The Atlantic

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BY ESTHER PEREL

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The TRUMP PRESIDENCY

A DAMAGE REPORT

WILL AMERICAN DEMOCRACY RECOVER?
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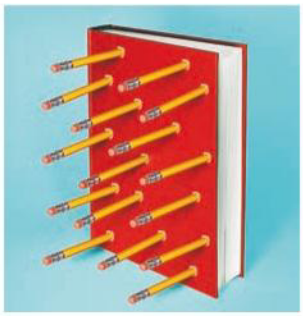

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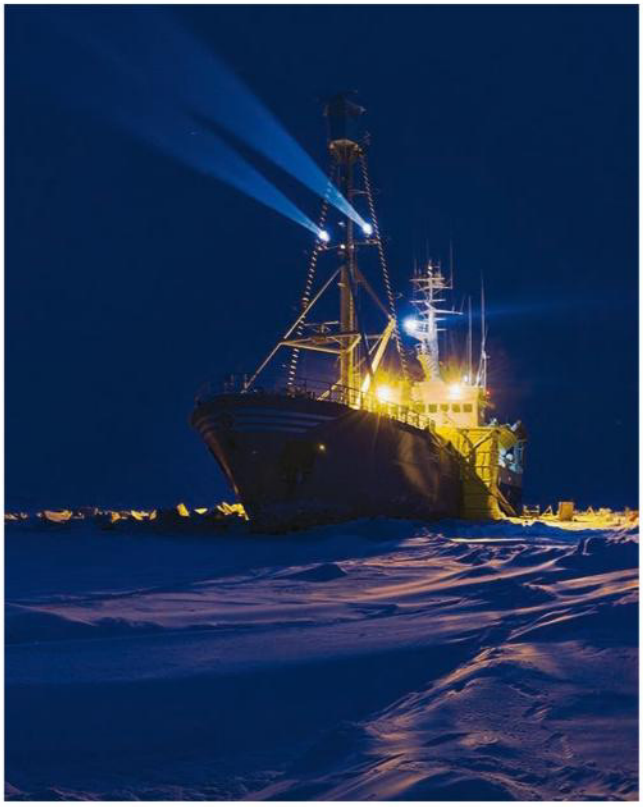

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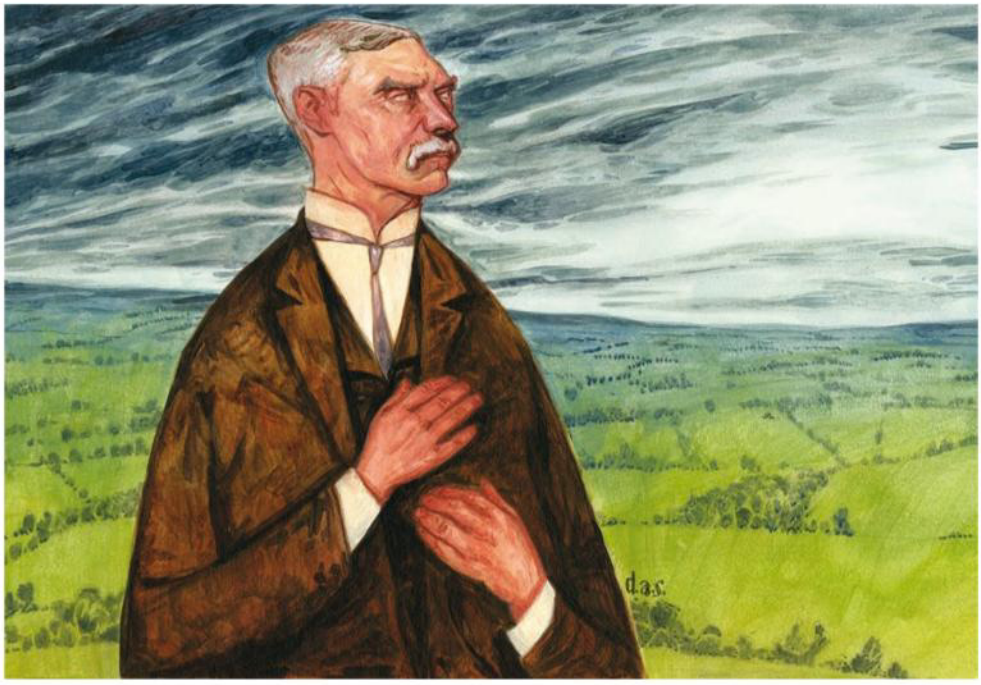

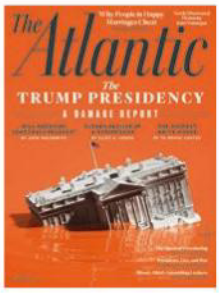

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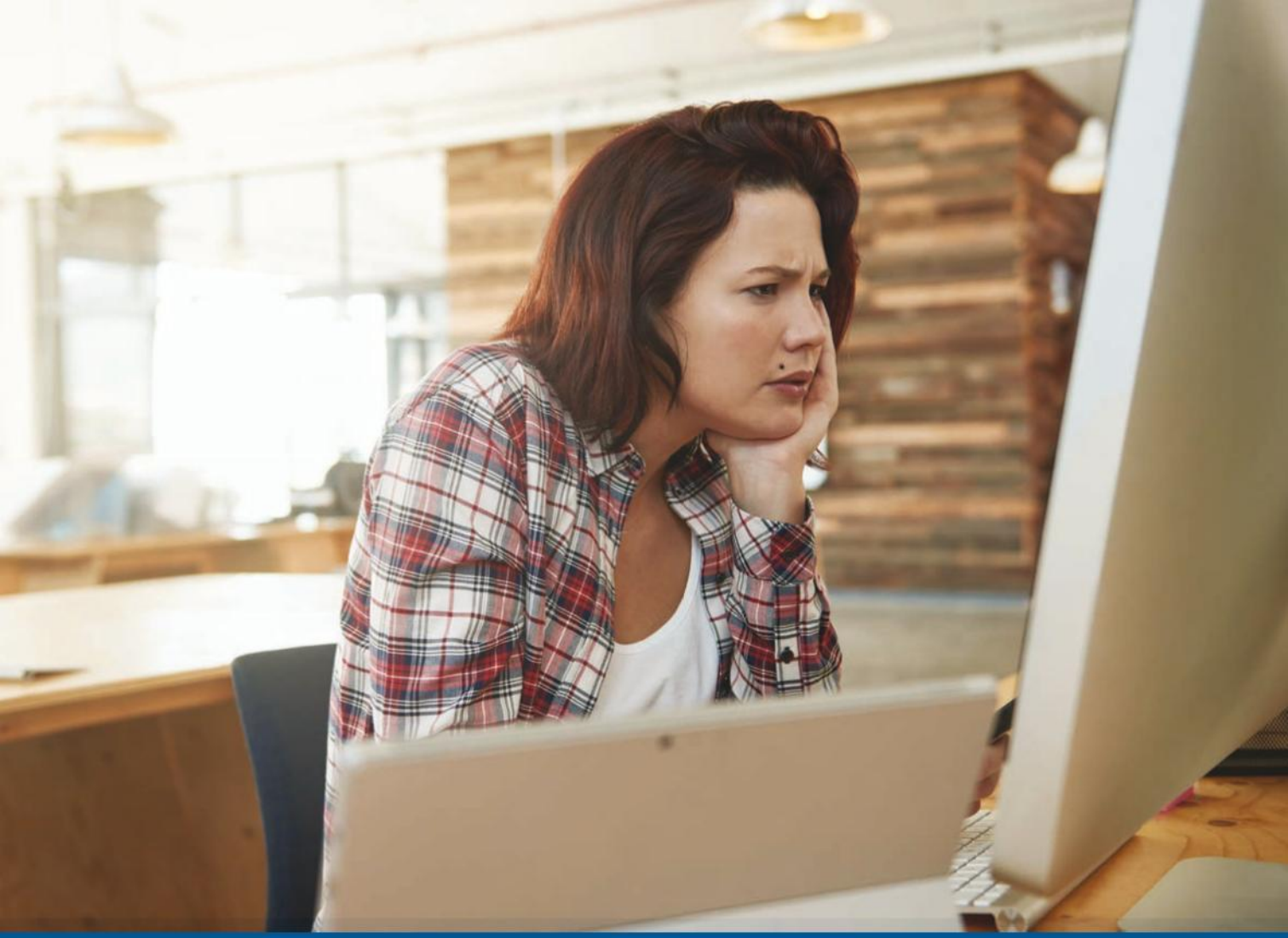
Photograph by The Voorhes



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THE AUTOCRATIC ELEMENT

LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I've lately been preoccupied by the mayhem-makers of the radical right, and by those in power who abet their work. But even as Nazis were invading Charlottesville, Virginia, in August, I found myself worrying about a more subtle, but still substantially pernicious, manifestation of democratic decay. This is the apparently deathless attempt by certain rightist Republicans to bring Hillary Clinton to "justice," a cause rationalized this way by one such Republican, a freshman congressman from Florida named Matt Gaetz: "Just because Hillary Clinton lost the election doesn't mean we should forget or forgive conduct that is likely criminal."

Let us lay aside the question of whether the charges of criminality leveled against Clinton are specious (they certainly seem to be) and focus instead on the novelty of Gaetz's mission. The idea he is endorsing—if not on behalf of Donald Trump, then in the spirit of Donald Trump—is that the political party that wins power is duty-bound to hound to the point of actual prosecution the losing party.

This is un-American, and I mean that in a very specific way. I've spent much of my reporting career covering countries that are not ruled by law, and that do not venerate the democratic norms of restraint, moderation, forgiveness, and compromise. It is common for autocratic rulers, even those who took office through ostensibly democratic elections, to persecute the individuals and parties that they have vanquished, for reasons ranging from paranoia to simple vindictiveness. America, though, has been different. It is not uncommon in the U.S. for the losers to challenge the victories of the winners, and this is as it should be. But it is a dangerous innovation to use the instruments of state power to harass powerless, defeated political foes. The fractures that this sort of behavior causes are not easily healed.

On matters concerning the possible disintegration of democratic norms, I turn to the most urgent and acute text on the subject, "How to Build an Autocracy," an *Atlantic* cover story by David Frum published earlier this year. Frum, a senior writer for the magazine (and a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush), made the argument in this groundbreaking article that if autocracy came to America, it would be not in the form of a coup but in the steady, gradual erosion of democratic norms. Frum's eloquent writing and ruthlessly sharp analysis for *The Atlantic* has made him an indispensably important—perhaps even the leading—conservative critic of President Trump.

I recently asked Frum about the attempt by many Republicans to pursue criminal charges against the losing candidate in last year's presidential contest. He called this pursuit "sinister," but then pointed me to something he considered even more pernicious: the quest to punish former National-Security Adviser Susan Rice for "unmasking" people associated with Trump's campaign whose communications with foreign officials were captured during U.S. intelligence collection.

"Rice was protecting the country from possible subversion, and they're pursuing her for this," Frum said. "It is not merely that they are trying to use the mechanisms of the law to attack political opponents; it is that they are trying to use the power of the state to conceal through diversion an attempt by an autocratic government to steal an American election.

"The autocratic element here is the abuse of power, but not only the abuse of power. This represents the reversal of truth."

I asked Frum to analyze his March cover story. Did he overplay or understate any of the threats? "The thing I got most wrong is that I did not anticipate the sheer chaos and dysfunction and slovenliness of the Trump operation," he said. "I didn't sufficiently anticipate how distracted Trump could be by things that are not essential. My model was that he was greedy first and authoritarian second. What I did not see is that he is needy first, greedy second, and authoritarian third. We'd be in a lot worse shape if he were a more meticulous, serious-minded person."

JOSHUA BLANCHARD/GETTY

David Frum, whose March 2017 cover story explained "How to Build an Autocracy," says he underestimated how needy Donald Trump is.

The Trump presidency is still young, but we thought it would be worthwhile to ask several writers to assess its first several months. Eliot A. Cohen, who served in the State Department under George W. Bush, examines how Trump has affected America's global standing; Jack Goldsmith, who served as a high official in the Bush Justice Department, investigates the possible damage Trump has done to American institutions. And our national correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates refracts the Trump presidency through the prism of race.

As ever, our goal is to pursue the truth—empirical, verifiable truth—wherever it takes us. So I want to thank you, our readers and subscribers, for making our journalism possible. We need you now more than ever.

—Jeffrey Goldberg

TWO WOMEN. TWO EMPIRES. ONE EPIC FEUD.

TWO-TIME TONY WINNER
PATTI LUPONE
is
HELENA RUBINSTEIN

TWO-TIME TONY WINNER
CHRISTINE EBERSOLE
is
ELIZABETH ARDEN

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Neutralizing North Korea

In the July/August cover story, Mark Bowden examined the United States' choices for dealing with "The Worst Problem on Earth"—a nuclear-armed North Korea. He laid out four options: a full-scale military strike, a limited strike, removal of Kim Jong Un from power, and "acceptance."

Mark Bowden's thoughtful article presents four equally ill-fated postures the U.S. might adopt toward North Korea, but fails to consider a fifth possibility: removing the thorn.

The Kim dynasty has justified its insane military escalation by convincing the people of North Korea that the U.S. is determined to invade. And we provide all the evidence he requires: For decades, the U.S. has supplied the bulk of non-Korean United Nations forces on the peninsula. About 30,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors, and airmen are on constant alert; we garrison countless anti-aircraft batteries; we operate massive Air Force bases just dozens of miles from the border. In short, we validate the "looming threat" that Kim Jong Un warns his people about.

When the Korean War broke out, in 1950, South Korea was an impoverished nation reeling from the ravages of World War II. Sixty-seven years later, South Korea boasts a thriving economy and can easily afford a robust military. Yet U.S. taxpayers still bankroll 60 percent of the cost of the Pentagon's 1950 scenario: thousands of steely-eyed GIs poised to repel the relentless horde of bayonet-wielding North Koreans swarming across the DMZ. But as Bowden chillingly describes, the reality of renewed aggression would be vastly different.

The U.S. military would have us believe that our troops are essential to preventing Kim from invading. But to Kim, our very presence on the peninsula represents the tip of a spear pointed directly at him.

So if our presence in South Korea is the thorn in North Korea's side, let's pull it out. Let South Korea man the trenches. The looming threat would no longer exist. Then we should encourage North Korea to curtail its (no longer necessary) weapons program and open a dialogue with its neighbor to the south.

We would still respect our UN obligation, but from a distance—making it clear that our response to aggression against South Korea would be immediate, nuclear, and final.

Continuing to invest American blood and treasure in a never-ending stalemate is not in our national interests.

Charles Bednar
OAKHURST, CALIF.

Somehow all the experts Mark Bowden consulted missed the fifth and best alternative: withdrawal and disengagement.

We should immediately announce our withdrawal from the mutual-defense treaty with South Korea and remove our troops. We should also commit ourselves to the eventual peaceful reunification of the peninsula and sign an agreement that the Korean War is indeed over. This would immediately de-escalate the conflict, discombobulate the North Koreans, and remove the issue from our problem list. It may still be a problem for the South Koreans, but they've clearly indicated that they'd rather handle it themselves via negotiations and dialogue.

Our troop presence inflames the conflict and gives the North Koreans a plausible reason in their minds to prepare for war with us. Since Bowden claims that the South Koreans could beat the North in a lopsided conventional war, why keep the troops there? To protect the South Koreans from the Chinese and the Russians, who would join in the North's invasion?

The key to the withdrawal-and-disengagement policy is the recognition that after 64 years—surprise—the environment has changed. If the U.S. hadn't been the South's military guarantor in the 1950s and '60s, the North very well may have invaded, imposed Communism on the South,

and won the war. However, the South Koreans have won the peace. Do Bowden and his experts really think that the North would initiate a war, win it, and then dominate the South, which has twice the population, 20 times the GDP per capita, an obviously more sophisticated society, and visible physical size differences?

Bowden somehow thinks even acceptance would be a bad option, as he describes the horrible specter of Kim potentially negotiating from strength and forcing a confederation with the South that would remove U.S. troops. But given that South Korean President Moon Jae-in wants something similar and that there is no sign of panic in Seoul, why is this a problem at all? The fact that our "experts" don't put walking away as an option in the top four but do include decapitation strikes and military/rebuilding efforts with the same scope as the original Korean War is alarming.

Jim Hemenway
NIWOT, COLO.

This article illustrates beautifully the foolish, narcissistic nature of U.S. foreign policy and the neocon thinking that underlies it. Writing from the safety and comfort of the United States, a country responsible for untold misery in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, and various other countries, the author is spectacularly oblivious to the chaos we have wrought. Can North Korea be stopped? Who, please explain, have the North Koreans bombed, invaded, or otherwise injured? What has North Korea done other than ignore the increasingly shrill and hysterical demands of the United States that it disarm unilaterally? The arrogance and sheer self-righteousness of our interventionist foreign policy are on stunning display.

If any nation today needs stopping, it is the United States. People all over the world will breathe a sigh of relief if and when the United States behaves as it expects others to behave.

Jonathan Moses
OREGON CITY, ORE.

Mark Bowden replies:
I would place the approaches suggested by Charles Bednar, Jim Hemenway, and Jonathan Moses in the broad category of "acceptance," which was presented as the least bad of four bad options. All three readers suggest we accept the fact that North Korea will, without radically changing direction, soon be armed with nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. In response to Moses's question, "Who ... have the North Koreans bombed, invaded, or otherwise injured?," the answer is South Korea, which they invaded in 1950 and bombed in 2010 (Yeonpyeong Island). They also sank the South Korean warship Cheonan *with a torpedo in 2010, killing 46 crew members.*

The Democrats' Immigration Policy

In the July/August issue, Peter Beinart advised the Democratic Party to stop emphasizing diversity over national unity ("The Democrats' Immigration Mistake").

Peter Beinart suggests that we need to coddle native-born Americans who fear diversity. By saying that immigrants need to assimilate further and learn English more quickly, Beinart implies that we should concede to the anxieties that native-born folks have about people who "don't look or talk like them." He does not explore the reasons immigrants are acquiring English at slower rates. Work hours are changing and becoming increasingly difficult to predict for low-wage earners. How could one possibly enroll in a class if one's schedule is constantly in flux? And that is just one possibility for why people are acquiring English at slower rates. If native-born folks feel no affinity toward people who do not look or speak like them, they are less likely to want to live near them, making it less necessary for immigrants to master the language.

If greater diversity makes Americans less charitable, then the problem is not immigration but the xenophobia embedded in the American psyche. This article is an excuse for those unwilling to cope with unfamiliarity.

Gloribel Rivas
BOSTON, MASS.

Excellent article. I'd say it's also worth noting that Democrats may have made a tactical error in how the debate was even framed. In the previous election cycle, an attempt was made to call out any reticence toward blanket amnesty as the equivalent of racism. The logic was that anti-illegal-immigration sentiment is the same as being anti-immigrant, which in turn is covert xenophobia. Unfortunately, that argument doesn't hold water with Trump supporters.

Many conservatives disagree that people here without permission possess an unalienable right to reside in the country. Conservatives see the current situation as being a result of personal—and ostensibly preventable—actions and choices. The prospective immigrant (outside of asylum seekers) *chooses* whether or not to break the law, they argue. As such, any consequences resulting from said action are due to poor decision making rather than the racism of U.S. citizens.

Progressives might be better served by addressing that viewpoint head on and eschewing clarion calls of xenophobia in favor of a frank and honest debate on how an immigration system ought to work. Whom should it benefit? How should prospective immigrants be selected? What effective enforcement measures are appropriate?

Gbadebo A.
(RESIDENCE WITHHELD BY REQUEST)

Beinart's policy argument is that liberals have given short shrift to the costs of immigration, especially the economic ramifications. He's mistaken.

LINCOLN AGNEW

If anything, Democrats are too hesitant about noting the enormous economic benefits immigration brings to most Americans, and certainly to immigrants themselves ...

But Beinart's political argument is disconnected from this narrative of immigration battering the working classes. He doesn't argue that Democrats should turn against immigration because doing so helps native workers. He instead claims that they "must take seriously Americans' yearning for social cohesion" and "[dust] off a concept many on the left currently hate: assimilation."

The idea that the U.S. has gotten worse at assimilating new immigrants, though, is unfounded ...

Beinart's concern about public opinion more generally is also odd, given that Americans have become more pro-immigration, not less, in recent decades.

Let's suppose for a second that Beinart is right, and this pro-immigration American public would nonetheless like Democrats to be less pro-immigration. For one thing, maybe this is a sincere desire of white voters without college degrees in states like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, who Democrats likely need to win over to retake the Senate and who remain important in the electoral college.

What policies should Democrats then champion? Here's Beinart's proposed agenda: a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants; no guest-worker programs; promoting English learning among immigrants; tough enforcement of companies that hire undocumented immigrants.

The first item is smart, and promoting English is benign enough, I suppose ...

But the other two provisos are just code words for limiting immigration, period.

Calling for enforcement that punishes companies that hire undocumented immigrants, rather than the immigrants themselves, is a cruel sleight of hand. If you're an undocumented immigrant working in a good job—maybe as a domestic-care worker in a welcoming household, or for a compassionate boss at a restaurant—and your job gets taken away due to the enforcement of this provision, are you really being held harmless? Or is the government denying you your livelihood in service of upholding a manifestly unjust law?

Dylan Matthews
EXCERPT FROM A *VOX* ARTICLE

Almost 63 million people voted freely for a presidential candidate who openly bragged about committing sexual assault, mocked a disabled reporter, incited violence at his rallies, and supported the creation of a Muslim registry (among other racist, sexist, and cultural offenses too numerous to list here). I find it very hard to believe Peter Beinart's suggestion that a mere alteration to Hillary Clinton's stance on immigration would have put her in the White House. The United States is more racist, sexist, and isolationist than most liberals could have imagined, and to lay the blame on individual campaign issues is to put your fingers in your ears and block out reality.

Deepti Limaye
TORONTO, ONTARIO

Can the Democrats Win Again?

Yes, says Franklin Foer—by learning how to appeal to the white working class ("What's Wrong With the Democrats?," July/August).

Franklin Foer is very insightful about why the Democratic Party is still wandering in the wilderness. But when he pivots to possible solutions, Foer, like almost every other commentator and Democratic official, focuses on what messages will help Democrats win the next election cycle. How about actually solving the problem that led to Trump's victory—the long-term structural shift in our economy that has now reached a tipping point?

For most of a century, a strong manufacturing sector made it possible for anyone with good hands and a decent work ethic to live with dignity—own a home, send their kids to college, and hold their heads high as productive citizens. For too many Americans, this is no longer true. To succeed in today's knowledge and innovation economy, you need a college degree (or more) and a willingness to migrate to the mostly coastal cities where the new economy is blossoming. Those left behind—a big chunk of the electorate—are so angry and disaffected that they're willing to blow up the entire system until something changes.

Trump is all about messaging. He dominates every news cycle but has no real solutions, so he's left the field open to Democrats to sow the seeds of a more inclusive economy. What are the most promising new employment sectors up and down the income scale, and how can we prepare people for them? There are no easy answers, but if Democrats figure this out, they'll win the future.

Matthew Kiefer
BOSTON, MASS.

Franklin Foer falls into the same trap as the Democrats, all while failing to name the problem: a myopic view centered entirely on the executive branch. The idea of midterm elections and congressional races is hardly mentioned at all. If the Democrats want to return to power and, more important, see their policies enacted, they need to make inroads in more than just one branch of government.

Travis Bott
CHICAGO, ILL.

I grew up in a working-class, union home and eventually graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree in political science. Today I am a married family man in my 50s, a middle manager for a *Fortune* 500 company. For many years I was a die-hard, dedicated Democratic Party activist. Indeed, I was a candidate for the Wisconsin State Assembly as a Democrat twice, an executive-board member and membership director for the

CHARLOTTE DELARUE

local county party, and a delegate to the Democratic Party's state convention on several occasions. I have volunteered for many state and national campaigns, doing everything from knocking on doors to putting together voter-file lists to creating direct-mail pieces. I know how it all works on the ground. Needless to say, I have also attended countless fund-raisers for Democratic candidates. I now consider myself a political independent, however. In fact, the only campaign cash I sent anyone last year was for a Republican, John Kasich.

The reason I left the party is largely because the leadership has abandoned the working class. They are concerned about issues like bathroom equity, the rights of illegal immigrants, and blaming working people for not adapting to globalization by going back to school (largely a false hope). If blue-collar workers were an endangered species of animal, they would have more influence in the party as presently configured.

In Wisconsin, the Democrats have lost all there is to lose: the state Senate, the assembly, and the governorship; in 2016, for the first time since 1984, Wisconsin voted for a GOP candidate for president. The story is largely the same around the country.

Whatever the cause of this drift into obscurity, the Democrats are in trouble, and will continue to be in trouble despite their delusions of being saved by demographic changes in the future. I know firsthand that as people mature, their views shift. Most of my working-class friends are now voting Republican. Their political thinking can be summed up as follows: *The GOP stinks, its trickle-down theory of economics is a proven 40-year-old lie … but at least I might get a tax cut; the Democrats have nothing to offer me.*

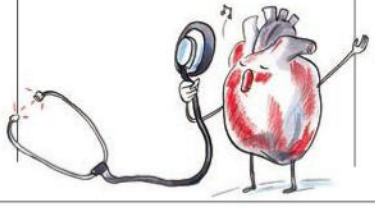
There is hope. Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders have tried hard to turn things around. If Democratic candidates would relentlessly advocate for a public option for health care, and for a government-subsidized livable wage for small-business workers, average Americans would again look twice at a candidate with a *D* after their name. Until that day, Democrats will wander in the wilderness and our country will suffer.

Donald Scott Waller
CAMBRIDGE, WIS.

Consider the Stethoscope

A reader adds context to a reply to the July/August Big Question, "What is the most underappreciated medical invention in history?"

It is especially ironic that Dr. Jack Ende's reason for nominating the stethoscope as the most underappreciated medical invention is that it "connects doctors to patients" and counters the erosion of the doctor-patient relationship. Dr. René Laënnec invented the device in 1816 specifically to distance himself from patients, against whose breasts he would otherwise have been expected to press his ear. Over the past two centuries, progressively longer tubing has been incorporated into stethoscopes, resulting in even greater distancing, both literal and metaphorical.



David L. Lerner, M.D.
SILVER SPRING, MD.

To contribute to The Conversation, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

THE BIG QUESTION

On TheAtlantic.com, readers answered September's Big Question and voted on one another's responses. Here are the top vote-getters.

Q: What was the most important letter in history?

5. In effect, **the Declaration of Independence** was an open letter to King George III in which the ragtag American colonists enunciated the basis of human rights—that all people are created equal and deserving of unalienable rights—and created a model for untold rebellions.
— David DeMarkey

4. Without **Martin Luther's 95 theses** starting the discussion that led to the Reformation, all Western Christians might still be Catholics today.
— Marguerite Katchen

3. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 **"Letter From Birmingham Jail."** Writing from his cell after his arrest for demonstrating in Alabama, King eloquently explained the importance of staying committed to the ideals of nonviolent resistance in the face of segregation.
— Mark Price

2. In August 1939, **Albert Einstein sent a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggesting that an atomic bomb was possible** and that Germany might be trying to build one. This was the first step in moving nuclear energy from esoteric science to the front of public consciousness.
— Michael Peskin

1. In 1215, **the Magna Carta,** which originated as a missive to King John from his barons and liege lords, established a precedent of limits on monarchical authority.
— Leonard Klepner

GRAHAM ROUMIEU

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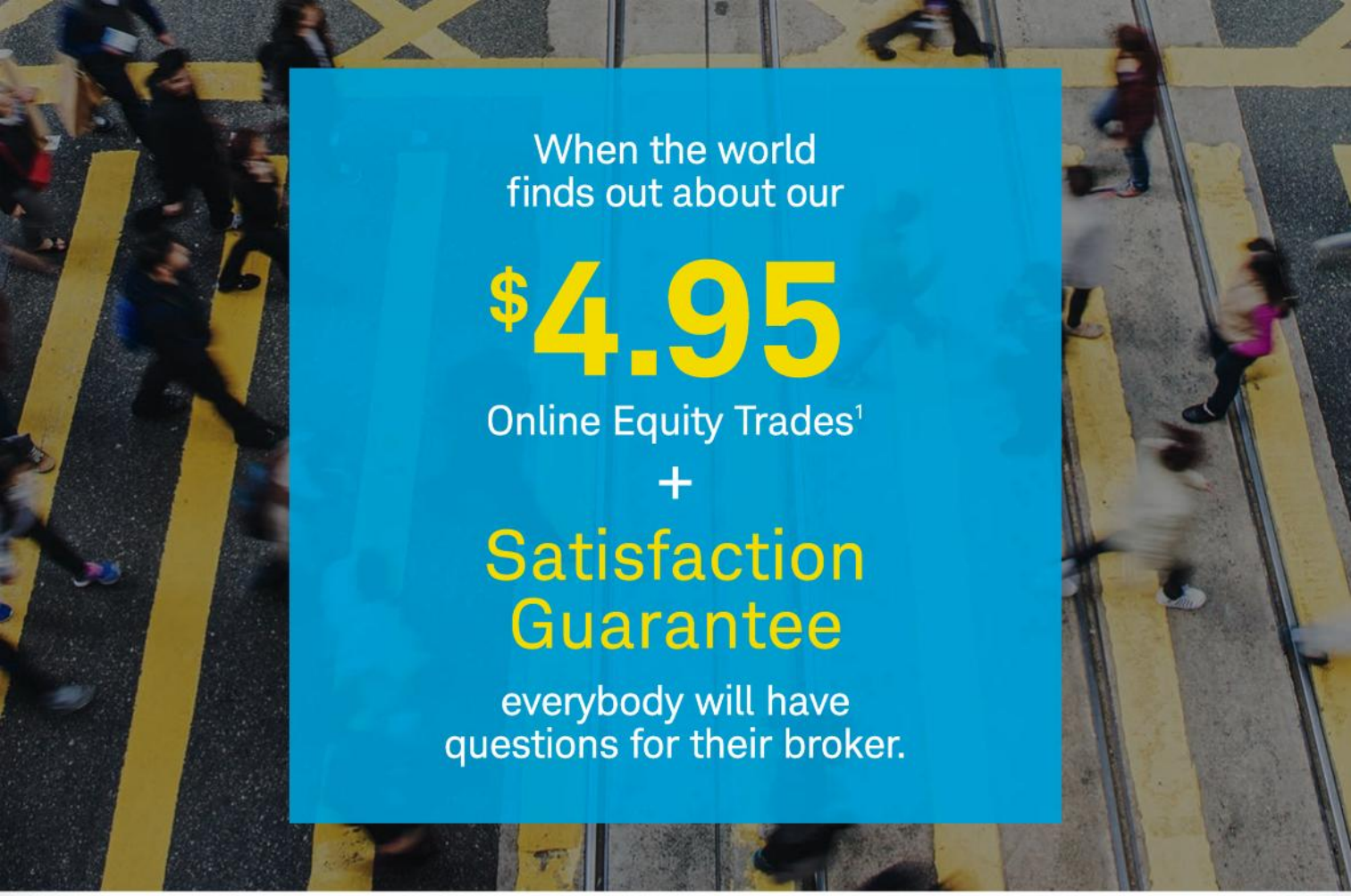

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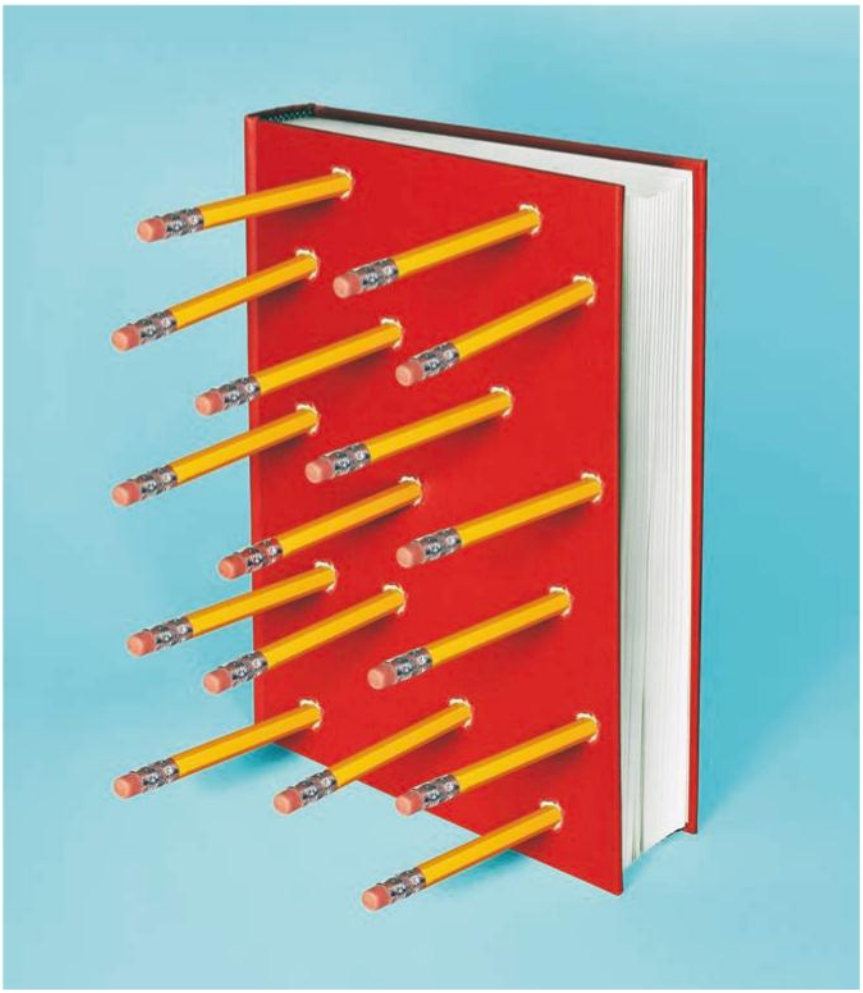
One survey found that 80 percent of adults would rather admit to a humiliating experience than divulge their daydreams.
—Jake Pelini, p. 26

•EDUCATION

The War on Public Schools

Across the political spectrum, Americans have declared them a failure. But we've underestimated their strengths—and forgotten their purpose.

BY ERIKA CHRISTAKIS



PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAVE always occupied prime space in the excitable American imagination. For decades, if not centuries, politicians have made hay of their supposed failures and extortions. In 2004, Rod Paige, then George W. Bush's secretary of education, called the country's leading teachers union a "terrorist organization." In his first education speech as president, in 2009, Barack Obama lamented the fact that "despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we've let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us."

President Donald Trump used the occasion of his inaugural address to bemoan the way "beautiful" students had been "deprived of all knowledge" by our nation's cash-guzzling schools. Educators have since recoiled at the Trump administration's budget proposal detailing more than $9 billion in education cuts, including to after-school programs that serve mostly poor children. These cuts came along with increased funding for school-privatization efforts such as vouchers. Our secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, has repeatedly signaled her support for school choice and privatization, as well as her scorn for public schools, describing them as a "dead end" and claiming that unionized teachers "care more about a system, one that was created in the 1800s, than they care about individual students."

Few people care *more* about individual students than public-school teachers do, but what's really missing in this dystopian narrative is a hearty helping of reality: 21st-century public schools, with their record numbers of graduates and expanded missions, are nothing close to the cesspools portrayed by political hyperbole. This hyperbole was not invented by Trump or DeVos, but their words and proposals have brought to a boil something that's been simmering for a while—the denigration of our public schools, and a growing neglect of their role as an incubator of citizens.

Americans have in recent decades come to talk about education less as a public good, like a strong military or a noncorrupt judiciary, than as a private

Illustrations by MATT CHASE

consumable. In an address to the Brookings Institution, DeVos described school choice as "a fundamental right." That sounds appealing. Who wouldn't want to deploy their tax dollars with greater specificity? Imagine purchasing a gym membership with funds normally allocated to the upkeep of a park.

My point here is not to debate the effect of school choice on individual outcomes: The evidence is mixed, and subject to cherry-picking on all sides. I am more concerned with how the current discussion has ignored public schools' victories, while also detracting from their civic role. Our public-education system is about much more than personal achievement; it is about preparing people to work together to advance not just themselves but society. Unfortunately, the current debate's focus on individual rights and choices has distracted many politicians and policy makers from a key stakeholder: our nation as a whole. As a result, a cynicism has taken root that suggests there is no hope for public education. This is demonstrably false. It's also dangerous.

THE IDEA THAT popular education might best be achieved privately is nothing new, of course. The Puritans, who saw education as necessary to Christian practice, experimented with the idea, and their experience is telling. In 1642, they passed a law—the first of its kind in North America—requiring that all children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts receive an education. Puritan legislators assumed, naively, that parents would teach children in their homes; however, many of them proved unable or unwilling to rise to the task. Five years later, the legislators issued a corrective in the form of the Old Deluder Satan Law: "It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures," the law intoned, "it is therefore ordered ... that everie Township [of 100 households or more] in this Jurisdiction" be required to provide a trained teacher and a grammar school, at taxpayer expense.

