic catastrophe, worked. Young Americans began opening credit cards less frequently; when they did, they missed fewer payments and maintained lower balances than

previous generations had. In 2012, only 41 percent of people in their 20s had a credit card, as opposed to more than 73 percent of American households overall. The use of debit cards soared. The marks weren't so easy anymore.

By 2019, that progress had eroded. The number of 20-somethings with credit cards ticked above 50 percent, and more of them began falling behind on payments. The cost of living was rising, the Great Recession wasn't so close in the rearview mirror, and people needed and wanted to buy things, even if they didn't necessarily want credit cards. It was the perfect time for a shiny new gambit from the finance world, and one emerged to meet the moment: point-of-sale lending start-ups like Klarna, Afterpay, and Affirm, or, as many of them prefer to be known, "buy now, pay later" services.

You've probably seen these businesses infiltrate many of the places you shop online. They're embedded in the checkout processes at Walmart, H&M, Sephora, Dyson. Their promises are enticing: Split a \$200 pair of Adidas into four automatic, interest-free payments of \$50, with only a cursory credit check required. Try a pricey new moisturizer and return it if you don't like it before the money has even left your bank account. Pelotons don't cost two grand; they cost 60 interest-free bucks a month for a few years. The checkout lenders market themselves on simplicity, transparency, and low cost—credit for people who are too smart to get tangled up with credit cards. But when you find yourself being flattered and asked for your debit-card number in the same breath, it's time once again to ponder one

of life's most important questions: What's the catch?

WHEN ERIN LOWRY first encountered the chance to take out a loan for a couple hundred dollars from Affirm, she was buying Cole Haan shoes. This was a few years ago, before Affirm and similar

services had been adopted by tens of thousands of American internet retailers. "My gut reaction was like, *Oh, this is a terrible idea*," Lowry, the author of the *Broke Millennial* financial-advice books, told me. Her standard counsel for these situations probably won't shock you: Deals

that sound too good to be true probably are. But could point-of-sale lenders be the exception to the rule?

These companies put forth a range of financing alternatives, but their most ubiquitous breaks down purchases into two to four installments, paid automatically over a few weeks

or months, usually with your debit card. The fine print varies, but the plans typically charge no interest, and the penalty for missing a payment ranges from nothing to nominal—seven or eight bucks. (Credit cards are also accepted, but that, of course, introduces the possibility of paying interest.)



Upon checkout, you give the store's lending partner your name, address, phone number, and birth date, and are approved or rejected based on an algorithm in lieu of a full credit check. None of the major lenders discloses the criteria included in their algorithms, but the time of day and the size of your purchase are often cited as examples of what might be considered—bad news if you want to spend a lot of money at three in the morning.

For Lowry, the claim of transparency and low cost felt like a red flag in and of itself. Most credit-card companies make money through interest and fees paid by the people who use their cards and continually add to their balances—so what was going on here? If you're not sure who's funding the bottom line, Lowry told me, it's probably you, in one way or another.

According to the lenders, their revenue comes primarily from stores, which pay much more than they would to process the same transactions with credit cards. Why are retailers willing to fork over the extra money? "They say consumers are more likely to shop; they see consumers spending a bit more money and shopping more regularly," says David Sykes, the head of Klarna's U.S. division. He compares his firm's business model to the one with which the Home Shopping Network struck gold decades ago: When people hear "four payments of \$25," they just don't feel like they're spending \$100.

These new lenders also give retailers greater access to a demographic whose purchasing power is relatively untapped: the nearly half of Americans in their 20s who don't have a

credit card. While many of the services offer loans for four- or five-figure purchases, with interest rates similar to those of credit cards, their bread and butter is the mundane commerce of everyday life for the young—people buying a last-minute suit for a job interview or stocking up during a sale at Sephora before their next paycheck clears.

As is the case with credit cards, Lowry thinks the trick is using these services infrequently. Something that's simple for one purchase can be difficult to track across many, especially for inexperienced budgeters. "It can become really easy to forget that two months ago, you purchased an item that's taking \$25 out of your account for the next four months," she said. "That's a quick way to end up in a debt cycle." And like with other forms of credit, if you just don't pay, a bill collector will come after you.

Amanda Clayman, a Prudential financial therapist and wellness advocate (a thing that many people could use right now), told me that the very novelty of these services presents peril. "Any new technology has a certain seductiveness," she said. "When we have these new exposures to things that make it easier for us to buy, we don't yet have the experience or template of danger. We only see the promise."

ALL OF THE financial experts I spoke with voiced apprehension about the sudden pervasiveness of point-of-sale lenders and the challenges consumers face in using them wisely. Their penchant for targeting young audiences, with sponsored content from Instagram influencers and *RuPaul's*

Drag Race contestants, was also a point of concern. But the experts were clear about something else: There is no reason to vilify these services more than any of the other products that encourage (or merely help) people to buy things they can't afford.

"The U.S. market for financial services is regulated under the philosophy of caveat emptor," observes Sarah Newcomb, the director of behavioral science at the financial-research firm

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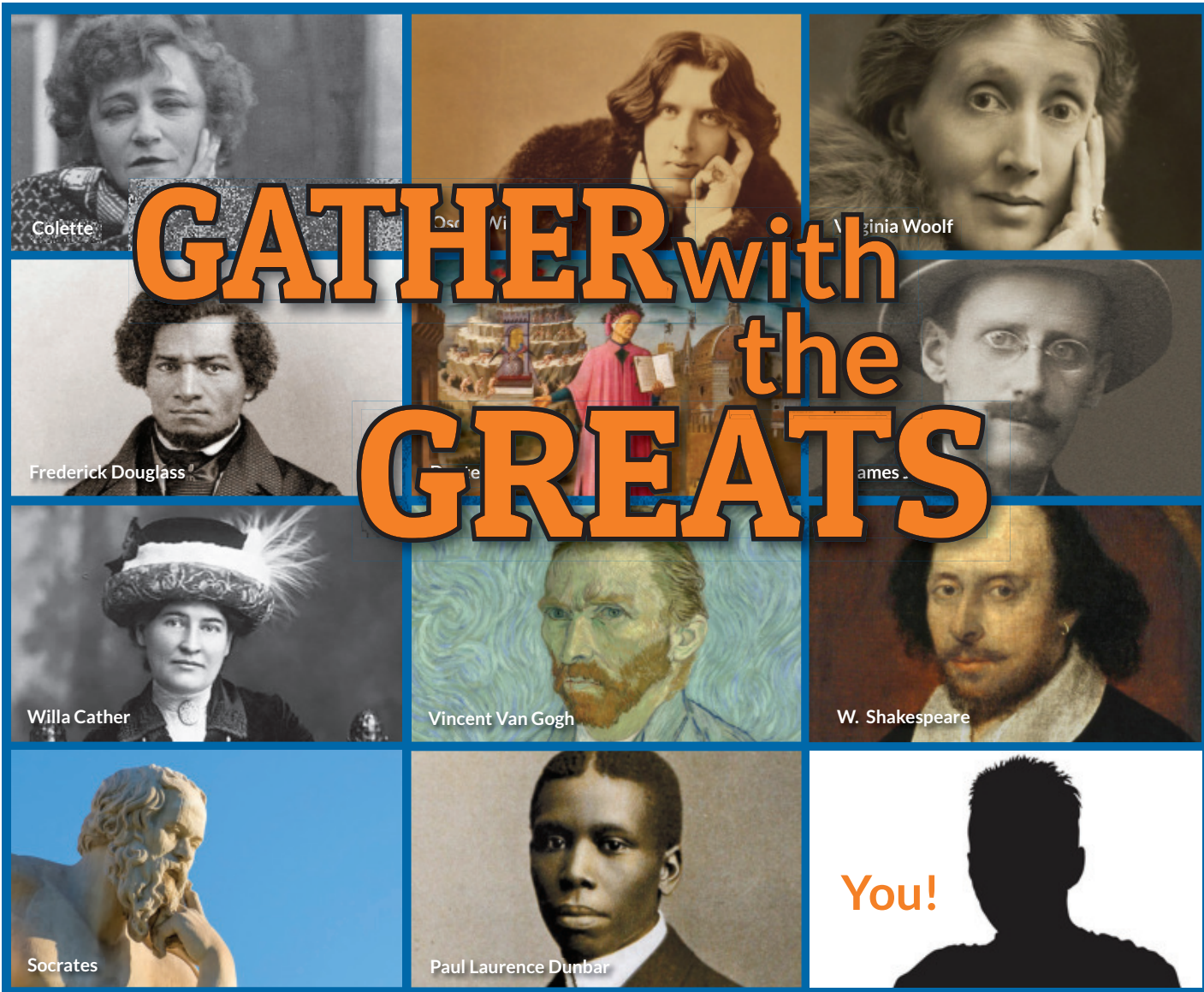
Morningstar. "Our laws basically say, 'Look, you need to know what you're buying—it's on you.'" That includes services that are objectively much riskier than what Klarna and its kin are peddling—such as payday lenders, which make small loans at sky-high interest rates to people who, because of their low income or poor credit history, can't use regular banks. These businesses take advantage of the working poor, yes, but so does the larger financial system, which leaves many people who need to pay the electric bill or buy groceries dependent on such high-risk loans.

"That line between helpful and predatory can be really blurry," Newcomb told me. "What may be predatory to one type of customer is actually a very good solution for another type of customer." Over the summer, I took out a zero-interest Affirm loan to buy a Peloton after considering the terms for a few months. I feel like I got a great deal—I was going to buy the bike regardless, and I'm paying no more than I would have had I taken the money out of my savings account. The benefit for me is that I get to hold on to my cash a bit longer, a cushion in case I have some kind of expensive emergency.

But I'm in my mid-30s, which makes me a little long in the tooth for any service looking to reach The Youths. I know things now that I didn't know when I was in college and accruing five figures of consumer debt, which it took me years to pay down. I would have salivated at the idea of paying \$72.50 up front for a new Coach bag and worrying about the rest in a few weeks. (There would not have been much more money in a few weeks.)

That come-what-may desire for instant gratification is what point-of-sale loans hope to inspire in us, after all. By decoupling the act of buying from the act of spending, they remove the psychological friction that can force people to stop, consider their choices, and decide whether they can really afford to buy that one fabulous thing. They obliterate the moment in which you might ask yourself if you are a mark. *A*

Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



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THE MAKING OF A MODEL MINORITY

Indian Americans rarely stop to ask why our entrance into American society has been so rapid—or to consider what we have in common with other nonwhite Americans.

BY ARUN VENUGOPAL

In 1978, several years after leaving India and coming to Texas, my parents decided to move out of our middle-class neighborhood in southwest Houston. Our new home, a few miles away, was a custom-designed contemporary structure on a one-acre lot in the exclusive Piney Point Village, population 3,419, a community that vies for the title of “richest city in Texas.” We had a swimming pool and a three-car garage, where my dad, an immaculately tailored allergist, parked his silver Cadillac and my mom parked her ivory Mercedes. We had, quite clearly, arrived.

Like countless other immigrants, my parents had come to the United States, in 1969, with little cash in hand. Within a few years, my devout Hindu mother, orphaned at an early age, had switched from a sari to tennis skirts and was competing at Houston’s swankiest clubs. My father, who hadn’t owned a pair of shoes until he was 10, was buying season tickets to the Houston Symphony, where he promptly fell asleep during every performance.

Our world was filled with Indian doctors and engineers. We never stopped to ask why their entrance into American

society had been so rapid. We simply accepted that their success was a combination of immigrant pluck and the right values: Indians were family-oriented, education-oriented, and work-oriented.

There was a term for our place in the country’s racial order: *model minority*. The concept is generally traced to a 1966 article in *The New York Times Magazine* by the sociologist William Petersen, which focused on Japanese Americans; the basic idea was extended to other Asian Americans. Of course, the notion of “model minorities” comes with a flip side—“problem minorities.” The terminology took on life at a time of intense social unrest: race riots across the country, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the emergence of Richard Nixon’s racially charged “southern strategy.” Many Americans were losing what faith they may have had in the possibility of racial equality.

Today, it’s easy to take for granted the measures of Indian American success: the ubiquity of the “Dr. Patel” stereotype; the kids who, year in and year out, dominate the Scripps National Spelling Bee; a vice president-elect, Kamala Harris, whose mother was Indian; and, most notably, the median annual household income,

which is among the highest of any group. Nikki Haley, Donald Trump’s former ambassador to the United Nations, whose parents arrived in the U.S. in the late ’60s, summed up one prevailing view this way: “Mostly we’re just good at being Americans.”

What is forgotten is that before Indian Americans became a model minority, we were regarded as a problem minority. Also forgotten is the extent to which the U.S. engineered the conditions that allowed certain nonwhite groups to thrive.

This is a reality to which Indian Americans themselves often seem blind. From the comfortable perspective of university towns and tech hubs and white-dominated suburbs, Indian Americans do not see what they have in common with other nonwhite Americans—as if life in a bubble were truly possible, and as if the idea of common interest with other groups were unseemly.

IN THE LATE 1800S and early 1900s, after the Exclusion Act halted most immigration from China, North American employers in need of laborers turned to India, among other places. As Erika Lee notes in her 2015 book, *The Making of Asian America*, leaflets blanketed the Punjabi countryside

promising “opportunities of fortune-making”—typically a wage of \$2 a day if a man was strong. As their numbers grew, Indian immigrants, primarily working as farm laborers or lumberjacks, came to be considered “the least desirable of all races.” Nativists warned of a “tide of turbans.” The immigrants were overwhelmingly men, and were legally prevented from bringing over a wife or children. Subject to anti-miscegenation laws, the unmarried frequently found spouses in the Hispanic or Black communities.

In 1920, a court in Oregon granted citizenship to a man named Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant who had served in the U.S. Army during the First World War. A naturalization examiner objected, and the issue made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Citing immigration and naturalization law of the time, the Court in 1923 ruled that Thind was not white in “the understanding of the common man” and denied him citizenship. In 1924, the U.S. passed the draconian Johnson-Reed Act, the last of a series of laws that effectively closed the door to immigrants from Asian countries.

Vaishno Das Bagai, the son of a wealthy landowner in Peshawar, had arrived on Angel

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Island, in San Francisco Bay, in 1915 with his wife, their three sons, and \$25,000 in gold. He became a naturalized citizen in 1921. But the revocation of his citizenship, in 1923, led to the liquidation of his property, including the store he owned. In 1928, despondent, he took his own life. “I came to America thinking, dreaming, and hoping to make this land my home,” he wrote in a farewell letter addressed to “the world at large,” which was published in the *San Francisco Examiner*. “Now what am I?”

Attitudes began to change during the Second World War. The U.S. began—selectively—to scrub exclusionary laws in a bid to build wartime alliances in Asia and to counter propaganda by Germany and Japan, which took aim at America’s grim racial history. Naturalization rights were extended to Chinese immigrants in 1943 and to immigrants from India and the Philippines in 1946. Japanese Americans were of course an exception—their loyalty questioned, they were rounded up during the war and interned in detention camps.

The nature of anti-Asian racism in the U.S. was always different from that of racism directed at Black Americans, which was much older than the nation. In sheer numerical terms, the Asian and Pacific Islander population was small—in 1940, it was one-50th the size of the Black population. African Americans would fight for decades more to end legal segregation and secure voting rights, even as doors were thrown open for Asians.

As one nation after another shed its colonial overlord—the Philippines in 1946, India and Pakistan in 1947, Indonesia in 1949—the U.S. was in the

delicate position of trying to expand its sphere of influence without perpetuating imperial optics. In her book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2011), the legal historian Mary Dudziak framed the issue pointedly:

How could American democracy be a beacon during the Cold War, and a model for those struggling against Soviet oppression, if the United States itself practiced brutal discrimination against minorities within its own borders?

The career of Dalip Singh Saund can be understood against this backdrop. Saund, a Democrat from California, was the first Indian American elected to Congress. In 1956, he narrowly defeated the Republican candidate, Jacqueline Cochran Odlum, a pioneering pilot and the first woman to break the sound barrier. She found it hard to believe that she had lost to “a Hindu,” and never ran for office again. Saund was in fact Sikh. He had arrived in the U.S. in 1920, at the height of anti-Asian sentiment, and received a doctorate in mathematics, but had gone on to become a successful farmer (and a justice of the peace). Early on, he wore a turban, but at some point he stopped. The images we have of him in later years show a dashing man in dark suits. In one photo, he flashes a rakish smile while greeting then-Senator John F. Kennedy. He represented a new kind of mid-century American.

Saund’s election was a big enough deal that a CBS television crew shadowed him on his first day in office. The House Foreign Affairs Committee sent Saund on an international tour

to Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. Saund said he wished to “present myself as a living example of American democracy in practice.” He and the committee hoped to counter, as Saund put it, “the Communist lie that racial prejudice against Asians is rampant in America.”

In 1959, Saund sat for a TV interview at WCKT, in Miami. The host introduced him, breathlessly, as “probably the most unforgettable character

MY PARENTS DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE EXTENT TO WHICH THEIR OWN LIVES WOULD BE TRANSFORMED WHEN THEY ARRIVED IN THIS COUNTRY.

I have ever met. The son of parents in faraway India who could neither read nor write, Judge Saund sits now with dignity and works with skill in the Congress of the United States.” The interviewer seemed to be saying, *See how far you have come. See how far we have brought you.* But Saund more than held his own.

In 1965, Congress made sweeping changes to U.S. immigration law. Part of the impetus was greater equity, but there was also pressure, in a Cold War context, from dozens of newly independent nations in Asia and Africa. The U.S. did away with the admittance formula that had heavily favored immigrants from Western Europe. The new legislation

also prioritized family reunification and professional skills, and Asian immigrants ultimately leveraged both to their advantage. When the legislation was passed, no one anticipated how radically it would alter the country’s demographics.

Nor did my parents understand the extent to which their own lives and fortunes would be transformed when they arrived in this country. They had fled a slow, lumbering economy, one derided by Western skeptics for its “Hindu rate of growth.” My father’s decision to move to the U.S. with my mother was at once an act of economic necessity and a sign of his intense ambition. The image of his sobbing parents and younger siblings upon their departure for the airport has stayed with him to this day. “It was like a death in the family,” he recalled in his self-published memoir, *My Mother Called Me Unni: A Doctor’s Tale of Migration*.

This scene played out in thousands of families as many of India’s best and brightest left for the U.S. From 1966 to 1977, according to the historian Vijay Prashad, about 20,000 scientists immigrated from India to the United States, along with 40,000 engineers and 25,000 physicians. The majority spoke English and came from upper-caste communities (as my parents did). The composition of the diaspora was representative of only a narrow slice of India: people who had the social capital and intellectual means to succeed far from home, and who had the resources to make the journey in the first place.

The result was an intense form of social engineering, but one that went largely unacknowledged. Immigrants from India, armed with degrees,

arrived after the height of the civil-rights movement, and benefited from a struggle that they had not participated in or even witnessed. They made their way not only to cities but to suburbs, and broadly speaking were accepted more easily than other nonwhite groups have been.

I DON'T RECALL hearing the name Dalip Singh Saund until I was in my 30s, well after I'd left Houston. Nor had I heard of Vaishno Das Bagai or Bhagat Singh Thind. These names were absent from my childhood. It was as if the entire history that preceded my family's arrival, the messy parts, had been snipped off. The year 1965, when the Immigration and Nationality Act was amended, was our Year Zero.

My parents arrived in this country in the waning days of 1969. They first settled in Washington, D.C., then moved to Connecticut, and finally put down roots in Texas. In a recent text thread with my two sisters, they recalled the excitement of moving into the Piney Point home—the trees, the serenity. “But I didn't perceive it at the time as moving up in the world,” Kala wrote. Subconsciously, though, we understood the new rules. We began to demand brand-name clothes—Izod and Polo—something my mother told us, years later, that she regretted giving in to.

In his memoir, my father recounted what he saw as my mother's evolution, and her awkwardness.

For a girl who grew up without parents, in a laid-back Kerala village with only one street, a big river, and three temples scattered across clusters of ancestral

homes, Devi tried her very best to be Americanized. Exchanging her favorite sarees, she made attempts to dress in evening gowns and mink coats and leather boots. From her preciously nourished, long, braided hairstyles with tucked-in jasmine garlands she half-heartedly learned to put up her hair on the top or to the fancy of the stylists.

I called Mom and asked her what she had felt about her adjustments back then. “That's all Dad's fancies, you know. I had to go along with it. To have peace. And I thought, *These are the things you have to do.*” As kids, we had been proud of our mother the tennis star, the woman who taught herself to ride a bike in her 30s. I hadn't considered the strain placed upon her—by her kids, by her husband, by the world beyond our home—as she attempted to fit herself and her family into this new place.

In many ways, my sisters and I had an exalted childhood. We traveled abroad, to Paris, Lucerne, Venice, and Tokyo, with frequent visits to see our relatives in India. Even as a young brown man, I felt secure. My parents never had to give me “the talk” that many Black teenagers receive. At the same time, I knew better than to expose my family life, even something as simple as the food in our refrigerator, to the judgment of the white world. Some people in that world, I realized, thought we were going to hell, that our food stank, that our customs were freakish.

Recently I looked up the current census data for Piney Point: The city is 85 percent white and 12 percent Asian. The Black population, however,

stands at 0.6 percent—virtually nonexistent, as it has been for decades. The historian Uzma Quraishi, who has studied the residential patterns of middle-class Indian and Pakistani immigrants in the Houston area in the 1970s and '80s, found that they track almost identically with those of white residents who left the central urban area for more affluent neighborhoods on the outskirts, ostensibly so their kids could attend “good schools” but also to distance themselves from Black residents. She calls this process “brown flight.” Those of us with roots in the Indian subcontinent had it drilled into us from an early age that “divide and rule” had been the most potent tool of the colonial power. As immigrants, had we become complicit in this same strategy?

During the pandemic this spring, my parents were stuck in Kerala and watched, bewildered, as America seemed to implode, and not just from disease and economic distress. Police killings of unarmed Black Americans inspired national outrage and protest; a backlash led by armed white counterprotesters was quick in coming. I communicated with them by email and WhatsApp. On one occasion, I asked Dad what had prompted him and Mom to move to Piney Point, back in the '70s. “Perhaps,” he ventured in reply, “the American dream.”

That “perhaps” reflected the fact that many years had passed and memories were foggy. But I think it also reflected something else: that the American narrative is not nearly as neat and linear in his mind as it had appeared when he arrived here, months after the U.S. had put a man on the moon. The

American dream doesn't mean what it once did to a newcomer.

In 2017, just a few weeks into the Trump presidency, Srinivas Kuchibhotla, an Indian-born engineer, was killed at a bar in a Kansas City suburb. The killer had shouted: “Get out of my country.” Not long after, I found myself on an email thread with my dad and a few of his good friends, or “uncles,” as we refer to them, all retired Indian American doctors around the age of 80. They understood that the position of Indian Americans was in many ways privileged, and that threats were sporadic. But they were worried. “The more noise we make, these racists will be awakened, who may never have heard of Hindus and their customs,” wrote one. “Fighting them alone may get us under six feet.” The only thing to do, he said, was lie low. Despite all their success, and nearly 50 years of living in the U.S., the uncles were reacting as if their Americanness remained tentative and conditional.

Like most of their Indian-immigrant peers, the uncles came from historically advantaged communities. This had helped them emerge from India's ferocious academic system victorious, allowed them to leap across continents and flourish professionally, and enabled them to isolate themselves in America's best and whitest neighborhoods.

It did not, however, prepare them for a fight—or for the realization that they were not in this alone. *A*

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How to Remember a Life

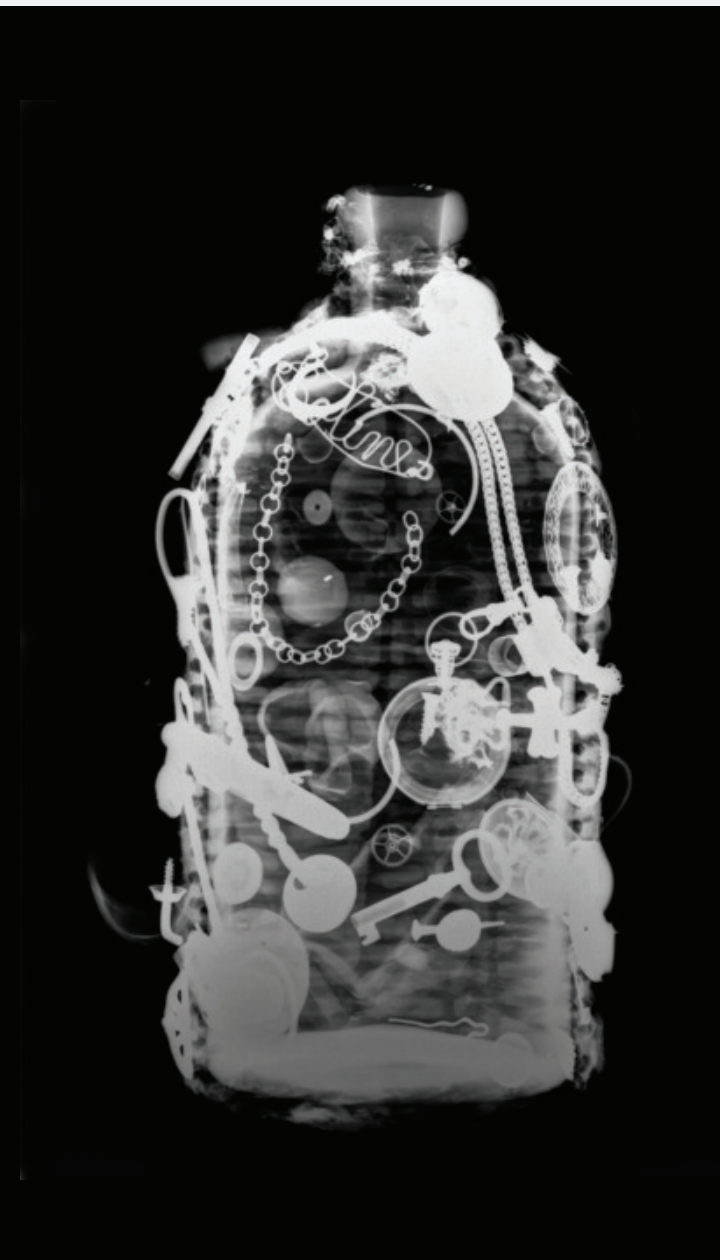
Photographs by Terry Adkins

What you are looking at is the afterlife of memories.

Memory jugs were funerary objects found in the South on the graves of African Americans through the mid-20th century. These small stoneware vessels were adorned with fragments—broken china, glass shards—and items beloved by the departed. The ritual is said to have its origins in Central Africa’s Bakongo culture. It was brought here by enslaved people

and continued by their descendants, mainly sharecroppers.

The artist Terry Adkins (1953–2014) had seen one such vessel in his grandmother’s home, in Upperville, Virginia, as a young boy, which fueled his fascination. He collected hundreds of memory jugs from the mid-1990s until his death, and began taking X-rays of them while he was a professor of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania. This quartet of images is featured in a



ESTATE OF FERRY ADKINS / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / LÉVY GORVY

forthcoming exhibition at New York's New Museum, titled "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," a show conceived by the late curator Okwui Enwezor.

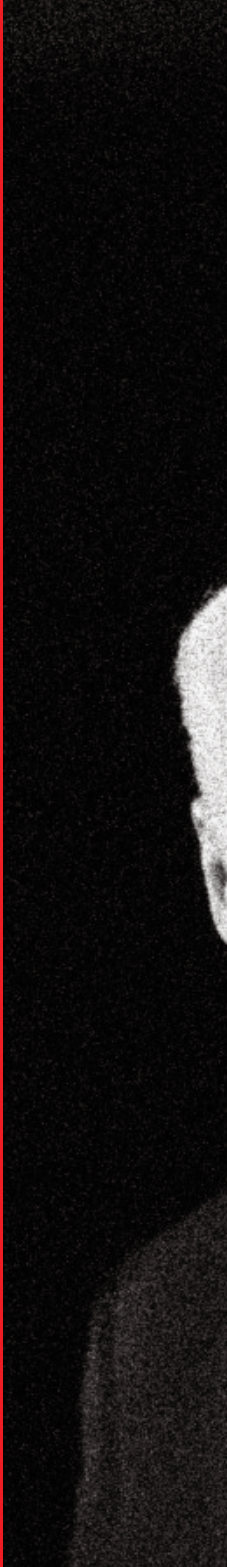
Adkins's X-rays transform the jugs into heavenly bodies, encouraging contemplation. The images feel intimate, ethereal, and futuristic. The stories of the lives of ordinary African Americans and their forebears are often distilled into a sweeping narrative—invisible, monolithic masses questing for

dignity and recognition of their citizenship or humanity. But if the historical record tends to overlook the simple moments of pleasure and joy in the lives of these men and women, Adkins brings them to the forefront. A hobby-horse toy, a pewter spoon, a mother-of-pearl hair comb, a pocket watch, buttons from a well-loved calico dress or coat, charm necklaces and shells, crosses and lace—photographed in this manner, the items take on a sacred

quality. Adkins's work uplifts the ordinary, asking viewers to make "modern memories," as his widow, Merele Williams-Adkins, told me.

These images resonate in a year overflowing with eulogies for hundreds of thousands of American dead, disproportionately Black, at a time when public mourning is itself deadly and, all the while, Americans wrestle with the country's past and future.

— *Syreeta McFadden*



**Trump and
his enablers
must be held
to account
for their
corruption
and malice.**

**But when
it comes to
exposing
misdeeds,
the new
president
should pick
his battles
carefully.**



How Far Should Biden Go?

By James Fallows



I. A CRIMES COMMISSION?

As he prepares to occupy the White House, President-elect Joe Biden faces a decision rare in American history: what to do about the man who has just left office, whose personal corruption, disdain for the Constitution, and destructive mismanagement of the federal government are without precedent.

Human beings crave reckoning, even the saintliest among us. Institutions based on rules and laws need systems of accountability. People inside and outside politics have argued forcefully that Biden should take, or at least condone, a maximalist approach to exposing and prosecuting the many transgressions by Donald Trump and his circle—that Biden can't talk about where America is going without clearly addressing where it has been. In 2019, two professors at Princeton, Julian E. Zelizer and Kevin M. Kruse, argued that the most harmful response to Trump's offenses would be for Democrats and Republicans to agree to look past them, in hopes of avoiding further partisan division. Eric Swalwell, a Democratic congressman from California, has proposed the creation of a Presidential Crimes Commission, made up of independent prosecutors. In the summer of 2020, Sam Berger of the Center for American Progress, an influential think tank with roots in the Clinton administration, released a detailed blueprint for conducting investigations and possibly prosecutions. It laid out the case this way:

Whenever the Trump administration ends, there may be good-faith concerns that addressing the administration's misconduct will be too divisive, set a bad precedent, or lead to political pushback from the administration's supporters. But the lesson from the past four years is clear: The absence of accountability is treated as license to escalate abuses of power.

Joe Biden, who improbably (or impressively) has lived through exactly one-third of America's history as a republic, is well aware of this line of argument, and of the risks of papering over the sins of the past. He was in the Senate during the Watergate investigations and, later, when the Church Committee investigated Cold War—era crimes and excesses by the CIA. Modern history is replete with instances of societies that were hampered and distorted by their refusal to face difficult truths.¹

But how much time can Biden spend looking backwards? Many presidents have taken office with challenges, even crises, immediately at hand. The examples are familiar, including Franklin D. Roosevelt and Barack Obama. Biden's challenges as he enters office are larger and appear on more fronts than any other president's since Abraham Lincoln. He faces a global pandemic that is still getting worse, and an economy that the pandemic has brought to its knees. America's relations with most of its allies are badly frayed. Conflicts with China are mounting. Many of the federal institutions Biden will supervise have been neglected for decades, and intentionally corrupted and weakened during the past four years. Trust in civic and political institutions has dwindled. For his own ends, the outgoing president has deliberately sought to sabotage the electoral process itself.

