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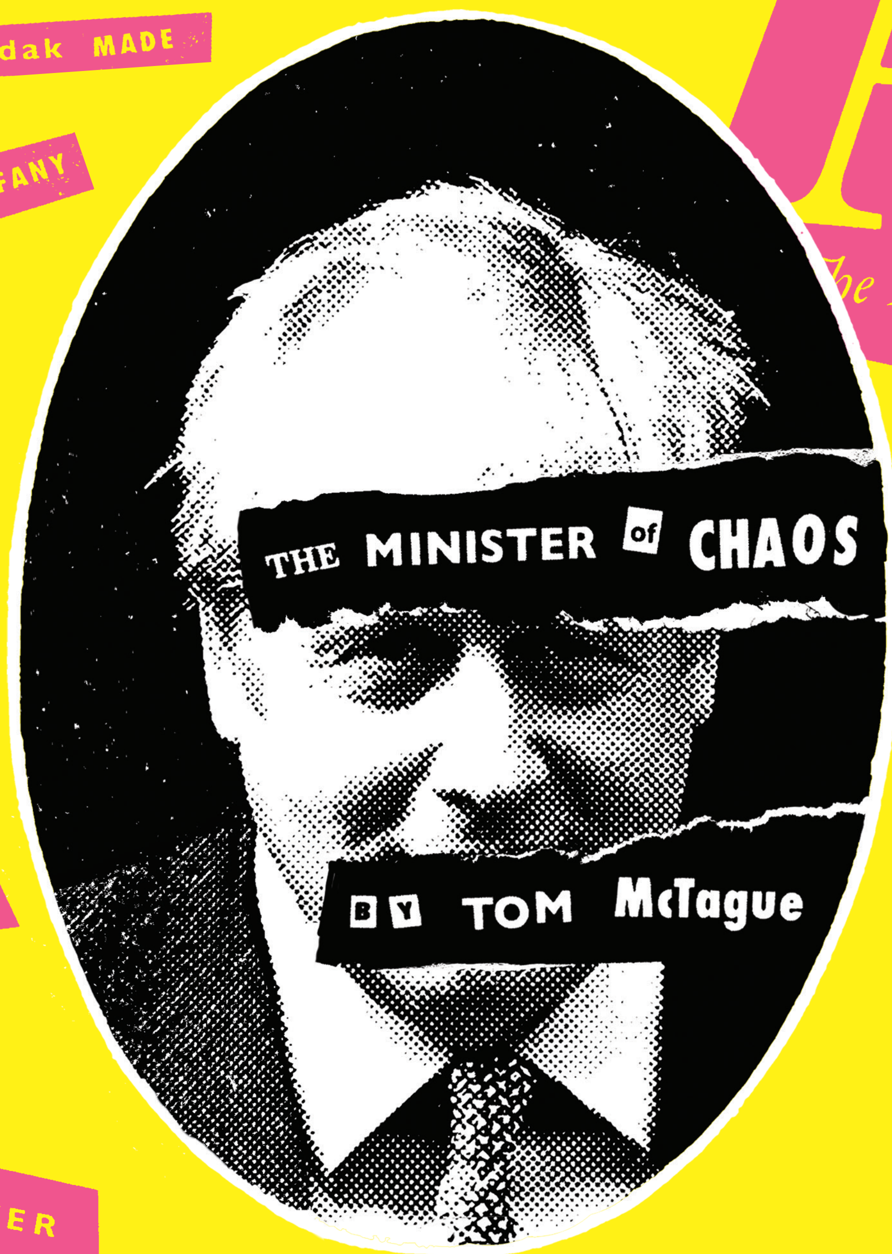

PLUS

The World Kodak MADE
BY KAITLYN TIFFANY

THE FOUR Americas
BY George PACKER

EVERY GIRL DESERVES AN EDUCATION

HOW YOUR GIFT SENDS A GIRL TO SCHOOL

A family living in poverty receives animals and training from Heifer. The animals give products like milk and eggs, which can be eaten or sold.

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OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE
VOL. 328–NO. 1 JULY/AUGUST 2021

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RAYMOND DEPARDON / MAGNUM

Features

A Kodak "Picture Spot" in Los Angeles, 1982

On the Cover

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDAY

LEON NEAL / GETTY


WHAT DO YOU SEE?
WE SEE YOUR NEXT INVESTMENT.
75% of venture capital firms strongly agree that you can invest in women and multicultural entrepreneurs while maximizing returns, a 55% increase from just two years ago.[1] And the evidence supports them, showing above-market returns on investments in these companies. Venture capital firms are realizing they have an instrumental role to play in addressing inequality, and by boosting diversity in their portfolios, they'll access returns from an underleveraged pool of talented entrepreneurs.
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[1]Morgan Stanley, "Can VCs Turn New Focus on Race and Inequality Into Long-Term Impact?" November 19, 2020.
Past performance is not indicative of nor a guarantee of future results. Diversification does not guarantee a profit or protect against loss in a declining financial market.
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Behind the Cover: In his profile of Boris Johnson (p. 38), Tom McTague takes readers inside the controlled chaos of 10 Downing Street, depicting a prime minister who is shrewder than his disheveled appearance suggests. Johnson is attempting to lead his country through a period of radical transformation, in part by projecting a sense of forward momentum that is fueled by his signature impulsiveness and exuberance. Our cover borrows punk-rock elements from Sex Pistols album covers to convey the deliberately anarchic spirit Johnson brings to the job.

— Oliver Munday, *Design Director*

THE

Return the National Parks to the Tribes

The jewels of America's landscape should belong to America's original peoples, David Treuer argued in May.

Letters

D

David Treuer suggests that the tribes deserve to have the parks under their management. As a former public servant on national-park and forest land, I believe his suggestion misses the National Park Service's core mission "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

The best stewards for the country's jewels are not one group, but Americans of all colors and creeds who are dedicated to those principles.

Sean Murphy
Berthoud, Colo.

The promise of liberalism, of the Enlightenment, was the concept of universal rights and responsibilities based on the individual—not on race, not on tribe, not on religion. While I can see the poetic justice of suggesting that Native Americans become the caretakers of the national parks, I am saddened at the notion of a tribal definition of those caretakers.

Kate Adams
Mountain View, Calif.

The National Park Service is doing a pretty good job. Let's instead review and make right the multitude of treaties and agreements reached with Native American tribes that we have almost universally ignored. A great deal of good can come from an effort in that direction.

Peter Thompson
Former U.S. National Park Service employee
Hobart, Wash.

As a veteran environmental reporter, I have to push back against David Treuer's proposal. The effort to privatize—and profit from—public lands in the West is never-ending. That includes Indian lands. Modern tribal governments were established in 1934 by the Indian Reorganization Act. The councils designated to deal with federal authorities often had little relationship to tribes' traditional leadership. The history of many tribal councils is riddled with corruption. The legacy has been environmental destruction on a massive scale, including coal mining and dirty power plants on Navajo and Hopi land in the Four Corners region as well as the recent fracking boom on Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (MHA) land in North Dakota.

The cultural center on MHA land that Treuer speaks so highly of was constructed with funds from oil development. The center cost roughly $30 million, but the real price was far greater: widespread contamination from fracking wells. There turned out to be far less money for most tribal members than there was for a handful of well-connected Native and white people, including the tribal chairman.

While there are impressive efforts by a new generation of leaders on tribal lands, the old

COMMONS

DISCUSSION & DEBATE

guard hasn't given way. The immense power of extractive industries in the West would make Treuer's utopian vision a memory as bitter as the terrible history of exploitation and oppression that he describes so movingly in his essay.

Susan Zakin
Twentynine Palms, Calif.

David Treuer's proposal to return the national parks to the Native American nations and tribes who once lived there is a refreshing idea. It is long past time that the country faced a serious moral and political reckoning with its history of Indian dispossession and physical assault.

Stephen Wertheimer
Boca Raton, Fla.

If Native Americans were to gain control of the parks, should they find revenue sources to pay for all the deferred maintenance by increasing fees or building new lodging, amusement parks, and even casinos? Or should they take the backcountry approach and just let the parks return to nature?

Richard Hanners
John Day, Ore.

DAVID TREUER REPLIES:
I suggested a transfer of the parks and monuments to a consortium of tribes to manage on behalf of all Americans (and, by extension, international visitors). How they would be funded is a technicality: They would continue to be funded by revenue from concessions and access fees and by more stable and more fulsome support from the republic that stole the land in the first place. I also mentioned that such a transfer, as I see it, would be bound by covenants that would prevent exploitation and development.

The promises of liberalism and of the Enlightenment and the concept of universal rights were underwritten by exploitation and the categorization of entire racial and cultural communities as "less than" or even subhuman. The Enlightenment was funded by its evil twin of colonialism, in Africa, Asia, South America, and yes, the United States. It could be argued that the much more ignored value of the "common good," also an important part of Enlightenment thought, would be a better thing on which to place our focus and our faith.

How Will We Remember the Pandemic?

In May, Melissa Fay Greene wrote about the science of how our memories form—and how they shape our future.

March 16, 2020, was to be my first day back from maternity leave, but instead, as the director of a public library, I had to seal up the doors and attempt to work from home. Now that I'm back in the library, I spend a bit of time every day scanning the shelves, wondering the same things. When will the memoirs get published? Will fiction be created to capture this time? What will the scientists write? The politicians? And then I realize how many stories won't be collected at all. But we are the living story.

I thank Melissa Fay Greene for reminding all of us that we have a unique story to tell, and I'd like to remind everyone to get out there and share yours.

Michelle Conners
East Waterboro, Maine

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

THE FACTS

What we learned fact-checking this issue

In June 2020, Michael Holtz began a nearly six-month stint working the line at the Cargill meatpacking plant in Dodge City, Kansas ("Pulling Count," p. 52). Just before he started the job, he learned that his grandfather Patrick Reilly had been a longtime employee at a beef-and-pork plant in Topeka, beginning in 1939. Reilly worked for John Morrell & Company, cycling through various posts on the plant's loading docks and eventually becoming a foreman. In 1951, flooding ravaged northeastern Kansas, killing dozens of people and causing more than $760 million worth of damage. Morrell's Topeka plant—one of the biggest employers in the city—was forced to close, and more than 1,000 workers lost their job. Reilly went on to work in real estate.

Kansas has only expanded its meat production since then. Meat processing has always been physically demanding work, but the industry has changed radically over the years. From the 1930s into the 1970s, working conditions and pay improved. But by the 1980s, Human Rights Watch reports, unions had weakened and evolving assembly-line processes had begun to transform the industry. In the space of two decades, the pace of line work more than doubled in some plants, and many workers' wages became a fraction of what they had been. By the early 2000s, rates of injury and illness in meatpacking were more than twice those of the broader manufacturing sector, as fast-moving, repetitive line work became the norm.

— Will Gordon, *Associate Editor*

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

BUST THE POLICE UNIONS

They don't just protect members at all costs—they condition officers to see themselves as above the law.

BY ADAM SERWER

In May 2020, Darnella Frazier, a 17-year-old with a smartphone camera, documented the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Most Americans who watched the video of Floyd begging for his life, as Officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on his neck, saw a human being. Robert Kroll did not. The head of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis saw a "violent criminal" and viewed the protests that followed as a "terrorist movement." In a letter to union members, he complained that Chauvin and the three other officers involved in Floyd's death had been "terminated without due process."

Kroll's response was typical. In the apocalyptic rhetoric of police-union leaders, every victim of police misconduct is a criminal who had it coming, and anyone who objects to such misconduct is probably also a criminal, and, by implication, a legitimate target of state violence. Due process is a privilege reserved for the righteous—that is, police officers who might lose their jobs, not the citizens who might lose their lives in a chance encounter with law enforcement.

In the Floyd case, the effectiveness of this rhetoric, so powerful in years past, was blunted by what Americans could see with their own eyes. That eight-minute-46-second video became the spark for what were reportedly the largest civil-rights protests in the history of the United States. It also led to the trial and conviction of Chauvin and the indictment of the three officers who stood by while their colleague committed murder.

But what if Frazier hadn't had the presence of mind to record what she witnessed? Floyd might have been remembered by the public as Kroll had described him, and that could have been more than enough to spare Chauvin and the others from indictment. The headline of the police department's statement on the day of Floyd's murder—"Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction"—might have become the accepted version of events.

Like any other type of union, police unions view their duty as protecting the interests of their dues-paying members. Yet these unions are fundamentally different, because their members are armed agents of the state. In practice, this means police unions reflexively come to the defense of men like Chauvin, while opposing any meaningful reforms of department procedures. The most modest attempts at change—banning choke holds or even gathering data on misconduct—are met with fierce resistance.

Americans are presently engaged in a debate about how to reform police departments to prevent the unlawful killing of civilians by officers, as well as other, nonlethal abuses of power. Reining in police unions may not seem like the most urgent response to this crisis. But no reform effort can hope to succeed given their power today. As long as they exist in anything like their current form, police unions will condition their members to see themselves as soldiers at war with the public they are meant to serve, and above the laws they are meant to enforce.

> THIS IS NOT A SYSTEM RUINED BY A FEW BAD APPLES. THIS IS A SYSTEM THAT CREATES BAD APPLES BY DESIGN.

THE FIRST EFFORTS to establish police unions, around the time of World War I, were largely unsuccessful. Today's unions took root in the 1960s and '70s, in part because of new state laws allowing public-sector employees to collectively bargain. But this was also the moment when the most heavily policed communities in the country sought to turn America into a true multiracial democracy, and this profoundly influenced the growth of unions, and their shape today.

The civil-rights movement was a rebellion against the law. It had to be. And the police were called upon to crush it. Many of the most iconic images of the era were representations of police brutality: the Birmingham police siccing dogs on protesters, Alabama state troopers beating marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Atlanta cops manhandling Martin Luther King Jr. after arresting him at a sit-in. For police, this moment of radical social change proved to be both a threat and an opportunity.

The threat came in the form of attempts to resolve issues endemic to American policing. These weren't the first such efforts. In the early 20th century, the widespread ineffectiveness and corruption of police departments had sparked a reform movement. In 1931, the Wickersham Commission, appointed by Herbert Hoover, issued a report on "Lawlessness in Law Enforcement," which documented a range of abuses, including "physical brutality, illegal detention, and refusal to allow access of counsel to the prisoner." These were particularly common when police interacted with Black people and immigrants.

That initial reform movement was more successful at professionalizing police practices and ending corruption than addressing such abuses. But in the '60s, as the civil-rights movement brought graphic images of police brutality into the national spotlight, the Supreme Court stepped in. In a series of decisions, the Court compelled cops to inform suspects of their rights, barred the use of evidence obtained through illegal search and seizure, and gave all defendants a right to counsel. These decisions curtailed, even if they did not eliminate, many of the lawless practices described by the Wickersham Commission. Cities began looking for ways to prevent police misconduct, such as civilian review boards.

To many police officers, the reforms were simply pro-criminal. These incursions on their long-standing prerogatives spurred unionization efforts around the country. "The police unionism movement, which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was a reaction to new efforts to bring the police under democratic control," David Sklansky, a Stanford Law professor and the author of *Democracy and the Police*, told me.

If the civil-rights movement drew fresh scrutiny to police abuses, however, the backlash to the movement provided the police with new allies and new opportunities. For most white voters, riots and clashes with police in Black neighborhoods in 1967 and '68 confirmed that liberal efforts to alleviate racial inequality had failed and that overwhelming force was the answer. "Unions discovered that they had a lot of power, that in union contract negotiations, they could play the crime card," Samuel Walker, a historian of American policing and a professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, told me.

As they sought maximal leverage, police unions brazenly linked crime with race. In New York City in 1966, for instance, the Patrolmen's Benevolent

Association promoted a ballot measure that would bar civilians from serving on an oversight board. Supporters of the union ran an ad showing an anxious white woman exiting the subway alone, onto a deserted street, with the words "The Civilian Review Board must be stopped! … Her life … your life … may depend on it." The group's president at the time warned, "You won't satisfy these people until you get all Negroes and Puerto Ricans on the board and every policeman who goes in front of it is found guilty." The police union and its allies won in a landslide victory.

Among the unions' most ardent champions in the tumult of the '60s was the segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace, a Democrat. "The police in this country are a beleaguered group," Wallace said in an interview republished by *The New York Times* in 1967. They deserved "praise" for beating civil-rights marchers in Selma—or, as he put it, for shutting down the "unlawful assembly" there. In a speech before the convention of the Fraternal Order of

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLE DEL PLATO

Police that same year, Wallace drew a standing ovation as he called for a literal police state: "If the police of this country could run it for about two years, then it would be safe to walk in the streets."

Wallace lost his bid for the 1968 presidential nomination, but his racist populism proved potent; both Richard Nixon's winning "law and order" strategy and a new penchant among Democrats for declaring themselves "tough on crime" were products of his campaign. These messages resonated because crime and violence were not merely white concerns. As the Yale Law professor James Forman Jr. writes in *Locking Up Our Own*, Black political leaders in the '70s and '80s pushed for strict anti-crime measures with the strong support of their constituents. (They also sought more government aid to fight poverty and discrimination, but those approaches to crime prevention had fallen out of favor among white voters.) Americans who would never have personally identified with Wallace tacitly took a version of the trade that he'd offered: Give the police impunity, and they will give you order.

Police unions found that they had new leverage at the bargaining table. In contract negotiations with cities, they sought not merely higher pay or better benefits, but protections for officers accused of misconduct.

At this, they proved remarkably successful. Reviewing 82 active police-union contracts in major American cities, a 2017 Reuters investigation found that a majority "call for departments to erase disciplinary records, some after just six months." Many contracts allow officers to access investigative information about complaints or charges against them before being interrogated, so they can get their stories straight. Some require the officer's approval before making information regarding misconduct public; others set time limits on when citizens can file complaints. A 2017 *Washington Post* investigation found that since 2006, of the 1,881 officers fired for misconduct at the nation's largest departments, 451 had been reinstated because of requirements in union contracts.

For many police unions, enacting and enforcing barriers to accountability became a primary concern. In 2014, in San Antonio, the local police union was willing to accept caps on pay and benefits as long as the then–city manager abandoned her efforts to, among other reforms, prevent police from erasing past misconduct records.

THE DAMAGE THAT these types of provisions have done is hard to overstate. In one recent study, the economist Rob Gillezeau of the University of Victoria found that after departments unionized, there was a "substantial increase" in police killings of civilians. Neither crime rates nor the safety of officers themselves was affected.

The provisions do more than simply protect bad actors. They cultivate an unhealthy and secretive culture within police departments, strengthening a phenomenon known as the code of silence. In a 2000 survey of police officers by the National Institute of Justice, only 39 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "Police officers always report serious criminal violations involving abuse of authority by fellow officers."

In the same survey, more than eight out of 10 "reported that they do not accept the 'code of silence'" as an "essential part of the mutual trust necessary to good policing." Yet even officers who might not believe in the code adhere to it. From their perspective, they have little reason to speak up, and plenty of incentive to ignore their conscience while on the job. Those who do speak up can become pariahs, while the misconduct they report goes unpunished.

> IN THE SHARED IDEOLOGY OF POLICE UNIONS AND THE TRUMPIST RIGHT, SAFETY IS AVAILABLE ONLY TO THOSE WHO REFUSE TO CRITICIZE THE POLICE.

Michael Quinn, a retired Minneapolis police officer and the author of *Walking With the Devil*, told me, "The whole problem with the code of silence is not so much that cops don't want to report misconduct, but that there's no accountability for the officers that are involved in misconduct. And if a department's not gonna hold them accountable, why should they step up?"

This is not a system ruined by a few bad apples. This is a system that creates and protects bad apples by design. Most people who become police officers enter the profession because it is held in high esteem and because they wish to provide a public service. But individual good intentions cannot overcome a system intended to render them meaningless. Being a good cop can get you in trouble with your superiors, your fellow officers, and the union that represents you. Being a bad one can get you elected as a union rep.

IN 2014, amid protests over the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, *The Washington Post* published an op-ed by a former police officer. The headline stated plainly, "I'm a Cop. If You Don't Want to Get Hurt, Don't Challenge Me." The author went on to enumerate the perfectly legal behaviors that he viewed as a "challenge": "Don't argue with me, don't call me names, don't tell me that I can't stop you, don't say I'm a racist pig, don't threaten that you'll sue me and take away my badge."

Such a mindset poses a mortal risk to people encountering the police, but it also poses a risk to democracy itself. In democratic societies, the use of state-sanctioned violence is meant to be constrained by the rule of law. Instead, led by their unions, the police in America have become a constituency with a strong interest in the ability to dispense violence with impunity. Such a constituency will have a natural affinity for authoritarianism. And having leveraged a racist backlash to establish their grip on power, such unions will inevitably attract the support of those who see the preservation of racial hierarchy as paramount.

President Donald Trump allied himself with police

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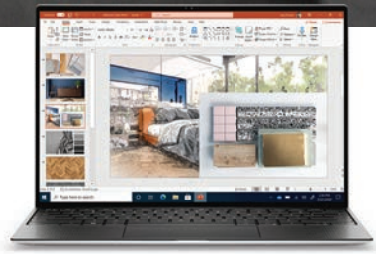


unions; the unions, in turn, proved to be among his staunchest supporters, campaigning on his behalf all over the country. The fact that last year's Democratic ticket was composed of the author of the 1994 crime bill and a former prosecutor did nothing to temper the hyperbole of police-union officials and their allies, one of whom attacked Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the "most radical anti-police ticket in history."

In Trump's apocalyptic warnings about the consequences of liberal political ascendancy, one can hear the echoes of police-union officials arguing that the police are the thin blue barrier between civilization and collapse. "Americans know the truth," Trump said during the 2020 campaign. "Without police, there is chaos. Without law, there is anarchy. And without safety, there is catastrophe."

In the shared ideology of police unions and the Trumpist right, that safety is available only to those who refuse to criticize the police. As Trump's attorney general Bill Barr told an audience of police officers and prosecutors in 2019, communities that protest maltreatment by police "might find themselves without the police protection they need." This is a mockery of free speech and a perversion of democracy.

If there were any doubt about the police unions' allegiances, it was made plain after January 6, when a white-supremacist mob attacked the Capitol in the president's name. These ostensible supporters of "Blue Lives Matter" beat and berated any law-enforcement officers who stood in their way. One officer, a Black Iraq War veteran named Eugene Goodman, led a crowd away from the Senate chamber and in doing so may have prevented lawmakers from being lynched. More than 100 of his fellow officers were reportedly injured in the melee.

Afterward, the National Fraternal Order of Police quietly released a letter condemning the mob and expressing sympathy for the dead and injured officers. But there was no parade of police-union officials on cable television labeling the MAGA mob "terrorists" or "animals." There were no announcements that off-duty cops would refuse to work security at political events supportive of the mob or the lie about a stolen election that motivated it. That kind of rhetoric is reserved for those who protest the killing of Black people by the police, not an assault on cops in the name of white rule. The head of the Chicago Fraternal Order of Police, John Catanzara, told a local news station how much he sympathized with an armed mob that attempted to overturn the results of a presidential election. "It was a bunch of pissed-off people that feel an election was stolen, somehow, some way," Catanzara said. Forced to decide between defending democracy and maintaining the political alliances that protect their impunity, the unions made the obvious choice.

POLICE UNIONS ARE unlike any other form of organized labor. A teacher who pulls out a gun and shoots a student cannot avoid prosecution if the school fails to investigate the incident within five days. A librarian with a tendency to throw large books at visitors who refuse to heed demands for silence will not be reinstated because an arbitrator determined that management failed to properly follow procedure in firing her. And while these professions provide essential services, withholding their labor cannot constitute a threat of violence.

The question is why there should be police unions at all. Because the defining work of police is violence, any police union is bound to eventually want to negotiate leniency for the misuse of violence by its members, and to advocate for policies that guarantee that leniency. Such a guarantee is rooted, in part, in the racial disparities of police misconduct, which also insulate police from backlash. The preservation of such disparities is thus a political interest for police unions.