Almost 400 years later, contempt for our public schools is commonplace. Americans, and especially Republicans, report that they have lost faith in the system, but notably, nearly three-quarters of parents rate their own child's school highly; it's other people's schools they worry about. Meanwhile, Americans tend to exaggerate our system's former glory. Even in the 1960s, when international science and math tests were first administered, the U.S. was never at the top of the rankings and was often near the bottom.

Not only is the idea that American test scores were once higher a fiction, but in some cases they have actually *improved* over time, especially among African American students. Since the early 1970s, when the Department of Education began collecting long-term data, average reading and math scores for 9- and 13-year-olds have risen significantly.

These gains have come even as the student body of American public schools has expanded to include students with ever greater challenges. For the first time in recent memory, a majority of U.S. public-school students come from low-income households. The student body includes a larger proportion than ever of students who are still learning to speak English. And it includes many students with disabilities who would have been shut out of public school before passage of the 1975 law now known as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which guaranteed all children a "free appropriate public education."

When we neglect schools' nation-binding role, it grows hard to explain why we need public schools at all.

The fantasy that in some bygone era U.S. test scores were higher has prevented us from acknowledging other possible explanations for America's technological, scientific, and cultural preeminence. In her 2013 book, *Reign of Error*, Diane Ravitch—an education historian and former federal education official who originally supported but later became a critic of reforms like No Child Left Behind—cites surprising evidence that a nation's higher position on an international ranking of test scores actually predicted *lower* per capita GDP decades later, compared with countries whose test scores ranked worse. Other findings complicate the picture, but at a minimum we can say that there is no clear connection between test scores and a nation's economic success. Surely it's reasonable to ask whether some of America's success might derive not from factors measured by standardized tests, but from other attributes of our educational system. U.S. public schools, at their best, have encouraged a unique mixing of diverse people, and produced an exceptionally innovative and industrious citizenry.

Our lost faith in public education has led us to other false conclusions, including the conviction that teachers unions protect "bad apples." Thanks to articles and documentaries such as *Waiting for "Superman,"* most of us have an image seared into our brain of a slew of know-nothing teachers, removed from the classroom after years of sleeping through class, sitting in state-funded "rubber rooms" while continuing to draw hefty salaries. If it weren't for those damned unions, or so the logic goes, we could drain the dregs and hire real teachers. I am a public-school-certified teacher whose own children attended public schools, and I've occasionally entertained these thoughts myself.

But unions are not the bogeyman we're looking for. According to "The Myth of Unions' Overprotection of Bad Teachers," a well-designed study by Eunice S. Han, an economist at the University of Utah, school districts with strong unions actually do a *better* job of weeding out bad teachers and retaining good ones than do those with weak unions. This makes sense. If you have to pay more for something, you are more likely to care about its quality; when districts pay higher wages, they have more incentive to employ good teachers (and dispense with bad ones). And indeed,

many of the states with the best schools have reached that position in the company of strong unions. We can't say for sure that unions have a positive impact on student outcomes—the evidence is inconclusive. But findings like Han's certainly undermine reformers' claims.

In defending our public schools, I do not mean to say they can't be improved. But if we are serious about advancing them, we need to stop scapegoating unions and take steps to increase and improve the teaching pool. Teacher shortages are leaving many states in dire straits: The national shortfall is projected to exceed 100,000 teachers by next year.

That many top college graduates hesitate to join a profession with low wages is no great surprise. For many years, talented women had few career alternatives to nursing and teaching; this kept teacher quality artificially high. Now that women have more options, if we want to attract strong teachers, we need to pay competitive salaries. As one observer put it, if you cannot find someone to sell you a Lexus for a few dollars, that doesn't mean there is a car shortage.

Oddly, the idea of addressing our supply-and-demand problem the old-fashioned American way, with a market-based approach, has been largely unappealing to otherwise free-market thinkers. And yet raising salaries would have cascading benefits beyond easing the teacher shortage. Because salaries are associated with teacher quality, raising pay would likely improve student outcomes. Massachusetts and Connecticut have attracted capable people to the field with competitive pay, and neither has an overall teacher shortage.

Apart from raising teacher pay, we should expand the use of other strategies to attract talent, such as forgivable tuition loans, service fellowships, hardship pay for the most-challenging settings (an approach that works well in the military and the foreign service), and housing and child-care subsidies for teachers, many of whom can't afford to live in the communities in which they teach. We can also get more serious about de-larding a bureaucracy that critics are right to denounce: American public schools are bloated at the top of the organizational pyramid, with too many administrators and not enough high-quality teachers in the classroom.

Where schools are struggling today, collectively speaking, is less in their transmission of mathematical principles or writing skills, and more in their inculcation of what it means to be an American. The Founding Fathers understood the educational prerequisites on which our democracy was based (having themselves designed it), and they had far grander plans than, say, beating the Soviets to the moon, or ensuring a literate workforce.

Thomas Jefferson, among other historical titans, understood that a functioning democracy required an educated citizenry, and crucially, he saw education as a public good to be included in the "articles of public care," despite his preference for the private sector in most matters. John Adams, another proponent of public schooling, urged, "There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the expense of the people themselves."

In the centuries since, the courts have regularly affirmed the special status of public schools as a cornerstone of the American democratic project. In its vigorous defenses of students' civil liberties—to protest the Vietnam War, for example, or not to salute the flag—the Supreme Court has repeatedly held public schools to an especially high standard precisely because they play a unique role in fostering citizens.

This role isn't limited to civics instruction; public schools also provide students with crucial exposure to people of different backgrounds and perspectives. Americans have a closer relationship with the public-school system than with any other shared institution. (Those on the right who disparagingly refer to public schools as "government schools" have obviously never been to a school-board meeting, one of the clearest examples anywhere of direct democracy in action.) Ravitch writes that "one of the greatest glories of the public school was its success in Americanizing immigrants." At their best, public schools did even more than that, integrating both immigrants and American-born students from a range of backgrounds into one citizenry.

At a moment when our media preferences, political affiliations, and cultural tastes seem wider apart than ever, abandoning this amalgamating function is a bona fide threat to our future. And yet we seem to be headed in just that direction. The story of American public education has generally been one of continuing progress, as girls, children of color, and children with disabilities (among others) have redeemed their constitutional right to push through the schoolhouse gate. But in the past few decades, we have allowed schools to grow *more* segregated, racially and socioeconomically. (Charter schools, far from a solution to this problem, are even more racially segregated than traditional public schools.)

Simultaneously, we have neglected instruction on democracy. Until the 1960s, U.S. high schools commonly offered three classes to prepare students for their roles as citizens: Government, Civics (which concerned the rights and responsibilities of citizens), and Problems of Democracy (which included discussions of policy issues and current events). Today, schools are more likely to offer a single course. Civics education has fallen out of favor partly as a result of changing political sentiment. Some liberals have come to see instruction in American values—such as freedom of speech and religion, and the idea of a "melting pot"—as reactionary. Some conservatives, meanwhile, have complained of a progressive bias in civics education.

Especially since the passage of No Child Left Behind, the class time devoted to social studies has declined steeply. Most state assessments don't cover civics material, and in too many cases, if it isn't tested, it isn't taught. At the elementary-school level, less than 40 percent of fourth-grade teachers say they regularly emphasize topics related to civics education.

So what happens when we neglect the public purpose of our publicly funded schools? The discussion of vouchers and charter schools, in its focus on individual rights, has failed to take into account American society at large. The costs of abandoning an institution designed to bind, not divide, our citizenry are high.

Already, some experts have noted a conspicuous link between the decline of civics education and young adults' dismal voting rates. Civics knowledge is in an alarming state: Three-quarters of Americans can't identify the three branches of government. Public-opinion polls, meanwhile, show a new tolerance for authoritarianism, and rising levels of antidemocratic and illiberal thinking. These views are found all over the ideological map, from President Trump, who recently urged the nation's police officers to rough up criminal suspects, to, ironically, the protesters who tried to block DeVos from entering a Washington, D.C., public school in February.

We ignore public schools' civic and integrative functions at our peril. To revive them will require good faith across the political spectrum. Those who are suspicious of public displays of national unity may need to rethink their aversion. When we neglect schools' nation-binding role, it grows hard to explain why we need public schools at all. Liberals must also work to better understand the appeal of school choice, especially for families in poor areas where teacher quality and attrition are serious problems. Conservatives and libertarians, for their part, need to muster more generosity toward the institutions that have educated our workforce and fueled our success for centuries.

The political theorist Benjamin Barber warned in 2004 that "America as a commercial society of individual consumers may survive the destruction of public schooling. America as a democratic republic cannot." In this era of growing fragmentation, we urgently need a renewed commitment to the idea that public education is a worthy investment, one that pays dividends not only to individual families but to our society as a whole.

Erika Christakis is the author of The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need From Grownups.

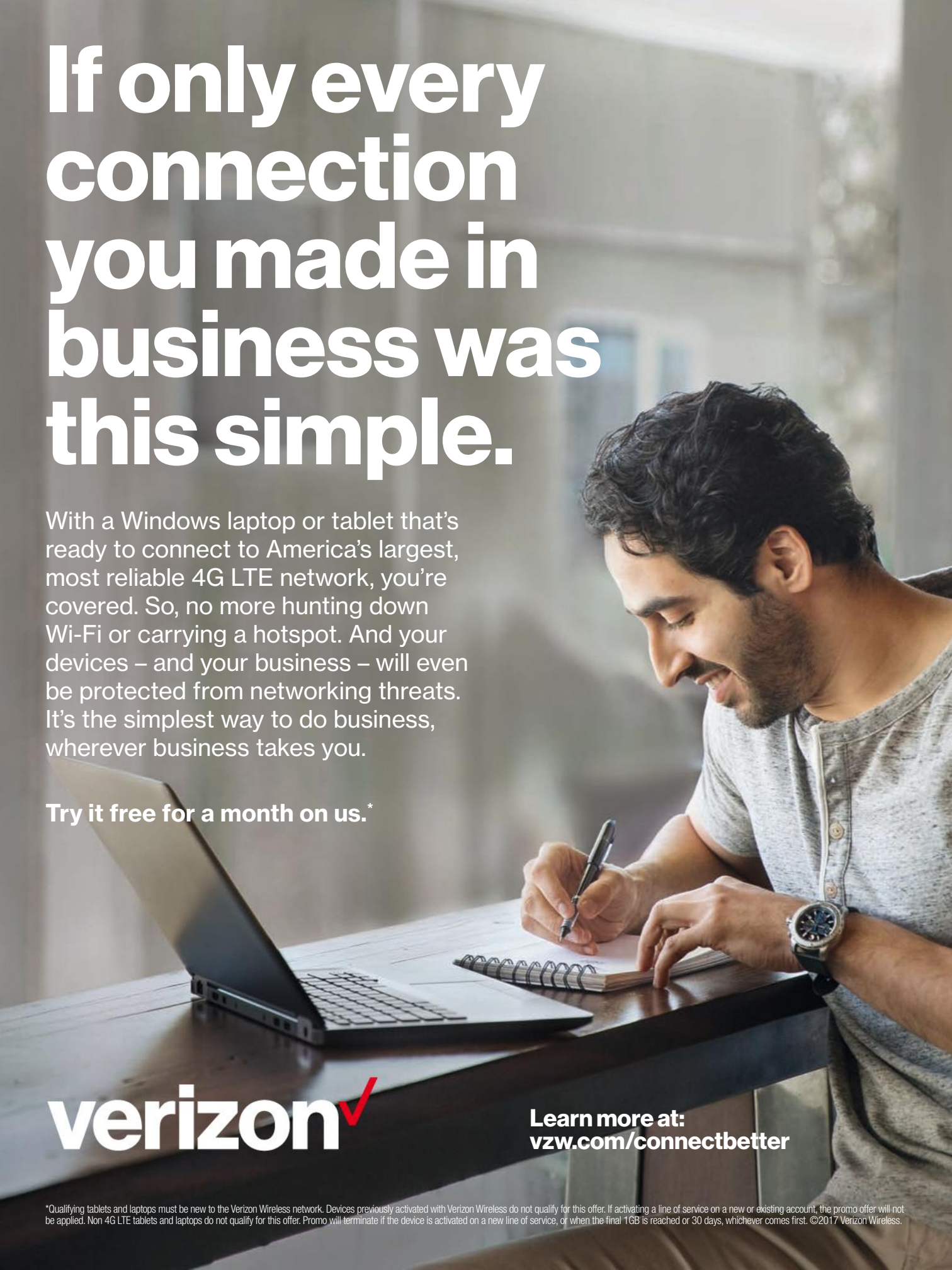
•VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

THE DRUNK VOTE

POLITICIANS IN THE early American republic were novices in the democratic arts, but it didn't take them long to recognize that the shortest route to a man's vote was through a shot glass. The Founding Fathers were the first to treat their constituents to hard cider or whiskey. The advent of universal white-male suffrage propelled election-related drinking to new heights. "In many counties the candidates would hire all the groceries in the county seats and other considerable villages, where the people could get liquor without cost for several weeks before election," a former governor of Illinois recalled. "Long before night a large portion of the voters would be drunk and staggering about town, cursing, swearing, halloing, yelling, huzzaing for their favorite candidates." The importance of alcohol was clear on the day Andrew Jackson was inaugurated in 1829. The rowdiness of his supporters at a reception threatened serious damage to the White House until the punch bowl was carried out to the lawn, drawing the crowd with it.

— From* Drunks: An American History, *by Christopher M. Finan, published by Beacon Press in June

Illustration by JOE McKENDRY



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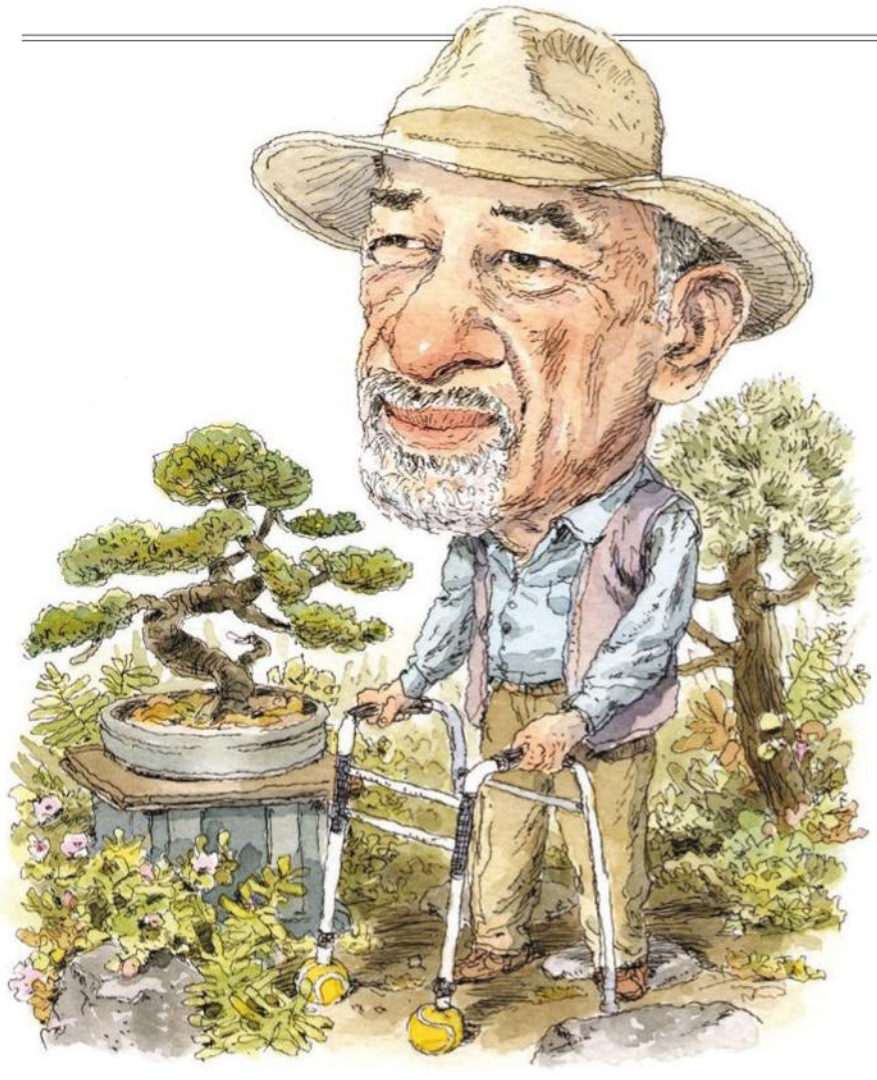

• SKETCH

How to Die

As a psychotherapist, Irvin Yalom has helped others grapple with their mortality. Now he is preparing for his own end.

BY JORDAN MICHAEL SMITH

One morning in May, the existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom was recuperating in a sunny room on the first floor of a Palo Alto convalescent hospital. He was dressed in white pants and a green sweater, not a hospital gown, and was quick to point out that he is not normally confined to a medical facility. "I don't want [this article] to scare my patients," he said, laughing. Until a knee surgery the previous month, he had been seeing two or three patients a day, some at his office in San Francisco and others in Palo Alto, where he lives. Following the procedure, however, he felt dizzy and had difficulty concentrating. "They think it's a brain issue, but they don't know exactly what it is," he told me in a soft, gravelly voice. He was nonetheless hopeful that he would soon head home; he would be turning 86 in June and was looking forward to the release of his memoir, *Becoming Myself*, in October.

Issues of *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The New York Times Book Review* sat on the bed, alongside an iPad. Yalom had been spending his stay watching Woody Allen movies and reading novels by the Canadian writer Robertson Davies. For someone who helped introduce to American psychological circles the idea that a person's conflicts can result from unresolvable dilemmas of human existence, among them the dread of dying, he spoke easily about his own mortality.

"I haven't been overwhelmed by fear," he said of his unfolding health scare. Another of Yalom's signature ideas, expressed in books such as *Staring at the Sun* and *Creatures of a Day*, is that we can lessen our fear of dying by living a regret-free life, meditating on our effect on subsequent generations, and confiding in loved ones about our death anxiety. When I asked whether his lifelong preoccupation with death eases the prospect that he might pass away soon, he replied, "I think it probably makes things easier."

The hope that our existential fears can be diminished inspires people around the world to email Yalom daily. In a Gmail folder labeled "Fans," he had saved 4,197 messages from admirers in places ranging from Iran to Croatia to South Korea, which he invited me to look at. Some were simply thank-you notes, expressions of gratitude for the insights delivered by his books. In addition to textbooks and other works of nonfiction, he has written several novels and story collections. Some, such as *Love's Executioner & Other Tales of Psychotherapy* and *When Nietzsche Wept*, have been best sellers.

As I scrolled through the emails, Yalom used his cane to tap a button that alerted the nurses' station. A voice came through the intercom, and he explained that he needed some ice for his knee. It was the third time he'd called; he told me his pain was making it difficult to concentrate on anything else, though he was trying. Throughout his stay, his wife of more than 60 years, Marilyn, had been stopping by regularly to refresh his reading material. The day before, he'd had a visit from Georgia May, the widow

Illustration by JOHN CUNEO

of the existential psychotherapist Rollo May, who was a colleague and friend of Yalom's. When he runs out of other things to do, he plays on his iPad or his computer, using them with the dexterity of someone half his age.

Many of Yalom's fan letters are searing meditations on death. Some correspondents hope he will offer relief from deep-seated problems. Most of the time he suggests that they find a local therapist, but if one isn't available and the issue seems solvable in a swift period—at this point in his career, he won't work with patients for longer than a year—he may take someone on remotely. He is currently working with people in Turkey, South Africa, and Australia via the internet. Obvious cultural distinctions aside, he says his foreign patients are not that different from the patients he treats in person. "If we live a life full of regret, full of things we haven't done, if we've lived an unfulfilled life," he says, "when death comes along, it's a lot worse. I think it's true for all of us."

Becoming Myself is clearly the memoir of a psychiatrist. "I awake from my dream at 3 a.m., weeping into my pillow," reads the opening line. Yalom's nightmare involves a childhood incident in which he insulted a girl. Much of the book is about the influence that his youth—particularly his relationship with his mother—has had on his life. He writes, quoting Charles Dickens, "For, as I draw closer and closer to the end, I travel in the circle, nearer and nearer to the beginning."

Yalom first gained fame among psychotherapists for *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. The book, published in 1970, argues that the dynamic in group therapy is a microcosm of everyday life, and that addressing relationships within a therapy group could have profound therapeutic benefits outside of it. "I'll do the sixth revision next year," he told me, as nurses came in and out of the room. He was sitting in a chair by the window, fidgeting. Without his signature panama hat, his sideburns, which skate away from his ears, looked especially long.

Although he gave up teaching years ago, Yalom says that until he is no longer capable, he'll continue seeing patients in the cottage in his backyard. It is a shrink's version of a man cave, lined with books by Friedrich Nietzsche and the Stoic philosophers. The garden outside features Japanese bonsai trees; deer, rabbits, and foxes make occasional appearances nearby. "When I feel restless, I step outside and putter over the bonsai, pruning, watering, and admiring their graceful shapes," he writes in *Becoming Myself*.

Yalom sees each problem encountered in therapy as something of a puzzle, one he and his patient must work together to solve. He described this dynamic in *Love's Executioner*, which consists of 10 stories of patients undergoing therapy—true tales from Yalom's work, with names changed but few other details altered. The stories concentrate not only on Yalom's suffering patients but also on his own feelings and thoughts as a therapist. "I wanted to rehumanize therapy, to show the therapist as a real person," he told me.

For all its morbidity, existential psychotherapy is deeply life-affirming.

That might not sound like the stuff of potboilers, but the book, which came out in 1989, was a commercial hit, and continues to sell briskly today. In 2003, the critic Laura Miller credited it with inaugurating a new genre. *Love's Executioner*, she wrote in *The New York Times*, had shown "that the psychological case study could give readers what the short fiction of the time increasingly refused to deliver: the pursuit of secrets, intrigue, big emotions, plot."

Today, the people around the world who email Yalom know him mostly from his writing, which has been translated into dozens of languages. Like David Hasselhoff, he may well be more of a star outside the United States than at home. This likely reflects American readers' religiosity and insistence on happy endings. Mondays with Yalom are not *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Yalom can be morbid, and he doesn't believe in an afterlife; he says his anxiety about death is soothed somewhat by the belief that what follows life will be the same as what preceded it. Not surprisingly, he told me, highly religious readers don't tend to gravitate toward his books.

Yalom is candid, both in his memoir and in person, about the difficulties of aging. When two of his close friends died recently, he realized that his cherished memory of their friendship is all that remains. "It dawned on me that that reality doesn't exist anymore," he said sadly. "When I die, it will be gone." The thought of leaving Marilyn behind is agonizing. But he also dreads further physical deterioration. He now uses a walker with tennis balls on the bottoms of the legs, and he has recently lost weight. He coughed frequently during our meeting; when I emailed him a month later, he was feeling better, but said of his health scare, "I consider those few weeks as among the very worst of my life." He can no longer play tennis or go scuba diving, and he fears he might have to stop bicycling. "Getting old," he writes in *Becoming Myself*, "is giving up one damn thing after another."

In his books, Yalom emphasizes that love can reduce death anxiety, both by providing a space for people to share their fears and by contributing to a well-lived life. Marilyn, an accomplished feminist literary scholar with whom he has a close intellectual partnership, inspires him to keep living every bit as much as she makes the idea of dying excruciating. "My wife matches me book for book," he told me at one point. But although Yalom's email account has a folder titled "Ideas for Writing," he said he may finally be out of book ideas. Meanwhile, Marilyn told me that she had recently helped someone write an obituary for Irvin. "This is the reality of where we are in life," she said.

Early in Yalom's existential-psychotherapy practice, he was struck by how much comfort people derived from exploring their existential fears. "Dying,"

he wrote in *Staring at the Sun*, "is lonely, the loneliest event of life." Yet empathy and connectedness can go a long way toward reducing our anxieties about mortality. When, in the 1970s, Yalom began working with patients diagnosed with untreatable cancer, he found they were sometimes heartened by the idea that, by dying with dignity, they could be an example to others.

Death terror can occur in anyone at any time, and can have life-changing effects, both negative and positive. "Even for those with a deeply ingrained block against openness—those who have always avoided deep friendships—the idea of death may be an awakening experience, catalyzing an enormous shift in their desire for intimacy," Yalom has written. Those who haven't yet lived the life they wanted to can still shift their priorities late in life. "The same thing was true with Ebenezer Scrooge," he told me, as a nurse brought him three pills.

For all the morbidity of existential psychotherapy, it is deeply life-affirming. Change is always possible. Intimacy can be freeing. Existence is precious. "I hate the idea of leaving this world, this wonderful life," Yalom said, praising a metaphor devised by the scientist Richard Dawkins to illustrate the fleeting nature of existence. Imagine that the present moment is a spotlight moving its way across a ruler that shows the billions of years the universe has been around. Everything to the left of the area lit by the spotlight is over; to the right is the uncertain future. The chances of us being in the spotlight at this particular moment—of being alive—are minuscule. And yet here we are.

Yalom's apprehension about death is allayed by his sense that he has lived well. "As I look back at my life, I have been an overachiever, and I have few regrets," he said quietly. Still, he continued, people have "an inbuilt impulse to want to survive, to live." He paused. "I hate to see life go."

Jordan Michael Smith is the author of Humanity: How Jimmy Carter Lost an Election and Transformed the Post-Presidency.

BIG IN … CHINA

LICENSE-PLATE MARRIAGES

YOU CAN marry for love, you can marry for money, or, in Beijing, you can marry for a license plate.

As authorities try to cap the number of vehicles in China's car-choked capital, they've taken to doling out new license plates via a six-time-a-year lottery. The odds are daunting. This June alone, more than 2.8 million people entered the drawing, and officials handed plates out at the lowest rate ever: one per 843 entries.

Since any driver who has resided in Beijing for more than a year can register, the drawing is fair in principle. But the license-plate system has a big loophole. While private sales of license plates are banned, the rules allow transfers between spouses.

Thus one solution: sham marriages. In crowded forums and chat rooms, plate owners offer to tie the knot—for the right price.

"All we need is a marriage registration, and we can get you a license plate," one middleman boasts in an online ad. "No need for the lottery—pay once and get the benefit for life!"

But that benefit doesn't come cheap. At current rates, a fake-marriage license plate costs some 90,000 yuan, or about $13,350—more than many Chinese-made cars. So-called leopard numbers, which include the same digit at least three times, are most desirable, and licenses with 888 can run as high as 150,000 yuan. (The word for "eight" is considered lucky because it sounds like the word for "fortune.")

It's a steep price to pay for the dubious privilege of driving in Beijing, with its clogged roads, angry drivers, and paucity of parking. But the booming middle class sees a car as a necessity, so demand is intense.

One young man tried the lottery for three years before taking the fake-matrimony route. The woman he chose had posted an ad saying: "Men who are interested [in fake marriage] to transfer the license, contact me. Middlemen don't bother."

A resident of Hebei was among the fortunate ones. He had two plates, so he posted one online, and a woman offered 80,000 yuan for it. He accepted. They divorced their respective spouses, married each other, and arranged the transfer. Once the paperwork was approved, they divorced a second time, and remarried their original spouses.

Enticements for matrimonial mischief extend beyond license plates. In Shanghai, people get sham divorces to take advantage of lower real-estate down-payment requirements for first-time buyers. One broker in the city married four different customers to help them satisfy regulations restricting housing purchases to locals.

Of course, some of this can be chalked up to the never-ending struggle between the bureaucrats who draw up rules and the citizens who do their utmost to skirt them. But the recent nuptial shenanigans also appear to reflect a changing, and highly pragmatic, attitude toward marriage.

Decades of the one-child policy and parents' preference for males has led to a glut of men and a dearth of women. Among middle-class Chinese, owning a house is seen as an "entry ticket" for male suitors to be considered eligible mates. Which raises an odd dilemma: To get a real wife, you need a house. But to get that house, you may first need a fake wife.

— Benjamin Carlson

Illustration by RAMI NIEMI

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•HISTORY

How Americans Lost Faith in the Presidency

The Vietnam War opened the credibility gap. What we've learned since has only widened it.

BY KEN BURNS AND LYNN NOVICK

On April 30, 1975, when the last helicopter lifted off the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, the Vietnam War, the most consequential event in American history since World War II, ended in failure. More than 58,000 Americans and as many as 3 million Vietnamese had died in the conflict. America's illusions of invincibility had been shattered, its moral confidence shaken. The war undermined the country's faith in its most respected institutions, particularly the military and the presidency. The military eventually recovered. The presidency never has.

It did not happen all at once, this radical diminution of trust. Over more than a decade, the accumulated weight of critical reporting about the war, the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, and the declassification of military and intelligence reports tarnished the office. Nor did the process stop when that last chopper took off. New evidence of hypocrisy has continued to appear, an acidic *drip, drip, drip* on the image of the presidency. The three men who are most responsible for the war, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon, each made the fateful decision to record their deliberations about it. The tapes they left behind—some of them still newly public, others long obscured by the sheer volume of the material—are extraordinary. They expose the presidents' secret motives and fears, at once humanizing the men and deepening the disillusionment with the office they held.

For most of American history, that office conveyed authority, dignity, and some measure of majesty upon its occupant. The great presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, the Roosevelts—came to be viewed not merely as capable executives but as figures of myth: They were heroic, selfless, noble, godlike. Time has a way of burnishing reputations. But as late as the middle of the last century, Americans were inclined to view even incumbent presidents with reverence. Faith in the presidency may have reached its apogee soon after the Second World War. The public generally trusted Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower to be honest and well intentioned and to put the interests of the nation above their own.

It is no coincidence that the last president to inspire such trust was also the last president elected before the Vietnam War began in earnest. Kennedy's charisma, and his military bona fides, encouraged Americans to believe in their young president as he confronted a complicated and dangerous world. His promise, in his inaugural address, that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty" reinforced Americans' vision of their country as a muscular force for good around the globe.

"I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out," said Lyndon Johnson of Vietnam in 1964.

As president, Kennedy immediately faced the challenge of how to use that power. He refused to send American troops to secure a pro-Western government in Laos. But after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and having been bullied by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at a summit in Vienna, he made a different calculation when it came to the continuing crisis in Vietnam, one influenced by domestic political concerns. Kennedy confided to an aide: "There are just so many concessions that one can make to the Communists in one year and survive politically." With the Vietcong gathering strength in South Vietnam, he felt he had to act.

If not for his untimely death, Kennedy's legacy might have been sullied while he was in office. Instead, not until the Pentagon Papers were published did Americans discover that he and his administration had harbored misgivings about the political and military progress in Vietnam but never shared their reservations with the public, even as they steadily increased America's commitment of special forces and military "advisers."

In August 1963, disturbed by the authoritarian South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diêm's failure to win over the populace or thwart the Communist insurgency, Kennedy approved a plan to encourage a cabal of dissident generals to overthrow Diêm's regime. In November, rebel troops seized key installations in Saigon and promised Diêm and his ruthless brother Ngô Đình Nhu safe passage out of the country. As soon as the brothers surrendered, they were murdered by rebel leaders. South Vietnam plunged into chaos, and a bad situation got worse.

On November 4, 1963, shortly after the coup, Kennedy recorded his thoughts about what he had allowed to happen. The Kennedy who speaks on this rarely heard tape is not the bold young man of the inaugural address, but a president consumed by doubt, even remorse. He rues having made such a crucial decision without adequate consideration.

> Over the weekend the coup in Saigon took place. It culminated three months of conversation … which divided the government here and in Saigon … I feel that we must bear a good deal of responsibility for it, beginning with our cable of … August in which we suggested the coup … I should not have given my consent to it without a roundtable conference …

ASSOCIATED PRESS; BETTMANN ARCHIVE; CORBIS; FRED W. MCDARRAH; GETTY; HORST FAAS; KEVIN SCHAFER; MICHAEL OCHS; PHOTOQUEST

> I was shocked by the death of Diêm and Nhu ... The question now is whether the generals can stay together and build a stable government or whether ... public opinion in Saigon ... will turn on this government as repressive and undemocratic in the not-too-distant future.

Kennedy did not live to learn the answer to his question. He was murdered in Dallas 18 days later.

Lyndon Johnson inherited both the presidency and the rapidly deteriorating situation in Vietnam. As vice president, he had opposed the Diêm coup, and he now dreaded being drawn more deeply into the conflict. He hoped the South Vietnamese would "get off their butts and get out in those jungles and whip hell out of some Communists," he told an aide. "And then I want 'em to leave me alone, because I've got some bigger things to do right here at home." Yet, like Kennedy, he allowed political calculations to affect his approach to the war.

It was not until the 1990s that most of the Johnson recordings began to be processed, digitized, and made accessible to the public—they are still not fully transcribed, and some remain classified. But the 700 mesmerizing hours of tape that are available cast new light on the inner workings of his presidency. In public, Johnson confidently reassured the country that the war in Vietnam was going well. Privately, his frustrations and misgivings were on excruciating display. In May 1964, less than six months before the presidential election, Johnson confessed to National-Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy that he did not know what to do.

> JOHNSON: I just stayed awake last night thinking about this thing—the more I think of it, I don't know what in the hell ... It looks like to me we're getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of there with once we're committed ... I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out. And it's just the biggest damn mess I ever saw.
> BUNDY: It is, it's an awful mess ...
> JOHNSON: I just thought about ordering those kids in there, and what in the hell am I ordering [them] out there for?
> BUNDY: One thing that has occurred to me—
> JOHNSON: What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? ... What is it worth to this country? ...
> BUNDY: Yup. Yup.
> JOHNSON: Now, of course, if you start running the Communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen.
> BUNDY: Yup. That's the trouble. And that is what the rest of that half of the world is going to think if this thing comes apart on us ...
> JOHNSON: It's damned easy to get in a war, but it's going to be awfully hard to ever extricate yourself if you get in.

Johnson's doubts about whether the war was winnable or worth fighting persisted throughout his presidency. But he could not countenance being seen as the first commander in chief to lose a war. In 1965, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told the president that even if he committed more men, the chances of victory were no better than one in three. Johnson still decided to escalate.

As American casualties mounted and news filtered back home that the war was not going nearly as well as the White House had been claiming, the public's faith in Johnson began to wane. Politicians and journalists described a "credibility gap"—the space between the president's assertions and the facts on the ground. Skepticism eventually gave way to disillusionment with the presidency itself.

Richard Nixon's presidency carried that process of disillusionment much further. Nixon's fondness for audio recordings is notorious. We rightly remember that it was transcripts revealing the president's crude, cutthroat willingness to conceal his crimes that shocked the nation and forced him from office. But we often forget that the war and the Watergate scandal were inextricably intertwined. Before the White House Plumbers botched the break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, they attempted to discredit Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked the Pentagon Papers, by stealing files from his psychiatrist's office.

When audio of the Nixon tapes eventually became public in 1980—2,658 of the 3,400 hours are now accessible—Americans could hear for themselves just how cynically the

Illustration by WG600

president had approached the war. On tape, he is frequently ruthless, amoral, and self-interested. Nixon had promised peace with honor, but as he weighed the consequences of American withdrawal, chief among his concerns was the potential effect on his reelection in 1972 if Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. Nixon and his national-security adviser, Henry Kissinger, returned to this worry again and again, including on May 29, 1971, in a conversation not released to the public until 1999:

> KISSINGER: The only problem is to prevent the collapse in '72 ... If it's got to go to the Communists, it'd be better to have it happen in the first six months of the new term than have it go on and on and on.
> NIXON: Sure.
> KISSINGER: I'm being very cold-blooded about it.
> NIXON: I know exactly what we're up to ...
> KISSINGER: But on the other hand, if Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam go down the drain in September '72, then they'll say you went into these ... You spoiled so many lives, just to wind up where you could've been in the first year.
> NIXON: Yeah.

The revelations of the Nixon tapes destroyed his presidency and further eroded American faith in the office itself. The presidents of the post-Vietnam era have never managed to fully restore that faith, and lately, it seems, confidence in the chief executive is at a new low, even if tape recorders are no longer running in the Oval Office.

But we needn't succumb to the cynicism often on display in the Vietnam recordings. The war may have robbed America of its innocence, but it also reminded us that the duty of citizens in a democracy is to be skeptical—not to worship our leaders, who have always been fallible, but to question their decisions, challenge their policies, and hold them accountable for their failures.

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick are co-directors and producers of the 10-part PBS documentary series The Vietnam War.

• STUDY OF STUDIES

When the Mind Wanders

An anatomy of daydreaming

BY JAKE PELINI

IN 2014, ONE IN 16 Americans visited the ER for home injuries that resulted from, among other things, fumbling knives (the cause of at least 249,000 injuries), ladders (at least 105,000), and cookware (at least 22,000). One of the main causes of these accidents? A wandering mind, says Steve Casner, the author of *Careful: A User's Guide to Our Injury-Prone Minds*. By one estimate, he notes, people daydream through nearly half their waking hours.