"Your most important decisions at the start are what to exclude," Jack Watson told me recently. In 1976, Watson was in charge of Jimmy Carter's transition-planning staff as Carter prepared to take over from Gerald Ford, and four years later, as White House chief of staff, he was Carter's coordinator for the transition to Ronald Reagan. He went on: "You have to separate what *must* be done, soon, from all the other things you might *want* to do later in the administration."

II. TIME FOR TRIAGE

Let's survey the rubble of the moment's landscape, imagining the way it will look to future historians. Joe Biden takes office in a strong position, and a weak one. The strength is his nationwide vote total, which as a share of the electorate is larger than Reagan's in what was considered a landslide win over Carter in 1980. The Democratic Party, usually fractious, minimized its disagreements while Biden was running. He will serve with the first woman, the first Black woman, and the first person of South Asian heritage ever to become vice president. Incoming presidents typically get at least a temporary boost in their favorability ratings when they officially begin the job. Even before being sworn in, Biden had higher popularity ratings than Donald Trump ever enjoyed.²

Biden's obvious great weakness is that, depending on the outcome of the two runoff races in Georgia, Mitch McConnell will likely still control the Senate majority. McConnell, who publicly said in 2010 that his main ambition was to

1. Choose a country from almost any point on the globe—Norway, France, Indonesia, Ireland—and people familiar with it can detail the ways that facing or avoiding yesterday's harsh truths can have effects that last through many tomorrows. The most extreme examples are widely known. They include the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing suppression of truths about mass starvation in the country during the Great Leap Forward of the 1950s, the terror and chaos during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and the forced repression at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Modern Japan's relations with South Korea, China, the Philippines, Singapore, and other nations in the region still suffer because of Japan's official muteness about what it did in these countries before and during the Second World War.

2. Trump is the only president in the history of polling never to have had an approval rating above 50 percent.

3. Charles Stevenson, a political scientist who has decades of Senate staff experience (including for Joe Biden), explained: “They have to get people nominated and confirmed quickly, or they will miss months. If you don’t get your people there, the ‘actings’ could still be Trump types, or unqualified in other ways.”

4. There is no shortage of databases that pertain to wrongdoing by the Trump administration. See, for instance, the “Catalog of Trump’s Worst Cruelties, Collusions, Corruptions, and Crimes,” produced by *McSweeney’s* magazine. At the beginning of Trump’s time in office, the writer Amy Siskind began compiling “The Weekly List.”

5. The seven individuals are Steve Bannon, Michael Cohen, Michael Flynn, Rick Gates, Paul Manafort, George Papadopoulos, and the omnipresent Roger Stone. (Flynn pleaded guilty and then tried to withdraw his guilty plea, after which William Barr’s Justice Department moved to dismiss the pending criminal case. Bannon pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial.)

make Obama a one-term president, is too disciplined to be caught saying the same thing about Biden. But it will of course be his strategy, pursued mainly by adding friction to whatever Biden wants to do. That will start with Biden’s need to find, assess, and vet candidates for some 4,000 political-appointment slots, more than 1,000 of which require Senate confirmation. This task, already slowed because of the pandemic, is all the harder because of stonewalling by the Trump team.³ Rather than cooperating on the transition—a basic civic duty and a long-standing norm—the outgoing administration for weeks impeded it, starting with its refusal to accept the simple fact that Biden had won.

Chronicling what went wrong under Trump has already generated tens of millions of words—and has barely begun. Works in this genre may eventually rival Civil War histories in their volume and their depictions of barely avoided national ruin. Daniel Dale, of the *Toronto Star* and then CNN, compiled a master list of false statements from Trump’s speeches, tweets, and other utterances, until he found, just before the 2020 election, when his list numbered almost 10,000, that he could no longer keep up. Last September, a nonprofit group called Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington released a compilation of 3,400 instances of corruption or conflicts of interest involving Trump and his family, any handful of which would have been considered scandalous and disqualifying in other administrations.⁴ The disproportion between Trump offenses and past political scandals may seem like a tired point, but it has been “normalized” enough by its fire-hose nature that the sense of outrage inevitably fades.

Joe Biden has a set of decisions to make about the record of the Trump era. The record needs to be discovered—in part so that damage can be undone, and in part to ensure that the country faces its failures squarely and through a common lens. To which efforts should Biden personally, as the new president, devote his limited time and political influence? Which efforts should he place in the hands of others?

Through the final months of the campaign, I asked historians, lawyers, and veterans of Republican and Democratic administrations how they would answer those two questions. The conversations, many of them lengthy, touched on a wide range of issues—vastly wider than I can encompass here. But the responses boiled down to an argument for triage.

For Biden personally, as president, the best thing he can do for most of the needed inquiries

is simply get out of the way. He has too many other things to contend with. Criminal proceedings require neither his instigation nor his help. There are two tasks, however, where his involvement is essential. One is stemming, and then beginning to reverse, the corrosion of the executive branch. The methodical destruction of the government’s competence and integrity has been nearly invisible but is one of Trump’s most consequential legacies. The second task is launching—but not running or controlling— independent investigations into three national catastrophes: the mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic, whose toll continues to rise; border policies under which U.S. officials intentionally separated children from their parents, and in more than 600 cases have not been able to reunite them; and purposeful or negligent destruction of the norms of government, the most important being the electoral process, pushing a diverse democracy close to the breaking point.

III. CORRUPTION VS. CORROSION

For purposes of answering the *What must be done?* and *Who should do it?* questions, two realms of Trump offenses should be considered. The first is the category “corrupt and possibly criminal.” This realm is potentially boundless, covers matters great and small, and extends not only throughout the four years of the Trump administration but to the transition period beforehand and even to Donald Trump’s activities prior to entering the White House. Trump will likely be consumed by criminal and civil litigation for the rest of his life. That is his problem; it should not be Joe Biden’s.

Before the end of Trump’s fourth year, seven prominent campaign or administration figures had been indicted, tried, convicted, jailed, or all of the above, more than in any other modern administration in its first term. They included Trump’s former personal lawyer, his former national security adviser, his former campaign chairman, and his former chief strategist.⁵ More indictments and convictions could well lie ahead. To take just one example: Tampering with the U.S. mail is a federal offense, and Trump’s postmaster general Louis DeJoy might face charges for doing so on a grand scale, because of allegations that he intentionally sought to delay election-related mail (which he has denied).

All presidents and major-party nominees since Richard Nixon have released their tax returns. Trump promised to do so when his were no longer “under audit,” but that time has never come. The authoritative *New York Times* accounting of his personal taxes found that he had paid little or nothing in most of the years for which the paper obtained documentation; on two occasions, his annual federal-income-tax payment was \$750. (For the record, a lawyer for the Trump Organization disputed the reporting.) Trump declared that he would separate himself from his business holdings when he took office. He did not. Instead he announced after being elected that he, as president, by definition could not have a conflict of interest. It was a counterpart to Nixon’s saying, “When the president does it, that means it’s not illegal.”⁶ Nixon’s claim did not stand up, and Trump’s probably won’t either. What secrets lie in Trump’s financial records? Why did he claim that certain properties were far more valuable when using them as collateral for loans than when valuing them for tax purposes? Was he paying himself

and his family members from what were supposed to be campaign funds or official government accounts? Were his Scottish golf resorts essentially elaborate money-laundering ventures?⁷

Questions like these just scratch the surface of what must be asked, and answered, about possible corruption during the Trump era, not to mention before. They should occupy little or nothing of Joe Biden’s attention. The machinery of justice will operate on its own. The matter of a pardon, suggested by some—and a last-minute possibility by Trump himself or conceivably by an elevated Mike Pence—is exciting as a cable-news topic, but is one Biden should ignore. The circumstances today are unlike those during the time of Watergate (when the new president, Gerald Ford, pardoned the president who had just resigned in disgrace, Richard Nixon), and anyway the potential financial crimes are mainly matters of state law, beyond the reach of a presidential pardon. Prosecutors in New York have sought access to years of Trump’s financial and tax records as part of their investigation of “possibly extensive and protracted criminal

6. The conflict-of-interest exemption seemingly extended to Trump’s family. While Trump was conducting his “trade war” with China, the Chinese government awarded some two dozen trademarks to businesses bearing the Ivanka Trump brand. Soon after Trump took office, Jared Kushner’s sister Nicole spoke at an event in Beijing to attract investors to a Kushner-family real-estate project in New Jersey. An ad for the event said, “Invest \$500,000 and immigrate to the United States.” In her pitch, according to multiple press reports, Nicole highlighted her ties to the White House.



7. According to data from Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, Trump made at least 500 visits to his own hotels, golf courses, restaurants, and other facilities during his four years in office. Special-interest groups held 130 events at Trump properties.

8. To mention one public episode: General Mark Milley, while dressed in combat fatigues, was enticed to accompany Trump on the walk to his infamous photo op holding a Bible in front of St. John's Church, near Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C. To make the walk possible, peaceful protesters were dispersed with tear gas. A week later, Milley took the extraordinary step of formally apologizing to his colleagues in uniform for allowing himself to have become part of a political spectacle.

conduct at the Trump Organization,” in the words of a 2020 filing by Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. So far, none of the prosecutions has begun—partly because of the legal gray zone involving actions against a sitting president, and also because of Trump’s wave after wave of unsuccessful appeals. But sooner or later, the full records will fall into the hands of the authorities.

Possible violations of federal rather than state law are trickier, because a new administration would by definition be involved. These might include the alleged mismanagement of the Postal Service, to cite one hypothetical, or the politicization of the Justice Department by Attorney General William Barr. But Biden should view such cases as opportunities to emphasize dispassionate accountability and rule of law. Trump undermined legal standards through a willing-accomplice attorney general and through the systematic removal of inspectors general, whose common fault was that they initiated investigations of Trump himself or of Trump appointees inside their departments. Biden’s response should be to repair the structure of checks and balances, and then let it do its work. His most important appointment may be a new attorney general, chosen to embody the very principles that Barr, who served in essence as Trump’s personal lawyer and adjunct campaign manager, traduced.

Biden needs to select an attorney general who will be seen as the most principled and eminent of all his Cabinet members, and choose correspondingly strong and independent inspectors general for the executive departments. The rest is up to them.

The second category of offense is *corrosion* of government rather than corruption of government. Here Biden’s responsibility is different—and his response should be very direct.

Everyone knows about the Michael Lewis books that have been turned into movies: *The Blind Side*, about football; *Moneyball*, about baseball; and *The Big Short*, about the 2008 financial crash. But in this moment the book for which he should be known is *The Fifth Risk*, published in 2018, about the arcane details of managing the

federal government, and why Trump’s indifference to them mattered. Questions of operational competence make headlines when an airliner crashes or the electric grid fails. The deficiencies don’t make headlines when they occur deep inside the federal bureaucracy. But they represent a quiet, daily, systemwide calamity—one that a new president can begin to control.

The shift from competence to cronyism is widespread across the government. Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and the radiologist

Scott Atlas—neither with training in epidemiology—had the president’s ear on pandemic control, as opposed to experts like National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci and National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins. Career intelligence officers were kicked out, and loyalists such as Richard Grenell and John Ratcliffe put in their place. Ten days into his administration, Trump fired Sally Yates, the acting attorney general, and then in short order fired the U.S. attorney in Manhattan, Preet Bharara, and the FBI director, James Comey—all three of whom were reportedly investigating the president or his appointees. Trump fired or drove out officials with professional standing that predated their political

support—H. R. McMaster, James Mattis, Dan Coats—and installed more pliant replacements. He undermined the independence of the military in a variety of ways.⁸ He signed an executive order that effectively made many professional civil servants subject to political dismissal.

Every executive agency and department needs top-to-bottom attention. A cadre of skilled career professionals has been lost to attrition, unable to countenance the Trump administration’s calculated disemboweling. Biden needs to rebuild the ranks of every part of the executive branch, but a symbolically important first step would involve America’s formal connection with the rest of the world: the State Department, whose capacities and expertise were made a special target during the Trump years. There and elsewhere, Biden can promote career professionals. He can experiment

Trump will likely be consumed by criminal and civil litigation for the rest of his life. That is his problem; it should not be Joe Biden’s.

with new ways of bringing in experts with specific skills—in public health, cybersecurity, climate issues, higher education, and many other areas—for temporary mid-career assignments. He can encourage a new generation of Americans to choose public service, so that 20 years from now, the government has a corps of experienced experts. Action and example matter.

IV. THE CATASTROPHES

Halting the corrosion is the very least that needs to be done—equivalent to stabilizing the patient. Just as important, investigations should be conducted into three catastrophes during the Trump years that have undermined our health as individuals, our morality as a people, and our character as a democracy.

The coronavirus pandemic may represent the greatest failure of governance in U.S. history, and responsibility for the extent of its ravages falls squarely on Donald Trump.⁹ The pandemic has killed hundreds of thousands of Americans, triggered a business collapse, and worsened every racial and economic injustice in our society. Here was a case where warnings came at an early stage, and where detailed plans to meet the threat were at hand. Trump was made aware of the imminent danger and chose first to ignore it and then to downplay it. Ultimately he resorted to outright mockery of containment and treatment efforts.¹⁰

“The pandemic is one of the major mass traumas collectively suffered by humanity during the last hundred years,” Philip Zelikow, a historian at the University of Virginia, wrote recently. “Such mass traumas are rare. Narratives about such traumas always become enduring touchstones in politics and culture, for better or worse.” The narrative Zelikow refers to is a shared public sense of why something has happened, and how a similar trauma might be avoided in the future. Establishing the correct narrative is especially urgent when it comes to a

pandemic that is still raging and that surely prefigures grave public-health threats ahead.

What can a new president do to this end? The answer, which is more powerful than it may sound, is to establish a commission. True, that’s not a word for bumper stickers or rally speeches. But commissions have played a role in shifting public awareness of major issues.¹¹ And compared with other, ever more siloed forms of public narrative, from cable TV to food-fight congressional hearings to anything online, they start out with less of a handicap. They are as useful a tool as we now possess for confronting complex issues without immediately being shunted into talking-point posturing. “This would be like the 9/11 Commission,” a person who has worked for presidents of both parties on emergency management told me, “about a disaster unfolding slowly before our eyes. It is a massive failure of leadership, and we’ve got to make sure that this doesn’t happen again.”

That’s the first investigation. The second, also conducted by a special commission, would look immediately into the cases of children separated from their parents at the border. Examples of the

Trump administration acting out of smug vengefulness and casual disregard for human suffering are sadly plentiful. For years, Trump denied aid to Puerto Rico after a devastating hurricane. He only reluctantly issued disaster declarations for California (a state he viewed as politically hostile territory) during a season of unprecedented wildfires. The brutal policy of family separation stands in for every other episode of cruelty, and transcends them all. “We’ve been declared in some respects a state sponsor of child abuse by friends overseas,” John R. Allen, a retired four-star Marine Corps general who now is president of the Brookings Institution, told me. “Having friends and allies declare this as state-sponsored child abuse is a stain on our national soul that will take a long time to remedy.” The

immediate charge to the commission would be to do everything possible to find the hundreds of displaced children and unite them with their families—which even before the election Biden promised to do.¹² The further task would be to

9. As I argued in “The Three Weeks That Changed Everything,” published in *The Atlantic* in June, the United States had the information, the plans, and the resources in place to limit the damage from an outbreak like the current pandemic. The Trump administration failed to put any of these tools to use.

10. In the eight months leading up to the election, 300,000 more Americans died than would have been expected during the equivalent period in a “normal” year—a figure known as the “excess death” toll of the pandemic. In the 1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to run for reelection when the weekly toll of American deaths in Vietnam passed 300. That figure had become an ordinary morning’s count of COVID-19 fatalities by the end of 2020.

11. The best-known U.S. commissions have been set up to deal with stand-alone past disasters: in the 1960s, the Warren Commission, investigating the killing of John F. Kennedy; in the 1980s, the commission investigating the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger; in the early 2000s, the 9/11 Commission, investigating who knew what before the attacks. Other commissions have been broadly diagnostic. In the 1960s, the Kerner Commission presciently argued to its mainly white readership that the country was evolving into “two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,” and that racism and poverty were the main causes of urban rioting. In the 1980s, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released what is known as the “Nation at Risk” report, making the case for schooling reform.

The brutal policy of family separation stands in for every other episode of cruelty, and transcends them all.

12. The grim reality is that history provides models for how organizations can undertake such efforts—mainly the years-long process of tracing and reconnecting children separated from their parents during and after World War II. Dealing with hundreds of children within one country is different from coping with hundreds of thousands in the aftermath of a war, but the moral imperative is at least as strong.

13. For a century after the Civil War, much of the white American South told itself a particular story about the “Lost Cause” and the noble origins of the “War Between the States.” Statues of Confederate leaders erected in the early 20th century, along with films such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, were ways of telling one version of the country’s most divisive story. It was a false version that was embraced by much of the nation.

document, step-by-step, the process by which the president and his officials were able to put this policy of sanctioned kidnapping into place. Separating children from their parents doesn’t simply occur by executive fiat. There are bureaucratic and legal hurdles that action of this kind must surmount—and Trump’s desire surmounted all of them with ease. That demanded complicity by scores of individuals at every level, from White House aides to Justice Department lawyers to the functionaries at the border.

From its immersion in tragedy, the commission could perhaps launch a larger discussion on immigration and immigration policy. But the main focus must be on the process of forcible separation.

The third investigation (and third commission) would probe the Trump administration’s attacks on democracy itself. American democracy depends on rules, and it depends on norms. The rules largely involve setting the balance between majority power and minority rights. The norms involve the informal cushioning that keeps disagreements from becoming civil wars. There is no law spelling out the duty of the loser of an election to concede graciously to the winner. But that is what Richard Nixon did after his hair’s-breadth loss to John F. Kennedy in 1960, and what Al Gore did after his even narrower (and more controversial) loss to George W. Bush in 2000. Democracy depends on the “consent of the losers,” as political scientists have put it.

Over the past generation, rules and norms have eroded. There is a reason books on guarding against autocracy—for instance, *On Tyranny*, by Timothy Snyder, and *Twilight of Democracy*, by Anne Applebaum—have become popular. The erosion was transformed into deliberate policy during the Trump years. Even before he was installed in office, and with no evidence, Trump called into question the popular vote in the 2016 election, alleging that millions of ballots had been cast fraudulently. Trump created a task force to look into the matter, which generated headlines (but quietly disbanded when it found no fraud). Elections are in the hands of the individual states. Now emboldened, many state legislatures have used fraud as an excuse to erect new barriers to voting by the poor, by members of minority groups, and by immigrants—reversing the gains of half a century. When the pandemic hit, prompting a shift away from voting in person, the Trump administration falsely equated mail-in ballots with fraudulent votes. When Biden won a decisive victory in both the popular vote and the Electoral College, the president refused to concede

and launched a war of attrition against the legitimacy of the electoral process itself.

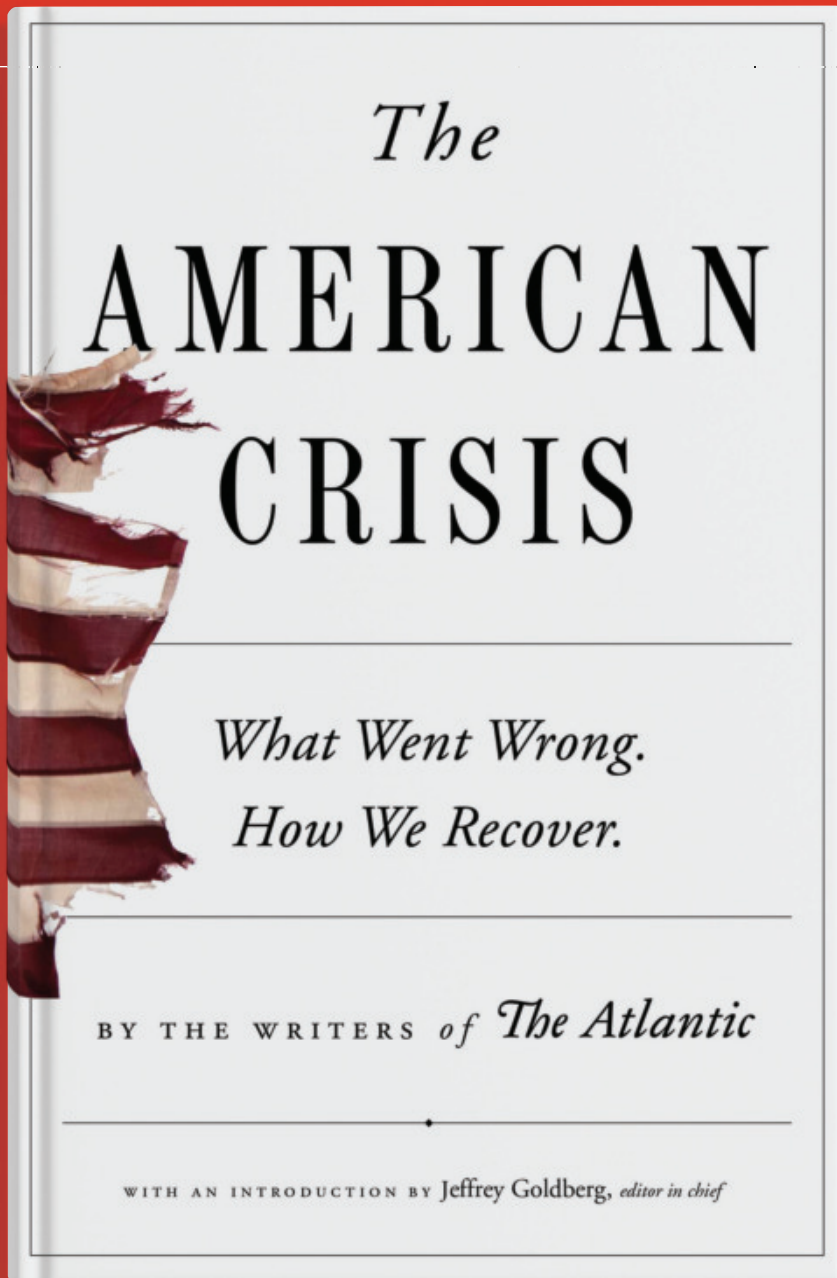
An investigation of America’s democratic process must start by decisively separating truth from lies. It must document the assault on voting rights and the cynical distortions of gerrymandering. It must reckon with the most lethal form of domestic terrorism in recent years, that from armed white supremacists. It must also explain what needs to be done to secure elections against interference by Russia and other foreign powers—a threat confirmed by all of the nation’s intelligence agencies, but one whose reality and significance were questioned by Trump. Finally, it must address how to rekindle a spirit of grassroots engagement among ordinary citizens. An excellent place to start is a recent report from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences called “Our Common Purpose.”

V. THE AMERICAN STORY

There is one further thing Biden can do: frame all of the above in terms of the larger American narrative. The specific steps he should take are not about payback, whatever some will say. They are not even about Donald Trump as an individual. They are about the never-ending mission of forming a more perfect union. As Philip Zelickow has observed, every part of the national experience, tragic or triumphant, lives on most powerfully in *story*. And stories have consequences.¹³ Presidents are often most powerful as storytellers, giving citizens a way to think about themselves, their neighbors, their country, and their times. Barack Obama, who came to national attention before holding any national office, did so with his “red states and blue states” speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Donald Trump told a very different story—of us versus them; of a hostile and cheating world beyond our borders; and of treacherous, devious interests here among us at home—in his “American carnage” inaugural address.

Biden likes to say, of the American-carnage era, “We’re better than that.” In practice, we haven’t been. In theory, we *could* be. Biden has a chance to tell a different story—a story about our potential—with the first words he utters after taking the oath of office. *A*

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ANNIE LOWREY

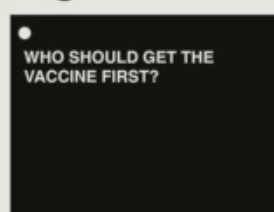
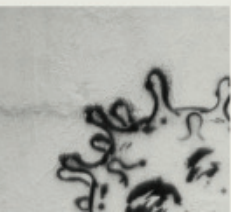
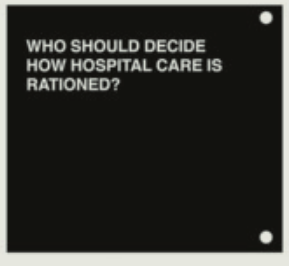
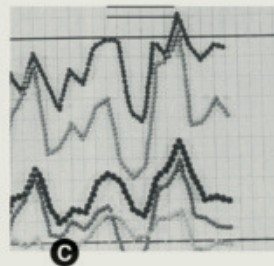
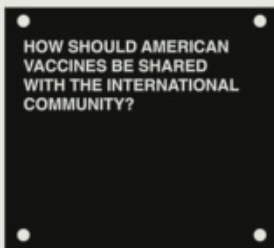
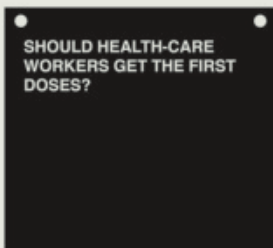
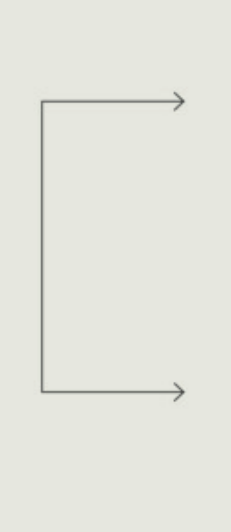
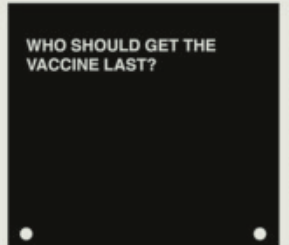
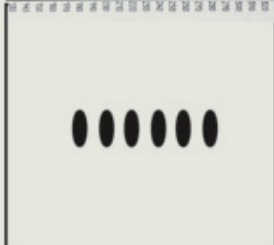
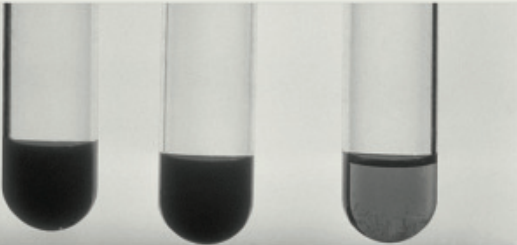
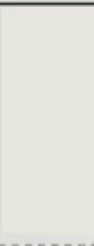
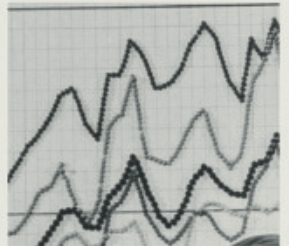
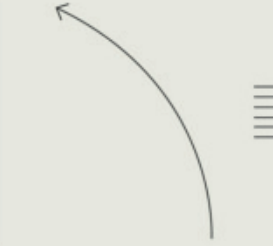
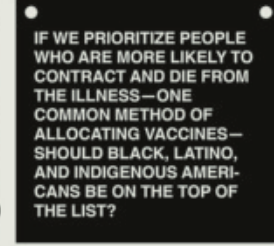
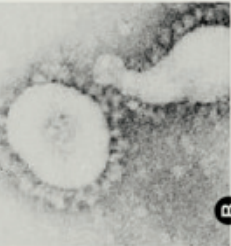
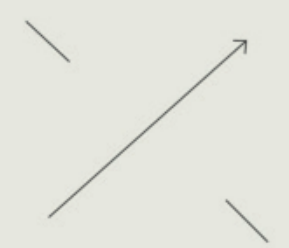
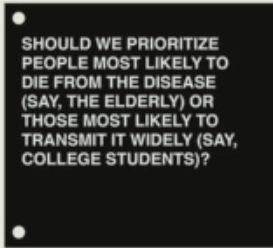
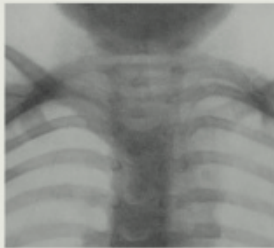
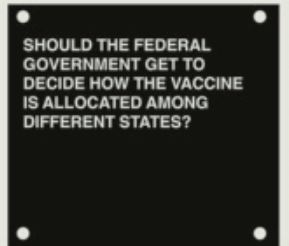
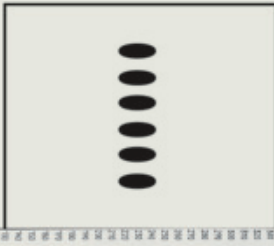
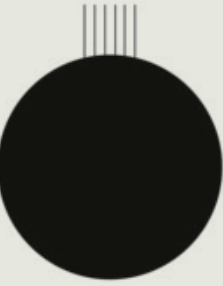
on the power of economic policy to create a more equal society

In “The Second Great Depression,” Lowrey looks at the four major factors that could determine the economic legacy of the pandemic in the U.S.

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The Committee on Life and Death

As COVID-19 has overwhelmed hospitals, the lack of clear bioethical guidelines has meant that doctors have had to make wrenching life-and-death decisions on the fly. The result has been chaos and unnecessary suffering, among both patients and clinicians. As the country prepares to distribute vaccines, we're at risk of reprising this chaos.

By Jordan Kisner

Photo illustrations by Arsh Raziuddin



he original “God Committee” had seven members: a surgeon, a minister, a banker, a labor leader, a housewife, a government worker, and a lawyer. They convened in the summer of 1961 in Seattle because a professor of medicine at the University of Wash-

ington had invented a new method of dialysis that could indefinitely filter the blood of people whose kidneys were failing. His device, hailed as the first artificial human organ, resided in an unobtrusive annex of Seattle’s Swedish Hospital, and it seemed like a true medical miracle. Suddenly people with less than a month to live could be restored to health, provided they could be dialyzed regularly. But at the time, roughly 100,000 Americans were dying of end-stage kidney disease. There were hundreds, possibly thousands, of viable candidates. The program could take only 10. Who should get the lifesaving care?

The committee set out to make this choice “with no moral or ethical guidelines save their own individual consciences,” as *Life* magazine reported. The physicians briefing the group had already narrowed the field by eliminating people older than 45 (because they were more likely to develop complications that would hinder their recovery) and children (on the theory that they weren’t mature enough to handle two 12-hour dialysis sessions a week, and were possibly vulnerable to unpredictable side effects). Beyond that, the committee was on its own.

Its members weighed, among other things, whether the person could afford to live near enough to the hospital to get regular treatment; whether residents of other states should be eligible, considering that Washington taxpayers had partially funded the development of the treatment; whether a chemist or an accountant had the greater “potential of service to society”; whether a candidate was “active in church work”; and, for the married men under consideration, which of their wives could best cope with losing her husband. “A woman with three children has a better chance to find a new husband than a very young widow with six children,” the labor leader remarked. The results of the deliberations were unsurprising, to an extent: The 10 patients chosen from among the first 17 who came before the committee lived; the others died. To this day, we know the seven committee members only by their professions, a Chaucerian feature that makes this story feel more like a fable than a piece of science history.

It was eerie to stumble across the God Committee—also known as the “Life or Death Committee”—last spring, when I was following the story of a different artificial organ. In New York, the nightmare scenario being discussed on the radio, in the bodegas, on TV was that the hospitals, overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients in respiratory failure, would run out of ventilators. Reports from northern Italy gave a grim preview: angst-ridden medical teams arbitrating which patients would get to breathe and which would be consigned to die. Governor Andrew Cuomo was on national television begging the federal government for more ventilators and personal protective equipment. Article after article outlined a series of awful questions: If and when New York hospitals ran out of ventilators, should the machines be allotted on a first-come,

first-served basis? Based on who was sickest? Based on who was most likely to survive? Based on who, if they survived, had the most years left to live? Based on some randomized lottery system?

As it happens, the job of answering these questions is still frequently left to committees. But today, “the lawyer, the housewife, the banker, the minister” have been supplemented by bioethicists. “New York’s Bioethics Experts Prepare for a Wave of Difficult Decisions,” read the headline of a March 28 *Washington Post* article. “Who Should Be Saved First?” *The New York Times* asked, pointing out that “well before rationing caused by coronavirus, protocols were established about ‘who lives and who dies.’”