Some liberals acknowledge that these unions are an obstacle to reform but argue that workers—including police—have a fundamental right to organize for better wages and benefits. Indeed, former officers I spoke with argued that unions helped secure financial stability or protected them from capricious decisions by management.

Yet the military—hardly exempt from questions about fair pay or capricious leadership—lacks a union. This is a matter of tradition, not law, but it reflects an understanding that such an organized political entity would be dangerous, placing the military beyond democratic accountability and civilian control. Instead, the military relies on public support, which means its members must maintain an outward stance of political neutrality—even when a sitting president expects them to interfere on his behalf.

There are some 18,000 police departments across the United States, and the laws governing relations between the departments and unions vary by jurisdiction. Curtailing union power will thus be a local fight. Some cities and states might opt to disband police unions altogether. Others might take disciplinary procedures off the negotiating table, leaving the unions to advocate for overtime pay and pension plans, not freedom from accountability. This spring, in San Antonio, activists succeeded in putting the collective-bargaining rights of the city's police union on the ballot. The referendum was narrowly defeated at the polls, but both the activists and the union see the confrontation as the first skirmish in a longer fight.

If police unions are eventually deprived of the powers they've wielded for the past half century, current and former officers could still, as individual citizens and as part of police organizations, speak out in favor of their politics. But they would lack the leverage to negotiate getting away with murder as a condition of employment, or to withdraw the state's cloak of protection to citizens who protest their conduct. The existence of powerful organizations that advocate for armed agents of the state at the expense of the public they serve is not simply an obstacle to reform. It is dangerous. *A*

Adam Serwer is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *This article was adapted from his book,* The Cruelty Is the Point: The Past, Present, and Future of Trump's America.

ADMIT IT, YOU MISS YOUR COMMUTE

You may have thought its only purpose was to get you to and from work. But it was doing something more.

BY JERRY USEEM

Back when commuting was a requirement for going to work, I once passed through a subway tunnel so filthy and crowded that the poem inscribed on its ceiling seemed like a cruel joke. "OVERSLEPT, / SO TIRED. / IF LATE, / GET FIRED. / WHY BOTHER? / WHY THE PAIN? / JUST GO HOME / DO IT AGAIN." "The Commuter's Lament," which adorns a subterranean passage in New York City's 42nd Street station, made the already grim ritual of getting to and from work positively Dante-esque. But no one questioned the gist of it. The commute, according to the Nobel Prize–winning economist Daniel Kahneman's research, ranked as the single most miserable part of our day. A Swiss study held long commutes responsible for "systematically lower subjective well-being."

And then, during the coronavirus pandemic, something bizarre happened. For many of us, the scourge we'd spent a lifetime bad-mouthing as a tedious time-waster went away. While essential workers have continued to brave the roads and rails—sometimes suffering truly punishing commute times—many others have lived for more than a year in a commute-less world. Some think they're never going back to the office, while others are receiving "return to work" notices from their employers explaining that, come September, butts will once again need to be in cubicle chairs.

But here's the strange part. Many people liberated from the commute have experienced a void they can't quite name. In it, all theaters of life collapse into one. There are no beginnings or endings. The hero's journey never happens. The threshold goes uncrossed. The sack of Troy blurs with Telemachus's math homework. And employers—even the ones that have provided the tools for remote work—see cause for alarm. "No commute may be hurting, not helping, remote worker productivity," a Microsoft report warned last fall. After-hours chats were up 69 percent among users of the company's messaging platform, and workers were less engaged and more exhausted.

In its pre-pandemic heyday, we very narrowly thought of the commute as doing one job: getting us to and from our place of work. But clearly, the commute was doing something more, something that we failed to appreciate. What was it?

IN 1994, an Italian physicist named Cesare Marchetti noted that throughout history, humans have shown a willingness to spend roughly 60 minutes a day in transit. This explains why ancient cities such as Rome never exceeded about three miles in diameter. The steam train, streetcar, subway, and automobile expanded that distance. But transit *times* stayed the same. The one-way average for an American commute stands at about 27 minutes.

Marchetti's Constant, as those 60 minutes are known, is usually understood to describe what people will endure, not what they might actually desire. But if you take the richest people of any era—who can afford to design their lives however they like—and calculate the transit time between their home and workplace, what do you find? J. P. Morgan: a roughly 25-minute ride by horse-drawn cab. John D. Rockefeller: an elevated-rail ride of about 30 minutes.

In a 2001 paper, two researchers at UC Davis attempted to divine the ideal commute time. They settled on 16 minutes. To be sure, this was a substantial shortening of the study participants' actual commutes (which were half an hour, on average). But it was not zero. In fact, a few wished for a *longer* commute. Asked why, they ticked off their reasons—the feeling of control in one's own car; the time to plan, to decompress, to make calls, to listen to audiobooks. Clearly, the researchers wrote, the commute had some "positive utility."

Before the pandemic, researchers had begun to unpack what that utility was. I reached one of them, Jon Jachimowicz of Harvard Business School, who contrasted WeWork and its ill-fated spin-off, WeLive. Pitched in the company's doomed IPO prospectus, WeLive claimed to offer "everything you need to live, work and play in a single location." But it never expanded beyond two locations. This could have something to do with the limits of grown-up demand for dorm life. But, Jachimowicz told me, "if everyone hated commuting as much as they say they do, we'd see these WeLive spaces everywhere."

GAIL SHEEHY WROTE about "the commuter's double life" for *New York* magazine in 1968, profiling the specific personalities aboard the 5:25, 6:02, and 9:57 out of Grand Central Station. As Sheehy wrote: "You get a very strong feeling of two lives with the train a bridge." The distance between those two lives is explored in a body of research loosely known as "boundary theory," and this, perhaps, is where we see the commute's more important job.

Broadly, boundary theory holds that however much Facebook encourages employees to bring their "authentic selves" to work, we have multiple selves, all of them authentic. Crossing between one role and another isn't easy; it's called boundary *work*. And the commute, as Arizona State University's Blake Ashforth and two collaborators wrote in a seminal paper on the topic, "is actually a relatively efficient way of simultaneously facilitating a physical and psychological shift between roles."

Consider the morning drive in. While superficially a matter of on- and off-ramps, it also initiates a sequence in which the feelings and attitudes of home life are deactivated, replaced by thoughts of work. This takes time, and if it doesn't happen, one role can contaminate the other—what researchers call "role spillover." "If you respond like a manager at home, you might be sleeping on the couch that night," Jachimowicz explained. "And if you respond like a parent at work," it's weird.

He and his colleagues found that workers who engaged in "role-clarifying prospection" during their morning commute—deliberately thinking about plans for the workday—reported higher levels of satisfaction with both their work and home lives than those who either zoned out or ruminated on personal problems. Skipping this cognitively difficult task left them in limbo, making each place more stressful.

Technology can help. In a 2017 experiment, a team at Microsoft installed a program called SwitchBot on commuters' phones. Before the start and end of each workday, the bot would pose simple questions. A morning session helped the participants transition into productive work mode, while prompts to detach at day's end—"How did you feel about work today? Is there anything else you would like to share?"—brought forth something unexpected. "People apparently would just spill out their day," Shamsi Iqbal, a researcher who helped design the study, told me. In reliving their day, they "relieved themselves" of it (and sent fewer after-hours emails as a result).

Why was this a good thing? Because the ability to detach from a job, Iqbal explained, is part of what makes a good worker. New research shows that it's crucial to facilitating mental rejuvenation. Without it, burnout rises, effort increases, and productivity ultimately drops.

BUT ALL OF THIS research was done before the pandemic, and it was aimed at helping commuters commute better. Now we have to ask: What if the commute never comes back—or at least not every weekday? Can we replace it?

When I gave up my own commute some years ago, I came to a realization. The smell of the café car, the gathering of the shoulder bag, the clack of shoes on the lobby floor—all the sensory cues saying *You're a professional journalist arriving in Manhattan for work* would be gone. After a brief period of jubilation, I began to wonder if getting to work was the same as *getting to work*. A spacecraft approaching a planet too fast can bounce off the atmosphere right back into space, and you can rearrange a lot of desk items and check a lot of sports scores before realizing you've spaced out, too.

If I was going to replace my commute, I'd have to get strategic.

I developed a set of tricks. Matching my surroundings with the task at hand seemed important. Deep research was best done in the stacks of a nearby library; writing, in coffee shops. Commuting directly from the desk to the dinner table was a bad idea. A run or stroll outside first. But no strolling in the a.m. Mornings, you walk like you're late for something. Above all: An underdressed day is an unproductive day. So if a deadline looms, out comes the writing blazer. In office attire, you can't take out the trash or water the lawn without a strong feeling that you ought to be doing something else. Like your job.

I was pleased to find an entire academic paper called "Enclothed Cognition" that backed me up on this. When people are asked to do a difficult task involving visual concentration, they make about half as many errors if they first put on a white lab coat. (If they're told it's a painter's coat, it helps, but only marginally.) The coat has a symbolic power, the paper says, which "is not realized until one physically wears and thus embodies the clothes."

How did the rest of my routine hold up? I sought the advice of Ezra Bookman, a corporate-ritual designer (yes, this is a real job) based in Brooklyn. His work includes coming up with ideas like "funerals" for failed projects. "Every single conversation I have with corporate clients is the same," he told me: "Employees are burnt out and have no separation between home and life."

> SPARE A KIND WORD FOR THE HIGHWAYS AND THE SUBWAYS, FOR THE CROWDS AND THE FILTH, FOR THE BAGELWICH AND THE JOSTLED COFFEE.

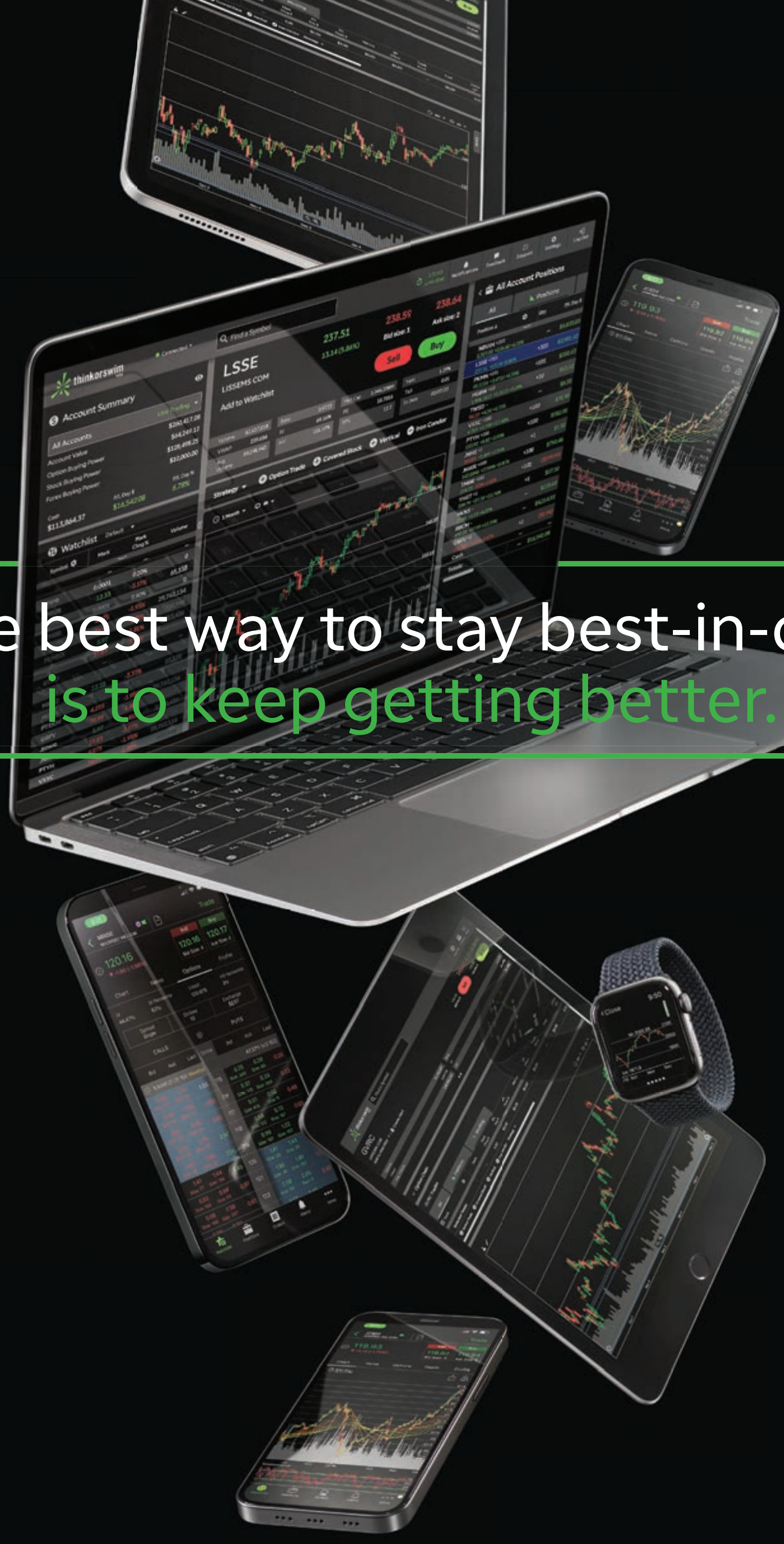
Naturally, he has come up with some rituals to replace the commute and mark the beginning and end of each day. The ideas he's proposed to clients include lighting variations, warm-up stretches, cellphone-free walks, and, as he demonstrated to me over Zoom, shrouding your computer in a fine blue cloth when you log off, as if it, too, needs a good night's sleep.

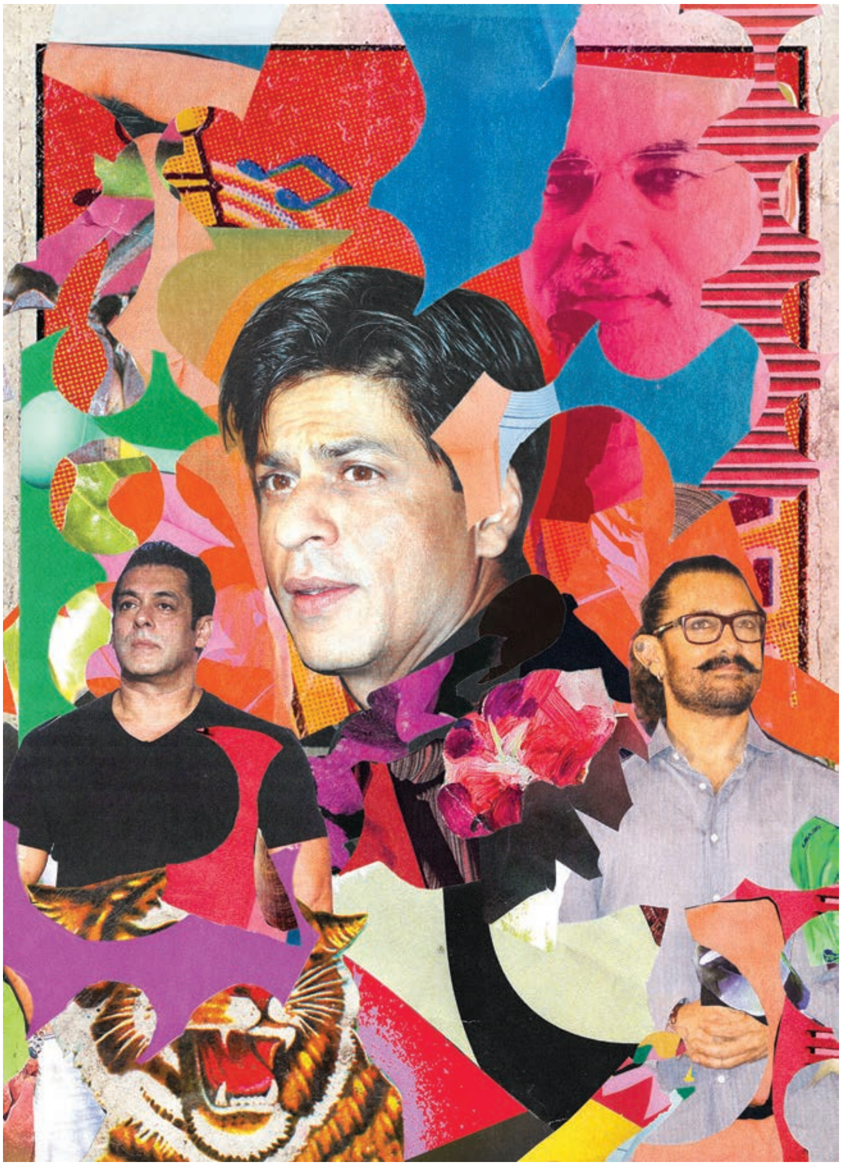
"Rituals are friction," he told me. Like the commute, "they slow us down. They're so antithetical to most of our life, which is all about efficiency and speed." One ritual that worked for Bookman was changing his laptop password to "DeepBreath": "It helps me to locate myself in time and say, 'Okay, what am I here to do?'"

Iqbal, the Microsoft researcher, said that this was the same idea behind a "virtual commute" that her company has just released. An onscreen tap on the shoulder—"Ready to leave for the day?"—signals that it's time to knock off. The shutdown sequence has you bookmark what you were working on. It invites you to "take a minute to breathe and reset," in sync, if you like, with a calming meditation video. Because work is done.

All of which is to say: With meditation exercises, costume changes, and chatbots, you too can replicate what the commute did for you. In the meantime, let's finally spare a kind word for something we've spent our lives abusing—for the highways and the subways, for the crowds and the filth, for the bagelwich and the jostled coffee, for the traffic tie-up and the terrible screech in the tunnel. Two optimistic subway vandals did it 10 years ago. Tired of that underground poem's eternal griping, they briefly replaced WHY THE PAIN? with MUCH TO GAIN. *A*

Jerry Useem, a contributing writer at The Atlantic, *has covered business and economics for* The New York Times, Fortune, *and other publications.*





CAN BOLLYWOOD SURVIVE MODI?

Its films have always celebrated a pluralistic India, making the industry—and its Muslim elite—a target of Hindu nationalists.

BY AATISH TASEER

The Bandra-Worli Sea Link connects central Mumbai with neighborhoods to the north. If you're driving from downtown, the bridge brings you into the orbit of Bollywood, the Hindi-language segment of India's vast movie industry. Actors, makeup artists, special-effects people—they cluster in a handful of seaside neighborhoods. The superstars live in great bungalows, with devoted crowds stationed outside.

Bollywood has been central to the creation of India's national myth. Its movies are full of dance and song, but their genius lies in their ability to weave serious issues—social justice, women's rights, gay rights, interreligious marriage—into entertainment. Bollywood films are at once commercial and political. They epitomize the pluralism of India.

And in today's political climate, that makes them a target. In ways reminiscent of the old Hollywood blacklist, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is using powerful tools to curtail the creative freedom of Bollywood—in particular the influence of Muslims, who have an outsize presence in the industry. The measures pushed by the Modi government include indiscriminate tax investigations, trumped-up accusations against actors

*India's Hindu-nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi (*upper right*), and three of Bollywood's biggest Muslim stars (*left to right*): Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Aamir Khan*

RAVEENDRAN / AFP; VISUAL CHINA GROUP / GETTY; CHIRAG WAKASKAR / GETTY; MANOJ VERMA / *HINDUSTAN TIMES* / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY GEOFF KIM

Google

Every day Google secures 1.5 billion inboxes,

Gmail

From: Abuelita Toña

Subject: Top secret recipe ❤️

Lisa,
My famous pozole recipe to share with your boys someday. ¡Pero con nadie más eh! Te amo.

PDF pozole-recipe.pdf

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and directors, intimidation and harassment in response to certain movies and TV shows, and the chilling rap of law enforcement at the door. Fearing worse to come, Bollywood has remained mostly silent in the face of the government's catastrophic response to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Everybody is just shit-scared and wanting to lie low," a woman who is closely involved with the industry told me recently. "This is such a vindictive government." The day before we spoke, tax authorities had raided the home and offices of one of the country's finest directors, along with those of an actor he worked with. Both are outspoken government critics, and the raid was widely seen as politically motivated.

As we talked, a director friend sent me a vanishing message on Signal, the encrypted-communications platform, about a case before India's Supreme Court. A senior Amazon executive in India was facing arrest, along with others, for a nine-part political drama called *Tandav*, which includes a portrayal of the Hindu god Shiva that some found objectionable. The director of the series had apologized, and removed the offending scene. And according to the message I received, the court had declined to offer protection (a decision it later revised). "The problem," one senior executive for a major streaming service told me later, "is that the director is Muslim and the actor is Muslim."

Soon, another show—*Bombay Begums*—was under fire, with India's National Commission for Protection of Child Rights calling on Netflix to pull the series on the grounds that it would "pollute the young minds of the children" by "normalizing" drug use. The more credible motivation was that the series normalized interfaith relationships, as well as LGBTQ ones.

I GOT TO KNOW India's movie industry starting in 2013, when I was dating a Bollywood director, a protégé of Karan Johar—one of the city's biggest producers, known as KJo. Johar is the Hindu half of a storied collaboration with Shah Rukh Khan, a Muslim and one of Bollywood's biggest stars. Their partnership began in the 1990s—at first yielding popcorn-and-bubblegum films, and then moving on to iconic post-9/11 dramas such as *My Name Is Khan* (2010), which dealt with growing Islamophobia worldwide.

Bollywood, in its upper echelons, is tight-knit, and through my boyfriend I met the whole A-list in a matter of days. It was a world of blacked-out SUVs that swept into underground garages, where men with walkie-talkies conveyed you up to palatial apartments overlooking the Arabian Sea.

The Indian film industry turns out more than 2,000 movies a year. Bollywood, its largest component, produces as many as Hollywood. The intensity of Bollywood celebrity is unmatched. One night, Ranbir Kapoor—India's Ryan Gosling, you might say, and the leading man in a movie my boyfriend was directing—picked me up at my hotel in a tinted SUV. Kapoor was with his then-girlfriend, the actor Katrina Kaif. Soon we were speeding to a private dinner. Word traveled along the Mumbai streets that Ranbir was on the move, and by the time we had arrived at our destination, a crowd of several dozen had gathered.

THERE IS A heartbreaking inevitability to the confrontation between Bollywood and Modi's BJP. Modi does not view India as a composite culture, to which Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians have all contributed, but rather as an essentially Hindu entity whose destiny lies in bringing about a Hindu cultural renaissance. Modi's record as chief minister of the western state of Gujarat included complicity in a pogromlike riot in 2002, in which more than 1,000 people, most of them Muslim, were killed.

"EVERYBODY IS JUST SHIT-SCARED AND WANTING TO LIE LOW. THIS IS SUCH A VINDICTIVE GOVERNMENT."

Muslims have always had a disproportionate influence in Bollywood. Actors such as Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, and Aamir Khan have towered over the landscape of Indian cinema for the past 30 years: Of the 10 highest-grossing films in Bollywood history, six feature one of the Khans. (The three are not related.) Several of Bollywood's most influential studios have been owned by Muslim families.

If Modi has the most Twitter followers of any man in India, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan are in the top rank, with more than 40 million each. At No. 2 is a legend named Amitabh Bachchan, whose career illustrates how inextricably Muslim lives are bound up with the movie industry.