Psychologists have recently focused more intently on the tendency to think about something other than the task at hand. For one experiment, two Harvard researchers developed an iPhone app to analyze the relationship between daydreaming and happiness. The average person's mind, the researchers found, wandered most frequently (about 65 percent of the time) during personal-grooming activities, and least often (10 percent of the time) during sex. Respondents' minds tended to wander more when they felt upset rather than happy, and were more likely to wander toward pleasant topics than unpleasant ones. **[1]**

Drinking alcohol and daydreaming also seem to go hand in hand. In one study, participants who imbibed a moderate amount daydreamed roughly twice as much as those given a placebo drink. **[2]** And the younger we are, the more likely we may be to let our mind wander. People ages 18 to 25 report significantly more task-unrelated thoughts than do those ages 60 to 85. **[3]**

How do daydreams affect daydreamers? Just as a wandering mind makes us accident-prone at home, it leaves us vulnerable behind the wheel. In an unusual study, French researchers visited an ER to interview 955 patients involved in traffic accidents. The majority of them reported having daydreamed just before the crash; more than 10 percent considered the daydream's content "highly disrupting/distracting." **[4]** And many studies have shown that mind-wandering interferes with cognitive functions such as reading comprehension and memory retention. **[5]**

Yet other research suggests that daydreaming has benefits. For one, much mind-wandering is future-oriented, and researchers have found that it gives us a chance to think about our goals. **[6]** It also seems to bolster creativity. In one experiment, 145 undergraduates completed four "unusual uses" tasks, each requiring them to list as many uses as possible for an everyday object. After the first pair of tasks was completed, one group of subjects was assigned an undemanding activity intended to elicit mind-wandering. When the subjects proceeded to the second pair of tasks, the daydreamers performed 40 percent better than the non-dreamers. **[7]**

So what are people daydreaming about at any given moment? Most of us prefer not to say. One University of Minnesota survey found that 79 percent of adults would rather admit to a humiliating experience than divulge their daydreams. **[8]** Even more embarrassing than falling off a ladder, in other words, might be the thoughts that led you to do so.

THE STUDIES:

[1] Killingsworth and Gilbert, "A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind" (*Science*, Nov. 2010)
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[4] Galéra et al., "Mind Wandering and Driving" (*British Medical Journal*, Dec. 2012)
[5] Mooneyham and Schooler, "The Costs and Benefits of Mind-Wandering" (*Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology*, March 2013)
[6] Baird et al., "Back to the Future" (*Consciousness and Cognition*, Dec. 2011)
[7] Baird et al., "Inspired by Distraction" (*Psychological Science*, Oct. 2012)
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Illustration by CHRISTOPHER DELORENZO

THE GIRL IS BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

"REST EASY LISBETH SALANDER FANS—OUR PUNK HACKER HEROINE IS IN GOOD HANDS."

</ USA TODAY >

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•WORKS IN PROGRESS

A Year on Ice

Why scientists are preparing to freeze the research vessel *Polarstern* in sea ice near the North Pole

BY ROBINSON MEYER

THERE AREN'T many unexplored places left on the planet, and most of those that remain are far beneath its surface. No one knows where the world's deepest cave is, and vast expanses of the ocean floor remain unmapped. But if you want to explore the top of the world, one of the only places to go is, well, the top of the world. Few people have visited the central Arctic Ocean; even fewer have observed it during winter—its most fearsome season, and the world's darkest.

Before long, though, scientists will have a chance to do just that. Later this decade, a new project—the Multidisciplinary Drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate, or MOSAiC—will set out to study the Arctic in unprecedented detail, across an entire year.

The icebreaker *Polarstern* will leave Norway in the fall of 2019, cruising to a point north of the Siberian archipelago Severnaya Zemlya. From there, it will steer its way into the Arctic's thin autumnal sea ice and—if all goes according to plan—get stuck. The *Polarstern* will remain trapped in sea ice for the next 12 months, carried along as the wind and ocean currents drive the ice through the central Arctic and, eventually, into the Greenland Sea. 1

This will be an unconventional mode of transport—most ships in the Arctic are desperate to avoid getting stuck in ice—but the *Polarstern* won't be the first to try it. In

1893, the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen 2 deliberately engulfed his ship, the *Fram*, in ice, in the hope that it would carry him toward the North Pole. Though he never got there, he did travel farther north than any previous recorded voyage. More recently, in 2015, the Norwegian research vessel *Lance* spent five months conducting research while deliberately locked in ice. 3

The *Polarstern* will stay more than twice as long. Using the ship as their base, scientists hope to observe nearly every aspect of the Arctic system: the drifting ice, the turbulent ocean, the blustery atmosphere, and the organisms that make it home.

Pressing questions about that ecosystem remain. Right now, scientists suspect that the Arctic Ocean may be a carbon sink—that is, it appears to capture more greenhouse gas than it releases—thanks to its phytoplankton, which absorb carbon dioxide via photosynthesis. But no one knows how these small creatures survive the world's longest night. Nor do scientists know whether life in the Arctic is limited mostly by darkness or by scarce nutrients.

They don't understand how Arctic weather works, either: Does the wind cool off sea ice as it skips along the surface? Can eddies of water break up ice? Researchers hope that data gathered by MOSAiC will improve models of day-to-day Arctic weather. Those predictions are important not only for the industries and militaries

1: MAPBOX; KATIE MARTIN; DATA: NASA, NATURAL EARTH, NGA, NPI, NSIDC; 2: FRIDTJOF NANSEN; 3: PAUL DODD/NORWEGIAN POLAR INSTITUTE; 4: CLINT FORD

looking to exploit the Arctic in the decades to come, but for everyone else, too. For one thing, recent research suggests that warm spells in the Arctic are linked to unusually unproductive years for American crops.

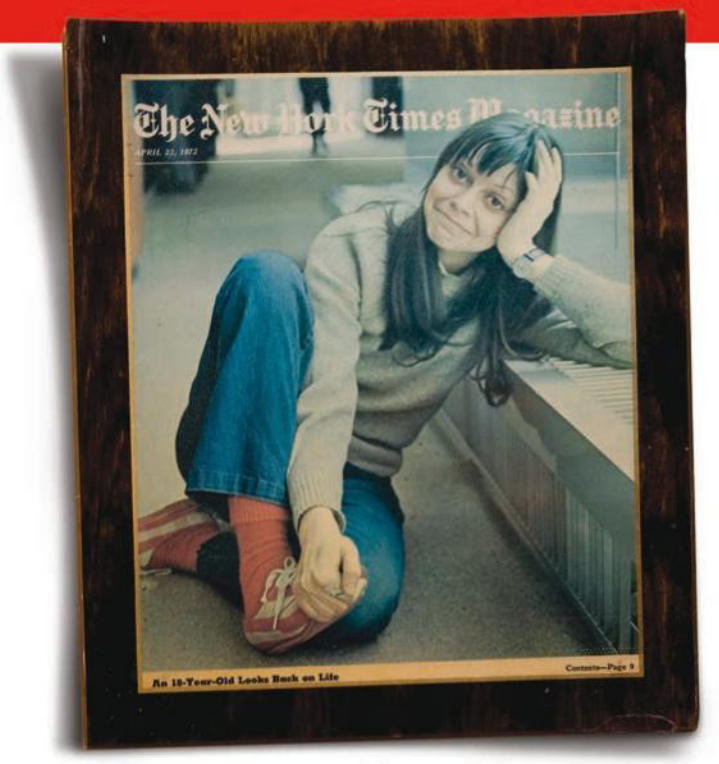
The answers to these questions will in turn help scientists answer perhaps the largest question of all: Will the Arctic Ocean, as it warms, keep absorbing carbon—or will it one day begin to belch CO_2 back into the atmosphere?

In search of answers, the *Polarstern*'s crew will set loose a constellation of sensors across all levels of the environment. Researchers plan to use weather balloons to monitor the atmosphere and planes outfitted with electromagnetic sensors to measure ice thickness. They will also leave behind a network of ice-tethered sensors and "snow buoys." 4

For now, the hardest part of working in the Arctic is reaching it. "November, December, January, February—those are typically the no-access months for scientists," says Benjamin Rabe, who is leading ocean research for the project.

For much of the year, the standard way for researchers to access the central Arctic is to pay for a trip to Camp Barneo, a Russian-operated tourist camp that sets up annually somewhere near the North Pole. Freezing the *Polarstern* in place will circumvent this—although MOSAiC will still depend on nearby countries to help transport new scientists out to the craft every two months via helicopter, airplane, or another icebreaker.

Soon, access will be much easier. The extent of Arctic sea ice 1 this year is expected to be among the least ever recorded. And if carbon emissions continue at current rates, by about 2043—150 years after the *Fram*'s journey—summer sea ice in the Arctic will almost certainly be a thing of the past.



THE OMNIVORE

The Confessionalist

Joyce Maynard can't stop writing about herself.

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

"THE PERSONAL-ESSAY BOOM Is Over," declared the headline of a much-circulated article on *The New Yorker*'s website earlier this year. It was the "God Is Dead" of the Jezebel generation, reporting that the craze for essays with titles like "My Gynecologist Found a Ball of Cat Hair in My Vagina"—a story by a writer named Michelle Barrow that became a fleeting sensation in 2015—had come to an end. To borrow a late-19th-century saying about the United States patent office, everything that could be found inside a vagina had been found.

Let young essayists find hope in the life and letters of Joyce Maynard, who has withstood market corrections to the personal-essay economy for 50 years, ever since her first one appeared in *Seventeen* magazine when she herself was 14. She is the Joyce Carol Oates of women's confessional essays, firing them off in such rapid succession that she will probably begin and finish one in the time it takes you to read this paragraph. Her subject is herself, and although she has but one life to live, she is never short of material, because she reads and rereads her own story according to market demands. Teach a woman to describe a ball of cat hair, and she will sell an essay. Teach her to regard that ball of cat hair as an illustrative example of a handful of recurring themes, and she will sell essays for a lifetime.

It all began, as do so many things, in the bed of a devouring mother. Fredelle Maynard was an artistically frustrated housewife with a doctorate in English who was stuck in a small New Hampshire town with an alcoholic husband (failed painter, English professor at the state university) and two smart daughters. She had an intense, intrusive, and sexualized relationship with the younger girl, Joyce. "Can you imagine what she'll be like with men?" she would announce after a morning "snuggling" with her in the marriage bed, teaching her various kisses: "Suction," "Movie star," "Cutie." (It's a fact that constitutes one of the few underexplored topics in her daughter's oeuvre.) She also had the desire that both girls would become magazine writers, an area in which she had achieved some modest success. She and her husband would sit with the girls in the living room and auto-tune their submissions until they fit seamlessly into the pages of a big-circulation publication: the rising action of a girls'-magazine problem (no dates; too many dates; breasts too small; breasts too big) leading to the falling action of its solution (a talk with Mother; a sudden epiphany; a call to character) and an adorable, girl-tastic kicker.

In 1971, Maynard arrived at Yale, which was then a kind of Cape Canaveral for the Boomer revolution, sending one brilliant rocket into the sky and then another. Garry Trudeau was in her film-animation class; Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham were students at the law school. Everyone on campus was emotionally engaged with the draft. But Maynard was listening to different music, the soundscape of the Seven Sisters magazines—*McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, etc.—magazines that were deeply, intentionally square, and that were always a decade or two behind the popular culture. During her first year of college, *Seventeen* sent Maynard to Texas to write about the Miss Teenage America pageant and to

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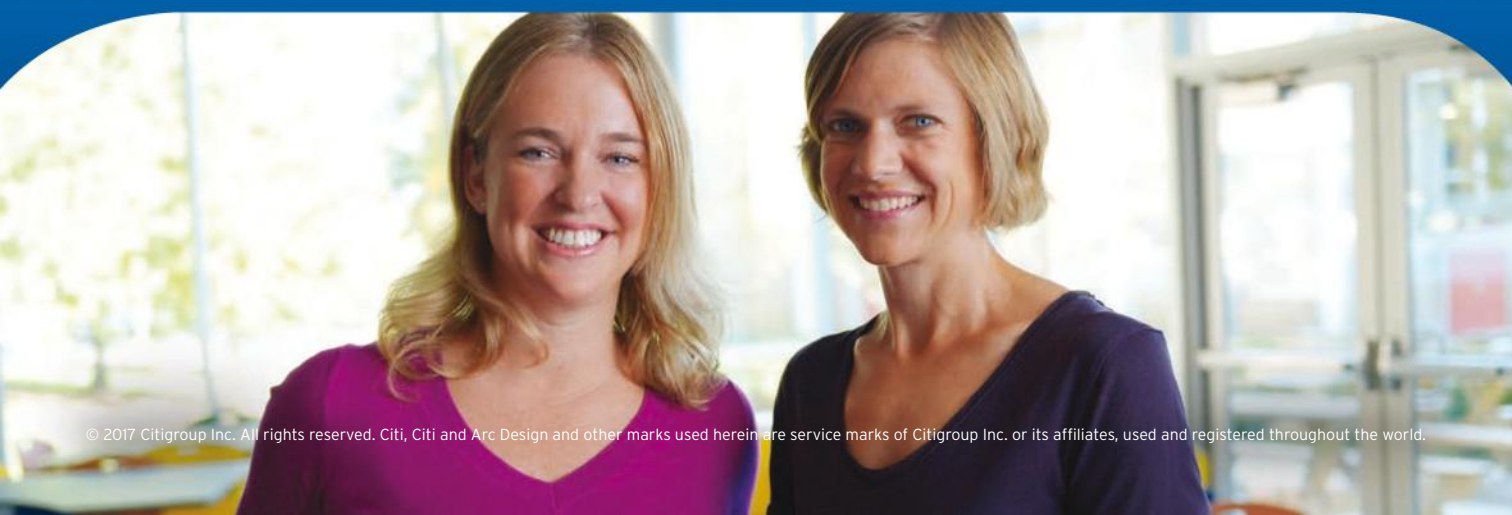


Washington, D.C., to interview Julie Nixon Eisenhower. She could not have been more out of step—intellectually, politically, or culturally—with her peers if she'd invited them to a Tupperware party. But when she sent a pitch to *The New York Times*, she got an assignment that changed her life.

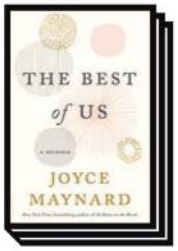
"Please go ahead with a 3,500-word personal essay about what it is like to be eighteen years old in this country," wrote *The Times Magazine*'s editor. The resulting essay describes sweeping trends, self-consciously positions its young author as the voice of her generation, and locates almost nothing fresh about the nature of youth. It didn't matter. Her photograph—a sprite of a girl, with huge brown eyes, sitting on the floor of the Yale library—ran on the cover of *The Times Magazine* under the career-making headline "An 18-Year-Old Looks Back on Life."

Famously, the essay and photo attracted the attentions of J. D. Salinger, for whom she dropped out of Yale at the start of her sophomore year. Their 11-month love affair, conducted in his isolated New Hampshire house and apparently a gulag experience for both of them, was the subject of her 1998 memoir, *At Home in the World*. The book inflamed an easily inflamed demographic: people who have an intense, almost irrational hatred of Joyce Maynard's literary output and by extension of the writer herself. It's not the prose they dislike; Maynard's writing is clean and engaging. She's written more than a dozen popular books and a very good true-crime novel. What drives the critics wild is her personal writing and its nonstop examination of self, one damn hair ball at a time.

Fredelle Maynard once published a book about parenting in which she averred that the most important gift to give a child was the certainty that "never since the beginning of time has there been anybody just like you." It is this lesson (perhaps the ultimate Boomer credo) that animates Joyce's collected essays and memoirs. She pours out confession after confession, but not in search of expiation. The goal is to get it all out on the page, shape it around a conventional narrative structure, find a lesson in it, and move on.

Her first husband and her three children are Snowy to her Tintin: reliable sidekicks yoked to the central character for the length of the run. The husband spent the duration of her 1980s syndicated column, "Domestic Affairs," as the ideal partner; in the '90s (after the divorce) he was revealed in subsequent essays and books as a cruel bastard who pressured her to get an abortion and filed a motion to have her declared an unfit mother. Lately, he has emerged as the co-victim of a bad union, as she has confessed that she actually had a long affair with his close friend. In his most recent appearance, he was gently reaching for his ex-wife's hand at their son's wedding.

We leave the girl writer where we found her, burbling it all up, experience unmediated by any meaning beyond itself.



THE BEST OF US
JOYCE MAYNARD
Bloomsbury

THE BOOMERS ARE getting old now; we know this because there's a Fidelity ad that plays "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida," and Joyce Maynard has started to appear in the AARP magazine. Her new book, *The Best of Us*, is about a topic of interest to this aging demographic: widowhood. In her late 50s, she met a man online and they married. Tragically, he was soon diagnosed with cancer; he died three years after the wedding. It was a cruel thing to happen, a wretched turn of luck.

Just as she dropped the depth charge of her mother's quasi-incest into an early chapter of *At Home in the World* yet expected readers to stay focused on the fact that J. D. Salinger was a bad boyfriend, *The Best of Us* tucks a whopper into an opening chapter. At age 55, her children grown, Maynard had "missed being a parent as much as a person crossing the desert misses water." So she sent away for a CD-ROM from an international adoption agency, liked what she saw at an Ethiopian orphanage, and traveled to Africa to adopt two sisters: "They were ravenous for meat. 'I love you I love you I love you,' they told me." But she soon tired of the responsibility. After 14 months, she drove them across the country and handed them off to a different family, and they were adopted a second time.

So there, on page 56, she loses the crowd. When she describes meeting her future husband just six months later and having the time of her life with him—traveling, eating, sleeping in the nude, throwing a wedding rapturously covered by *The New York Times*—the reader is back with those little girls she impulsively adopted and then abandoned. Always, Maynard wants our sympathies. "Of all the losses I'd known, this had been the worst," she tells us about relinquishing the girls, a few pages before going on to describe her new beau's silver Porsche Boxster.

And so yet again, we leave the girl writer where we found her, in the pages of her endless testimony, burbling it all up, the stream of experience unmediated by any meaning beyond itself. If Saint Augustine was the father of the autobiography as a form of confession, Maynard is one of the mothers of the "My Gynecologist Found a Ball of Cat Hair in My Vagina" genre. "When I got two cats, I knew their fur was going to get everywhere," that essay begins, its writer surely aware that never since the beginning of time has there been anybody just like her.

Caitlin Flanagan, the author of Girl Land *and* To Hell With All That, *will be sharing the Omnivore column with James Parker through next summer.*

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FILM

The Remarkable Laziness of Woody Allen

Putting next to no effort into his films is the secret to sustaining his reputation.

BY CHRISTOPHER ORR

For roughly a quarter century—from *Take the Money and Run* in 1969 to, say, *Bullets Over Broadway* in 1994—Woody Allen was among America's most fascinating and iconic filmmakers. His early comedies were a revelation; his more mature works (in particular *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*) were among the best films of the period. Frequently casting himself in central roles, he mined a vein of humor that was emphatically Jewish yet accessible to a wide audience. And if his occasional homages to great European directors such as Bergman (*Interiors* and *Another Woman*) and Fellini (*Stardust Memories* and *Alice*) weren't entirely successful, they nonetheless deepened the intellectual reputation of an oeuvre also known for its allusions to art, literature, and philosophy. Alone among major directors, he seemed to be speaking almost intimately to his audience, playing repeated variations on the same character, a man who was a recognizable variation on Allen himself.

Though Allen, now 81, has maintained his frenetic pace of one feature film a year since 1982, his more recent output has been generally, yet gently, judged a disappointment. His best films of the past 20 years—*Match Point*, *Blue Jasmine*—are solid but overrated, perhaps because so many of us dream of a return to his early form. (A. O. Scott of *The New York Times*, who accurately described *Match Point* as Allen's "most satisfying film in more than a decade," then couldn't resist hyperbole: "a Champagne cocktail laced with strychnine.") The rest run the gamut from middling—*Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *Midnight in Paris*—to genuinely bad: *Scoop*, *Whatever Works*, *To Rome With Love*. While the former have a habit of garnering plaudits anyway (*Midnight in Paris* won an Oscar for best original screenplay), the latter are often politely ignored in discussions of the overall quality of his work.

The upshot has been that Allen's stature as an important filmmaker (unlike his personal reputation) has proved surprisingly sturdy—despite the withering self-assessments he offers every so often. In an interview during the filming of *Match Point*, he described himself as "functioning within the parameters of my mediocrity," and went on to note that if he were ever to make another great film, it would be "by accident." False modesty? Some, no doubt. But we would do best to take his words at face value.

For years the evidence has accumulated: Allen is an astonishingly lazy director. Often this fact gets a positive spin, as when he is described as "an actor's director"—code for the reality that he offers his performers little or no guidance and

tries to complete every scene in as few takes as possible. Here, again, Allen is bluntly honest. "I'm lazy and an imperfectionist," he explained in a 2015 NPR interview. "Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese will work on the details until midnight and sweat it out, whereas for me, come 6 o'clock, I want to go home, I want to have dinner, I want to watch the ballgame. Filmmaking is not [the] end-all be-all of my existence."

The most recent grist for this assessment comes from Eric Lax, an Allen acolyte, whose fourth book on the director, *Start to Finish: Woody Allen and the Art of Moviemaking*, is essentially an indictment framed as an encomium. Focused on the making of 2015's *Irrational Man*, a film seen by few and liked by fewer, it functions as a third-person diary of a directorial indifference so extreme that one would expect it to have eroded the Allen brand by now. So how and why does Allen still enjoy his current level of prestige? Lax's otherwise tedious account is a good occasion to explore that mystery, the key to which is something of a paradox: Allen's reputation depends in no small part on the very indolence that undermines so many of his films.

DESPITE THE *art* in his title, Lax reveals Allen's moviemaking technique as something more akin to an assembly line. From beginning to end, the enterprise is designed to maximize efficiency, all but inevitably at the cost of quality. Screenwriting, casting, shooting—at almost every stage of the process, Allen performs, to judge from Lax's account, a fraction of the labor customarily expected of a director. How else could he keep up a filmmaking pace that smacks more of neurotic obsession than of intensive dedication? (When the character he plays in *To Rome With Love* is told, "You equate retirement with death," the line lands close to home.)

Allen says he functions "within the parameters of my mediocrity."

Allen's oft-quoted dictum that "80 percent of success is showing up" seems to apply to almost every aspect of the endeavor. This lassitude is enabled by an arrangement that is virtually unique among major directors: Allen is answerable to no one on his films. Though they are distributed by major studios (most recently Amazon Studios), those studios play no role in their production. Allen arranges his own financing, and investors sign on with barely any idea of what they're investing in. (As he explains, "I've never given anybody who's done one of my films more than three or four lines" of description.) Allen's longtime producer (and sister) Letty Aronson, and his editor, Alisa Lepselter, offer advice throughout, as do the cinematographer and others on set. But that advice is always Allen's to take or leave.

Start to Finish, well over half of which consists of a scene-by-scene account of the 32-day shooting schedule of *Irrational Man*, sheds limited light on Allen's writing process. But another of his longtime producers, Robert Greenhut, marveled in *Woody Allen: A Documentary*, "I've never seen anybody write so fast." Allen once boasted that he rewrote a central character in *Match Point* in "about an hour" after changing her nationality from English to American—scarcely a sign of thoughtful revision. And anyone who has watched recent Allen films knows that he leans on the crutch of voice-over to an extraordinary degree. On this count, too, he is his own most astute critic: Lax quotes him saying, "Don't ruin it by making the characters talk to the audience because that distances you from the intense reality of it."

When it comes to casting, Lax's description of Allen's method is unintentionally comical. His longtime casting directors, Juliet Taylor and Patricia DiCerto, will propose actors, show him footage, and

> if he likes what he sees, there is a quick face-to-face interview, "quick" meaning about one minute … [The actors] are not told what part they are being considered for or anything about the film. Each interview is an almost verbatim repetition of the last … [Allen] is standing toward the middle, comes over,

Illustration by TOMI UM

shakes hands, and says a version of, "Hi, I'm shooting a film starting in July. We thought you might be right for one of the parts, and today I just want to see how you look." Usually the actor stammers out something reasonably appropriate. Then Woody thanks the actor and he or she leaves.

Those wondering how Andrew Dice Clay came to appear in *Blue Jasmine*, visibly straining to act, have their answer.

Other corners are comparably cut. Allen's editor sometimes has to live with technical imperfections in the footage because he hasn't shot enough takes for her to choose from. He selects his music from the decidedly limited range of his own personal taste—jazz, classical, American standards—because he "does not like working with a composer." And so on.

Allen's laziness becomes most glaring as the shoot approaches and then unfolds. In Lax's telling, Allen is disengaged prior to the shoot, sometimes leaving his collaborators (location scouts, costume designers, etc.) to spin their wheels. "Woody has paced himself to be at top strength when the filming begins" is how Lax puts it, "often to the frustration of those who want only to do their best work on his behalf but cannot always get his attention to make a choice on what he wants." As for the shoot itself, Allen has confessed, "I don't do any preparation. I don't do any rehearsals. Most of the times I don't even know what we're going to shoot." Indeed, Allen rarely has any conversations whatsoever with his actors before they show up on set. Those with smaller parts will not even have seen the full script, merely their own scenes. (Parker Posey showed up for her first *Irrational Man* shoot not knowing whether it was a comedy or a drama.)

On the set, Allen typically offers his actors no direction before the camera rolls. If he is unhappy with a performance, though, he will weigh in with recommendations. In addition to limiting the number of takes on any given shot, he strongly prefers "master shots"—those that capture an entire scene from one angle—over multiple shots that would subsequently need to be edited together. In the past, Allen budgeted sufficient time and money to go back and reshoot scenes: 1987's *September* and 1989's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, for example, were both extensively reshot. But he stopped doing that about 20 years ago, according to Lax. Allen now tries to stay as close to the allotted schedule as possible, in part because his financing agreements stipulate that any budget overage come out of his own fee for writing and directing.

In a passage in *Start to Finish*, Allen seems genuinely astonished when his editor tells him that the director David Fincher frequently does 30 or more takes of a single shot: "Really? … Well, his movies are terrific." Allen's rather different approach was crystallized by Liam Neeson in a 2014 interview in which he spoke about his experience working on the 1992 picture *Husbands and Wives*:

> "Not a lot of takes, right?"
> "Oh no, no, no."
> "Because he wants to be done by six o'clock every day."
> "Oh, we were out at four in the afternoon. It was fucking great."

He typically offers his actors no direction before the camera rolls.

Neeson's delight offers a crucial clue to the endurance of Allen's reputation. Filmmaking can be a grueling process, and Allen has settled upon an alternative business model that serves the interests of all involved. The limited time and effort that he expects not only of himself but of his cast surely helps him continue to attract topflight talent to his films, despite paying his actors just over the Screen Actors Guild minimum. He is one of the few genuine household names—and internationally recognized figures—working in cinema, and appearing in one of his movies checks off a useful career box. Especially for younger actresses eager to signal their desire to work with serious material, the experience is an ideal credential. Think of Scarlett Johansson (who appeared in three Woody Allen pictures from 2005 to 2008) and Emma Stone (who was in two in 2014 and 2015, including *Irrational Man*).

The minimal commitment that appearing in an Allen film entails is a highly relevant consideration for a time-strapped actor. Lax himself notes the contrast with Mike Leigh—another director of small, art-house films—who rehearses his actors for weeks before shooting even starts. For Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*, Stone and her co-star, Ryan Gosling, rehearsed for four months before the cameras rolled. Among other chores, they practiced singing, dancing, and, in Gosling's case, piano. The fact that Stone's *Irrational Man* character plays piano is less central to that movie's plot, but Allen didn't expect her even to fake it. He simply shot her recital with the piano blocking her hands. Similarly, in *Match Point*, Jonathan Rhys Meyers plays a retired tennis pro who once almost beat Andre Agassi. But the scenes of him on court give every indication that tennis lessons were not required. He looks as though he's never lifted a racket before in his life.

Such shortcuts result in a feedback loop of cinematic prestige: Allen is considered an important director in part because so many big stars still

want to work with him. Meanwhile, his perceived importance as a director draws those stars for the short period it will take to film a movie and acquire their Allen credential. The accumulated prestige also rubs off on his investors, some of whom have even gotten bit parts. And their risk of a financial loss is low. Allen's films almost always recoup their modest budgets—here, the actors' willingness to work at a deep discount is essential—and now and then one strikes gold. (*Midnight in Paris* made more than $150 million on a $17 million budget.) The fact that so few of them wind up being any good barely enters into the director-actor-investor equation.

Given that Allen's movie-a-year schedule extends well back into his prime, one might wonder what explains such a precipitous decline in quality since the 1990s. Presumably age, however healthy and fit he remains, has something to do with it. His shoots are typically shorter now than they were in his earlier years. (The shoot for 1973's *Sleeper* lasted a full 101 days.) Ambition simply isn't on the agenda. When asked whether his films would benefit from more time and effort, he has consistently maintained that they are as good as they can be and no amount of additional work would improve them. Moreover, it is hardly unusual for a director's later work to grow somewhat stale, particularly when the director's preoccupations—death, philosophy, older men sleeping with younger women—remain as constant as Allen's have.

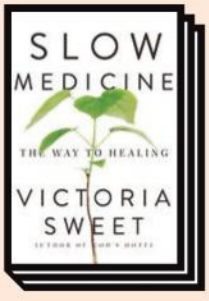
But once again, Allen himself is ready with the most astute diagnosis. "I'm not a curious person," he noted in that 2015 NPR interview. "I'm not curious to travel … I'm not curious to see other places, I'm not curious to try new things." During the fertile years in which he forged his reputation, he pursued themes very close to home, with films that were set almost exclusively in his native New York City and frequently dealt with the fields of comedy or show business. More recently, he has worked in locales—London, Paris, Rome, Barcelona—he evidently knows only from the perspective of an unenthusiastic tourist. *Match Point* was knocked for its unfamiliarity with London; *To Rome With Love* looks as though it was shot with a copy of Fodor's in hand.

The limited time and effort he expects of his cast surely helps him attract topflight talent.

Early in his career, Allen was often his own star, and his distinctive patter—the phobias and neuroses and literary references—worked effortlessly in a way that it does not when it emanates from the mouths of his various surrogates since then. And the filmmaker who these days has so little contact with his actors used to have his female stars close at hand: Between them, his longtime love interests Louise Lasser, Diane Keaton, and Mia Farrow starred in 22 out of 23 consecutive films during his heyday.

So it is perhaps good news that Allen's next film, *Wonder Wheel*, is set in 1950s Brooklyn, where he spent his youth. In fact, the movie takes place on Coney Island, where his long-ago *Annie Hall* character, Alvy Singer, claimed to have grown up in a house beneath the roller coaster. His 48th movie—scheduled for release on December 1, Allen's 82nd birthday—will be the first one he has released during awards season since *Match Point* more than a decade ago. No one will be more pleased than I if the film turns out to be a return to prime form for Allen. But even if *Wonder Wheel* is a triumph, it will likely be, as Allen himself has suggested, a happy accident.

Christopher Orr is a senior editor at The Atlantic.



COVER TO COVER

Slow Medicine: The Way to Healing

VICTORIA SWEET
RIVERHEAD

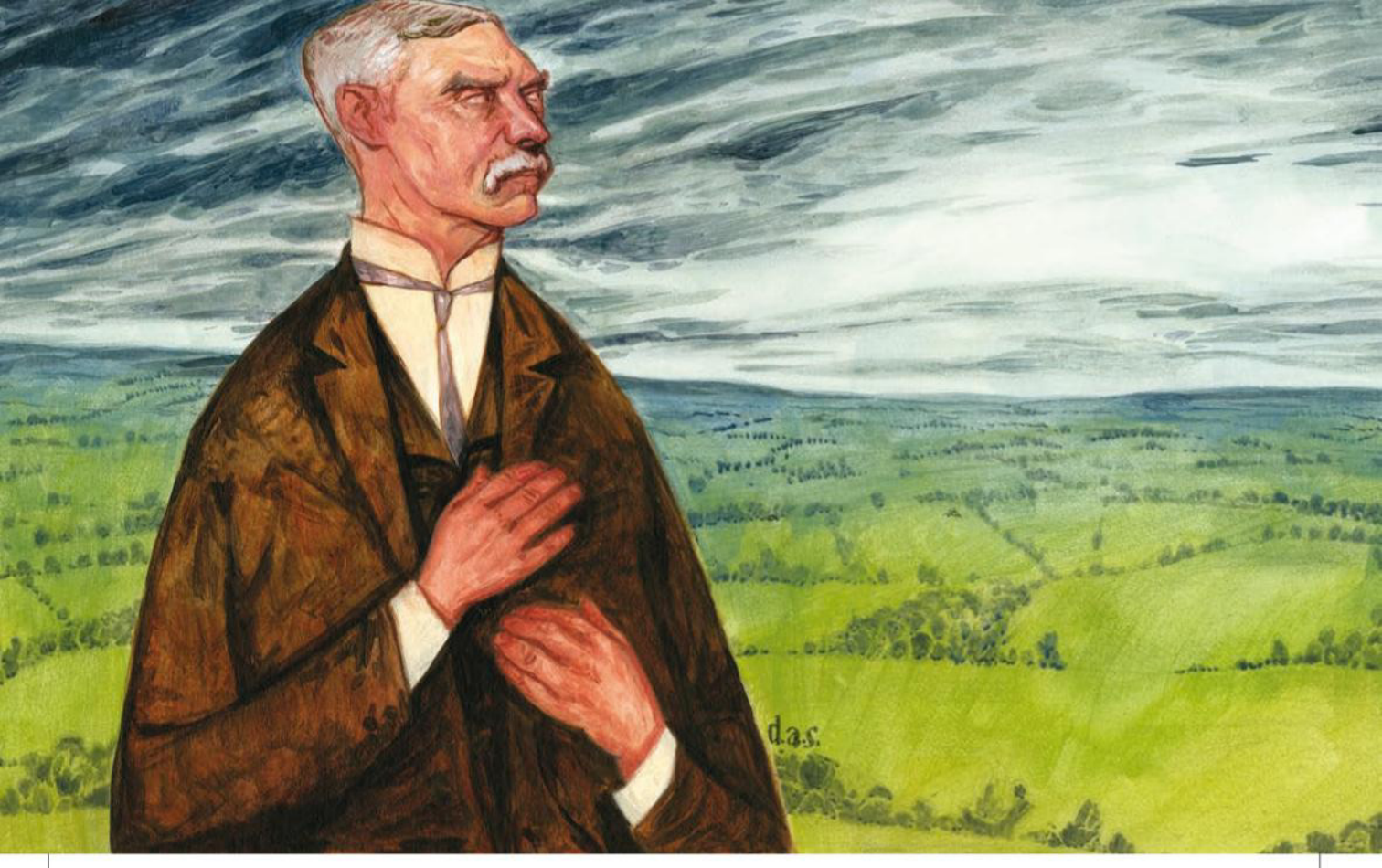
ANYBODY considering medical school, or already toiling there, has to read this book. Everyone else should too. Victoria Sweet's account of discovering her vocation never once uses the word *passion*. Instead, she calls attention to time's mysterious power to reveal purpose. Her memoir of growing slowly into her calling is about learning not just to save lives but to make a life.

Sweet's first book, *God's Hotel*, was about her quest to set her patients—ailing and destitute people at one of the last remaining almshouses in the U.S.—on a path of gradual healing unavailable from hurried, high-tech health care. This time her observant gaze and artful prose focus on signposts along *her* path toward that mission.

As a California college student in the late '60s and early '70s, Sweet boarded with a family whose "sort of hippie" ethos left its mark. In medical school, key moments of guidance (and also arrogance) came when least expected. Stints at out-of-the-way clinics supplied rare colleagues and unusual crises. A trek across Nepal as a physician proved essential, too, in shaping a version of medicine that, without renouncing mechanical fix-it prowess, aims to nurture patients' own curative powers.

That cause now has a name, "slow medicine," and it couldn't have a better champion than Sweet. Her personal odyssey is more stirring than any polemical manifesto could be.

— Ann Hulbert



BOOKS

The Poet Laureate of Englishness

Revisiting A. E. Housman in the age of Brexit

BY ADAM KIRSCH

GREAT POETS FALL into two categories: those whose public personas are of a piece with their work, and those whose personalities seem to contradict their work. If you met, say, Lord Byron, you would have no doubt that this was the man who wrote "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage." Byron was as dramatic, world-weary, and scandalous in a drawing room as he was on the page. By contrast, if you were introduced to T. S. Eliot, you might have trouble making the connection between this buttoned-up bank clerk and the nightmare enchantment of "The Waste Land." The patron saint of this latter type—the poet whose poetry is conspicuously at odds with his or her person—would have to be Alfred Edward Housman, the author of *A Shropshire Lad* and a writer who became, over the course of the 20th century, a kind of tutelary genius of Englishness.

The 63 lyrics in that book, first published in 1896, have a purity of speech and intensity of feeling that lent the collection the aura of a classic from the moment of its appearance. "You may read it in half-an-hour," said one early reviewer of the book, "but there are things in it you will scarce forget in a lifetime." What Housman writes about, almost without exception, is sorrow: lost love, nostalgia, mutability, grief, and death. He seems to understand everything about the pain of life, and the beauty of that pain—the way suffering itself can become a source of bittersweet pleasure. He is a poet who can't listen to a blackbird sing without hearing a summons to the grave:

> Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;
> What use to rise and rise?
> Rise man a thousand mornings
> Yet down at last he lies,
> And then the man is wise.