The article was right—there were protocols, written by committees of ethicists, physicians, lawyers, clergy, philosophers, community activists, and political scientists. In New York, guidelines for allocating ventilators in a pandemic had been designed by the New York State Task Force on Life and the Law, which used the 1918 flu as a model. These guidelines were part of a plan for “crisis standards of care,” or protocols for handling a public-health emergency that outstrips the medical system’s capacity. Published in 2015, the task force’s plan envisioned the transfer of equipment, personnel, and patients among hospitals to ensure that one institution wasn’t overrun while others had empty beds.

Last March, as the coronavirus took hold, the committee met with the state’s health commissioner to brainstorm ideas for COVID-specific protocols. Despite that meeting, its key recommendations were never taken; no crisis standards of care were implemented in New York. These standards can be initiated only by the government—a process that, in most states, including New York, requires a declaration from the governor. This left the clinical ethicists staffing New York’s hospitals—along with the doctors and nurses and administrators—to figure out rationing themselves.

“At a certain point, I realized the ambulance is the score of this movie,” Joseph J. Fins, the chief of medical ethics at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan and one of the leading figures in the field, told me in October. He lives down the street from his hospital, and by late March the wail of sirens had become an unending drone, day and night. He and his team of ethicists were on call 24/7, trying to support physicians, nurses, and administrators through the initial COVID-19 surge. “Our world became 69th Street,” Fins said.

Fins is an affable 61-year-old with an easy smile and a calm, teacherly aspect. He wore a crisp white shirt and a tie for both of our video interviews, despite being home in his apartment. More than once in our conversations, he referenced Thucydides. An internist as well as a bioethicist, Fins serves on the task force that in 2015 came up with ventilator-allocation guidelines for New York. “Our analysis was anticipatory and a tabletop exercise,” he wrote in an academic journal in June. “It was not the real deal.”

The real deal was almost beyond imagining. During the eight weeks of the surge, Fins’s team members at Weill Cornell worked around the clock, providing 2,500 ethics consultations and addressing a range of horrific questions they’d never previously encountered. Fins likened the influx of critical-care patients to what you’d expect if there had been “a major plane crash at LaGuardia Airport”—only the influx never stopped. Patients just kept coming.

Hospital staff needed to know how to triage. “We were approaching the hinterland of chaos.”

Physicians in the emergency department were begging Fins for the authority to withhold CPR when they felt it was futile; they wanted to be able to focus their care on patients with better odds of surviving, and to avoid the viral transmission that CPR can cause. But since 1987, New York State law has generally held that physicians must try to resuscitate a patient, unless the patient has a “do not resuscitate” order. Hospitals could have, in theory, made an argument for suspending doctors’ obligation to follow that law given the crisis circumstances. (The prosecution of health-care workers after Hurricane Katrina is seen as a disastrous example of what happens when doctors work without legal clarity regarding their end-of-life decision making during a crisis.) Fins’s team quickly wrote 12 different versions of a triage protocol, hoping to anticipate whatever guidelines might come from the New York State Department of Health—but no guidelines ever came.

“This was a stress test for medical ethics, for distributive justice and the allocation of scarce resources,” he wrote. “Simply put, there were more patients to be resuscitated than available personnel, much less equipment.” As far as we know, New York hospitals never ran out of ventilators, but the state did experience terrible shortages of PPE, of staff, of crucial equipment and supplies. In March, PPE was so scarce on the ground in New York City that pictures surfaced of nurses wrapping themselves in trash bags. At hospitals across the city and state, the shortage contributed to the policy of prohibiting all visitors. It wasn’t acceptable to, say, risk depriving a nurse of PPE in order to provide the gear to visitors, whom the hospitals were ethically obliged to protect from exposure, for their own sake and to limit community spread.

Hospitals faced other urgent and difficult questions. Physicians needed to know: What do we do when we have a COVID-19

patient who wants to be discharged against medical advice but who would be returning to a home where she cannot isolate from others? Can we sequester patients over their objections? Is using physical restraints justifiable if people resist being quarantined? Comparable questions and shortages now confront hospital systems around the country, as COVID-19 cases spike all over. Questions of rationing have emerged again, in Utah and elsewhere, reprising the grisly experience of last spring.

In New York, staff ethicists became lifelines for frightened colleagues who were “surrounded by 10 to 15 critically ill intubated patients in the emergency department, while the patients’ panicked relatives sat nervously in a (virtual) waiting room, anxiously expecting news of their loved one,” Fins later wrote in *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*.

One call in particular sticks out in Fins’s memory: a frantic consult request from an ER doctor with three patients who needed to be put on ventilators right away. Within 15 minutes, two more arrived. The department had enough ventilators, but only two teams of practitioners that could work them.

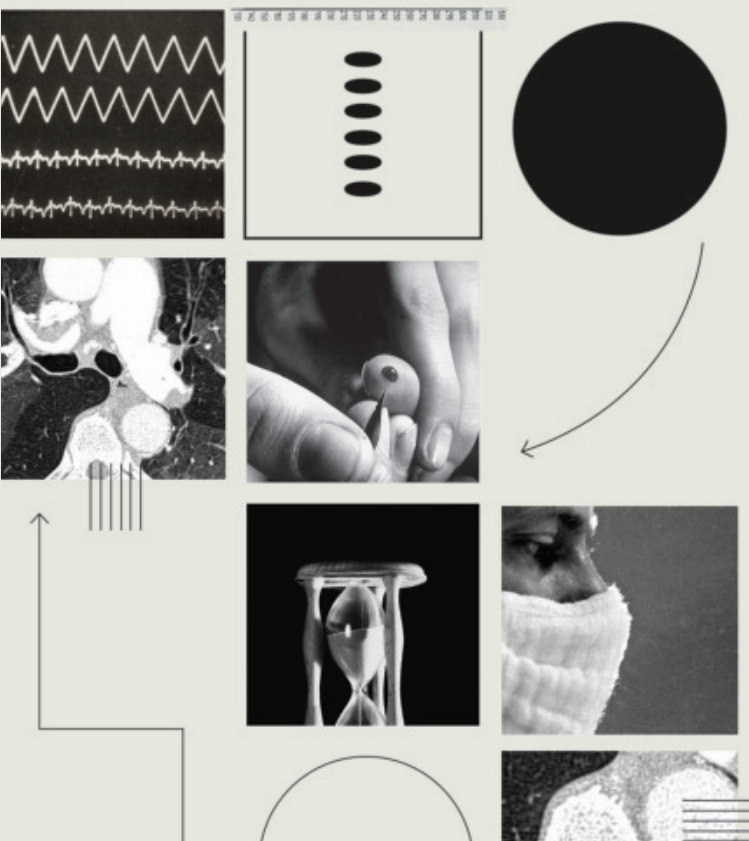
COVID-19, when it triggers acute respiratory distress syndrome, causes the body to essentially drown itself: The lungs stiffen and fill with blood and fluid until the person suffocates. A ventilator can force pure oxygen into the lungs with enough pressure to overcome some of the fluid and stiffening, but putting someone on a ventilator is a tricky, risky procedure that requires expert training. Fluids and secretions spray into the air, exposing everyone in the room to infection; patients usually have to be sedated and even paralyzed for the procedure.

This doctor had five drowning people, two intubation teams, and not very much time.

What do I do? the physician pleaded.

BIOETHICS AS A FIELD developed in response to concerns about the doctor’s power: Someone who is uniquely equipped to heal is also uniquely equipped to harm. Writings about the moral obligations of medical practice date back thousands of years, but until the 20th century there was, generally speaking, trust that doctors were reliable moral actors—besides which, the doctor’s might was naturally restrained by the limitations of medical technology. But the rash of scientific advancements in the 20th century presented physicians and scientists with awesome new capabilities: cultivating human life in a laboratory; artificially sustaining life after brain death; manipulating genetics. That century also witnessed a number of human-rights atrocities committed by physicians and scientists: the torturous medical experiments that German doctors subjected prisoners to during the Holocaust; the radiation experiments done on pregnant women and schoolchildren after World War II; the Tuskegee syphilis experiments.

The upshot was a steep erosion of public trust in medicine concurrent with a dramatic increase in the ability doctors had to “play at God,” a temptation that the Hippocratic oath warns against. By the 1970s a new field, bioethics, had emerged, whose experts were supposed to advise and check the power of scientists and physicians.



The field has evolved to meet demand. Today, bioethicists work on the moral dimensions of a broad range of medical issues: genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, organ donation, assisted suicide, surrogacy, data privacy, reproductive rights and technology, alternative medicine, disability studies, pain management. Their primary role is consultative—tackling the question *What should I do?*, whether the querent is a pharmaceutical company asking about the best way to test a new drug on children, a state government wondering whether it's okay to mandate mask wearing, or a federal government sorting out whether to relax guidelines to speed up a vaccine trial. Their task often isn't to offer a verdict or directive but to help the decision maker tease out the options, clarify the aims of various stakeholders, and note any obvious ethical pitfalls.

A wide spectrum of approaches and values exists within the bioethicist community, many of them traceable to various branches of ethical thought. To dramatically compress several centuries of isms: An ethicist might favor deontology, which suggests that you should judge an action based on whether it follows moral and ethical rules, such as honesty or duty to others. (Kantians, named after the most famous deontologist, make up the school's most prominent sect.) She might be a consequentialist, who worries about the impact of a decision, as opposed to its motives. (Utilitarianism is the most familiar version of this school, prioritizing the greatest good for the greatest number.) She could be a virtue ethicist, whose highest priority is striving to fulfill ideals such as justice and kindness; a pragmatist, who holds that any ethic can really be judged only by evaluating its practical application; a Deweyan pragmatist, who believes that ethical choice evolves over time, requiring constant reevaluation; and so on.

Especially when it comes to life-and-death questions, ethicists fiercely debate the right path—not only the path itself, but the correct basis for it. “The reality is these decisions are really controversial,” says Matthew Wynia, the director of the Center for Bioethics and Humanities at the University of Colorado. “You could go in several different directions, and all of them have some ethical justification, but not a justification that 100 percent of people are going to buy.”

A self-identified “pragmatist with some deontological leanings,” Wynia has spent the past 20 years working on standards of care in public-health emergencies. “It's very common to look at catastrophic disasters and say, ‘Just try to save the most lives,’” he told me. As reasonable as “save the most lives” sounds, taken too literally it would require that hospitals prioritize the patients they deem most likely to survive—the ethical dangers of which are obvious when applied to COVID-19. In the U.S., the disease disproportionately kills people of color, those with preexisting conditions (sometimes linked to poverty), the elderly, and people with disabilities, so a system of care that privileges *only* survival odds reinforces existing injustices. “Equity still matters,” even in a crisis situation, Wynia said. “Justice matters. Fairness still matters. You're not just trying to optimize a number.”

Tia Powell, who served as executive director of the New York State Task Force on Life and the Law in 2007, when it released a preliminary version of the ventilator-allocation guidelines, and who today is director of the Montefiore Einstein Center for Bioethics

in the Bronx, told me that the guidelines were motivated by the desire to even out the quality and availability of care. The goal was to keep New Yorkers' fates from depending on which hospital they landed in, or what team of doctors they happened to encounter. She sighed. “You don't want people making complex decisions and policies while tired and frightened, or at the last minute and behind closed doors.”

But this is exactly what happened in New York last spring, and in other parts of the country this fall, as coronavirus cases climbed exponentially. As of this writing, only a few states have enacted crisis standards of care, despite how resource-strapped their hospitals have become. (Texas's governor has not instituted crisis standards of care even though at various points multiple counties in the state have run out of room in their hospitals, which had to turn people away.) “What we learned is that no matter how good the ethical guidance, governors are incredibly reluctant to actually implement explicit triage,” Wynia told me. “Why do you think that is? Because it would mean admitting that we are not able to provide top-quality medical care in the United States of America in 2020.” When asked in late March how the state would decide who got ventilators if it ran out, New York's Governor Cuomo said, “I don't even want to think about that consequence.” (State administration officials told me that their focus had been increasing the system's capacity, and that they never seriously considered rationing or crisis standards, despite pleas to do so from medical professionals and organizations like the New York State Bar Association and the New York Chapter of the American College of Physicians. “The last resort was never an option,” said Gary Holmes, a spokesperson for the department of health.)

“I understand it, by the way,” Wynia said. “No one would want to be accountable for making these decisions. They're tragic decisions, which is why they roll downhill. Right? From powerful person to less powerful person to the person who can't say *I refuse to make that decision*. That's how they end up in the lap of the bedside doctor.”

NORMALLY, IF FIVE PATIENTS arrived in the ER with the same condition and roughly the same level of urgency, they would be treated in order of arrival. If they arrived at roughly the same time and with the same condition, they would be treated in order of urgency. But the panicked phone call about the five patients who all needed ventilators presented a vanishingly rare predicament: five patients, same arrival time, same problem, all critically ill.

The decision was “based on who was most likely to survive,” Fins told me. Drawing on a modified version of the save-the-most-lives method to which Wynia referred, the ethicist on call (one of Fins's colleagues) advised the physician to prioritize the five patients using the sequential organ-failure assessment (SOFA), which predicts the likelihood of short-term survival. (Not all ethicists think SOFA is an adequate prognostic system for COVID-19—Wynia has pointed out that it hasn't been an accurate outcome predictor for pandemic flus.) The ethicist also reminded the physician to be vigilant for any implicit bias in the assessment (ageism, ableism, racism). This wasn't rationing; it was prioritization: In what order would these patients get put on ventilators?

This distinction between prioritization and rationing may seem technical, or like doublespeak. What's the difference when "deprioritizing" someone might mean he doesn't survive long enough to get the care that could have saved him? But in this case, the prioritization seems to have made sense. The medical team was able to give the third, fourth, and fifth patients in line other kinds of mechanical respiratory support to bridge the gap. The fifth patient had end-stage dementia and multiple organ failure.

Fins said that situations like this, in which all of the options are bad but you have to make a decision, create "a kind of a moral scar for the clinician." The clinical ethicist's job is to help the scar fade, essentially by assuring health-care workers that they did the best they could given the circumstances. "The moral explication is a balm for the clinicians, who have to go back and do it again." In this case, they avoided the absolute worst: All five people were eventually placed on a ventilator.

The full-scale ventilator shortage people feared never came to pass in New York last spring. But the wave of relief at dodging that particular catastrophe has obscured the fact that other kinds of rationing did occur amid the chaos—and is still occurring as the coronavirus continues to rampage around the country. For instance, in a challenge that harkens back to the God Committee, last spring dialysis was in critically short supply. As COVID-19 patients developed renal failure in large numbers, hospitals began to run out of dialysis liquid. As the stock of the liquid shrank to nearly nothing, Fins's team, alongside other ethics teams across the city, considered the questions at play: "Is it better to dialyze three people really well or six people not as well but enough to try to maintain their viability?" What about if you have 12 people who need it? Once again, a committee was sitting around a table (or around their various dining tables on Zoom) trying to come up with a protocol for who would receive dialysis and who would die.

"I kept feeling gobsmacked," Tia Powell told me, describing what it was like heading Montefiore's bioethics team during the surge. "Like, *What now?! It's going up to the kidney? We need dialysis? No one saw that coming!*"

Powell, who is a psychiatrist, chairs the bioethics committee of a hospital system that's very different from Fins's Upper East Side institution. In the Bronx, Montefiore serves the patients who are most vulnerable to COVID-19: people of color, the uninsured, and Medicaid recipients. Terrified of running out of beds, clinicians, and equipment, the hospital drafted doctors from other specialties into critical care, turned conference rooms into intensive-care units, built tents outside to test and triage patients, reused PPE when possible, and retrained staff on alternative ventilation equipment. Powell described the situation as "staying just one step ahead of the wolf."

It was terrifying not only because people were dying in droves, Powell said, or because running out of ventilators would mean more death, or because the dearth of PPE could put doctors and nurses in mortal danger—it was terrifying because clinicians were facing a quality and scale of uncertainty and moral trauma that they'd never seen before, in ways that affected their clinical decision making. Suddenly, performing CPR posed agonizing ethical questions. Chest compressions spewed virus into the air, putting the medical team at extra risk of getting the disease. Normally,

this is a risk medical staff take without hesitation. But doctors and nurses quickly realized that in most COVID-19 cases, CPR was useless—the patients died anyway, skewing the risk-benefit balance for the procedure.

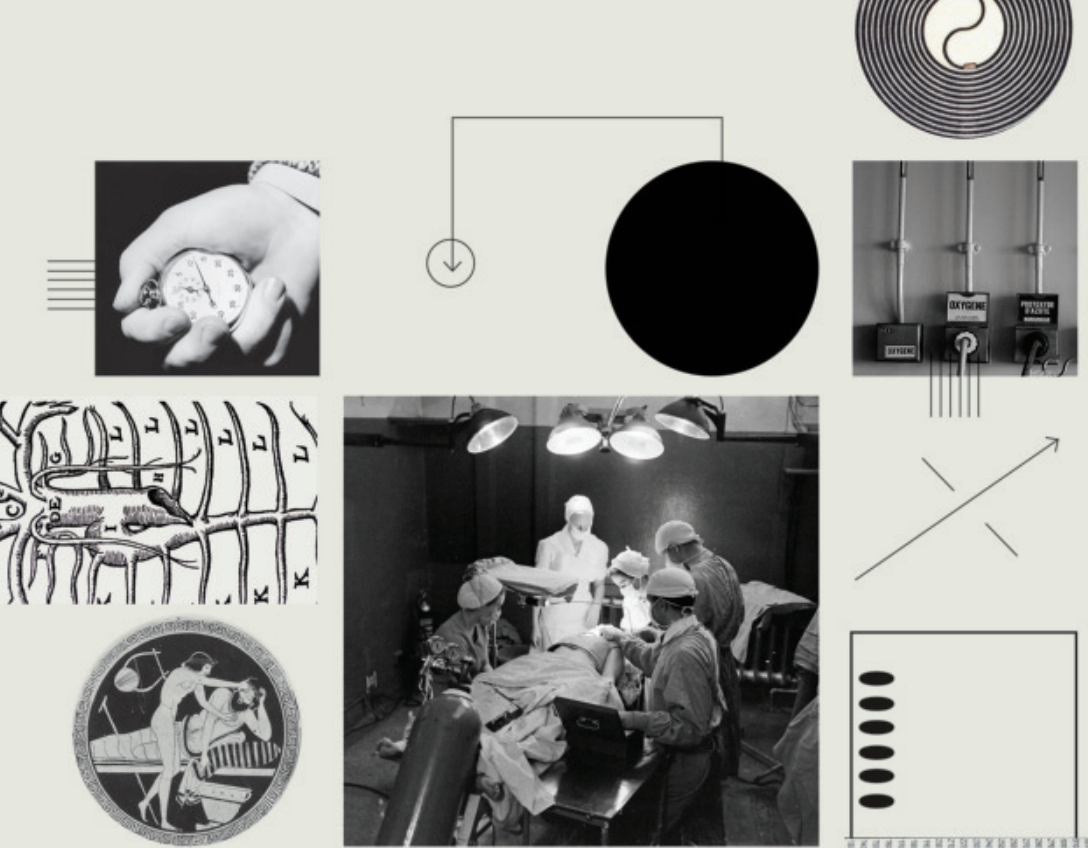
Kristine Torres-Lockhart is an internist specializing in addiction medicine who was called to provide care for COVID-19 patients at Montefiore's Wakefield campus. She told me about a day when she was assigned to the "code team," the group that rapidly responds to

Fins likened the influx of critical-care patients to what you'd expect if there had been "a major plane crash at LaGuardia Airport"—only the influx never stopped. Patients just kept coming.

anyone who loses a heartbeat or whose vital signs become unstable. "I think that was honestly one of the most physically and emotionally draining days of my career to date," she said. She and her colleagues worried that being on the code team would expose them to the virus, which they'd then take home to their families. The resuscitation measures themselves were athletic and exhausting. The code bell went off over and over again during her 12-hour shift—maybe 10 times, she said. Of the "code blues"—patients who lost a heartbeat—no one survived. "That amount of loss in a day ..." She trailed off. Data now indicate that this is the pattern in hospitals across the country and around the world. When COVID-19 patients go into cardiac arrest, it's often because their lungs are failing, which can't be solved by restarting their heart. Mortality data suggest that only a small percentage—as low as 3 percent or less—of COVID-19 patients who receive CPR survive.

Meanwhile, at Montefiore, dozens of critical-care staff members were out sick themselves with COVID-19, and some were dying. While efforts to restart the heart of virtually any patient without a DNR order are normal practice, there were serious questions about whether they were ethical now, considering that they seemed futile. "It is unconscionable to create risk to providers without benefit to the patient," Powell wrote in *The American Journal of Bioethics* in May, "and indeed to create the likelihood of a painful death if the patient retains any consciousness." Fins wrestled with the question as well after clinicians entreated him to sanction withholding CPR in certain cases. He recognized the abundant ethical reasons for unilateral DNR orders, but something about the idea sat poorly with him—it robbed patients and their families of the right to make that decision.

To some medical teams, though, attempting resuscitation felt not only fruitless but also like a charade or a lie, like they were giving families false hope. Beyond that, because resuscitation is a



life. “I think the public perceived it as if we withheld care,” Michael P. Jones, the residency-program director for emergency medicine at Montefiore, told me. “Like we didn’t do everything possible. But we actually did.” He said that of his 84 residents, 35 got COVID-19. Burned into his memory, he said, is the day he had to take one resident by the shoulder, walk him down to the emergency department, and then bring him on a stretcher to the ICU. Their collective sacrifices and efforts, he felt, had been immense. “Many of us had greater ethical dilemmas with regards to doing too much and saying, ‘What are we doing here? We’re not going to be able to help this

somewhat violent process—ribs are broken, bruises inflicted—some doctors and nurses felt demoralized by the sense that they were abusing people’s dying bodies to no positive end. At Montefiore, the doctors responsible for running the codes—officially deciding whether to start chest compressions and when to stop them—were usually second- or third-year residents. This was “horrifying” for newly minted physicians, Powell told me.

Conversations with families about advance directives and DNR orders were wrenching. One of the great tragedies of the pandemic was the way that patients had to be isolated and denied visitors—a decision made out of an ethical imperative to reduce the spread of the disease and save lives, but with the horrible effect of trapping patients alone in hospital rooms, and stranding their frightened loved ones at home, unable to see what was going on or to provide comfort. Torres-Lockhart would call a family to discuss switching a patient to palliative care and the family would balk, unprepared to make end-of-life decisions after a swift decline they hadn’t seen. “It would be like, *What are you talking about? You know, I just dropped off my grandfather/my mother, like, two days ago. She was here in the house doing totally great.* I think it was just really hard for folks to wrap their minds around that, because they couldn’t physically see it.”

Powell blamed this situation, in large part, on the state’s punting the decision making regarding clinical guidelines. “Under these conditions, placing the burden of a medical decision about CPR onto these traumatized families is also unacceptable,” she wrote. “NY’s failure to issue guidance is responsible for creating additional risk to staff and additional pain to dying patients and their families. This was a way to make a tragedy worse.”

The mistrust that sometimes arose was heartbreaking for the doctors, who were working as hard as they’d ever worked in their

person ... and how does that interplay with the person in the room next door that maybe we could have done more for?”

Hospital personnel had to act as family for their dying patients, breaking down emotional barriers they normally maintain to avoid going to pieces every time a patient dies. This was, in its way, the moral response the situation demanded—doing whatever it took to offer the dying some measure of human connection. CBS News made a documentary about health-care workers at Montefiore during the surge, which features one young nurse recalling the team’s first COVID-19 death. “The family kept saying, ‘They’re gonna die alone.’ And we told them, ‘No, they’re not.’ And the entire unit sat in front of the room and waited for them to pull the tube and allow them to go on their own.” As she tells the story for the camera, the nurse is both smiling and crying. “We said a prayer, we said goodbye, and we told the family, ‘No. They didn’t die alone. They died with us.’”

The moral and emotional weight of treating dying patients like family while also having to decide whom to admit and whom to turn away—and how much care was enough and how much was too much, and which treatments should be deployed when—was too overwhelming for some, especially amid the trauma of witnessing so much death. There has been a rash of suicides among critical-care providers around the world, and studies suggest high levels of psychological trauma among frontline personnel. Many are leaving the field or retiring early, citing exhaustion.

To Fins, the system’s reliance on already overburdened critical-care workers—rather than on government-enacted protocols—to bear the moral burden of the care decision making was a failure and a tragedy. He cringed at the sound of the 7 p.m. “clap” every night, when New Yorkers came outside to cheer medical workers. “That applause,” Fins said, visibly squirming. “It was, in a

sense, mortifying. Nobody liked it. None of us felt we deserved it.” Torres-Lockhart felt hollow leaving the hospital at the end of a long, horrible day of failed resuscitation attempts, and walking out into the 7 p.m. clap. “I didn’t feel worthy of a round of applause after a day like that,” she said miserably.

“It was a bread-and-circus kind of thing,” Fins said. “They needed to believe we were superheroes. But why do we value heroes? Because heroes assume a disproportionate share of the burden.” He shook his head. “We had to do more than we should. A pandemic response based on heroism is a thin reed.”

I asked if he had regrets—things he would have done differently had he known in March what he knows now. Broadly, he said, he thinks COVID-19 has offered a wake-up call to the bioethics field. It hasn’t focused nearly enough on health-care inequity, which COVID-19 has revealed and exacerbated in ways no clinical ethicist or individual physician could fix on the spot: The Bronx and Queens were much harder hit than Manhattan, a fact driven by inequities wrapped up in race, class, and access to insurance. Patients at underfunded public hospitals fared far worse than those at private ones—*The New York Times* reported that at the height of the surge, patients at some community hospitals were three times as likely to die as patients at private hospitals in wealthy areas of the city, such as Weill Cornell. Historically, the bioethicist’s attention has been on the individual patient, but Fins, Wynia, and Powell all suggested that the field should move toward what Fins called “an ecosystemic approach,” one that anticipates and corrects the injustices and resource rationing “baked into the system.”

Yolonda Wilson, a Howard University philosopher who specializes in bioethics, shares this view, and says that COVID-19 has exposed the way the field has marginalized ethicists who argue that racial and other structural inequities merit serious attention. “What we’re seeing is that institutions and structures, including bioethics, have been caught with their pants down,” Wilson told me. “Because most folks aren’t trained to talk about this and to think in these ways. So they’re scrambling.”

In September, Fins lamented that Cuomo’s decision to effectively deny that rationing would ever happen (even as it was actively happening) and his refusal to enact crisis standards of care (even as hospitals were having to enact those standards themselves) might have kept other states from taking COVID-19 as seriously as they should. “If New York State had truly acknowledged the need for crisis standards of care, and they were transparent, maybe people in other parts of the country would wear a mask.” He looked tremendously sad. “Maybe people elsewhere would have understood how serious this was.”

MY CONVERSATIONS WITH bioethicists over the past six months produced the eerie sensation of talking to a chorus of Cassandras. Fins’s fear that what happened in New York’s ICUs would replicate elsewhere has come to pass: As of this writing, in mid-November, caseloads are at record highs all over the country, and health-care systems in multiple states are facing rationing. Need far outstripped resources in the Rio Grande Valley for months over the summer, and El Paso, Texas, began bracing

itself to exceed hospital capacity in October. The Utah Hospital Association is preparing to ask the governor to enact crisis standards of care as its system becomes overwhelmed. Hospitals in Wisconsin are nearing capacity. The Dakotas, Idaho, Nebraska, and New Mexico are facing similar challenges.

The other big bioethical hurdle facing the field, the United States, and the world is the COVID-19 vaccine—how to create and manufacture it quickly but safely, and, just as daunting, how to allocate it. With successful and safe vaccines now emerging from clinical trials, the supply chain will need months to catch up. Stéphane Bancel, the chief executive of Moderna—a biotech company whose vaccine has, as of this writing, shown strong preliminary signs of effectiveness—predicted in late summer that the U.S. and every other country will be “massively supply-constrained” until mid-to-late 2021. Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has said the same.

Given this, who should get the vaccine first? If we prioritize people who are more likely to contract and die from the illness—which is one common method of allocating vaccines—should Black, Latino, and Indigenous Americans be on the top of the list, given their documented vulnerability? Should the risks associated with being among the first to receive the vaccine be distributed more broadly? Should health-care workers get the first doses? What about schoolchildren, or teachers? Should we prioritize people most likely to die from the disease (say, the elderly) or those most likely to transmit it widely (say, college students)? Can a government compel some citizens to get inoculated? Should it? If the U.S. is the first country to develop the vaccine, should it share its limited early doses with the international community? Should the federal government get to decide how the vaccine is allocated among different states? What if multiple vaccines arrive on the market with different levels of effectiveness, or different side effects? Who gets which one?

The debate about these questions is intense. Take whether the United States should share some of its limited vaccine supply with the international community. Some bioethicists, like Wynia, say yes: The spirit of collaboration and common humanity should rule the day. Others, like Ezekiel Emanuel, the chair of the department of medical ethics and health policy at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of President-elect Joe Biden’s COVID-19 task force, argue that countries are justified in attending to the vital needs of their own citizens, and perhaps even morally obligated to do so, before looking elsewhere. Only once a country achieves herd immunity, Emanuel says, does it become obliged to share.

Or consider further the question about whether to prioritize vaccine distribution to racial minority groups. Doing so would seem to be a sound choice from a public-health perspective and a just one from a moral perspective, Yolonda Wilson argues, given the higher statistical likelihood that these populations will contract and die from COVID-19, and given the fact that American health care has historically underserved or outright harmed those communities. But according to Dorit Reiss, a legal scholar who specializes in vaccine policy, allocating based on race

or ethnicity quickly runs into legal questions about discrimination. It would also, Reiss told me, create a new legal precedent for giving certain races medical care first—and America’s track record on the racial allocation of preferential medical care is grim.

In mid-September, the World Health Organization released its preliminary guidance on vaccine allocation, and in October, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released its framework, drafted by ethicists, scientists, doctors, and public-health experts. NASEM proposes a rollout that prioritizes, in order, first responders and frontline health-care workers, including people whose job it is to clean and support health-care facilities; anyone with dangerous underlying health conditions and comorbidities; older adults living in group homes or who are unable to self-isolate; teachers, school staff, and child-care workers; and essential workers whose jobs increase their exposure risk, like public-transit workers. No demographic

*The doctor had five patients,
two intubation teams, and not
very much time. What do I do?
the physician pleaded.*

population would have priority, but NASEM suggested making special efforts to attend to “residents of high-vulnerability areas,” which “would incorporate the variables that the committee believes are most linked to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people of color.”

Every ethicist I asked agreed that the NASEM framework was good on the whole, but that the path to its implementation is precarious. (The CDC’s latest “COVID-19 Vaccination Program Interim Playbook for Jurisdiction Operations” includes a three-phase plan but remains vague about the logistics and ethics of distribution, stating that “final decisions are being made about use of initially available supplies of COVID-19 vaccines.”) What’s more, while the federal government will distribute vaccines to the states and provide guidelines for who should get inoculated in what order, the CDC announced in late August that states will need to make their own plans for how to allocate the vaccine.

In October, the states submitted their interim plans, which health experts and ethicists say are vague and patchy. Different states prioritize different populations: Arkansas has moved meatpacking workers toward the front of the line; Maryland includes incarcerated people alongside health-care workers and older adults, while Mississippi does not. Some states, like Virginia and Kentucky, say they will give priority to communities of color. ProPublica reviewed 47 of those plans and found that most states aren’t ready for distribution: Georgia’s plan is to relegate

distribution decisions to local counties and districts; Washington State doesn’t have any warehouses ready to store a vaccine, like Pfizer’s, that needs ultracold temperatures; North Dakota and Oregon have no clear plan for how to vaccinate migrant workers. Illinois has solicited bids from private companies that could help handle planning and distribution. Meanwhile Native American reservations, and rural areas more generally, are not yet provided for in many states’ plans, even as COVID-19 cases have risen sharply there. “Early, when we don’t have lots of doses, I frankly do not anticipate that vaccine will be widely available in every rural community,” Amanda Cohn, the chief medical officer for the CDC’s vaccine task force, told ProPublica in early November.