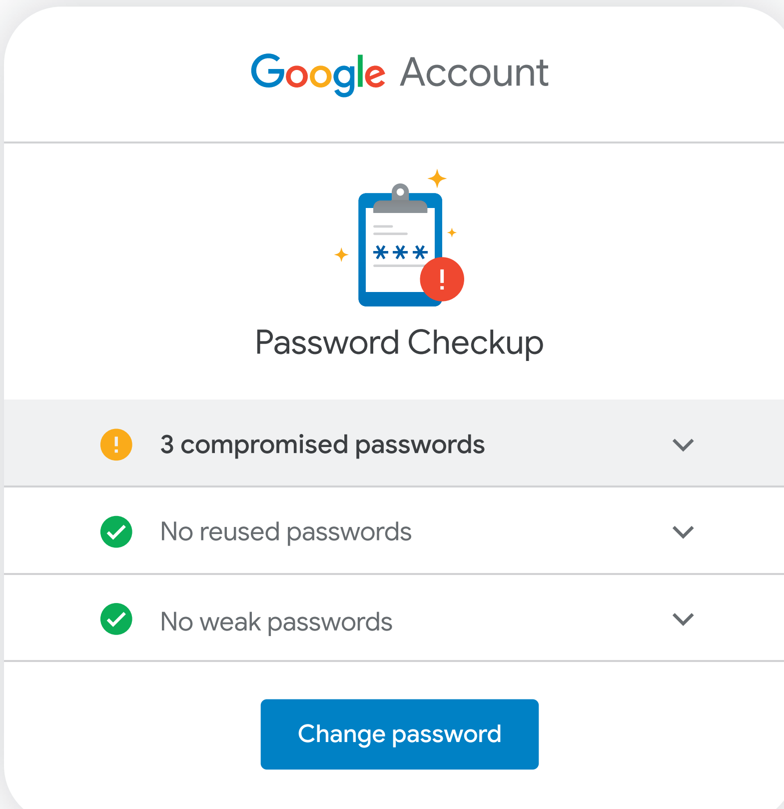
Though not Muslim himself, Bachchan grew famous on the screen in the 1970s by inhabiting an angry-man character named Vijay, a persona created by two Muslim screenwriters. The films he made told stories of an India whose very survival depended on Hindu-Muslim unity. Bachchan's father, a Hindi poet, grew up in a world steeped in Urdu and Persian poetry. It was this shared culture, in which Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus all participated, that fed Bollywood in its early days. It is Bollywood's DNA.

The BJP has a very different origin story. The party began in the 1980s as the political face of an organization called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The RSS was founded in 1925, at a time when European fascist movements were gaining ground. Its early leaders, men such as M. S. Golwalkar, whose birthday the Modi government recently celebrated with a Twitter announcement, brimmed with regard for Nazi Germany. Golwalkar wrote in 1939 that India could learn from Germany's efforts to "keep up the purity of the race and its culture."

The RSS in recent years has sought to move past its ugly beginnings. But fixations remain, including an insistence on racial purity and a horror of interreligious marriage. A spate of new laws restricts marriages between Hindus and Muslims in BJP-controlled states. Interreligious marriage, meanwhile, is far more common in Bollywood than in Indian society at large. Two of the three Khans are married to Hindu women.

Google

Every day Google checks 1 billion saved passwords,



so if any of yours get hacked, we’ll let you know.

During Modi's first term, which began in 2014, the BJP's "IT Cell"—a network of online influencers and hate-mongers—made some of its most serious social-media attacks on Muslims in Bollywood. In 2015, Aamir Khan was hideously trolled when he expressed alarm at growing intolerance and mentioned that his wife had broached the idea of leaving the country. The following year, Saif Ali Khan—another leading man—came under orchestrated social-media attack when he and his Hindu wife, Kareena Kapoor, named their first son Taimur. (Taimur was the Muslim ruler known in the West as Tamerlane.)

In 2018, Hindu nationalists offered a bounty to anyone who cut off the nose of the actor Deepika Padukone, because she was starring in a historical movie rumored to depict an intimate scene between a Muslim king and a Hindu queen.

The following year brought a now-infamous photo op between Modi and Bollywood elites—an episode of appeasement or perhaps opportunism by elements of the industry. The stunt was arranged by a man named Mahaveer Jain, whom no one had heard of until then. Somehow he managed to corral a mighty figure like KJo into taking a group of A-listers on a private plane to Delhi to meet the prime minister. The stars were encouraged to post selfies with Modi. Not a single Muslim actor or director was included. The message was clear: Modi wanted a new Bollywood, one that was Muslim-*rein*. Soon Jain was working with major producers and directors, including Johar, on film projects with nationalistic themes.

MODI'S REELECTION, in 2019, emboldened the prime minister to press his cultural agenda. The suicide by hanging last summer of an actor named Sushant Singh Rajput gave the government a new opportunity. Rajput was a talented young actor who had risen in an industry with a reputation for being clubby. He also had a history of mental illness. People spoke of his struggle with substance abuse. "I hadn't seen him sober once in the last three years," a mutual friend told me.

IN 2018, HINDU NATIONALISTS OFFERED A BOUNTY TO ANYONE WHO CUT OFF THE NOSE OF ONE OF INDIA'S MOST POPULAR ACTORS.

Rajput's suicide was a tragedy, but in the hands of a pliant press, known in India as the "godi media"—*godi* means "lap," as in lapdog—his death became a way to put the entire movie industry on trial. With an election looming in Bihar—Rajput's native state—the BJP made his suicide seem like a murder at the hands of a nepotistic and druggy elite. Rajput's picture appeared on posters, with the words WE HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN. WE WON'T LET THEM FORGET. His girlfriend, Rhea Chakraborty, was thrown in jail on charges of abetting his suicide. Soon, the Narcotics Control Bureau raided her home and those of other major figures in the movie industry, ostensibly in search of drugs but mainly to intimidate and sully reputations.

Modi used Rajput's suicide to exploit Bollywood's internal fissures and launch an outright culture war. One actor in particular led the charge.

I first met Kangana Ranaut in 2014, in New York City. I remember her as having a tremendous sense of fun. I recently came across a picture of us in Brooklyn, where she is wearing a summery white dress and silver sunglasses, and smiling broadly.

Ranaut looks very different in her WhatsApp profile picture, which presents her as a fierce figure of piety, wearing a blue sari and offering ablutions to Shiva. In 2019, before an audience of executives, journalists, and intellectuals, Ranaut defended a previous statement in which she had called for the destruction of Pakistan. (Her earlier comment had come in the wake of a deadly attack by a Pakistani suicide bomber in Kashmir. On hearing that news, Ranaut said, she had felt like going to the border and killing Pakistanis herself.) On another occasion, she described the movie industry as "full of such anti-nationals who boost enemies' morals in many ways." (Ranaut's incitements to violence have led to her being banned from Twitter.) Last year, in response to unspecified threats, Ranaut was given a high personal-security designation by the Ministry of Home Affairs—a level that, according to news reports, is generally reserved for "someone who holds a position of consequence either in the government or in civil society."

It's hard to know whether Bollywood will emerge with its character intact. Johar, a child of the old Bollywood, is both a casualty of this new time and an enabler, trying frantically to remake himself in the image of Modi's India. It's an exercise doomed to fail. Johar has an incriminating body of work: movies with gay themes (Johar does not discuss his own sexual orientation, even though, as he has written, it is something that "everybody knows") and movies that resist Islamophobia. My director friend recalls telling him simply, "Dude, you're going to get fucked. You're a fake."

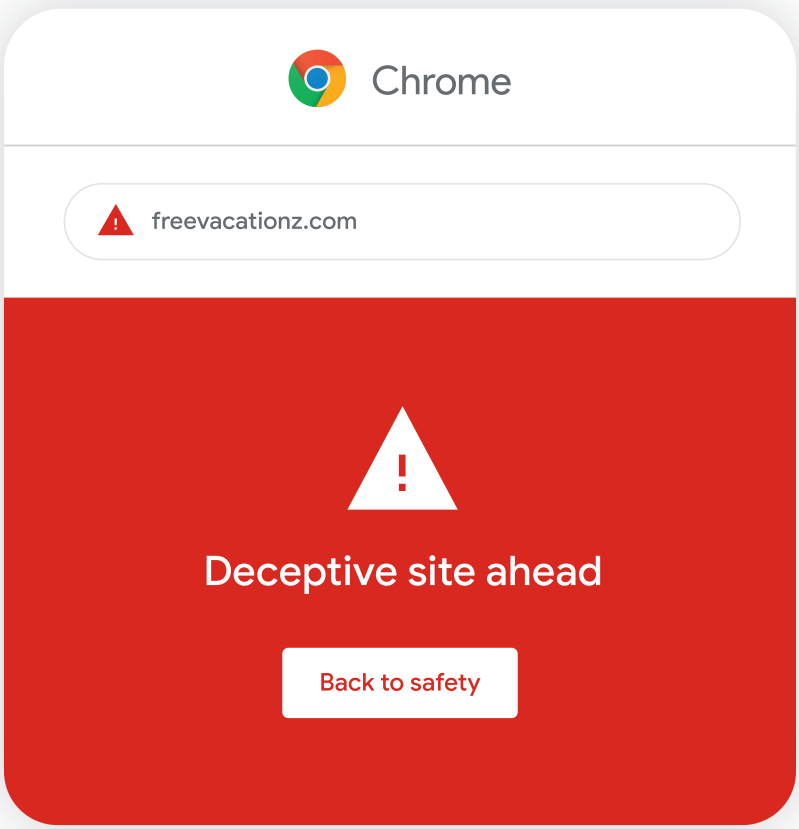
Last fall, after months of attacks, the movie industry showed a rare bit of gumption. Jaya Bachchan—Amitabh's wife, and a member of the upper house of Parliament—described a "conspiracy to defame the film industry." A few weeks later, a group of producers filed a defamation suit against cable channels allied with the government. Bollywood's only chance of survival, given the weakness of India's institutions, lies in its ability to stick together and marshal its star power.

Bollywood's influence stretches well beyond India. The BJP knows this, and wants to bring it into line. In 1935, the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels went to see *It Happened One Night*, and later wrote enviously in his diary, "The Americans are so natural. Far superior to us." Authoritarians always want that megaphone for themselves. One way to seize it is by making an example of a few while stirring fear and self-censorship among the rest. *A*

Aatish Taseer's most recent book is The Twice-Born: Life and Death on the Ganges. *His documentary,* In Search of India's Soul, *was released last year.*

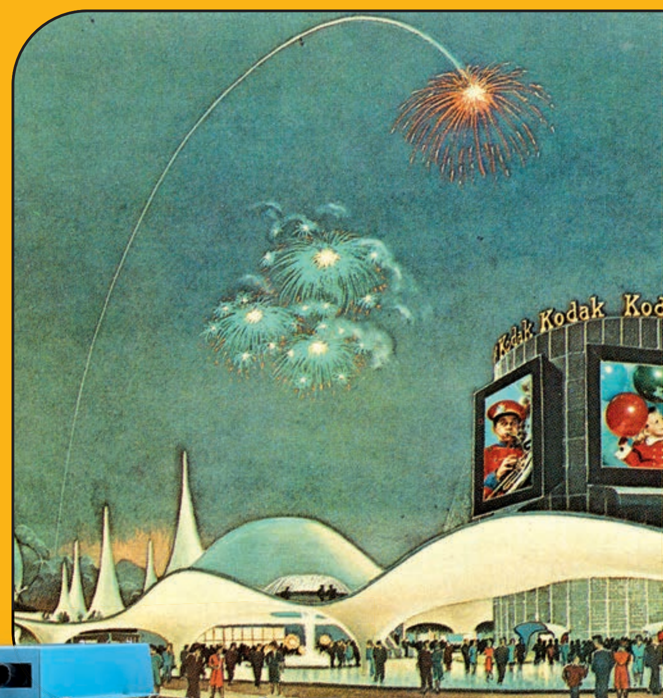
Google

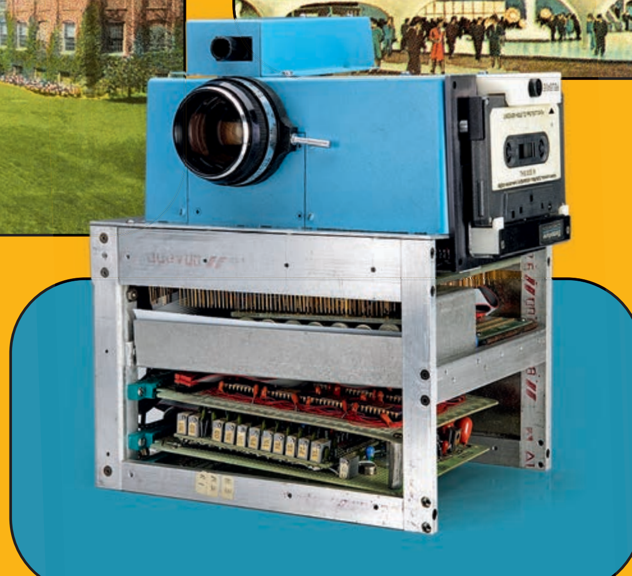
Every day Google protects 4 billion devices,

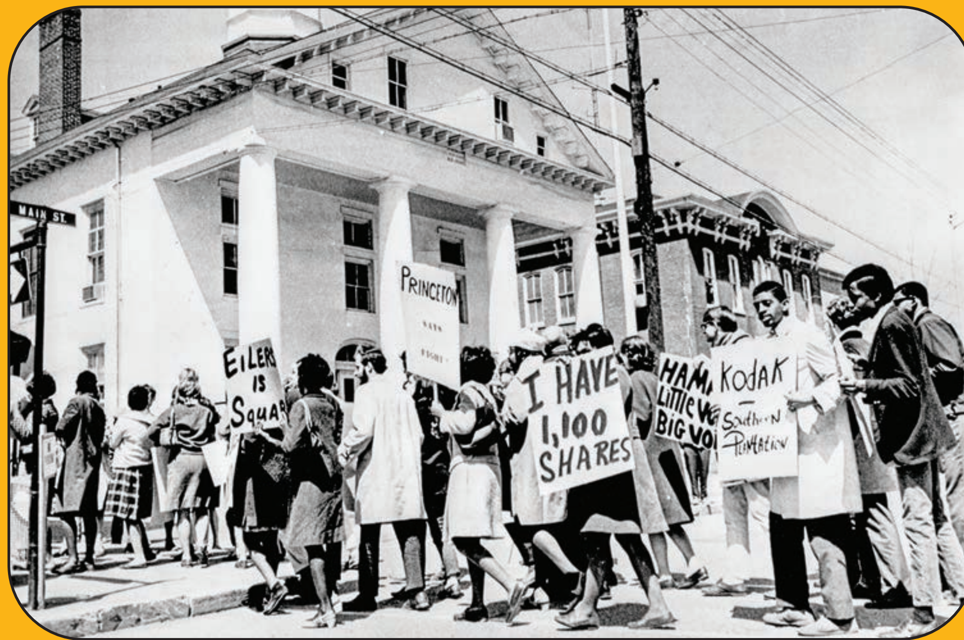


alerting you if a site seems risky.

The World



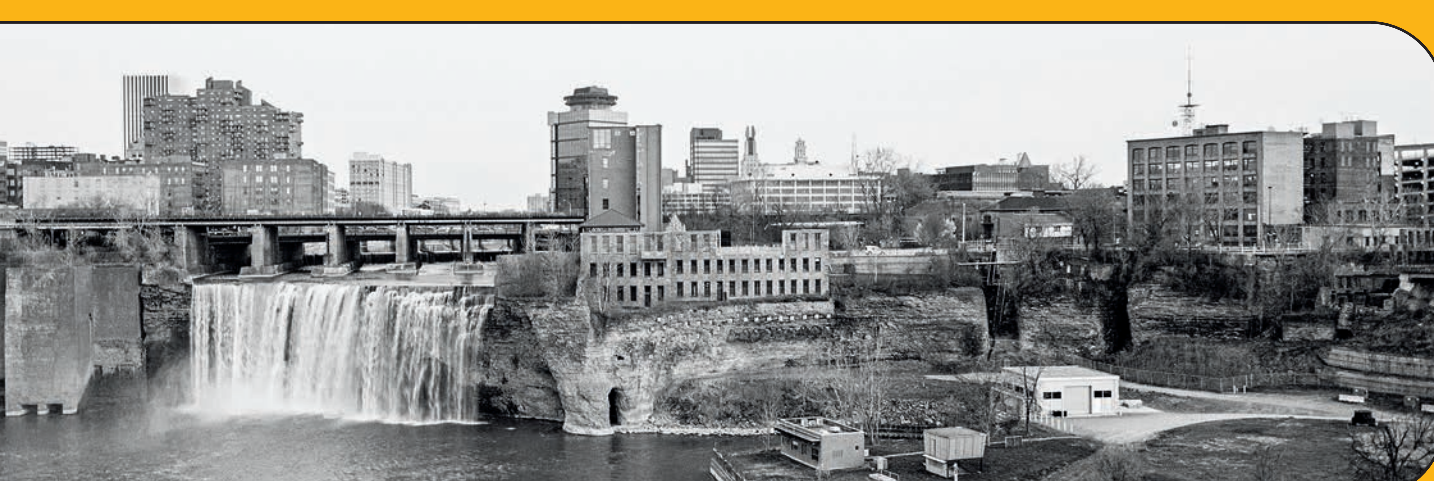




Kodak Made

The tech giant of the 20th century changed the way Americans saw themselves and their country—and built the city where it made its home. Now Kodak and Rochester are trying to reinvent themselves, and escape their history.

By Kaitlyn Tiffany



When I was in fifth grade, my class took a field trip to the George Eastman Museum, in Rochester, New York, as the fifth graders at my rural elementary school, 30 minutes south of the city, did every year. Housed in a Colonial Revival mansion built for the founder of the Eastman Kodak Company in 1905, the museum is home to one of the most significant photography and film collections in the world. But our job there was to stare at old cameras the size of our bodies, marvel at the luxury of having a pipe organ in your house, and write down what a daguerreotype is to prove that we'd been paying attention. At the end of the tour—in a second-story sitting room full of personal artifacts—we were presented, matter-of-factly, with a copy of Eastman's suicide letter, dated March 14, 1932: "My work is done. Why wait?" Eastman shot himself in the heart with a Luger pistol at the age of 77.

Telling this story to a bunch of 10-year-olds was not meant to be morbid. It was meant to be edifying: To work is to live. And nobody could argue that Eastman hadn't worked. His company, founded in 1880, invented the first easy-to-use consumer camera and thereby amateur photography; it achieved a near-monopoly on the consumer-film business, capturing the imagination of the entire world; it was Hollywood, and it was New York, and it was as grand as history—with a simple search, even a child can find images of Eastman hosting Thomas Edison, nonchalantly, in his backyard. The city where we stood was just another of his accomplishments: Eastman funded Rochester's colleges and its hospital system, its cultural institutions, its nonprofits, its parks, its suburban housing developments. In 1920, his free pediatric dental clinic removed the tonsils of 1,470 children in seven weeks. Even in 2003, when I made that class trip, we were encouraged to believe we should feel lucky that he had chosen Rochester to lavish his attention upon.

Being a child, and having no accomplishments or distinguishing characteristics of my own, I did derive some pride from living near the home of Kodak. My first memories were recorded on Kodak film and developed at the grocery store, and what company could be more important than the company that did that? (I was already pretty convinced of the stunning importance of my personal narrative.) Nobody was offering, but a peek behind the curtain at the company's sprawling business and manufacturing domain—then called Kodak Park, encompassing 1,200 acres traversed by a private railroad—would have been the equivalent of being allowed inside Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. The only difference was that my own Wonka was dead, cremated, and interred beneath a cylinder of Georgia marble at the factory gates. Also, there would have been no candy.

By the time the offer came, last year, I knew the experience likely wouldn't be magical. Kodak was already past its prime when I'd visited the Eastman mansion on my field trip, though it reported $4.3 billion in gross profits that year. Since then, many of the buildings in the park had been rented out, sold off, or demolished. The company filed for bankruptcy while I was in college, and rebounded slowly: In 2019, Kodak reported just $182 million in profits. Still, I'd read a few news items about Kodak "pivoting"—a funny word that makes spinning sound intentional—to pharmaceuticals, and as a journalist and an adult, I now had my chance. I'd emailed and asked to hear the story, and was almost immediately told that I could come for a quick visit during a pandemic.

For the past five years, Kodak has been easing its way into the pharmaceutical industry, producing inactive filler materials for generic pills. This will be boring to explain: The company plans to expand under the banner of its Advanced Materials & Chemicals Division, which will continue producing unregulated "key starting materials" and begin making regulated ones, as well as smaller quantities of active pharmaceutical ingredients. The pandemic—which strained global supply chains for generic drugs—prompted a realization from CEO and Chair Jim Continenza, who saw a moment for Kodak to "kind of reinvent ourselves."

That would require an investment in both jobs and building upgrades, which is why Kodak applied for a $765 million loan through the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation—a federal agency that in ordinary times funds projects only in the developing world. Under the Defense Production Act loan program, and in the context of the pandemic, the year 2020 qualified as nonordinary times, and Kodak's project qualified as an opportunity for the federal government to do something about the nation's reliance on overseas manufacturers for generic drugs. Given the draw of Kodak's name and the low-key bizarreness of an international-development bank pouring money into a forgotten Rust Belt city, Washington's willingness to entertain the loan application became a news event, despite its relative irrelevance to essentially everyone's immediate future.

In July, the agency signed a letter of interest with Kodak, a loose but significant promise preceding a longer process of consideration and due diligence. The national reaction was a mix of frenzy and incredulousness. Kodak's stock soared, and within 24 hours 79,000 amateur traders had added Kodak shares to their portfolios on the Robinhood app. The Trump administration was eager to take credit for the deal, and the White House trade adviser, Peter Navarro, speculated that the company might have "one of the greatest second acts in American industrial history." The announcement put

Opening spread, clockwise from mid-right: *Kodak founder George Eastman takes a picture, circa 1925. High Falls in Rochester, New York, Kodak's hometown. Steve Sasson's first digital camera, 1975. A matchbox camera developed by Kodak during World War II. Rochester's Kodak Park, circa 1940. A Black employee in 1967 on a Kodak assembly line, where opportunities for Black workers were few. The Brownie Flash 20, introduced in 1959. The crown of Kodak Tower. The Reverend Franklin D. R. Florence, president of FIGHT, a group seeking to change Kodak's hiring practices, at a company stockholders' meeting in Flemington, New Jersey, 1967. Picketers from FIGHT in Flemington.* Center: *Postcard of the Kodak Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, 1964.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BETTMANN / GETTY; LARRY TOWELL / MAGNUM; EASTMAN KODAK; BETTMANN / GETTY; FOUND IMAGE PRESS / CORBIS / GETTY; ASSOCIATED PRESS; SSPL / GETTY; CAROL M. HIGHSMITH / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL / HUNTERDON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY; HENNING KAISER / DDP / AFP / GETTY; UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL / HUNTERDON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY; NEXTRECORD ARCHIVES / GETTY

Kodak up for analysis by the nation's business pages in a serious way for the first time in several years, though not every publication took it *that* seriously: Kodak's shift to pharmaceuticals was, after all, coming "years after" that of "rival Fujifilm," *Fortune* wrote. Incidental to much of the discussion, the move into pharmaceuticals was expected to create about 360 new jobs, mainly in Rochester.

But within days, the deal was on the rocks. In a letter to the Securities and Exchange Commission, Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts requested that the agency investigate Kodak for allegations of insider trading, and pointed to large stock purchases before the official loan announcement and other suspicious activity by Kodak executives, including Continenza. She also noted that Kodak had briefed local news outlets about the loan in advance, without telling them the information was embargoed. After journalists broke the news, Kodak, rather than admitting its mistake and releasing the information widely, asked journalists to delete their tweets. This alone could help explain why there was a small trading burst the day before the official announcement. So the SEC announced that it was putting the loan on hold, pending investigation. (Kodak declined to comment on the allegations, citing the ongoing inquiry.)