The emotional directness of his delivery reads like an invitation to intimacy, giving unhappy readers, especially young ones, the sense that they have finally found a sympathetic heart in an unfeeling world. The last poem in *A Shropshire Lad* is an appeal to the "luckless lads" who will enjoy the poet's "flowers" after he is gone:

> So up and down I sow them
> For lads like me to find,
> When I shall lie below them,
> A dead man out of mind.

Yet as the English biographer and journalist Peter Parker shows in *Housman Country*, his new study of the poet's work and legacy, "luckless lads" who came to Housman prepared to open their hearts were shocked by the wary, acerbic, pedantic man they encountered. His obituary in *The Times* of London described him

Illustration by DANNY SCHWARTZ

as "so unapproachable as to diffuse a frost … [He] appeared of all men least tolerant of sentiment." When the novelist E. M. Forster wrote to Housman expressing enthusiasm for his poetry, Housman responded with a letter that Forster described as "absolutely hateful … I was so disappointed and hurt that I destroyed it after one rapid perusal." Another writer was stunned, too. "Far from believing that man wrote *[A] Shropshire Lad*," he said after meeting Housman, "I shouldn't even have thought him capable of reading it!"

To perceptive observers, however, the vast gulf between the poetry and the poet only added to Housman's pathos. Clearly this was a man so sensitive to pain that he had to wear heavy emotional armor. Indeed, the poems themselves are often about the deflection of feeling by an ironic stoicism, which ends up highlighting the very emotion it is meant to conceal. What, readers from the beginning must have wondered, was the wound behind Housman's bow? What made him so well acquainted with grief?

This was a matter for speculation and rumor during Housman's lifetime (the man wasn't about to give anything away), but the answer has long since been established as a central part of his legend. In 1879, when he was 20 years old and a star student at Oxford, Housman fell in love with a classmate, Moses Jackson—a hearty, athletic, and entirely straight man. In his distress that his romantic feelings were not reciprocated, Housman ended up failing his final exams, to the shock of his teachers and family. Although he eventually did become a classical scholar, his career was sidetracked for a decade by the fiasco.

Housman was left convinced that his sexuality doomed him to loneliness—or worse. During his lifetime, public attitudes toward homosexuality in England were growing more hostile and vindictive. Most of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad* were written in 1895, the same year that Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years' hard labor for the crime of being gay. ("Oh they're taking him to prison for the color of his hair," Housman wrote bitterly, in a poem that remained unpublished for years.) No wonder he kept his deepest feelings to himself; and no wonder gay men, as Parker shows, constituted one of the best audiences for his poetry. They picked up on subterranean emotions and themes that might be read entirely differently by the straight reader:

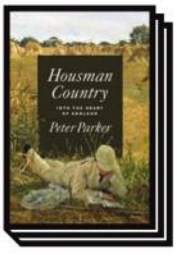
> Others, I am not the first,
> Have willed more mischief than they durst;
> If in the breathless night I too
> Shiver now, 'tis nothing new.
> More than I, if truth were told,
> Have stood and sweated hot and cold,
> And through their reins in ice and fire
> Fear contended with desire.

Any reader who has ever experienced a moral crisis can identify with this poem, but readers for whom sexual desire was linked to a very specific kind of fear might well gather that it was written especially for them. At the same time, Housman's combination of intense feeling and intense inhibition struck his first readers as quintessentially English. "It is not that the Englishman can't feel—it is that he is afraid to feel," Forster observed. "He has been taught at his public school that feeling is bad form … He must bottle up his emotions, or let them out only on a very special occasion." Is it English reserve or sexual caution, or both, that we hear in Housman's lines?

> Because I liked you better
> Than suits a man to say,
> It irked you, and I promised
> To throw the thought away.

This poem ends with the speaker lying in his grave, boasting that he "kept his word"—with the implication that his refusal to speak about his love has actually killed him. It is a masterpiece of repression and self-pity, two emotions that help form Housman's poetic climate.

Housman seems to understand everything about the pain of life.



HOUSMAN COUNTRY: INTO THE HEART OF ENGLAND
PETER PARKER
FSG

BUT THE HOUSMAN COUNTRY Parker writes about is not only an emotional territory. It is also an actual landscape, the county of Shropshire in the west of England, on the border with Wales. For many readers, Housman conjured a nostalgia for English country life that was all the more powerful because it bore less and less resemblance to reality. By the end of the 19th century, England was predominantly urban, more Dickens than Wordsworth. But people who were one or two generations removed from the farm delighted in Housman's timeless visions of village games and plowing oxen.

The mythic nature of Housman's Shropshire is ironically fitting. "While he undoubtedly put Shropshire on the map for many readers," Parker writes, "he often acknowledged that he did not in fact know the county well at all." Actually, he was born in the neighboring county of Worcestershire; Shropshire was the western landscape he could see only at a romantic remove. This separation made it a highly appropriate setting for a book whose central theme is longing. "The preferred view of Housman Country is … from a distance, both in time and geography," Parker writes. Happiness is always elsewhere:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

The opening sections of *Housman Country* offer an excellent, if familiar, introduction to the man and his work. Parker's real contribution is to explore the influence of Housman's work on English culture. When *A Shropshire Lad* was published, it made a very small splash, selling fewer than 400 copies in its first year. But an enterprising publisher kept the book alive, aided by Housman's willingness to take no royalty on sales—a decision that cost him thousands of pounds, but kept the price down, making the book more accessible to his "luckless lads."

By 1914, *A Shropshire Lad* was selling upwards of 10,000 copies a year, and it went to war in the packs of many literary-minded soldiers. (Housman commented wryly on this phenomenon: "The advertisement to which I am always looking forward: a soldier is to receive a bullet in the breast, and it is to be turned aside from his heart by a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* which he is carrying there. Hitherto it is only the Bible that has performed this trick.") On the Western Front, Housman's doomed lads and English nostalgia spoke powerfully to young soldiers, and Parker traces the echoes of his poems in the work of war poets such as Edward Thomas and Rupert Brooke. Later, Housman's poems would be set to music by a wide range of English composers; the glum rocker Morrissey was a natural fan.

Today, in the age of Brexit and the renewed movement for Scottish independence, the question of what Englishness means is once again up for debate. For nativist movements like the UK Independence Party, as for xenophobes across Europe, national identity is usually a matter of ethnic exclusivity and economic isolation. Reading Housman suggests an alternative to this kind of aggressive nationalism—an Englishness whose sources are nature and memory, melancholy and reserve. Of course, this poetic vision can encompass only a small part of what England means; not everyone can live in Housman country. But after more than a century, his poetry remains one of England's most humane and appealing reflections.

Adam Kirsch is the author, most recently, of The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century.

BOOKS

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Convict

Katherine Dunn's cult classic, *Geek Love*, has eclipsed her debut, *Attic*, for too long.

BY MICHAEL LAPOINTE

Some novels grow so popular that they overwhelm a writer's career. Like one jagged peak in a range of well-proportioned hills, the novel towers over the author's other books and holds them in shadow. For Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (1989) is that novel. The epic saga of the Binewskis, a family of circus freaks, and the tragic fate of their traveling sideshow, *Geek Love* was a finalist for the National Book Award and has since inspired cultish devotion (just Google "*Geek Love* tattoos"). It has sold more than 475,000 copies in the United States alone.

In championing weirdness over "the horror of normalcy," the novel became scripture to readers on the margins of the mainstream, attracting such high-profile admirers as Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love. Dunn grafted vaudeville vernacular onto a cool classicism, a prose style at once effortless and extravagant. And in *Geek Love*'s fun-house mirror, conventional hierarchies of beauty and worth are upended—an alluring inversion for legions of readers to whom the Binewskis are folk heroes. Dunn once said her ambition was "to write something that will punch out through time," and almost 30 years on, *Geek Love* does exactly that.

A success of such magnitude guarantees posterity, but it also threatens to make Dunn, who died in 2016 at the age of 70, seem like a narrower artist than she was. Lost in the *Geek Love* phenomenon were the two novels that Dunn had published some 20 years earlier, which have struggled to remain in print. "Most people didn't even know I'd ever written anything else," Dunn recalled in 2009. Now, with the reissue of *Attic* (1970), her astonishing debut, readers have a chance to see Katherine Dunn not only as *Geek Love*'s author, but as an expansive novelist giving voice to American estrangement.

Attic is a jail novel. Largely set on the 13th floor of the Jackson County Jail in Kansas City, Missouri, it provides a barred window into one woman's pitilessly violent, radically sexual psyche in the early 1960s. That the narrator shares a name with the author suggests that it's also a book of artistic awakening, a portrait of the artist as a young convict.

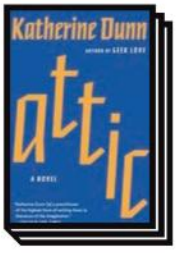
Katherine, the late-adolescent narrator, has run away from her Oregon home and finds herself in Independence, Missouri, with a traveling posse hawking magazines door-to-door. *Attic* functions as an early exposé of these crews, still a scourge in America, which hire vulnerable youth to peddle magazine subscriptions at wildly inflated prices. Part of the trick is to pitch a sob story to potential marks, to say anything that will make them cut a check—a criminal perversion of the author's relationship to her readers, and a hint at her developing rhetorical powers.

Katherine is given to spinning exceedingly dark fantasies out of everyday moments. Setting the tone of this often twisted novel, an early passage elaborates the sight of small children on a merry-go-round into

a pornographic vision of sexual initiation, the children "screaming and laughing" as they submit to the suddenly virile horses of the carousel. Angela Carter's most subversive fairy tales come to mind: Just as Carter foregrounds the savagery inherent in children's stories, so Katherine unleashes violent impulses onto innocent pictures.

When she tries cashing a fraudulent check, Katherine is thrust into the Jackson County Jail. That sprawling imagination of hers is now barricaded in a cell, and the honed result is a fierce observational gaze. This witness has the power to annihilate a cell mate with scornful precision: She has "the phony fecundity of a belly full of slack muscles"; "her breasts are heavy and dead at her navel and I can tell." *Attic* is a gallery of vividly drawn prisoners—an alpha-dog lesbian, a pregnant thief, and the mysterious Sister Blendina. The only murderer in the cell, Blendina plays solitaire day and night, never appearing to sleep or eat, "her ancient face and her newborn eyes unchanging" even during a fire in the cell.

Katherine tells the stories of her cell mates, offering a brutal, often heartbreaking glimpse of what working-class Midwestern women endured in a society that would rather lock them up than listen. Take Patsy, who, after being raped as a young woman, cut her hair short and blackened it with shoe polish, becoming someone who "couldn't say 'Pass the butter' without putting into that voice a plea not to be hated." Patsy is in jail for attempting to murder her rapist, and is now obsessed with a private, theological justice: "She was always reading her Bible but she only read the parts that were on her side."



ATTIC
KATHERINE DUNN
Vintage Contemporaries

Attic requires an iron stomach. An early *New York Times* review complained that "a great deal of the action takes place near or on the toilet"—but surely this complaint applies to any time spent in the scant interior of a jail cell. *Attic*'s scatology speaks to what Katherine's ravenous imagination must feed on when incarcerated. The toilet becomes a kind of shrine for Katherine, a space in which to work out the neuroses of confinement:

> I could piss over [my cell mate's] piss but I can't piss over her shit, much less shit over it and have them mix. It would be terrible if mine came out lighter or darker than hers—you could tell whose they were. Even worse if they were the same.

Dehumanized by imprisonment, Katherine seeks remnants of identity in excrement.

Yet this consummate jail novel is also a novel of escape. As the plot slows, the days beginning to blend into something like a stable routine, Katherine's imagination expands outward again into fantasy and memory. Many of her fantasies involve spasms of violence, including what must be one of the earliest visions of a school shooting in American literature: "Walk into the dining hall with a machine gun and spray into their faces—stop them all dead in the laughing with their war stories about Wittgenstein."

But Katherine's memories turn the violence back upon herself. She sees memory as "an aggressive thing," and indeed the recollections come as unwilled visitations. Her mother, who frequently inspected the young Katherine's genitals for signs of abuse or masturbation, looms largest. In these fragments of memory (Dunn said that *Attic* was composed in five-minute washroom breaks while working three part-time jobs), we see the genesis of Katherine's psychodramatic blend of pleasure and shame: "Even when I was very young I giggled when my mother whipped me." Dimly, we also perceive an emerging artistic intelligence, one that instinctively retreats to the safety of observation and rejects the instinct for some apocalyptic outburst that might impose her inner torment on the world. When her mother violates her privacy,

Illustration by RIKI BLANCO

Katherine says, in a telling switch to the second person, "You draw back further and further into some quiet place and watch." What she sees there hints at why she fled into the American heartland.

DUNN'S UNUSUAL DEBUT came with an unusual author profile. "Before turning to writing Katherine Dunn tried the following occupations," read the dust jacket of the first edition of *Attic*, citing jobs as an artist's model, a Sugar Daddy wrapper, and an "Invalid's companion," among others. The closer-to-fiction reality went unsaid: Dunn, as she later wrote, had been "big on running away" from her artistic mother and family of storytelling migrant workers, and had often found herself in juvenile-detention centers, even once landing in the Jackson County Jail for peddling magazines.

But the strange book made readers curious to know more. Upon *Attic*'s publication, *The Kansas City Star* asked the local sheriff whether he could corroborate its particulars. He indeed remembered Dunn—"different from most of the women"—and then nitpicked one of the book's most disturbing sequences: "Yes, she could have heard a boy being raped in the men's section but the sounds would have come through a ceiling grill, not through a steel plate on the same floor."

Attic's truth doesn't reside in such details—or in the other specifics drawn from Dunn's life. It lies in how jail reshapes Katherine's—and Dunn's—consciousness. For the author, certainly, incarceration changed everything. "I saw myself at a fork in the road," Dunn wrote in 1989 in an autobiographical note, "where my choices were a life of petty and extremely unglamorous crime, or getting my shit together in a major way." She pulled that off at Reed College, where she won a Rockefeller grant for writing, which sustained her until she went back to part-time jobs. But to judge by her first, autobiographical narrator, her writing practice was profoundly shaped by her early experience of jail. The word *attic* doesn't appear in the novel, yet it suggests a childhood refuge, a private incubator for the imagination, a height from which to contemplate the world below. For better and for worse, the towering Jackson County Jail was Dunn's attic.

The novel is far from perfect. Visibly learning on the job, Dunn tries out different, not always appropriate, angles from which to approach her subject. The compulsion to render an image in an original way—one of the book's central strengths—sometimes leads to a tortured obliqueness. (Her cell's metalwork is "steel—but more natural, allowed to flow in its own nonorganic forms, pure tubes and plates without the strain of assuming mock-living shapes.") Elsewhere, Dunn is given to breathless run-on sentences that read like Molly Bloom's castoffs, complete with the punctuating "yes." Dunn herself was impatient with her lack of craft, later remarking that in her two early works (*Truck* appeared a year after *Attic*), she'd "been cranking the stuff all those years only semiconsciously. I opened my mouth and it poured out. It was about as deliberate and artful as belly-button lint."

Determined "to learn how to write," she then embarked on the 18-year journey that finally resulted in *Geek Love*. Dunn published only essays and journalism, not fiction, and in 1979 quietly began focusing on what turned out to be her last completed novel. She emerged a changed writer, dedicated to agonizing perfectionism. She worked on her next novel, *Cut Man,* set in the world of small-time boxing, until the end of her life, never bringing it to a satisfactory state. Yet for all the distance she traveled, fans of *Geek Love* may be surprised to find that *Attic* is the crucible in which Dunn undertook an experiment she kept returning to in different ways.

Her lifelong interest, and creative impetus, lay in social arrangements outside the norm. The family dynamic at the heart of *Geek Love* is a baroque elaboration of the ad hoc family of Katherine's cell. Both are collections of designated freaks on the margins of society, gnarled souls seeking some sense of belonging. Though she yearns for freedom, Katherine recognizes that inside the jail, perhaps for the first time in her life, "the food's good. It's warm. Outside I could only shiver and scrounge."

A Hobbesian vision of human nature undergirds Dunn's art. Violence animates all her novels, as well as her considerable output as a journalist covering the sport of boxing. In a 2009 interview she said, "My perception of the human animal is as an extremely dangerous predator," an insight that seems already fully formed in *Attic*. "We are so afraid of eating each other," Katherine observes of the women in the cell. "Sharks do—wolves do—it is irresistible." As in the catastrophic *Geek Love*, family bonds can suddenly give way to a war of all against all.

But *Attic* shouldn't be seen simply as an apprenticeship to the later work. With its ruthless, utterly unsentimental depiction of a closed female society, imprinted in explosive, expressionistic language, this shattering prison novel deserves to capture its own audience. Dunn's debut has served a long enough sentence in the shadow of *Geek Love*.

Michael LaPointe is a writer in Toronto, Canada.

A Hobbesian vision of human nature undergirds Dunn's art.

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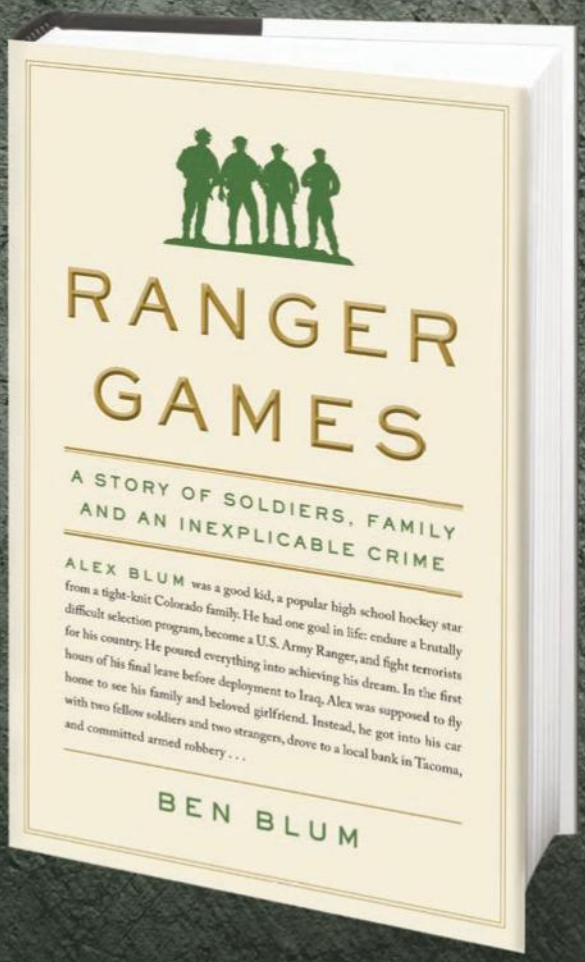

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A SEPTEMBER 2017 INDIE NEXT PICK

Why Happy People Cheat

Adulterers are often assumed to be fleeing broken relationships, but a good marriage is no guarantee against infidelity.

By Esther Perel

Illustrations by Isabel Seliger

SEPIA

"Most descriptions of troubled marriages don't seem to fit my situation," Priya insists. "Colin and I have a wonderful relationship. Great kids, no financial stresses, careers we love, great friends. He is a phenom at work, fucking handsome, attentive lover, fit, and generous to everyone, including my parents. My life is *good*." Yet Priya is having an affair. "Not someone I would ever date—ever, ever, ever. He drives a truck and has tattoos. It's so clichéd, it pains me to say it out loud. It could ruin everything I've built."

Priya is right. Few events in the life of a couple, except illness and death, carry such devastating force. For years, I have worked as a therapist with hundreds of couples who have been shattered by infidelity. And my conversations about affairs have not been confined within the cloistered walls of my therapy practice; they've happened on airplanes, at dinner parties, at conferences, at the nail salon, with colleagues, with the cable guy, and of course, on social media. From Pittsburgh to Buenos Aires, Delhi to Paris, I have been conducting an open-ended survey about infidelity.

Adultery has existed since marriage was invented, yet this extremely common act remains poorly understood. Around the globe, the responses I get when I mention infidelity range from bitter condemnation to resigned acceptance to cautious compassion to outright enthusiasm. In Paris, the topic brings an immediate frisson to a dinner conversation, and I note how many people have been on both sides of the story. In Bulgaria, a group of women I met seem to view their husbands' philandering as unfortunate but inevitable. In Mexico, women I spoke with proudly see the rise of female affairs as a form of social rebellion against a chauvinistic culture that has long made room for men to have "two homes," *la casa grande y la casa chica*—one for the family, and one for the mistress. Infidelity may be ubiquitous, but the way we make meaning of it—how we define it, experience it, and talk about it—is ultimately linked to the particular time and place where the drama unfolds.

In contemporary discourse in the United States, affairs are primarily described in terms of the damage caused. Generally, there is much concern for the agony suffered by the betrayed. And agony it is—infidelity today isn't just a violation of trust; it's a shattering of the grand ambition of romantic love. It is a shock that makes us question our past, our future, and even our very identity. Indeed, the maelstrom of emotions unleashed in the wake of an affair can be so overwhelming that many psychologists turn to the field of trauma to explain the symptoms: obsessive rumination, hypervigilance, numbness and dissociation, inexplicable rages, uncontrollable panic.

Intimate betrayal hurts. It hurts badly. If Priya's husband, Colin, were to stumble upon a text, a photo, or an email that revealed his wife's dalliance, he would be devastated. And thanks to modern technology, his pain would likely be magnified by an archive of electronic evidence of her duplicity. (I am using pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my clients and their families.)

The damage that infidelity causes the aggrieved partner is one side of the story. For centuries, when affairs were tacitly condoned for men, this pain was overlooked, since it was mostly experienced by women. Contemporary culture, to its credit, is more compassionate toward the jilted. But if we are to shed new light on one of our oldest behaviors, we need to examine it from all sides. In the focus on trauma and recovery, too little attention is given to the meanings and motives of affairs, to what we can learn from them. Strange as it may seem, affairs have a lot to teach us about marriage—what we expect, what we think we want, and what we feel entitled to. They reveal our personal and cultural attitudes about love, lust, and commitment—attitudes that have changed dramatically over the past 100 years.

Affairs are not what they used to be because marriage is not what it used to be. For much of history, and in many parts of the world today, marriage was a pragmatic alliance that ensured economic stability and social cohesion. A child of immigrants, Priya surely has relatives whose marital options were limited at best. For her and Colin, however, as for most modern Western couples, marriage is no longer an economic enterprise but rather a companionate one—a free-choice engagement between two individuals, based not on duty and obligation but on love and affection.

Never before have our expectations of marriage taken on such epic proportions. We still want everything the traditional family was meant to provide—security, respectability, property, and children—but now we also want our partner to love us, to desire us, to be *interested* in us. We should be best friends and trusted confidants, and passionate lovers to boot.

Contained within the small circle of the wedding band are vastly contradictory ideals. We want our chosen one to offer stability, safety, predictability, and dependability. And we want that very same person to supply awe, mystery, adventure, and risk. We expect comfort and edge, familiarity and novelty, continuity and surprise. We have conjured up a new Olympus, where love will remain unconditional, intimacy enthralling, and sex oh so exciting, with one person, for the long haul. And the long haul keeps getting longer.

We also live in an age of entitlement; personal fulfillment, we believe, is our due. In the West, sex is a right linked to our individuality, our self-actualization, and our freedom. Thus, most of us now arrive at the altar after years of sexual nomadism. By the time we tie the knot, we've hooked up, dated, cohabited, and broken up. We used to get married and have sex for the first time. Now we get married and stop having sex with others. The conscious choice we make to rein in our sexual freedom is a testament to the seriousness of our commitment. By turning our back on other loves, we confirm the uniqueness of our "significant other": "I have found The One. I can stop looking." Our desire for others is supposed to miraculously evaporate, vanquished by the power of this singular attraction.

At so many weddings, starry-eyed dreamers recite a list of vows, swearing to be everything to each other, from soul mate to lover to teacher to therapist. "I promise to be your greatest fan and your toughest adversary, your partner in crime, and your consolation in disappointment," says the groom, with a

tremble in his voice. Through her tears, the bride replies, "I promise faithfulness, respect, and self-improvement. I will not only celebrate your triumphs, I will love you all the more for your failures." Smiling, she adds, "And I promise to never wear heels, so you won't feel short."

In such a blissful partnership, why would we ever stray? The evolution of committed relationships has brought us to a place where we believe infidelity shouldn't happen, since all the reasons have been removed; the perfect balance of freedom and security has been achieved.

And yet, it does. Infidelity happens in bad marriages and in good marriages. It happens even in open relationships where extramarital sex is carefully negotiated beforehand. The freedom to leave or divorce has not made cheating obsolete. So why do people cheat? And why do *happy* people cheat?

Priya can't explain it. She vaunts the merits of her conjugal life, and assures me that Colin is everything she always dreamed of in a husband. Clearly she subscribes to the conventional wisdom when it comes to affairs—that diversions happen only when something is missing in the marriage. If you have everything you need at home—as modern marriage promises—you should have no reason to go elsewhere. Hence, infidelity must be a symptom of a relationship gone awry.

The symptom theory has several problems. First, it reinforces the idea that there is such a thing as a perfect marriage that will inoculate us against wanderlust. But our new marital ideal has not curbed the number of men and women who wander. In fact, in a cruel twist of fate, it is precisely the expectation of domestic bliss that may set us up for infidelity. Once, we strayed because marriage was not *supposed to* deliver love and passion. Today, we stray because marriage fails to deliver the love and passion it promised. It's not our desires that are different today, but the fact that we feel entitled—even obligated—to pursue them.

In session after session, I meet people who assure me, "I love my wife/my husband. We are best friends and happy together," and then say: "But I am having an affair."

Second, infidelity does not always correlate neatly with marital dysfunction. Yes, in plenty of cases an affair compensates for a lack or sets up an exit. Insecure attachment, conflict avoidance, prolonged lack of sex, loneliness, or just years of rehashing the same old arguments—many adulterers are motivated by domestic discord. And then there are the repeat offenders, the narcissists who cheat with impunity simply because they can.

However, therapists are confronted on a daily basis with situations that defy these well-documented reasons. In session after session, I meet people like Priya—people who assure me, "I love my wife/my husband. We are best friends and happy together," and then say: "But I am having an affair."

Many of these individuals were faithful for years, sometimes decades. They seem to be well balanced, mature, caring, and deeply invested in their relationship. Yet one day, they crossed a line they never imagined they would cross. For a glimmer of what?

The more I've listened to these tales of improbable transgression—from one-night stands to passionate love affairs—the more I've sought alternate explanations. Once the initial crisis subsides, it's important to make space for exploring the subjective experience of an affair alongside the pain it can inflict. To this end, I've encouraged renegade lovers to tell me their story. I want to understand what the affair means for them. Why did you do it? Why him? Why her? Why now? Was this the first time? Did you initiate? Did you try to resist? How did it feel? Were you looking for something? What did you find?

One of the most uncomfortable truths about an affair is that what for Partner A may be an agonizing betrayal may be transformative for Partner B. Extramarital adventures are painful and destabilizing, but they can also be liberating and empowering. Understanding both sides is crucial, whether a couple chooses to end the relationship or intends to stay together, to rebuild and revitalize.

In taking a dual perspective on such an inflammatory subject, I'm aware that I risk being labeled "pro-affair," or accused of possessing a compromised moral compass. Let me assure you that I do not approve of deception or take betrayal lightly. I sit with the devastation in my office every day. But the intricacies of love and desire don't yield to simple categorizations of good and bad, victim and perpetrator. Not condemning does not mean condoning, and there is a world of difference between understanding and justifying. My role as a therapist is to create a space where the diversity of experiences can be explored with compassion. People stray for a multitude of reasons, I have discovered, and every time I think I have heard them all, a new variation emerges.

Half-fascinated and half-horrified, Priya tells me about her steamy assignations with her lover: "We have nowhere to go, so we are always hiding in his truck or my car, in movie theaters, on park benches—his hands down my pants. I feel like a teenager with a boyfriend." She can't emphasize enough the high-school quality of it all. They have had sex only half a dozen times during the whole relationship; it's more about feeling sexy than having sex. Unaware that she is giving voice to one of the most common experiences of the unfaithful, she tells me, "It makes me feel alive."

As I listen to her, I start to suspect that her affair is about neither her husband nor their relationship. Her story echoes a theme that has come up repeatedly in my work: affairs as a form of self-discovery, a quest for a new (or lost) identity. For these seekers, infidelity is less likely to be a symptom of a problem, and more likely an expansive experience that involves growth, exploration, and transformation.

"Expansive?!," I can hear some people exclaiming. "Self-discovery?! Cheating is cheating, whatever fancy New Age labels you want to put on it. It's cruel, it's selfish, it's dishonest, and it's abusive." Indeed, to the one who has been betrayed, it can be all these things. Intimate betrayal feels intensely personal—a direct attack in the most vulnerable place. And yet I often find myself asking jilted lovers to consider a question that seems ludicrous to them: *What if the affair had nothing to do with you?*

Sometimes when we seek the gaze of another, it's not our partner we are turning away from, but the person we have become. We are not looking for another lover so much as another version of ourselves. The Mexican essayist Octavio

Paz described eroticism as a "thirst for otherness." So often, the most intoxicating "other" that people discover in an affair is not a new partner; it's a new self.

To doggedly look for marital flaws in order to understand cases like Priya's is an example of what's known as the "streetlight effect": A drunk man searches for his missing keys not where he dropped them but where the light is. Human beings have a tendency to look for the truth in the places where it is easiest to search rather than the places where it's likely to be.

Perhaps this explains why so many people subscribe to the symptom theory. Blaming a failed marriage is easier than grappling with our existential conundrums, our longings, our ennui. The problem is that, unlike the drunk, whose search is futile, we can always find problems in a marriage. They just may not be the right keys to unlock the meaning of the affair.

A forensic examination of Priya's marriage would surely yield something—her disempowered position as the partner who earns less; her tendency to repress anger and avoid conflict; the claustrophobia she sometimes feels; the gradual merging of two individuals into a "we," as in, *Did we like that restaurant?* If she and I had taken that route, we may have had an interesting chat, but not the one we needed to have. The fact that a couple has "issues" doesn't mean that those issues led to the affair.

"I think this is about you, not your marriage," I suggest to Priya. "So tell me about yourself."

"I've always been good. Good daughter, good wife, good mother. Dutiful. Straight A's." Coming from a traditional family of modest means, for Priya, *What do I want?* has never been separated from *What do they want from me?* She never partied, drank, or stayed out late, and she smoked her first joint at 22. After college, she married the right guy, and helped to support her family, as so many children of immigrant parents do. Now she is left with a nagging question: *If I'm not perfect, will they still love me?* A voice in her head wonders what life is like for those who are not so "good." Are they more lonely? More free? Do they have more fun?

Priya's affair is neither a symptom nor a pathology; it's a crisis of identity, an internal rearrangement of her personality. In our sessions, we talk about duty and desire, about age and youth. Her daughters are becoming teenagers and enjoying a freedom she never knew. Priya is at once supportive and envious. As she nears the mid-century mark, she is having her own belated adolescent rebellion.

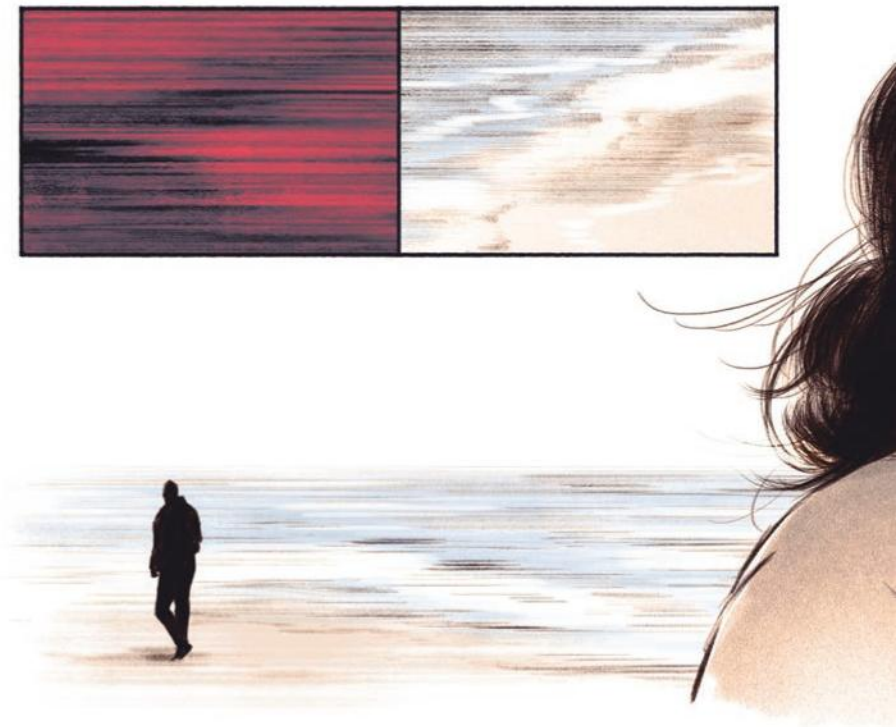
These explanations may seem superficial—petty First World problems, or rationalizations for immature, selfish, hurtful behavior. Priya has said as much herself. We both agree that her life is enviable. And yet, she is risking it all. That's enough to convince me not to make light of her behavior. If I can help her make sense of her actions, maybe we can figure out how she can end the affair for good—since that's the outcome she says she wants. It's clear this is not a love story that was meant to become a life story (which some affairs truly are). This started as an affair and will end as such—hopefully without destroying Priya's marriage in the process.

> I often say to my patients that if they could bring into their marriage one-tenth of the boldness and the playfulness that they bring to their affair, their home life would feel quite different.

Secluded from the responsibilities of everyday life, the parallel universe of the affair is often idealized, infused with the promise of transcendence. For some people, like Priya, it is a world of possibility—an alternate reality in which they can reimagine and reinvent themselves. Then again, it is experienced as limitless precisely because it is contained within the limits of its clandestine structure. It is a poetic interlude in a prosaic life.

Forbidden-love stories are utopian by nature, especially in contrast with the mundane constraints of marriage and family. A prime characteristic of this liminal universe—and the key to its irresistible power—is that it is unattainable. Affairs are by definition precarious, elusive, and ambiguous. The indeterminacy, the uncertainty, the not knowing when we'll see each other again—feelings we would never tolerate in our primary relationship—become kindling for anticipation in a hidden romance. Because we cannot *have* our lover, we keep wanting. It is this just-out-of-reach quality that lends affairs their erotic mystique and keeps the flame of desire burning. Reinforcing this segregation of the affair from reality is the fact that many, like Priya, choose lovers who either could not or would not become a life partner. By falling for someone from a very different class, culture, or generation, we play with possibilities that we would not entertain as actualities.

Few of these types of affairs withstand discovery. One would think that a relationship for which so much was risked



would survive the transition into daylight. Under the spell of passion, lovers speak longingly of all the things they will be able to do when they are finally together. Yet when the prohibition is lifted, when the divorce comes through, when the sublime mixes with the ordinary and the affair enters the real world, what then? Some settle into happy legitimacy, but many more do not. In my experience, most affairs end, even if the marriage ends as well. However authentic the feelings of love, the dalliance was only ever meant to be a beautiful fiction.

The affair lives in the shadow of the marriage, but the marriage also lives in the center of the affair. Without its delicious illegitimacy, can the relationship with the lover remain enticing? If Priya and her tattooed beau had their own bedroom, would they be as giddy as they are in the back of his truck?

The quest for the unexplored self is a powerful theme of the adulterous narrative, with many variations. Priya's parallel universe has transported her to the teenager she never was. Others find themselves drawn by the memory of the person they once were. And then there are those whose reveries take them back to the missed opportunity, the one that got away, and the person they could have been. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote that in modern life,

> there is always a suspicion ... that one is living a lie or a mistake; that something crucially important has been overlooked, missed, neglected, left untried and unexplored; that a vital obligation to one's own authentic self has not been met, or that some chances of unknown happiness completely different from any happiness experienced before have not been taken up in time and are bound to be lost forever.

Bauman speaks to our nostalgia for unlived lives, unexplored identities, and roads not taken. As children, we have the opportunity to play at other roles; as adults, we often find ourselves confined by the ones we've been assigned or the ones we have chosen. When we select a partner, we commit to a story. Yet we remain forever curious: What other stories could we have been part of? Affairs offer us a view of those other lives, a peek at the stranger within. Adultery is the revenge of the deserted possibilities.

Dwayne had always cherished memories of his college sweetheart, Keisha. She was the best sex he'd ever had, and she still featured prominently in his fantasy life. They'd both known they were too young to commit, and parted reluctantly. Over the years, he had often asked himself what would have happened had their timing been different.

Enter Facebook. The digital universe offers unprecedented opportunities to reconnect with people who exited our lives long ago. Never before have we had so much access to our exes, and so much fodder for our curiosity. "Whatever happened to so-and-so?" "I wonder if she ever got married?" "Is it true he's having difficulties in his relationship?" "Is she still as cute as I remember?" The answers are a click away. One day, Dwayne searched for Keisha's profile. Lo and behold, they were both in the same city. She, still hot, was divorced. He, on the other hand, was happily married, but his curiosity got the better of him and "Add Friend" soon turned into a secret girlfriend.

It seems to me that in the past decade, affairs with exes have proliferated, thanks to social media. These retrospective encounters occur somewhere between the known and the unknown—bringing together the familiarity of someone you once knew with the freshness created by the passage of time. The flicker with an old flame offers a unique combination of built-in trust, risk taking, and vulnerability. In addition, it is a magnet for our lingering nostalgia. The person I once was, but lost, is the person you once knew.