The chaos and moral confusion that COVID-19 has wreaked in American ICUs—first in New York, and now all over the country—show how a leadership vacuum can generate an atomized and uncoordinated crisis response. Bioethicists fear this is a preview of what will happen with vaccine allocation. (A new presidential administration will likely change the federal response to the pandemic—Biden’s announcement of his COVID-19 task force has been met with hope—but whether and how that will affect the course of distribution remains to be seen.) As with the disease itself, the people who stand to suffer most gravely are the ones already neglected or systematically “deprioritized.”

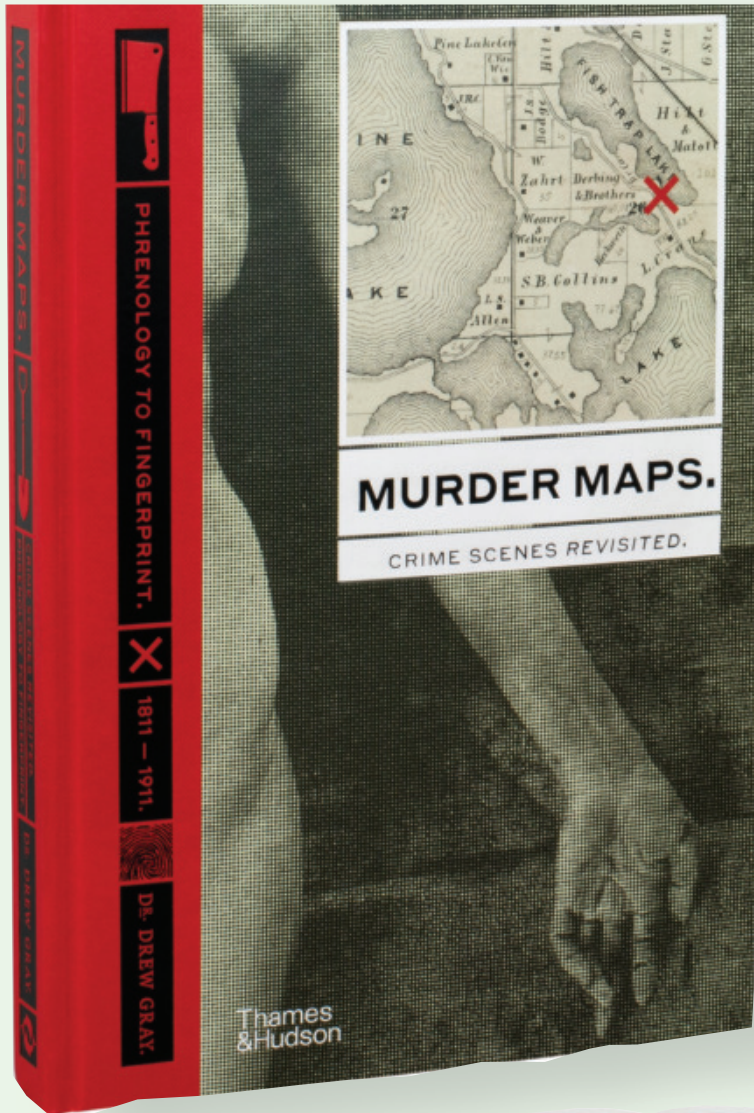
One key to a just and effective vaccine plan, all the bioethicists I spoke with pointed out, is the inclusion of affected communities in the making of plans that will determine their access to care—a step that has been almost uniformly overlooked. “In how many spaces are folks who actually are essential workers invited to have conversations about what they understand their needs to be?” Yolonda Wilson asked. She pointed out that Biden’s COVID-19 task force, while it does include a bioethicist (Ezekiel Emanuel), has no nurses, no “essential workers” other than physicians on it, and no one who specializes in rural health. “It’s good that we have a serious task force and someone who cares about having a real federal response,” Wilson said. “At the same time, if all we’re going to do is replicate power structures that leave out important voices, then I’m not sure how much work that’s doing.”

AS WAS THE CASE last spring in New York, doctors are waiting for guidance from their institutions, which are waiting for guidance from their cities, which are waiting for guidance from their governors. Everyone is girding themselves. How will vaccines be allocated among the states, and once allocated, how should the states distribute them? How much funding will states receive to help with distribution? Who will cover the cost of vaccinating the uninsured? How will tribal sovereignty be respected? What is the state’s role in monitoring people after they have been vaccinated? Will states be forced to hand over personally identifiable vaccine data to the federal government?

As of this writing, governors and health-care workers are still waiting for definitive answers. *A*

Jordan Kisner is the author of Thin Places: Essays From In Between.

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NEVER HAVE
SO MANY
RESEARCHERS
TRAINED THEIR
MINDS ON A
SINGLE PROBLEM
IN SO BRIEF
A TIME.
SCIENCE WILL
NEVER BE
THE SAME.

BY ED YONG

1.

In fall of 2019, exactly zero scientists were studying COVID-19, because no one knew the disease existed. The coronavirus that causes it, SARS-CoV-2, had only recently jumped into humans and had been neither identified nor named. But by the end of March 2020, it had spread to more than 170 countries, sickened more than 750,000 people, and triggered the biggest pivot in the history of modern science. Thousands of researchers dropped whatever intellectual puzzles had previously consumed their curiosity and began working on the pandemic instead. In mere months, science became thoroughly COVID-ized.

As of this writing, the biomedical library PubMed lists more than 74,000 COVID-related scientific papers—more than twice as many as there are about polio, measles, cholera, dengue, or other diseases that have plagued humanity for centuries. Only 9,700 Ebola-related papers have been published since its discovery in 1976; last year, at least one journal received more COVID-19 papers than that for consideration. By September, the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* had received 30,000 submissions—16,000 more than in all of 2019. “All that difference is COVID-19,” Eric Rubin, *NEJM*’s editor in chief, says. Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, told me, “The way this has resulted in a shift in scientific priorities has been unprecedented.”

Much like famous initiatives such as the Manhattan Project and the Apollo program, epidemics focus the energies of large groups of scientists. In the U.S., the influenza pandemic of 1918, the threat of malaria in the tropical battlegrounds of World War II, and the rise of polio in the postwar years all triggered large pivots. Recent epidemics of Ebola and Zika each prompted a temporary burst of funding and publications. But “nothing in history was even close to the level of pivoting that’s happening right now,” Madhukar Pai of McGill University told me.

That’s partly because there are just more scientists: From 1960 to 2010, the number of biological or medical researchers in the U.S. increased sevenfold, from just 30,000 to more than 220,000. But SARS-CoV-2 has also spread farther and faster than any new virus in a century. For Western scientists, it wasn’t a faraway threat like Ebola. It threatened to inflame their lungs. It shut down their labs. “It hit us at home,” Pai said.

In a survey of 2,500 researchers in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, Kyle Myers from Harvard and his team found that 32 percent had shifted their focus toward the pandemic. Neuroscientists who study the sense of smell started investigating why COVID-19 patients tend to lose theirs. Physicists who had previously experienced infectious diseases only by contracting them found themselves creating models to inform policy makers. Michael D. L. Johnson at the University of Arizona normally studies copper’s toxic effects on bacteria. But when he learned that SARS-CoV-2 persists for less time on copper surfaces than on other materials, he partially pivoted to see how the virus might be vulnerable to the metal. No other disease has been scrutinized so intensely, by so much combined intellect, in so brief a time.

These efforts have already paid off. New diagnostic tests can detect the virus within minutes. Massive open data sets of viral genomes and COVID-19 cases have produced the most detailed picture yet of a new disease's evolution. Vaccines are being developed with record-breaking speed. SARS-CoV-2 will be one of the most thoroughly characterized of all pathogens, and the secrets it yields will deepen our understanding of other viruses, leaving the world better prepared to face the next pandemic.

But the COVID-19 pivot has also revealed the all-too-human frailties of the scientific enterprise. Flawed research made the pandemic more confusing, influencing misguided policies. Clinicians wasted millions of dollars on trials that were so sloppy as to be pointless. Overconfident poseurs published misleading work on topics in which they had no expertise. Racial and gender inequalities in the scientific field widened.

Amid a long winter of sickness, it's hard not to focus on the political failures that led us to a third surge. But when people look back on this period, decades from now, they will also tell stories, both good and bad, about this extraordinary moment for science. At its best, science is a self-correcting march toward greater knowledge for the betterment of humanity. At its worst, it is a self-interested pursuit of greater prestige at the cost of truth and rigor. The pandemic brought both aspects to the fore. Humanity will benefit from the products of the COVID-19 pivot. Science itself will too, if it learns from the experience.

2.

In February, Jennifer Doudna, one of America's most prominent scientists, was still focused on CRISPR—the gene-editing tool that she'd co-discovered and that won her a Nobel Prize in October. But when her son's high school shut down and UC Berkeley, her university, closed its campus, the severity of the impending pandemic became clear. “In three weeks, I went from thinking we're still okay to thinking that my whole life is going to change,” she told me. On March 13, she and dozens of colleagues at the Innovative Genomics Institute, which she leads, agreed to pause most of their ongoing projects and redirect their skills to addressing COVID-19. They worked on CRISPR-based diagnostic tests. Because existing tests were in short supply, they converted lab space into a pop-up testing facility to serve the

local community. “We need to make our expertise relevant to whatever is happening right now,” she said.

Scientists who'd already been studying other emerging diseases were even quicker off the mark. Lauren Gardner, an engineering professor at Johns Hopkins University who has studied dengue and Zika, knew that new epidemics are accompanied by a dearth of real-time data. So she and one of her students created an online global dashboard to map and tally all publicly reported COVID-19 cases and deaths. After one night of work, they released it, on January 22. The dashboard has since been accessed daily by governments, public-health agencies, news organizations, and anxious citizens.

Studying deadly viruses is challenging at the best of times, and was especially so this past year. To handle SARS-CoV-2, scientists must work in “biosafety level 3” labs, fitted with special airflow systems and other extreme measures; although the actual number is not known, an estimated 200 such facilities exist in the U.S. Researchers often test new drugs and vaccines on monkeys before proceeding to human trials, but the U.S. is facing a monkey shortage after China stopped exporting the animals, possibly because it needed them for research. And other biomedical research is now more difficult because of physical-distancing requirements. “Usually we had people packed in, but with COVID, we do shift work,” Akiko Iwasaki, a Yale immunologist, told me. “People are coming in at ridiculous hours” to protect themselves from the very virus they are trying to study.

Experts on emerging diseases are scarce: These threats go neglected by the public in the lulls between epidemics. “Just a year ago I had to explain to people why I was studying coronaviruses,” says Lisa Gralinski of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “That's never going to be a concern again.” Stressed and stretched, she and other emerging-disease researchers were also conscripted into unfamiliar roles. They're acting as makeshift advisers to businesses, schools, and local governments. They're barraged by interview requests from journalists. They're explaining the nuances of the pandemic on Twitter, to huge new follower counts. “It's often the same person who's helping the Namibian government to manage malaria outbreaks and is now being pulled into helping Maryland manage COVID-19,” Gardner told me.

But the newfound global interest in viruses also means “you have a lot more people you can talk through problems with,” Pardis Sabeti, a computational geneticist at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, told me. Indeed, COVID-19 papers are more likely than typical biomedical studies to have authors who had never published together before, according to a team led by Ying Ding, who works at the University of Texas at Austin.

Fast-forming alliances could work at breakneck speed because many researchers had spent the past few decades transforming science from a plodding, cloistered endeavor into something nimbler and more transparent. Traditionally, a scientist submits her paper to a journal, which sends it to a (surprisingly small) group of peers for (several rounds of usually anonymous) comments; if the paper passes this (typically months-long) peer-review gantlet, it is published (often behind an expensive paywall). Languid and opaque, this system is ill-suited to a fast-moving outbreak. But biomedical scientists can now upload preliminary versions of their papers, or “preprints,” to freely accessible websites, allowing others to immediately dissect and build upon their results. This practice had been slowly gaining popularity before 2020, but proved so vital for sharing information about COVID-19 that it will likely become a mainstay of modern biomedical research. Preprints accelerate science, and the pandemic accelerated the use of preprints. At the start of the year, one repository, medRxiv (pronounced “med archive”), held about 1,000 preprints. By the end of October, it had more than 12,000.

Open data sets and sophisticated new tools to manipulate them have likewise made today's researchers more flexible. SARS-CoV-2's genome was decoded and shared by Chinese scientists just 10 days after the first cases were reported. By November, more than 197,000 SARS-CoV-2 genomes had been sequenced. About 90 years ago, no one had even seen an individual virus; today, scientists have reconstructed the shape of SARS-CoV-2 down to the position of individual atoms. Researchers have begun to uncover how SARS-CoV-2 compares with other coronaviruses in wild bats, the likely reservoir; how it infiltrates and co-opts our cells; how the immune system overreacts to it, creating the symptoms of COVID-19. "We're learning about this virus faster than we've ever learned about any virus in history," Sabeti said.

3.

By March, the odds of quickly eradicating the new coronavirus looked slim. A vaccine became the likeliest endgame, and the race to create one was a resounding success. The process normally takes years, but as I write this, 54 different vaccines are being tested for safety and efficacy, and 12 have entered Phase 3 clinical trials—the final checkpoint. As of this writing, Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna have announced that, based on preliminary results from these trials, their respective vaccines are roughly 95 percent effective at preventing COVID-19. "We went from a virus whose sequence was only known in January, and now in the fall, we're finishing—*finishing*—a Phase 3 trial," Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White House's coronavirus task force, told me. "Holy mackerel."

Most vaccines comprise dead, weakened, or fragmented pathogens, and must be made from scratch whenever a new threat emerges. But over the past decade, the U.S. and other countries have moved away from this slow "one bug, one drug" approach. Instead, they've invested in so-called platform technologies, in which a standard chassis can be easily customized with different payloads that target new viruses. For example, the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines both consist of nanoparticles that contain pieces of SARS-CoV-2's genetic material—its mRNA. When volunteers are injected with these particles, their cells use the mRNA to reconstruct a noninfectious

fragment of the virus, allowing their immune system to prepare antibodies that neutralize it. No company has ever brought an mRNA vaccine to market before, but because the basic platform had already been refined, researchers could quickly repurpose it with SARS-CoV-2's mRNA. Moderna got its vaccine into Phase 1 clinical trials on March 16, just 66 days after the new virus's genome was first uploaded—far faster than any pre-COVID vaccine.

Meanwhile, companies compressed the process of vaccine development by running what would normally be sequential steps in parallel, while still checking for safety and efficacy. The federal government's Operation Warp Speed, an effort to accelerate vaccine distribution, funded several companies at once—an unusual move. It preordered doses and invested in manufacturing facilities before trials were complete, reducing the risk for pharmaceutical companies looking to participate. Ironically, federal ineptitude at containing SARS-CoV-2 helped too. In the U.S., "the fact that the virus is everywhere makes it easier to gauge the performance of a vaccine," says Natalie Dean of the University of Florida, who studies vaccine trials. "You can't do a [Phase 3] vaccine trial in South Korea," because the outbreak there is under control.

Vaccines will not immediately end the pandemic. Millions of doses will have to be manufactured, allocated, and distributed; large numbers of Americans could refuse the vaccine; and how long vaccine-induced immunity will last is still unclear. In the rosiest scenario, the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines are approved and smoothly rolled out over the next 12 months. By the end of the year, the U.S. achieves herd immunity, after which the virus struggles to find susceptible hosts. It still circulates, but outbreaks are sporadic and short-lived. Schools and businesses reopen. Families hug tightly and celebrate joyously over Thanksgiving and Christmas.

And the next time a mystery pathogen emerges, scientists hope to quickly slot its genetic material into proven platforms, and move the resulting vaccines through the same speedy pipelines that were developed during this pandemic. "I don't think the world of vaccine development will ever be the same again," says Nicole Lurie of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.

As fast as the vaccine-development process was, it could have been faster. Despite the stakes, some pharmaceutical companies with relevant expertise chose not to enter the race, perhaps dissuaded by intense competition. Instead, from February to May, the sector roughly tripled its efforts to develop drugs to treat COVID-19, according to Kevin Bryan, an economist at the University of Toronto. The decades-old steroid dexamethasone turned out to reduce death rates among severely ill patients on ventilators by more than 12 percent. Early hints suggest that newer treatments such as the monoclonal-antibody therapy bamlanivimab, which was just approved for emergency use by the FDA, could help newly infected patients who have not yet been hospitalized. But although these wins are significant, they are scarce. Most drugs haven't been effective. Health-care workers became better at saving hospitalized patients more through improvements in basic medical care than through pharmaceutical panaceas—a predictable outcome, because antiviral drugs tend to offer only modest benefits.

The quest for COVID-19 treatments was slowed by a torrent of shoddy studies whose results were meaningless at best and misleading at worst. Many of the thousands of clinical trials that were launched were too small to produce statistically solid results. Some lacked a control group—a set of comparable patients who received a placebo, and who provided a baseline against which the effects of a drug could be judged. Other trials needlessly overlapped. At least 227 involved hydroxychloroquine—the antimalarial drug that Donald Trump hyped for months. A few large trials eventually confirmed that hydroxychloroquine does nothing for COVID-19 patients, but not before

hundreds of thousands of people were recruited into pointlessly small studies. More than 100,000 Americans have also received convalescent plasma—another treatment that Trump touted. But because most were not enrolled in rigorous trials, “we still don’t know if it works—and it likely doesn’t,” says Luciana Borio, the former director for medical and biodefense preparedness at the National Security Council. “What a waste of time and resources.”

In the heat of a disaster, when emergency rooms are filling and patients are dying, it is hard to set up one careful study, let alone coordinate several across a country. But coordination is not impossible. During World War II, federal agencies unified private companies, universities, the military, and other entities in a carefully orchestrated effort to speed pharmaceutical development from benchtop to battlefield. The results—revolutionary malaria treatments, new ways of mass-producing antibiotics, and at least 10 new or improved vaccines for influenza and other diseases—represented “not a triumph of scientific genius but rather of organizational purpose and efficiency,” Kendall Hoyt of Dartmouth College has written.

Similar triumphs occurred last year—in other countries. In March, taking advantage of the United Kingdom’s nationalized health system, British researchers launched a nationwide study called Recovery, which has since enrolled more than 17,600 COVID-19 patients across 176 institutions. Recovery offered conclusive answers about dexamethasone and hydroxychloroquine and is set to weigh in on several other treatments. No other study has done more to shape the treatment of COVID-19. The U.S. is now catching up. In April, the NIH launched a partnership called ACTIV, in which academic and industry scientists prioritized the most promising drugs and coordinated trial plans across the country. Since August, several such trials have started. This model was late, but is likely to outlast the pandemic itself, allowing future researchers to rapidly sort medical wheat from pharmaceutical chaff. “I can’t imagine we’ll go back to doing clinical research in the future the way we did in the past,” the NIH’s Francis Collins said.

**THE VIRUS WAS
FULLY SEQUENCED IN
JANUARY 2020. “AND NOW
IN THE FALL, WE’RE
FINISHING—FINISHING—
A PHASE 3 TRIAL,”
ANTHONY FAUCI TOLD ME.
“HOLY MACKEREL.”**

4.

Even after the COVID-19 pandemic, the fruits of the pivot will leave us better equipped for our long and intensifying war against harmful viruses. The last time a virus caused this much devastation—the flu pandemic of 1918—scientists were only just learning about viruses, and spent time looking for a bacterial culprit. This one is different. With so many scientists observing intently as a virus wreaks its horrible work upon millions of bodies, the world is learning lessons that could change the way we think about these pathogens forevermore.

Consider the long-term consequences of viral infections. Years after the original SARS virus hit Hong Kong in 2003, about a quarter of survivors still had myalgic encephalomyelitis—a chronic illness whose symptoms, such as extreme fatigue and brain fogs, can worsen dramatically after mild exertion. ME cases are thought to be linked to viral infections, and clusters sometimes follow big outbreaks. So when SARS-CoV-2 started spreading, people with ME were unsurprised to hear that tens of thousands of COVID-19 “long-haulers” were experiencing incapacitating symptoms that rolled on for months. “Everyone in my community has been thinking about this since the start of the pandemic,” says Jennifer Brea, the executive director of the advocacy group #MEAction.

ME and sister illnesses such as dysautonomia, fibromyalgia, and mast cell activation syndrome have long been neglected, their symptoms dismissed as imaginary or psychiatric. Research is poorly funded, so few scientists study them. Little is known about how to prevent and treat them. This negligence has left COVID-19 long-haulers with few answers or options, and they initially endured the same dismissal as the larger ME community. But their sheer numbers have forced a degree of recognition. They started researching, cataloging their own symptoms. They gained audiences with the NIH and the World Health Organization. Patients who are themselves experts in infectious disease or public health published their stories in top journals. “Long COVID” is being taken seriously, and Brea hopes it might drag all post-infection illnesses into the spotlight. ME never experienced a pivot. COVID-19 might inadvertently create one.

Anthony Fauci hopes so. His career was defined by HIV, and in 2019 he said in a paper he co-wrote that

reasoning is shortsighted folly. Respiratory viruses are the pathogens most likely to cause pandemics, and those outbreaks could potentially be far worse than COVID-19's.

Their movements through the air have been poorly studied, too. "There's this very entrenched idea," says Linsey Marr at Virginia Tech, that viruses mostly spread through droplets (short-range globs of snot and spit) rather than aerosols (smaller, dustlike flecks that travel farther). That idea dates back to the 1930s, when scientists were upending outdated notions that disease was caused by "bad air," or miasma. But the evidence that SARS-CoV-2 can spread through aerosols "is now overwhelming," says Marr, one of the few scientists who, *before* the pandemic, studied how viruses spread through air. "I've seen more acceptance in the last six months than over the 12 years I've been working on this."

Another pandemic is inevitable, but it will find a very different community of scientists than COVID-19 did. They will immediately work to determine whether the pathogen—most likely another respiratory virus—moves through aerosols, and whether it spreads from infected people before causing symptoms. They might call for masks and better ventilation from the earliest moments, not after months of debate. They will anticipate the possibility of an imminent wave of long-haul symptoms, and hopefully discover ways of preventing them. They might set up research groups to prioritize the most promising drugs and coordinate large clinical trials. They might take vaccine platforms that worked best against COVID-19, slot in the genetic material of the new pathogen, and have a vaccine ready within months.

5.

For all its benefits, the single-minded focus on COVID-19 will also leave a slew of negative legacies. Science is mostly a zero-sum game, and when one topic monopolizes attention and money, others lose out. Last year, between physical-distancing restrictions, redirected funds, and distracted scientists, many lines of research slowed to a crawl. Long-term studies that monitored bird migrations or the changing climate will forever have holes in their data because field research had to be canceled. Conservationists who worked to protect monkeys and apes kept their distance for fear of passing COVID-19 to already endangered species.

Roughly 80 percent of non-COVID-19 clinical trials in the U.S.—likely worth billions of dollars—were interrupted or stopped because hospitals were overwhelmed and volunteers were stuck at home. Even research on other infectious diseases was back-burnered. "All the non-COVID work that I was working on before the pandemic started is now piling up and gathering dust," says Angela Rasmussen of Georgetown University, who normally studies Ebola and MERS. "Those are still problems."

The COVID-19 pandemic is a singular disaster, and it is reasonable for society—and scientists—to prioritize it. But the pivot was driven by opportunism as much as altruism. Governments, philanthropies, and universities channeled huge sums toward COVID-19 research. The NIH alone received nearly \$3.6 billion from Congress. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation apportioned \$350 million for COVID-19 work. "Whenever there's a big pot of money, there's a feeding frenzy," Madhukar Pai told me. He works on tuberculosis, which causes 1.5 million deaths a year—comparable to COVID-19's toll in 2020. Yet tuberculosis research has been mostly paused. None of Pai's colleagues pivoted when Ebola or Zika struck, but "half of us have now swung to working on COVID-19," he said. "It's a black hole, sucking us all in."

While the most qualified experts became quickly immersed in the pandemic response, others were stuck at home looking for ways to contribute. Using the same systems that made science faster, they could download data from free databases, run quick analyses with intuitive tools, publish their work on preprint servers, and publicize it on Twitter. Often, they made things worse by swerving out of their scholarly lanes and plowing into unfamiliar territory. Nathan Ballantyne, a philosopher at Fordham University, calls this "epistemic trespassing." It can be a good thing: Continental drift was championed by Alfred Wegener, a meteorologist; microbes were first documented by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a draper. But more often than not, epistemic trespassing just creates a mess, especially when inexperience couples with overconfidence.

On March 28, a preprint noted that countries that universally use a tuberculosis vaccine called BCG had lower COVID-19 mortality rates. But such cross-country comparisons are infamously treacherous. For example, countries with higher cigarette-usage rates have longer life expectancies, not because smoking prolongs life but because it is more popular in wealthier nations. This tendency to draw faulty conclusions about individual health using data about large geographical regions is called the ecological fallacy. Epidemiologists know to avoid it. The BCG-preprint authors, who were from an osteopathic college in New York, didn't seem to. But their paper was covered by more than 70 news outlets, and dozens of inexperienced teams offered similarly specious analyses. "People who don't know how to spell *tuberculosis* have told me they can solve the link between BCG and COVID-19," Pai said. "Someone told me they can do it in 48 hours with a hackathon."

Other epistemic trespassers spent their time reinventing the wheel. One new study, published in *NEJM*, used lasers to show that when people speak, they release aerosols. But as the authors themselves note, the same result—sans lasers—was published in 1946, Marr says. I asked her whether any papers from the 2020 batch had taught her something new. After an uncomfortably long pause, she mentioned just one.

In some cases, bad papers helped shape the public narrative of the pandemic. On March 16, two biogeographers published a preprint arguing that COVID-19 will "marginally affect the tropics" because it fares poorly in warm, humid conditions. Disease experts quickly noted that techniques like the ones the duo used are meant for modeling the geographic ranges of animal and plant

species or vector-borne pathogens, and are ill-suited to simulating the spread of viruses like SARS-CoV-2. But their claim was picked up by more than 50 news outlets and echoed by the United Nations World Food Program. COVID-19 has since run rampant in many tropical countries, including Brazil, Indonesia, and Colombia—and the preprint’s authors have qualified their conclusions in later versions of the paper. “It takes a certain type of person to think that weeks of reading papers gives them more perspective than someone with a Ph.D. on that subject, and that type of person has gotten a lot of airtime in this pandemic,” says Colin Carlson of Georgetown.

The incentives to trespass are substantial. Academia is a pyramid scheme: Each biomedical professor trains an average of six doctoral students across her career, but only 16 percent of the students get tenure-track positions. Competition is ferocious, and success hinges on getting published—a feat made easier by dramatic results. These factors pull researchers toward speed, short-termism, and hype at the expense of rigor—and the pandemic intensified that pull. With an anxious world crying out for information, any new paper could immediately draw international press coverage—and hundreds of citations.

The tsunami of rushed but dubious work made life harder for actual experts, who struggled to sift the signal from the noise. They also felt obliged to debunk spurious research in long Twitter threads and relentless media interviews—acts of public service that are rarely rewarded in academia. And they were overwhelmed by requests to peer-review new papers. Kristian Andersen, an infectious-disease researcher at Scripps Research, told me that journals used to send him two or three such requests a month. Now “I’m getting three or five a day,” he said in September.

The pandemic’s opportunities also fell inequitably upon the scientific community. In March, Congress awarded \$75 million to the National Science Foundation to fast-track studies that could quickly contribute to the pandemic response. “That money just *went*,” says Cassidy Sugimoto of Indiana University, who was on rotation at the agency at the time. “It was a first-come, first-served environment. It advantaged people who were aware of the system and could act upon it quickly.” But not all scientists could pivot to COVID-19, or pivot with equal speed.

Among scientists, as in other fields, women do more child care, domestic work, and teaching than men, and are more often asked for emotional support by their students. These burdens increased as the pandemic took hold, leaving women scientists “less able to commit their time to learning about a new area of study, and less able to start a whole new research project,” says Molly M. King, a sociologist at Santa Clara University. Women’s research hours fell by nine percentage points more than did men’s because of the pressures of COVID-19. And when COVID-19 created new opportunities, men grabbed them more quickly. In the spring, the proportion of papers with women as first authors fell almost 44 percent in the preprint repository medRxiv, relative to 2019. And published COVID-19 papers had 19 percent fewer women as first authors compared with papers from the same journals in the previous year. Men led more than 80 percent of national COVID-19 task forces in 87 countries. Male scientists were quoted four times as frequently as female scientists in American news stories about the pandemic.

American scientists of color also found it harder to pivot than their white peers, because of unique challenges that sapped their time and energy. Black, Latino, and Indigenous scientists were most likely to have lost loved ones, adding mourning to their list of duties. Many grieved, too, after the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. They often faced questions from relatives who were mistrustful of the medical system, or

were experiencing discriminatory care. They were suddenly tasked with helping their predominantly white institutions fight racism. Neil Lewis Jr. at Cornell, who studies racial health disparities, told me that many psychologists had long deemed his work irrelevant. “All of a sudden my inbox is drowning,” he said, while some of his own relatives have become ill and one has died.

Science suffers from the so-called Matthew effect, whereby small successes snowball into ever greater advantages, irrespective of merit. Similarly, early hindrances linger. Young researchers who could not pivot because they were too busy caring or grieving for others might suffer lasting consequences from an unproductive year. COVID-19 “has really put the clock back in terms of closing the gap for women and underrepresented minorities,” Yale’s Akiko Iwasaki says. “Once we’re over the pandemic, we’ll need to fix it all again.”

6.

COVID-19 has already changed science immensely, but if scientists are savvy, the most profound pivot is still to come—a grand reimagining of what medicine should be. In 1848, the Prussian government sent a young physician named Rudolf Virchow to investigate a typhus epidemic in Upper Silesia. Virchow didn’t know what caused the devastating disease, but he realized its spread was possible because of malnutrition, hazardous working conditions, crowded housing, poor sanitation, and the inattention of civil servants and aristocrats—problems that require social and political reforms. “Medicine is a social science,” Virchow said, “and politics is nothing but medicine in larger scale.”

This viewpoint fell by the wayside after germ theory became mainstream in the late 19th century. When scientists discovered the microbes responsible for tuberculosis, plague, cholera, dysentery, and syphilis, most fixated on these newly identified nemeses. Societal factors were seen as overly political distractions for researchers who sought to “be as ‘objective’ as possible,” says Elaine Hernandez, a medical sociologist at Indiana University. In the U.S., medicine fractured. New departments of sociology and cultural anthropology kept their eye on the societal side of health, while the nation’s first schools of public health focused instead on fights between germs and individuals. This rift widened as improvements in hygiene,



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living standards, nutrition, and sanitation lengthened life spans: The more social conditions improved, the more readily they could be ignored.

The ideological pivot away from social medicine began to reverse in the second half of the 20th century. The women's-rights and civil-rights movements, the rise of environmentalism, and anti-war protests created a generation of scholars who questioned "the legitimacy, ideology, and practice of any science ... that disregards social and economic inequality," wrote Nancy Krieger of Harvard. Beginning in the 1980s, this new wave of social epidemiologists once again studied how poverty, privilege, and living conditions affect a person's health—to a degree even Virchow hadn't imagined. But as COVID-19 has shown, the reintegration is not yet complete.

Politicians initially described COVID-19 as a "great equalizer," but when states began releasing demographic data, it was immediately clear that the disease was disproportionately infecting and killing people of color. These disparities aren't biological. They stem from decades of discrimination and segregation that left minority communities in poorer neighborhoods with low-paying jobs, more health problems, and less access to health care—the same kind of problems that Virchow identified more than 170 years ago.

Simple acts like wearing a mask and staying at home, which rely on people tolerating discomfort for the collective good, became society's main defenses against the virus in the many months without effective drugs or vaccines. These are known as non-pharmaceutical interventions—a name that betrays medicine's biological bias. For most of 2020, these were the only interventions on offer, but they were nonetheless defined in opposition to the more highly prized drugs and vaccines.