Irritated by what he seemed to view as incompetence rather than corruption, Navarro appeared bewildered on CNBC. "What happened at Kodak was probably one of the dumbest decisions made by executives in corporate history," he said. "You can't even anticipate that degree of stupidity." In Reddit's noxious and now-infamous Wall Street Bets forum, day traders were sneering. "It's obviously a scam," one wrote. "Kodak is going to keep sinking like the Titanic," wrote another. I had to admit that there was a sort of appropriateness to the failure—the unfamous employees of a company from another time forgetting that news doesn't wait for the morning paper anymore. I also felt hurt and a little annoyed. My whole adult life, I have heard stories about Kodak messing up, Kodak trying again, Kodak attempting something slightly interesting but fundamentally tragic, such as experimenting with some kind of sensor that would indicate whether a package of meat has gone bad. Kodak *was* arguably the greatest of the great American companies, because what it provided was both a perfect invention that changed the world and a beautiful story about the lives that the country's middle class could not only dream of but expect. All of that was already ending before I was born.

At the end of our fifth-grade tour we were presented, matter-of-factly, with a copy of Kodak founder George Eastman's suicide letter: "My work is done. Why wait?"

Huge pipes run aboveground all along the road through Eastman Business Park, which is what Kodak Park is now called, moving steam and solvents through the air at eye level. This is "a city within a city," Kodak's chief technology officer, Terry Taber—who started working at Kodak when my parents were in high school—told me when I visited in August. We were driving around in a van, because the campus was too large to walk across, so I had to agree. "We're now moving into the chemical-manufacturing area," he said as we approached a brown building that looked exactly like any building in any business park in any city, and also like most apartment buildings and dorms.

Inside, I stepped into white coveralls and selected a hard hat for a tour—my cellphone and voice recorder would have to stay behind in a conference room. The halls were a dated tannish-pink, studded with electric-blue doors and hand-painted logos for the Synthetic Chemicals Division. We walked around. We talked about federal regulation of the various components of generic pharmaceuticals. We stopped before hulking metal reactors and centrifuges, which weren't much to look at. Nobody would say exactly what was in them—confidential. I allowed myself one pause and no questions about the fact that Kodak used to store, for several decades, in a bunker beneath a building that was not part of the day's tour, a small amount of weapons-grade uranium. Taber made one joke about *Breaking Bad*, and chemists as a category. I clomped down a metal staircase on the outside of the building, looking out at nothing more impressive than some pavement and another building, which looked almost exactly like the one I had been in. How funny it was to be here, a grown woman who is both suspicious of a company's image and deeply defensive of it. I do not love companies, on principle, I reminded myself—but I can't lie.

This is where Kodak, the doomed photography company, will be pivoting to drugs, I thought, climbing into the hot van. I was struck by a creeping feeling that nothing is impressive and everything is weird. Soon, if all goes according to plan—and Kodak insists that all will go according to plan, with or without the $765 million federal loan—Kodak will upgrade that building by pulling out its guts; putting in new floors, air locks, and control systems; and replacing certain glass-lined reactors with ones made of stainless steel. This makes sense. Kodak is a chemical company—photographic film has hundreds of material components, after all—and it has the experience and the chemists (and the outfits) to make all kinds of chemicals for drugs. Later, in an email, a Kodak spokesperson asked me not to identify the brown building too specifically, for security reasons, so I won't. (The uranium was stored under Building 82, as reported by CNN.)

All of this, what little of it there is, is likely riveting only if you've been steeped in the local history against your express consent. Rochester was founded as a mill town after the Revolutionary War, but boomed with the opening of its section of the Erie Canal in the 1820s, an event about which there is a famous and unnerving song that my classmates and I were required to learn and perform. Like any city, it has cultivated grand and sometimes silly self-mythologies. Once called "Flour City" in honor of its status as the country's leading producer and distributor of flour, Rochester was renamed "Flower City," supposedly because of

an abnormal concentration of garden nurseries, which remains a point of confusion for residents 150 years later. As a child, I was told that the Genesee River, which cuts through the center of the city, is the only river on Earth besides the Nile that runs north. (It turns out that a lot of rivers run north.) Rochester has an arched aqueduct, just like Rome, and an abandoned subway system full of ghosts, and it once had a famous daredevil, who survived jumping from the top of Niagara Falls but died jumping from the High Falls along the Genesee, in November 1829, with a crowd looking on. (In the spring, legend has it, a block of ice enclosing his corpse turned up on a suburban riverbank.)

Rochester was also where the prosperity of early manufacturing gave Frederick Douglass the patronage required to found his newspaper *The North Star* and allowed Susan B. Anthony the leisure time to organize for suffrage. The region was a locus of the Second Great Awakening; Jell-O was also invented there, as was the rumor of a generations-long Jell-O curse.

And then, one day, there was Kodak. The first camera for ordinary people was a long black box, about the size of a loaf of bread, introduced in 1888. It was marketed with advertisements meant to convey ease of use—in the images, both women and children were using the cameras successfully. "You press the button, we do the rest," the ads promised, which was God's honest truth: Once an amateur photographer had used up the film in her camera, she mailed the entire thing back to the Kodak factory, then awaited her pictures and a reloaded machine. Kodak's advertising made personal photography a national phenomenon, a new way of seeing and remembering daily life. "Prove it with a Kodak," one tagline went. "A vacation without a Kodak is a vacation wasted." "Let Kodak tell the story." In time, *Kodaking* became a verb, as natural as *Instagramming*. Many early Kodak ads mentioned the company's location, planting it firmly on the map: "Rochester, New York, the Kodak City."

The business model was simple: Distribute tens of millions of cheap cameras—at times even giving them to children for free—and create lifelong customers for the far more lucrative product, film. And wealth made Kodak ambitious. The company created the film formats of Hollywood; invented the Super 8 technology, which inspired the age of home movies; and built the photosystems that would map 99 percent of the moon's surface. To the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, it offered teeny-tiny cameras that could fit into matchboxes, for spy stuff. "Kodak was the eyes of the world for over 100 years," Steve Sasson, the inventor of the first digital camera and one of the company's most famous employees, told me. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Kodak sold 70 million of its $16 Instamatic cameras, and the average owner used eight rolls of its signature Kodapak film each year. The most famous recording of John F. Kennedy's assassination is on 8-mm Kodachrome film, captured by a random bystander in Dallas, Abraham Zapruder, who was filming because he had the opportunity to film—the Kodak mindset.

In her 1977 book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag saw cameras as a tool of "colonization" after the opening of the transcontinental railroad. She commented on the signs that Kodak put at the entrances of various towns, providing suggestions to tourists of local attractions they might wish to photograph: "Faced with the awesome spread and alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited." Similarly, Kodak laid claim to the American imagination with its "Coloramas"—18 feet high and 60 feet wide—in Grand Central Terminal, in Manhattan, which were swapped out every three weeks and reportedly elicited an "ovation" from passing crowds. Many of those images depicted the adventurous and still-mysterious West. In 1961, Ansel Adams contributed a photo of an Oregon wheat field—he participated because he found the project "technically remarkable." The rest of the Coloramas were Kodak's vision of ordinary American life: a Texas family in a convertible, a beauty pageant in Alabama, a family swimming pool in New York (Rochester, of course).

In the famous Kodak episode of *Mad Men*, which aired in 2007, the ad guru Don Draper wows his clients by coming up with the name for the Kodak Carousel slide projector, filling it with photos of his own gorgeous family and reciting a dictionary definition of *nostalgia* as he flicks through them. As usual, he's extremely moved by his own words, feeling things he struggles to feel outside an advertising context. The pitch resonates because Kodak didn't just teach Americans to take photographs; it taught them what to take photographs *of*, and it taught them what photographs were for.

The Kodak mythology, though powerful, was and is easily seen through. In the final year of the Coloramas' installation at Grand Central, *The New York Times*' Andy Grundberg composed a eulogy for them, lightly mocking the "idealized pseudo-snapshots

COURTESY OF THE GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM; BETTMANN / GETTY; GETTY; SSPL / GETTY

Left to right: *"Children Breaking Wishbone," a 1968 installment in Kodak's Colorama campaign. Kodak Tower, the company's headquarters. Kodak color film for a movie camera, 1935.*

of happy families doing happy-family things." Still, Grundberg admitted, more people had probably looked up at the Ansel Adams photograph in the train station than had ever deliberately sought one out in a museum. The landscapes were wonderful. The effect couldn't be denied. It's a cliché at this point to say that there is "something very American" about any particular event or idiosyncrasy, which is maybe why it's unsatisfying to say that the Coloramas were very American. But in their obviousness I think they were *even more* very American than they looked: Nobody was really duped, but at some level people wanted to be, or at least they had to concede that the effect was impressive.

In Rochester, Kodak was nothing less than the 20th century itself. Kodak Tower, a 19-story neo-Renaissance skyscraper, was the gilded beacon of downtown. By the postwar period, the company had developed a reputation for generosity toward its employees, paying health-care costs not just for retirees but for their entire families, as well as subsidizing advanced degrees, providing mortgage loans, and organizing employee sports leagues. By the end of the '70s, Kodak employed more than 50,000 people in Rochester, and things were so good that Flower City became known as "Smugtown." In 1980, Kodak celebrated its centennial with a summer-long birthday party of free music and fireworks.

For a long time, the prosperity looked like it would hold. In the early '80s, Kodak was responsible for about a quarter of the economy in Rochester, according to Kent Gardner, an economist at the Center for Governmental Research, a nonprofit consulting firm based in Rochester and originally funded by George Eastman himself. "There were tens of thousands of direct jobs, plus indirect jobs from supplying materials and other services, then the yearly bonus flooding into car dealerships and appliance showrooms," he told me. "In 1980, the bonus was, in current dollar terms, $450 million of purchasing power landing in the people's hands at one time." Nowhere was the symbiotic relationship between Kodak and its city more obvious than in the pages of Rochester's local newspaper, the *Democrat and Chronicle*. The space dedicated to letters from the community was often filled with discussion of Kodak's latest triumphs or challenges, almost always with a sentiment of shared fate. In 1989, as Kodak was skidding through a significant rough patch, an employee named Robert J. Hogan wrote to the paper: "If 20,000 Kodak people volunteered 20 minutes per day, it would amount to 1,660,000 volunteer hours per year donated to the company, to us, to our future."

This letter was sent in at a time of particular turmoil: The company had failed to produce its own videotape camcorder, a fact that competitors in Japan were profiting from handsomely, and it had been late to instant photography, which had led to a $12 billion patent-infringement suit filed by Polaroid. (Kodak ultimately paid $925 million, at the time the largest infringement payout ever.) Kodak had also just spent $5 billion to acquire Sterling Drug, a pharmaceutical company, to diversify its business—a baffling move to many onlookers; a few years later, Kodak sold the company. There had been several rounds of layoffs throughout the decade, including a cut of 4,500 jobs in 1989 alone. A briefly promising union-organizing effort, led by the International Union of Electrical Workers, petered out, as employees expressed fear of retaliation by an openly anti-union company.

But to the extent that Rochester residents expressed distress about any of this, they focused their ire on specific executives, never on the company itself. Several letters to the newspaper at that time called for CEO Colby Chandler to resign—and quick, lest his epitaph read THE MAN WHO KILLED KODAK. This would soon reveal itself as a miscalculation. In 1990, Chandler retired and was replaced by a new CEO, Kay Whitmore, who promptly gave an interview about his positions on the company's urgent issues. Among other things, he said that he saw some legitimacy to the recently floated argument that Kodak's headquarters should be moved out of Rochester. Stockholders and board members were justified in their "frustration" with the city, he went on, and with the notion that Kodak *owed* Rochester the generosity it had so freely shown. "Communities are not really entitled to that sort of thing," he explained.

In 1993, the year I was born, the blood was in the water. Kodak replaced Whitmore—who had not been cutting costs quickly enough—with a former head of Motorola, George Fisher, the first person to lead the company who hadn't lived most of a lifetime in Rochester. The company laid off 10,000 people in Fisher's first three years. Then it laid off another 10,000. As consumers moved beyond film photography and started to favor digital, Kodak was slow to adapt. Back in 1989, Steve Sasson had shown Kodak's management a version of the digital camera he and other Kodak researchers had spent 15 years perfecting, and management had turned him down flat. "That's when I kind of got frustrated," he told me. "If *we* could do it, other people could do it. But Kodak was reluctant. You could never project a financial business model that was superior to photographic film." So, by 1993, Kodak had spent $5 billion on digital-imaging research, yet that year it only reluctantly entered the digital-camera race—neck and neck with competitors like Sony, Canon, and Olympus, not miles ahead, as it could have been. And it failed to rearrange its business model to make the new cameras profitable. In 1997, Fisher was trying to push the company to succeed in digital while still placating its internal old guard and insisting that "electronic imaging will not cannibalize film." In 2001, according to a Harvard case study, Kodak was losing $60 on each digital camera it sold.

By the time Kodak filed for bankruptcy, in 2012, it employed just over 5,000 people in Rochester. Soon that number was cut in half. Retirees lost their health care, and many of them lost their pension. Remaining employees could look forward only to more layoffs, and local nonprofits and cultural institutions had to think of someplace else to approach for support.

Kodak has since made many efforts to come back: Leaning into commercial printers. Selling off patents. Trying to break into the smartphone game, and then trying again, but uglier. (The Kodak Ektra, announced in 2016, was a smartphone that was supposed to look like a camera from 1941. The technology website *The Verge* compared the aesthetic result to "an insect that eats the insides of its rivals and then wears their hollowed-out corpses like trophy armor.") A few years ago, Kodak was leaning into its history, making a new Super 8 camera and a collection of retro jackets, fanny packs, sports bras, and other items with the fast-fashion brand Forever 21. "I have this ambition to return Kodak to being one of the world's best-known, best-loved brands," the chief branding officer, Dany Atkins, told me at the time. She doesn't work at Kodak anymore. Neither does the CEO who hired her.

Kodak continues to sell film, but now it calls itself a chemical company. Its pared-down workforce focuses primarily on commercial printing (everything from newspapers to food packaging) and, to a lesser extent, on an array of specialty products: X-ray films; fabric coatings; antimicrobial materials; and, more recently, films that can be used to manufacture printed circuit boards, like the ones in ventilators. It also sells film for the type of high-altitude cameras that can be used in reconnaissance planes. "What they use them for is classified, but it's not classified that we make the film and sell it to the U.S. government," Terry Taber said.

The company is still innovating, filing new patents for ink compositions and "nanoparticle composites," as well as processes for high-speed printing—it says that its inkjet printers are the fastest in the world, and that they can print on surfaces no other company's can—but it is generally not inventing splashy products that are meant to charm the average American consumer. "Anytime people hear about Kodak coming back, they think it's coming back to be the Kodak it was when they were a kid, or when their mom was working there or something," Sasson told me. "I don't foresee that."

Former employees still pine for that Kodak, some of them gathering in Facebook groups to reminisce. "I used to walk down the dark halls and think, *This is manufacturing*," Marla Dudley, a 67-year-old retiree, told me. "I was so proud." Her story was similar to what I heard from almost everyone I spoke with: She started working at Kodak when she was young; she climbed the ranks at Kodak; she retired from Kodak. It was the only employer she ever had. Patricia Loop, 65 and retired, told me that her father worked at Kodak, as did her grandfather, her sister, and her first and second husbands. "I made more money than most of my friends and got everything I wanted," she said with a laugh. These people didn't exactly miss working—they were happy to be retired—but they were disappointed that the Kodak way of life is over.

The Kodak way was paternalism, a term that was first intended affectionately. Back in the day, George Eastman offered his employees a lifelong pension and an annual profit-sharing bonus in exchange for their loyalty and the surrender of any ideas about collective bargaining. Kodak sometimes put off making big technological changes until it could retrain employees so they could

Clockwise from top left: *Eastman Kodak CEO George Fisher, 1996. A production line for Brownie cameras, circa 1945. A FIGHT protest at a shareholders' meeting, 1967.*

JAMES LEYNSE / CORBIS / GETTY; HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY; KODAK HISTORICAL COLLECTION / RARE BOOKS, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, AND PRESERVATION / UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER keep their jobs, the historian Rick Wartzman wrote in his 2017 book, *The End of Loyalty: The Rise and Fall of Good Jobs in America*. In the late 1950s, the company waited five years to install a new kind of film-emulsion coating machine so that workers who would have been made redundant could first reach retirement age and move gracefully on to pension payments. These pensions were "the ultimate expression of how the social contract between employer and employee was based on an expectation of lifetime loyalty," Wartzman told me. "You'd work hard until you couldn't work anymore, and then they'd take care of you forever."

Today, in some ways for the better but mostly for the worse, work looks nothing like that. None of this social-contract talk even resonates with me. The first thing I read about my fate as a Millennial was in a magazine that had been left on a chair in my college library. I don't remember which magazine, or who wrote the story; all I know is that it used a still from *Girls* and that the author informed me I would make lateral career moves all my life, having many jobs and many different employers and sometimes a good amount of money and sometimes very little, and also no loyalty, and no personal character built off a relationship with one company. I accepted this as reality.

"Kodak was an exemplar of something that was pretty standard among large employers at the time," Wartzman said. *Sounds fake, but okay*, my internet brain responded. Workers "were able to take part and get more of their fair share of the country's economic gains," he explained. "People look back on that time in Rochester nostalgically because that's what a lot of people are hoping the country can somehow find its way back to."

But in truth, to ache for Kodak's past in Rochester, you have to indulge in some revisionist history. The vaunted mid-century prosperity and surety were really only for white men—and Kodak's generosity was often two-faced. This was publicly apparent as early as 1939, when the New York legislature's Commission on the Condition of the Colored Urban Population investigated why the Black citizens of upstate manufacturing cities remained so impoverished, despite a recovering economy. The report called out a "manufacturer of photographic equipment and supplies" with a payroll of 16,351—Kodak—for employing just one Black person, as a porter (in addition to 19 Black construction workers through a subsidiary). The numbers for other large manufacturers in the area at the time were no better.

Justin Murphy, an education reporter at the *Democrat and Chronicle*, is working on a book about this lesser-known history of Rochester, which he argues is a root cause of the area's grievous racial inequality and school segregation in the present day. "Kodak just *didn't* hire Black people," he told me. "It was just absolutely not something they were interested in doing." Like other local power brokers at the time, Kodak also played a direct role in the region's housing segregation, by building developments in Rochester's suburbs specifically for its employees and helping them finance home purchases. In the property deeds for at least one major development, called Meadowbrook, a covenant stated that "no lot or dwelling shall be sold to or occupied by a colored person." (A Kodak spokesperson said that the company did not have any comment

In 1939, a commission of the New York legislature called out Kodak, with a payroll of 16,351, for employing just one Black person, as a porter.

on events that happened decades ago and that today it has "an unwavering commitment to diversity.")

The Black population of the city grew from less than 8,000 in 1950 to about 32,000 in 1964, and still the region's largest employers were not providing Black workers with the types of reliable manufacturing jobs that white residents could count on almost as a birthright. Rochester's overall unemployment rate was below 2 percent at the time, but for the Black population it was 14 percent. Racial tension drew the eyes of the country to Rochester in the summer of 1964, when the use of dogs by the police to control a crowd at a block party incited three days of riots. Not long after, a community group called FIGHT, led by a local minister, Franklin D. R. Florence, and the renowned organizer and provocateur Saul Alinsky, initiated contentious negotiations with Kodak over a job-training program to prepare unemployed Black residents for entry-level positions. At one point Alinsky suggested hosting a "fart-in" at the philharmonic to get attention. More salient was the group's demonstration at Kodak's 1967 stockholders' meeting, in Flemington, New Jersey. The two sides eventually reached an agreement, and a job-training program was promised. But by 1968, just 4 percent of Kodak's Rochester workforce was Black—compared with what would soon be nearly 17 percent of the city's population—and the whole thing was written off by some white residents as unjustified petulance. Letters from the community printed in the *Democrat and Chronicle* called the dispute the "shame of the city," FIGHT's tactics "deplorable," and its allegations baseless. The paper itself took Kodak's side, openly. Responding to a complaint from a local rabbi that previous editorials had been "one-sided in favor of Kodak," the editors wrote, "Good heavens, we hope so!" Years later, Alinsky, in a magazine interview, looked back on the events in "Rochester, New York, the home of Eastman Kodak," and applied some practiced rhetorical torque: "Or maybe I should say Eastman Kodak, the home of Rochester, New York."

Today, Rochester is a different place. Murphy, the *Democrat and Chronicle* reporter, asked me to correct the record: "Often when we read about Rochester in the national media, it seems like the writer thinks … all we ever do is walk around and cry about how Kodak is gone." So, in print, here it is: People who live in Rochester do many things other than walk around and cry about how Kodak is gone.

Though they do talk—*sometimes*, not crying, just talking—about how bad it is that Kodak is gone. "I don't think anyone ever imagined that the industry would change as rapidly as it did and that we would experience the economic decline that we did," Mayor Lovely Warren told PBS in 2019, after mentioning that her mother had worked for Kodak. The same year, Gardner, the economist, published an analysis of Kodak's "long shadow" over the local job market, writing in the *Rochester Beacon* that "Rochester's growth in real GDP from 2007 to 2018 was effectively zero," compared with a national growth rate of 16 percent.

When I asked Warren what people tend to get wrong about Rochester, she said that the city has been "written off as a has-been" just because it's no longer affiliated with a flashy *Fortune* 500 company. As in many post-manufacturing cities, Rochester's largest job providers are now its universities and its health-care system. The University of Rochester has a renowned medical school and is also home to a famous laser lab. In recent years, the city has had luck with optics-related start-ups and enjoyed the government's interest in its photonics talent and its nuclear-fusion research capabilities. Rochester has also attracted the attention of the MIT economist Jon Gruber. In a 2019 book, *Jump-Starting America*, Gruber and his co-author, Simon Johnson, proposed massive federal grants to create new science and tech hubs in mid-size American cities. They argued that Rochester would be an ideal candidate for investment because of its affordability and its concentration of respected colleges.

But Gruber and Johnson's analysis did not consider several other common measures of a city's health, such as metrics related to income inequality, trust in government, and high-school education. Rochester is struggling with all three. Today, the poverty rate—31.3 percent—is roughly triple the national average. Mayor Warren was indicted on two felony campaign-finance violations in October 2020 (she maintains her innocence and has called the accusations a "witch hunt"), compounding a crisis of public faith in her leadership that followed the death of Daniel Prude, a Black man who died of complications from asphyxiation after being restrained by Rochester police earlier that year. (No police officers have been indicted in connection with Prude's death.) More recently, Warren's husband, Timothy Granison—from whom Warren is separated, though the couple still live together—was arrested on charges of gun and drug possession and accused of participating in a cocaine-trafficking ring. (He has pleaded not guilty.) Meanwhile, the city school district has faced massive budget deficits in recent years, and its graduation rate, though slowly rising, is about 20 percentage points below the state average. ("You're right," Gruber told me, after I asked about the absence of public-education metrics in his book. "I wouldn't invest in a place like Rochester without a commitment to turn the education system around.")

"Many people are surprised to learn that we are one of America's most racially segregated communities," the Rochester Area Community Foundation and its data-collecting arm, ACT Rochester, wrote in a special report last August. "We have some of the most segregated schools; we have one of the greatest income disparities in America based on race and ethnicity; we have one of the country's greatest concentrations of poverty." These are disparities that were arranged in Rochester throughout the 20th century, and have proved themselves durable.

My whole adult life, I have heard stories about Kodak messing up, Kodak trying again, Kodak attempting something slightly interesting but fundamentally tragic.

Ann Johnson, the executive director of ACT Rochester, told me that awareness of Rochester's problems has grown, spiking after the city's Black Lives Matter protests last year. Those protests, led by city activists, were of a piece with the nationwide outrage after George Floyd's killing, but they were also motivated by local anger over Prude's death. They eventually spread to the mostly white suburbs at an unprecedented scale. Last July, a group called Save Rochester organized a march out of the city and onto the interstate that leads east into the wealthiest towns in the area, blocking traffic and commanding attention. That group has since formalized operations, and is one of many agitating for substantive policing reform and reparations-minded wealth redistribution, bolstered by pieces of state legislation.