Priya is mystified and mortified by how she is putting her marriage on the line. The constraints she is defying are also the commitments she cherishes. But that's precisely where the power of transgression lies: in risking the very things that are most dear to us. No conversation about relationships can avoid the thorny topic of rules and our all-too-human desire to break them. Our relationship to the forbidden sheds a light on the darker and less straightforward aspects of our humanity. Bucking the rules is an assertion of freedom over convention, and of self over society. Acutely aware of the law of gravity, we dream of flying.

Priya often feels like she's a walking contradiction—alternately dismayed by her reckless behavior and enchanted by her daredevil attitude; tormented by fear of discovery and unable (or unwilling) to put a stop to the affair. She is bewitched by this thought: *What if just this once, I act as if the rules don't apply to me?*

Our conversations help Priya bring clarity to her confusing picture. She is relieved that we don't have to pick apart her relationship with Colin. But having to assume full responsibility leaves her heavy with guilt: "The last thing I've ever wanted to do is hurt him. If he knew, he would be crushed. And knowing that it had nothing to do with him wouldn't make a difference. He would never believe it."

She may be right. Perhaps knowing what motivated his wife's duplicity would do nothing to alleviate Colin's pain. Or perhaps it would. Even after decades of this work, I still cannot predict what people will do when they discover a partner's infidelity. Some relationships collapse upon the discovery of a fleeting hookup. Others exhibit a surprisingly robust capacity to bounce back even after extensive treachery.

Priya has tried to end her affair several times. She deletes her lover's phone number, drives a different route home from dropping the kids off at school, tells herself how wrong this entire thing is. But the self-imposed cutoffs become new and electrifying rules to break. Three days later, the fake name is back in her phone. Yet her torment is mounting in proportion to the risks she is taking. She's beginning to feel the corroding effects of the secret, and getting sloppier by the day. Danger follows her to every movie theater and secluded parking lot.

It is not my place to tell Priya what she should do. Besides, she has already made it clear that for her, the right thing is to end the affair. She's also telling me, however, that she doesn't really want to. What I can see, and what she has not yet grasped, is that the thing she is really afraid to lose is not her lover—it's the part of herself that he awakened. This distinction between the person and the experience is crucial. She needs to know that if she lets Truck Man go, she isn't doomed to lose herself as well.

"You think you had a relationship with Truck Man," I tell her. "Actually, you had an intimate encounter with yourself, mediated by him. I don't expect you to believe me right now, but you can terminate your relationship and keep some of what it gave you. You reconnected with an energy, a youthfulness. I know that it feels as if, in leaving him, you are severing a lifeline to all of that, but I want you to know that over time you will find that the otherness you crave also lives inside you."

I often say to my patients that if they could bring into their marriage even one-tenth of the boldness, the playfulness, and the verve that they bring to their affair, their home life would feel quite different. Our creative imagination seems to be richer when it comes to our transgressions than to our commitments. Yet while I say this, I also think back to a poignant scene in the movie *A Walk on the Moon*. Diane Lane's character has been having an affair with a free-spirited blouse salesman. Her teenage daughter asks, "You love [him] more than all of us?" "No," the mother replies, but "sometimes it's easier to be different with a different person."

If Priya succeeds in ending the affair, and doing so with finality, a new dilemma will arise: Should she tell her husband, or should she keep her secret to herself? Could her marriage survive the pain of revelation? Could it continue with a lie undisclosed? I have no tidy answer to offer. I don't condone deception, but I've also seen too many carelessly divulged secrets leave unfading scars. In many instances, however, I have helped couples work toward revelation, hopeful that it will open up new channels of communication for them.

Catastrophe has a way of propelling us into the essence of things. In the wake of devastating betrayals, so many couples tell me that they are having some of the deepest, most honest conversations of their entire relationship. Their history is laid bare—unfulfilled expectations, unspoken resentments, and unmet longings. Love is messy; infidelity, more so. But it is also a window, like none other, into the crevices of the human heart.

The revelation of an affair forces couples to grapple with unsettling questions: What does fidelity mean to us and why is it important? Is it possible to love more than one person at once? Can we learn to trust each other again? How do we negotiate the elusive balance between our emotional needs and our erotic desires? Does passion have a finite shelf life? And are there fulfillments that a marriage, even a happy one, can never provide?

For me, these conversations should be part and parcel of any adult, intimate relationship from the beginning. It's far better to address these issues before a storm hits. Talking about what draws us outside our fences, in an atmosphere of trust, can actually foster intimacy and commitment. But for many couples, unfortunately, the crisis of an affair is the first time they talk about any of this. Priya and Colin will have to negotiate these questions while also dealing with the ravages of betrayal, dishonesty, and broken trust.

Every affair will redefine a marriage, and every marriage will determine what the legacy of the affair will be. Although infidelity has become one of the prime motives for divorce in the West, I've seen many couples stay together after the revelation of an affair. I believe the odds are in favor of Priya and Colin's marriage surviving, but the quality of their future connection will depend on how they metabolize her transgression. Will they emerge stronger as a result? Or will they bury the affair under a mountain of shame and mistrust? Can Priya step out of her self-absorption and face the pain she caused? Can Colin find solace in knowing that the affair was not meant to be a rejection of him? And will he get to meet the carefree, youthful woman Priya became in her parallel life?

These days, many of us are going to have two or three significant long-term relationships or marriages. Often when a couple comes to me in the wake of an affair, it is clear to me that their first marriage is over. So I ask them: Would you like to create a second one together?

Esther Perel, a couples therapist, is the author of Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence *and the host of the podcast* Where Should We Begin? *This article is adapted from her book* The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity, *which is being published this month by Harper.*

SLEEPING ON MY SIDE

Every night, no matter where I am
when I lie down, I turn
my back on half the world.

At home, it's the east I ignore,
with its theaters and silverware,
as I face the adventurous west.

But when I'm on the road
in some hotel's room 213 or 402
I could be pointed anywhere,

yet I hardly care as long as you
are there facing the other way
so we are defended in all degrees

and my left ear is pressing down
as if listening for hoofbeats in the ground.

— Billy Collins

Billy Collins's most recent collection is The Rain in Portugal *(2016).*

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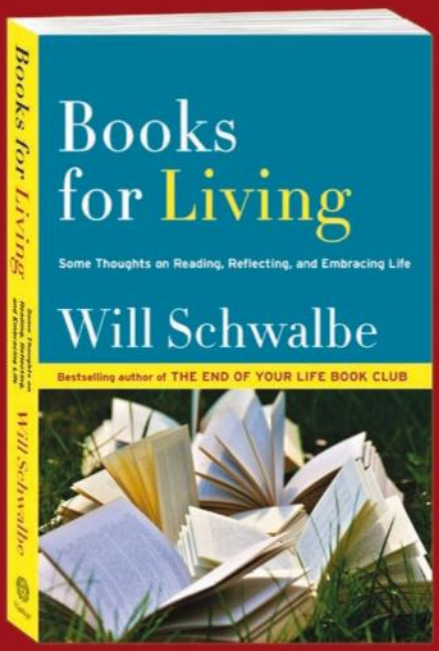

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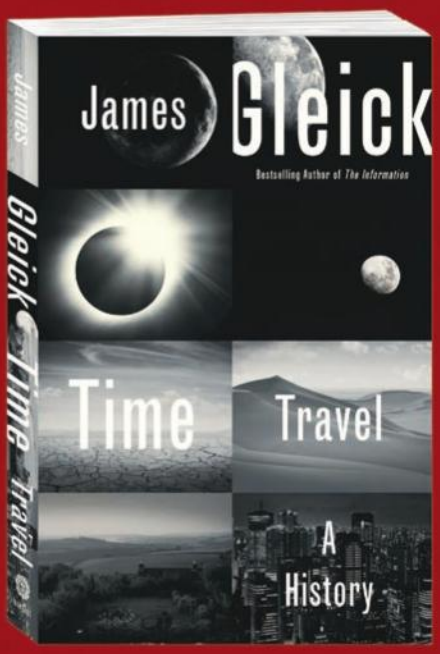

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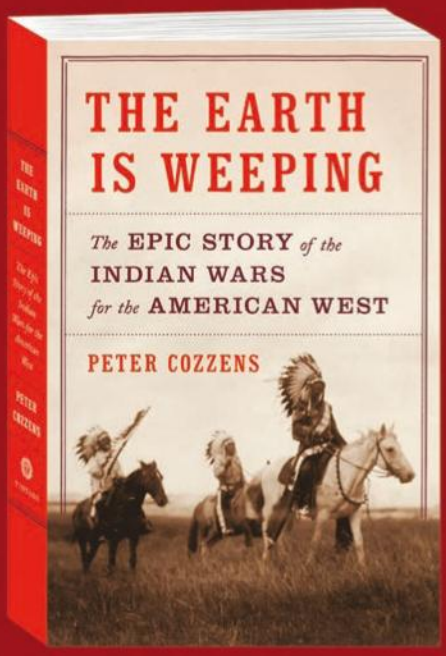

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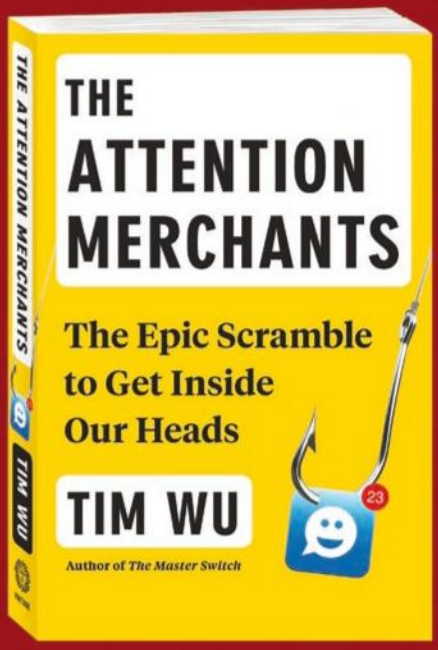

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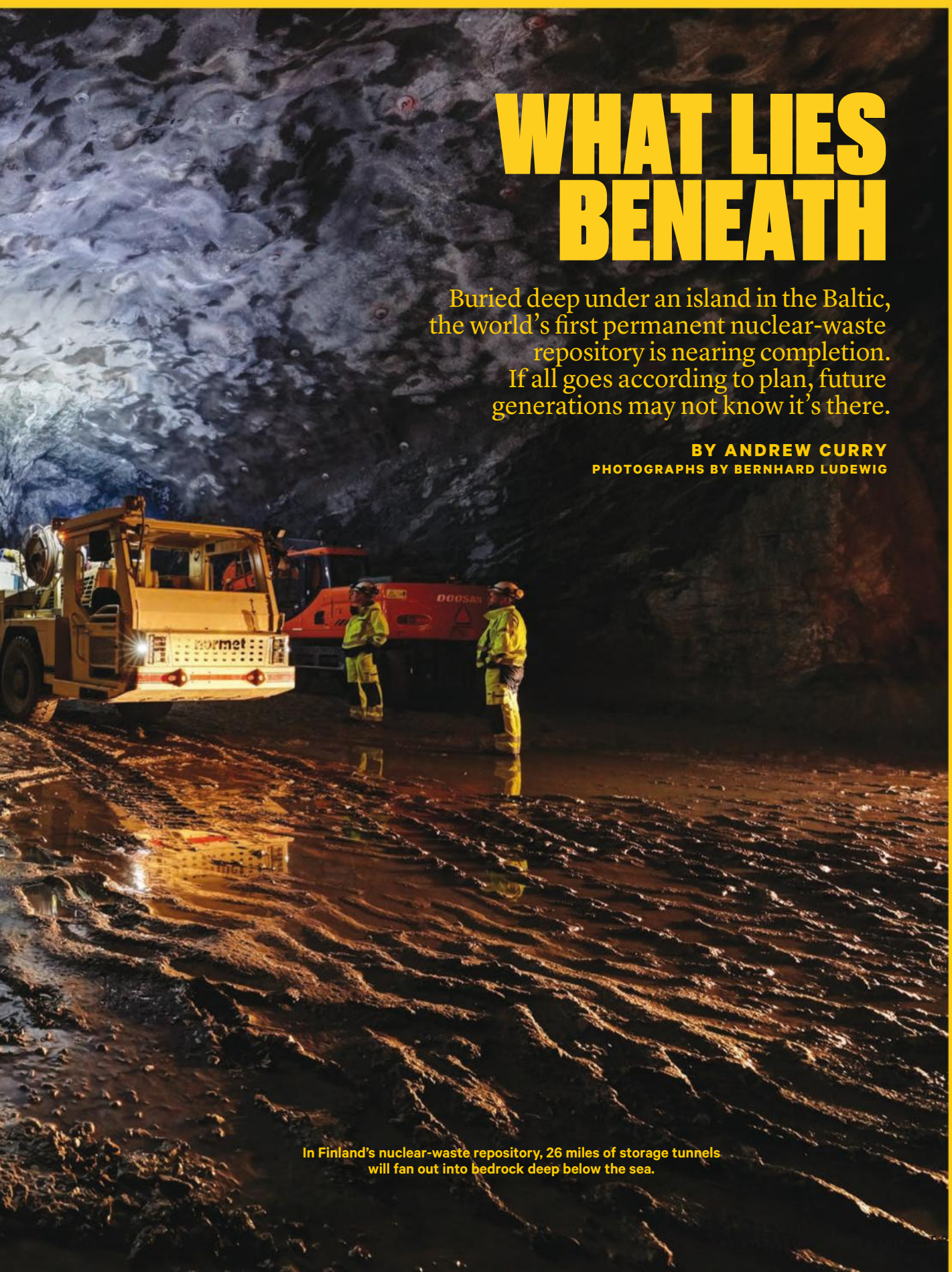
WHAT LIES BENEATH

Buried deep under an island in the Baltic, the world's first permanent nuclear-waste repository is nearing completion. If all goes according to plan, future generations may not know it's there.

BY ANDREW CURRY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERNHARD LUDEWIG



In Finland's nuclear-waste repository, 26 miles of storage tunnels will fan out into bedrock deep below the sea.

In **1980,** a 29-year-old Finnish geologist named Timo Äikäs accepted a huge responsibility: He joined a team in charge of finding a way to permanently store his country's growing stockpile of nuclear waste.

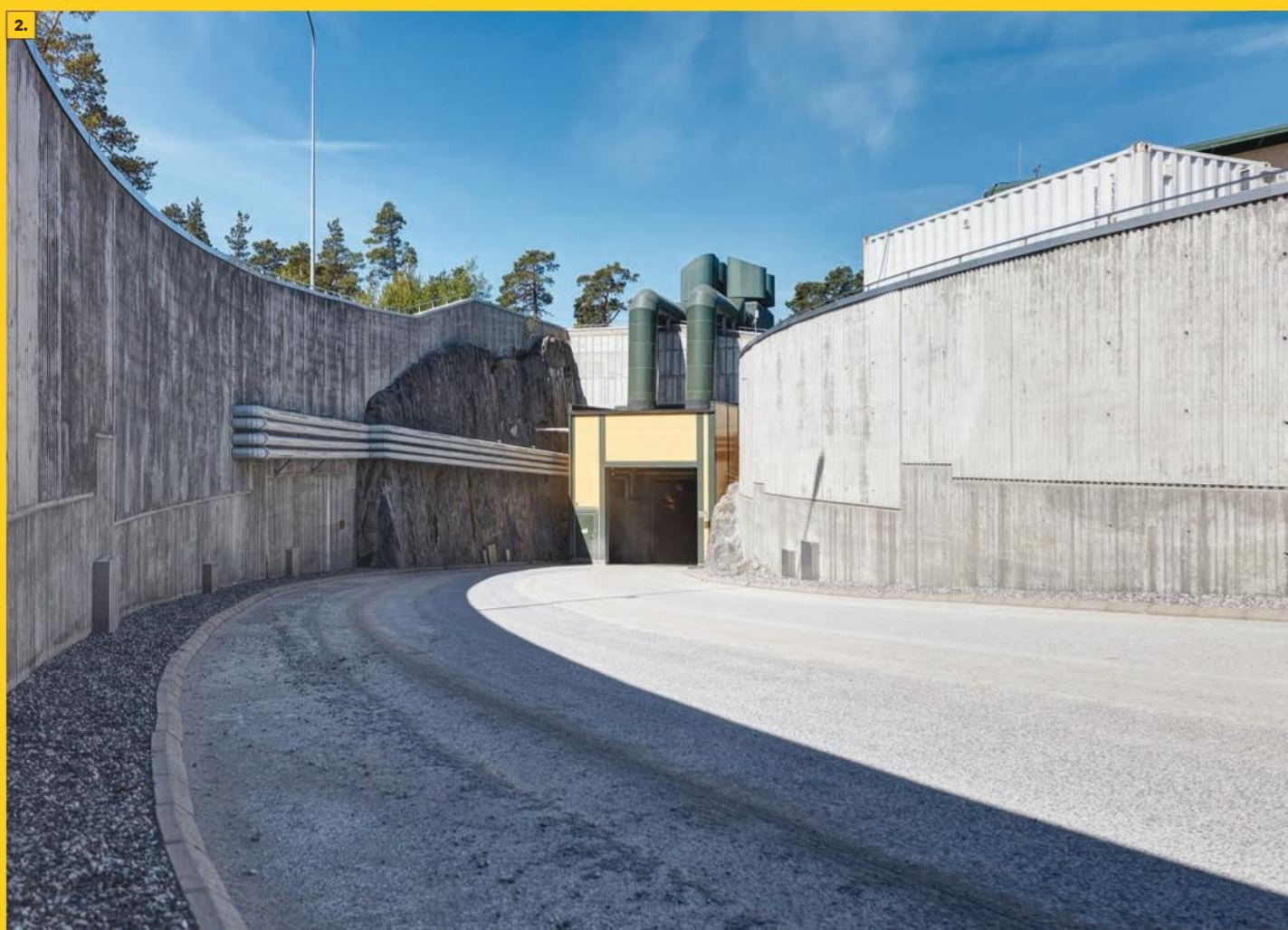
Doing so would require Äikäs and his colleagues to think far, far into the future. They would need to build something to last as long as the spent fuel from nuclear-power plants remains dangerous—between 100,000 and 1 million years. Considering that the pyramids are a mere 4,500 years old, this is an essentially unimaginable span.

When Äikäs began working on the project, repositories were already on the drawing boards in the United States, Sweden, Germany, and elsewhere. The Finns figured that other countries would do the early research and development, and Finland could copy their best ideas. Indeed, the plan Äikäs and his team settled on was borrowed from Sweden, which sits on the same slab of bedrock that Finland does.

Almost 40 years later, Finland is the only country in the world that has a permanent nuclear-waste repository under construction. The projects Äikäs had assumed would be completed long before Finland's have faltered on NIMBY politics. (Around the world, an estimated 250,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel are stored in temporary facilities that are showing their age, and accidents are surprisingly common; several have occurred at U.S. facilities in the past few years alone. Accidents risk exposing people and the environment to radiation, and cleanup costs can run into the billions of dollars.) "Our original strategy—to follow others—has failed," Äikäs says. Nevertheless, the facility he spent his career planning, known as Onkalo—which means "cave" or "hiding place" in Finnish—is on the verge of completion.

The facility's entrance is nestled in an evergreen forest on Olkiluoto, a sparsely inhabited island off Finland's western coast; three nearby nuclear reactors are just out of view, hidden by the surrounding trees. Beyond what looks like an oversize garage door, a tunnel descends nearly 1,500 feet into the bedrock. Eventually, 137 additional tunnels will fan out from the bottom. When the facility is up and running, spent fuel will be packed into 25-ton canisters made of cast iron wrapped in pure copper. The canisters will be stored in specially carved chambers sealed with bentonite clay (the active ingredient in kitty litter), which swells on contact with water.

Onkalo's design is deceptively simple. The near-seamless local bedrock, a type of rock called gneiss, is geologically stable and keeps water out. The bentonite clay will absorb any water that does seep in. The groundwater deep below the surface has a low oxygen content, which makes it less corrosive. And because copper is one of the most stable substances on Earth, geologists say it would take millions of years for groundwater to eat through the canisters. **CONTINUED ON P. 57**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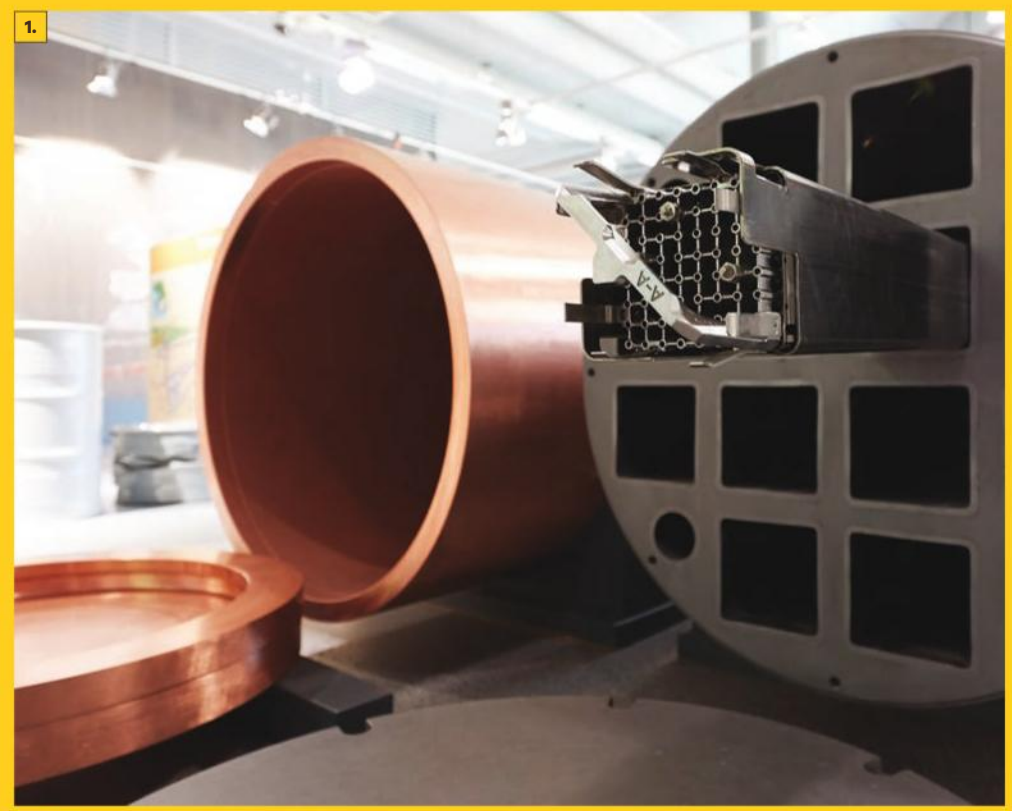
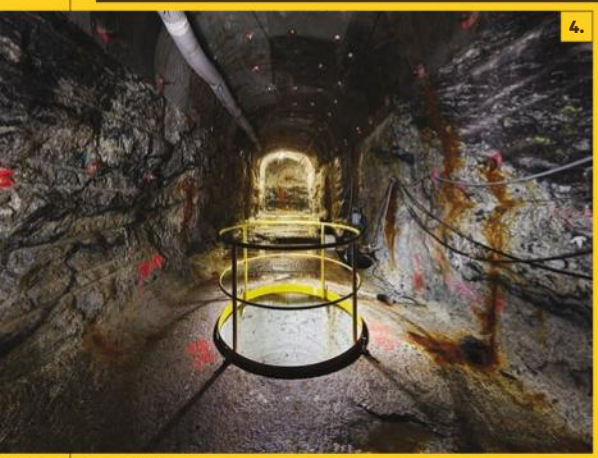
1. Spent nuclear-fuel rods will be encased in cast-iron canisters with a shell made of pure copper, which is extremely resistant to corrosion. The shell is almost two inches thick—equal to a little more than 32 stacked pennies.



2. Beyond Onkalo's entrance, a tunnel extends nearly 1,500 feet below the surface. Planners expect to begin storing radioactive waste here by 2024. In the U.S., local opposition to a repository at Yucca Mountain, in Nevada—once expected to open in 2017—helped derail the project after billions had already been spent on an exploratory tunnel and geological surveys.

3. Geologists and engineers working for Posiva, the Finnish company responsible for building the facility, use chambers like this to measure groundwater seepage in the local bedrock and to gather other data.



4.

5.

4-5. Canisters full of nuclear waste will be welded shut and then lowered into storage shafts as deep as 26 feet. The shafts will then be filled with bentonite clay, a substance that absorbs water.

6. A drill used to place blasting charges. The geologist Ismo Aaltonen likens the underground construction work to mining, with one important difference: Workers will still be active underground a century or more from now.

7. As the repository is filled, operators will use remote-controlled machinery to backfill the tunnels and seal them off. One day, the entire facility may be covered by the surrounding forest and—perhaps—forgotten forever.

7.

6.

8. Engineers use 3-D scanners to measure the tunnels after drilling and blasting.

9. For safety, the tunnel roofs are covered in spray concrete and loose rocks are pried from the walls after blasting.

By then, the radioactive isotopes inside will have degraded to a form that no longer poses a threat to the environment.

Planners have also devoted lots of thought to the question of how to warn our distant descendants, "Don't dig here!" That's because if humans still inhabit the Earth in 100,000 years, they probably won't be able to read our writing. After all, just 10,000 years ago humans were roaming the planet in small groups of hunter-gatherers and using stone tools; we're baffled by Stonehenge, which is only 5,000 years old. One hundred millennia from now, the human race might be totally unrecognizable.

A short-lived academic subfield called nuclear semiotics arose in the 1980s to answer the warning-sign question. It yielded proposals ranging from fields of jagged, menacing stone spikes to cats genetically engineered to change color when exposed to radiation. The idea was that if you were digging and saw cats changing color, you'd be freaked out enough to stop. (The cat plan called for seeding global religions and folklore with the belief that fur fluctuations are a bad omen.)

The Finns have taken a simpler—and much more Finnish—tack: At least for now, they've decided against putting any kind of warning sign on the site at all. "If we mark it, we'd most likely invite people to look and see what's down there," Äikäs says. Instead, they've designed Onkalo to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Äikäs says he purposely chose a location where the boring bedrock wouldn't interest future prospectors looking for metal, ore, or oil deposits. As the tunnels are packed full, they will be backfilled with absorbent clay blocks. Sometime in the early 2100s, the repository will reach capacity. Once that happens, it should require no oversight or management, no guards or electricity. One day, it will likely be covered by the surrounding forest. A few hundred years from now, Onkalo may be all but forgotten.

The Finns avoided the NIMBY problems that have stalled other projects by garnering consensus from the outset. Nearby communities were granted veto rights during the planning process. Äikäs and his team at Posiva, the company in charge of building the facility, spent years organizing town halls, giving tours of mine shafts, and patiently answering questions about the potential risks of a direct meteor strike or future ice age.

Äikäs retired in 2014. Today, Ismo Aaltonen, another young Finnish geologist, is shepherding Onkalo through the final phases of construction and preparation. Aaltonen's colleagues are already planning final practice runs of the disposal procedure, with real canisters and components but no spent fuel, for 2022.

If the practice runs go well, Aaltonen expects to start filling the tunnels with radioactive waste by 2024. It'll be up to his successors, or rather their successors, to complete the task a century or more from now. "I hope I'm not retired when we start disposal," he says. "But I'm sure I'll be dead when we're finished."

Andrew Curry is a journalist based in Berlin.

WILL DONALD TRUMP DESTROY THE PRESIDENCY?

He disdains the rule of law. He's trampling norms of presidential behavior. And he's bringing vital institutions down with him.

BY JACK GOLDSMITH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE McQUADE

DONALD TRUMP IS TESTING THE INSTITUTION OF THE PRESIDENCY

unlike any of his 43 predecessors. We have never had a president so ill-informed about the nature of his office, so openly mendacious, so self-destructive, or so brazen in his abusive attacks on the courts, the press, Congress (including members of his own party), and even senior officials within his own administration. Trump is a Frankenstein's monster of past presidents' worst attributes: Andrew Jackson's rage; Millard Fillmore's bigotry; James Buchanan's incompetence and spite; Theodore Roosevelt's self-aggrandizement; Richard Nixon's paranoia, insecurity, and indifference to law; and Bill Clinton's lack of self-control and reflexive dishonesty.

"Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm," James Madison wrote in one of the *Federalist Papers* during the debates over the ratification of the Constitution. He was right, but he never could have imagined Donald Trump.

At this point in the singular Trump presidency, we can begin to assess its impact on American democracy. The news thus far is not all bad. The Constitution's checks and balances have largely stopped Trump from breaking the law. And while he has hurt his own administration, his successors likely won't repeat his self-destructive antics. The prognosis for the rest of our democratic culture is grimmer, however. Trump's bizarre behavior has coarsened politics and induced harmful norm-breaking by the institutions he has attacked. These changes will be harder to undo.

Trump, in short, is wielding a Soprano touch on American institutions. "I'm fucking King Midas in reverse here," Tony Soprano once told his therapist. "Everything I touch turns to shit."

The Framers of the Constitution wanted to create a powerful, independent executive branch, but they didn't want to stoke fears that the new United States would replicate the monarchy from which it had just separated. Confident that George Washington would be the first chief executive and would use his power responsibly, they established an unstructured office with ambiguous authorities. Article II vests the president with "executive Power," but it doesn't define the term, and it gives the president only a few rather modest enumerated powers.

These vague constitutional contours allowed the presidency to grow, in response to changes in society and the world, into a gargantuan institution that the Framers never could have foreseen. The president's control over the bully pulpit, federal law enforcement, and the national-security establishment has made the office the dominant force in American government and a danger to constitutional liberties. The flexible structure of the office has meant that it is defined largely by the person who occupies it—his character, competence, and leadership skills. Great presidents, such as Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, exercised power wisely (though controversially) to lead the nation through crisis. But Richard Nixon debased the office and betrayed the Constitution and our laws, while others, like Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding, allowed the executive branch to become engulfed in corruption and scandal.

> "HE IS UNLIKELY TO BE CONTAINED BY NORMS AND CUSTOMS, OR EVEN BY LAWS AND THE CONSTITUTION."

This was the background to the near-hysterical worries when Trump became president. During the campaign, he pledged to act in illegal ways; expressed illiberal attitudes toward freedom of speech, religion, and the press; attacked immigrants and minorities; tolerated, and even incited, thuggery at his rallies. The man who on January 20, 2017, took a constitutional oath to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States" seemed disdainful of the rule of law and almost certain to abuse his power. "He is unlikely to be contained by norms and customs, or even by laws and the Constitution," wrote Peter Wehner, a circumspect Republican commentator, in *The New York Times* the day after Trump's inauguration. Wehner captured, in an understated way, prevalent fears about Trump's presidency.

Thus far, however, Trump has been almost entirely blocked from violating laws or the Constitution. The courts, the press, the bureaucracy, civil society, and even Congress have together robustly enforced the rule of law.

Trump's initial executive order on immigration—a temporary ban on entry for people from seven Muslim-majority countries that were not obvious sources of terrorist activity inside the United States—was widely seen as his first step toward authoritarianism. Issued seven days into his presidency, the ban was sloppily written, barely vetted inside the executive branch, legally overbroad, and incompetently rolled out.

The administration gave the people subject to the ban's edicts no notice, which led to bedlam at airports. Many observers believed the immigration order indulged the "symbolic politics of bashing Islam over any actual security interest," as Benjamin Wittes of the Brookings Institution put it at the time.

A crucial moment occurred during the week after Trump issued the order. Civil-society groups such as the ACLU quickly filed habeas corpus petitions asking federal courts to enjoin the order in various ways, which they did. For several days, it was unclear whether border agents were complying with the injunctions, and rumors that Trump or his Department of Homeland Security had ordered them not to filled the news. When a federal district-court judge in Seattle named James Robart halted the entire immigration order nationwide in the middle of the afternoon on Friday, February 3, Twitter and the cable shows were aquiver for several hours with the possibility that Trump would defy the court.

"What would happen if the administration were to simply ignore this court order and continue to deny people entry?," MSNBC national correspondent Joy Reid asked her guests on *All In*. Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson, who had brought the case against Trump, treated the question as a live possibility. "I don't want to be overly dramatic, Joy," he said, "but you would have a constitutional crisis."

The hardest question in American constitutional law was suddenly raised: Why does a president, who controls what Alexander Hamilton described as "the sword of the community," abide by a judicial decision he abhors?

Trump wouldn't have been the first president to flout a court order. Six weeks into the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln defied a ruling by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney that the president lacked the authority to suspend the writ of habeas corpus, and Franklin Roosevelt threatened to ignore the Supreme Court in a World War II case involving Nazi saboteurs. But during the next few decades, judicial authority solidified. Though many worried that Nixon would disobey the Supreme Court in 1974 when it ordered him to turn over his incriminating tapes to a special prosecutor, Nixon famously acquiesced. Would Trump?

We can imagine that he didn't want to. We can imagine him ranting deliriously after Robart issued his decision. But at 10:05 p.m., the White House put out a statement declaring that the Justice Department would seek to stay the "outrageous order," which meant that the executive branch would pursue review in higher courts. And 10 hours later, at 8:12 a.m., the incensed chief executive tweeted the first of many attacks against Robart. "The opinion of this so-called judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned!," Trump wrote. He would appeal, rather than defy, Robart's injunction.

We don't know why Trump acquiesced. Perhaps his staff convinced him that ignoring the ruling would spark resignations in the White House and the Justice Department, as well as congressional reprisal, which would jeopardize his two-week-old presidency. Whatever the reason, the most powerful man in the world complied with the edict of a little-known federal trial judge on an issue at the top of his agenda. The Constitution held.

The still-unfolding Russia investigation is a second context in which checks and balances have worked well thus far. The possibility that the president's inner circle might have colluded with our fiercest adversary to sway the 2016 election, or might have other inappropriate ties to Russian interests, is the most serious instance of potential presidential malfeasance since Watergate. In trying to influence the investigation, Trump has acted much like Nixon did. He has pressured his senior intelligence and law-enforcement officials to help clear his name and fired the original lead investigator, FBI Director James Comey. Unlike Nixon, Trump has also publicly attacked just about everyone involved in investigating him. And yet every institution has stood firm.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions made his boss furious by following the Justice Department's rules and recusing himself from the matter because of his involvement in the Trump campaign. Many feared that the FBI's investigation would flounder when Trump fired Comey. But the opposite happened. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, another Trump appointee, angered the president but also followed the rules in appointing a special counsel, the esteemed former FBI director Robert Mueller, to investigate the matter. Mueller has assembled a formidable squad of prosecutors and investigators and impaneled a grand jury.

Trump has sharply criticized Sessions's and Mueller's roles in the Russia investigation, raising concerns that he might fire one or both. (As of press time, he had not done so.) But such a step would not take the heat off him any more than canning Comey did. Firing Mueller in particular would be almost exactly like Nixon's infamous order to dismiss the Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox, known as the "Saturday Night Massacre," and it would invite the same heightened suspicion and blowback as befell Nixon. Justice Department leaders would face pressure to appoint a new and undeniably independent special counsel, who would have every incentive to replicate Mueller's aggressive investigation.

The Republican-controlled Congress would also likely act. Many believe Congress hasn't done enough to stand up to Trump. But in the context of facing a Republican president in his honeymoon first year, it has been remarkably tough. This summer, by large bipartisan majorities, it passed a law imposing sanctions on Russia that Trump abhorred and that curbed his power. Congress has also shown backbone in investigating the Trump campaign's connection to Russian election meddling. The Senate Intelligence Committee has been conducting a "notoriously bipartisan" investigation, as *The Washington Post* put it. Representative Devin Nunes of California, the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, appeared to be in Trump's pocket and trying to delegitimize the committee's investigation. But the press uncovered his shenanigans, Nunes stepped aside, and the House has since been pursuing the matter more seriously. Republican senators also rose to Sessions's defense when Trump openly attacked him, and they have signaled strong support for Mueller. These efforts reflect unusual Republican distrust of a Republican president, and would surely ramp up if Trump fired Sessions or Mueller.

A symbiotic relationship between the bureaucracy and the press has also exposed abuses and illegalities. National-Security Adviser Michael Flynn's lies about his Russian contacts were leaked and reported, and forced his resignation. When *The New York Times* published a leaked draft of an executive order that would have restored CIA authority for black sites and enhanced interrogation, the outcry in Congress and elsewhere killed the order. Trump and his family have not yet been brought to heel on their business conflicts of interest. Checks have been weakest here, but that is mainly because the Constitution and laws are ambiguous on such conflicts, and are not designed for judicial enforcement. Nonetheless, several imaginative lawsuits have been filed against Trump and his associates, and the press has done a good job of bringing conflicts to light.

▲ Past presidents have broken norms, too. But Trump's norm-breaking is different, both in scale and in intent.

JOE RAEDLE/GETTY

In these and other ways, actors inside and outside the executive branch have so far stymied Trump's tendencies toward lawlessness. One might even say that in the first year of his presidency, Trump has invigorated constitutional checks and balances, and the nation's appreciation for them.