In March, when the U.S. started shutting down, one of the biggest questions on the mind of Whitney Robinson of UNC at Chapel Hill was: *Are our kids going to be out of school for two years?* While biomedical scientists tend to focus on sickness and recovery, social epidemiologists like her "think about critical periods that can affect the trajectory of your life," she told me. Disrupting a child's schooling at the wrong time can affect their entire career, so scientists should have prioritized research to figure out whether and how schools could reopen safely. But most studies on the spread of COVID-19 in schools were neither large in scope nor well-designed enough to be conclusive. No federal agency funded a large, nationwide study, even though the federal government had months to do so. The NIH received billions for COVID-19 research, but the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development—one of its 27 constituent institutes and centers—got nothing.

**THE NEXT TIME A PATHOGEN
EMERGES, SCIENTISTS
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MATERIAL INTO PROVEN
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PIPELINES THAT WERE
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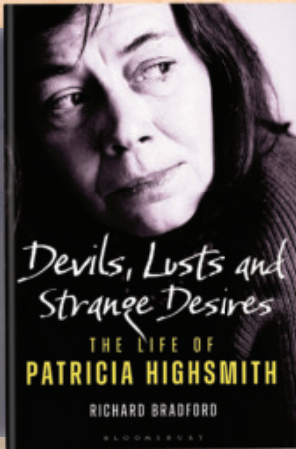
The horrors that Rudolf Virchow saw in Upper Silesia radicalized him, pushing the future "father of modern pathology" to advocate for social reforms. The current pandemic has affected scientists in the same way. Calm researchers became incensed as potentially game-changing innovations like cheap diagnostic tests were squandered by a negligent administration and a muzzled Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Austere publications like *NEJM* and *Nature* published explicitly political editorials castigating the Trump administration for its failures and encouraging voters to hold the president accountable. COVID-19 could be the catalyst that fully reunifies the social and biological sides of medicine, bridging disciplines that have been separated for too long.

"To study COVID-19 is not only to study the disease itself as a biological entity," says Alondra Nelson, the president of the Social Science Research Council. "What looks like a single problem is actually all things, all at once. So what we're actually studying is literally everything in society, at every scale, from supply chains to individual relationships."

The scientific community spent the pre-pandemic years designing faster ways of doing experiments, sharing data, and developing vaccines, allowing it to mobilize quickly when COVID-19 emerged. Its goal now should be to address its many lingering weaknesses. Warped incentives, wasteful practices, overconfidence, inequality, a biomedical bias—COVID-19 has exposed them all. And in doing so, it offers the world of science a chance to practice one of its most important qualities: self-correction. *A*

Ed Yong is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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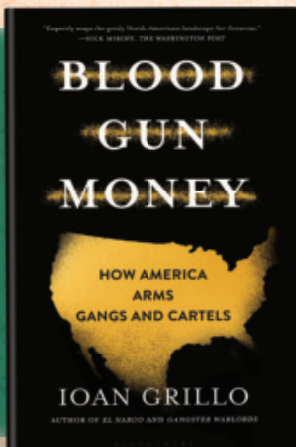
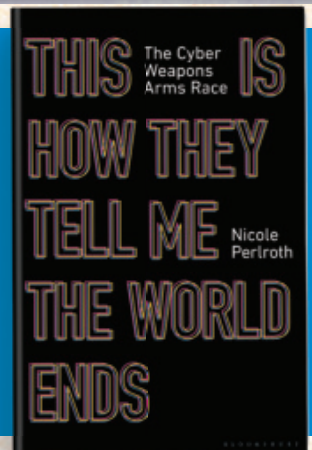
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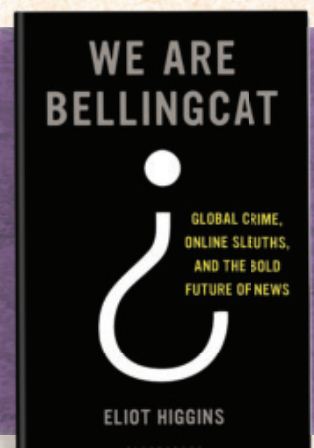
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*Perpetual outsiders,
Mormons spent
200 years assimilating
to a certain national
ideal—only to find
their country in an
identity crisis. What
will the third century of
the faith look like?*

Photographs by Michael Friberg

To meet with the prophet during a plague,

certain protocols must be followed. It's a gray spring morning in Salt Lake City, and downtown Temple Square is deserted, giving the place an eerie, postapocalyptic quality. The doors of the silver-domed tabernacle are locked; the towering neo-Gothic temple is dark. To enter the Church Administration Building, I meet a handler who escorts me through an underground parking garage; past a security checkpoint, where my temperature is taken; up a restricted elevator; and then, finally, into a large, mahogany-walled conference room. After a few minutes, a side door opens and a trim 95-year-old man in a suit greets me with a hygienic elbow bump.

"We always start our meetings with a word of prayer," says Russell M. Nelson, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "So, if we may?"

The official occasion for our interview is the Mormon bicentennial: Two centuries ago, a purported opening of the heavens in upstate New York launched one of the most peculiar and enduring religious movements in American history, and Nelson designated 2020 as a year of commemoration. My notebook is full of reporterly questions to ask about the Church's future, the painful tensions within the faith over race and LGBTQ issues, and the unprecedented series of changes Nelson has implemented in his brief time as prophet. But as we bow our heads, I realize that I'm also here for something else.

For the past two months, I've been cooped up in quarantine, watching the world melt down in biblical fashion. All the death and pestilence and doomscrolling on Twitter has left me unmoored—and from somewhere deep in my spiritual subconscious, a Mormon children's song I grew up singing has resurfaced: *Follow the prophet, don't go astray ... Follow the prophet, he knows the way.*

As president of the Church, Nelson is considered by Mormons to be God's messenger on Earth, a modern heir to Moses and Abraham. Sitting across from him now, some part of me expects a grand and ancient gesture in keeping with this calamitous moment—a raised staff, an end-times prophecy, a summoning of heavenly powers. Instead, he smiles and asks me about my kids.

Over the next hour, Nelson preaches a gospel of silver linings. When I ask him about the lockdowns that have forced churches to close, he muses that homes can be "sanctuaries of faith." When I mention the physical ravages of the virus, he marvels at the human body's miraculous "defense mechanisms." Reciting a passage from the Book of Mormon—"Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy"—he offers a reminder that feels like a call to repentance: "There can be joy in the saddest of times."

There is something classically Mormon about this aversion to wallowing. When adversity strikes, my people tend to respond with can-do aphorisms and rolled-up sleeves; with an unrelenting helpfulness that can border on caricature. (Early in the pandemic, when Nelson ordered the Church to suspend all worship services worldwide and start donating its stockpiles of food and medical equipment, he chalked it up to a desire to be "good citizens and good neighbors.") This onslaught of earnest optimism can be gratifying to some. "There's always a Mormon around when you don't want one," David Foster Wallace once wrote, "trying your patience with unsolicited kindness." But it has served the faith well.

By pretty much every measure, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has defied the expectations of its early observers. In the years immediately after its founding—as Mormons were being chased across the country by state-sanctioned mobs—skeptics predicted that the movement would collapse before the century was out. Instead, it became one of the fastest-growing religions in the world. The Church now averages nearly 700 converts a day; it has temples in 66 countries and financial reserves rumored to exceed \$100 billion.

In the past few years, Mormons have become a subject of fascination for their surprising resistance to Trumpism. Unlike most of the religious right, they were decidedly unenthusiastic about Donald Trump. From 2008 to 2016, the Republican vote share declined among Latter-day Saints more than any other religious group in the country. And though Trump won back some of those defectors in 2020, he continued to underperform. Joe Biden did better in Utah than any Democrat since 1964, and Mormon women likely played a role in turning Arizona blue.

Scholars have offered an array of theories to explain this phenomenon: that Mormon communities are models of connectedness and trust, that the Church's unusual structure promotes consensus-building over culture war, that the faith's early persecution has made its adherents less receptive to nativist appeals.

Nelson attributes these qualities to the power of the Church's teachings. "I don't think you can separate the good things we do from the doctrine," he tells me. "It's not what we do; it's why we do it."

As a lifelong member of the faith, I can't help but see a more complicated story. Mormons didn't become avatars of a Norman Rockwellian ideal by accident. We taught ourselves to play

Previous spread: *The Oquirrh Mountain Temple sits about 20 miles south of Temple Square in Salt Lake City, where the Church is based.*

the part over a centuries-long audition for full acceptance into American life. That we finally succeeded just as the country was on the brink of an identity crisis is one of the core ironies of modern Mormonism.

The story of the Latter-day Saints begins with a confused teenage boy. It was the spring of 1820, and the town of Palmyra, New York, was in the throes of the Second Great Awakening. Fevered Christian revivals were everywhere. New sects were sprouting, and preachers competed fiercely for converts. To Joseph Smith, a 14-year-old farm boy with little education, the frenzy was at

once exhilarating and disorienting. As he would later write in his personal history, he became consumed with the question of which church to join—sampling worship services, consulting scripturians, and growing ever more concerned about the state of his soul.

The turning point in his spiritual search came when he was reading the Book of James: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God . . . and it shall be given him.” Determined to test the thesis, he walked into a grove of trees near his family’s farm and knelt down to ask for guidance. What happened next, according to Smith, would be the catalyst for a new world religion—the literal restoration of Christ’s Church to the Earth. In his own words:



Russell M. Nelson, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was a cardiothoracic surgeon before becoming the prophet. He is considered by Mormons to be God’s messenger on Earth.

I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!

I don’t remember the first time I heard this story, but I do know where I was when I committed it to memory. As a Mormon teenager in suburban Massachusetts, I woke up every morning at 5:30 to attend a “seminary” class held in the bishop’s basement. This was no mark of special devotion on my part; all the Mormon kids were expected to be there, and so all the Mormon kids were, Mormonism being a religion that prizes showing up. Most mornings, we struggled to stay awake while our teacher read from the Bible, but on Fridays, we ate cinnamon rolls and played scripture-memorization games. Our teacher would hold up cue cards with verses scrawled across them, while we repeated the words over and over until we could recite them without looking. Smith’s canonized account of “the first vision” was the longest of the passages, but it was also the most important.



The Mormon pioneers crossed through Emigration Canyon before arriving in what would become Salt Lake City in July 1847.

The power of his story was in its implausibility. No reasonable person would accept such an outlandish claim on its face—to believe it required faith, a willingness to follow young Joseph’s example. This was how our teacher framed the story, as much object lesson as historical event. *Don’t believe in this because your parents do*, we were told. *Go ask God for yourself*.

But the part of Smith’s account that always resonated most with me was what happened after the vision. Word got around Palmyra, and the community turned on him. His claims were declared to be “of the devil.” His family was ostracized. Facing pressure to recant, Smith refused. “I had seen a vision,” he wrote later. “I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it.” In seminary, this was treated as a coda to the main event—mentioned, if at all, as an example of standing up for unpopular beliefs. But to a 21st-century teenager who was already insecure enough about his oversized head and undersized muscles without bringing a weird religion into the mix, it sounded a lot like a cautionary tale.

My own testimony didn’t come in a blaze of revelation, but in living the faith day to day. The church was where I felt most like myself. The green hymnals we sang from on Sundays, the sacramental Wonder Bread we passed down the pews, the corny youth dances in the sweaty church gym where we’d jump around to DJ Kool before closing with a prayer—these were more than

just quirks of my parents’ religion. They were emblems of an identity, one I could never fully reveal to my non-Mormon friends.

At school, I laughed along when the boys in the cafeteria asked me how many moms I had, and I nodded thoughtfully when the girl I liked speculated, after the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, that she must have been an easy mark for brainwashing because she was Mormon. When the time came to apply for college, I feigned an interest in Arizona State University just so my guidance counselor wouldn’t think I was interested only in Mormon colleges.

I aimed to cultivate a reputation that sanded off the edges of my orthodoxy—*he’s Mormon, but he’s cool*. I didn’t drink, but I was happy to be the designated driver. I didn’t smoke pot, but I would never narc.

All this posturing could be undignified, but I took pride in my ability to walk a certain line. Unlike my co-religionists in Utah—where kids went to seminary in the middle of the day, at Church-owned buildings next to the high schools—I was one of only a few Mormon kids in my town. If my classmates liked me, I reasoned, it was a win for Mormons everywhere. In the pantheon of minority-religion neuroses, this was not wholly original stuff. But I wouldn’t realize until later just how deeply rooted the Mormon craving for approval was.

The Church that Joseph Smith set about building was almost achingly American. He held up the Constitution as a quasi-canonical work of providence. He published a new sacred text, the Book of Mormon, that centered on Jesus visiting the ancient Americas. He even taught that God had brought about the American Revolution so that his Church could be restored in a free country—thus linking Mormonism’s success to that of the American experiment. And yet, almost as soon as Smith started attracting converts, they were derided as un-American.

A charismatic figure with gleaming blue eyes and a low voice, Smith taught a profoundly optimistic theology that stood in contrast with the harsher doctrines of his day. But what made him most controversial was his commitment to establishing a “new Jerusalem” in the United States. The utopia he envisioned would be godly, ordered, and radically communitarian. As the Mormons searched for a place to build their Zion, they were met with an escalating campaign of persecution and mob violence.

In New York, Smith was arrested at the urging of local clergy. In Ohio, he was tarred and feathered. By the time the Mormons settled in Missouri, they were viewed as enemies of the state. Their economic and political power made local officials nervous, as did their abolitionist streak. (Though the Church would later adopt exclusionary policies toward Black people, many of its early members disapproved of slavery.) Residents complained that the growing Mormon community had “opened an asylum for rogues, vagabonds, and free blacks” in their backyard. Mormon leaders responded with their own incendiary rhetoric.

The tension came to a head on October 27, 1838, when the governor issued an “extermination order” demanding that all Mormons be driven out of the state or killed. A few days later, a militia descended on a Mormon settlement about 70 miles northeast of Kansas City and opened fire. Witnesses would later describe a horrific scene—women raped, bodies mutilated, children shot at close range. By the end of the massacre, 17 Mormons had been killed, and homes had been looted and burned to the ground.

The violence was justified, in part, by the portrayal of Mormons as a degenerate, nonwhite race—an idea that would spread throughout the 19th century. Medical journals defined Mormons by their “yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage” and “thick, protuberant lips.” Cartoons depicted them as “foreign reptiles” sprawled out over the U.S. Capitol. At one point, the secretary of state tried to institute a ban on Mormon immigration from Europe.

For a time, Smith and his followers retained an almost quaint trust in America’s democratic system. Even as they were forced to flee Missouri and resettle in Nauvoo, Illinois, they were convinced that the Constitution guaranteed their freedom of religion—and that if they could simply alert the nation’s leaders to what was happening, all would be made right. In 1839, Smith led a delegation to Washington, D.C., to seek redress for the Mormons’ violent expulsion from Missouri. In a meeting with President Martin Van Buren, the prophet presented a vividly detailed list of offenses committed against his people. But the president, fearing a backlash from Missourians, dismissed his appeals. “Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you,” Van Buren said, according to Smith’s account.

At school, I laughed along when the boys in the cafeteria asked how many moms I had.

The experience radicalized Smith. Stung by the government’s mistreatment—and under siege by a growing anti-Mormon cohort—he took on a more theocratic bent. In Nauvoo, he served simultaneously as prophet, mayor, and lieutenant general of a well-armed Mormon militia. He introduced the ancient biblical practice of polygamy to his followers, eventually marrying at least 32 women himself. He even convened a group of men to draft a replacement for the U.S. Constitution, which they believed had failed them.

Still, the Mormons’ innate Americanness made them self-conscious theocrats—constantly establishing new councils and quorums designed to disperse power and hold one another accountable. Though the Church was hierarchical, it was infused with checks and balances. Congregations were led by a rotating cast of volunteers. Decisions were presented to congregants for ratification. “All things shall be done by common consent in the Church,” read one Mormon scripture.

In 1844, Smith launched a quixotic presidential bid to draw attention to the Mormon plight. He campaigned on abolishing prisons and selling public lands to purchase the freedom of every enslaved person in the country. America, he wrote, should be a place where a person “of whatever color, clime or tongue, could rejoice when he put his foot on the sacred soil of freedom.”

The campaign wouldn’t last long. That June, Smith was arrested for ordering the destruction of an anti-Mormon printing press. While he awaited trial, a mob attacked the jail where he was being held with his brother Hyrum and murdered them both. Among his followers, the prophet’s death gave way to infighting, defections, and yet another flight from their homes—this time into the western desert beyond America’s borders.

Yet even as the Mormons fled their country, they weren’t ready to disown it. In “The Angel of the Prairies,” a short story written by a Church leader at the time, the Latter-day Saints were not victims or enemies of the American experiment, but its purest embodiment: “When they had no longer a country or government to fight for, they retired to the plains of the West, carrying with them the pure spirit of freedom.”

Like Noah’s ark before the flood, Mormonism was, to its adherents, a vehicle for the preservation of America’s highest



ideals. One day, they believed, their former countrymen would turn to them for deliverance.

It's hard to overstate just how deeply this history is woven into modern Mormon life. As little kids, we sing songs about pioneer children who “walked and walked and walked and walked”; when we get older, we read about pioneers burying their children in shallow graves on the brutal westward trek. The stories I grew up hearing in church—about Missouri and martyrdom and Martin Van Buren—were often sanitized for devotional effect. But the scars they've left on the Mormon psyche are real.

At its worst, this reverence for our forebears can fuel an unhealthy persecution complex—or even be used to dismiss groups that have faced much worse oppression, much more recently. In June, a Facebook page affiliated with Brigham Young University–Idaho shared a post that compared early Mormon persecution to slavery and encouraged people of color to “RISE ABOVE” racism. (The post was deleted after student outcry.) But the stories of pioneer suffering have also instilled in many American Mormons a sensitivity to the experiences of immigrants and refugees.

According to one survey, Latter-day Saints are more than twice as likely as white evangelicals to say they welcome increased immigration to the United States. When Donald Trump called for a ban on Muslim immigration, the Church, hearing an eerie historical echo, issued a blistering condemnation. Later, when Trump signed an executive order allowing cities and states to veto refugee resettlement, Utah was the first red state in the country to request more refugees.

Muhammed Shoayb Mehtar, who served as an imam in Utah for more than a decade, told me that when new people would arrive at his mosque—many of them refugees fleeing desperate circumstances—locals would show up, offering food, furniture, and jobs. In some states, Muslims worried about harassment and hate crimes. But in Utah, Mehtar said, “folks don't have this toxic view of *Oh, they are foreigners; they want to take over*. They don't have that mentality within them.”

“I think it goes back to the beginning,” says Elder M. Russell Ballard, a senior apostle in the Church. “We were really refugees.” As a direct descendant of Hyrum Smith, Ballard talks about the Church's early history with the raw emotion of a family tragedy. “We never forget,” he told me, “that Joseph and Hyrum were gunned down in cold blood.”

Ballard told me about a trip he'd made to Greece on behalf of the Church. During a visit to a refugee camp, he witnessed a Syrian family get tossed from a dinghy into the Aegean Sea and crawl onto the beach, shivering, soaked, and hungry. As volunteers handed them towels and food, one of the children, a 9-year-old boy named Amer, tore into a package of Oreos and offered the first one to Ballard. Today, the cookie sits encased in a small cube on the apostle's desk—a reminder, he says, to reach out to “those people running for their lives” all over the world.

Churches in the Salt Lake City area, which is home to roughly half a million members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Like most teenage Mormons who sign up for missionary service, I wanted an adventure, stories to tell. The Church sent me to Texas.

When I turned 19, I put in my papers to become a missionary, and prayed to be sent abroad. I pictured myself building chapels on some far-flung island, or teaching the gospel in a mountain-side hut. Like most of the teenage Mormons who sign up for missionary service, I wanted an adventure, stories to tell. The Church sent me to Texas.

I arrived in August amid a record-breaking heat wave that seemed designed to test my faith. Huffing up hills on an eight-speed bike—necktie whipping in the wind, white shirt soaked with sweat—I wondered whether the other elders muttered bad words under their breath, too. But I came to appreciate the little miseries of missionary life. The grueling schedule, the rigid curfew, the monastic abstention from movies and TV—each small sacrifice had its sanctifying effect. Religion without difficulty had always seemed pointless to me. The divine magic was in what faith demanded.

I quickly realized that my knack for playing the likable Mormon would come in handy in the Bible Belt. Likability, it turned out, was a big part of the job. With our black name tags and IBM-salesman uniforms, missionaries were walking billboards for the Church. We were trained to take rejection in stride, to cling to our good-natured wholesomeness no matter what. When a Baptist minister condemned you to hell, you smiled politely and complimented his landscaping. When somebody hurled a Big Gulp at you from a passing car, you calmly collected the cup and looked for the nearest trash can. Once, in the seedy apartment complex where I lived with another missionary, we made the mistake of leaving our laundry unattended, and returned to find it drenched in urine. Not wanting to make a scene, we shrugged and pumped more quarters into the washing machine.

We spent most of our time teaching prospective converts about the faith or offering English classes for local Spanish speakers. On slow days, we'd go door-to-door passing out pamphlets and copies of the Book of Mormon. This was not a particularly efficient method for finding future Mormons, but we looked for small victories. I skimmed an old copy of *How to Win Friends*

and Influence People, and practiced jokes that I could deploy on strangers' doorsteps. We took consolation in these pleasant, fruitless interactions, telling ourselves that we'd improved the Mormon brand, however slightly. "Planting seeds," we called it.

In 2007, I was serving in the heavily Latino Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch when voters approved a city ordinance designed to punish undocumented immigrants. As missionaries, we lived fairly disconnected lives—no newspapers, no social media—so I didn't know at the time that the crackdown had become a national scandal. But I remember the snippets of hushed conversation—*la migra, miedo*—that I caught at the laundromat. I remember, the Sunday after the referendum passed, the women huddled, crying, in the church foyer; the chapel half-full for the Spanish service because so many members feared crossing town lines. And I remember the branch president, a young Guatemalan dad with glasses, abandoning his usual soft-spoken style to reassure his shaken congregation. "You are children of God," he thundered. "Never, *never* let them make you feel like less." So little about their experience was truly accessible to me, but I felt a flicker of solidarity in that moment that I hoped would never be stamped out.

On a sticky summer evening in Brooklyn, the Bushwick Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints threw a karaoke night. The congregation was small but eclectic, and as members took turns at the microphone, the wonderful weirdness of the Mormon community was on full display. A missionary from Hong Kong crooned a pop ballad in Cantonese. A petite goth fashion designer headbanged to Metallica. While young dads scurried around filling plastic cups with Sprite and replenishing the pretzel bowl, older members from Guyana and the Philippines sang their favorite songs.

Mormonism has a reputation for conformity—starched white shirts and white picket fences and broods of well-behaved white children. But in much of the world, Mormon congregations are characterized by the way they force together motley groups of people from different backgrounds. Unlike most American Christians, Latter-day Saints don't get to choose whom they go to church with. They're assigned to congregations based on geographic boundaries that are often gerrymandered to promote socioeconomic diversity. And because the Church is run almost entirely by volunteers, and every member is given a job, they have to work together closely. Patrick Mason, a historian of religion, calls this "the sociological genius of Mormonism"—in a society of echo chambers and bowling alone, he says, the Church has doubled down on an old-fashioned communitarianism.

In some ways, the Bushwick congregation, where my wife and I landed after moving to New York, was unusual. It was more diverse than a typical Mormon ward, and more bootstrapped. We met in a retrofitted space leased from a Jewish community center across the street from a public-housing complex. When our Sunday-morning services were interrupted by a subwoofered SUV parked outside, our branch president—a bearded filmmaker with a conciliatory approach to neighborhood relations—would slip outside and offer the driver a twenty to take the music down the block.



The author, about to be baptized by his father; during his two-year missionary service in Texas; and with his wife and children at their church in Brooklyn

We took turns teaching Sunday school and delivering sermons. When one of us lost a job, somebody would stop by with a carload of groceries. When one of us had to change apartments, we'd all show up with cardboard boxes and doughnuts.

At work, I was surrounded by 20-something journalists with similarly curated Twitter feeds. But at church, my most meaningful relationships were with people who resided well outside my bubble—middle-aged mail carriers and Caribbean immigrants; white-haired retirees and single parents navigating the city's morass of social services. Our little community wasn't perfect. We argued and irritated one another, and more than once a heated Sunday-school debate ended in shouting and hurt feelings. But the dynamic was better than utopian—it was hard. Over time, we learned to live a portion of our lives together, to “mourn with those that mourn,” as the Book of Mormon teaches, “and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”

Spencer Cox, who was elected governor of Utah in November, told me that his state has been shaped by this ethic. When the Mormon pioneers first arrived in the territory in 1847, they built their homes in village centers and established their crops on the outskirts of town so that farmers weren't isolated from one another. “This was not a place that people were really excited to settle—it was kind of a wasteland,” Cox said. “To scratch it out here, to make it work, you really had to rely on each other.”

Though Utah is very conservative, its residents generally don't romanticize rugged individualism or Darwinian hyper-capitalism. It has the lowest income inequality in the country, and ranks near the top for upward mobility. The relative lack of racial diversity no doubt helps skew these metrics—structural racism doesn't take the same toll in a state that is 78 percent white. But economists say the tightly networked faith communities have provided a crucial extra layer to the social safety net.

To Mormons, this mindset has always been a matter of theology. Joseph Smith taught that salvation was achieved through community, not individual action alone. And his expansive view of the afterlife—as a kind of sprawling, joyous web of interconnected family reunions—prioritized human relationships. “I would rather go to hell with my friends,” he was said to have preached, “than to heaven alone.”

In 1863, a writer for *The Atlantic* named Fitz-Hugh Ludlow traveled to the Mormon settlement in Utah, and was surprised by what he found. In his 11,000-word dispatch, Ludlow presented the strange desert civilization of exiles as a study in contradictions. The Mormons were clearly theocratic, yet he found no evidence of corruption. Their open embrace of polygamy was scandalous, yet somehow appeared more practical than lascivious. Their beliefs were preposterous, but sincere.

The Mormons Ludlow encountered seemed to believe they had something to offer their former nation, now riven by the Civil War. When he talked to Brigham Young—Joseph Smith's bearded, burly successor—the prophet predicted doom for the Union, and a flood of immigrants to Utah. After the war, Americans would be drawn to Mormons' comity and the genius of polygamy, whose appeal would be obvious after so many men

died fighting. “When your country has become a desolation,” Young told the writer, “we, the saints whom you cast out, will forget all your sins against us, and give you a home.”

Ludlow played the quote for laughs—a sign of the absurd grandiosity of a people who comprised, in his estimation, “the least cultivated grades of human society, a heterogeneous peasant-horde.” He predicted that the Church would “fall to pieces at once, irreparably,” as soon as Young died. But until then, the Mormon threat was not to be taken lightly. Mormonism was, he wrote, “disloyal to the core”—just like the Confederates: “The Mormon enemies of our American Idea should be plainly understood as far more dangerous antagonists than hypocrites or idiots can ever hope to be.”

Ludlow's story, published in the April 1864 issue, was emblematic of how the rest of the country viewed Utah. Just a few years earlier, President James Buchanan had sent U.S. forces to the territory to put down a rumored Mormon rebellion. The Republican Party, in its founding platform, placed polygamy alongside slavery as one of the “twin relics of barbarism.”

Yet Mormons still longed for full initiation into American life. By the end of the 19th century, they had embarked in earnest on a quest for assimilation, defining themselves in opposition to their damaging caricatures. If America thought they were non-Christian heretics, they would commission an 11-foot statue of Jesus and place it in Temple Square. If America thought they were disloyal, they would flood the ranks of the military and intelligence agencies. (At one point, Brigham Young University was the third-largest source of Army officers in the country.) To shake the stench of polygamy—which the Church renounced in 1890—they became models of the large nuclear family.

By the middle of the 20th century, Mormon prophets were appearing on the cover of *Time* and Hollywood had made a hagiographic movie about Young. Mormons were Boy Scouts and business leaders, homemakers and family men. They developed a reputation for volunteerism, priding themselves on being the first on the ground after a natural disaster. Some of these transformations were more conscious than others, says Matthew Bowman, a historian at Claremont Graduate University. “But desire for respectability,” he adds, “is very much at the heart of modern Mormonism.”

The assimilation efforts had a darker side as well. Having been cast as a nefarious race, Mormon leaders became determined to reclaim their whiteness. Beginning with Young, and continuing until 1978, Black men were barred from holding the priesthood—a privilege extended to virtually every Mormon male—and Black families were unable to participate in important temple ordinances. Church leaders preached that black skin was a “curse” from God and discouraged marriage between Black and white people. Rather than opposing America's racial hierarchy, they attempted to secure their place at the top of it, says the scholar Janan Graham-Russell: “There was almost this ultra-pure whiteness that Mormons were striving for.” The Church has been haunted by the consequences ever since.

In January 2012, I got a job covering Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. America was in the midst of what headline writers were calling “The Mormon Moment,” as Romney's candidacy had occasioned a surge of interest in the country's most enduring

homegrown religion. It should have been a major milestone in the faith's American journey. But something was amiss in the Mormon assimilation project.

Romney was a clear product of his Church. Born into the faith, he'd served as a missionary in France, graduated from BYU, and raised five strapping sons with his high-school sweetheart. When his political star first began to rise, Romney tried to deflect questions about his religion by arguing that Mormonism was "as American as motherhood and apple pie." When he was asked, in an early interview with this magazine, "How Mormon are you?," he responded: "My faith believes in family, believes in Jesus Christ. It believes in serving one's neighbor and one's community. It believes in military service. It believes in patriotism; it actually believes this nation had an inspired founding. It is in some respects a quintessentially American faith."

Many Americans weren't so sure. In the Republican primaries, Romney encountered skepticism from conservative evangelicals such as the megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress, who declared Mormonism a "cult" from the "pit of hell." On MSNBC, Lawrence O'Donnell sneered that Romney's Church had been founded by a guy who "got caught having sex with the maid and explained to his wife that God told him to do it." In *Slate*, Jacob Weisberg argued that no one who believed in "such a transparent and recent fraud" as Mormonism could be trusted with the presidency.

Meanwhile, Romney's all-American persona—cultivated by generations of assimilators—proved to be a political liability. With his Mormon-dad diction (all those *hecks* and *holy cows* and *goshdarnits*) and his penchant for reciting "America the Beautiful" on the stump ("I love the patriotic hymns"), Romney seemed like a relic—a "latter-day Beaver Cleaver," as one *Boston Globe* writer put it. To those familiar with Mormon history, the irony was notable. "It is now because Mormons occupy what used to be the center that they fall into contempt," wrote Terry L Givens, a Latter-day Saint scholar.

As the only Mormon reporter in the Romney-campaign press corps, I was in a unique position to watch him squirm as he confronted these issues—and I often made it harder for him. I wrote about the candidate's faith constantly, much to the consternation of his consultants, who had made a strategic decision to ignore the religion issue altogether. Often when I asked the campaign for comment on a Mormon-related story, I was told, curtly, to "ask the Church." (The Church's spokespeople—determined to project political neutrality—usually directed me back to the campaign.)

When I went on TV to discuss the race, I'd talk about how Romney should open up about his religious life. But as the election wore on, I began to understand his reluctance. I didn't buy the idea that his religion should be off-limits. But I also couldn't believe some of the things my otherwise enlightened peers were willing to say about a faith they knew so little about.

I heard reporters crack jokes about "Mormon underwear," and I fielded snickering questions on TV about obscure teachings from early prophets. One day, the CEO of the company where I worked gathered the staff for a presentation in which he explained internet virality by comparing Judaism with Mormonism. He'd given versions of the talk before. The idea was that Jews might

have the "higher quality" religion, but Mormonism was growing faster because its members—slick marketers that we were—knew how to "spread it." To make his point, he flipped through a series of slides featuring various famous Jews before comically declaring that the most famous Mormon was Brandon Flowers, the lead singer of the Killers. Once again, I felt that familiar tug—to smile politely, to laugh agreeably. I faked a phone call so that no one would see my face turn red.