In the immediate future, Rochester must also figure out how to rebound from the job losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic. But this crisis, Johnson said, has galvanized community groups. Outside observers have suggested this as well, if in a colder, backhanded manner. A recent analysis by the Brookings Institution argued that "legacy cities" like Rochester have an advantage in times of crisis because of their "grit." In other words: Rochester's recent past is so grim that its residents should by now be more clear-eyed than people who live in happier places.

After our visit to the manufacturing building, Taber took me to the 14-story structure that houses Kodak's research labs, where the company plans to create a 36,000-square-foot R&D center for its pharmaceutical work. When the company was in its prime, as many as 2,000 people worked in the building. It was built in 1969, and the vacant reception area has a mid-century-modern look; it seems sort of hip but is perhaps only authentically outdated. As we walked through various lab spaces, Taber explained to me again that Kodak has the experience to produce chemicals for drugs. He seemed aware of the arguments and attitudes that were already set against the proposition: Here is Kodak, trying to reinvent itself again. *Really, one more try?* Into each silence in my conversations with Taber or the men who led us around the business park, the reassurances would inevitably come: *We're qualified to do this, and it's going to work. We're a chemical company.*

After the tour, Jim Continenza told me the same thing over a Google Hangouts call. He does not live in Rochester, and was in Florida when we spoke. "We've been making chemicals for 100 years," he said. "If you walk through [the business park]—and I think you just did—you will not see an assembly line anywhere. You didn't see anybody assembling pieces and parts, did you? You saw big reactors and steam pipes." He spoke briskly, making a series of rapid-fire clarifications about the company's latest plan, and I recognized the signature sharp candor of people who have been on the defensive for so long that they no longer care about sounding polite. Kodak has been making components for pharmaceuticals for five years already, Continenza said, and it will keep doing so, with or without a federal loan. Kodak could play "a very, very important role" in fixing the nation's broken pharmaceutical supply chain, he argued. "It's very interesting how we're not qualified to do it, yet we're doing it." Then he reminded me again that Kodak is a chemical company. "I think we've made one camera in 100 years—I'm making that up; I don't even know," he said, then tossed in a revision: "Yeah, we did invent the digital camera that killed the company."

Actually, Kodak has made many different cameras over the past century—and licenses its name to many more—but I take his point. Continenza sees the commercial value of Kodak's brand, but is not interested in its emotional resonance. Today, Kodak is not an icon of Americana but an interesting collection of remarkably capable scientists, with a history of coming up with new things to do with chemicals. "In the last 100 years, Kodak has received over 20,000 U.S. patents," Taber told me. "If you look at where our invention is, where our innovation is, its foundation is in science and chemistry. In order to make money, you have to make businesses out of what you can invent and make."

It now seems unlikely that Kodak will ever receive the $765 million loan. When I toured the property, Taber would say merely that Kodak would renovate its facilities even without the funds—"it will just be a different scale and a different pace." (Kodak has since raised more than $300 million in new capital from other investors, some of which it says it might use for the pharmaceuticals business.) In September, an outside law firm finished an investigation into the federal loan guarantee without finding evidence of anything illegal, but Democratic lawmakers questioned that conclusion. An investigation led by the Development Finance Corporation's inspector general took longer, wrapping up in December, also without finding evidence of wrongdoing, though the agency acknowledged in May that the loan was still on "indefinite hold." There have been no updates on a simultaneous investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission since it was announced last August. In May, a Kodak spokesperson said that the company was no longer expecting the loan "given the time that has elapsed," and downplayed the importance and scope of pharmaceuticals in Kodak's overall business.

After my tour of the business park, I went back to the Eastman Museum, which was in the process of building a large new entrance. I wanted to see if it matched my memory. The house itself looked smaller and less grand, and the elephant head in the main room—a reproduction of the taxidermied one Eastman had hung, which, decades ago, mysteriously disappeared—looked goofy. But there were still a few wonders: the sprawling gardens, the pristine library, and, in that low-ceilinged room on the second floor, the suicide letter. The display around it included a handwritten note from Eastman requesting to be cremated, a duplicate of his death certificate, and a small pile of metal. Unlike many of the objects in the museum, the metal pieces weren't bequeathed by Eastman or donated by his family. The fragments, metallic bits from his coffin that survived cremation, had been tucked away for decades. According to the museum curator, a police officer had scooped them up and saved them, the same way you might save a newspaper from the day of some spectacular event, or a sock left behind by a pop star.

The museum curator also provided me with a map for a self-guided driving tour of everything in Rochester that might not exist without George Eastman: the art gallery, the music school, the hospital, the parks, the bridge, the YMCA, the children's center, the college my dad graduated from, the college my sister was currently studying at. That wasn't the whole list, but at this point I'm repeating myself. *Okay, okay*, I thought.

When I asked former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers to speculate about Kodak's future, he said that "excessive nostalgia" had led to the company's downfall, and he wasn't focused on what might come next. "Kodak is no longer an institution that is of great significance for the American economy," he told me. I don't know why I was so interested in hearing a different story. I never worked at Kodak, nor did anybody in my family or, for that matter, anyone I know. But I like listening to any Kodak story for a little bit at a time, to remind myself that I'm susceptible to "excessive nostalgia," which may be the same thing as what Joan Didion once called "pernicious nostalgia." When you zoom out, there are moments in which the symbolism is too good: the Coloramas replaced by an Apple store; the cameras that now wander around on Mars, which Kodak this time had nothing to do with; the lunatics of Reddit juicing stocks for all the other golden oldies—the movie theaters, the mall brands, even Nokia—but refusing to spare a thought for a comeback by Kodak.

Zooming back in to Rochester, there are fewer startling images and less drama, replaced by the unglamorous organizing and the incremental progress that is more characteristic of 21st-century urban life. An initiative called Confronting Our Racist Deeds coalesced last year to revoke and replace the property covenants pertaining to homes in Meadowbrook, Kodak's former housing development in the suburb of Brighton. The covenants in the deeds hadn't been enforceable since 1948, but several hundred of them were still there, which residents said was a kind of symbolism they didn't want to continue living with. "The reality is that the impact of these deed restrictions is felt for generations," an organizer named Johnita Anthony told the local paper after the group succeeded. This episode is one moment in a new story—about an American city that was once synonymous with an American company, quietly coming to stand for something of its own. *A*

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INSIDE THE CONTROLLED CHAOS OF DOWNING STREET

BORIS JOHNSON KNOWS EXACTLY What HE'S DOING

BY TOM McTAGUE

PHOTOGRAPH BY NADAV KANDER

"Nothing can go wrong!" Boris Johnson said, jumping into the driver's seat of a tram he was about to take for a test ride. "Nothing. Can. Go. Wrong."

The prime minister was visiting a factory outside Birmingham, campaigning on behalf of the local mayor ahead of "Super Thursday"—a spate of elections across England, Scotland, and Wales in early May. These elections would give voters a chance to have their say on Johnson's two years in office, during which quite a lot *did* go wrong.

Johnson was, as usual, unkempt and amused, a tornado of bonhomie in a country where politicians tend to be phlegmatic and self-serious, if not dour and awkward. Walking in, he had launched into a limerick about a man named Dan who likes to ride trams. The mayor, Andy Street, looked horrified, tomorrow's disastrous headlines seeming to flash before his eyes. (The limerick, I'm sorry to say, was not at all filthy.)

Johnson's aide told me the prime minister had been excited about his tram ride all morning. He loves infrastructure, mobile infrastructure especially—planes, trains, bicycles, trams, even bridges to Ireland and airports floating in the sea. And he loves photo ops. There would be no point in displaying action and intent and momentum if no one were present to document it.

"All aboard!" he yelled, though there were no passengers. News photographers crowded around and men in hard hats stood by. The tram (British for "streetcar") inched forward, only to jerk and shudder to a halt. That's £2.5 million worth of vehicle, the chief executive of the tram company told me with a nervous laugh. When Johnson finally made it around the bend and neared the end of the circuit, he slammed on the brakes and blasted the horn. "Nothing went wrong!" he said gleefully.

Nothing, really, could have gone wrong. The tram was limited to three miles an hour and had an automatic-override system to protect it from reckless prime ministers, among others. No matter. It provided Johnson with the chance to do what he loves: to put on a show, to create a little tumult where there is none. He became famous in the late 1990s and early 2000s for his appearances on a popular satirical news program, *Have I Got News for You*. Each time, he was the butt of the jokes and also the center of attention. After he was first elected to Parliament, in 2001, his colleagues told him that he would have to become serious to succeed in politics. To spend time with Johnson, as I have done over the past several months, is to watch a politician completely indifferent to such advice.

Johnson is nothing like the other prime ministers I've covered. Tony Blair and David Cameron were polished and formidable. Gordon Brown and Theresa May were rigid, fearful, cautious. Johnson might as well be another species. He is lively and engaged, superficially disheveled but in fact focused and watchful. He is scruffy, impulsive, exuberant. He is the first British leader I've seen who genuinely appears to be having a good time. His conversations with members of the public are peppered with "That's amazing!" and "You're joking!" and "Wonderful!" and "Fantastic, fantastic!"

His mission, he says, is to restore Britain's faith in itself, to battle the "effete and desiccated and hopeless" defeatism that defined the Britain of his childhood. He believes that if you repeat that it is morning in Britain over and over again, the country will believe it, and then it will come to pass. His critics, however, say he is just leading the country "sinking giggling into the sea."

By now, every British subject is an expert on the matter of Boris Johnson. We know that he has an extraordinary gift for extramarital affairs, that he has (at least) six children by three women, and that his personal finances are a regular subject of press gossip. We know that he has been fired twice for lying (once as a journalist, once as a politician); that he was the Conservative mayor of Britain's left-wing capital city; that he helped engineer the defenestration of two prime ministers from his own party; and that he very nearly died during the pandemic. For three decades, we've followed his writing, his ambition, his outrages, his scandals. Yet the truth, for a professional Boris-watcher such as myself, is maddeningly elusive.

To many, Johnson is a clown—the embodiment of the demise of public standards and the face of international populism, post-truth politics, even British decline itself. He is the man who got stuck on a zip line during the London Olympics, dangling above the crowds in a harness and helmet, helplessly waving British flags while people cheered below. The French newspaper *Libération* used this image on its front page after Britain voted to leave the European Union, with the headline "Good Luck."

Above: *During the 2012 London Olympics, Johnson—who was then the city's mayor—got stuck on a zip line, dangling over the crowds until he could be rescued.* Previous page: *The prime minister, photographed at 10 Downing Street in May 2021.*

BARCROFT MEDIA / GETTY

Johnson's sense of humor regularly gets him into trouble. In 2017, as foreign secretary, he joked about the Libyan city of Sirte having a bright future, as soon as its residents "clear the dead bodies away." Announcing further COVID-19 restrictions in October 2020, he reportedly told lawmakers that at least they wouldn't have to spend Christmas with their in-laws. He has likened Hillary Clinton to "a sadistic nurse in a mental hospital" and the Conservative Party's infighting to "Papua New Guinea–style orgies of cannibalism and chief-killing."

To his most vehement critics, he is worse than a clown: a charlatan who lied his way to the top, who endangers democracy and traffics in racism, and who believes in nothing but his own advancement. He has been accused of triggering a wave of populist anger that he then rode to 10 Downing Street, leaving Britain weakened and in very real danger of dissolution. (Scotland once again is considering making its own exit.) He is leading his country through the most radical reshaping of its economy, electoral map, and international role since World War II. To Johnson's cry of faith that nothing can go wrong, critics say: *No,* a lot *can go wrong—and very well might.*

When I began meeting with Johnson early this year, I didn't know precisely how he would take to interrogation. His exuberance worked in my favor; the fact that he is a former journalist, familiar with our wicked ways, did not.

In Northern Ireland once, he looked over at me as I scribbled in my notebook. "Ah, Tom," he said, "you're picking up color or something, aren't you?" The answer, of course, was yes—*color* being the journalist's term for anything that goes beyond straight facts or quotes, the details used to paint a scene for the reader. But I was after more than that.

I wanted to understand whether Johnson was truly a populist, or just *popular*. His argument for patriotic optimism has obvious appeal, but I wondered whether it masked more cynical impulses. Was he working in the country's interest, or his own? And I wanted to see up close if he truly was—as his enemies charge—the British equivalent of Donald Trump. On this question, Johnson would have an emphatic answer for me.

Later, in his office, I asked Johnson to imagine that he was a journalist again. How would *he* open this profile? What is the key, I asked, to understanding Boris Johnson? After a few *um*s and *ah*s, Johnson replied: "Sheer physical fitness. And hard work."

I laughed, as he'd surely hoped I would. "Look, Tom, that is your challenge," he said (pronouncing *challenge* as if it were French), shutting down this line of inquiry. Here was the uncrackable Johnson: the amiability, the self-deprecation, the evasion.

JOHNSON IS LEADING HIS COUNTRY THROUGH THE MOST RADICAL RESHAPING OF ITS ECONOMY, ELECTORAL MAP, AND INTERNATIONAL ROLE SINCE WORLD WAR II.

ON THE DAY of Johnson's visit to the tram factory, the big national story was the formation of an elite European soccer league, modeled on its steroidal American cousin, the NFL. The plan would draw at least six English clubs and six from the continent into a "European Super League." It was announced the night before, and Johnson had come out against it, arguing that it would yank England's grandest clubs from their traditional environment against the wishes of their fans. It was unfair, he said, and the government would fight it. His opposition led the news that morning.

I wondered why he cared so much. He doesn't know anything about soccer, and in fact delights in his ignorance.

But Johnson intuited something important about English anxiety, and he turned the issue into a parable for a sense of powerlessness and dislocation felt by many in Britain, precisely the sort of feelings that had energized the Brexit movement and carried him to 10 Downing Street. In one of our conversations, Johnson had said that people need to feel part of something bigger than themselves. He told me that he doesn't think of himself as a nationalist, but he argued that individuals need to feel that they belong, and they shouldn't be patronized for worrying that their traditions and connections are being eroded. Was this why he opposed the European Super League?

"Absolutely," he said. "This is about the deracination of the community fan base." Soccer clubs, he continued, had turned into global brands and were leaving their supporters behind, "taking off like a great mother ship and orbiting the planet."

I was struck by his use of the word *deracinated* to describe the peculiar dynamics of English soccer partisanship. To be deracinated is to be uprooted from your customs, your culture, your home—in this instance, from England. Here, Johnson was offering himself as the people's tribune, defender of the national game from the threat of alien imposition. He was channeling a cry of anger and turning it against globalization.

Johnson is a strange figurehead for such a movement. The prime minister is, at least nominally, a free-marketeer and the chief proselytizer of "Global Britain." He plays to the rootedness of Middle England—to its anxieties, traditions, and national pride—but he is also a very obvious transient.

He was born Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson on Manhattan's Upper East Side, in a hospital that served poor New Yorkers. Johnson's father, Stanley, then 23, had moved to the U.S. on a creative-writing scholarship but quit and enrolled in an economics program at Columbia University instead. The first few months of Boris's life were spent in a single-room apartment opposite the Chelsea Hotel. He was officially a dual U.S.–U.K. citizen until 2016, once telling David Letterman that he could, "technically speaking," be elected president. Some wondered whether he meant it—he had, after all, said as a child that his ambition was to be "world king." (Johnson renounced his U.S. citizenship after being chased by the IRS for a tax bill on the sale of a London home.)

Johnson's intricate name suggests the cosmopolitanism of his background. *Boris* honors a Russian émigré whom Stanley and Johnson's mother, Charlotte, met in Mexico shortly before his birth. The man bought them plane tickets back to the U.S. so the heavily pregnant Charlotte wouldn't have to endure the Greyhound bus. *De Pfeffel* comes from Johnson's half-French grandmother, Irène, who was born in the grand Pavillon du Barry, in Versailles, which belonged to her grandfather, Baron Hubert de Pfeffel.

Even the *Johnson* is less English than it might seem. Boris's great-grandfather was a Turkish journalist and politician who was murdered in the chaos of the Ottoman empire's collapse. He was denounced as a traitor for his opposition to Kemal Atatürk and was attacked and hanged by a nationalist mob wielding stones, sticks, and knives. According to Sonia Purnell's biography, *Just Boris*, his body parts were said to have been stuffed in a tree. His half-English, half-Swiss wife, Winifred, gave birth to their son Osman in England, but died soon after. Osman was brought up by his English grandmother—maiden name Johnson—and went by the name Wilfred Johnson. (In 2020, at the age of 55, Boris Johnson named his new baby boy Wilfred.)

Over the first 14 years of Johnson's life, his family moved 32 times, including to Washington, D.C., where Stanley worked at the World Bank. Some of Johnson's fondest early memories are of his tree house in their yard on Morrison Street, just off Connecticut Avenue. In 1974, Charlotte had a nervous breakdown while the family was living in Brussels. The next year, Johnson and his younger sister, who were then 11 and 10, were sent to a boarding school in England, traveling there each term unaccompanied by their parents.

Before leaving for school, the young Alexander was a quiet, introspective boy. He had been partially deaf until age 8 or 9, because of a condition known as "glue ear," in which fluid builds up behind the eardrum. At school, he transformed himself into the confident, insouciant extrovert we see today. It was at Eton that Alexander became Boris, a "fully-fledged school celebrity," according to Purnell—head boy, editor of the school magazine, president of the debating society. Sir Eric Anderson, who was a housemaster to Tony Blair in Scotland and to Johnson at Eton, was once asked to name the most interesting pupil he'd ever had, and replied: "Without a doubt, Boris Johnson."

After graduating from Eton and then Oxford—the finishing schools of England's elite, where he was close friends with Princess Diana's brother, Charles Spencer—Johnson married young, returned to Brussels, divorced, married again, moved back to London, conducted numerous affairs, divorced again, got engaged again, and all the while steadily made his professional ascent.

Throughout, Johnson has stood apart from any clique, whether the modernizers who have sought to remake the Conservative Party or the Thatcherite resistance against them. Johnson has, in fact, tended to avoid the formal ties of obligation that come with being part of any group. In many ways he himself is the definition of *deracinated*. (A friend of his once told me he suspected that Johnson subscribed to a pre-Christian morality system, with a multitude of gods and no clear set of rules. I put this to the prime minister, but he dismissed the notion. "Christianity is a superb ethical system and I would count myself as a kind of very, very bad Christian," he told me. "No disrespect to any other religions, but Christianity makes a lot of sense to me.")

The one group he *is* associated with are the Brexiteers. Johnson largely avoids the nativist rhetoric of the group's more extreme elements, but he does believe that Britain's discomfort with its power and its history has gone too far. (George Orwell once observed that Britain is "the only great country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality.") On England's national day last summer, Johnson released a video message urging the country to raise a glass "without embarrassment, without shame." Imagine a U.S. president needing to make the same qualification on Independence Day.

But while Johnson's patriotic message is powerful in England—by far the largest of the U.K.'s four nations—it does not readily translate elsewhere, particularly in Scotland, which voted to remain in the EU. The great irony is that although Johnson led the campaign to "take back control" from Europe, his success has intensified calls in Scotland for control to be wrested from London. This is where Johnson's legacy is most at risk. If he were to preside over the breakup of the country, whatever else he did would forever be overshadowed. He would be the Lord North of the 21st century: not the prime minister who lost America, but the one who lost Britain itself.

A FEW DAYS after Johnson's tram ride, I saw him again in Hartlepool, a coastal town in England's struggling, industrial northeast. Johnson had threatened to drop a "legislative bomb" on the English soccer clubs planning to join the new Super League. Within hours all six had pulled out, and the league had collapsed. Newspapers across Europe hailed Johnson's influence. Italy's *La Gazzetta Dello Sport*, apparently a newspaper given to hyperbole, likened Johnson's intervention to Churchill's stand against the Nazis.

Keen to squeeze more political capital from the episode, Johnson stopped by a soccer stadium in town. I grew up only a short drive from Hartlepool. The region was once rock-solid Labour Party territory, but Conservatives have been making inroads there. It was heavily in favor of Brexit, and it has a long tradition of contempt for the political establishment. In 2002, the town elected its soccer club's mascot, H'Angus the Monkey, as mayor. The man who wore the costume served the term and was twice reelected.

When Johnson arrived to be interviewed by the regional press, I showed him the *Gazzetta* article. Grabbing my phone, he read the headline aloud in exaggerated Italian as an aide urged him to get to the business at hand, which was to ensure that the town moved into the Conservative column.

Talking to a TV reporter, Johnson kept referring to a previous Labour MP for Hartlepool, Blair's close ally Peter Mandelson, as "Lord Mandelson of Guacamole." Mandelson is reputed to have once confused mushy peas—a side dish served with fish and chips—for guacamole. The story isn't true, but the populist in Johnson enjoyed it so much that he deployed the nickname three more times before leaving the stadium. The joke would be hypocritical but for the fact that the prime minister doesn't try to hide his own class status: When David Cameron was mocked for admitting that he didn't know the price of a loaf of bread, a reporter confronted Johnson with the same question. He got it right, but then added: "I can tell you the price of a bottle of champagne—how about that?"

After the interview, Johnson joined a group of players passing a ball around. "Another chapter in my epic of football humiliation," he said, alluding to a much-watched YouTube video of a charity soccer match in which Johnson charged at an opposing player before stumbling and crashing headfirst into the player's groin, leaving him collapsed in pain on the ground. In Hartlepool, Johnson told the players that he was better with an oval ball than a round one, referring to rugby, the sport of Britain's elite schools. He added that he knew how to play the wall game, an obscure sport played only at Eton. The Hartlepool players didn't seem to know what he was talking about.

SOPHIE BAKER / ARENAPAL; BRIAN SMITH / REUTERS; DAFYDD JONES

*Johnson was a quiet, introspective child who was partially deaf until he was 8 or 9, but he transformed himself after his parents sent him off to boarding school. Above, Johnson at age 8 (*top left*), at 21 at Oxford (*top right*), and with Allegra Mostyn-Owen, whom he would soon marry.*

Johnson and his team then set off to knock on doors on a quiet suburban street. Prime-ministerial campaigning is more homespun and spontaneous than the American presidential sort, and Johnson knew next to nothing about the people whose doors he'd be knocking on. At one home, a retired couple told him they were furious about his handling of the pandemic, especially his failure to close the border as emerging strains of the coronavirus ravaged India.

Before the virus was brought under control in the spring, Johnson had overseen one of the worst responses in Europe; more than 125,000 Britons have died. His own former chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, has publicly accused Johnson and his team of botching the government's response to the pandemic and then lying about it.

Johnson stood silently and took the couple's haranguing. A few days later, he would take another; it was reported that in the depths of the pandemic, faced with announcing a second lockdown, he had declared: "No more fucking lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands." He has denied saying this.

*Johnson's political ascent began with a run for Parliament in 2001 (*top*) and culminated with his becoming prime minister in 2019.*

THE INDEPENDENT / ALAMY ; ADRIAN DENNIS / AFP / GETTY

At the other houses, however, the prime minister was treated like a lovable celebrity, and it was almost taken for granted when he asked people if he could count on their support. He was twice stopped and thanked for "everything you've done." (Although Britain's death count is appalling, Johnson has also overseen a rapid vaccine rollout; by March, Britain had administered first doses to half its adult population—more than the U.S., Germany, and France.) Two women came out clutching toddlers. Johnson elbow-bumped the little ones and asked how old they were, then struggled to remember precisely when his own son would turn 1. The mothers laughed as he fumbled for the right date—guessing three times before he got it right.

Johnson's uncle, the journalist Edmund Fawcett, told me the prime minister's shambolic manner helps him connect with people. One of Johnson's closest allies in government, his Brexit negotiator, David Frost, said the technique was "deliberate but unconscious." Johnson, however, seems to know exactly what he's doing. He said as much in an interview with CNBC in 2013, when he was asked whether his performative incompetence was typical in a politician. "No, I think it's a very cunning device," he said. "Self-deprecation is all about understanding that basically people regard politicians as a bunch of shysters."