Trump has been less constrained by norms, the non-legal principles of appropriate behavior that presidents and other officials tacitly accept and that typically structure their actions. Norms, not laws, create the expectation that a president will take regular intelligence briefings, pay public respect to our allies, and not fire the FBI director for declining to pledge his loyalty. There is no canonical list of presidential norms. They are rarely noticed until they are violated.

Donald Trump is a norm-busting president without parallel in American history. He has told scores of easily disprovable public lies; he has shifted back and forth and back again on his policies, often contradicting Cabinet officials along the way; he has attacked the courts, the press, his predecessor, his former electoral opponent, members of his party, the intelligence community, and even his own attorney general; he has failed to release his tax returns or to fill senior political positions in many agencies; he has shown indifference to ethics concerns; he has regularly interjected a self-regarding political element into apolitical events; he has monetized the presidency by linking it to his personal business interests; and he has engaged in cruel public behavior. The list goes on and on.

Presidential norm-breaking is neither new nor always bad. Thomas Jefferson refused to continue the practice begun by George Washington and John Adams of delivering the State of the Union address in person before Congress, because he believed it resembled the British monarch speaking before Parliament. For the next 112 years, presidents conveyed the State of the Union in writing—until Woodrow Wilson astonished Congress by addressing it in person, a practice that once again settled into a norm. Wilson's novel step was part of a broader change from the 19th century, when giving policy speeches before the public was rare and controversial for a president, to the 20th century, when mass oratory became a routine tool of presidential leadership. Although the Constitution allowed presidents to serve for more than two consecutive terms, no one did so until Franklin Roosevelt won a third term, in 1940. Roosevelt tried but failed to break another norm when he sought to increase the number of Supreme Court justices in order to secure more favorable interpretations of his New Deal programs.

These and countless other examples show that presidential norm violations have often been central to presidential leadership. Even if presidents don't always get the calculation right (Roosevelt's court-packing plan was and remains almost universally derided), they usually break norms to try to improve the operations of government.

Trump's norm violations are different. Many of them appear to result from his lack of emotional intelligence—a "president's ability to manage his emotions and turn them to constructive purposes, rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish his leadership," as the Princeton political scientist Fred I. Greenstein has put it. Trump's behavior seems to flow from hypersensitivity untempered by shame, a mercurial and contrarian personality, and a notable lack of self-control.

A corollary to Trump's shamelessness is that he often doesn't seek to hide or even spin his norm-breaking. Put another way, he is far less hypocritical than past presidents—and that is a bad thing. Hypocrisy is an underappreciated political virtue. It can palliate self-interested and politically divisive government action through mollifying rhetoric and a call to shared values. Trump is bad at it because he can't "recognize the difference between what one professes in public and what one does in private, much less the utility of exploiting that difference," Henry Farrell and Martha Finnemore have noted in *Foreign Affairs*. He is incapable of keeping his crass thoughts to himself, or of cloaking his speech in other-regarding principle.

Commentary about Trump's behavior has tended to assume that presidential norms, once broken, are hard if not impossible to restore. This can be true, but in Trump's case isn't. Presidents don't embrace their predecessors' norm entrepreneurship unless it brings political advantage, and Trump's hasn't. His successors are no more likely to replicate his self-destructive antics than they would be if he yelled at the first lady during a public dinner or gave a televised address from the White House Rose Garden in his bathrobe.

Another reason presidential norms will prove resilient is that Trump's aberrant actions have been sweepingly condemned. He has been rebuked for his attacks on investigatory independence not just by his political opponents but by more-sympathetic voices in the Republican Party and on the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, and even, implicitly, by his own Justice Department appointees, who have continued the Russia investigation despite his pushback. Trump's response to the violent demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August produced a uniform outcry that will reinforce norms for future presidents about denouncing racism and racial violence. The majority of the other presidential norms that Trump has defied will similarly be strengthened by the reactions to his behavior, and will snap back in the next presidency.

But that doesn't mean virtuous norms will hold elsewhere.

TRUMP IS FAR LESS HYPOCRITICAL THAN PAST PRESIDENTS—AND THAT IS A BAD THING.

During the presidential campaign, Trump gave his challengers derogatory nicknames. Hillary Clinton was "Crooked Hillary." Jeb Bush was "Low-Energy Jeb." Ted Cruz was "Lyin' Ted." And Marco Rubio was "Little Marco." Trump's taunts exceeded the bounds of campaign decorum but generated attention and helped distinguish him from the stale, conventional elite wisdom reflected by other candidates in both parties. (Norm-breaking helped him more during the campaign than it has in the presidency.)

Two days before Super Tuesday, on February 28, 2016, Rubio decided to fight back. "Have you seen his hands?," Rubio asked the audience at a rally at Roanoke College. "You know what they say about men with small hands." The college students loved the juvenile humor, and Rubio briefly got the increased cable coverage he sought. But he had sacrificed his integrity, and his campaign collapsed. Immediately after the remark, "Rubio's aides were besieged with dazed and irate missives from donors, allies, and friends" because his "reputation as conservatism's upbeat, optimistic standard-bearer—so meticulously crafted over so many years—was dissolving before their eyes," Tim Alberta reported in *National Review*. Rubio later admitted that the gambit had been a mistake, and apologized. "I didn't like what it reflected on me," he said. "It embarrassed my family. It's not who I am."

What happened to Marco Rubio on the campaign trail is now happening to a variety of American institutions. These institutions have risen up to check a president they fear. But in some instances, they have defied their own norms, and harmed themselves and the nation in the process. Unfortunately, many of these norm violations will be hard to reverse.

Since the day of Trump's election, members of the federal bureaucracy have taken unusual steps to stop him. Soon after November 8, online guides for how to "resist from below" or to "dissent from within" the administration popped up. During the transition, and continuing after the inauguration, federal employees who were repulsed by the new president and his agenda discussed strategies to hide or alter documents, leak damaging information, and slow down the process of changing government policy. "You're going to see the bureaucrats using time to their advantage," an anonymous Justice Department official told *The Washington Post* in January. "People here will resist and push back against orders they find unconscionable."

These tactics had been used before; clashes between the governing class and a new administration are not uncommon. But the scale of the effort, and especially how it was coordinated, was new. "Federal workers are in regular consultation with recently departed Obama-era political appointees about what they can do to push back against the new president's initiatives," *The Washington Post* reported. Federal employees used encrypted communications to avoid detection by the president's team, and a number of anonymous Twitter accounts attributed to government officials—@Rogue_DoD, @alt_labor, and the like—cropped up to organize resistance and release damaging information about the administration.

Leaks are not new, but we have never seen anything like the daily barrage of leaks that have poured out of Trump's executive branch. Not all of them have come from bureaucrats; Trump appointees have engaged in leaking too. But many of the leaks appear to have come from career civil servants who seek to discredit or undermine the president. And many involve types of information that have never been leaked before. In August, *The Washington Post* published complete transcripts of conversations Trump had had with the prime minister of Australia and the president of Mexico. These leaks were "unprecedented, shocking, and dangerous," as David Frum wrote for *The Atlantic*'s website. "No leader will again speak candidly on the phone to Washington, D.C.—at least for the duration of this presidency, and perhaps for longer."

The most-harmful leaks have been of information collected in the course of surveillance of Russian officials. The first, in February 2017, concerned a December 2016 court-approved National Security Agency wiretap of a phone conversation between the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, and the incoming national-security adviser, Michael Flynn, that included a discussion of U.S. sanctions against Russia. (This was the leak that exposed Flynn's lies and led to his resignation.) Other leaks by current and former intelligence officials have involved intercepts of Russian government officials discussing "derogatory" information about Trump and his campaign staff; of other Russian officials bragging that they could use their relationship with Flynn to influence Trump; of Kislyak claiming to have discussed campaign-related issues with then-Senator Sessions; and of Kislyak reporting to Moscow that Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, wanted to establish a secure communication channel.

The leaks of Russia intercepts may seem commonplace, but they violated taboos that had been respected even in the wild west of unlawful government disclosures. The first was a taboo against publishing the contents of foreign intelligence intercepts, especially ones involving a foe like Russia. It is hard to recall another set of leaks that exposed so much specific information about intelligence intercepts of a major adversary. This form of leaking risks compromising a communication channel and thus telling an adversary how to avoid detection in the future. The Russia leaks may well have burned large investments in electronic surveillance and constricted future U.S. surveillance opportunities.

The Russia leaks also breached a taboo against revealing information about U.S. citizens "incidentally collected" during surveillance of a foreign agent. The government acquires this type of data without suspicion that the citizen has engaged in wrongdoing, and thus without constitutional privacy protections. For this reason, it is typically treated with special care inside the government. The gush of this information to the public was an astounding breach of privacy. It also violated yet another taboo—against using intelligence information for political ends. In the bad old

Among Trump's countless norm violations: giving an overtly political speech at the National Scout Jamboree, in July

days when J. Edgar Hoover ran the FBI, the bureau regularly leaked (or threatened to leak) secretly collected intelligence information about U.S. citizens, including government officials, in order to influence democratic politics. The intelligence reforms of the mid-1970s and beyond eliminated this pernicious practice for four decades and were believed to have created a culture that would prevent its recurrence. The anti-Trump leaks mark a dangerous throwback.

These norm violations are an immune response to Trump's attacks on the intelligence community. But the toll from the leaks has been significant and may outlast the Trump presidency. Although a future president likely won't find advantage in following Trump's example, intelligence officials who have discovered the political power of leaking secretly collected information about Americans may well continue the practice. A world without norms to prevent the disclosure of sensitive information about U.S. citizens is not just a world in which Michael Flynn is revealed as a liar and removed from office. It is also a world in which intelligence bureaucrats repeat the trick for very different political ends that they deem worthy but that might not be.

Trump has not attacked the U.S. military while president, but he has taken a wrecking ball to customs of civilian–military relations. More than other presidents, he has staffed senior positions with current and former military brass. He has attempted to leverage popular admiration for the military into backing for his policies, such as by signing his initial executive order on immigration in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes and by giving political speeches before military audiences. He has even urged soldiers to contact members of Congress in support of his policies, contrary to regulations and customs forbidding them from lobbying. These practices threaten to politicize the military and leave "tattered shreds of the military's ethics and values in their wake," Phillip Carter of the Center for a New American Security wrote for *Slate*. Even if future presidents don't repeat Trump's practices, he will have done great harm if attitudes change within the military toward the chain of command and the appropriateness of service members' engagement in politics.

SAUL LOEB/GETTY

Trump is also politicizing the judiciary. He has accused the judges reviewing his January immigration order, and a replacement order he signed in March, of trampling presidential prerogatives and endangering national security. But the judges reviewing Trump's orders engaged in norm-breaking behavior of their own.

Courts have always been political, in the sense that laws and precedents don't always yield obvious answers and, especially in high-stakes cases, judges' personal views can matter. But it is important to judicial legitimacy that judges appear neutral and detached, that they appear to follow precedent, and that they appear to pay presidents appropriate deference and respect. This is especially true in cases touching on immigration and national security, where the executive branch's authority is at its height.

In the Trump immigration cases, the judges sometimes abandoned these norms. They were in a tough spot because they were reviewing extraordinary executive-branch actions in a highly charged context. But they reacted with hasty and, in some ways, sloppy judicial opinions. They issued broad injunctions unsupported by the underlying legal analysis. They seemed to extend constitutional protections to noncitizens who lacked any connection to the United States. And they failed to give the government's national-security determinations proper deference.

The judges had many avenues to rule against Trump on many issues, especially with regard to the first order. They had plenty of reasons to be angry or defensive because of his tweeted attacks. But they neglected principles of restraint, prudence, and precedent to rule against him across the board based on what seemed to many a tacit determination that the just-elected president lacked legitimacy on immigration issues.

If judges were to continue such behavior for four or eight years, judicial norms and trust in the judiciary might take a serious hit. But there are reasons to think this won't happen. Federal judges sit in a hierarchical system with the Supreme Court at the top. The highest court in the land doesn't just overrule lower-court legal decisions; it can also model proper judicial behavior. This is what the Supreme Court did in its opinion in late June announcing that it would review the lower-court decisions about Trump's second immigration order. The nine justices rarely agree on any issue of importance. But they unanimously ruled that, at a minimum, the lower-court injunctions were too broad and had failed to take his national-security prerogatives seriously enough.

The Court did not indicate how it will ultimately rule. But its sober, respectful, low-temperature opinion sent a strong signal about the importance of judicial detachment. For this reason, the judiciary has a fighting chance to return to normal patterns.

The same cannot be said of the norms that govern the news media. Journalistic practices, of course, were already evolving as a result of social media, the decentralization of news production, and changing financial models. But Trump has had a distinct effect.

The vast majority of elite journalists have a progressive outlook, which influences what gets covered, and how, in ways that many Americans, especially outside of big cities, find deeply biased. The press was among the least trusted of American institutions long before Trump assaulted it as the "enemy of the people" and the "lowest form of life." Members of the media viewed these attacks, correctly, as an effort by Trump to discredit, marginalize, and even dehumanize them. And they were shocked when the strategy worked. "The country was really angry at the elite, and that included us, and I don't think we quite had our finger on it," Dean Baquet, the executive editor of *The New York Times*, said with exquisite understatement during a roundtable discussion with his reporters in June.

After the election, news organizations devoted more resources than ever to White House coverage, and they have produced exceptional in-depth reporting that has been integral to the constitutional checks on the presidency. Reporting on a

flagrantly norm-breaking president produces a novel conundrum, however. A Harvard study found that Trump's mainstream coverage during the first 100 days of his presidency "set a new standard for negativity": four negative stories for each positive one and no single major topic on which he received more positive than negative coverage. Many Trump critics insist that his behavior justifies this level of adverse scrutiny. But even if that is true, the overall effect can make the press seem heavily biased and out to get Trump. "Every time he lies you have to point out it's a lie, and there's a part of this country that hears that as an attack," the *New York Times* media columnist, Jim Rutenberg, said at the June roundtable. "That is a serious problem." Trump's extremes require the mainstream press to choose between appearing oppositional or, if it tones things down, "normalizing" his presidency. Either way, Trump in some sense wins.

The appearance problem that Rutenberg described is real. But it is also true that many reporters covering Trump have overreacted and exaggerated and interjected opinion into their stories more than usual. In doing so, they have veered from the norm of "independence" and instead are "binge-drinking the anti-Trump Kool-Aid," as the venerable Bob Woodward argued in May. Such excesses lend credence to Trump's attacks on "the fake-news media."

So, too, do other changes in the norms of covering the president. Many journalists let their hair down on Twitter with opinionated anti-Trump barbs that reveal predispositions and shape the way readers view their reporting. And news outlets have at times seemed to cast themselves as part of the resistance to Trump, and seen their revenues soar. (It cannot be an accident that *The Washington Post*'s "Democracy dies in darkness" motto, though used in-house for years, was rolled out publicly in February.) Just as Trump drew energy and numbers on the campaign trail from the excessive coverage of his norm-busting behavior, the news media seem to draw energy and numbers from their own norm-busting behavior.

REPORTERS ARE "BINGE-DRINKING THE ANTI-TRUMP KOOL-AID," BOB WOODWARD SAYS.

But while Trumpism has been good for the media business, it has not been good for overall media credibility. An Emerson College poll in February indicated that more voters found Trump to be truthful than the news media, and a Suffolk University/*USA Today* poll in June concluded that the historically unpopular president still had a slightly higher favorability rating than the media. Trump is not just discrediting the mainstream news, but quickening changes in right-wing media as well. Fox News Channel always leaned right, but in the past year several of its programs have become open propaganda arms for Trump. And sharply partisan outlets like *Breitbart News* and *The Daily Caller* have grown in influence among conservatives.

"Does it ever go back?" chief White House correspondent Peter Baker asked his *Times* colleagues. "Have we changed something in a fundamental way in terms of the relationship between the person in the White House, people in power, and the media?" The answers to those questions are no and yes, respectively. The media have every incentive to continue on their current trajectories. And because Trump's extreme media-bashing is perceived to have served him relatively well, other Republicans will likely perpetuate his strategy. Many on the right increasingly agree with a point Ron Unz, the influential former publisher of *The American Conservative*, made in a memo last year. "The media is the crucial force empowering the opposition and should be regarded as a primary target of any political strategy," Unz wrote. "Discrediting the media anywhere weakens it everywhere."

Citizens' trust in American institutions has been in decline for a while. That's one reason Donald Trump was elected. His assault on those institutions, and the defiant reactions to his assault, will further diminish that trust and make it yet harder to resolve social and political disputes. The breakdown in institutions mirrors the breakdown in social cohesion among citizens that was also a major cause of Trumpism, and that Trumpism has churned further. This is perhaps the worst news of all for our democracy. As Cass Sunstein lamented in his book *#Republic*, "Members of a democratic public will not do well if they are unable to appreciate the views of their fellow citizens, if they believe 'fake news,' or if they see one another as enemies or adversaries in some kind of war."

To that depressing conclusion I will add another. The relatively hopeful parts of the analysis offered here—that the Constitution has prevented presidential law-breaking, and that most of Trump's norm violations will not persist—rest on a pair of assumptions that have so far prevailed but that might not hold in the future. The first is that Trump's presidency, which has accomplished little, will continue to fail and that he will not be reelected. But it is conceivable that he will turn things around—for example, by pulling off tax and infrastructure reform and putting Kim Jong Un in a box—and win the 2020 election, perhaps in a three-way race. If Trump succeeds and makes it to a second term, his norm-breaking will be seen to serve the presidency more than it does today. If that happens, the office will be forever changed, and not for the better.

The second assumption is that the country is fundamentally stable. In Trump's first seven months in office, the stock market boomed and the United States faced no full-blown national-security crisis. But what if the economy collapses, or the country faces a major domestic terrorist attack or even nuclear war? What if Mueller finds evidence that Trump colluded with the Russians—and Trump fires not just Mueller but also scores of others in the Justice Department, and pardons himself and everyone else involved? These are not crazy possibilities. The Constitution has held thus far and might continue to do so under more-extreme circumstances. But it also might not.

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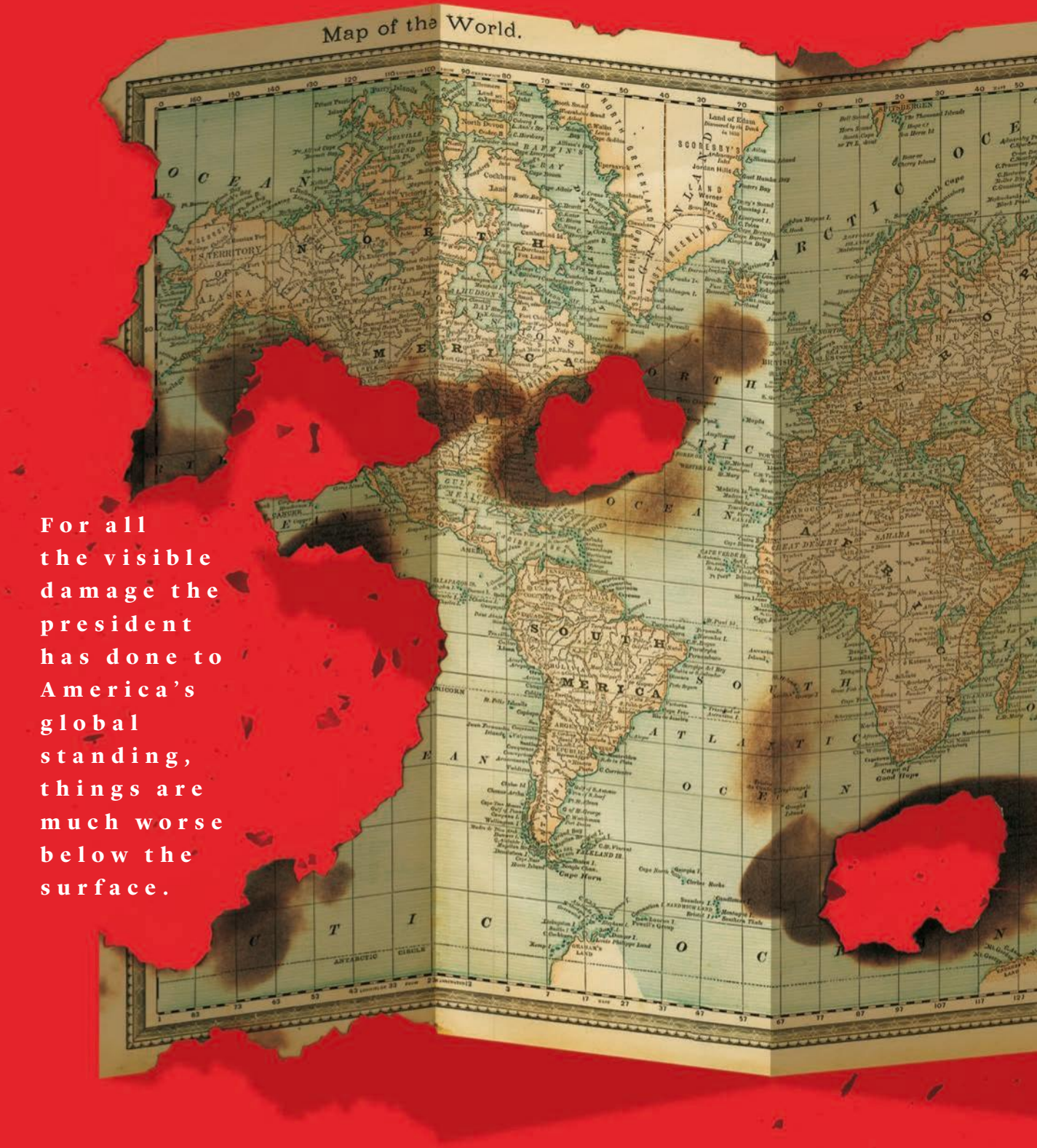
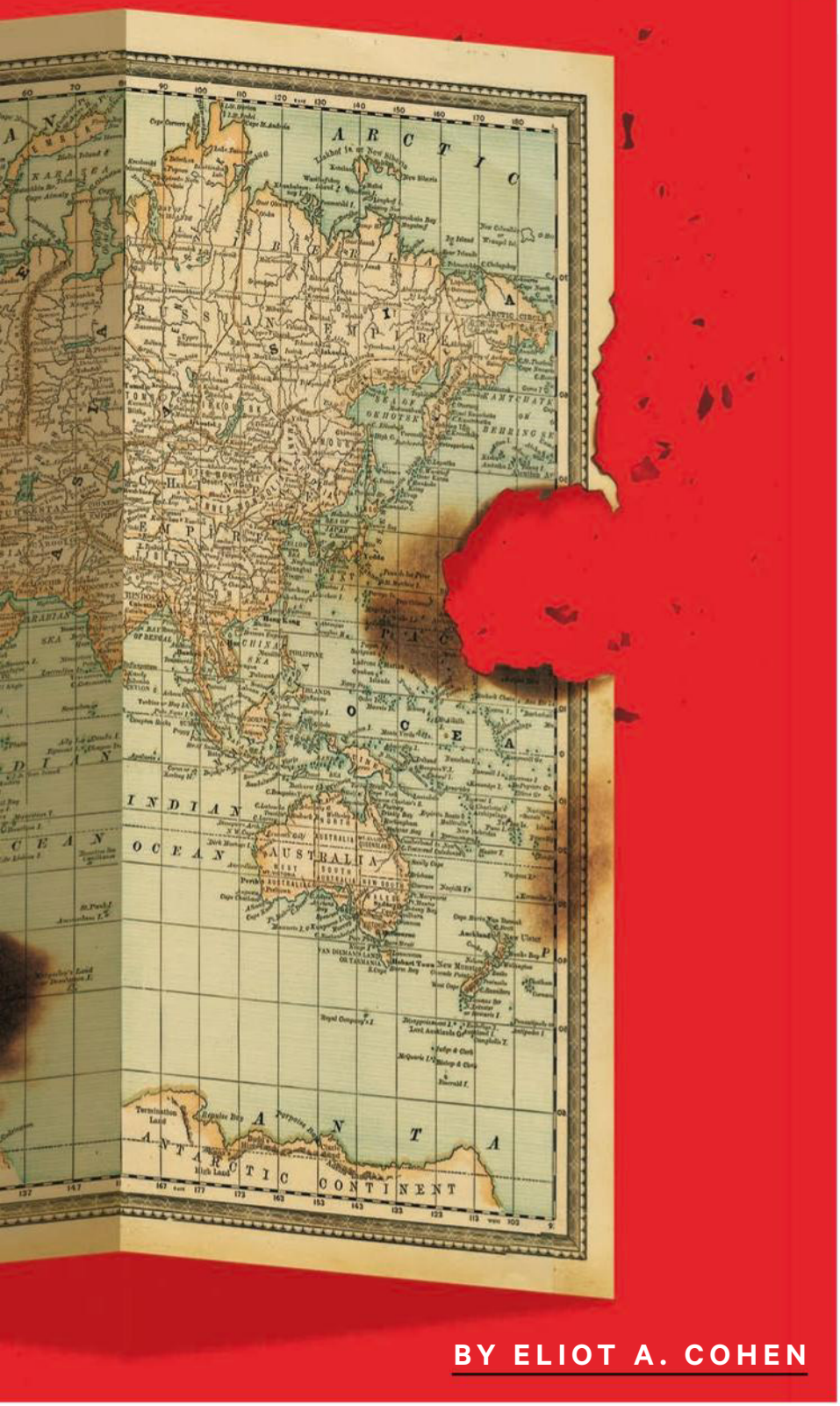


For all the visible damage the president has done to America's global standing, things are much worse below the surface.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE McQUADE

AMERICAN ERA?



BY ELIOT A. COHEN

Donald Trump was right. He inherited a mess. In January 2017, American foreign policy was, if not in crisis, in big trouble. Strong forces were putting stress on the old global political order: the rise of China to a power with more than half the productive capacity of the United States (and defense spending to match); the partial recovery of a resentful Russia under a skilled and thuggish autocrat; the discrediting of Western elites by the financial crash of 2008, followed by roiling populist waves, of which Trump himself was part; a turbulent Middle East; economic dislocations worldwide.

An American leadership that had partly discredited itself over the past generation compounded these problems. The Bush administration's war against jihadist Islam had been undermined by reports of mistreatment and torture; its Afghan campaign had been inconclusive; its invasion of Iraq had been deeply compromised by what turned out to be a false premise and three years of initial mismanagement.

The Obama administration's policy of retrenchment (described by a White House official as "leading from behind") made matters worse. The United States was generally passive as a war that caused some half a million deaths raged in Syria. The ripples of the conflict reached far into Europe, as some 5 million Syrians fled the country. A red line about the use of chemical weapons turned pale pink and vanished, as Iran and Russia expanded their presence and influence in Syria ever more brazenly. A debilitating freeze in defense spending, meanwhile, left two-thirds of U.S. Army maneuver brigades unready to fight and Air Force pilots unready to fly in combat.

These circumstances would have caused severe headaches for a competent and sophisticated successor. Instead, the United States got a president who had unnervingly promised a wall on the southern border (paid for by Mexico), the dismantlement of long-standing trade deals with both competitors and partners, a closer relationship with Vladimir Putin, and a ban on Muslims coming into the United States.

Some of these and Trump's other wild pronouncements were quietly walked back or put on hold after his inauguration; one defense of Trump is that his deeds are less alarming than his

words. But diplomacy is about words, and many of Trump's words are profoundly toxic.

Trump seems incapable of restraining himself from insulting foreign leaders. His slogan "America First" harks back to the isolationists of 1940, and foreign leaders know it. He can read speeches written for him by others, as he did in Warsaw on July 6, but he cannot himself articulate a worldview that goes beyond a teenager's bluster. He lays out his resentments, insecurities, and obsessions on Twitter for all to see, opening up a gold mine to foreign governments seeking to understand and manipulate the American president.

Foreign governments have adapted. They flatter Trump outrageously. Their emissaries stay at his hotels and offer the Trump Organization abundant concessions (39 trademarks approved by China alone since Trump took office, including one for an escort service). They take him to military parades; they talk tough-guy-to-tough-guy; they show him the kind of deference that only someone without a center can crave. And so he flip-flops: Paris was no longer "so, so out of control, so dangerous" once he'd had dinner in the Eiffel Tower; Xi Jinping, during an April visit to Mar-a-Lago, went from being the leader of a parasitic country intent on ripping off American workers to being "a gentleman" who "wants to do the right thing." (By July, Trump was back to bashing China, for doing "NOTHING" to help us.)

In short, foreign leaders may consider Trump alarming, but they do not consider him serious. They may think they can use him, but they know they cannot rely on him. They look at his plans to slash the State Department's ranks and its budget—the latter by about 30 percent—and draw conclusions about his interest in traditional diplomacy. And so, already, they have begun to reshape alliances and reconfigure the networks that make up the global economy, bypassing the United States and diminishing its standing. In January, at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, Xi made a case for Chinese global leadership that was startlingly well received by the rich and powerful officials, businesspeople, and experts in attendance. In March, Canada formally joined a Chinese-led regional development bank that the Obama administration had opposed as an instrument of broadened Chinese influence; Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France were among the founding members. In July, Japan and Europe agreed on a free-trade deal as an alternative to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Trump had unceremoniously discarded.

FOREIGN LEADERS HAVE BEGUN TO RESHAPE ALLIANCES, BYPASSING AND DIMINISHING THE UNITED STATES.

In almost every region of the world, the administration has already left a mark, by blunder, inattention, miscomprehension, or willfulness. Trump's first official visit abroad began in Saudi Arabia—a bizarre choice, when compared with established democratic allies—where he and his senior advisers offered unreserved praise for a kingdom that has close relations with the United States but has also been the heartland of Islamist fanaticism since well before 9/11. The president full-throatedly took its side in a dispute with Qatar, apparently ignorant of the vast American air base in the latter country. He has seemed unaware that he is feeding an inchoate but violent conflict between the Gulf kingdoms and a countervailing coalition of Iran, Russia, Syria, Hezbollah, and even Turkey—which now plans to deploy as many as 3,000 troops to Qatar, at its first base in the Arab world since the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of World War I.

The administration obsesses about defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and yet intends to sharply reduce the kinds of advice and support that are needed to rebuild the areas devastated by war in those same countries—support that might help prevent a future recurrence of Islamist fanaticism. The president, entranced by the chimera of an Israeli–Palestinian peace, has put his inexperienced and overburdened son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in charge of a process headed nowhere. Either ignorant or contemptuous of the deep-seated maladies that have long afflicted the Arab world, Trump embraces authoritarians like Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ("Love your shoes") and seems to dismiss the larger problems of governance posed by the crises within Middle Eastern societies as internal issues irrelevant to the United States. A freedom agenda, in either its original Bush or subsequent Obama form, is dead.

In Europe, the administration has picked a fight with the Continent's most important democratic state, Germany ("Bad, very bad"). Trump is sufficiently despised in Great Britain, America's most enduring ally, that he will reportedly defer a trip there until his press improves (it will not). Paralyzed by scandal and internal division, the administration has no coherent Russia policy: no plan for getting Moscow back out of the Middle East; no counter to Russian political subversion in Europe or the United States; no response to reports of new Russian meddling in Afghanistan. Rather than pushing back when the Russians announced in July that 755 U.S. government employees would be expelled, Trump expressed his thanks for saving taxpayers 755 salaries.

America's new circumstances in Asia were not much better as this story went to press, in mid-August—and with the world on edge, they could quickly get much worse. Though North Korea is on the verge of developing a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile, Trump neglected to rally American allies to confront the problem during his two major trips abroad. His aides proclaimed that they had discovered the solution, Chinese intervention—apparently unaware of the repeated failure of that gambit in the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. Trump did, however, take a break from a golfing holiday to threaten North Korea with "fire and fury" in the event that Kim Jong Un failed to pipe down. To accommodate a president fixated on economic deals, an anxious Japan has pledged investments that would result in American jobs. A prickly Australia, whose prime minister Trump snarled at during their first courtesy phone call, has edged further from its traditional alliance with America—an alliance that has been the cornerstone of its security since World War II. (In a gesture

that may seem trivial but signifies much, in July Australia's foreign minister, Julie Bishop, slapped at Trump for his ogling of the French president's wife, suggesting that his admiring looks had gone unreciprocated.)

On issues that are truly global in scope, Trump has abdicated leadership and the moral high ground. The United States has managed to isolate itself on the topic of climate change, by the tone of its pronouncements no less than by its precipitous exit from the Paris Agreement. As for human rights, the president has taken only cursory notice of the two arrests of the Russian dissident Alexei Navalny or the death of the Chinese Nobel Prize winner and prisoner of conscience Liu Xiaobo. Trump did not object after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's security detail beat American protesters on American soil, in Washington, D.C. In April, he reportedly told Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte, who has used death squads to deal with offenders of local narcotics laws, that he was doing an "unbelievable job on the drug problem." Trump's secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, made it clear in his first substantive speech to State Department employees that American values are now of at best secondary importance to "American interests," presumably economic, in the conduct of foreign policy.

All this well before a year was out.

THE COMPOUNDING RISK OF CRISIS

Matters will not improve. Trump will not learn, will not moderate, will not settle into normal patterns of behavior. And for all the rot that is visible in America's standing and ability to influence global affairs, more is spreading beneath the surface. Even when Trump's foreign policy looks shakily mediocre rather than downright crazy, it is afflicting the U.S. with a condition not unlike untreated high blood pressure. Enormous foreign-policy failures are like heart attacks: unexpected and dangerous discontinuities following years of neglect and hidden malady. The vertigo and throbbing pulse one feels today augur something much worse tomorrow.

To a degree rarely appreciated outside Washington, it is virtually impossible to conduct an effective foreign policy without political appointees at the assistant-secretary rank who share a president's conceptions and will implement his agenda. As of mid-August, the administration had yet to even nominate a new undersecretary of state for political affairs; assistant secretaries for Near Eastern, East Asian and Pacific, or Western Hemisphere Affairs; or ambassadors to Germany, India, or Saudi Arabia. At lower levels, the State Department is being actively thinned out—2,300 jobs are slated for elimination—and is losing experience by the week as disaffected professionals quietly leave.

High-level diplomatic contact with allies and adversaries alike has withered. Meanwhile, for fear of contradicting him, Trump's underlings avoid saying too much publicly. As a result, the administration's foreign policy will continue to be as opaque externally as it is confused internally.

One consequence will be a corresponding confusion on the part of foreign powers about the administration's goals, commitments, and red lines—and the likely misinterpretation of stray signals. Even well-run administrations can fail to communicate their intentions clearly, with dire consequences. On July 25, 1990, the American ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, met with Saddam Hussein. Glaspie assured Saddam of President George H. W. Bush's friendship and, although the administration was concerned about a possible Iraqi attack on Kuwait, blandly remarked that "we have no opinion on the Arab–Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait." A week later, Saddam's troops invaded Kuwait, and he was surprised when Bush did not take it well. Again, this happened in a competent administration. One shudders to think what the Trump equivalent might be with regard to, say, Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

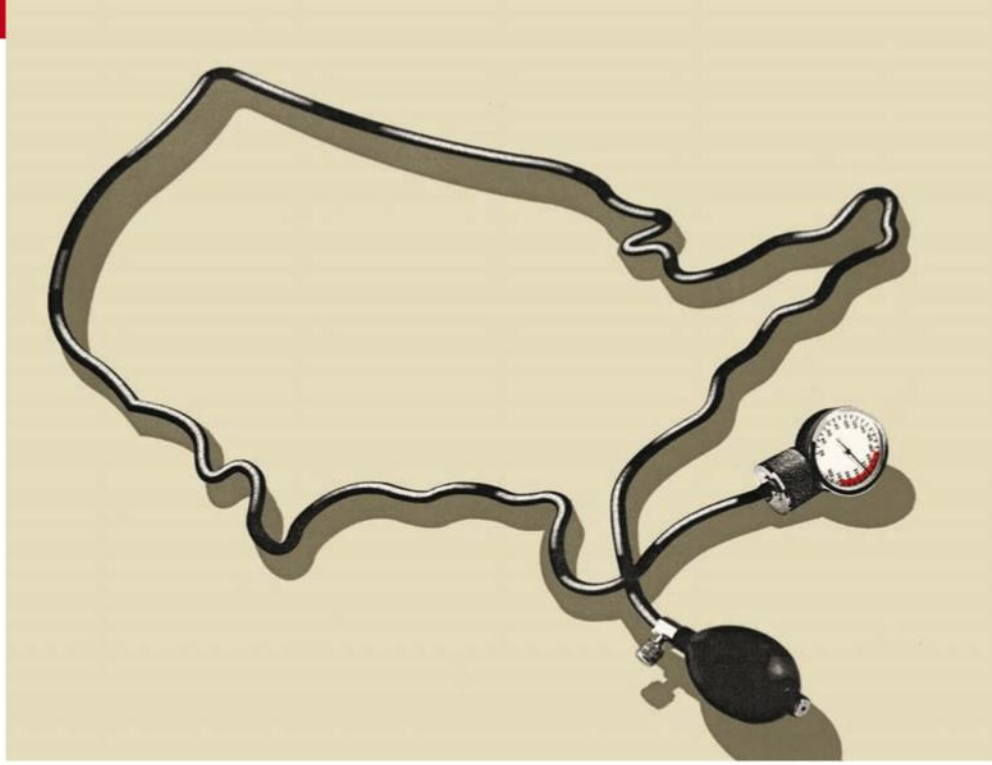
The first Bush administration recovered from the disaster of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait because it was an effective and cohesive team of highly experienced professionals—Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, Dick Cheney—led by a prudent and disciplined president. They built a coalition, reassured and mobilized allies, placated neutrals, and planned and executed a war. They disagreed with one another in open and productive ways. They shrewdly used the career civil servants and able political appointees who served them energetically and well. Even so, the war's ragged end and unexpected consequences are with us still.