I often wondered if Romney shared my ambivalence about "The Mormon Moment"—if he ever struggled with the ways in which his candidacy shaped perceptions of his Church. When I asked him about this recently, he pushed back on the premise. "I didn't see my role as a political candidate to proselyte, or educate, even, about my religion," he told me. "I wanted to make it clear that I was not a spokesman for my Church." Fair enough. But he must have also known that was hopeless.

As Romney was trying to become the first Mormon president, *The Book of Mormon* musical was selling out on Broadway. Co-written by *South Park's* creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the show skewered Mormonism with gleeful profanity and depicted its adherents as simpletons. My initial reaction, after listening to the soundtrack, was exasperation that *this* was how affluent theatergoers were being introduced to my faith. But I also felt compelled to be a good sport—and I wasn't alone. When Romney was asked about the show, he said he'd love to see it: "It's a Tony-award winner, big phenomenon!" And the Church itself took out ads in the playbill that read, "You've seen the play. Now read the book." (The show's creators had apparently anticipated something like this: Stone would later recount that when friends asked if he was concerned about Mormons protesting, he said, "Trust us, they're going to be cool.")

I remember being delighted by the Church's response. Such savvy PR! Such a good-natured gesture! *See, everyone? We can take a joke!* But then I met a theater critic in New York who had recently seen the musical. He marveled at how the show got away with being so ruthless toward a minority religion without any meaningful backlash. I tried to cast this as a testament to Mormon niceness. But the critic was unconvinced. "No," he replied. "It's because your people have absolutely no cultural cachet."

Somehow, it wasn't until that moment that I understood the source of all our inexhaustible niceness. It was a coping mechanism, born of a pulsing, sweaty desperation to be liked that I suddenly found humiliating.

What happens when a religious group discovers that it's spent 200 years assimilating to an America that no longer exists? As their native country fractures and turns on itself, Mormons are being forced to grapple with questions about who they are and what they believe. And a loose but growing liberal coalition inside the Church is pushing for reform.

One major source of tension is race. Since lifting its ban on Black priesthood-holders in 1978, the Church has made fitful efforts to reckon with its history. In 2013, it formally disavowed its past racist teachings. In 2018, it announced a partnership with the NAACP, an organization that had once led a march through the streets of Salt Lake City to protest the Church's

discrimination. And in the spring of 2020, President Nelson responded to the killing of George Floyd by decrying the “blatant disregard for human life” and calling on racists to “repent.” Amos Brown, the president of the San Francisco branch of the NAACP, told me his experience with Church leaders has left him convinced that they are making a genuine effort: “They were transparent enough and humble enough to say, ‘Hey, the Church may have a checkered past, but we want to work with you now.’”

Still, for many Black members, the progress has been painfully slow. When Tamu Smith saw Nelson’s statement—which also included a condemnation of looting and property destruction—she felt something familiar. “I see the effort, and I can appreciate the effort, but I still thirst,” she told me. “I want more.” Smith, who grew up in California and joined the Church when she was 11, now lives in Provo, Utah, where she often hears white Mormons try to rationalize the Church’s past racism. And while she’s

seen hopeful signs of progress, she believes the Church can’t truly move forward without a show of complete institutional repentance: “As part of a living Church, I believe that an apology is necessary.”

So far, the Church has ignored such calls, a fact that Smith attributes to fear. Though the Church has never claimed prophetic infallibility, Smith says that for many orthodox believers, the faith is “either true or it’s not—the Church can’t make a mistake; the Church can’t back off; the Church can’t fix something that’s problematic.” Mormon leaders are afraid that if they apologize for the racism of past prophets, she speculates, they will undermine their own authority.

That institutional fear is a common theme in the Church’s response to a certain kind of activism. Though Mormons are encouraged to air their doubts and even voice dissent among themselves, Church leaders have sometimes lashed out when dissenters start attracting external allies. This dynamic is perhaps best exemplified by the ongoing debate about the role of women in the faith. In 2000, the Church excommunicated the feminist scholar Margaret Toscano, who had challenged Mormon teachings on male authority and the priesthood. What drew the Church’s censure wasn’t really the substance of her critiques, but her success in attracting media attention.



Tamu Smith, who converted to Mormonism at age 11, would like to see the Church do more to reckon with its history of racism. “As part of a living Church, I believe that an apology is necessary,” she says.

Kristine Haglund, a feminist and former editor of the liberal Mormon journal *Dialogue*, says it doesn't help that intrafaith debates are so often misunderstood by outsiders. For example, coverage of Mormon gender issues often focuses on the fight for female ordination. But a 2011 Pew survey found that only 8 percent of women in the Church supported the idea. "One of the reasons I think Mormon feminist activism is so tricky is that the things that are important to women's experience in the Church are ... hard to explain and impossible to turn into a slogan," Haglund told me. As an example, she cited calls for the Relief Society, which is led by women, to operate autonomously at the local ward level, instead of reporting to a male bishop. "'Ordain women' makes sense to outsiders," she said, "but it doesn't resonate within Mormonism the way it does with non-Mormon feminist allies."

In recent years, perhaps no issue has provoked more debate within the Church than its treatment of LGBTQ people. For decades, the Church was an uneasy partner in the religious right's crusade against same-sex marriage—united in a shared orthodoxy, but also keenly aware that many in the coalition privately derided Mormons as heretics and cultists. This effort culminated in 2008, when the Church helped wage a high-profile—and successful—campaign to ban same-sex marriage in California.

The short-lived political victory was followed by an intense backlash, and in recent years the Church has taken a more conciliatory approach. It launched a website dedicated to promoting "kindness and respect" for gay Mormons and endorsed a bill in Utah that expanded housing and employment protections for LGBTQ people. The Church affirmed that homosexuality was not a choice, and one former Church official, a psychologist, publicly apologized for his promotion of conversion therapy.

Still, the Church has not changed its prohibition on same-sex relationships and gender transitions. Nathan Kitchen, the head of the Mormon LGBTQ group Affirmation, calls this "the rainbow stained-glass ceiling" in the Church. A formerly devout Mormon who came out as gay in 2013 and divorced his wife, Kitchen says that he stopped going to church not because he stopped believing, but because he felt forced to choose between his sexuality and his faith. For those of us who have seen people we care about wrestle with the same agonizing choice, Kitchen's story hits home. But although views among rank-and-file Mormons are evolving, the Church has codified its teachings on sexuality as doctrinal. That means they won't change until the prophet says he's received divine permission.

On a nightstand next to his bed, Russell Nelson keeps a notebook where he records his revelations. Before he entered Church leadership, he was a cardiothoracic surgeon who helped design the first heart-lung machine. During his early years as a doctor, he would often receive late-night phone calls from the hospital beckoning him to perform emergency operations. "I don't get those phone calls anymore," he told me. "But very frequently, I'm awakened with directions to follow." Lately, the notebook has been filling up quickly.

The Mormon claim to prophetic revelation is one of the faith's most audacious doctrines, and also its most practical. A kind of

theological survival mechanism, it allows the Church to adapt and reform as necessary while giving changes the weight of providence. When Nelson ascended to the presidency of the Church, in 2018, few members expected the then-93-year-old to be a transformational leader. But his tenure has been an eventful one.

Some of Nelson's reforms have been small, inside-baseball measures, such as shortening the length of church services and expanding the approved wardrobe for missionaries. (Coming soon to a doorstep near you: elders without neckties.) He's also launched a campaign against the term *Mormon*, arguing that the nickname deemphasizes the Church's Christianity. (I chose to use the term in this story for clarity's sake, and also because *the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* presented a multisyllabic writerly dilemma that my own God-given talents left me powerless to solve.)

Other reforms have been more significant. He reversed a policy that restricted baptisms for children of same-sex couples, adjusted temple ordinances in ways that emphasize women's authority, and appointed the first-ever Asian American and Latin American apostles to the Church's second-highest governing body.

But while some of these changes have been celebrated as signs of progress, Nelson has not budged on key issues. When I asked him what he'd say to LGBTQ people who feel that the Church doesn't want them, he told me, "God loves all his children, just like you and I do," and "There's a place for all who choose to belong to his Church." But when I asked whether the prohibition on same-sex relationships might someday be lifted, he demurred. "As apostles of the Lord, we cannot change God's law," he said. "We teach his laws. He gave them many thousands of years ago, and I don't expect he'll change them now."

As we spoke, I noticed that Nelson kept glancing down at an open binder on the table. It's easy to forget that he's almost 100 when you're with him. He's remarkably spry for a nonagenarian, and prone to enthusiastic tangents about the human body's "servoregulatory mechanisms." But he also seems to understand the risk of saying the wrong thing. So when he talks about the LGBTQ community, he slows down and reads from his notes to make sure he's hitting every letter in the acronym.

I thought, in that moment, about the difficulty of Nelson's job—about trying to steer a 200-year-old institution in a world that refuses to sit still. Mormons like to say that while the Church's policies and programs may change, the core of the gospel is eternal. But identifying that core can be hard. What do you keep, and what do you jettison? Which parts are of God, and which parts came from men? What's worth preserving in the endangered Americanism that Latter-day Saints have come to embody, and what's best left behind? These are the questions that Nelson faces as he tries to figure out what Mormonism should mean in the 21st century. And he knows he's running out of time to answer them.

As we neared the end of our conversation, the prophet closed his binder and became quiet. "Judgment day is coming for me pretty soon," he said. It was a strange sort of confession—both startling and obvious, at least from an actuarial standpoint—and I didn't know how to respond. After another pause, Nelson began to contemplate what he would have to answer for in his imminent "interview" with God. "I doubt if I'll be judged by the

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

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“Judgment day is coming for me pretty soon,” Nelson said. It was a strange sort of confession, and I didn’t know how to respond.

number of operations I did, or the number of scientific publications I had,” he told me. “I doubt if I’ll even be judged by the growth of the Church during my presidency. I don’t think it’ll be a quantitative experience. I think he’ll want to know: What about your faith? What about virtue? What about your knowledge? Were you temperate? Were you kind to people? Did you have charity, humility?”

In the end, Nelson told me, “we exist to make life better for people.” As mission statements go, a Church could do worse. But Mormonism has always harbored grander ambitions.

There is a story about Joseph Smith that has circulated among Mormons for generations. In 1843, a year before his death, he was meeting with a group of Church elders in Nauvoo when he began to prophesy. The day would come, Smith predicted, when the United States would be on the brink of collapse—its Constitution “hanging by a thread”—only to be saved by a “white horse” from God’s true Church.

Historians and Church leaders have long dismissed the story as apocryphal, and today the white-horse prophecy exists primarily as a winking in-joke among Latter-day Saints whenever a member of the Church runs for office. But the notion has lingered for a reason. It appeals to the Mormons’ faith in America—and to their conviction that they have a role to play in its preservation.

That conviction is part of why conservative Mormons were among the GOP voters most resistant to Trump’s rise in 2016. He finished dead last in Utah’s Republican primary, and consistently underperformed in Mormon-heavy districts across the Mountain West. When the *Access Hollywood* tape leaked, the Church-owned *Deseret News* called on Trump to drop out. On Election Day, he received just over half of the Mormon vote, whereas other recent Republican nominees had gotten closer to 80 percent.

Trump did better in 2020, owing partly to the lack of a conservative third-party candidate like Evan McMullin. (Full postelection data weren’t available as of this writing.) But the Trump era has left

many Mormons—once the most reliable Republican voters in the country—feeling politically homeless. They’ve begun to identify as moderate in growing numbers, and the polling analyst Nate Silver has predicted that Utah could soon become a swing state. In June, a survey found that just 22 percent of BYU students and recent alumni were planning to vote for Trump.

Robert P. Jones, the head of the Public Religion Research Institute, says this Mormon ambivalence is notable when compared with white evangelicals’ loyalty to Trump. “History and culture matter a lot,” Jones told me. “Partisanship today is such a strong gravitational pull. I think what we’re seeing with Mormons is that there’s something else pulling on them too.”

When I talk with my fellow Mormons about what our faith’s third century might look like, one common fear is that the Church, desperate for allies, will end up following the religious right into endless culture war. That would indeed be grim. But just as worrisome to me—and perhaps more likely—is the prospect of a fully diluted Mormonism.

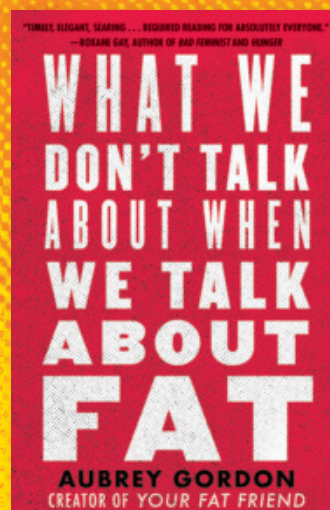
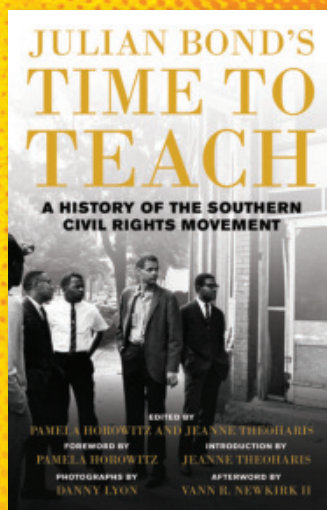
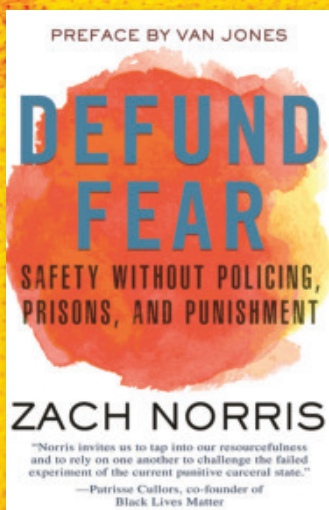
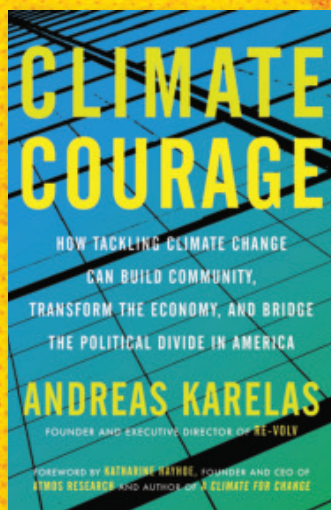
Taken too far, the Latter-day Saint longing for mainstream approval could turn the Church into just another mainline sect—drained of vitality, devoid of tension, not making any real demands of its members. It’s not hard to imagine a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that is “respectable” in the way of the Rotary Club, because it’s bland, and benign, and easy to ignore. Kathleen Flake, a Mormon historian at the University of Virginia, told me many of the Church’s concessions to modernity have been healthy and necessary. “But it’s like a game of strip poker,” she said. “How far will you go?”

The hard parts of Mormonism—huffing up hills in a white shirt and tie, forgoing coffee, paying tithes—might complicate the sales pitch. But they can also inspire acts of courage. After Romney voted to remove Trump from office—standing alone among Republican senators—he told me his life in the Church had steeled him for this lonely political moment, in which neither the right nor the left is ever happy with him for long. “One of the advantages of growing up in my faith outside of Utah is that you are different in ways that are important to you,” he said. In high school, he was the only Mormon on campus; during his stint at Stanford, he would go to bars with his friends and drink soda. Small moments like those pile up over a lifetime, he told me, so that when a true test of conscience arrives, “you’re not in a position where you don’t know how to stand for something that’s hard.”

In Mormon circles, Romney’s impeachment vote was fodder for another round of “white horse” jokes. But the reality, of course, is that America will never be “saved” by a single person, or even a single group. What holds the country together is its conviction in certain ideals—community, democracy, mutual sacrifice—that it once possessed, and now urgently needs to reclaim. If Mormonism has anything to offer that effort, it will have to come from a confident Church, one that is unafraid of owning up to its mistakes and embracing what makes it distinct. *A*

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

OUR FIGHT CONTINUES

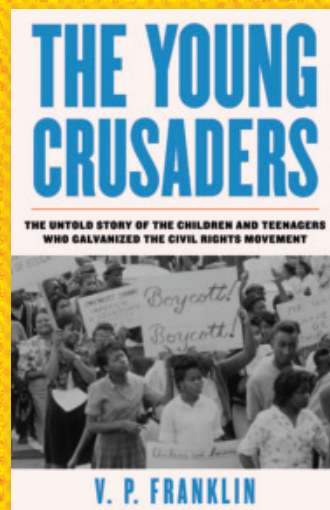
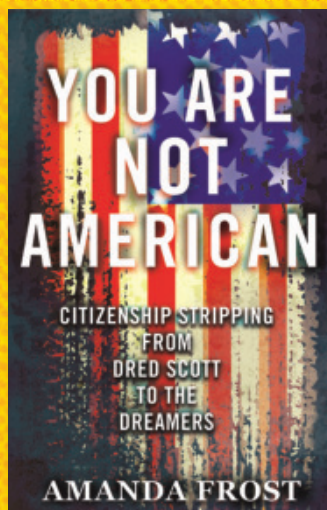
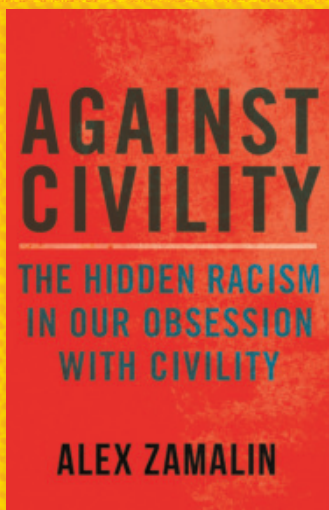
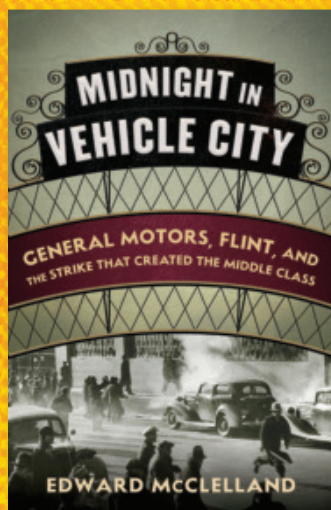


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Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

How Great Is Martin Amis?

*Assessing the legacy of a comic master
who grasps for seriousness*

By James Parker

Posterity, you bitch. What are you going to say about Martin Amis? When the winnowing's done, and the windbags and the mediocrities have all been blown out the side of the threshers, what will your verdict be? Will you hail him as a Bellovian/DeLillovian seer-novelist, bestriding the millennium with his mega-thoughts? Will you shake your head and say that he was a great comic talent misused, a prancing master wit who tripped himself up on the winding stair, the stony spiral, to seriousness and significance? Or will you be a bit confused about him, as we are, here in the clumsy, unfiltered present?

Inside Story is the most confusing of the 14 novels, two short-story collections, one memoir, and seven works of journalism and history that Amis, 71, has written. It's a summit of confusion—appropriately enough because, he shares with us rather airily, it's his last big book. Or his last “full-length fiction.” Listen to this: “There are a good few short stories I mean to get done (most of them about race in America), and I have in mind a third fiction about the Third Reich—a modest novella.” Is he teasing us? Taking the piss, as we say in England? Or is that a genuine flash of his still-opulent literary ambition? I've read all his books, I've loved most of them—I know him, tonally, pretty well—and I have no idea. This is sometimes the way with the older Amis.

Inside Story advertises itself as a novel, but it can't be just a novel—can it?—because it has an index, featuring real people. (“Amis, Kingsley ... likes nude magazines 118*n*.”) It comprises, briefly: magnificent and affecting accounts of the decline of Saul Bellow and the death of Christopher Hitchens, both of whom Amis knew and loved; further puzzling over the phenomenon of Philip Larkin (he already did a lot of this in his memoir, *Experience*); a pointless subnovel featuring *another* (Jesus Christ) of Amis's Eros-Thanatos women, his crippled-inside sex witches, this one called

Phoebe Phelps; a slightly half-assed but nonetheless very interesting how-to-write manual; lashings of his bamboozlingly brilliant critical commentary; digressions and footnotes galore. Really it's a 500-page miscellany of Amis-ness, a bristling compendium that puts me in mind of nothing so much as the slightly bananas 19-minute medley on the 1970 live album *The Everly Brothers Show*, in which the late-period brothers career wildly but with exquisite emotional command from Chuck Berry to the Beatles to B. B. King to the soundtrack from *Hair*. Except that in this case Amis is Chuck Berry *and* the Beatles *and* B. B. King *and* the cast of *Hair*. And also the late-period Everly Brothers.

The great lines come flying at you, as always, volleyed out of the cleft of the book and into the magic space beneath your raised eyebrows. "The train was now slaked of motion." Think about that: the strange satiety of a train as it pulls into the station, the luxurious settling-back into stasis. (And listen also to the slowing-down sound of the words—the long *a*, the long *o*.) And there are good jokes, too. On the acceleration of time as one ages: "After I turned sixty my birthdays became biannual, then triannual. The *Atlantic Monthly* gradually became a fortnightly; and now it's the *Atlantic Weekly*." Plenty here, in other words, to give you that Amis feeling: scurrying exhilarations faithfully dogged by—if you're a writer—tiny depressions, little bouncing bladders of despair, because he's just so much bleeding better than you are. (It's not a competition, I hear you kindly protest. Reader, it's *all* a competition.)

Plenty here also to give you that other Amis feeling, which is the sneaking awareness of a supreme and impersonal literary intelligence bumping up against—or perhaps we should say exploring—the edges, the limits, of the personality in which it is provisionally housed. This Phoebe Phelps business, for example. She's excitingly mean; she's skinny but she has large breasts; she enralls him; she carries deep trauma; her attitude to lovemaking is transactional. As Nabokov with his nymphets, so Amis with his sociopathically sexy women, his avenging victims, his id-torturers. He can't stop writing about them—about her. Selina Street from *Money* was the prototype, but she looks fresh as a daisy next to the dark Nicola Six, the "murderess" from *London Fields*; the pornographic destroyer Cora Susan from *Yellow Dog*; and now Phoebe Phelps. It's an obsession, an unprocessed lump, not to be got around, not to be explained away: There it is, part of his psyche. "I've got to get this stuff out of my system," as John Self said in *Money*. "No, more than that, much more. I've got to get my system out of my system. That's what I've got to do."

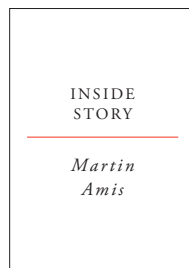
The death of Hitchens; the obscuration, by dementia, of the great searchlight that was Bellow; Amis's own dalliance with "suicidal ideation"—*Inside Story* is a heavy, mortal book. It's full of ellipses: Dangling,

tantalizing, confiding, pregnant beyond utterance ... polyvalent, let's say. "The end of a sentence is a weighty occasion," Amis tells us on page 394. So what does it mean to trail off, as he so frequently does, into three little dots? The effect accumulates and begins to feel—in a book so full of death and dying—very human. A reluctance to say goodbye. Out they go, his thoughts, his words; out they travel, part of his extra-temporal communion with us, his readers, to whom Amis has always been extravagantly generous. We are the ones, after all, who will be commending him to posterity. "You'll be reading me every now and then at least until about 2080, weather permitting. And when you go maybe my afterlife, too, will come to an end, my afterlife of words."

Ah, the afterlife. We come to the stony spiral, the quest for global seriousness. Since roughly the middle of his career—1991, *Time's Arrow*—Amis has been having running engagements with the Holocaust, the Great Terror, a godless universe, and lately Islamism. He wrote a whole book—*The Second Plane*—about 9/11, but that didn't do it, apparently, because he's at it again in *Inside Story*. Does he write about it well? Of course he does. But he also sucks it into his fiction with a weird slurping sound. As the day, the disaster, progresses, so does his preoccupation with a large and fragile scab on his right hand: "Whereas the carapace, the protective crust, gave no pain when I prodded it, the ambient area, I found, was still stringently tender to the touch." It's a theory of suffering, like in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts": in the background, the gored and billowing towers, the broken world-scene; in the foreground, Martin Amis frowning over his scab.

A high-risk contrivance? Certainly. Amis is Amis: Beneath an autumnal maturity of mind beats the still-atavistic writerly ego. He wants to lance the moment with language, and he wants his language to live forever. But there are reckonings in *Inside Story*, real moral and spiritual reckonings. On the death of his younger sister, an alcoholic, at the age of 46: "Surely, surely, I could've done something about that. Couldn't I?" There are sweating pockets of male shame and grease spots on the conscience. "You can't possibly get away with all this," the young Amis thinks to himself after some rather seedy '70s behavior, "nor should you." I put the book down in a mood of deep and disquieted self-consideration. How do I measure up to all this? Not the writing, but the level of perception, the level of interrogation, the level of work, the level of living. And then the mood passed, and as a reader I felt—like an absolution—the gaze of the author, and his understanding. That's greatness. That lasts. *A*

Beneath an autumnal maturity of mind beats the still-atavistic writerly ego.



James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



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China's Rebel Historians

Defiant researchers chronicle a past that the Communist Party grows ever more intent on erasing.

By Barbara Demick

In China, history long occupied a quasi-religious status. During imperial times, dating back thousands of years and enduring until the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, historians' dedication to recording the truth was viewed as a check against wrongdoing by the emperor. Rulers, though forbidden from interfering, of course tried.

So have their successors. Among the most intent on harnessing history for political gain are the current leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. They routinely scrub Chinese-language scholarly books, journals, and textbooks of anything that might undermine their own legitimacy—including anything that tarnishes Mao Zedong, the founding father of the party. The effort, no small task, has not gone unchallenged. A web of amateur historians has been collecting documents and eyewitness testimony from the seven decades that have elapsed since the establishment of modern China in 1949. Guo Jian, an English professor at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater who has translated some

of their findings, describes the tenacious researchers as “the inheritors of China’s great legacy,” dedicated to “preserving memory against repression and amnesia.”

The best-known of the new self-styled historians is Yang Jisheng, whose detailed account of Mao’s Great Leap Forward—the world’s worst man-made disaster, an ill-conceived attempt to jump-start China’s economy that led to the deaths of some 36 million people by famine—was published in Hong Kong in 2008. Though this book, *Tombstone*, was banned on the mainland, it circulated there in samizdat versions available online and from itinerant booksellers, who hid copies on their pushcarts. Four years later, edited and translated into English by Guo and Stacy Mosher, it was published internationally to great acclaim, and in 2016, Yang received an award for “conscience and integrity in journalism” from Harvard. He was forbidden to leave the country to attend the awards ceremony, and has told friends that he fears he is under constant surveillance.

Rather than being chastened, Yang has done it again. His latest book, *The World Turned Upside Down*, was published four years ago in Hong Kong and is now in English, thanks to the same translators. It is an unsparing account of the Cultural Revolution, another of Mao’s misadventures, which began in 1966 and ended only with his death in 1976.

YANG WAS BORN in 1940 in Hubei province, in central China. In a heartbreaking scene in *Tombstone*, he writes of coming home from school to find his beloved uncle—who had given up his last morsel of meat so that the boy he had raised as a son could eat—unable to lift a hand in greeting, his eyes sunken and his face gaunt. That happened in 1959, at the height of the famine, but it would be decades before Yang understood that his uncle’s death was part of a national tragedy, and that Mao was to blame.

In the meantime, Yang ticked off all the boxes to establish his Communist bona fides. He joined the Communist Youth League; served as editor of his high school’s mimeographed tabloid, *Young Communist*; and wrote a poem eulogizing the Great Leap Forward. He studied engineering at Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University, although his education was cut short by the start of the Cultural Revolution, when he and other students were sent traveling around the country as part of what Mao called the “great networking” to spread the word. In 1968, Yang became a reporter for Xinhua News Agency. There, he would later write, he learned “how ‘news’ was manufactured, and how news organs served as the mouthpieces of political power.”

But it wasn’t until the crackdown on prodemocracy demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in 1989 that Yang had a political awakening. “The blood of those young students cleansed my brain of all the lies I had accepted

over the previous decades,” he wrote in *Tombstone*. He vowed to discover the truth. Under the guise of doing economic research, Yang began digging into the Great Leap Forward, uncovering the scale of the famine and the degree to which the Communist Party was culpable. His job at Xinhua and his party membership gave him access to archives closed to other researchers.

In moving on to tackle the Cultural Revolution, he acknowledges that his firsthand experiences during those years did not prove to be much help. At the time, he hadn’t understood it well, and “missed the forest for the trees,” he writes. Five years after the upheaval ended, the Communist Party’s Central Committee adopted a 1981 resolution laying down the official line on the horrifying turmoil. It described the Cultural Revolution as occasioning “the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people” since the founding of the country. At the same time, it made clear that Mao himself—the inspiration without whom the Chinese Communist Party could not remain in power—was not to be tossed onto the rubbish heap of history. “It is true that he made gross mistakes during the Cultural Revolution,” the resolution continued, “but, if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes.” To exonerate Mao, much of the violence was blamed on his wife, Jiang Qing, and three other radicals, who came to be known as the Gang of Four.

In *The World Turned Upside Down*, Yang still dwells very much amid the trees, but he now brings vividness and immediacy to an account that concurs with the prevailing Western view of the forest: Mao, he argues, bears responsibility for the cascading power struggle that plunged China into chaos, an assessment supported by the work of, among other historians, Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, the authors of the 2006 classic *Mao’s Last Revolution*. Yang’s book has no heroes, only swarms of combatants engaged in a “repetitive process in which the different sides took turns enjoying the upper hand and losing power, being honored and imprisoned, and purging and being purged”—an inevitable cycle, he believes, in a totalitarian system. Yang, who retired from Xinhua in 2001, didn’t obtain as much archival material for this book, but he benefited from the recent work of other undaunted chroniclers, whom he credits for many chilling new details about how the violence in Beijing spread to the countryside.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION was Mao’s last attempt at creating the utopian socialist society he’d long envisioned, although he may have been motivated less by ideology than by political survival. Mao faced internal criticism for the catastrophe that was the

Mao is a demented emperor, cackling madly at his own handiwork as rival militias slaughter one another.

Great Leap Forward. He was unnerved by what had happened in the Soviet Union when Nikita Khrushchev began denouncing Joseph Stalin's brutality after his death in 1953. China's aging despot (Mao turned 73 the year the revolution began) couldn't help but wonder which of his designated successors would similarly betray his legacy.

To purge suspected traitors from the upper echelons, Mao bypassed the Communist Party bureaucracy. He deputized as his warriors students as young as 14 years old, the Red Guards, with caps and baggy uniforms cinched around their skinny waists. In the summer of 1966, they were unleashed to root out counter-revolutionaries and reactionaries ("Sweep away the monsters and demons," the *People's Daily* exhorted), a mandate that amounted to a green light to torment real and imagined enemies. The Red Guards persecuted their teachers. They smashed antiques, burned books, and ransacked private homes. (Pianos and nylon stockings, Yang notes, were among the bourgeois items targeted.) Trying to rein in the overzealous youth, Mao ended up sending some 16 million teenagers and young adults out into rural areas to do hard labor. He also dispatched military units to defuse the expanding violence, but the Cultural Revolution had taken on a life of its own.

In Yang's pages, Mao is a demented emperor, cackling madly at his own handiwork as rival militias—each claiming to be the faithful executors of Mao's will, all largely pawns in the Beijing power struggle—slaughter one another. "With each surge of setbacks and struggles, ordinary people were churned and pummeled in abject misery," Yang writes, "while Mao, at a far remove, boldly proclaimed, 'Look, the world is turning upside down!'"

Yet Mao's appetite for chaos had its limits, as Yang documents in a dramatic chapter about what is known as "the Wuhan incident," after the city in central China. In July 1967, one faction supported by the commander of the People's Liberation Army forces in the region clashed with another backed by Cultural Revolution leaders in Beijing. It was a military insurrection that could have pushed China into a full-blown civil war. Mao made a secret trip to oversee a truce, but ended up cowering in a lakeside guesthouse as violence raged nearby. Zhou Enlai, the head of the Chinese government, arranged his evacuation on an air-force jet.

"Which direction are we going?" the pilot asked Mao as he boarded the plane.

"Just take off first," a panicked Mao replied.