According to his allies, Johnson goes out of his way to suggest that he's more flawed than he really is. He claims, for instance, not only that he has smoked pot "quite a few" times but also that he once tried cocaine and accidentally sneezed it out. Andrew Gimson, who wrote *Boris: The Rise of Boris Johnson*, doesn't believe it. Noting that the prime minister once described sex as "the supreme recreation," Gimson argued that "where others might reach for the bottle, or the needle, he is more likely to embrace some warm and attractive woman."

Johnson's ability to invite underestimation seems to shield him from the usual rules of politics. "There's a magic to Boris which allows him to escape some of the political challenges that he's had since he became prime minister," Frank Luntz, an American pollster who was friends with Johnson at Oxford, told me. "People are more patient with him, they are more forgiving of him, because he's not a typical politician."

And there's been a lot to forgive.

Johnson has written about Africans with "watermelon smiles" and described gay men as "tank-topped bumboys." As foreign secretary, he put a fellow citizen at risk when he mistakenly claimed that she was in Iran to teach journalism, giving Tehran an excuse to charge her with spreading propaganda. As prime minister he has erected a trade barrier within his own country as the price of Brexit—subjecting Northern Ireland to EU regulations while the rest of the country is free to do its own thing.

That nothing ever seems to stick drives his opponents mad. He won the Conservative leadership just weeks after it was reported that an argument with his fiancée, Carrie Symonds, became so heated, neighbors called the police. He won the biggest parliamentary majority in a generation despite breaking promises over when and how he would secure a Brexit deal. Time and again, when controversy has engulfed him, he has emerged unscathed.

Part of his electoral genius lies in his ability to stop his opponents from thinking straight: In their hatred for him, they cannot see why he is popular, nor what to do about it.

"WHAT AM I doing this for?" Johnson asked his aides, looking at his schedule for the day and seeing a slot carved out to talk to me.

"It's for the profile I advised you not to do," James Slack, Johnson's then–director of communications, said.

In the year since I'd first asked Johnson's team for time with the prime minister, his director of communications had changed twice, and much of the rest of Johnson's early team had been replaced, partly over interoffice rivalries that had spun out of control. In the end, Johnson himself gave the green light. When I finally got to see him, it was March 2021 and the country was just starting to come out of its most stringent lockdown.

Visiting Downing Street is a strange business: You have to be precleared to enter and you pass through airport-style metal detectors, but then you simply walk up the street as if it were any other and knock on a door to be let in. It is not a single building, but a warren of Georgian townhouses that have been connected, extended, fixed up, and perpetually tinkered with. At the heart of the complex is No. 10, the prime minister's official residence and place of work.

Behind the smart black bricks and polished front door, an air of shabbiness hangs over the place. Stepping inside, you find yourself in a high-ceilinged entrance hall where the house cat, Larry, is often asleep. Discarded modems sit on windowsills; thick red carpets lie worn and uneven with bits of tape stuck to them. (This spring, Johnson was caught up in an ethics investigation over allegations that he'd sought political donations to help pay for redecorating the Downing Street apartment he shares with Symonds, who was blamed in the British tabloids and nicknamed "Carrie Antoinette." Johnson has denied any wrongdoing.)

Downing Street is extraordinarily ill-suited to its function as the nerve center of a modern bureaucracy. Its rooms are either small and disconnected or big and impractical—the dining rooms, libraries, and servants' quarters of a different England. It manages to be both modest and cavernous, iconic and underwhelming. It is outdated and dysfunctional—and yet somehow it works. It is a physical incarnation of 21st-century Britain.

Johnson believes the British state showed unforgivable weakness in its Brexit negotiations, and some of his advisers told me it also exhibited fatal incompetence during the pandemic. Britain's bureaucracy, they argue, is in need of an overhaul. Johnson's critics would point out that it was he who negotiated Britain's exit from the EU, and the state was not to blame for his pandemic decision making. It is also true, however, that Britain was notably ill-equipped to cope with the coronavirus, and that by the time Johnson took over in 2019, he faced a devil's bargain in how to leave the EU, the terms on offer largely having been set beforehand.

Britain's only real success fighting COVID-19 came when Johnson turned down the opportunity to join the EU's vaccine-procurement program and handed the country's own effort to a venture capitalist with a virtually unlimited budget outside the usual rules of government. As a result, Britons were being vaccinated in the millions long before the rest of Europe. But this way of working has created layers of complexity and confusion that have left no clear lines of accountability. Even some of those at the top feel a sense of powerlessness, telling me that the only way to get anything done is to declare, "I've spoken to the prime minister about this, and he wants it to happen."

In his office, Johnson steered the conversation to a subject he raised nearly every time I saw him. He'd read an article I'd written, a kind of eulogy for the late British novelist John le Carré. I'd praised le Carré's observations about England and its failing ruling class—privately educated charlatans whom the author mocked as the greatest dissemblers on Earth. And I'd listed Johnson as an example.

HIS ELECTORAL GENIUS LIES IN HIS ABILITY TO STOP HIS OPPONENTS FROM THINKING STRAIGHT: IN THEIR HATRED FOR HIM, THEY CANNOT SEE WHY HE IS POPULAR.

He told me he'd taken a completely different lesson from the novelist. To Johnson, le Carré had exposed not the fakery of the British ruling class, but its endemic passivity, and acceptance of decline. "I read *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* at school," he said. "It presented to me this miserable picture of these Foreign Office bureaucrats … For me, *they* were the problem." Johnson told me this was exactly what he was determined to fight.

"You lump me together with various other people—and you say we are all products of these decadent institutions and this culture, an inadequate and despairing establishment. That's not me!" He said he was trying "to recapture some of the energy and optimism that this country used to have."

Johnson believes there remains a "world-weariness" in the government that has to be "squeezed out," one of his ministers told me. Johnsonism, an aide said, was partly about "puffing our chest out and saying, 'We're Britain.'" (Several of Johnson's advisers agreed to be candid in exchange for anonymity.) In an early phone call with Joe Biden, an aide told me, Johnson said he disliked the phrase *special relationship* after the president used it. To Johnson it seemed needy and weak.

The one member of le Carré's establishment whom Johnson does not hold in contempt is the hero, George Smiley, who is jaded like his colleagues but plods on nonetheless, catching traitors and serving Britain. "He was a patriot," Johnson said.

To Johnson, Smiley might be a cynic, but he is also a romantic—a *believer*. Isn't that you? I asked. Johnson is a romantic who urges the country to believe in itself, but who plays the political game, stretches the truth, stands against his friends, and deposes his colleagues. After an initial show of mock evasion, the prime minister replied: "All romantics need the mortar of cynicism to hold themselves up."

Here was Johnson offering a rare moment of self-reflection. During the time I spent with him, whenever we got close to anything approaching self-analysis, he would parry, swerve, or crack a joke. At one point, when I brought the conversation back to le Carré, Johnson fell into a series of impersonations of the novelist's characters. One of Johnson's aides told me the prime minister loathed anything that smacked of over-intellectualizing politics.

At Downing Street, I heard Johnson repeat a saying his maternal grandmother was fond of quoting. "Darling," he said, mimicking her, "remember, it's not *how* you're doing; it's *what* you're doing." Johnson said this was "the key advice." I asked Johnson's sister, Rachel, about it. She told me their mother was also fond of the saying. "It's about being in the moment," she said, rather than worrying about how things will turn out.

Get on with it is the Johnson mantra.

JOHNSON MADE A NAME FOR HIMSELF WITH OUTLANDISH STORIES ABOUT EUROPEAN REGULATIONS GOVERNING THE FLAVORS OF POTATO CHIPS, THE BENDINESS OF BANANAS, THE SIZE OF CONDOMS.

JOHNSON OFTEN CARRIES a notepad around, a habit from his days as a journalist. A former aide told me that you know he has taken your point seriously if he writes it down. He runs meetings like an editor, surveying his staff for ideas, always looking for "the line"—cutting through dry and occasionally contradictory facts to identify what he sees as the heart of the matter, the story.

The prime minister's journalism career, however, got off to an ignominious start. In 1988, one year out of Oxford, he was fired from *The Times*, the newspaper of the establishment, for making up a quote in a front-page story and attributing it to his godfather. He has since apologized, sort of, while also complaining about the "sniveling, fact-grubbing historians" who called him out.

Despite getting sacked from *The Times*, he quickly landed at its rival, *The Daily Telegraph*, and rose through the ranks of British media, eventually becoming the editor in chief of *The Spectator*, Britain's premier conservative magazine. In 1992, Johnson was the Brussels correspondent for the *Telegraph* when the Maastricht Treaty was signed, laying the foundation for the modern incarnation of the European Union and sending British politics into one of its perennial tailspins over London's relationship with Europe. It was the perfect time and place for a man of Johnson's talents.

He made a name for himself with outlandish, not-always-accurate stories about European regulations ostensibly being imposed on Britons—rules governing the flavors of potato chips, the bendiness of bananas, the size of condoms. Margaret Thatcher, whose battles over European integration had cost her the premiership in 1990, reputedly enjoyed Johnson's columns. He later described his life in Brussels as "chucking these rocks over the garden wall and [listening] to this amazing crash from the greenhouse next door over in England."

But rereading Johnson's work today, what jumps out is that he appears far less hostile to Europe than one might imagine: In a January 1992 article, for example, he writes that while the principal charges against the EU—that it was wasteful and bureaucratic—were true, these problems were "dwarfed by the benefits" of membership. He goes on to say that the EU was "run by an undemocratic Brussels machine, full of faceless busybodies," but that it also gave Britain a new purpose: to run Europe.

I asked Johnson about his change of mind. He famously wrote two drafts of a column—one in favor of "Leave," the other for "Remain"—before announcing which side he supported in the 2016 referendum. Critics allege that he only backed Brexit because it provided him with a path to power. Johnson rejects that characterization—his aides say he often plays devil's advocate to pressure-test his arguments and ideas. And Johnson told me Britain had never been able to lead the EU in any case, because it was too hamstrung by division and doubt over the project to be anything but a brake. This seemed anathema to him: better momentum, whatever the direction, than playing the role of spoiler.

"Anyway," he said, "do we have to talk about Brexit? We've sucked that lemon dry."

So we turned instead to Horace.


MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA 6:57 AM
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In 2005, Johnson gave a lecture about the Roman poet, in which he reflected on the lasting influence that poets and historians and journalists have over how people are remembered. “Horace writes all these bum-sucking poems about his [patrons] saying how great they are,” Johnson told me, “but the point he always makes to them is ‘You’re going to die and the poem is going to live, and who wrote the poem?’”

I told him that sounded like a cynical view of the world.

“It’s a defense of journalism!” he said.

“So you’re saying I’m more powerful than you?” I asked.

“Exactly, exactly,” he replied, laughing.

I said I didn’t buy it. But Johnson very clearly appreciates the importance of shaping perceptions. To him, the point of politics—and life—is not to squabble over facts; it’s to offer people a story they can believe in.

In the prime minister’s view, those who wanted to remain in the EU during the Brexit referendum didn’t have the courage to tell the real story at the heart of their vision: a story of the beauty of European unity and collective identity. Instead, they offered claims of impending disaster were Britain to leave, most of which haven’t come to pass, at least not yet. The story voters believed in was fundamentally different—in Johnson’s words, “that this is a great and remarkable and interesting country in its own right.”

“People live by narrative,” he told me. “Human beings are creatures of the imagination.”

Johnson in his office at The Spectator *magazine, where he served as editor in chief from 1999 to 2005*

EDD WESTMACOTT / ALAMY

“SO YOU’RE NOT TRUMP?” I asked Johnson. I had just been treated to a long monologue about his liberal internationalism and support for free trade, climate action, and even globalism.

“Well, self-evidently,” he replied.

It might be self-evident to him, but not to others—the former president himself embraced Johnson as “Britain Trump,” and Biden once called him a “physical and emotional clone” of Trump.

This is the central argument against Johnson: For all his positivity and good cheer, the verses of Latin and ancient Greek he drops into conversation, he is much closer to Trump than he lets on. Johnson spearheaded the “Leave” campaign the same year the U.S. voted for Trump, and the two campaigns looked similar on the surface—populist, nationalist, anti-establishment. What, after all, is Brexit but a rebellion against an ostensibly unfair system, fueled by the twin angers of trade and immigration, that aims to restore to Britain a sense of something lost: control.

The prime minister certainly understands that this perception has taken hold. “A lot of people in America, a lot of respectable liberal opinion in America—*The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, etc.—thinks that Brexit is the most appalling, terrible aberration and a retreat into nationalism,” he told me. “It’s not at all.”

As for Johnson himself, his past language about members of minority groups is, to some, evidence of a kinship with Trump. Johnson has compared Muslim women in burkas to mailboxes, written of “flag-waving piccaninnies,” and recited a nostalgic colonial-era poem while in Myanmar. His partisans note, defensively, that his first finance minister was the son of a Pakistani bus driver; his second is a British Indian. The business secretary is a fellow Eton alum whose parents came to Britain from Ghana, and Britain’s president of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which is being held in Glasgow, Scotland, this year, was born in India. The man Johnson charged with overseeing Britain’s vaccine rollout is an Iraqi-born British Kurd, and the home secretary, responsible for policing, is the daughter of Ugandan Indians.

There is also the issue of immigration. During the Brexit campaign, Johnson did call for—and has since delivered—stronger controls on migration from Europe. But in contrast to Trump, he has supported amnesty for undocumented immigrants; offered a path to British citizenship to millions of Hong Kongers; and refashioned Britain’s immigration system to treat European and non-European migrants equally. As mayor of London, he said that Trump’s claim that the British capital had “no-go areas” because of Islamic extremists betrayed “stupefying ignorance” and that Trump was “out of his mind” for seeking to ban Muslim immigration.

Even so, the Trump question is the first thing many Americans will want to know, I told him.

“Well, how ignorant can they be?” he said. I ventured that the curse of international politics is that each country looks at others through its own national prism.

“They do, they do,” he admitted, before continuing: “I’m laboriously trying to convey to an American audience that this is a category error that has been repeatedly made.”

"The point I'm trying to get over to you and your readers is that you mustn't mistake this government for being some sort of bunch of xenophobes," he added, "or autarkic economic nationalists." (Here even Johnson's critics would have to concede one difference: Donald Trump is unlikely to have ever used the word *autarkic* in conversation.)

The first attempt at pulling together a coherent intellectual framework for Johnsonism was the government's "integrated review" of foreign, economic, and defense policy, published in March. It emphasized the importance of deepening alliances outside Europe and the need to more robustly defend democratic values. Its driving force was John Bew, Johnson's chief foreign-policy adviser and the author of *Realpolitik*, a book published four years before Johnson came to power that now reads like a primer for Johnsonism. According to Bew, realpolitik is based on four interlocking principles: politics is the law of the strong; states are strong when they are domestically harmonious; ideas matter because people believe them, not because they are true; and finally, the zeitgeist is "the single most important factor in determining the trajectory of a nation's politics."

Johnson's blueprint for governing can be found in these principles. His pitch to voters is that he will "unite and level up" the country, which starts from the premise that Britain cannot be a decisive, confident international actor as long as it is divided, economically imbalanced, and as vulnerable to global financial and health crises as it has shown itself to be.

He also believes that the global zeitgeist has radically changed since the 2008 financial crisis, and therefore so too must Britain's foreign policy. This is not an ephemeral, insubstantial thing: Voters will not accept a laissez-faire attitude toward free trade, deindustrialization, or the rise of China any longer. Whether voters' demands on these issues are reasonable or constructive is beside the point—they are reality.

Johnson and his allies emphasize that Brexit did not happen in a vacuum. In *The Globalization Paradox*, the Harvard economist Dani Rodrik notes that the more tightly the world's economies intertwine, the less influence national governments can have over the lives of their citizens. For a long time, governments—including Britain's—believed that the economic benefits of globalization outweighed that cost. But when this bargain began to reveal its emptiness, particularly after 2008, voters demanded more control. In Britain this was particularly acute, because the country was more exposed than most, with its oversize financial sector and open economy. It was ripe for a revolt to "take back control"—the "Leave" campaign's central promise.

Johnson has vowed to use the power of government to reinvigorate industry and boost growth outside London, using levers that he says wouldn't be available if the country were still in the EU. One aide told me Johnson had ordered civil servants to reject conservative orthodoxies about government intervention being bad and to be "more creative and more confident around who we choose to back." It's an unusual approach for someone caricatured as a right-wing ideologue; on the American political spectrum, Johnson's policies would fall well to the left of center.

The prime minister told me he doesn't want the EU to fragment—he just doesn't want Britain to be a part of it. For too long, Johnson and his team believe, Britain has been "living out a foreign policy of a world that has gone," one of his closest advisers said. Beijing and Moscow have shown us the limits of the rules-based order. Britain can no longer afford to be a "status quo power" naively trying to resurrect a defunct system. "The world is moving faster," the adviser said, "and therefore we have got to get our shit together and move faster with it."

WHENEVER YOU TALK TO JOHNSON, YOU BUMP UP AGAINST AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING BELIEF THAT THINGS WILL BE FINE.

To do so, Johnson insists, Britain must be independent, united, and nimble. (His foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, told me that instead of "some big cumbersome whale," the country needed to be "a more agile dolphin.") The prime minister has already indicated what this might look like, imposing human-rights sanctions on Russia, using the presidency of the G7 to turn the group into a wider alliance of democracies, and trying to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The world is messy, and Johnson likes mess. He believes the key is to adapt. He has spent a lifetime turning ambition, opportunism, and ruthless self-promotion into extraordinary personal success. Why can't a country do the same?

WHENEVER YOU TALK to Johnson, you bump up against an all-encompassing belief that things will be fine. He believes, for example, that the threat of Scottish independence will melt away over time, with Brexit acting as a centripetal force pulling the U.K. back together.

Yet Johnson understands the art of politics better than his critics and rivals do. He is right that his is a battle to write the national story, and that this requires offering people hope and agency, a sense of optimism and pride in place. He has shown that he is a master at finding the story voters want to hear.

Johnson in 2021 at a session of the UN Security Council on climate and security in London (top) *and campaigning on the Isle of Wight in 2019*

STEFAN ROUSSEAU / WPA POOL / GETTY; DOMINIC LIPINSKI / WPA POOL / GETTY

Whether he succeeds or fails matters beyond Britain's borders. As democratic states look for ways to answer the concerns of voters without descending into the authoritarian Orbánism of Eastern Europe or the Trumpian populism that has consumed the Republican Party, Johnson is beginning a test run for a conservative alternative that may prove attractive, or at least viable.

But with Britain finally outside the European Union, Johnson must now address problems that cannot be dealt with by belief alone. If his domestic economic project fails, some fear the country will turn toward xenophobic identity politics. If he cannot unify the country at home, his bid to make Britain more assertive on the world stage may prove impossible. If he cannot fend off demands for Scottish independence, the state will fracture. "Telling everyone everything is fine is not the same as everything *is* fine," Tony Blair told me.

Now that Johnson has won his revolution, does he have the focus to see it through? Even one of his closest aides expressed worry that the prime minister doesn't think systematically about Britain's problems, that he is too reliant on unshakable faith.

The last time I saw Johnson was back in the northeast of England. "Super Thursday" had come and gone and he had scored thumping victories in England, though not in Scotland, where pro-independence parties won a small majority. We met in Sedgefield, long Blair's constituency. When I was a child, the joke was that Labour votes there were not so much counted as weighed. Now it's Conservative territory.

Johnson admitted a certain "grudging admiration" for Blair, who won three parliamentary majorities in the 1990s and 2000s. I said that the difference between the two men, as far as I could tell, was that Blair saw everything through a prism of progress: those on the right side of history, such as himself, and those like Johnson who were trying to hold back the inevitable.

"He felt the hand of history on his shoulder, didn't he?" Johnson said, mocking a famous Blair quote shortly before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.

Johnson doesn't see the world that way. "I think that history—societies and civilizations and nations—can rise and fall, and I think that things can go backwards," he said.

This might sound like a warning. But to Johnson, Brexit is the fuel for Britain's rise, not its fall. He believes the country today has far more "oomph, impetus, mojo" than before it left the EU.

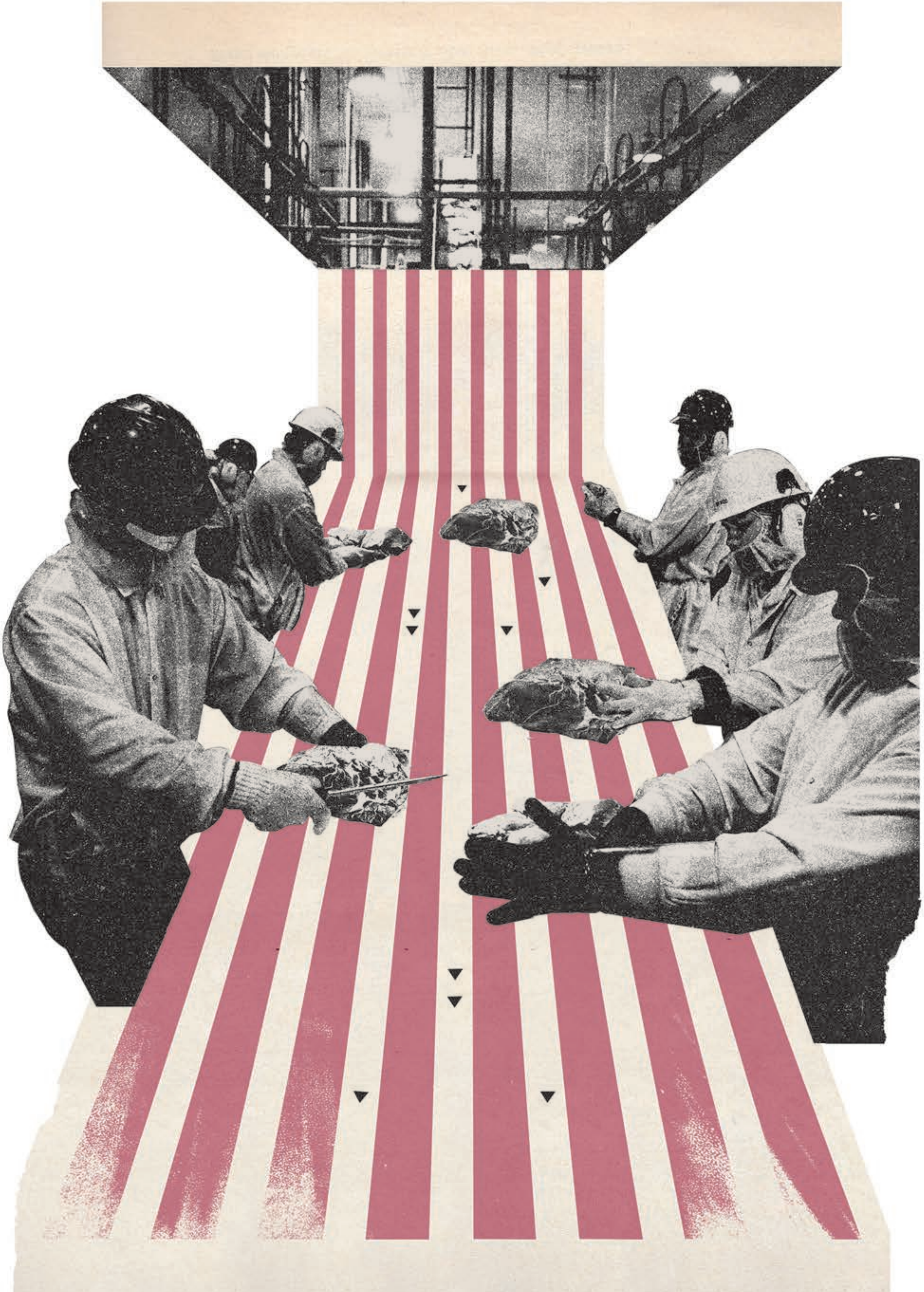
As ever with Johnson, it's hard to discern true belief from narrative skill. I kept coming back to something he'd told me earlier, in our discussion of le Carré: "All romantics need the mortar of cynicism to hold themselves up." The duality of his character continued to fascinate me. There is the light and the color he wants the world to see—his jokes and unclouded optimism. But there is a shadow, too, the darker side that most people who know him acknowledge, the moments of introspection and calculation.