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, North Korea's invasion of the South in 1950, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the Cuban missile crisis, the 1967 and 1973 Middle East wars, the collapse of communism, 9/11, the 2011 Arab Spring—all were surprises. So too were lesser episodes like the 2007 discovery of a North Korean nuclear reactor in Syria. Surprises are unavoidably what international politics is all about; what matters is how well an administration copes with them. Trump was lucky to avoid an external crisis in his first seven months. That luck will run out.

Add to this fractured foundation the erratic behavior of the president himself, who will be less and less likely to accede to (or even hear) contrary advice as he passes more time in the Oval Office. Septuagenarian tycoons do not change fundamental qualities of their personalities: They are who they are. Nor is someone who has spent a career in charge of a small, family-run corporation without shareholders likely to pay much attention to external views. These arguments have been well ventilated. But what many people have not weighed adequately is the effect of the White House itself, the trappings and the aura, on those who inhabit it. After an initial period of awe, presidents become more confident that they know what they're doing. Particularly for someone whose ego knows few bounds, it can be a dangerously intoxicating place.

The longer someone is in high office and becomes accustomed to supreme power, the less opposition and disagreement he will encounter and the less disagreement he is likely to heed. This may explain Obama's Syria failure throughout his second term. This process is already well advanced within Trump's White House, as evidenced by the bizarre and deeply worrying spectacle orchestrated by the president on June 12, in which all members of his Cabinet, with the honorable exception of Defense Secretary James Mattis, offered up competitively obsequious compliments to the boss while on national television. As old advisers and officials fall by the wayside—exhausted, disgraced, or both—the new ones will be more likely to accommodate a man they have known chiefly as "Mr. President" and whose favor has required self-abasement.

Consider this contrast: In July 2005, I published in *The Washington Post* a searing critique of the Bush administration's



conduct of the Iraq War. The besieged defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, did not fire me from the Defense Policy Board, a senior advisory committee to the Department of Defense, on which I served. Within months I was advising the National Security Council staff, and eventually Secretary Condoleezza Rice asked me to serve in one of the most senior positions in the Department of State without a murmur of disapproval from the White House. This reflected less my value to the administration than the large-spiritedness of President George W. Bush and those who worked for him, and their awareness that expressing criticism or dissent was an act of patriotism, not personal betrayal.

Trump lacks that spirit, and his advisers—one way or another—will find themselves sapped of it as well. Mattis and Tillerson have, by all accounts, raged at a White House obsessed with loyalty, which fired a junior staffer for unflattering retweets more than a year old and had trouble attracting first-tier or independent-minded experts to begin with. At some point these advisers will either give up in frustration or simply be replaced by more-pliable individuals.

Trump unrestrained is of course a frightening prospect. His instincts are not reliable—if they were, he and his campaign would have kept their distance from Russian operatives. A man who has presided over failed casinos, a collapsed airline, and a sham university is not someone who knows when to step back from the brink. His domestic political circumstances, already bad, seem likely to deteriorate further, which will only make him more angry, and perhaps more apt to take risks. In a fit of temper or in the grip of spectacular misjudgment—possibly influenced by what he's just seen on TV—he could stumble into or launch an uncontrollable war.

In one of the worst scenarios, Trump, as a result of his alternating overtures to and belligerence toward China, might bring about a conflict with Xi Jinping, who is consolidating his own power in a way not seen since the days of Mao Zedong. Military conflict between rising and preeminent global powers is hardly anomalous, after all, and the Chinese are no longer in the mood to accept American hegemony. In 1990, when George H. W. Bush confronted Saddam, an isolated dictator, a paralyzed Russia and weak China were powerless to interfere. He had at his disposal the American military at the peak of its post–Cold War strength, and a ready set of allies. The United States has grown used to wars with limited risk against minor and isolated rivals. A conflict with China would be something altogether different.

Trump is, and is likely to be to the end, volatile, truculent, and impulsive. When he does face a crisis, whether or not it is of his own making, he will discover just how weak his hand is, because no one—friends or enemies, the American public or foreign leaders—will take anything that he promises or threatens at face value. At that point we may find another Donald Trump emerging: the Trump who paid $25 million to the victims of Trump University, who rages at *The New York Times* and then truckles to its reporters. Like most bullies, he can be stared down. But when he folds, American foreign policy will fold with him.

THE DAMAGE THAT CANNOT BE UNDONE

This dangerous and dispiriting chapter in American history will end, in eight years or four—or perhaps in two or even one, if Trump is impeached or removed under the Twenty-Fifth Amendment. But what will follow? Will the United States recover within a few years, as it did from the disgrace of Richard Nixon's resignation and the fecklessness of Jimmy Carter during the Iranian hostage crisis? Alas, that is unlikely. Even barring cataclysmic events, we will be living with the consequences of Trump's tenure as chief executive and commander in chief for decades. Damage will continue to appear long after he departs the scene.

Americans, after trying every other alternative, can always be counted on to do the right thing, Winston Churchill supposedly said. But who will count on that now, after the victory of a man like Trump? Other countries interpret Trump's election as America's repudiation of its role as guarantor of world order. Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland put it bluntly in a speech in June: "The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course."

Indeed, that is what is happening. Trump is not entirely a historical fluke, and it is reasonable to see his foreign policy as reflecting some Americans' attitudes toward the outside world. Our politicians and our foreign-policy establishment—the former consumed by domestic matters, the latter largely by technocratic concerns—have lost the ability to make the

case to the country for prudent American management of an international system whose relative peace for 70 years owes so much to Washington's leadership. Americans who oppose Trump may conclude (also reasonably) that the country's internal problems, including the fundamentals of its civic culture, demand their attention. They too may turn inward, not least because they have lost confidence in the strength of political institutions and the competence of the political class.

But there is also a more structural development that will make the recovery of America's global status difficult: Trump is accelerating the decomposition of the Republican foreign-policy and national-security establishment that began in the 2016 campaign. Two public letters signed by some 150 of its members during the spring and summer of last year denounced Trump not merely for bad judgment but also for bad character. (I co-organized one letter and assisted with the other.) Few who signed the letters cared to recant after the election. The administration clearly wanted nothing to do with any of them anyway, although it would have been wise to display magnanimity and recruit some of them. Magnanimity is not, however, part of the Trump playbook.

These would have been some of the leading candidates to serve in a normal Republican administration. Finding other candidates has been difficult, but eventually the jobs will be filled. If the administration lasts four years, and even more so if it lasts eight, those who fill them will be the GOP's successor generation, much of the anti-Trump group being too old, or too compromised within a Republican Party that has dutifully rallied around its leader, to hold sway. Because the Trump administration prizes personal loyalty above all other qualities—most emphatically including competence, creativity, integrity, and even, in some measure, patriotism—this is a serious problem.

Establishments exist for a reason, and, within limits, they are good things. Despite what populists think, foreign policy is not, in fact, safely handed over to teams of ideologues or adventurous amateurs. Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's secretary of state, who helped stabilize the post–World War II world, was not a corporate head who suddenly took an interest in what goes on abroad; neither was George Shultz, who, as Ronald Reagan's secretary of state, helped orchestrate the final stage of the Cold War. Behind each of those men were hundreds of experts and practitioners who had thought hard about the world, and had experience steering the external relations of the Great Republic.

An elite consensus that spans both parties means a government that does not shift radically from administration to administration in its commitments to allies or to human rights, in its opposition to enemies, or in its support for international institutions; that has a sense of direction and purpose that transcends partisan politics; that can develop the political appointees our system uniquely depends on to staff the upper levels of government. As long as that elite is honest, able, open to new talent and to considered course alterations, and tolerant of dissent, it can provide consistency and stability.

Veterans of Trump's administration will include some patriots who knowingly took a reputational hit to save the country from calamity—plus a large collection of mediocrities, cynics, and trimmers willing to equivocate about American values and interests, and indeed about their own beliefs. Many of them even now can say, as the old Soviet joke had it, "I have my personal opinions, but I assure you that I don't agree with them." Or, as one person explained his decision to me as he began working for the administration, "It's my last shot at a big job."

Most of these veterans, knowing what their former friends and colleagues think of their decision, will be angrily self-justifying. Many of the "Never Trumpers" who have held back from working for an odious man will be disdainful. That is human nature. But the upshot will be a Republican establishment riven, like the conservative intellectual class more broadly, by antagonisms all the more bitter because they rest as much on personal feelings of injury or vindication as on principled beliefs. "Everything I've worked for for two decades is being destroyed," a senior Republican experienced in foreign policy told Susan B. Glasser of *Politico* in March. One should not expect from such individuals ready forgiveness of the destroyers. All the while, the Democratic Party will be going through its own turmoil as its foreign-policy experts, who had aligned overwhelmingly with Hillary Clinton, come under pressure from members of the party's left wing, some of whose views on foreign affairs are not that far from Trump's.

BIG FOREIGN-POLICY FAILURES ARE LIKE HEART ATTACKS: THEY FOLLOW YEARS OF HIDDEN MALADY.

America's astonishing resilience may rescue it once again, particularly if Trump does not finish his first term. But an equally likely scenario is that Trump will leave key government institutions weakened or corrupted, America's foreign-policy establishment sharply divided, and America's position in the world stunted. An America lacking confidence, coupled with the rise of undemocratic powers, populist movements on the right and left, and failing states, is the kind of world few Americans remember. It would be like the world of the late 1920s or early 1930s: disorderly and unstable, but with much worse to follow.

There are many reasons to be appalled by President Trump, including his disregard for constitutional norms and decent behavior. But watching this unlikeliest of presidents strut on the treacherous stage of international politics is different from following the daily domestic chaos that is the Trump administration. Hearing him bully and brag, boast and bluster, threaten and lie, one feels a kind of dizziness, a sensation that underneath the throbbing pulse of routine scandal lies the potential for much worse. The kind of sensation, in fact, that accompanies dangerously high blood pressure, just before a sudden, excruciating pain.

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DONALD TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY IS PREDICATED NEARLY ENTIRELY ON THE NEGATION OF A

ILLUSTRATION BY JESSE DRAXLER

BLACK PRESIDENT. AND THE CONSTITUENCIES HE HAS ACTIVATED ARE NOT GOING AWAY.

THE FIRST WHITE PRESIDENT

BY TA-NEHISI COATES

IT IS INSUFFICIENT TO STATE the obvious of Donald Trump: that he is a white man who would not be president were it not for this fact. With one immediate exception, Trump's predecessors made their way to high office through the passive power of whiteness—that bloody heirloom which cannot ensure mastery of all events but can conjure a tailwind for most of them. Land theft and human plunder cleared the grounds for Trump's forefathers and barred others from it. Once upon the field, these men became soldiers, statesmen, and scholars; held court in Paris; presided at Princeton; advanced into the Wilderness and then into the White House. Their individual triumphs made this exclusive party seem above America's founding sins, and it was forgotten that the former was in fact bound to the latter, that all their victories had transpired on cleared grounds. No such elegant detachment can be attributed to Donald Trump—a president who, more than any other, has made the awful inheritance explicit.

His political career began in advocacy of birtherism, that modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built. But long before birtherism, Trump had made his worldview clear. He fought to keep blacks out of his buildings, according to the U.S. government; called for the death penalty for the eventually exonerated Central Park Five; and railed against "lazy" black employees. "Black guys counting my money! I hate it," Trump was once quoted as saying. "The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day." After his cabal of conspiracy theorists forced Barack Obama to present his birth certificate, Trump demanded the president's college grades (offering $5 million in exchange for them), insisting that Obama was not intelligent enough to have gone to an Ivy League school, and that his acclaimed memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, had been ghostwritten by a white man, Bill Ayers.

It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true—his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power. Trump inaugurated his campaign by casting himself as the defender of white maidenhood against Mexican "rapists," only to be later alleged by multiple accusers, and by his own proud words, to be a sexual violator himself. White supremacy has always had a perverse sexual tint. Trump's rise was shepherded by Steve Bannon, a man who mocks his white male critics as "cucks." The word, derived from *cuckold*, is specifically meant to debase by fear and fantasy—the target is so weak that he would submit to the humiliation of having his white wife lie with black men. That the slur *cuck* casts white men as victims aligns with the dicta of whiteness, which seek to alchemize one's profligate sins into virtue. So it was with Virginia slaveholders claiming that Britain sought to make slaves of them. So it was with marauding Klansmen organized against alleged rapes and other outrages. So it was with a candidate who called for a foreign power to hack his opponent's email and who now, as president, is claiming to be the victim of "the single greatest witch hunt of a politician in American history."

In Trump, white supremacists see one of their own. Only grudgingly did Trump denounce the Ku Klux Klan and David Duke, one of its former grand wizards—and after the clashes between white supremacists and counterprotesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August, Duke in turn praised Trump's contentious claim that "both sides" were responsible for the violence.

To Trump, whiteness is neither notional nor symbolic but is the very core of his power. In this, Trump is not singular. But whereas his forebears carried whiteness like an ancestral talisman, Trump cracked the glowing amulet open, releasing its eldritch energies. The repercussions are striking: Trump is the first president to have served in no public capacity before ascending to his perch. But more telling, Trump is also the first president to have publicly affirmed that his daughter is a "piece of ass." The mind seizes trying to imagine a black man extolling the virtues of sexual assault on tape ("When you're a star, they let you do it"), fending off multiple accusations of such assaults, immersed in multiple lawsuits for allegedly fraudulent business dealings, exhorting his followers to violence, and then strolling into the White House. But that is the point of white supremacy—to ensure that that which all others achieve with maximal effort, white people (particularly white men) achieve with minimal qualification. Barack Obama delivered to black people the hoary message that if they work twice as hard as white people, anything is possible. But Trump's counter is persuasive: Work half as hard as black people, and even more is possible.

For Trump, it almost seems that the fact of Obama, the fact of a black president, insulted him personally. The insult intensified when Obama and Seth Meyers publicly humiliated him at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2011. But the bloody heirloom ensures the last laugh. Replacing Obama is not enough—Trump has made the negation of Obama's legacy the foundation of his own. And this too is whiteness. "Race is an idea, not a fact," the historian Nell Irvin Painter has written, and essential to the construct of a "white race" is the idea of not being a nigger. Before Barack Obama, niggers could be manufactured out of Sister Souljahs, Willie Hortons, and Dusky Sallys. But Donald Trump arrived in the wake of something more potent—an entire nigger presidency with nigger health care, nigger climate accords, and nigger justice reform, all of which could be targeted for destruction or redemption, thus reifying the idea of being white. Trump truly is something new—the first president whose entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president. And so it will not suffice to say that Trump is a white man like all the others who rose to become president. He must be called by his rightful honorific—America's first white president.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DAVID HUME KENNERLY/GETTY

THE SCOPE OF TRUMP'S commitment to whiteness is matched only by the depth of popular disbelief in the power of whiteness. We are now being told that support for Trump's "Muslim ban," his scapegoating of immigrants, his defenses of police brutality are somehow the natural outgrowth of the cultural and economic gap between Lena Dunham's America and Jeff Foxworthy's. The collective verdict holds that the Democratic Party lost its way when it abandoned everyday economic issues like job creation for the softer fare of social justice. The indictment continues: To their neoliberal economics, Democrats and liberals have married a condescending elitist affect that sneers at blue-collar culture and mocks the white man as history's greatest monster and prime-time television's biggest doofus. In this rendition, Donald Trump is not the product of white supremacy so much as the product of a backlash against contempt for white working-class people.

"We so obviously despise them, we so obviously condescend to them," the conservative social scientist Charles Murray, who co-wrote *The Bell Curve*, recently told *The New Yorker*, speaking of the white working class. "The only slur you can use at a dinner party and get away with is to call somebody a redneck—that won't give you any problems in Manhattan."

"The utter contempt with which privileged Eastern liberals such as myself discuss red-state, gun-country, working-class America as ridiculous and morons and rubes," charged the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, "is largely responsible for the upswell of rage and contempt and desire to pull down the temple that we're seeing now."

That black people, who have lived for centuries under such derision and condescension, have not yet been driven into the arms of Trump does not trouble these theoreticians. After all, in this analysis, Trump's racism and the racism of his supporters are incidental to his rise. Indeed, the alleged glee with which liberals call out Trump's bigotry is assigned even more power than the bigotry itself. Ostensibly assaulted by campus protests, battered by arguments about intersectionality, and oppressed by new bathroom rights, a blameless white working class did the only thing any reasonable polity might: elect an orcish reality-television star who insists on taking his intelligence briefings in picture-book form.

Asserting that Trump's rise was primarily powered by cultural resentment and economic reversal has become de rigueur among white pundits and thought leaders. But evidence for this is, at best, mixed. In a study of preelection polling data, the Gallup researchers Jonathan Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell found that "people living in areas with diminished economic opportunity" were "somewhat more likely to support Trump." But the researchers also found that voters in their study who supported Trump generally had a higher mean household income ($81,898) than those who did not ($77,046). Those who approved of Trump were "less likely to be unemployed and less likely to be employed part-time" than those who did not. They also tended to be from areas that were very white: "The racial and ethnic isolation of whites at the zip code level is one of the strongest predictors of Trump support."

TRUMP'S POLITICAL CAREER BEGAN IN ADVOCACY OF BIRTHERISM. BUT LONG BEFORE THAT, HE HAD MADE HIS WORLDVIEW CLEAR.

An analysis of exit polls conducted during the presidential primaries estimated the median household income of Trump supporters to be about $72,000. But even this lower number is almost double the median household income of African Americans, and $15,000 above the American median. Trump's white support was not determined by income. According to Edison Research, Trump won whites making less than $50,000 by 20 points, whites making $50,000 to $99,999 by 28 points, and whites making $100,000 or more by 14 points. This shows that Trump assembled a broad white coalition that ran the gamut from Joe the Dishwasher to Joe the Plumber to Joe the Banker. So when white pundits cast the elevation of Trump as the handiwork of an inscrutable white working class, they are being too modest, declining to claim credit for their own economic class. Trump's dominance among whites across class lines is of a piece with his larger dominance across nearly every white demographic. Trump won white women (+9) and white men (+31). He won white people with college degrees (+3) and white people without them (+37). He won whites ages 18–29 (+4), 30–44 (+17), 45–64 (+28), and 65 and older (+19). Trump won whites in midwestern Illinois (+11), whites in mid-Atlantic New Jersey (+12), and whites in the Sun Belt's New Mexico (+5). In no state that Edison polled did Trump's white support dip below 40 percent. Hillary Clinton's did, in states as disparate as Florida, Utah, Indiana, and Kentucky. From the beer track to the wine track, from soccer moms to NASCAR dads, Trump's performance among whites was dominant. According to *Mother Jones*, based on preelection polling data, if you tallied the popular vote of only white America to derive 2016 electoral votes, Trump would have defeated Clinton 389 to 81, with the remaining 68 votes either a toss-up or unknown.

Part of Trump's dominance among whites resulted from his running as a Republican, the party that has long cultivated white voters. Trump's share of the white vote was similar to Mitt Romney's in 2012. But unlike Romney, Trump secured this support by running against his party's leadership, against accepted campaign orthodoxy, and against all notions of decency. By his sixth month in office, embroiled in scandal after scandal, a Pew Research Center poll found

Trump's approval rating underwater with every single demographic group. Every demographic group, that is, except one: people who identified as white.

The focus on one subsector of Trump voters—the white working class—is puzzling, given the breadth of his white coalition. Indeed, there is a kind of theater at work in which Trump's presidency is pawned off as a product of the white working class as opposed to a product of an entire whiteness that includes the very authors doing the pawning. The motive is clear: escapism. To accept that the bloody heirloom remains potent even now, some five decades after Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down on a Memphis balcony—even after a black president; indeed, strengthened by the fact of that black president—is to accept that racism remains, as it has since 1776, at the heart of this country's political life. The idea of acceptance frustrates the left. The left would much rather have a discussion about class struggles, which might entice the white working masses, instead of about the racist struggles that those same masses have historically been the agents and beneficiaries of. Moreover, to accept that whiteness brought us Donald Trump is to accept whiteness as an existential danger to the country and the world. But if the broad and remarkable white support for Donald Trump can be reduced to the righteous anger of a noble class of smallville firefighters and evangelicals, mocked by Brooklyn hipsters and womanist professors into voting against their interests, then the threat of racism and whiteness, the threat of the heirloom, can be dismissed. Consciences can be eased; no deeper existential reckoning is required.

This transfiguration is not novel. It is a return to form. The tightly intertwined stories of the white working class and black Americans go back to the prehistory of the United States—and the use of one as a cudgel to silence the claims of the other goes back nearly as far. Like the black working class, the white working class originated in bondage—the former in the lifelong bondage of slavery, the latter in the temporary bondage of indenture. In the early 17th century, these two classes were remarkably, though not totally, free of racist enmity. But by the 18th century, the country's master class had begun etching race into law while phasing out indentured servitude in favor of a more enduring labor solution. From these and other changes of law and economy, a bargain emerged: The descendants of indenture would enjoy the full benefits of whiteness, the most definitional benefit being that they would never sink to the level of the slave. But if the bargain protected white workers from slavery, it did not protect them from near-slave wages or backbreaking labor to attain them, and always there lurked a fear of having their benefits revoked. This early white working class "expressed soaring desires to be rid of the age-old inequalities of Europe and of any hint of slavery," according to David R. Roediger, a professor of American studies at the University of Kansas. "They also expressed the rather more pedestrian goal of simply not being mistaken for slaves, or 'negers' or 'negurs.'"

Roediger relates the experience, around 1807, of a British investor who made the mistake of asking a white maid in New England whether her "master" was home. The maid admonished the investor, not merely for implying that she had a "master" and thus was a "sarvant" but for his basic ignorance of American hierarchy. "None but negers are sarvants," the maid is reported to have said. In law and economics and then in custom, a racist distinction not limited to the household emerged between the "help" (or the "freemen," or the white workers) and the "servants" (the "negers," the slaves). The former were virtuous and just, worthy of citizenship, progeny of Jefferson and, later, Jackson. The latter were servile and parasitic, dim-witted and lazy, the children of African savagery. But the dignity accorded to white labor was situational, dependent on the scorn heaped upon black labor—much as the honor accorded a "virtuous lady" was dependent on the derision directed at a "loose woman." And like chivalrous gentlemen who claim to honor the lady while raping the "whore," planters and their apologists could claim to honor white labor while driving the enslaved.

And so George Fitzhugh, a prominent 19th-century Southern pro-slavery intellectual, could in a single stroke deplore the exploitation of free whites' labor while defending the exploitation of enslaved blacks' labor. Fitzhugh attacked white capitalists as "cannibals," feeding off the labor of their fellow whites. The white workers were "'slaves without masters;' the little fish, who were food for all the larger." Fitzhugh inveighed against a "professional man" who'd "amassed a fortune" by exploiting his fellow whites. But whereas Fitzhugh imagined white workers as devoured by capital, he imagined black workers as elevated by enslavement. The slaveholder "provided for them, with almost parental affection"—even when the loafing slave "feigned to be unfit for labor." Fitzhugh proved too explicit—going so far as to argue that white laborers might be better off if enslaved. ("If white slavery be morally wrong," he wrote, "the Bible cannot be true.") Nevertheless, the argument that America's original sin was not deep-seated white supremacy but rather the exploitation of white labor by white capitalists—"white slavery"—proved durable. Indeed, the panic of white slavery lives on in our politics today. Black workers suffer because it was and is our lot. But when white workers suffer, something in nature has gone awry. And so an

• **The Republican National Convention, Cleveland, July 2016. According to pre-election polling, if you tallied only white voters, Trump would have defeated Clinton 389 to 81 in the Electoral College.**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIELLA DEMCZUK

opioid epidemic among mostly white people is greeted with calls for compassion and treatment, as all epidemics should be, while a crack epidemic among mostly black people is greeted with scorn and mandatory minimums. Sympathetic op-ed columns and articles are devoted to the plight of working-class whites when their life expectancy plummets to levels that, for blacks, society has simply accepted as normal. White slavery is sin. Nigger slavery is natural. This dynamic serves a very real purpose: the consistent awarding of grievance and moral high ground to that class of workers which, by the bonds of whiteness, stands closest to America's aristocratic class.

This is by design. Speaking in 1848, Senator John C. Calhoun saw slavery as the explicit foundation for a democratic union among whites, working and not:

> With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.

On the eve of secession, Jefferson Davis, the eventual president of the Confederacy, pushed the idea further, arguing that such equality between the white working class and white oligarchs could not exist at all without black slavery:

> I say that the lower race of human beings that constitute the substratum of what is termed the slave population of the South, elevates every white man in our community ... It is the presence of a lower caste, those lower by their mental and physical organization, controlled by the higher intellect of the white man, that gives this superiority to the white laborer. Menial services are not there performed by the white man. We have none of our brethren sunk to the degradation of being menials. That belongs to the lower race—the descendants of Ham.

Southern intellectuals found a shade of agreement with Northern white reformers who, while not agreeing on slavery, agreed on the nature of the most tragic victim of emerging capitalism. "I was formerly like yourself, sir, a very warm advocate of the abolition of slavery," the labor reformer George Henry Evans argued in a letter to the abolitionist Gerrit Smith. "This was before I saw that there was *white* slavery." Evans was a putative ally of Smith and his fellow abolitionists. But still he asserted that "the landless white" was worse off than the enslaved black, who at least enjoyed "surety of support in sickness and old age."

Invokers of "white slavery" held that there was nothing unique in the enslavement of blacks when measured against the enslavement of all workers. What evil there was in enslavement resulted from its status as a subsidiary of the broader exploitation better seen among the country's noble laboring whites. Once the larger problem of white exploitation was solved, the dependent problem of black exploitation could be confronted or perhaps would fade away. Abolitionists focused on slavery were dismissed as "substitutionists" who wished to trade one form of slavery for another. "If I am less troubled concerning the Slavery prevalent in Charleston or New-Orleans," wrote the reformer Horace Greeley, "it is because I see so much Slavery in New-York, which appears to claim my first efforts."

Firsthand reports by white Union soldiers who witnessed actual slavery during the Civil War rendered the "white slavery" argument ridiculous. But its operating premises—white labor as noble archetype, and black labor as something else—lived on. This was a matter of rhetoric, not fact. The

noble-white-labor archetype did not give white workers immunity from capitalism. It could not, in itself, break monopolies, alleviate white poverty in Appalachia or the South, or bring a decent wage to immigrant ghettos in the North. But the model for America's original identity politics was set. Black lives literally did not matter and could be cast aside altogether as the price of even incremental gains for the white masses. It was this juxtaposition that allowed Theodore Bilbo to campaign for the Senate in the 1930s as someone who would "raise the same kind of hell as President Roosevelt" and later endorse lynching black people to keep them from voting.

The juxtaposition between the valid and even virtuous interests of the "working class" and the invalid and pathological interests of black Americans was not the province merely of blatant white supremacists like Bilbo. The acclaimed scholar, liberal hero, and future senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in his time working for President Richard Nixon, approvingly quoted Nixon's formulation of the white working class: "A new voice" was beginning to make itself felt in the country. "It is a voice that has been silent too long," Nixon claimed, alluding to working-class whites. "It is a voice of people who have not taken to the streets before, who have not indulged in violence, who have not broken the law."

It had been only 18 years since the Cicero riots; eight years since Daisy and Bill Myers had been run out of Levittown, Pennsylvania; three years since Martin Luther King Jr. had been stoned while walking through Chicago's Marquette Park. But as the myth of the virtuous white working class was made central to American identity, its sins needed to be rendered invisible. The fact was, working-class whites had been agents of racist terrorism since at least the draft riots of 1863; terrorism could not be neatly separated from the racist animus found in every class of whites. Indeed, in the era of lynching, the daily newspapers often whipped up the fury of the white masses by invoking the last species of property that all white men held in common—white women. But to conceal the breadth of white racism, these racist outbursts were often disregarded or treated not as racism but as the unfortunate side effect of legitimate grievances against capital. By focusing on that sympathetic laboring class, the sins of whiteness itself were, and are still being, evaded.

When David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, shocked the country in 1990 by almost winning one of Louisiana's seats in the U.S. Senate, the apologists came out once again. They elided the obvious—that Duke had appealed to the racist instincts of a state whose schools are, at this very moment, still desegregating—and instead decided that something else was afoot. "There is a tremendous amount of anger and frustration among working-class whites, particularly where there is an economic downturn," a researcher told the *Los Angeles Times*. "These people feel left out; they feel government is not responsive to them." By this logic, postwar America—with its booming economy and low unemployment—should have been an egalitarian utopia and not the violently segregated country it actually was.

But this was the past made present. It was not important to the apologists that a large swath of Louisiana's white population thought it was a good idea

• **The fact of a black president seemed to insult Donald Trump personally. He has made the negation of Barack Obama's legacy the foundation of his own.**

to send a white supremacist who once fronted a terrorist organization to the nation's capital. Nor was it important that blacks in Louisiana had long felt left out. What was important was the fraying of an ancient bargain, and the potential degradation of white workers to the level of "negers." "A viable left must find a way to differentiate itself strongly from such analysis," David Roediger, the University of Kansas professor, has written.

That challenge of differentiation has largely been ignored. Instead, an imagined white working class remains central to our politics and to our cultural understanding of those politics, not simply when it comes to addressing broad economic issues but also when it comes to addressing racism. At its most sympathetic, this belief holds that most Americans—regardless of race—are exploited by an unfettered capitalist economy. The key, then, is to address those broader patterns that afflict the masses of all races; the people who suffer from those patterns more than others (blacks, for instance) will benefit disproportionately from that which benefits everyone. "These days, what ails working-class and middle-class blacks and Latinos is not fundamentally different from what ails their white counterparts," Senator Barack Obama wrote in 2006:

> Downsizing, outsourcing, automation, wage stagnation, the dismantling of employer-based health-care and pension plans, and schools that fail to teach young people the skills they need to compete in a global economy.

Obama allowed that "blacks in particular have been vulnerable to these trends"—but less because of racism than for reasons of geography and job-sector distribution. This notion—raceless antiracism—marks the modern left, from the New Democrat Bill Clinton to the socialist Bernie Sanders. Few national liberal politicians have shown any recognition that there is something systemic and particular in the relationship between black people and their country that might require specific policy solutions.

IN 2016, HILLARY CLINTON acknowledged the existence of systemic racism more explicitly than any of her modern Democratic predecessors. She had to—black voters remembered too well the previous Clinton administration, as well as her previous campaign. While her husband's administration had touted the rising-tide theory of economic growth, it did so while slashing welfare and getting "tough on crime," a phrase that stood for specific policies but also served as rhetorical bait for white voters. One is tempted to excuse Hillary Clinton from having to answer for the sins of her husband. But in her 2008 campaign, she evoked the old dichotomy between white workers and loafing blacks, claiming to be the representative of "hardworking Americans, white Americans." By the end of the 2008 primary campaign against Barack Obama, her advisers were hoping someone would uncover an apocryphal "whitey tape," in which an angry Michelle Obama was alleged to have used the slur. During Bill Clinton's presidential-reelection campaign in the mid-1990s, Hillary Clinton herself had endorsed the "super-predator" theory of William J. Bennett, John P. Walters, and John J. DiIulio Jr. This theory cast "inner-city" children of that era as "almost completely unmoralized" and the font of "a new generation of street criminals ... the youngest, biggest and baddest generation any society has ever known." The "baddest generation" did not become super-predators. But by 2016, they were young adults, many of whom judged Hillary Clinton's newfound consciousness to be lacking.

WHITE AMERICANS ELECTED AN ORCISH REALITY-TV STAR WHO INSISTS ON TAKING HIS INTELLIGENCE BRIEFINGS IN PICTURE-BOOK FORM.

It's worth asking why the country has not been treated to a raft of sympathetic portraits of this "forgotten" young black electorate, forsaken by a Washington bought off by Davos elites and special interests. The unemployment rate for young blacks (20.6 percent) in July 2016 was double that of young whites (9.9 percent). And since the late 1970s, William Julius Wilson and other social scientists following in his wake have noted the disproportionate effect that the decline in manufacturing jobs has had on African American communities. If anyone should be angered by the devastation wreaked by the financial sector and a government that declined to prosecute the perpetrators, it is African Americans—the housing crisis was one of the primary drivers in the past 20 years of the wealth gap between black families and the rest of the country. But the cultural condescension toward and economic anxiety of black people is not news. Toiling blacks are in their proper state; toiling whites raise the specter of white slavery.

Moreover, a narrative of long-neglected working-class black voters, injured by globalization and the financial crisis, forsaken by out-of-touch politicians, and rightfully suspicious of a return of Clintonism, does not serve to cleanse the conscience of white people for having elected Donald Trump. Only the idea of a long-suffering white working class can do that. And though much has been written about the distance between elites and "Real America," the existence of a class-transcending, mutually dependent tribe of white people is evident.

Joe Biden, then the vice president, last year:

> "They're all the people I grew up with ... And they're not racist. They're not sexist."

Bernie Sanders, senator and former candidate for president, last year:

> "I come from the white working class, and I am deeply humiliated that the Democratic Party cannot talk to the people where I came from."

Nicholas Kristof, the *New York Times* columnist, in February of this year:

> My hometown, Yamhill, Ore., a farming community, is Trump country, and I have many friends who voted for Trump. I think they're profoundly wrong, but please don't dismiss them as hateful bigots.

These claims of origin and fidelity are not merely elite defenses of an aggrieved class but also a sweeping dismissal of the concerns of those who don't share kinship with white men. "You can't eat equality," asserts Joe Biden—a statement worthy of someone unthreatened by the loss of wages brought on by an unwanted pregnancy, a background-check box at the bottom of a job application, or the deportation of a breadwinner. Within a week of Sanders lambasting Democrats for not speaking to "the people" where he "came from," he was making an example of a woman who dreamed of representing the people where she came from. Confronted with a young woman who hoped to become the second Latina senator in American history, Sanders responded with a parody of the Clinton campaign: "It is not good enough for someone to say, 'I'm a woman! Vote for me!' No, that's not good enough … One of the struggles that you're going to be seeing in the Democratic Party is whether we go beyond identity politics." The upshot—attacking one specimen of identity politics after having invoked another—was unfortunate.

Other Sanders appearances proved even more alarming. On MSNBC, he attributed Trump's success, in part, to his willingness to "not be politically correct." Sanders admitted that Trump had "said some outrageous and painful things, but I think people are tired of the same old, same old political rhetoric." Pressed on the definition of political correctness, Sanders gave an answer Trump surely would have approved of. "What it means is you have a set of talking points which have been poll-tested and focus-group-tested," Sanders explained. "And that's what you say rather than what's really going on. And often, what you are not allowed to say are things which offend very, very powerful people."

This definition of political correctness was shocking coming from a politician of the left. But it matched a broader defense of Trump voters. "Some people think

• The KKK and counterprotesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, July 8, 2017. Not every Trump voter is a white supremacist. But every Trump voter felt it acceptable to hand the fate of the country over to one.

that the people who voted for Trump are racists and sexists and homophobes and just deplorable folks," Sanders said later. "I don't agree." This is not exculpatory. Certainly not every Trump voter is a white supremacist, just as not every white person in the Jim Crow South was a white supremacist. But every Trump voter felt it acceptable to hand the fate of the country over to one.

One can, to some extent, understand politicians' embracing a self-serving identity politics. Candidates for high office, such as Sanders, have to cobble together a coalition. The white working class is seen, understandably, as a large cache of potential votes, and capturing these votes requires eliding uncomfortable truths. But journalists have no such excuse. Again and again in the past year, Nicholas Kristof could be found pleading with his fellow liberals not to dismiss his old comrades in the white working class as bigots—even when their bigotry was evidenced in his own reporting. A visit to Tulsa, Oklahoma, finds Kristof wondering why Trump voters support a president who threatens to cut the programs they depend on. But the problem, according to Kristof's interviewees, isn't Trump's attack on benefits so much as an attack on *their* benefits. "There's a lot of wasteful spending, so cut other places," one man tells Kristof. When Kristof pushes his subjects to identify that wasteful spending, a fascinating target is revealed: "Obama phones," the products of a fevered conspiracy theory that turned a long-standing government program into a scheme through which the then-president gave away free cellphones to undeserving blacks. Kristof doesn't shift his analysis based on this comment and, aside from a one-sentence fact-check tucked between parentheses, continues on as though it were never said.

Observing a Trump supporter in the act of deploying racism does not much perturb Kristof. That is because his defenses of the innate goodness of Trump voters and of the innate goodness of the white working class are in fact defenses of neither. On the contrary, the white working class functions rhetorically not as a real community of people so much as a tool to quiet the demands of those who want a more inclusive America.