What started as casual brutality—class enemies forced to wear ridiculous dunce caps or stand in stress positions—degenerated into outright sadism. On the outskirts of Beijing, where traffic-crammed ring roads now lead to walled compounds with luxury villas, neighbors tortured and killed one another in the 1960s, using the cruelest methods imaginable. People

Xi Jinping is no fan of the Cultural Revolution, yet he has anointed himself the custodian of Mao's legacy.



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Previous spread: During the Cultural Revolution, a rebel group subjects a rival leader to a criticism session. This page, top: A property owner is publicly shamed. Middle: Schoolchildren march on National Day. Bottom: Confiscated stocks and savings-deposit books are burned.

said to be the offspring of landlords were chopped up with farm implements and beheaded. Male infants were torn apart by the legs to prevent them from growing up to take revenge. In a famous massacre in Dao County, Hunan province, members of two rival factions—the Red Alliance and the Revolutionary Alliance—butchered one another. So many bloated corpses floated down the Xiaoshui River that bodies clogged the dam downstream, creating a red scum on the reservoir's surface. During a series of massacres in Guangxi province, at least 80,000 people were murdered; in one 1967 incident, the killers ate the livers and flesh of some of their victims.

An estimated 1.5 million people were killed during the Cultural Revolution. The death toll pales in comparison to that of the Great Leap Forward, but in some ways it was worse: When people consumed human flesh during the Cultural Revolution, they were motivated by cruelty, not starvation. Stepping back from the grim details to situate the upheaval in China's broader history, Yang sees an inexorable dynamic at work. "Anarchism endures because the state machine produces class oppression and bureaucratic privilege," he writes. "The state machinery is indispensable because people dread the destructive power of anarchism. The process of the Cultural Revolution was one of repeated struggle between anarchism and state power."

IN CHINA, the Cultural Revolution has not been quite as taboo as other Communist Party calamities, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Tiananmen Square crackdown, which have almost entirely vanished from public discourse. At least two museums in China have collections dedicated to the Cultural Revolution, one near Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, and another in the southeastern port city of Shantou, which now appears to be closed. And for all the horrors associated with that period, many Chinese and foreigners have a fondness for what has since become kitsch—the Mao pins and posters, the Little Red Books that the marauding Red Guards waved, even porcelain figurines of people in dunce caps. (I confess I bought one a few years back at a flea market in Beijing.) A decade ago, a craze for Cultural Revolution songs, dances, and uniforms took off in the huge southwestern city of Chongqing, tapping a vein of nostalgia for the revolutionary spirit of the old days. The campaign was led by the party boss Bo Xilai, who was eventually purged and imprisoned in a power struggle that ended with the ascension of Xi Jinping to the party leadership in 2012. History seemed to be repeating itself.

Although Xi is widely considered the most authoritarian leader since Mao, and is often referred to in the foreign press as "the new Mao," he is no fan of the

Cultural Revolution. As a teenager, he was one of the 16 million Chinese youths exiled to the countryside, where he lived in a cave while toiling away. His father, Xi Zhongxun, a former comrade of Mao's, was purged repeatedly. And yet Xi has anointed himself the custodian of Mao's legacy. He has twice paid homage to Mao's mausoleum in Tiananmen Square, bowing reverently to the statue of the Great Helmsman.

Tolerance for free expression has shrunk under Xi. A few officials have been fired for criticizing Mao. In recent years, teachers have been disciplined for what is called "improper speech," which encompasses disrespecting Mao's legacy. Some textbooks gloss over the decade of chaos, a retreat from the admission of mass suffering in the 1981 resolution, which ushered in a period of relative openness compared with today.

In 2008, when *Tombstone* first appeared, the Chinese leadership was more accepting of criticism. Two of Yang's contemporaries at Tsinghua University in the 1960s had by then risen to the top ranks of the Communist Party—the former leader Hu Jintao and Wu Bangguo, the head of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress—and he received indirect messages of support, according to Minxin Pei, a political scientist at Claremont McKenna College and a friend of Yang's. "The book resonated with the top Chinese leadership because they knew the system could not produce its own history," he told me. The problem for Yang today "is the overall sense of insecurity of the current regime."

Yang, now 81, is still living in Beijing. He was so nervous about the repercussions of *The World Turned Upside Down* that he initially tried to delay publication of the English edition, according to friends, out of worry that his grandson—who was applying to university—might bear the brunt of reprisals. But the repressive political climate in China today makes honest assessments of Communist Party history ever more urgent, Guo told me. "Ever since the time of Zuo Qiuming [a historian from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.] and Confucius, truthfully recorded history has been considered a mirror against which the present is viewed and a stern warning against rulers' abuse of power." He pointed as well to a more contemporary, Western source, George Orwell's *1984*, and its mantra, "Who controls the past controls the future: Who controls the present controls the past."

Unlike the imperial dynasties, the Communist Party can't claim a mandate from heaven. "If it admits error," Guo said, "it loses legitimacy." *A*

Barbara Demick, formerly the Beijing bureau chief of the Los Angeles Times, is the author, most recently, of Eat the Buddha: Life and Death in a Tibetan Town.

THE WORLD
TURNED
UPSIDE DOWN:
A HISTORY OF
THE CHINESE
CULTURAL
REVOLUTION

Yang Jisheng
Translated and edited
by Stacy Mosher
and Guo Jian

FARRAR, STRAUS
AND GIROUX



BOOKS

How Civilization Broke Our Brains

What can hunter-gatherer societies teach us about work, time, and happiness?

By Derek Thompson

Several months ago, I got into a long discussion with a colleague about the origins of the “Sunday scaries,” the flood of anxiety that many of us feel as the weekend is winding down and the workweek approaches. He said that the culprit was clear, and pointed to late-stage capitalism’s corrosive blend of performance stress and job insecurity. But capitalism also exists Monday through Saturday, so why should Sunday be so uniquely anxiety-inducing?

The deeper cause, I thought, might have something to do with the modern psychology of time. Imagine the 21st-century worker as accessing two modes of thinking: productivity mind and leisure mind. When we are under the sway of the former, we are time- and results-optimizing creatures, set on proving our industriousness to the world and, most of all, to ourselves. In leisure mode, the thrumming subsides, allowing us to watch a movie or finish a glass of wine without considering how our behavior might affect our reputation and performance reviews. For several hours a week, on Sunday evening, a psychological tug-of-war between these perspectives takes place. Guilt about recent lethargy kicks in as productivity mind gears up, and apprehension about workaday pressure builds as leisure mind cedes power.

If only we could navigate our divided lives with seamless ease—except what if ease isn’t what most of us really want? In 2012, the University of Maryland sociologist John P. Robinson reviewed more than 40 years of happiness and time-use surveys that asked Americans how often they felt they either were “rushed” or had “excess time.” Perhaps predictably, he concluded that the happiest people were the “never-never” group—those who said they very rarely felt hurried or bored, which isn’t to say they were laid-back. Their schedules met their energy level, and the work they did consumed their attention without exhausting it. In an essay for *Scientific American* summarizing his research, Robinson offered a strenuous formula for joy: “Happiness means being just rushed enough.”

Despite the headline focus on happiness, Robinson’s most unexpected insights were about American discontent. We may constantly complain about our harried schedules, but the real joy-killer seemed to be the

absence of any schedule at all. Considerably less happy than the just-rushed-enough, he said, were those with lots of excess time. He found, as other workplace studies have shown, that Americans are surprisingly fretful when not absorbed by tasks, paid or otherwise. And at the bottom of his rankings, registering an “unparalleled level of unhappiness,” were those whose plight may sound puzzling; people who, though they almost always felt underscheduled, also almost always felt rushed. Such is the psychological misery of an undirected person for whom an urgent need to overcome idleness—to find purpose—becomes a source of stress. This always-always condition struck me as the most peculiarly modern anxiety: It’s the Sunday scaries, all week long.

This bizarre need to feel busy, or to feel that time is structured, even when one is sprawled on the couch on a weekend afternoon—where does it come from? Is it inscribed in our DNA, or is it as much an invention of industrialized culture as paper clips and microchips? To answer that question, we would have to understand the texture of human life for most of our history, before civilization and workweeks edged their way into the picture. We would need a participant-observer from our era to live among hunter-gatherers and experience their relationship to work, time, and joy.

The anthropologist James Suzman has done a version of that, devoting almost 30 years to studying the Ju/’hoansi “Bushmen,” a tribe whose members lived an isolated existence in Namibia and Botswana until the late 20th century, when incursions by local governments destroyed their way of life. In his new book, *Work: A Deep History, From the Stone Age to the Age of Robots*, Suzman describes the Ju/’hoansi of yore as healthy and cheerful, perfectly content to work as little as possible and—not coincidentally—ingenious at designing customs that discourage competition and status-seeking. Combining careful anthropological research with excursions into sociology and psychology, he asks how we’ve come to find ourselves more harried—and seemingly more unhappy—than the small-scale communities from which civilization emerged. If there is some better way of handling modernity’s promises and pressures, perhaps the Ju/’hoansi can light the way.

WORK, SUZMAN OBSERVES, is what distinguishes animate organisms, humans above all, from inert matter: “Only living things actively seek out and capture energy specifically to live, to grow and to reproduce.” Yet it is the million-year history of labor’s counterpoint, leisure, that holds the key to humanity’s exceptionalism—its record of remarkable progress, and the discontent that seems to have accompanied those strides.

From what we can tell, our *Australopithecus* ancestors of roughly 2.5 million years ago closely resembled modern primates, such as chimpanzees, who spend

about eight hours a day foraging and eating. In between chewing and digesting all that raw pith, stalk, and root, gorillas and chimps sleep nine to 12 hours. Such a routine doesn’t leave much daylight time for leisure activities more energy-intensive than lazy grooming.

Fire changed everything. Anthropologists don’t know precisely how humans first marshaled fire for their use roughly 1 million years ago, but it’s obvious how fire formed humans. By softening meat and vegetables, fire predigests our food, allowing us to eat and retain more calories in less time. By warding off predators, fire allowed our ancestors to climb down from their tree beds and sleep soundly on the ground; more REM sleep sharpened their memory and their focus. Fire also allowed humans to grow huge, energy-greedy brains that gobble up about a fifth of our calories, a far greater proportion than other primates’ brains consume.

By expanding our minds and our free time, fire sparked humankind’s capacity for boredom, amusement, craftsmanship, and art. And from what we can discern, our *Homo sapiens* ancestors celebrated the gift of free time with gusto.

The Ju/’hoansi spent an average of 17 hours a week finding food—2,140 calories daily—and devoted another 20 to chores, as Suzman gleaned from other ethnographies and firsthand research. This left them with considerably more downtime than the typical full-time employee in the U.S., who spends about 44 hours a week doing work—and that doesn’t include domestic labor and child care. In that downtime, the Ju/’hoansi remained strikingly free, over centuries, from the urge to cram it with activities that we would classify as “productive” (or, for that matter, destructive). By day, they did go on walks with children to teach them how to read the canvas of the desert for the footprints of animals. But they also lounged, gossiped, and flirted. During firelit evenings, they sang, danced, and told stories. One anthropologist studying another hunter-gatherer tribe, the Hadza people of northern Tanzania, described its members in the 1960s as habitual small-stakes gamblers whose days were filled with one particular pastime: winning and losing arrows in games of chance.

SO HOW DID WE MOVE from that world to a culture in which leisure exists for the sake of work—in which downtime activities (such as using social media) are strewn with performance metrics, and childhood play (such as team sports) has become a résumé enhancer? Suzman does not answer this question in a very organized way. But his discussion highlights at a macro level what the Sunday scaries signal on a personal level: Modern life has made it harder for Americans to forget about their work.

Where does the bizarre need to feel busy, even when one is sprawled on the couch on a weekend afternoon, come from?

Suzman calls attention to the changing nature of work. He draws on the writing of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who pointed to a crucial difference between “primitive” and complex societies called *interchangeability*. For hunter-gatherers, chiefs and shamans could, and did, moonlight as foragers and hunters. Overlapping duties preserved a strong sense of community, reinforced by customs and religions that obscured individual differences in strength, skill, and ambition. Shared labor meant shared values.

But in industrial economies, lawyers don’t tag in for brain surgery, and drill sergeants don’t harvest wheat—and the different jobs people do, requiring different skill sets, command (often vastly) different pay. As specialization spread and superior performance was rewarded, a cult of competition emerged: High achievers believed they could and should always toil harder for a fatter raise, bigger house, higher honor, or more wondrous breakthrough. Where rest once beckoned, now restlessness did. The productivity mode thrived—and it just might deserve credit (along with luck) for almost all scientific progress and technological ingenuity. But it also bears the blame for what Durkheim called a “malady of infinite aspiration,” which by now we’ve discovered is chronic. When a recent Pew Research Center survey asked about the secret to happiness, most Americans, of all ages, ranked “a job or career they enjoy” above marriage, children, or any other committed relationship. Careerism, not community, is the keystone in the arch of life.

You might say that leisure mind never had a chance. But Suzman emphasizes another fundamental change to help account for that: our relationship to time—specifically, to the future. Small hunter-gatherer groups in tropical climates rarely stored food for more than a few days, Suzman writes. Trusting in the abundance of their environment, the Ju/’hoansi worked to meet their absolute needs, and then stopped to rest, rather than planning ahead.

By comparison, modern civilization is a shrine to the future. The shift goes back to the agricultural revolution, which subjected humans to farming cycles that separated planting and harvest by many months, and continued with the rise of finance. But a fixation on the future by now goes far beyond crop cycles and long-term loans. It is at the heart of our concept of education and corporate development, which presumes that young students and workers will gladly spend decades honing skills that they will be well compensated for only years later. The least controversial values in America today—the importance of grit, the hope for progress, the dream of social mobility—assume that the future is always changing and that our inclination is always to wish for better. Meanwhile, excessively negative future-oriented thinking is

the most common feature of anxiety disorders, which afflict almost 20 percent of Americans.

At the aggregate level, high expectations for the future have surely made the world a better place. Despite routine complaining from the 21st century’s inhabitants, modern civilization has produced quite a lot to be thankful for. Slow cookers, Venmo, and internet kittens; vaccines and aspirin, heat lamps and mittens; Amazon, hand soap, air-conditioning—these are a few of *my* favorite things, at least. But at the individual level, Suzman offers the tantalizing promise that the Ju/’hoansi have something to teach those of us whose brains have been dizzied by the vertigo of civilization.

Even the present-oriented hunter-gatherers, it turns out, had to develop communal strategies to quash the drivers of overwork—status envy, inequality, deprivation. When a Ju/’hoan hunter returned with a big kill, the tribe perceived a danger that he might think his prowess elevated him above others. “We can’t accept this,” one tribesman said. “So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle.” This practice became known among researchers as “insulting the hunter’s meat.”

It was not the only custom that aimed to discourage a destabilizing competition for status and avoid a concentration of power. The tribe also “insisted that the actual owner of the meat, the individual charged with its distribution, was not the hunter, but the person who owned the arrow that killed the animal,” Suzman writes. By rewarding the semi-random contributor of the arrow, the Ju/’hoansi kept their most talented hunters in check, in order to defend the group’s egalitarianism. A welcome result was that “the elderly, the short-sighted, the clubfooted and the lazy got a chance to be the centre of attention once in a while.”

Reading about these strategies, I felt several things at once—astonished by their ingenuity, mind-blown by the notion of *ridiculing* exceptional achievements, and worried that my failure to imagine taking comparable pains to protect leisurely harmony meant that my own brain had been addled by too many years in productivity mode, too many twitchy Sunday evenings. But what Suzman’s foray into humanity’s past reveals is that leisure has never been the ready default mode we may imagine, even in the chilliest of cultures. The psychological cost of civilization, the scourge of the Sunday scaries, and the lesson of the Ju/’hoansi converge in an insight worth taking to heart: Safeguarding leisure is work. While progress depends on pinning our hopes on a world that doesn’t yet exist, those who cannot stop planning for the future are doomed to labor for a life they will never fully live. *A*

Derek Thompson is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

WORK:
A DEEP HISTORY,
FROM THE STONE
AGE TO THE AGE
OF ROBOTS

James
Suzman

PENGUIN PRESS

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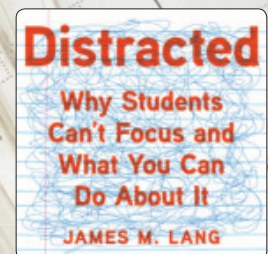
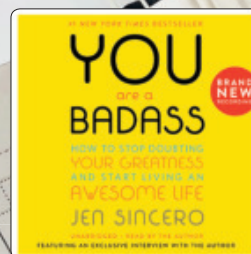
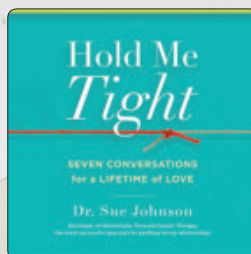
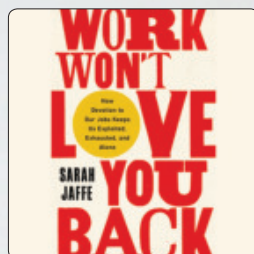
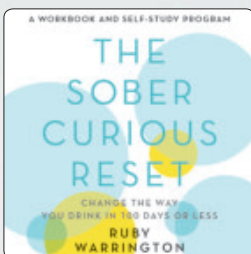
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BOOKS

More Than the Vote

The suffragists' struggle produced undaunted trailblazers, Black and white, who continued to pursue social reform.

By Deborah Cohen

Women's-suffrage campaigners and their equally adamant opponents were in full agreement on one fundamental point: Giving women the vote would change everything. It would end poverty, and wars, too! So promised Britain's militant suffragists, envisioning a civilization in which the patriarchy was upended and society's evils were largely vanquished. A Greek chorus of "antis" foretold a different future. The death of the family! The destruction of morality! After most British women over the age of 30 won the vote, in 1918, the Liberal politician and diplomat Lord Esher saw a watershed moment at hand. An "avalanche of women has been hurled into the political chaos," he wrote. "Institutions as well as ideas will have to be re-sorted."

Twenty years later, on the brink of the Second World War, the surprise was how little women's suffrage had disturbed the status quo, either at home or abroad. In Britain, the Conservative Party's substantial parliamentary majorities were likely undergirded by the women's vote. In the United States, where female turnout was low, if women voted at all they tended to vote like their husbands.

The sense that the franchise was an anticlimax, even a disappointment, was widespread among those who had taken part in the cause, like Virginia Woolf. She'd gotten the right to vote at the same time that she'd inherited a legacy from her aunt. "Of the two—the vote and the money—the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important," Woolf reflected.

The idea that suffrage didn't measure up to its promise echoed through the centenary celebrations. The recognition accorded to feminist pioneers such as Carrie Chapman Catt, the head of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and the radical suffragist Alice Paul, the leader of the National Woman's Party, has been accompanied by a serious and overdue public reckoning with what the historian Martha S. Jones calls their "dirty" compromises. Those included a willingness to do deals with white supremacists to exclude Black voters. For Black women in the Jim Crow South, the Nineteenth Amendment arrived practically as a dead letter. Neither the National Woman's Party nor the newly formed League of Women Voters was willing to take up the problem of Black disenfranchisement.

The best way to appreciate the suffrage movement's legacy is to look beyond suffrage itself. Lacking the vote, women had already embraced political participation by other means, such as petitioning and editorial-writing; they'd been active in 19th-century reform efforts, including abolition and temperance. In the heat of the suffrage campaigns, they learned how to perform on the hustings; land rhetorical blows; recruit allies in unlikely places; and bend the machinery of the statehouse, the church synod, and the union council to their purposes. The struggle for the vote decanted into public life a large number of women who had thought rigorously about injustice as both an individual and a systemic matter. Battle-hardened, unafraid of infighting, they were prepared to meet the obstacles in their way and forge on. Nowhere is this process more evident than in the career of Britain's Sylvia Pankhurst and in the veterans of the American Black-suffragist movement.

AS RACHEL HOLMES recounts in her new biography, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel*, Sylvia and her sister Christabel had been "teen radicals," the Greta Thunbergs of their day. Together with their mother, Emmeline, they launched a militant suffrage campaign in 1903. Under the banner of "Deeds Not Words," the Pankhursts pushed their disciples to attention-grabbing acts of defiance and violence. As the women's franchise got bogged down in parliamentary finagling,

Police officers manhandled suffragist protesters, twisting their arms, tying their skirts over their heads when they were arrested, throwing them in jail.

the suffragists ramped up their campaign, torching country houses, smashing plate-glass department-store windows, slashing paintings at the National Gallery, and—sticking it to the gentlemen where it really hurt—wrecking golf courses.

Police officers manhandled them, pinching them hard on the buttocks or breasts, twisting their arms, tying their skirts over their heads when they were arrested, throwing them in jail. When imprisoned suffragists started hunger striking, the British state responded with a savage force-feeding program. Sylvia went to jail nine times, serving 65 days; she and her mother, as she put it, were "chasing each other in and out of prison, as though it had been a race between us." At one point in 1913, she was being restrained, a tube thrust down her throat or jammed up her nose, twice daily.

Sylvia drew on this experience in her showdown with Vladimir Lenin seven years later. By then, she'd already broken with both her mother and her sister. Christabel had come to see men as the enemy, crusading under the slogan "Votes for women and chastity for men." For Christabel, as for her mother, the singular issue was suffrage, and women would have to go it alone. Sylvia, by contrast, had a white-hot social conscience and was committed to the class struggle; during World War I, she'd become a pacifist as well. She took as her lover Keir Hardie, a founder of Britain's Labour Party. The women's movement, as Sylvia saw it, was inseparable from the socialist crusade.

Her Workers' Suffrage Federation had been among the first of Britain's socialist groups to establish relations with Moscow after the revolution. At the Kremlin for the meeting of the Communist International, Sylvia sized up the Russian leader. He was no fan of women, she deduced. Nor did he share her tactical sense. Lenin thought that British communism needed to work through Parliament and with the Labour Party; amalgamation and centralization were in order. Sylvia disagreed: "Though I am a socialist, I have fought a long, long time in the suffrage movement and I have seen how important it is to be extreme." Lenin's pamphlet about her position, "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, commemorated the quarrel for all time.

Sylvia lost her fight with Lenin and was ejected from the Communist Party. She went on to devote her life to anti-racist, anti-imperial causes. Often overshadowed by her early years as a suffragist, these later campaigns are where Holmes rightly lays her emphasis. Her Sylvia is a Cassandra, foresighted but rarely heeded, who as early as 1923 raised the alarm about fascism. When, in 1935, the Italians invaded Ethiopia, she launched a press campaign to urge the British government to stand up to Mussolini. "Unless the peoples of Europe will rise to the menace overhanging them, another greater catastrophe will shortly follow," she admonished.

Opposite page, clockwise from left: *Sylvia Pankhurst upon her 1921 release from prison and in a 1918 portrait; Vivian Malone registering at the University of Alabama in 1963; the Freedom Rider Diane Nash in 1961; a 1966 Alabama voting line*

To each of these endeavors, Pankhurst applied the lessons she'd learned as a suffragist. She'd emerged from the movement a dogged opponent of authority not founded on the consent of the governed; she believed in the power of the press and the importance of action rather than talking. "Dictatorship is the absolute negation of the women's movement, the death of progress," she explained. Why? she was asked. "Because it rests on force" was her answer. She loathed violence but wasn't frightened off by it. Denouncing Joseph Stalin—she was an early, trenchant critic—she publicized evidence of his purges in the *New Times and Ethiopia News*, the paper she founded.

She was, the playwright George Bernard Shaw said, a latter-day Joan of Arc, hurling herself full-tilt against the entirety of society. Her approach wasn't a recipe for popularity: "This horrid old harridan should be choked to death with her own pamphlets," one British diplomat grouched. But Pankhurst had long since dispensed with a womanly need for approbation. That included the good opinion of her mother and sister. To her quarrels with them about pacifism and socialism, she added the indignity (as her family saw it) of an illegitimate son, the product of her union with an Italian anarchist. The gulf among the Pankhursts grew ever wider. Emmeline campaigned for Parliament as a Conservative. Christabel moved to California and became a Second Adventist preacher.

Sylvia, meanwhile, kept company with the leading lights of anti-colonial nationalism, including Kwame Nkrumah, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Jomo Kenyatta. A young Nkrumah, later the president of Ghana, dubbed Sylvia's house in a northeastern London suburb "The Village." Her feminism drove her internationalism. "I make no distinction between mother love, whether it be in Africa or Europe," she proclaimed. When she was 74 years old, she accepted the invitation of Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, to immigrate to Addis Ababa. Once there, she pressed him on the need for democratization.

THE DISPUTE that divided the Pankhursts confronted suffrage campaigners everywhere. Should suffragists make common cause with other political movements, or should they continue their struggle apart? Was the goal an improvement in women's status or social transformation writ large? For Black suffragists in the United States, separating the fights for racial justice and voting rights was impossible. Trailblazing a path, these women developed an analysis of oppression that linked suffrage to other movements for social change, including education, prison reform, and workers' rights. That is the argument of Martha S. Jones's *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*.

SYLVIA
PANKHURST:
NATURAL
BORN REBEL

Rachel Holmes

BLOOMSBURY

VANGUARD:
HOW BLACK
WOMEN BROKE
BARRIERS,
WON THE VOTE,
AND INSISTED
ON EQUALITY
FOR ALL

Martha S. Jones

BASIC

Suffrage figures in Jones's account as just one episode in a much longer story of emancipation. She begins in the early 19th century, with Black women's struggles for autonomy and power in their churches, and continues through the antislavery movement and then to suffrage and its long aftermath. From the start, the American women's-suffrage campaign was riddled with exclusions. A joint effort to secure voting rights for both Black Americans and women fell apart when Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave Black men the right to vote. As the Black suffragist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper said in the 1860s, "You white women speak of rights. I speak of wrongs."

The idea that Black women needed their own, independent organization came to fruition in the 1890s, with the founding of the National Association of Colored Women. Its motto was "Lifting as we climb," and by the early 1920s, it had nearly 100,000 members. Black women, Jones notes, were setting an anchor in American political culture even as the architects of Jim Crow sought to remove Black men from public life. The stakes couldn't have been higher. In the Senate, Mississippi's James K. Vardaman led an effort to use women's suffrage as the lever to repeal the Fifteenth Amendment. White women could have the vote, but only at the expense of Black men and women. Vardaman's maneuver failed, but not before garnering more than a quarter of senators' votes.

Jones's long chronology serves to illuminate the connection between the Black suffragists' campaign and the civil-rights movement. After the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Black women rushed to register to vote. Their struggles to overcome Jim Crow barriers helped bring about the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The effort was ceaseless, and largely invisible. On a hot day in August 1965, a local photographer captured 68-year-old Joe Ella Moore, dressed in a beribboned straw hat, registering to vote. This was Moore's eighth attempt. On each of her seven previous tries, Mississippi authorities had turned her away.

One of the satisfactions of Jones's book is her attention to unheralded figures such as Moore and the organizer Diane Nash, an architect of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's "Selma strategy," the well-remembered marches for voting rights. Or the three women, handbags hooked on their arms, who were photographed with Lyndon B. Johnson, Ralph Abernathy, and Martin Luther King Jr. at the signing of the Voting Rights Act. The picture is famous, yet despite occupying a third of the frame, the women are hardly ever identified. They are Patricia Roberts Harris, a Howard University law professor, who went on to become the first Black woman to hold a Cabinet post, in the Carter administration; Vivian Malone, a

Department of Justice staffer on the Voter Education Project who had, in 1963, defied Governor George Wallace to integrate the University of Alabama; and Zephyr Wright, who worked as the Johnson family's cook, from whom LBJ had heard firsthand about experiences of discrimination. Remember their names, too.

ANNIVERSARIES FOCUS on the single-issue standouts: the Emmeline Pankhursts or the Alice Pauls, leading the parades of women in white. But for most suffragists, the campaign for the vote was simply a stop on a road with many turns. From there, they went on to lobby for improved maternity and infant care, collective bargaining, protections for women workers, access to professions, and municipal reform, among many other causes. Scratch a trailblazing woman in the 20th century and you're likely to find a suffragist past: the first woman elected to the House of Representatives (Jeannette Rankin), the first woman Cabinet member (Frances Perkins), the first woman to win a case before the Supreme Court (Florence King), the first woman journalist to have a political column (Dorothy Thompson).

This was the outcome that the early opponents of women's suffrage had imagined with horror: an avalanche of activist women and a world remodeled along feminist lines. But for the first 70 years after suffrage, women didn't vote as a bloc, as the suffragists had hoped. The moral fervor that powered their campaign just as easily tilted into right-leaning crusades in defense of the "traditional" family. Starting in the early 1990s, though, American women's partisan preferences consolidated in favor of the Democratic Party. Since 2014, that gender gap has only widened. This divergence owes as much to men—especially white men—leaving the Democratic ranks as to women joining them.

One party for white men, another party for women of all kinds: That wasn't the world that Sylvia Pankhurst wanted. Like the Black women in Jones's book, she had no time for the "sex antagonism" her sister had preached. Her vision was utopian, but when it came to the machinations of power politics, Pankhurst was a hardheaded realist. She'd scarcely be surprised that today, the men who hold the cards are no more eager to surrender their power than they'd been a century earlier. "Why are women so patient?" Sylvia's father asked his wife and daughters. "Why don't you scratch our eyes out?" *A*

Deborah Cohen is the Richard W. Leopold Professor of History at Northwestern. Her new book, Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: Reporters of the Lost Generation, will be published next year.

Bats and Swallows By Erica McAlpine

Whatever the difference might be
to one who knows,
we couldn't see
from where we stood in soft shadows
any signs that they were swallows

or bats. That there were wings
was without doubt;
you could see small pointed things
swooping out
into the gloaming—

and sometimes back.
One seemed almost iridescent
as I tried to track
its crescent
flight across the hill. The lack

of sound suggested
bats to me;
you strained to see if they nested
somewhere below the
terrace, having rested

your case on swallows.
We couldn't be sure
either way—and so it follows
that neither of us knows.
But since it is in your nature

always to side one way
or the other, you hold
that they were swallows. I say
the question never gets old,
that either, or both, hold sway.

Erica McAlpine's most recent book is The Poet's Mistake (2020). She teaches at the University of Oxford.

FICTION



Shanghai
Murmur

By
Te-Ping
Chen

The man who lived upstairs had died, and it had taken the other tenants days to notice, days in which the sweetly putrid scent thickened and residents tried to avoid his part of the hall, palms tenting their noses as they came and left. At last someone sent for the building manager, who summoned his unemployed cousin



to break the lock and paid him 100 yuan to carry the body down the three flights of stairs.

There was a squabble as the residents who inhabited the adjoining rooms argued that they should have their rent lowered; the death was bad luck. Xiaolei stood listening as the building manager shouted them down. She felt sorry for the man who had died, whom she recalled as middle-aged, with tired, deep-set eyes, a chain-smoker who'd worked at the local post office. She supposed that if she ever asphyxiated or was stabbed overnight, the same thing would happen to her.

That evening, she brought back a white chrysanthemum and went upstairs in the dark, intending to leave it outside his room. As she carefully mounted the steps, though, she saw that the door stood open. The room was windowless, with a blackness even denser than that of the hall. She didn't wait for her eyes to adjust. She pitched the flower into the void, barely breathing, and ran back down the stairs.

If she came to the store more often, Yongjie would have noticed in a flash that the flower was gone; she had the sharp female eyes of a southerner. But most days she wasn't around; in addition to the flower shop, she ran her uncle's poultry slaughterhouse, which occupied most of her time. Since she'd been at the job, Xiaolei probably could have gotten away with taking whole sheaves of flowers: high-waisted, frilly-leaved stems of alstroemeria, clusters of lilac batons. She thought they looked better in isolation, though, and kept her windowsill lined with individually pilfered stems, each housed in its own soda bottle: a tousle-headed rose, a single agapanthus in electric blue.