Hoping for another glimpse of the more reflective Johnson, I repeated the quote to him and began to ask him what he'd meant.

"I wondered—" was all I was able to get out before Johnson cut in.

"Did I say that?" he asked. "How pompous of me." *A*

Tom McTague is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



USDA PHOTO / ALAMY; ITALIANFOODPRODUCTION / GETTY

PULLING COUNT

MY SIX MONTHS ON THE LINE IN A DODGE CITY MEATPACKING PLANT

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BY MICHAEL HOLTZ

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK HARRIS

On the morning of May 25, 2019, a food-safety inspector at a Cargill meatpacking plant in Dodge City, Kansas, came across a disturbing sight. In an area of the plant called the stack, a Hereford steer had, after being shot in the forehead with a bolt gun, regained consciousness. Or maybe he had never lost it. Either way, this wasn't supposed to happen. The steer was hanging upside down by a steel chain shackled to one of his rear legs. He was showing what is known in the euphemistic language of the American beef industry as "signs of sensibility." His breathing was "rhythmic." His eyes were open and moving. And he was trying to right himself, which the animals commonly do by arching their back. The only sign he wasn't exhibiting was "vocalization."

The inspector, who worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, told employees in the stack to stop the moving overhead chain to which the cattle were attached and "reknock" the steer. But when one of them pulled the trigger on a handheld bolt gun, it misfired. Someone brought over another gun to finish the job. "The animal was then stunned adequately," the inspector wrote in a memorandum describing the incident, noting that "the timeframe from observing the apparent egregious action to the final euthanizing stun was approximately 2 to 3 minutes."

Three days after the incident occurred, the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, citing the plant's history of compliance, put the plant on notice for its "failure to prevent inhumane handling and slaughter of livestock." FSIS ordered the plant to create an action plan to ensure that such an incident didn't happen again. On June 4, the agency approved a plan submitted by the plant's manager and said in a letter to him that it would defer a decision about punishment. The chain could keep moving, and with it the slaughtering of up to 5,800 cows a day.

The first time I stepped foot in the stack was late last October, after I had been working at the plant for more than four months. To find it, I arrived early one day and worked my way backwards down the chain. It was surreal to see the slaughter process in reverse, to witness step-by-step what it would take to reassemble a cow: shove its organs back into its body cavities; reattach its head to its neck; pull its hide back over its flesh; draw blood back into its veins.

During my visits to the kill floor, I saw a severed hoof lying inside a metal sink in the skinning room, and puddles of bright-red blood dotting the red-brick floor. One time, a woman in a yellow synthetic-rubber apron was trimming away flesh from skinless, decapitated heads. A USDA inspector working next to her was doing something similar. I asked him what he was cutting. "Lymph nodes," he said. I found out later that he was performing a routine check for diseases and contamination.

On my last trip to the stack, I tried to be inconspicuous. I stood against the back wall and watched as two men standing on a raised platform cut vertical incisions down the throat of each passing cow. As far as I could tell, all of the animals were unconscious, though a few of them involuntarily kicked their legs. I watched until a supervisor came over and asked what I was doing. I told him I wanted to see what this part of the plant was like. "You need to leave," he said. "You can't be here without a face shield." I apologized and told him that I would get going. I couldn't have stayed for much longer anyway; my shift was about to start.

GETTING A JOB at the Cargill plant was surprisingly easy. The online application for "general production" was six pages long. It took less than 15 minutes to fill out. At no point was I required to submit a résumé, let alone references. The most substantial part of the application was a 14-question form that asked things like:

"Do you have experience working with knives to cut meat (this does not include working in a grocery store or deli)?"

No.

"How many years have you worked in a beef production plant (example: slaughter or fabrication, not a grocery store or deli)?"

No experience.

"How many years have you worked in a production or plant environment (example: assembly line or manufacturing work)?"

Zero.

Four hours and 20 minutes after hitting "Submit," I received an email confirmation for a phone interview the next day, May 19, 2020. The interview lasted three minutes. When the woman conducting it asked me for the name of my last employer, I told her that it was the First Church of Christ, Scientist, the publisher of *The Christian Science Monitor*. I had worked at the *Monitor* from 2014 to 2018. For the last two of those four years, I was its Beijing correspondent. I had quit to study Chinese and freelance.

"And what did you do there?" the woman asked about my time at the Church.

"Communications," I said.

The woman asked a couple of follow-up questions about when I quit and why. During the interview, the only question that gave me pause was the final one.

"Do you have any issues or concerns working in our environment?" she asked.

After hesitating for a moment, I replied, "No, I don't."

With that, the woman said that I was "eligible for a verbal, conditional job offer." She told me about the six positions for which the plant was hiring. All were for the second shift, which at the time was running from 3:45 in the afternoon to between 12:30 and 1 o'clock in the morning. Three of the jobs were in harvesting, the side of the plant more commonly known as the kill floor, and three were in fabrication, where the meat is prepared for distribution to stores and restaurants.

I quickly decided that I wanted a job in fab. Temperatures on the kill floor can approach 100 degrees in the summer, and, as the woman on the phone explained, "the smell is stronger because of the humidity." Then there were the jobs themselves, jobs like removing hides and "dropping tongues." After you remove the tongue, the woman said, "you do have to hang it on a hook." Her description of fab, on the other hand, made it sound less medieval and more like an industrial-scale butcher shop. A small army of assembly-line workers saw, cut, trim, and package all of the meat from the cows. The temperature on the fab floor ranges from 32 to 36 degrees. But, the woman told me, you work so hard that "you don't feel the cold once you're in there."

We went over the job openings. Chuck cap puller was immediately out because it involved walking and cutting at the same time. The next to go was brisket bone for the simple reason that having to remove something called brisket fingers from in between joints sounded unappealing. That left chuck final trim. That job, as the woman described it, consisted entirely of trimming pieces of chuck "to whatever spec it is that they're running." *How hard could that be?* I thought to myself. I told the woman that I would take it. "Perfect," she said, and went on to tell me my starting pay ($16.20 an hour) and the conditions of my job offer.

A couple of weeks later, after a background check, a drug screening, and a physical exam, I got a call about my start date: June 8, the following Monday. The drive to Dodge City from Topeka, where I had been living with my mom since mid-March because of the coronavirus pandemic, takes about four hours. I decided that I would leave on Sunday.

On the evening before I left, my mom and I went to my sister and brother-in-law's house for a steak dinner. "It might be the last one you ever have," my sister said when she called to invite us over. My brother-in-law grilled two 22-ounce rib eyes for him and me and a 24-ounce sirloin for my mom and sister to split. I helped my sister cook the side dishes: mashed potatoes and green beans sautéed in butter and bacon grease. The quintessential home-cooked meal for a middle-class family in Kansas.

The steak was as good as any I've had. It's hard to describe it without sounding like an Applebee's commercial: charred crust, juicy and tender meat. I tried to eat slowly so that I could savor every bite. But soon I was caught up in conversation, and I finished eating without thinking about it. In a state where cows outnumber people two to one, where more than 5 billion pounds of beef are produced annually, and where many families—including mine, when my three sisters and I were younger—fill their deep freezer once a year with a side of beef, it's easy to take a steak dinner for granted.

THE CARGILL PLANT is on the southeastern outskirts of Dodge City, just down the road from a slightly larger meatpacking plant owned by National Beef. The two facilities sit at opposite ends of what is surely the most noxious two-mile stretch of road in southwestern Kansas. Situated close by is a wastewater-treatment plant and a feedlot. On many days last summer, I found the stench of lactic acid, hydrogen sulfide, manure, and death to be nauseating. The oppressive heat only made it worse.

The High Plains of southwestern Kansas are home to four major meatpacking plants: the two in Dodge City, plus one in Liberal (National Beef) and another near Garden City (Tyson Foods). That Dodge City became home to two meatpacking plants is a fitting coda to the town's early history. Founded in 1872 along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, Dodge City was originally an outpost for buffalo hunters. After the herds that once roamed the Great Plains were decimated—to say nothing of what happened to the Native Americans who'd once lived there—the city turned to the cattle trade.

Practically overnight, Dodge City became, in the words of a prominent local businessman, "the greatest cattle market in the world." This was the era of lawmen like Wyatt Earp and gunfighters like Doc Holliday, of gambling and shoot-outs and barroom brawls. To say that Dodge City is proud of its Wild West heritage would be an understatement, and nowhere is that heritage more celebrated—some might say mythologized—than at the Boot Hill Museum. Located at 500 West Wyatt Earp Boulevard, near Gunsmoke Street and the Gunfighters Wax Museum, the Boot Hill Museum is anchored by a full-scale replica of the once-famous Front Street. Visitors can enjoy a sarsaparilla at the Long Branch Saloon or shop for handmade soap and homemade fudge at the Rath & Co. General Store. Entry to the museum is free for Ford County residents, a deal that I took advantage of many times last summer after I moved into a one-bedroom apartment near the local VFW.

ON THE EVENING BEFORE I LEFT FOR DODGE CITY, MY MOM AND I WENT TO MY SISTER AND BROTHER-IN-LAW'S HOUSE FOR A STEAK DINNER. "IT MIGHT BE THE LAST ONE YOU EVER HAVE," MY SISTER SAID.

Yet for all its dime-novel-worthy stories, Dodge City's Wild West era was short-lived. In 1885, under growing pressure from local ranchers, the Kansas legislature banned Texas cattle from the state, bringing an abrupt end to the cattle drives that had fueled the town's boom years. For the next seven decades, Dodge City remained a quiet farming community. Then, in 1961, a company called Hyplains Dressed Beef opened the first meatpacking plant in town (the same one now operated by National Beef). In 1980, a subsidiary of Cargill opened its plant down the road. The beef industry had returned to Dodge City.

With a combined workforce of more than 12,800 people, the four meatpacking plants are among the largest employers in southwestern Kansas, and all of them rely on immigrants to help staff their production lines. "The packers followed the maxim of 'Build it and they will come,'" Donald Stull, an anthropologist who has studied the meatpacking industry for more than 30 years, told me. "And that's basically what happened."

According to Stull, the boom started in the early 1980s with the arrival of refugees from Vietnam and migrants from Mexico and Central America. In more recent years, refugees from Myanmar, Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have all come to work in the plants. Today, nearly one in three Dodge City residents is foreign-born, and three in five are Latino or Hispanic. When I arrived at the plant on my first day of work, I was greeted by four banners at the entrance, one each in English, Spanish, French, and Somali, warning employees to stay home if they were exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19.

I spent much of my first two days at the plant with six other new hires in a windowless classroom near the kill floor. The room had beige cinder-block walls and fluorescent overhead lighting. On the wall near the door hung two posters, one in English and the other in Somali, that read BRINGING BEEF TO THE PEOPLE. The HR rep who was with us for most of those two days of orientation made sure we didn't forget that mission. "Cargill is a worldwide organization," she said before starting a lengthy PowerPoint presentation. "We pretty much feed the world. That's why when the coronavirus started, we didn't shut down. Because you guys want to eat, right?" Everyone nodded.

By that point, in early June, COVID-19 had forced at least 30 meatpacking plants across the United States to pause operations and, according to the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, had killed at least 74 workers. The Cargill plant reported its first case on April 13. Kansas public-health records reveal that over the course of 2020, more than 600 of the plant's 2,530 employees contracted COVID-19. At least four died.

In March, the plant started to implement a series of social-distancing measures, including some that had been recommended by the CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. It staggered breaks and installed plexiglass barriers on tables in the cafeteria and thick plastic curtains between workstations on the production line. During the third week of August, metal dividers suddenly appeared in the men's bathrooms, providing workers with a bit of space (and privacy) at the stainless-steel urinal troughs.

The plant also hired a company called Examinetics to screen employees before each shift. In a white tent at the entrance to the plant, a team of medical personnel—all of whom wore N95 masks, white coveralls, and gloves—checked temperatures and handed out disposable face masks. Thermal cameras were set up inside the plant for additional temperature checks. Face coverings were mandatory. I always wore the disposable masks, but many other employees preferred to wear a blue neck gaiter with a United Food and Commercial Workers International Union logo or a black bandana with the Cargill logo and, for some reason, #EXTRAORDINARY printed on it.

Catching the coronavirus wasn't the only health risk at the plant. Meatpacking is notoriously dangerous. According to Human Rights Watch, government statistics show that from 2015 to 2018, a meat or poultry worker lost a body part or was sent to the hospital for in-patient treatment about every other day. On the first day of orientation, one of the other new hires, a Black man from Alabama, described a close call he'd had when he worked in packaging at National Beef's plant up the road. He rolled up his right sleeve to reveal a four-inch scar on the outside of his elbow. "I almost turned into chocolate milk," he said.

The HR rep told a similar story about a man whose sleeve got caught in a conveyor belt. "He lost his arm up to here," she said, pointing halfway up her left biceps. She let this sink in for a few moments, before moving on to the next PowerPoint slide: "That's a good transition into workplace violence." She began explaining Cargill's zero-tolerance policy on guns.

After a 15-minute break, we returned to the classroom for a presentation by a union rep.

"Why are we all here?" he asked.

"To make money," someone responded.

"To make money!" the union rep repeated.

For the next hour and 15 minutes, money—and how the union helped us make more of it—was our focus. The union rep told us that UFCW's local chapter had recently negotiated a permanent $2 raise for all hourly employees. He explained that all hourly employees would also earn an additional $6 an hour in "purpose pay," because of the pandemic, through the end of August. This brought the starting wage up to $24.20. The next day at lunch, the man from Alabama told me how eager he was to work overtime. "Right now I'm trying to work on my credit," he said. "We'll be working so much, we won't even have time to spend all that money."

ON MY THIRD DAY OF WORK at the Cargill plant, the number of coronavirus cases in the U.S. surpassed 2 million. But the plant was beginning to bounce back from the outbreak that it had experienced earlier in the spring. (In early May, the plant's production output had fallen by about 50 percent, according to a text message sent by Cargill's director of state-government affairs to Kansas's secretary of agriculture, which I later obtained through a public-records request.) The superintendent in charge of second shift, a giant man with a bushy white beard and a missing right thumb, sounded pleased. "It's balls to the wall," I overheard him say to contractors fixing a broken air conditioner. "Last week we were hitting 4,000 a day. This week we'll probably be around 4,500."

In fab, processing all of those cows takes place in a cavernous room filled with steel chains, hard-plastic conveyor belts,

RAZOOMGAMES / GETTY; STEVE SMITH / GETTY

industrial-size vacuum sealers, and stacks of cardboard shipping boxes. But first is the cooler, where sides of beef are left to hang for an average of 36 hours after they leave the kill floor. When they are brought out for butchering, the sides are broken down into forequarters and hindquarters and then into smaller, marketable cuts of meat. These are what get vacuum-sealed and loaded into boxes for distribution. In non-pandemic times, an average of 40,000 boxes, each weighing between 10 and 90 pounds, are shipped out from the plant every day. McDonald's and Taco Bell, Walmart and Kroger—they all buy beef from Cargill. The company has six beef-processing plants across the U.S.; the one in Dodge City is the largest.

The most important tenet of the meatpacking industry is "The chain never stops." Companies do everything they can to ensure that their production lines keep moving as fast as possible. Yet delays do occur. Mechanical problems are the most common reason; less common are shutdowns initiated by USDA inspectors because of suspected contamination or "inhumane handling" incidents like the one that occurred two years ago at the Cargill plant. Individual workers help keep the line moving by "pulling count"—industry parlance for doing your share of the work. The surest way to lose the respect of your co-workers is to continually fall behind on count, because doing so invariably means more work for them. The most heated confrontations I witnessed on the line happened when someone was perceived to be slacking off. These fights never escalated into anything more than yelling or the occasional elbow jab. If things got out of hand, a foreman would be called over to mediate.

New hires have a probation period of 45 days in which to prove that they can pull count—to "qualify," as it's known at the Cargill plant. Each one is supervised by a trainer for the duration of that time. My trainer was 30, just a few months younger than me, and had smiling eyes and broad shoulders. He was a member of a persecuted ethnic minority from Myanmar, the Karen. His Karen name was Par Taw, but after becoming an American citizen in 2019, he changed his name to Billion. "Maybe I'll be a billionaire one day," he told me when I asked him how he had chosen his new name. He laughed, as if embarrassed by sharing this part of his American dream.

Billion was born in 1990 in a small village in eastern Myanmar. Karen rebels were in the middle of a long insurgency against the country's central government. The conflict raged on into the new millennium—it is one of the longest-running civil wars in the world—and forced tens of thousands of Karen to flee over the border into Thailand. Billion was one of them. When he was 12 years old, he began living in a refugee camp there. He moved to the U.S. when he was 18 years old, first to Houston and then to Garden City, where he went to work at the nearby Tyson plant. In 2011, he landed a job at Cargill, where he has worked ever since. Like many Karen people who arrived before him in Garden City, Billion attends Grace Bible Church. It was there that he met Toe Kwee, whose English name is Dahlia. The two started dating in 2009. In 2016, they had their first son, Shine. They bought a house and got married two years later.

Billion was a patient teacher. He showed me how to put on a chain-mail tunic that looked made for a knight, layers of gloves, and a white-cotton frock. Later, he gave me an orange-handled steel hook and a plastic scabbard filled with three identical knives, each with a black handle and a slightly curved six-inch blade, and led me to an empty spot near the middle of a 60-foot-long conveyor belt. Billion slid a knife from the scabbard and demonstrated how to sharpen it using a counterweight sharpener. Then he got to work, trimming away cartilage and bone fragments and ripping off long, thin ligaments from boulder-size pieces of chuck moving past us on the belt.

Billion worked methodically as I stood behind him and watched. He told me that the key was to cut off as little meat as possible. (As a supervisor succinctly put it: "More meat, more money.") Billion made the job look effortless. In one swift motion, he flipped over 30-pound slabs of chuck with the flick of his hook and pulled out ligaments from folds in the meat. "Take it slow," he told me after we switched spots.

I cut into the next piece of chuck that came down the line, surprised by how easily my knife sliced through the chilled meat. Billion told me to sharpen my knife after every other piece. On my tenth or so piece, I accidentally hit the blade against the side of my hook. Billion motioned for me to stop working. "Be careful not to do that," he said, the expression on his face telling me that I had made a cardinal mistake. Nothing is worse than trying to cut meat with a dull knife. I grabbed a new one from my scabbard and got back to work.

LOOKING BACK ON my time at the plant, I consider myself lucky to have ended up in the nurse's office only once. The precipitating incident occurred on my 11th day on the line. I was trying to flip over a piece of chuck when I lost my grip and drove the tip of my hook into the palm of my right hand. "It should heal in a few days," the nurse said after she wrapped a bandage around the resulting half-inch-long gash. She told me that she often treated injuries like mine.

"I see at least one or two a day," she said. "It's why I have a job."

"What's the worst you've seen?" I asked.

"Guys losing a finger," she said.

Over the next several weeks, Billion checked on me sporadically during my shifts, tapping me on the shoulder and asking,

> HE SHOWED ME HOW TO PUT ON A CHAIN-MAIL TUNIC THAT LOOKED MADE FOR A KNIGHT, LAYERS OF GLOVES, AND A WHITE-COTTON FROCK. HE LED ME TO A SPOT NEAR THE MIDDLE OF A 60-FOOT-LONG CONVEYOR BELT.

"Doing good, Mike?" before walking away. Other times he would linger to talk. If he saw that I was tired, he might grab a knife and work alongside me for a while. During one of these moments, I asked him if many people had been infected during the spring COVID-19 outbreak. "Yeah, a ton," he said. "I had it just a few weeks ago."

Billion said that he'd likely caught the virus from someone in his carpool. Forced to quarantine at home for two weeks, Billion did his best to isolate himself from Shine and Dahlia, who was eight months pregnant at the time. He slept in the basement and rarely came upstairs. But during his second week of quarantine, Dahlia developed a fever and a cough. She started having difficulty breathing a few days later. Billion drove her to the hospital, where she was admitted and put on oxygen. Three days after that, a doctor induced labor. On May 23, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. They named him Clever.

Billion told me all of this shortly before our 30-minute dinner break, which, along with our earlier 15-minute break, I had come to cherish. I had been working at the plant for three weeks by then, and my hands constantly throbbed with pain. When I woke in the mornings, my fingers were so stiff and swollen that I could hardly bend them. I took two ibuprofen tablets before work most days. If the pain persisted, I would take two more during one of my breaks. This was a relatively tame solution, I discovered. For many of my co-workers, oxycodone and hydrocodone were the painkillers of choice. (A Cargill spokesperson said that the company "is not aware of any trend in the plant" of illegal use of either drug.)

A TYPICAL SHIFT LAST SUMMER: I pull into the plant's parking lot at 3:20 p.m. According to a digital bank sign that I passed on the way here, it's 98 degrees outside. The windows of my car—a 2008 Kia Spectra with extensive hail damage and 180,000 miles on it—are rolled down on account of the air conditioner being broken. This means that when the wind blows from the southeast, I sometimes smell the plant before I see it.

I'm wearing an old cotton T-shirt, Levi's jeans, wool socks, and Timberland steel-toed boots that I got for 15 percent off with my Cargill ID at a local shoe store. After I park, I put on my hairnet and hard hat and grab my lunch box and fleece jacket from the back seat. I walk past a holding pen on my way to the plant's main entrance. Inside the pen are hundreds of cows waiting to be slaughtered. Seeing them alive like this makes my job harder, but I look at them anyway. Some jostle with their neighbors. Others crane their neck, as if they're trying to see what's ahead.

The cows fall out of view as I step into the medical tent for my health screening. When it's my turn, a woman in full protective gear calls me over. She holds a thermometer to my forehead and hands me a face mask, while asking me a series of routine questions. When she tells me I'm good to go, I put on my mask, exit the tent, and pass through a turnstile and a security shack. The kill floor is to the left; fab is straight ahead, on the opposite side of the plant. On my way there, I walk past dozens of first-shift workers who are on their way out. They look tired and sore and grateful to be done for the day.

I make a brief stop in the cafeteria and take two ibuprofen. I put on my jacket and leave my lunch box on a wooden shelf. I then walk down a long hallway that leads to the production floor. I put in a pair of foam earplugs and pass through a swinging double door. The floor is a cacophony of industrial machinery. To help mute the noise and stave off boredom, employees can pay $45 for a pair of company-approved 3M noise-reduction earbuds, though the consensus is that they don't drown out enough of the din to make listening to music possible. (Few seem to worry about the added distraction of listening to music while doing what is already an incredibly dangerous job.) One alternative is to buy a pair of non-approved Bluetooth earbuds that I could hide underneath a neck gaiter. I know a few guys who do this and have never been caught, but I decide not to risk it. I stick with the standard-issue earplugs, new pairs of which are handed out every Monday.

To get to my workstation, I climb up to a catwalk, then down a stairway that leads to a conveyor belt. The belt is one of a dozen that stretch across the middle of the production floor in long, parallel rows. Each row is called a "table," and each table has a number. I work at table two: the chuck table. There are tables for shank, brisket, sirloin, round, and so on. The tables are one of the most crowded areas in the plant. At my spot on table two, I stand less than two feet away from the men who work on either side of me. The plastic curtains are supposed to help make up for the lack of social distancing, but most of my co-workers flip the curtains up and around the metal bars from which they hang. It's easier to see what's coming down the line this way, and before long I start doing the same thing. (Cargill denies that most workers flip up the curtains.)