Mark Lilla's *New York Times* essay "The End of Identity Liberalism," published not long after last year's election, is perhaps the most profound example of this genre. Lilla denounces the perversion of liberalism into "a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual


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identity," which distorted liberalism's message "and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing." Liberals have turned away from their working-class base, he says, and must look to the "pre-identity liberalism" of Bill Clinton and Franklin D. Roosevelt. You would never know from this essay that Bill Clinton was one of the most skillful identity politicians of his era—flying home to Arkansas to see a black man, the lobotomized Ricky Ray Rector, executed; upstaging Jesse Jackson at his own conference; signing the Defense of Marriage Act. Nor would you know that the "pre-identity" liberal champion Roosevelt depended on the literally lethal identity politics of the white-supremacist "solid South." The name Barack Obama does not appear in Lilla's essay, and he never attempts to grapple, one way or another, with the fact that it was identity politics—the possibility of the first black president—that brought a record number of black voters to the polls, winning the election for the Democratic Party, and thus enabling the deliverance of the ancient liberal goal of national health care. "Identity politics ... is largely expressive, not persuasive," Lilla claims. "Which is why it never wins elections—but can lose them." That Trump ran and won on identity politics is beyond Lilla's powers of conception. What appeals to the white working class is ennobled. What appeals to black workers, and all others outside the tribe, is dastardly identitarianism. All politics are identity politics—except the politics of white people, the politics of the bloody heirloom.

White tribalism haunts even more-nuanced writers. George Packer's *New Yorker* essay "The Unconnected" is a lengthy plea for liberals to focus more on the white working class, a population that "has succumbed to the ills that used to be associated with the black urban 'underclass.'" Packer believes that these ills, and the Democratic Party's failure to respond to them, explain much of Trump's rise. Packer offers no opinion polls to weigh white workers' views on "elites," much less their views on racism. He offers no sense of how their views and their relationship to Trump differ from other workers' and other whites'.

That is likely because any empirical evaluation of the relationship between Trump and the white working class would reveal that one adjective in that phrase is doing more work than the other. In 2016, Trump enjoyed majority or plurality support among every economic branch of whites. It is true that his strongest support among whites came from those making $50,000 to $99,999. This would be something more than working-class in many nonwhite neighborhoods, but even if one accepts that branch as the working class, the difference between how various groups in this income bracket voted is revealing. Sixty-one percent of whites in this "working class" supported Trump. Only 24 percent of Hispanics and 11 percent of blacks did. Indeed, the plurality of all voters making less than $100,000 and the majority making less than $50,000 voted for the Democratic candidate. So when Packer laments the fact that "Democrats can no longer really claim to be the party of working people—not white ones, anyway," he commits a kind of category error. The real problem is that Democrats aren't the party of white people—working or otherwise. White workers are not divided by the fact of labor from other white demographics; they are divided from all other laborers by the fact of their whiteness.

AN OPIOID EPIDEMIC IS GREETED WITH CALLS FOR COMPASSION AND TREATMENT; A CRACK EPIDEMIC IS GREETED WITH SCORN AND MANDATORY MINIMUMS.

Packer's essay was published before the election, and so the vote tally was not available. But it should not be surprising that a Republican candidate making a direct appeal to racism would drive up the numbers among white voters, given that racism has been a dividing line for the national parties since the civil-rights era. Packer finds inspiration for his thesis in West Virginia—a state that remained Democratic through the 1990s before turning decisively Republican, at least at the level of presidential politics. This relatively recent rightward movement evinces, to Packer, a shift "that couldn't be attributed just to the politics of race." This is likely true—the politics of race are, themselves, never attributable "just to the politics of race." The history of slavery is also about the growth of international capitalism; the history of lynching must be seen in light of anxiety over the growing independence of women; the civil-rights movement can't be disentangled from the Cold War. Thus, to say that the rise of Donald Trump is about more than race is to make an empty statement, one that is small comfort to the people—black, Muslim, immigrant—who live under racism's boot.

The dent of racism is not hard to detect in West Virginia. In the 2008 Democratic primary there, 95 percent of the voters were white. Twenty percent of those—one in five—openly admitted that race was influencing their vote, and more than 80 percent voted for Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama. Four years later, the incumbent Obama lost the primary in 10 counties to Keith Judd, a white felon incarcerated in a federal prison; Judd racked up more than 40 percent of the Democratic-primary vote in the state. A simple thought experiment: Can one imagine a black felon in a federal prison running in a primary against an incumbent white president doing so well?

But racism occupies a mostly passive place in Packer's essay. There's no attempt to understand why black and brown workers, victimized by the same new economy and cosmopolitan elite that Packer lambastes, did not join the Trump revolution. Like Kristof, Packer is gentle with his subjects. When a woman "exploded" and told Packer, "I want to eat what I want to eat, and for them to tell me I can't eat French fries or Coca-Cola—no way," he sees this as a rebellion against "the moral superiority of elites." In fact, this elite conspiracy dates back to 1894, when the government first began advising Americans on their diets.

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As recently as 2002, President George W. Bush launched the HealthierUS initiative, urging Americans to exercise and eat healthy food. But Packer never allows himself to wonder whether the explosion he witnessed had anything to do with the fact that similar advice now came from the country's first black first lady. Packer concludes that Obama was leaving the country "more divided and angrier than most Americans can remember," a statement that is likely true only because most Americans identify as white. Certainly the men and women forced to live in the wake of the beating of John Lewis, the lynching of Emmett Till, the firebombing of Percy Julian's home, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers would disagree.

The triumph of Trump's campaign of bigotry presented the problematic spectacle of an American president succeeding at best in spite of his racism and possibly because of it. Trump moved racism from the euphemistic and plausibly deniable to the overt and freely claimed. This presented the country's thinking class with a dilemma. Hillary Clinton simply could not be correct when she asserted that a large group of Americans was endorsing a candidate because of bigotry. The implications—that systemic bigotry is still central to our politics; that the country is susceptible to such bigotry; that the salt-of-the-earth Americans whom we lionize in our culture and politics are not so different from those same Americans who grin back at us in lynching photos; that Calhoun's aim of a pan-Caucasian embrace between workers and capitalists still endures—were just too dark. Leftists would have to cope with the failure, yet again, of class unity in the face of racism. Incorporating all of this into an analysis of America and the path forward proved too much to ask. Instead, the response has largely been an argument aimed at emotion—the summoning of the white working class, emblem of America's hardscrabble roots, inheritor of its pioneer spirit, as a shield against the horrific and empirical evidence of trenchant bigotry.

Packer dismisses the Democratic Party as a coalition of "rising professionals and diversity." The dismissal is derived from, of all people, Lawrence Summers, the former Harvard president and White House economist, who last year labeled the Democratic Party "a coalition of the cosmopolitan élite and diversity." The inference is that the party has forgotten how to speak on hard economic issues and prefers discussing presumably softer cultural issues such as "diversity." It's worth unpacking what, precisely, falls under this rubric of "diversity"—resistance to the monstrous incarceration of legions of black men, resistance to the destruction of health providers for poor women, resistance to the effort to deport parents, resistance to a policing whose sole legitimacy is rooted in brute force, resistance to a theory of education that preaches "no excuses" to black and brown children, even as excuses are proffered for mendacious corporate executives "too big to jail." That this suite of concerns, taken together, can be dismissed by both an elite economist like Summers and a brilliant journalist like Packer as "diversity" simply reveals the safe space they enjoy. Because of their identity.

WHEN BARACK OBAMA came into office, in 2009, he believed that he could work with "sensible" conservatives by embracing aspects of their policy as his own. Instead he found that his very imprimatur made that impossible. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that the GOP's primary goal was not to find common ground but to make Obama a "one-term president." A health-care plan inspired by Romneycare was, when proposed by Obama, suddenly considered socialist and, not coincidentally, a form of reparations. The first black president found that he was personally toxic to the GOP base. An entire political party was organized around the explicit aim of negating one man. It was thought by Obama and some of his allies that this toxicity was the result of a relentless assault waged by Fox News and right-wing talk radio. Trump's genius was to see that it was something more, that it was a hunger for revanche so strong that a political novice and

• **January 6, 2017. Republicans applaud after Congress certifies Donald Trump's victory in the Electoral College. The American tragedy now being wrought will not end with him.**

accused rapist could topple the leadership of one major party and throttle the heavily favored nominee of the other.

"I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters," Trump bragged in January 2016. This statement should be met with only a modicum of skepticism. Trump has mocked the disabled, withstood multiple accusations of sexual violence (all of which he has denied), fired an FBI director, sent his minions to mislead the public about his motives, personally exposed those lies by boldly stating his aim to scuttle an investigation into his possible collusion with a foreign power, then bragged about that same obstruction to representatives of that same foreign power. It is utterly impossible to conjure a black facsimile of Donald Trump—to imagine Obama, say, implicating an opponent's father in the assassination of an American president or comparing his physical endowment with that of another candidate and then successfully capturing the presidency. Trump, more than any other politician, understood the valence of the bloody heirloom and the great power in not being a nigger.

But the power is ultimately suicidal. Trump evinces this, too. In a recent *New Yorker* article, a former Russian military officer pointed out that interference in an election could succeed only where "necessary conditions" and an "existing background" were present. In America, that "existing background" was a persistent racism, and the "necessary condition" was a black president. The two related factors hobbled America's ability to safeguard its electoral system. As late as July 2016, a majority of Republican voters doubted that Barack Obama had been born in the United States, which is to say they did not view him as a legitimate president. Republican politicians acted accordingly, infamously denying his final Supreme Court nominee a hearing and then, fatefully, refusing to work with the administration to defend the country against the Russian attack. Before the election, Obama found no takers among Republicans for a bipartisan response, and Obama himself, underestimating Trump and thus underestimating the power of whiteness, believed the Republican nominee too objectionable to actually win. In this Obama was, tragically, wrong. And so the most powerful country in the world has handed over all its affairs—the prosperity of its entire economy; the security of its 300 million citizens; the purity of its water, the viability of its air, the safety of its food; the future of its vast system of education; the soundness of its national highways, airways, and railways; the apocalyptic potential of its nuclear arsenal—to a carnival barker who introduced the phrase *grab 'em by the pussy* into the national lexicon. It is as if the white tribe united in demonstration to say, "If a black man can be president, then any white man—no matter how fallen—can be president." And in that perverse way, the democratic dreams of Jefferson and Jackson were fulfilled.

The American tragedy now being wrought is larger than most imagine and will not end with Trump. In recent times, whiteness as an overt political tactic has been restrained by a kind of cordiality that held that its overt invocation would scare off "moderate" whites. This has proved to be only half true at best. Trump's legacy will be exposing the patina of decency for what it is and revealing just how much a demagogue can get away with. It does not take much to imagine another politician, wiser in the ways of Washington and better schooled in the methodology of governance—and now liberated from the pretense of antiracist civility—doing a much more effective job than Trump.

TRUMP'S LEGACY WILL BE EXPOSING THE PATINA OF DECENCY FOR WHAT IT IS AND REVEALING JUST HOW MUCH A DEMAGOGUE CAN GET AWAY WITH.

It has long been an axiom among certain black writers and thinkers that while whiteness endangers the bodies of black people in the immediate sense, the larger threat is to white people themselves, the shared country, and even the whole world. There is an impulse to blanch at this sort of grandiosity. When W. E. B. Du Bois claims that slavery was "singularly disastrous for modern civilization" or James Baldwin claims that whites "have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white," the instinct is to cry exaggeration. But there really is no other way to read the presidency of Donald Trump. The first white president in American history is also the most dangerous president—and he is made more dangerous still by the fact that those charged with analyzing him cannot name his essential nature, because they too are implicated in it.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an Atlantic *national correspondent. His new book,* We Were Eight Years in Power, *from which this essay is drawn, is being published this month.*

THE DRONE KING

BY KURT VONNEGUT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MELINDA JOSIE

EDITOR'S NOTE: *While reading through Kurt Vonnegut's papers in the Lilly Library, at Indiana University, as they worked on the first comprehensive edition of his short fiction, Vonnegut's friend Dan Wakefield and Jerome Klinkowitz, a scholar of Vonnegut's work, came across five previously unpublished stories. Klinkowitz dates "The Drone King," one of those five, to the early 1950s, when Vonnegut hadn't yet written a novel and was only beginning to publish short fiction.* Complete Stories *will be published this month by Seven Stories Press.*

ONE THING ABOUT the investment-counseling business: The surroundings are almost always nice. Wherever my work takes me, prosperity has beat me there.

Prosperity beat me to the Millennium Club by about 100 years. As I walked through the door for the first time, my cares dropped away. I felt as though I'd just finished two brandies and a good cigar. Here was peace.

It was a club downtown—six stories of snug hideaways and playthings and apartments for rich gentlemen. It overlooked a park.

The foyer was guarded by an elegant old man behind a rosewood desk.

I gave him my card. "Mr. Quick? Mr. Sheldon Quick?," I said. "He asked me to come over."

He examined the card for a long time. "Yes," he said at last. "Mr. Quick is expecting you. You'll find him in the small library—second door on the left, by the grandfather clock."

"Thank you," I said, and I started past him.

He caught my sleeve. "Sir—"

"Yes?," I said.

"You aren't wearing a boutonniere, are you?"

"No," I said guiltily. "Should I be?"

"If you were," he said, "I'd have to ask you to check it. No women or flowers allowed past the front desk."

I paused by the door of the small library. "Say," I said, "you know this clock has stopped?"

"Mr. Quick stopped it the night Calvin Coolidge died," he said.

I blushed. "Sorry," I said.

"We all are," he said. "But what can anyone do?"

SHELDON QUICK WAS alone in the small library. We were meeting for the first time.

He was about 50—very tall, and handsome in a lazy, ornamental way. His hair was golden, his eyes blue, and he stroked his mustache with his little finger as he shook my hand.

"You come highly recommended," he said.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

He brought his finger away from his mustache, and I saw that his upper lip was swollen on one side, as fat as a Ping-Pong ball. He touched the swelling. "A bee," he said.

"It must be very painful," I said.

"It is," he said. "I won't deceive you about that." He smiled sourly. "Don't let anybody tell you this isn't a woman's world."

"How's that, sir?," I said.

"Only a female bee can sting," he said.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know that about bees."

"You knew that about *females*, didn't you?" he said. He closed one eye, and, with his face already lopsided from the bee sting, he looked crazy as a bedbug. "Law of life!" he said sharply. "If you get yellow fever, you'll have the female mosquito to thank. If a black widow spider does you in, my boy, again—*cherchez la femme*."

"Huh," I said. "I'll be darned."

A sweet, doddering old waiter came in with coffee and cigars on a silver tray. "Is they anything else you wants, Mr. Quick?" he said.

"Anything else I wants?" said Quick. He rolled his eyes unhappily. "Wealth, George? Power? Instant success?"

The waiter shrugged and seemed close to tears. "Mr. Quick, suh—we's goin' to miss you, sir," he said.

Quick threw back his head and tried to laugh heartily. It was a horrible laugh, full of fear and peevishness. "Why must everybody act as though resigning from the Millennium Club was the same thing as death?" he said. "Don't depress me, man! Wish me luck!"

"Oh, I do, I do, sir!" said the waiter.

"I'll have plenty of expert help on the outside," said Quick. He nodded at me. "He'll be handling the financial end, while I take care of research and production."

The waiter looked at me miserably. "It ain't gonna be the same aroun' here without Mr. Quick," he said. "I'll come to work in the mornin', an' I'll look in the barbershop, an' I'll look in the bar, an' I'll look in the shower room, an' I'll look up on the roof where the beehives is." His eyes widened, as though he were telling a ghost story. "An' Mr. Quick, he won't be none of them places.

"An' when I gets ready to go home at night," said the waiter, "I'll look in the periodical room, an' Mr. Quick, he won't be in there, sippin' his brandy—just a-underlinin' an' a-underlinin' an' a-underlinin'."

"Underlining?," I said.

"Important things in the magazines," said the waiter respectfully. "I reckon in the past 25 years Ah done throwed out tons of magazines Mr. Quick done underlined."

Every word seemed to snap a vertebra in Sheldon Quick's back. When the waiter left, Quick lay down on the couch. He murmured something, and his voice was like wind in the treetops.

"Beg your pardon?," I said, leaning close to him.

"You are in the stock-and-bond business?" he said.

"I sell advice on them," I said.

"I want you to sell some stock for me," he said.

"I'll be glad to look at your portfolio and give you my recommendations as to what to hold and what to sell," I said.

He waved his hand feebly. "You miss my meaning," he said. "I want you to sell stock in a new company of mine. That's the way new companies raise money, isn't it? Sell stock?"

"Yessir," I said. "But that's way out of my line. First of all, you'll need a lawyer."

Again he said something I missed.

"Are you sick, sir?," I said.

He sat up, blinking blindly. "I wish he hadn't said all those things," he said. "The agreement was that nobody was going to say goodbye. Someday soon, nobody knows when, I'm simply going to walk out, as though for a breath of fresh air. And I won't come back. The next thing they hear from me will be a letter, telling them where to send my things."

"Um," I said.

He looked around the room wistfully. "Well, I'm neither the first nor the last to go out into the world, to recoup my fortunes, to return."

"Something happened to your fortunes, sir?," I said uneasily.

"The money my father left to me is at an end," he said. "I've seen the end coming for some time." He curled his swollen lip, baring a long, white, wet fang. "I'm not unprepared. I've been planning this business for more than a year."

"Look—about this business of yours," I said, "I—"

"Business of *ours*," he said.

"Ours?," I said.

"I want you to be general manager," he said. "I want you to see the lawyer, and get us incorporated, and do whatever needs to be done to put us in business."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Quick," I said, "but I couldn't take an assignment like that."

Quick looked at me levelly. "Does $200,000 a year sound like inadequate compensation for a man of your caliber?" he said.

The room seemed to go around slowly, like a stately merry-go-round. My own voice seemed to come back to me from a distance—sweet and flutelike. "Nossir," I said. "Are you offering me that?"

"Nature is offering us that," said Quick. He reached out and closed his hand on air. "We have only to reach out and take it."

"Uranium?," I whispered.

"Bees!" he said. His face twisted into a look of wild triumph.

"Bees?," I said. "What about bees?"

"Sometime in the next month I shall call you," he said, "and you shall see what you shall see."

"When, exactly?," I said.

"It's up to the bees," said Quick.

"Where are they?," I said.

"On the roof," said Quick. "Then you and I will call a press conference, to tell the world what it is we have to sell."

The clock on the mantelpiece struck noon.

Quick winced with each strike. "In exactly 30 days," he said, "my membership expires."

He shook my hand, and opened the door for me. "When I call, come at once," he said.

In the corridor outside, the old waiter was talking to a young one. "With Mr. Quick gone," he said, "who's gonna be Santy Claus at the Christmas party for the help? You tell me that!"

TEN DAYS LATER, Quick called me up. He was awfully excited. "They're doing it!" he yelled into the phone. "It's going on right now!" He hung up.

The man behind the rosewood desk waved me into the Millennium Club. The old waiter was waiting for me. He handed me a beekeeper's mask and

gloves, and hustled me to an elevator. The elevator operator took me straight to the roof.

On the roof was Sheldon Quick and 10 beehives. He was gloved and masked, wearing plus fours, a sport coat, and shoes with gum soles as thick as fruitcakes.

He was furious about what the bees were doing. He pointed to a hive. "Look! Just look, would you!"

Fat, clumsy, colorful bees were staggering out of the hive doors, bumping into one another, floundering around in circles, buzzing in hurt surprise.

Then little bees came out, whining in high-pitched rage. They stung the big ones again and again, and tried to tear them to pieces.

Quick lashed out at the little bees with one gloved hand, and with the other hand he scooped up the big bees. He stepped back, and dropped the big bees into a mason jar—tenderly.

"What is it?," I said. "A bee war?"

"War?" said Quick, his nostrils flaring. "I'll say it's a war! A war to the bitter finish! No quarter given!"

"Gee," I said, "you'd think the big ones would be knocking the stuffing out of the little ones, instead of the other way around."

"The big ones have no sting," said Quick.

"Whose hives were they in the first place?," I said.

Quick's laughter clanked with irony. "Your question is good enough to be chiseled in granite for all time to ponder," he said. "The little ones are the females. The big ones are the males."

WE WENT FROM the roof to the basement, with Quick carrying his jar of bees. We went to a big room that opened off the stairwell. The only thing in the room was an office desk, which sat in the middle of the cement floor.

The old waiter had arrived ahead of us with cocktails and sandwiches. He bowed and left.

"Have you guessed it—the wonderful thing we're going to sell?" said Quick.

I shook my head.

"I will give you the key word, and it will hit you like a thunderclap," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Ready," I said.

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"*Communications!*" he said. He raised his glass. "To the so-called drones! If nature has no use for them, we do!" He nudged me. "Eh? Eh?"

He set his glass down hard on the desk, and a deep, lazy, fuzzy buzzing sound came from inside.

"This wholesale slaughter of the males takes place after the males have performed their most basic function," said Quick. "They have risen in an insane spiral, pursuing the queen—higher and higher and higher!"

He swung his arms around, portraying a swarm of drones chasing a queen. "Until—*presto*!" he said. "One lucky devil gets her, the jewel beyond price. He dies instantly." He bowed his head. "And when the rest go home, they are murdered—as you saw."

"Gosh," I said. "And you rescue the males?"

"Like the Scarlet Pimpernel in the French Revolution," said Quick. "I attend the executions, and spirit away the innocent victims. I

"I will give you the key word, and it will hit you like a thunderclap," Mr. Quick said. "Are you ready?" "Ready," I said.

feed them and shelter them, and teach them to lead useful lives."

Coyly, he offered me a riddle. "When is a drone not a drone?"

"I give up," I said.

"When is a file drawer not a file drawer?" said Quick. He opened the file drawer of the desk. In the drawer was a big wooden box with a hole in its top.

Two drones came out of the hole, buzzed stupidly, bumped into each other, waddled back to the hole, and fell in.

"Here," said Quick raptly, "we have the first all-male beehive in history—a sort of bee Millennium Club, if you like. The food, which I provide, is rich and plentiful. Fellowship is the order of the day. And there is time for reflection and a relishing of life, away from the senseless, thankless, harrowing rush-rush-rush and moodiness of the female workers. Take a drone away from his

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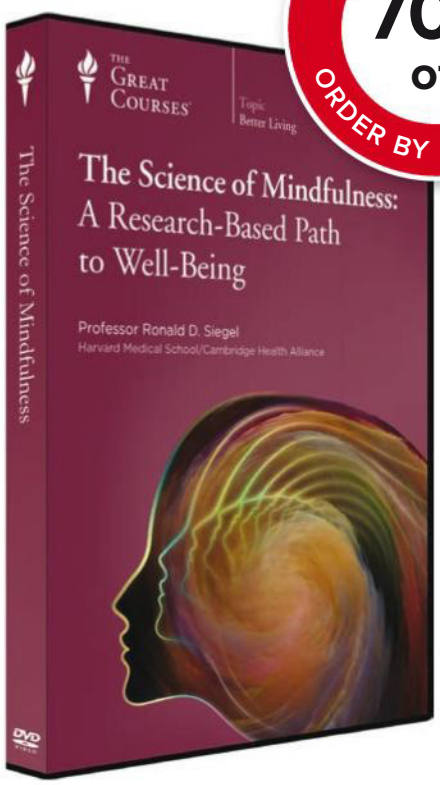

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Millennium Club, and he will be back like a shot!"

Quick opened the top drawer of the desk and took from it a magnifying glass, a needle-sharp pencil, tissue paper, string, and soda straws chopped in half-inch lengths.

"A drone is not a drone," said Sheldon Quick, "*when he carries messages*."

He opened the lid of the bee Millennium Club. It was teeming with drones. He dumped in the drones from the mason jar. "Welcome to civilization, little brothers," he said. "It's been a long time coming."

"FOR THE SAKE of drama," Quick called down to me as he climbed the basement stairs, "you will be the president of a motorcar company, and I will be the president of a taxicab company. I am about to order a new fleet."

"Anything you say," I said, from my post by the desk.

Gaily, Quick waved a drone over his head, holding it firmly between his thumb and forefinger. The drone buzzed in alarm. Quick had kidnapped it from the file drawer.

He disappeared from sight, going to the top of the stairs. I heard him talking reassuringly to the drone.

A moment later, the drone plummeted down the stairwell, pulled up inches from the floor, and blundered across the room to the desktop. There was a piece of soda straw tied under his belly.

The drone rested, then started groggily for the open file drawer.

"Grab him!" yelled Quick. "Get the message!"

I chased the drone around the desktop with my hands cupped, but I didn't have the nerve to grab him.

Quick had to come down the stairs to do the job. He handed me the straw with the message in it.

The drone, with a buzz of joy, dived into his club. There was a murmur of welcome inside.

The message was on a scrap of tissue paper. The writing was so tiny, I needed the magnifying glass to make it out. "Quote price on 400 taxis," it said. "Reply by beegram. Quick Taxi Corp."

"See?" said Quick. "You would have bees from my club, and I would have bees from yours. And a penny's worth of honey would keep one of our little messengers operating for a year."

"Don't they make their own honey?," I said bleakly. It was just something to say—something to cover up my feelings. I felt awful. Quick was so happy about the drone business, was staking so much on it—and it seemed to be up to me to tell him what a fatheaded enterprise it was.

"Only the female workers make honey," said Quick.

"Oh," I said. "Huh. I guess that's why the female workers knock off the males, eh? The males are nothing but a drain on the community."

The color left Quick's fine face. "What's so wonderful about making honey?" he said. "Can *you* make honey?"

"Nope," I said.

He was excited, upset. "Is that any reason to condemn you to death?" he said.

"Nope—heck no," I said.

Quick gathered up my lapel in his fist. "Consider the philosophical and moral implications of what you've just seen!" he said intensely. "Bees are just the beginning!"

"Yessir," I said, smiling and sweating.

His eyes narrowed. "The female praying mantis eats the male as you or I would eat a stalk of celery," he said. "The female tarantula pops her little lover into her mouth like a canapé!"

He backed me into the wall. "What are we going to do with the male praying mantis and the male tarantula?" he said. He stabbed my chest with his finger. "We're going to teach them to carry interoffice memos, to carry orders from foxhole to foxhole on the front lines!"

Quick let go of my lapel and looked at me disappointedly. "My God, man," he said irritably, "you stand there with fishy eyes and a slack jaw, and I've just showed you the greatest thing in humanitarianism since the New Testament!"

"Yessir," I said, "but—"

"The greatest advance in communications since the invention of wireless telegraphy!" he said.

"Yup. Yessir," I said. I sighed and squared my shoulders. "If you'd discovered this *before* somebody else had discovered wireless telegraphy," I said, "maybe you'd have something. But, good gosh, what person in this day and age

is going to want to write eensy-teensy messages on tissue paper and send them by bee?"

He leaned against the desk, closed his eyes, and nodded to himself. "I should have expected it," he said. "The chorus of 'No, no, no—it can't be done.' Every innovator has faced that."

"Yessir, I guess that's so," I said. "But sometimes the chorus is right. I mean, good gosh, what you've got here is competitive with carrier pigeons."

His eyes lit up. "Aha!" he said. "And look how wide-open you have to leave a window for carrier pigeons!" He waggled his finger at me. "And tell me this: Can you use carrier pigeons indoors as well as outdoors?"

I scratched my head. "Everything you say against carrier pigeons is true," I said. "But who uses carrier pigeons anymore?"

Quick looked at me blankly. His lips moved, but no sounds came. An automobile backfired in the outside world, and fear crossed Quick's face like a cloud. "I'm no genius," he said softly. "I never claimed that, did I?"

"Nossir," I said.

"Living quietly and decently seemed to be the best I could expect of myself, with my small store of talents," said Quick. He was humble and reverent. "But once in this life, as I sat in the small library where

"Here we have the first all-male beehive in history—a sort of bee Millennium Club, if you like."

we met, I was reading Maeterlinck's *The Life of the Bee*—and I heard the thunderclap and saw the flash of inspiration."

"Um," I said.

"In that divine trance," he said, "I bought my bees, experimented—and here we are."

"Yup," I said, wretchedly.

He raised his chin bravely. "Very well," he said. "I have gone this far—I will go the rest of the way. I will put my findings before the greatest jury of all, the American public, and let them decide: Have I got the seeds of something useful to humanity, or have I not?"

Quick laid his hand on my shoulder. "We will call a press conference at once. Will you help?"

There was a lump in my throat. "Yessir, I will," I said.

"Good boy!" he said. "You tear up tissue paper while I chop straws."

FOR THE PRESS CONFERENCE, Quick chose a sober blue suit and the air of a historian. His eyes were red, and his head ached. For three hours he had been writing tiny beegrams. The messages were a secret, known only to him and to God.

The conference took place in the auditorium of the Millennium Club. Quick had splurged, using some of the little money he had left, on a buffet and cocktails for the gentlemen of the press.

Five gentlemen of the press came—three reporters and two photographers. Quick had prepared for 100.

The five sat in the front row, eating and drinking. Quick stood on the stage. I stood behind him, with his entire fleet of

drones in a wooden box. Each drone had a message tied under his belly. By a window stood the faithful old waiter, ready to open the window at a signal from Quick.

Quick had explained his experiments, his theories, and his inspiration. The time was coming when I was to open the box and release the history-making cloud that would fly out the window, down three stories, through an open basement window, and into the first all-male beehive in the desk.

The bees themselves seemed to sense the excitement around them. They bumped their heads against the lid of the box and kept up a steady, anxious, eager buzzing.

"The history of man's advance," said Quick impressively, "has been the history of encouraging that which is good in nature, and discouraging that which is bad. For millions of years now, nature has been throwing away, like so much garbage, one of her wisest, gentlest, most beautiful creations—the drone, whose only crime is that he does not make honey."

Quick raised his finger. "Now!" he said. "Man comes along, and declares in the face of this cruel waste: 'There is more to life than this crazy, sick-headed preoccupation with honey, honey, honey, everything for honey—and death to anybody who can't make honey!'"

Quick's voice became husky with emotion, as though he were praying for a multitude. "We welcome the drones today to the fruits of freedom and equality. Down with tyranny wherever we find it! Down with the tyranny of honey! Down with the tyranny of the self-centered and vain queen! Down with the tyranny of the narrow-minded, materialistic female workers!"

Quick turned to address the box. "Life and liberty are yours!"

I opened the lid and dumped the box.

The drones tumbled to the floor in a seething heap. And then, one by one, they took to the air, forming a ragged circle over our heads.

"Pursue happiness!" shouted Quick.

The old waiter threw open the window.

The drones bungled around the room for several minutes, until some found the open window. The swarm strung out in a line and went out the window, over the park below.

The line started down, and we cheered. And then something went wrong. The line went up again, and drifted out over the park.

"Down! Down, boys!" cried Quick.

The drones seemed to be looking for something. And then they found it—not down, but up. They arose in an insane spiral, higher and higher above the park, until they were out of sight.

"A queen!" sobbed Quick. "A queen!"

THE PRESS conference moved into the basement with its refreshments, to wait by the bee Millennium Club. The hive in the file drawer was empty. A basement window was propped open, but nothing came in except little gusts of soot.

Quick was strangely at peace. The appearance of the queen seemed to have blown every fuse in his nervous system.

After an hour of waiting, he said in a distant voice to me, "Go up on the roof and keep a lookout for our faithful messengers from there."

I went to the roof, and found the drone fleet there. They were back from the mating, dragging their message

cases, swaggering triumphantly toward the homes of their birth—the hives from which Quick had rescued them.

The female workers came whining out to meet their brothers. In a matter of minutes, Quick's drones lay dead or dying, buzzing their last in mournful mystification.

WITH A HEART as heavy as a stone, I went back to the basement and told Quick the news.

He took the news calmly. He had banked the fires of his hopes during the long wait. And now, like the gentleman he was, he let the fires die quietly.

"You would think," he said, "that there would be one out of the many whose intellect would rise above his instincts." He stood and smiled gamely. "With him, we might have sired a new and nobler race of bees."

He shook hands all around. "A fiasco, gentlemen. I apologize." There were tears in his eyes. "Report me as a fool, if you must," he said. "But report me as a fool with one of the kinder, grander dreams of our time."

He bowed, and left, climbing the stairs alone.

THE NEWSPAPERMEN and the old waiter left soon after, and I was alone.

Footsteps passed the open window, and I saw Quick's feet go by. He had picked the moment in which to leave the Millennium Club, probably never to return.

I closed the window, and drank to the health of Sheldon Quick, to the memory of his drones.

There was a gentle bumping sound against the window.

I opened the window, and let in a single drone. He was horribly maimed, with wings torn, legs gone.

He flew to the file drawer, crawled to the hole in the bee Millennium Club, and fell in. There was a weak buzz inside—the buzz of a soul fulfilled.

He was dead.

I took his message, and read the words Quick had written over and over again for all his bees to carry.

"What," Quick had written, "hath God wrought?"

Kurt Vonnegut, who died in 2007, was the author of 14 novels, four short-story collections, seven plays, and five works of nonfiction.

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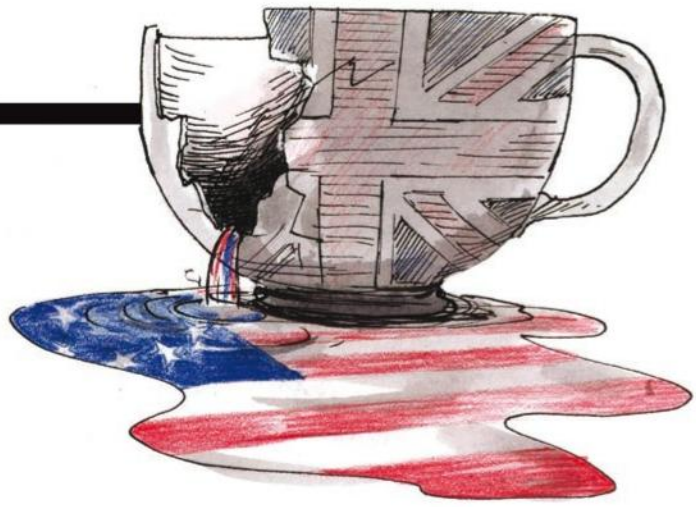
Q: What crime most changed the course of history?



Benjamin Percy, writer, *Green Arrow* and *Teen Titans*

If **the Sons of Liberty,** in defiance of the Tea Act, hadn't **boarded those ships in Boston Harbor in 1773 and heaved overboard shipments from the East India Company,** then the British Parliament wouldn't have responded with the Intolerable Acts. The American Revolution might not have erupted into all-out war, and the Constitution might not have been written.

Tana French, author, *The Trespasser*

Gavrilo Princip's assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, precipitated World War I, which reshaped large parts of the world politically, culturally, and psychologically and laid the groundwork for World War II.

Reginald Hudlin, director, *Marshall*

Some of the greatest crimes are not considered illegal. **The African slave trade** changed history by forcibly disrupting millions of lives in two worlds—it robbed Africa of its people and perverted the foundation of America with a national sin, while leaving more than 1 million bodies dead in the Atlantic.

Erin L. Thompson, art-crime specialist

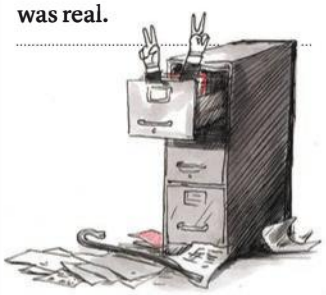
An Italian wishing to return Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece to its homeland **stole the Mona Lisa from the Louvre** in 1911. Museum officials swear they recovered the painting in 1913, but the theft launched our modern age of artistic skepticism: Some still think the painting on display is a copy.

Anthony E. Zuiker, creator and executive producer, *CSI* franchise

People of the State of California v. Orenthal James Simpson was the crime of the century. Not only was "The Juice" on trial for double murder, but our entire judicial system was on trial for evidentiary integrity and racial sensitivity. The jury rendered a not-guilty decision in 1995, but America is still guilty of disharmony in 2017.

Josh Braun, executive producer, *The Keepers*

The Manson-family murders were one of the first crimes that became a celebrity spectacle. They also changed people's day-to-day perception of how safe they were at home: Suddenly the bogeyman **was real.**



Peter Landesman, writer and director, *Mark Felt—The Man Who Brought Down the White House*

In crimes of ideology, it's rarely the crime itself that sends people to ruination, but the cover-up. **Watergate** ended a presidency, and ever since, *-gate* has been stuck to political crimes like an STD.

READER RESPONSES

Jim Lee III, Charlotte, N.C.

Caesar's murder by stabbing in the Roman Senate in 44 B.C., which led to major political changes and helped Rome become a great empire.

Paul Jones, L'Île-Perrot, Quebec

Hitler used **the Reichstag fire** of February 27, 1933, as an excuse to crack down on his opposition. He persuaded German President Paul von Hindenburg to pass draconian laws that suspended civil liberties, allowing the Nazis to seize control.

Gloria Kottick, Iowa City, Iowa

For the civil-rights movement in the United States, a pivotal awakening came with the **horrific murder, in 1955, of Emmett Till** by two racially motivated white men, who accused him of whistling at a white woman. Gradual, painful progress toward a civilized society has ensued since that event.

Want to see your name on this page? Email bigquestion@theatlantic.com with your response to the question for our December issue: **What was the most significant event to happen on a holiday?**

Illustrations by GRAHAM ROUMIEU

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