It had been three years since she'd said goodbye to her parents, telling them that she'd gotten a job at a microchip factory down south in Shanghai. Plenty of girls had already left their village; no one expected them to farm anymore. As it happened, she didn't know what a microchip was, but she'd heard a segment about them on the radio. She was 16 and took a teenager's cruel pride in telling her parents about the microchips—a Japanese company, she'd said authoritatively, that made exports for Europe—and they'd been

impressed enough to let her go. All the way up until she boarded the train, she'd been expecting them to catch her in the lie. When they hadn't, she felt disappointed and unexpectedly sad, boarding a train to a city 14 hours south where she knew no one and had only a phony job waiting.

THE NEXT MORNING, when she got to the flower shop, she was in a foul temper. She had not brushed her hair, and her reflection in the mirror behind the counter made her wince. It seemed that days of fighting to board buses, hustling for space on the sidewalk—elbows always out, eyes half-squinted to see if someone was cheating her, lips pursed and ready to answer back—had left an indelible mark. She was not yet 20 but felt the years deep beneath her skin, as though Shanghai had grafted steel plates in her cheeks. Already she'd lost a teenager's mobility of features, sensed the exhausted cast of her eyes. Everyone she met had a story about someone from back home who'd made it big in Shanghai. Funny how she'd never actually met any of those people firsthand.

Still, she thought the flower shop had helped. In her first job, working at the bottling plant, she'd felt herself turning into something nearly savage, fingers stiff, mind numb, chest a cage. There had been cats in her village who'd hiss and spit at anyone who came near them, and Xiaolei thought she could understand why. Sometimes if she wanted to leave her room, she first found herself listening for any hall noises and waiting until they subsided before exiting; the sound of another door rasping open would prompt her to pause. If she spotted people her age clustered in the courtyard—a few girls had made friendly overtures—she would turn and make a hasty retreat, as if suddenly remembering something. It wasn't surprising, she told herself: All wild animals fear human contact.

But for six months now, she'd stripped rose thorns and sold bouquets, and there was a civility to it. She'd found an aperture onto a part of Shanghai that she'd almost stopped hoping she'd ever see, which soothed some of the growling in her chest. She sold flowers to office secretaries and grieving widows who arrived in sleek black

cars and men who dispatched identical bouquets to separate addresses, their wives and their mistresses. She learned to flatten her tones and inflect her voice with a certain inquisitive softness that wasn't native to any one place, certainly not Shanghai, and customers seemed to appreciate it.

Her moods were all over the place these days, low currents that eddied peaceably before surging up into the sand, erasing everything in their path. Maybe someday she would open her own flower shop. Skyscrapers were rising everywhere across the city, a neon tangle of signs and burnished steel, men in suits and women in high heels, *click click clack*. She could sell potted plants for their hallways, build up her own business, maybe meet someone in the elevator, get an office job. It wasn't impossible.

By lunch she had stopped thinking about the dead man and her spirits began to lift. Outside, the sunlight reflected off the white strips of the crosswalk, and the street almost glowed. She'd sold six bunches of daisies that morning and taken an order for a funeral spray of chrysanthemums. Yongjie would be pleased.

It was Wednesday, so she'd been saving the best flowers all day for her favorite customer, first selling the ones with edges threatening to turn brown, the petals starting to swoon and go loose at the tips—another two days and they'd come undone.

By 5 o'clock he still hadn't arrived, though, and she felt a creeping sadness clot her limbs. As she helped other customers, she kept one eye out the door for his silhouette. The light outside was turning that pallid gray of late afternoon, stealing across the sidewalk, muting even the garish red sign across the way that blared HEALTH PRODUCTS, ADULT PRODUCTS; the jumble of computer cords and pipe fittings in the store next door; and beyond that, the dirty, slovenly floors of a small restaurant named for its chief menu item, Duck Blood Noodle Soup. He wasn't in sight. She stared at the remaining flowers, fought the urge to tip them from their buckets onto the sidewalk.

The day after next was Friday, meaning that she'd have to wake up at 3 a.m. to try to beat all the other flower vendors to the wholesale market across town, then

spend the next few hours slopping heavy, wet bundles back to the store. It also meant that she now had to go wash out the buckets, already rancid with rotting stems, before leaving for the night. The scent of dying stock flowers, their stems soft and mushy in the water, she thought, compared almost unfavorably to the smell of her neighbor's corpse.

And then, suddenly, the man was outside the store and smiling at her with his crinkled-up eyes. He ducked through the door as if dodging inclement weather, though it wasn't raining, and he rolled his shoulders backwards, relaxing them. He'd cut his hair, she noticed, and was wearing the same white collared shirt as always; she envisioned his closet lined with whole glowing rows of them.

At the sight of him, she felt the room come into focus again; her face unfroze. "Seven red roses and three lilies?" she asked, not quite able to meet his eyes, and he nodded. "The nice wrapping, please." She felt a warm thrum in her chest. The ease he carried with him worked on her like a balm, though he rarely said much—indeed, now that she'd memorized his order, there was scarcely any need to speak at all. She stepped toward the buckets with their floral charges, grateful now for their perked-up appearance, and tucked her hair behind her ears.

Gently, she pulled each flower from its bucket and started splaying them out in her left hand, a galaxy of rose heads, then carefully threaded the lilies in among them. Finished, she slid out a sheet of pink paper and one of purple tissue and laid them tenderly atop each other on the worktable. She thought she could feel his gaze on her and moved more slowly, just for the pleasure of drawing out the moment.

Then, with one unsteady hand, she raised the cleaver and brought it down on the flowers' stems. She placed them at the trembling center of the paper and brought its edges together, carefully tying an orange ribbon around the bouquet's middle. It wasn't very nicely assembled, far more ragged than she would have liked, and she hoped he couldn't tell. Yongjie made bouquets perfectly, so even across their tops that you could drape a cloth over them and mistake them for pedestals.

When she turned to look at him, he was standing at the counter, back to her, but as though sensing her movement, he turned to look at her expectantly. Little trickles of thought bubbled up that she wanted to share with him, but she tamped them down as she handed him the flowers, feeling a jolt as he took them, as though they were an extension of her fingertips. It was foolish, she knew: The flowers were likely for a wife, or a mistress.

"What do you do, anyway?" she asked hastily, trying to cover her embarrassment as she assumed her position again behind the counter. "I see so much of you, I've

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of the growling
in her chest.*

always wondered." That was an understatement; in her mind she'd already constructed an elaborate life for him. He was a doctor specializing in the brain; he played the violin; he liked stinky tofu and walks in the park; he had been to Japan.

He looked at her and smiled, and the clean lines of his shirt, the dark thatch of his hair, the contrast of it, made her ache. She wanted to lean over the counter and stare at each strand of hair, count the hair follicles on his chin. "I do sales," he said. Then, examining her, as though rethinking his statement: "Well, I'm in sales," he corrected himself, and there was that smile

again. He laid the flowers carefully crosswise on the counter and began fishing for his wallet. "Here, I'll give you my card."

Xiaolei looked down and studied it—it was matte and thick to the touch. The company wasn't one she'd ever heard of; she wouldn't insult him by asking what it did.

Outside you could tell the time by the ranks of red taillights forming on the street; dusk was pressing in. Farther down the road was an expensive residential compound sealed with fat shrubs and a tall iron fence around its perimeter. The building, which bore the name Triumph Mansion, was six years old but still had the bewildered air of a fresh transplant; the neighborhood had not yet developed to match the pocketbooks or aspirations of its new residents. Xiaolei looked toward it now, as if for clues. Was she being rude by not speaking? Should she speak?

His gaze was no longer on her as he fumbled, emptying his pockets, looking for his wallet. The silence had gone on too long. "It's a nice neighborhood," she said hesitatingly at last. "Do you live at Triumph Mansion?"

He looked at her again, longer this time, his brow furrowed slightly. "I do," he nodded, handing her some bills. "Do you?" This, of course, was sheer politesse; she was wearing a smock and could see this embarrassed realization cross his face as she shook her head and tried to think of what else to say. "A little farther out," she said. He nodded absently, checked his watch.

Desperation surged inside her; she'd already demanded more of him in two minutes than she had in two months. In another moment he would disappear, gone for another week. She counted out his change more deliberately than usual, willing him to ask her a question, any question. He didn't. She paused. "Well, take care," she said, unable to keep the regret from her voice.

He smiled and picked up the bundle of flowers and inhaled. "Thank you," he said. "See you."

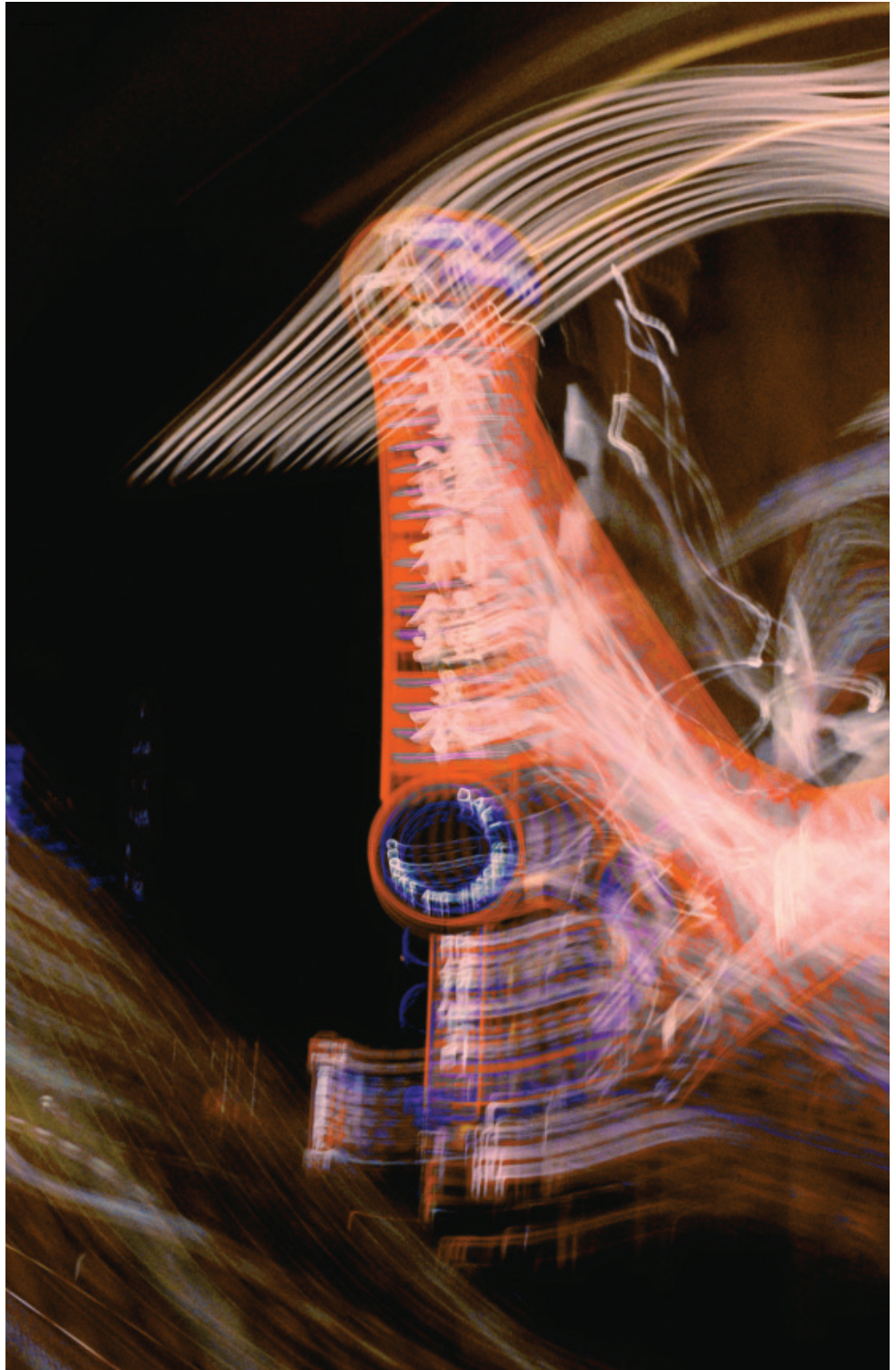
AFTER HE LEFT, she started sweeping the green scraps off the table with a wedge of newspaper, flushed in the cheeks, angry with herself. He'd thought her odd, surely, to be asking such

questions. Maybe he wouldn't even come back. Asking about Triumph Mansion must have sounded to him so aggressive and strange; she'd been greedy, should have left that question for another week, spaced out all the details she wanted to know. But then that would take months, years, and she didn't want to be at this job that long.

Later on, while helping another customer, she noticed a pen that had been left on the counter. It was black and thick-waisted with a narrow band of silver around its middle and a matching silver clip, a jagged white line on it depicting a mountain. She uncapped it and drew a long stroke against the back of a receipt—its ink was black and dense, and flowed under her touch like a thin, controlled river. *It must have been his*, she thought to herself, and dropped it into her pocket, where it landed with surprising weight.

For an hour between the final two customers (no purchases), she filled out bouquets with the last salvageable flowers; they might sell more quickly that way the next day. As the cars thinned outside, she mixed bleach and water and was on her knees scrubbing out buckets on the sidewalk when she saw a woman stride past her into the store. After a moment Xiaolei followed her, patting her hands dry on her smock.

Her first impression: big sunglasses with crystal-studded hinges resting on her head, and below that a makeup-free face, so flawless that Xiaolei couldn't stop trying to seek out imperfections. She had on a pair of snug sweatpants and a pink purse that swung from a strap of golden chains. A soon-to-be bride, she thought, though surprising that she'd come alone and so late. A wife asking



where else flowers had been sent, perhaps; it had happened once before.

"My husband left his pen here," the woman said. "Have you seen it?"

A confusion of emotions drifted across Xiaolei's face like clouds. She didn't know what she'd expected the man's wife to look

like—not like this—but mentally she paid the woman tribute; she was beautiful, what he deserved, though frankly there was something off-putting about her face. She looked like the sort of woman who would feed a pet dog expensive food and dock her servants' pay.

An interval passed before Xiaolei realized that the silence had gone on too long. “We have some pens,” she said slowly, feeling heavy and shapeless in her smock. She went to the cash drawer and brought out a handful of ballpoint pens and laid them on the counter with ceremony.

The woman shook her head, frustrated. “No, I’m talking about a nice pen,” she said. “Black, thick,” she said, and then she named the brand, which Xiaolei had never heard of. “You must have seen it.”

She raised her eyes to Xiaolei’s and held them. It was like being trapped in a cobra’s gaze. After a minute, just to put an end to it, Xiaolei drew the pen unwillingly from her pocket.

The woman’s face struggled between relief and annoyance that it had taken her so long. Relief won out. “Yes, that’s the one,” she said, and reached out to take the pen. “Thank you. It’s worth a lot.”

Panic rose in Xiaolei, irrational and strong, and she pulled the pen back, just as quickly. She put on her best functionary’s voice, a mixture of boredom and witlessness. “I’m sorry. I can’t let you take it. I can only give it back to the pen’s owner.”

“I’m his wife,” the woman said, her face now suspicious.

“Do you have ID?” Xiaolei said.

“Does that pen have ID?” the woman said. “What kind of question is that?”

Xiaolei shrugged.

“Look, it was an expensive pen, a gift from his boss. You wouldn’t want to get him into trouble, would you?” the woman said. “If I come back without it, he’ll be unhappy, and I’ll be unhappy.”

Inside, Xiaolei stiffened. Then the woman smiled again, such a confident look, and that sealed it. She would not give the woman this pen, no indeed. There was no protocol for expensive lost pens, but if there were, Xiaolei was certain she would be in the right; surely one should return the lost item only to its owner. She sat down deliberately at her stool behind the counter, as though to cement her position.

The woman stared at her. “Are you deaf? Give me the pen!”

A couple was passing by outside, an elderly pair of retirees walking in that slow, stooped way of older people. She knew them by sight; the man used to walk a

songbird in a cage by the shop in the mornings until one day he’d been alone, and she wondered what had become of the bird. On hearing the woman’s raised voice, they stopped and looked inquiringly at the scene.

The woman made as though to go behind the counter. “Give it to me!”

“No, and you need to stay in front of the counter!” Xiaolei’s reflexes were honed after years of living in the city; her right leg shot out and quickly blocked her.

“Thief! Thief!” the woman shouted. “I’ll report you to the police!”

*The scent of dying
stock flowers,
their stems soft
and mushy in
the water,
compared almost
unfavorably to
the smell of her
neighbor’s corpse.*

Xiaolei was full of indignant fire now; she had what she needed to keep fighting all day. “Go ahead! I’m not going to violate protocol! We have rules,” she said proudly.

Seeing the retirees hesitating at the doorway, Xiaolei quickly recruited them. “She wants me to just give it to her, but I can’t—there are policies.” The elderly woman seemed confused, but after hearing Xiaolei’s explanation, the man turned to the woman inside and spoke gently. “These policies are for your own protection,” he said. “Who would want their lost things to be given away so casually? Tell your husband, tell your husband to come back to the store and get it himself.”

At this the woman turned tail and spit on the floor. “You’ll be sorry,” she said to Xiaolei, and walked out.

Years later, lying awake in bed at night, Xiaolei sometimes thought of all the things she could have done differently. She could have handed back the pen, submitted to the woman, seen her husband the following week and pretended nothing had happened, continued to sell him flowers for weeks and months, an avalanche of roses, an eternity of lilies. She could have held on to the pen and returned it to the husband the next week, or the next day; probably he would have come back in person if it had been truly necessary. She could have kept it in her pocket and never returned to the store, perhaps pawned the pen. Used the money to start her own business.

Instead, after the woman left, Xiaolei closed up the shop in a hurry; she didn’t want to risk her returning with the police. She took the pen back with her that evening, tucked inside her purse, and rode two buses to a night market, where she sat on a stool amid other workers finished with their shifts and ate a bowl of especially good noodle soup with pickled vegetables, then walked back in the direction of her rented room.

That night she slept poorly, dreaming of the man who had died above her. In her dream, they were riding the same bus in the dark, the brightly lit buildings of Shanghai flashing by in a blur. He was seated a row behind her and leaning forward, his voice a steady, urgent murmur in her ear, the sound of it not unpleasant. He held a bundle of daisies, with petals that tickled her neck. Then the scene shifted, and they were whirling together on a dance floor lit up in an enormous, multicolored grid.

THE NEXT DAY was Xiaolei’s day off. Usually she would lie in bed reading dime novels, or occasionally she’d go to the Bund, an hour’s bus ride away and one of the few destinations she knew. She liked to gaze across the water at the gleaming pink orbs of the Pearl Tower and the colored jets of light that illuminated the skyline. Sometimes she sat there for hours, long enough to see the skyscraper lights wink off, just before midnight. Her first year in Shanghai she went frequently, until she overheard a beautifully clad woman telling a friend it

was where all the “country bumpkins went to stare.” After that, she didn’t go so often.

Xiaolei remained in bed awhile, trying to go back to sleep, until at last she rose, feeling restless. She put on a white hooded sweatshirt—adorned with the word SUPERSTAR, edged in gold trim—which she seldom wore for fear of getting it dirty. She donned a matching baseball hat, and her nicest pair of jeans. Under her bed she located a tube of bright-red lipstick, which she’d bought shortly after moving to the city. She’d worn it only once before wiping it off, ashamed and startled at the change in her appearance. Today she carefully applied it to her lips. She shouldered her purse and walked toward the bus, humming softly.

When she’d first arrived in Shanghai, the girls at the bottling plant said there were two ways to make it: get rich or get married. But here she was, still working for a pittance, and the only man to make a pass at her had been her boss at the plant, who was married and three times her age. One day after she’d been there two years, he’d called her in to give her that week’s pay. As she bent over his desk to sign the receipt, he leaned against her and squeezed her chest, as though testing the firmness of a fruit at the market. “Do you like this?” he’d said, breath hot against her ear. Xiaolei had wrenched herself away and quit not long after, but occasionally she found herself wondering whether life would have been better if she hadn’t refused him.

She got off the bus not far from Triumph Mansion. As she approached its thick shrubs, she walked more slowly, heart jumping. Its tall black gate was locked, but she loitered until she saw another resident leaving, and quickly slipped inside. It was easier than she’d imagined.

Inside was an oasis, with shrubs clipped into spheres and a marble lobby that contained a golden statue of a trident-bearing angel. The air was perfumed, and from somewhere overhead, a melody was playing, pianissimo. A somnolent guard sat at the front desk, but his head snapped up on seeing Xiaolei.

“Sign in,” he grunted.

“I’m just waiting for a friend,” Xiaolei said, and ran one hand carelessly through her hair, a gesture borrowed from the

man’s wife. The guard looked at her hard but didn’t say anything.

There was a large mirror on one side of the lobby, and a white-leather bench opposite, which Xiaolei sank onto gratefully. She took out the pen and gazed at it briefly before slipping it self-consciously back in her bag. The man would thank her for returning the precious item. He would offer her cookies made from paper-thin crepes baked in tight scrolls, and tea served in fragile glassware. Back in the village, when she was not yet a teenager, she had watched a popular television show that depicted the lives of two women in a

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She pinched herself
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big-city apartment upholstered entirely in white—white-leather couch, white tufted rug, white lilies—and she pictured his apartment like that too. They would sit beside each other on the couch. He would press against her like her boss from the bottling plant, only this time, she would not resist.

Hours passed. The air was cool and conditioned, and carried its own kind of quiet hush. A few men in suits and nannies with their beautifully dressed charges came and went. The security guard left and another took his place. Every now

and then, Xiaolei pretended to be on the phone, but mostly she just sat and watched the scene. She felt perfectly content there, a thousand miles from the dusty village where she’d been raised, as comfortable as if she belonged. She liked observing the residents’ faces, so intelligent and refined, no doubt full of more clever things to say than just *going to rain; guess so; have you eaten yet; yes, hot out today*.

She thought back to her grandfather’s 80th-birthday celebration, the year before he’d died. A crowd of villagers had assembled for roast fowl, and after a long string of toasts, he’d told them how glad he was that he’d lived all his life among them. He meant it with pride, the fact that he’d never left, but the thought had filled Xiaolei with horror, and she’d vowed to get away.

A ding from the elevator interrupted her reverie. When she looked up, her favorite customer was disappearing into it, briefcase tucked neatly under one arm. She rose to follow, trying to look casual, but the elevator doors had already slid shut. The gold numbered panel overhead showed him getting off at the fourth floor. Up front, the guard was busy chatting with another resident. She hurried up the stairs in pursuit.

She arrived just as he’d reached an apartment at the end of the hall and shut the door behind him. The floors here were carpeted in dark blue, with faux-crystal lamps above. She hung back, suddenly shy. It was very quiet. In a mirror by the elevator, she inspected her face carefully. She removed the baseball cap and wet her lips and smoothed her hair. *You’ve come this far, she told herself. Don’t be afraid.*

A few minutes later she was knocking at his door, but there was no answer. After a long while she knocked again, more loudly this time, and heard footsteps. When the door opened, he was standing there in an undershirt and shorts, having just changed. “Yes?” he said impatiently. “Who are you?”

Xiaolei tried to find her voice amid her surprise. “I’m—”

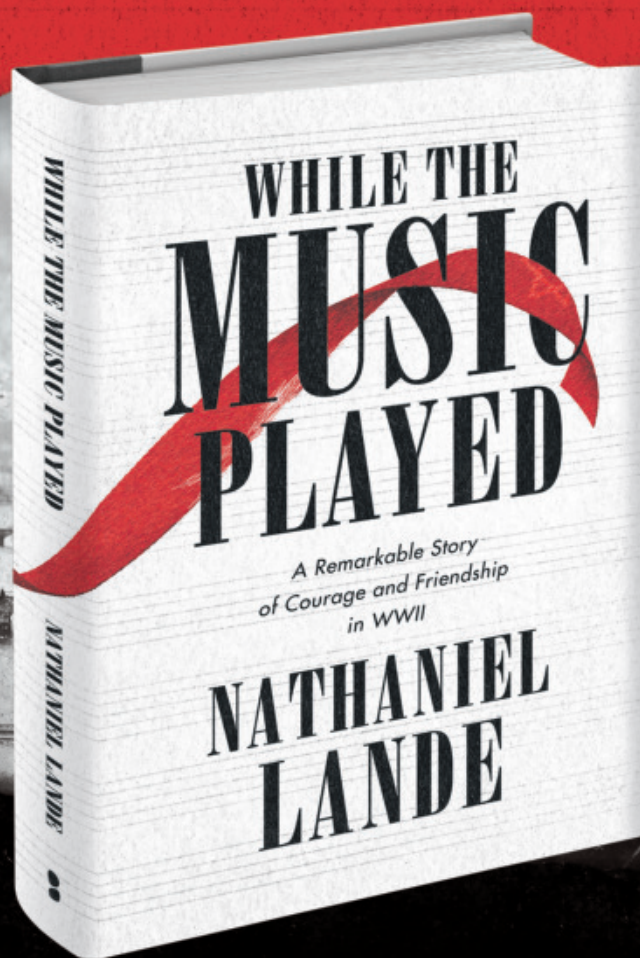
“What do you want?” he said. No flicker of recognition registered in his eyes.

Xiaolei heard a woman’s voice from somewhere deeper in the apartment. “I don’t know,” he called over his shoulder.

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*We were the dreamers of dreams,
the singers of songs.*

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He looked at Xiaolei again, more quizzically this time. “We’re not interested.”

Inside, she could see a mahogany coffee table and a miniature fountain built into one wall that bubbled over a polished black orb. At the sight of Xiaolei, a white poodle curled on the couch stood and barked. The man still didn’t appear to recognize her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, disappointment crashing over her in heavy waves. She began backing away.

The man eyed her strangely. “That’s okay,” he said, and shut the door with a click.

Somehow, Xiaolei found her way out of the apartment building, cheeks burning, looking neither left nor right as she hurried down the stairs. Outside, the cool air was a relief. She was sweating profusely and remembered just in time to strip off her white sweatshirt to keep it from getting stained. It was foolish of her to have gone. It was foolish of her to expect anything of him, to think someone like her might have made an impression on him. She pinched herself hard as punishment, leaving ugly red marks on her arm. She rode the bus and walked home in a daze; once back, she crawled immediately under the covers and lay there, a pit in her stomach and shame in her chest, until she fell asleep.

It was only the next day—after four hours of trundling through the wholesale market in streets slicked with water and dawn half-light, after arriving back at the store to find Yongjie waiting there with an ominous expression—that she’d looked inside her purse and found the pen gone. She didn’t know if it had been stolen or perhaps slipped out. Anyway, it didn’t matter. The wife had found her boss early the previous morning. By the time Xiaolei returned to the shop the following day, arms sopping with bundles of flowers, Yongjie had made up her mind; she was fired. Plenty of other young girls could do the job, and probably better, besides.

When Xiaolei heard the amount of money the woman claimed the pen was

worth, it astounded her; it was nearly 20 times her monthly salary.

“She must be lying,” she said desperately. “What pen costs that much?”

Yongjie hadn’t heard of such a pen before either, Xiaolei was nearly sure of it, but she affected an instant sense of knowingness that came down like a shield. It was a famous European brand, she said.

“Well, then it was probably fake,” Xiaolei said, feeling only briefly disloyal. “Who carries a pen like that around?”

Yongjie didn’t disagree, but she also refused to pay any of the two weeks’ back wages Xiaolei was owed. “You’ve caused me that much trouble—count yourself lucky it isn’t worse,” she said. “Word will get around. Triumph Mansion is our key clientele, and now no one will want to come here.”

Xiaolei didn’t bother to argue; Yongjie probably had a point. At the very least, she’d lost them one of their steadiest weekly customers. “I really did lose it,” she said, meaning the pen, but her boss wasn’t moved.

“You know it doesn’t make a difference,” Yongjie said. She was poking white chrysanthemums into a stand of green foam, as if Xiaolei had already disappeared.

IN THE MONTHS that followed, as she looked for another job, Xiaolei found herself stopping into the city’s small stationery stores seeking out its likeness, wondering if such an expensive pen could possibly exist, and if so, where to find it. She saw thin-stemmed ballpoints and some with outlandish pink or green ink; all kinds of imports were coming in now from South Korea, transparent ones and gel tips and retractables. She’d hold them in her hands, evaluating them, weighing their worth.

Her only regrets were that she hadn’t spent more time with the man’s pen, cradling it, uncapping it, testing it out for herself, and that she hadn’t been able to keep it. She’d retraced her steps, of course, even interrogated some vendors at the wholesale market, and gone back to check

the perimeter of Triumph Mansion, but found nothing.

Even when she got another job, this time selling shampoo and conditioner door-to-door, the pen still haunted her. She’d bought a bicycle by then and would ride it up and down Shanghai’s streets, leaping off occasionally at stationery stores to check their racks in different seasons. It was a benign quest that gave her some control over a city that otherwise threatened to wear her down.

Once, at a pharmacist’s, she saw a woman filling out a receipt with a fat black pen. Its shape was familiar, and her heart stopped. “May I try?”

The clerk knitted her brows, but Xiaolei was sheepish and insistent, and at last the woman shrugged and gave her the pen and a piece of thin gray cardboard, the inside of a pillbox, to try it on. It was lighter than Xiaolei had remembered, and had no silver clip, no alpine etching. But it sat in her hand the same way, and it, too, had that glossy sheen. “How much?” she asked.

The clerk frowned. “Not for sale,” she said.

“Please,” Xiaolei said. She started writing with it. It wasn’t a fountain pen, she discovered; inside was a raspy ballpoint that skidded over the cardboard’s surface, leaving only a wisp of an imprint behind.

“It works better on the pad,” the clerk said, and that was true. Xiaolei could see the receipt she’d just written out in a clear black hand. The clerk looked at her curiously, and then pushed the pad forward kindly. “You can try.”

But Xiaolei had already disappeared out the door, shaking her head. “Thanks,” she called out behind her. “It’s not what I’m looking for.” *A*

Te-Ping Chen, a Wall Street Journal reporter, was a Beijing and Hong Kong correspondent for the newspaper. This story is an excerpt from her upcoming collection, Land of Big Numbers.

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either way.*

It can succeed, which is to say it can perform its function of refreshment and revival. Twenty minutes or so of light, untroubled sleep, just when you need it. After lunch, perhaps; nature gently makes the suggestion. So you settle; you sink. But not too far. A delicious shallowness. You open your eyes. You're awake again—in a state of lamblike innocence, blinking limpidly and contentedly. The prickle of health is on your skin. Ah, it feels so good. What a great idea that was, to take a nap.

Or it can fail. You go down, you get swallowed. Sweating, fidgeting, moaning. After a slow-motion, deep-sea struggle, you flounder to wakefulness. You're up, sort of. But you've spent too long in the shaggy embrace of Morpheus; now his stagnant chemicals are in your blood. You've aged, visibly. Your face looks like a sat-on bagel. Your last five meals are burning black smoke in

your system. You blunder into the kitchen, craving sugar. The afternoon ahead of you is gray with torpor. Consciousness is a trial. Taking a nap was the worst idea in the world.

And you never know; that's the thing. Certain biological variables may apply—your booze intake, how much of a sleep overdraft you happen to be running, your hormones, your glands, your general neurological-emotional tone—but basically it's a mystery. The good nap alights upon you like the grace of God: weightless, unmerited, spirit-altering. The bad nap, the sad nap, lies in wait like Wile E. Coyote with an anvil.

Sleep experts will tell you that a too-heavy afternoon nap can interfere with what Bertie Wooster called "my usual nine hours of the dreamless." It jangles the biorhythms, they say. But what do they know? After the year we just had, after whatever happened this morning, all sleep data are moot. The sleep studies: Start them over. We're different animals now. If you have space for oblivion in your day, a sleep pocket, jump into it, by God; seize the nap. Mix yourself recklessly with insensibility.

You may come to grief on the shoals of the underworld, but I don't think you will. The underworld, after all—sour, dangerous, roiled by obscure forces—is pretty much where we've been living.

Sleep is merciful. Chances are, you'll wake up and you'll return to yourself, feeling like the poet Edward Thomas hearing the silver horn of morning: "Up with the light, / To the old wars; / Arise, arise!" *A*

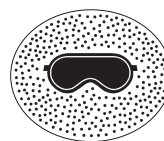
James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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