At 3:42, I swipe my ID card at a time clock near my workstation. Employees have a five-minute window in which to clock in: 3:40 to 3:45. Any later and you lose half an attendance point (losing 12 points in a 12-month period can lead to termination). I walk to the front of the belt to get my equipment. I suit up at my workstation. I sharpen my knives and stretch my hands. A few of my co-workers fist-bump me as they walk by. I look across the table and watch two Mexican men standing next to each other make the sign of the cross. They do this at the start of every shift.

Pieces of chuck soon start coming down the belt, which on my side of the table moves from right to left. Ahead of me are seven chuck boners whose job it is to remove the bones from the meat. This is one of the hardest positions in fab (a grade eight, the highest grade of difficulty there is and five grades higher than chuck final trim, with a wage increase of $6 an hour). The job requires both careful precision and brute strength: careful precision for cutting as close to the bones as possible, and brute strength for prying them out. My job is to trim off whatever pieces of bone and ligament the chuck boners miss. This is what I do for the next nine hours, stopping only for my 15-minute break at 6:20 and 30-minute dinner break at 9:20. "Not too much!" my supervisor yells when he catches me cutting off too much meat. "Money! Money! Money!"

Toward the end of the shift, a palpable restlessness sets in across the floor. The line slows down and everyone keeps glancing over at the cooler, waiting for the last side of beef to come down the chain. I make eye contact with the shorter of the two Mexican men who made the sign of the cross. He gives me a thumbs-up, tilts his head to the side, and shrugs his shoulders. Translation: *You doing all right?* I nod my head and return the thumbs-up. He points to an invisible watch on his wrist and holds his index finger and thumb half an inch apart. *Hang in there. The shift is almost over.* He then mimes opening a can of beer. He tilts his head back and takes a swig. He nods a satisfied nod, makes a pillow with his hands, and rests the side of his head against it with his eyes closed. When he opens them and lifts his head, I nod approvingly and give him another thumbs-up.

A few minutes later, one of the chuck boners bangs the edge of the belt with the handle of his hook. He does this every night to announce that the last side of beef has left the cooler. I hurriedly trim the last piece of chuck as soon as it reaches me. I put away my equipment and clock out at 12:43. I'm tired and sore and grateful to be done for the day. When I get back to my apartment, I grab a beer and drink it on the balcony. Across the street is a small pasture. I usually see a dozen or more cattle there during the day, but in the dark they are impossible to spot. Not that I mind. The last thing I want to see right now is a cow.

MY JOB ON THE CHUCK TABLE turned out to be much more difficult than I had anticipated. The sheer volume of meat that came down the line could be overwhelming at times; more than once, I threw my hands up in defeat.

A month or so in, things started to improve. My hands were still sore most days, as were my shoulders. (In mid-August, my left ring finger would develop an annoying habit of spontaneously locking up so I couldn't extend it—a condition known as "trigger finger.") But at least the constant, throbbing pain had begun to relent. And now that my hands were stronger, I was getting better at the job. By the Fourth of July, I was close enough to pulling count that Billion told me I qualified. On my 20th day on the line, he drew me aside to sign some paperwork that made it official. He later gave me a white hard hat to replace the brown one that I had received during orientation. I was surprised by how excited I was to put it on.

A part of me had hoped that qualifying was all I needed to do to fit in with my co-workers. Yet some of them had suspicions about me that my new hard hat did nothing to allay. My skin color alone was enough to raise eyebrows. Of the 30 or so men who worked on the chuck table, I was one of only two white Americans. Most of the other men were from Mexico; others were from El Salvador, Cuba, Somalia, Sudan, and Myanmar. When anyone asked how I'd ended up working at the plant, my usual approach was to explain, truthfully, that I had been traveling in Asia when the pandemic hit and, after flying home, wanted a quick way to make money. I didn't tell anyone that I was a journalist, though a Mexican American chuck boner who worked next to me came close to figuring it out.

"You aren't an undercover boss, are you?" he asked me late one shift.

"Why would you think that?" I asked.

"In the four years that I've worked here," he said, "I've never seen another white guy do your job."

Most of the men eventually got used to my presence on the line. Even the skeptical chuck boner warmed up to me. As time went on, he would turn to me to talk about his latest marital drama or to ask questions about traveling abroad. "Have you had McDonald's over there?" he once asked me about Singapore. I told him that I had. He told me that he dreamed of traveling abroad someday but that for now he needed to work to support his wife and two young children. He was 24 years old, and he told me that he planned to work at the plant until he could retire. "I got my 401(k) here and everything," he said, in a tone that suggested a kind of forced acceptance.

"If you could do any job in the world, what would you want to do?" I once asked.

"Lots of shit," he said, his eyes wide.

"What's your No. 1?"

He thought for a few seconds and looked up at the ceiling. "Own something like this," he said.

My conversations with the chuck boner were a welcome distraction from the monotony of my job. Another thing that helped was an unspoken agreement I had with the friendly Mexican man who worked to my left. If one of us walked away from the line to check the nearby time clock—something we both did at least once a shift—we would report back to the other one by using the butt of our knives to carve the time into the thin layer of pink juices that coated the conveyor belt. It was a simple act of solidarity, one that meant more to me as the weeks passed. Though I often felt a profound sense of alienation on the line, I never once felt alone.

WORKING SECOND SHIFT, especially amid a pandemic, made it virtually impossible to spend time with my co-workers outside the plant. Every bar in Dodge City closes by 2 a.m. This meant that if I ever wanted to brave the risk of infection to go out for drinks after work, I would have no more than an hour before last call. But one evening in September, Billion asked me if I had any plans for the weekend. I told him that I didn't. "Tomorrow after work I'm going frog hunting with my brother-in-law," he said. "You wanna come?"

The next night after clocking out, I met Billion in the cafeteria and walked with him to the parking lot, where his brother-in-law sat waiting for us in a black Toyota Camry. I got in my car and followed the two men to a small lake 20 miles north of the plant. We passed endless fields of corn and hundreds of wind turbines, their red warning lights flashing in hypnotic unison across a moonless sky. As Billion later explained to me, the new moon was key to helping us avoid casting shadows over the easily spooked bullfrogs. The problem was the wind, which rustled the prairie grass that encircled the lake and made it difficult to hear their calls.

When we arrived at the lake, Billion introduced me to his brother-in-law, Leo, who was 20 years old. "Do you recognize him?" Billion asked. "He used to work on table three." I didn't, and Leo explained that he had worked there for only two and a half weeks before switching to the Tyson plant near Garden City, where he lives. "I got tired of the drive," he said. Billion opened the trunk of his car and reached inside for three flashlights and an empty burlap sack. These were our hunting supplies. I asked what I needed to do. "Just follow me," Billion said, before heading down a trampled path through the prairie grass and onto the lake's muddy bank.

Before long, Billion spotted a frog at the edge of the water. To catch it, he first stunned it by shining his flashlight directly into its eyes. He then crept up next to it in a crouch, slowly positioned his hand over its torso like the crane of an arcade claw machine, and snatched it off the ground. The frog was about the size of a pint glass, and Billion held it so tightly that its eyes bulged out of their sockets. Rather than kill it, he left it alive and broke its hind legs. "So it can't get away," he said. I watched him drop the maimed frog into the burlap sack, which Leo held with outstretched arms.

For the next two hours, we slowly made our way around the lake. Billion walked in front and caught most of the frogs, about 20 in total. I caught only four. I thought that together we had a good haul, but Billion and Leo were disappointed. "Someone else must have been out here already," Billion said, pointing down at a pair of fresh shoe prints. Perhaps it was someone from the small community of Karen people in Garden City. Leo said that everyone in the community knew about the lake and had been hunting frogs there for years.

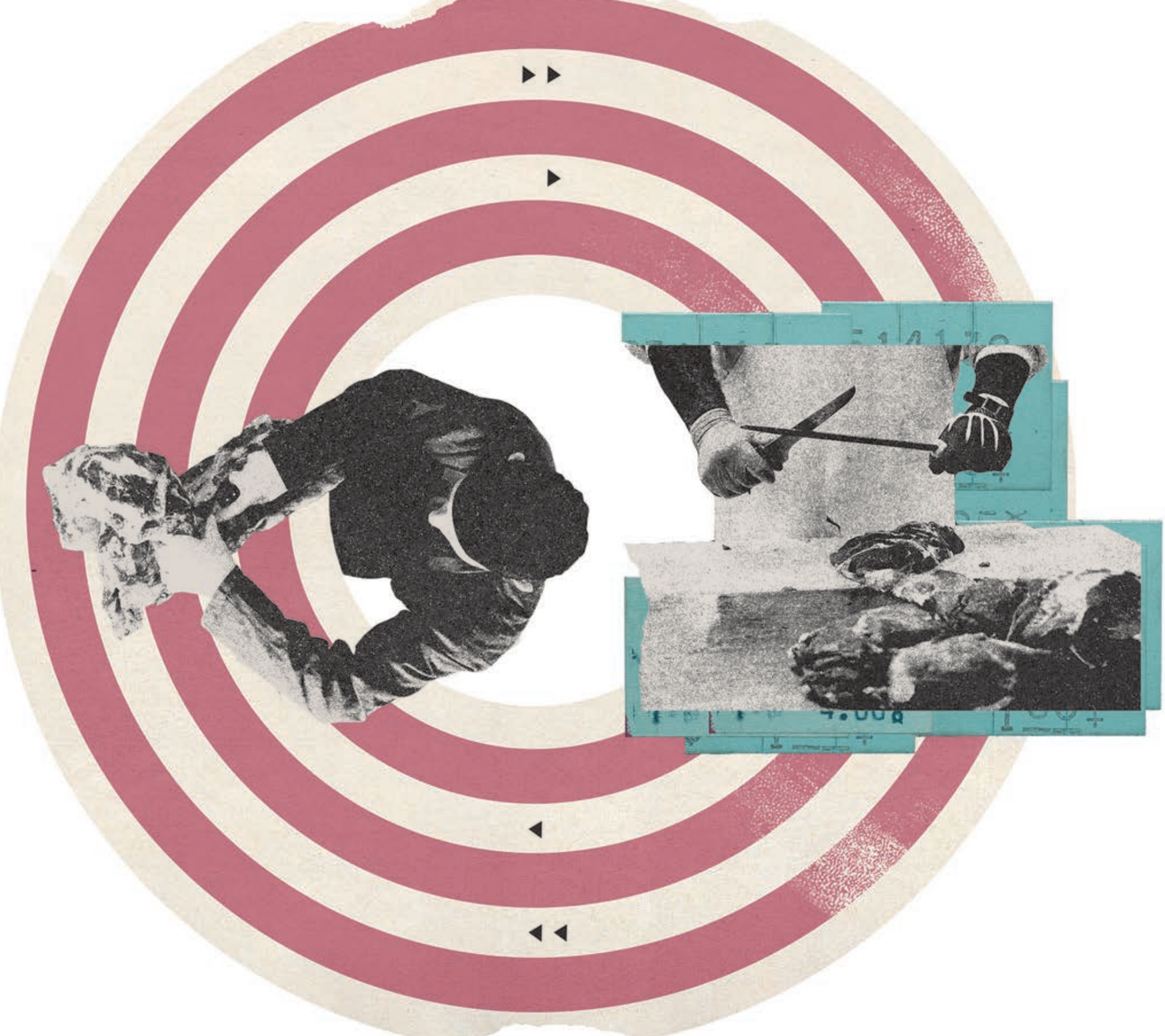
We didn't call it a night until sometime after 3 o'clock. On the way back to our cars, Billion talked excitedly about the spicy frog curry he planned to cook for dinner the next day. It was one of his specialties, something he had learned to make in the refugee camp. "Frog is the only meat that we can eat fresh here," he said. "It's better than chicken."

AT SOME POINT in early July, the TVs in the cafeteria at the plant switched from showing the Wichita Fox affiliate to showing Fox News. Seeing the chyrons on Laura Ingraham's show in place of the local 9 o'clock news was a stark change—"Trump: I will bring law and order, Biden won't"; "Trump's America first vs Biden's America last"; "Biden beholden to billionaires and Bolsheviks"; "Biden's COVID plan: blindly following the 'experts.'"

The night before the election, Fox News was broadcasting live from Kenosha, Wisconsin, at one of Donald Trump's final campaign rallies. During my dinner break, I watched a Haitian-born man in his mid-30s stop underneath one of the TVs on his way back to the floor. When the camera zoomed in on Trump, the man held up both his middle fingers toward the screen. He did this for about half a minute without saying a word. Then he yelled, "I'm voting for Biden!" as he walked away. It was the most overt act of political expression I witnessed at the plant. The only other thing that came close was some pro-Trump graffiti scrawled anonymously on the inside of a bathroom stall: AMERICA LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT and TRUMP 2020. The latter got a couple of responses: FOK YOU and CHINGA TU MADRE.

Mostly what I found at the plant was a pervasive sense of political apathy. Many people I talked with in the weeks leading up to November 3 told me the results hardly mattered to them. "As long as they leave me alone, I don't care who wins," a Mexican American man told me over dinner in late October. "The government hasn't done anything for me." It seemed clear that he didn't plan to vote.

On Election Day, I drove to a polling station south of downtown. At a stone-and-concrete band shell by the voting pavilion, I met an older white man who was happy to share his opinion on almost anything. The man said that he had voted for Trump, that China needed to pay for starting the pandemic, and that he didn't have a problem with immigrants as long as they came here legally. "If they ever leave," he said, referring to those who worked in the local meatpacking plants, "we'd be in a world of hurt." The man knew how important immigrants were to Dodge City's economy, but he showed little interest in getting to know them personally. "It's like oil and water," he said. "We don't really get together … I guess they're scared of us."



FMAJOR / GETTY; RGTIMELINE / GETTY

After leaving the band shell, I drove to a liquor store up the street from my apartment. I knew that it was going to be a long week. While I was browsing the whiskey shelves, the store owner came over to offer a few recommendations. "They say if you take a shot of whiskey that is 80-proof or higher a day it will help protect you against the coronavirus," she said as she reached for a bottle of 90-proof Woodford Reserve. "The virus likes to lodge in your throat, and the whiskey will help keep your throat clear. I don't know if it's true, but I did it religiously over the summer. Then I went to Florida and I was fine." I looked at her incredulously—then went for something even stronger, splurging on a bottle of 114-proof Willett.

I arrived at work an hour before the start of my shift to see if there was finally any buzz about the election. I sat outside and talked with a middle-aged Somali man. "I voted for Trump," he said. He was both Muslim and a former refugee—not typical of Trump supporters as I imagined them. "He's good at business," he said when I asked him what he liked about Trump.

As Election Day turned into Election Week, I heard dozens of stories from nonwhite workers who wanted Trump to win. A Congolese man told me that he liked Trump because he "makes everything good." "Trump takes care of the world," a Salvadoran man said. "If Biden wins, I think ISIS will be happy." Then there was the man from Sudan who said that he, too, admired Trump's business credentials before leaning in to tell me why else he liked him. "Trump doesn't want people from Arab countries to come to America," he whispered. "I think that's good."

I did also meet people at the plant who supported Joe Biden, many of them because they couldn't stand Trump. "He's crazy" was the most common sentiment expressed by those who wanted Trump to lose. No worker I spoke with was more invested in the election outcome than the Haitian man who had flipped off the TV. "You know why I don't like Trump?" he asked me during our 15-minute break one night. "Because he knew about the coronavirus and didn't do anything about it. We need a president who will protect us. So many people have died because of him." The man paced back and forth while he talked. He paused for a moment to check an Electoral College map that he had pulled up on his phone. "Trump doesn't give a shit about us," he concluded.

On the Saturday the election was called for Biden, I went into work. During the shift change that afternoon, I noticed few signs of celebration or disappointment.

The Mexican American man I'd eaten dinner with a couple of weeks earlier came over to my table. He was carrying a large styrofoam cup of coffee and a bag of Bimbo puff pastries. He smelled of marijuana. As he sat down at an adjacent table, a white pill fell out of his pants pocket and onto the floor. He reached down to pick it up. "I'm telling you, Michael," he said. "This is my life." He said that for the past week he had felt an excruciating pain in his left arm and shoulder. He couldn't see a doctor until January because his health-insurance coverage didn't start until then, so for now he was self-medicating with hydrocodone. I didn't ask where he'd gotten it. "I'm going to ask for oxycodone when I go to the doctor," he said. "I need something more powerful." I decided not to ask him about the election. He had more important things to worry about.

ON THE MONDAY after the election, the news reported that the U.S. had surpassed 10 million coronavirus cases, and Pfizer-BioNTech announced that early data showed their vaccine was more than 90 percent effective. In Kansas, the virus was raging out of control. New cases were hitting record numbers, hospitals were strained for resources, and deaths were on the rise. At the plant, additional plexiglass barriers were installed on the tables in the cafeteria, splitting them into quarters instead of halves. Department holiday parties were canceled. And everyone who didn't already have a plastic face shield was given one to attach to their hard hat. Wearing them was mandatory. But many people, including me, didn't pull them down all the way, because of how easily they fogged up from the masks that we still had to wear. The supervisors didn't seem to care; many of them did the same thing.

My last shift at the plant was the night before Thanksgiving, some six months after I'd started. The work itself had become muscle memory, and I spent much of the night lost in thought. At 12:45, I clocked out for the last time. "Nothing we can do to convince you to stay, help us out a bit longer?" one of the foremen asked me when I approached him to turn in my ID badge. I told him that I really couldn't, that I had to get back to Topeka. "Let us know if you want to come back," he said. "The door is always open." I didn't doubt that, but I knew that I would likely never step foot inside the plant again.

Outside, the night air was frigid. Across the way, hundreds of 53-foot refrigerated trailers sat in neat rows, waiting to be loaded with beef before being hauled away. I wish I could say that, in the early hours of Thanksgiving morning, the trailers put me in mind of American gluttony and abundance—our insatiable and unsustainable craving for meat. But as I walked to my car, all that came to mind were photos I had seen of identical trailers, mobile morgues, parked outside hospitals across the country.

A COUPLE OF WEEKS after I left the plant, I drove to Garden City to visit Billion and his family. I met them at a small Vietnamese restaurant and then followed them to the local zoo. It was an unseasonably warm day, and the mid-afternoon sun was melting what little snow remained from a recent winter storm. The lemurs seemed especially happy about this. Billion lifted Shine onto his shoulders to give him a better view, while Dahlia kept an eye on Clever in his stroller. Dahlia was four months pregnant. Billion was hoping for a girl; Dahlia didn't have a preference. She just wanted the pregnancy to go better than her last one.

"YOU AREN'T AN UNDERCOVER BOSS, ARE YOU?" A CO-WORKER ASKED ME LATE ONE SHIFT. "IN THE FOUR YEARS THAT I'VE WORKED HERE, I'VE NEVER SEEN ANOTHER WHITE GUY DO YOUR JOB."

I usually don't care much for zoos. I find them depressing, largely because my childhood zoo, in Topeka, has a long and troubling animal-safety record. (In 2006, a hippopotamus died there, hours after being found in 108-degree water.) But after working in a meatpacking plant, I found it comforting to see so many animals that were still alive, even if they were in cages. Seeing them with a 5-year-old made the experience all the more enjoyable. When Shine wasn't perched on Billion's shoulders, he was sprinting ahead to the next exhibit and shouting out each animal he saw. "Rhino!" "Giraffe!" "Fox!" "Lions!" He was in awe of the animals, which made me wonder what he knew about where his dad worked.

As we made our way past the antelope exhibit, I asked Billion and Dahlia how they had chosen their sons' names. Shine had been Dahlia's idea. "I want him to shine brightly," she said. Billion had picked Clever with more concrete aspirations in mind. "I want him to be smart and do well in school," he said. "Maybe he'll become a doctor or a lawyer someday." Whatever they grew up to be, Billion would never allow them to work in a meatpacking plant. That was something only he did. "I do it for them," he told me. They were what made his work essential. *A*

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COMPETING VISIONS OF THE COUNTRY'S PURPOSE AND MEANING ARE TEARING IT APART. IS RECONCILIATION POSSIBLE?

THE FOUR AMERICAS

BY GEORGE PACKER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUCY JONES

Nations, like individuals, tell stories in order to understand what they are, where they come from, and what they want to be. National narratives, like personal ones, are prone to sentimentality, grievance, pride, shame, self-blindness. There is never just one—they compete and constantly change. The most durable narratives are not the ones that stand up best to fact-checking. They're the ones that address our deepest needs and desires. Americans know by now that democracy depends on a baseline of shared reality—when facts become fungible, we're lost. But just as no one can live a happy and productive life in nonstop self-criticism, nations require more than facts—they need stories that convey a moral identity. The long gaze in the mirror has to end in self-respect or it will swallow us up.

Tracing the evolution of these narratives can tell you something about a nation's possibilities for change. Through much of the 20th century, the two political parties had clear identities and told distinct stories. The Republicans spoke for those who wanted to get ahead, and the Democrats spoke for those who wanted a fair shake. Republicans emphasized individual enterprise, and Democrats emphasized social solidarity, eventually including Black people and abandoning the party's commitment to Jim Crow. But, unlike today, the two parties were arguing over the same recognizable country. This arrangement held until the late '60s—still within living memory.

The two parties reflected a society that was less free than today, less tolerant, and far less diverse, with fewer choices, but with more economic equality, more shared prosperity, and more political cooperation. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats played important roles in their respective parties. Americans then were more uniform than we are in what they ate (tuna noodle casserole) and what they watched (*Bullitt*). Even their bodies looked more alike. They were more restrained than we are, more repressed—though restraint and repression were coming undone by 1968.

Since then, the two parties have just about traded places. By the turn of the millennium, the Democrats were becoming the home of affluent professionals, while the Republicans were starting to sound like populist insurgents. We have to understand this exchange in order to grasp how we got to where we are.

The 1970s ended postwar, bipartisan, middle-class America, and with it the two relatively stable narratives of getting ahead and the fair shake. In their place, four rival narratives have emerged, four accounts of America's moral identity. They have roots in history, but they are shaped by new ways of thinking and living. They reflect schisms on both sides of the divide that has made us two countries, extending and deepening the lines of fracture. Over the past four decades, the four narratives have taken turns exercising influence. They overlap, morph into one another, attract and repel one another. None can be understood apart from the others, because all four emerge from the same whole.

1.

Call the first narrative "Free America." In the past half century it's been the most politically powerful of the four. Free America draws on libertarian ideas, which it installs in the high-powered engine of consumer capitalism. The freedom it champions is very different from Alexis de Tocqueville's art of self-government. It's personal freedom, without other people—the negative liberty of "Don't tread on me."

The conservative movement began to dominate the Republican Party in the 1970s, and then much of the country after 1980 with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. As the historian George H. Nash observed, it uneasily wove together several strands of thought. One was traditionalist, a reaction against the utopian plans and moral chaos of modern secular civilization. The traditionalists were sin-fearing Protestants, orthodox Catholics, southern agrarians, would-be aristocrats, alienated individualists—dissidents in postwar America. They were appalled by the complacent vulgarity of the semi-educated masses. Their hero was Edmund Burke, the avatar of conservative restraint, and their enemy was John Dewey, the philosopher of American democracy. The traditionalists' elitism put them at odds with the main currents of American life—the one passage of American history that most appealed to them was the quasi-feudal Old South—but their writings inspired the next generation of conservatives, including William F. Buckley Jr., who introduced the first issue of *National Review*, in 1955, with the famous command to "Stand athwart history, yelling Stop."

Adjacent to the traditionalists were the anti-Communists. Many of them were former Marxists, such as Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, who carried their apocalyptic baggage with them when they moved from left to right. Politics for them was nothing less than the titanic struggle between good and evil, God and man. The main target of their energy was the ameliorative creed of Eleanor Roosevelt and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., good old liberalism, which they believed to be a paler communism—"the ideology of Western suicide," Burnham called it. The anti-Communists, like the traditionalists, were skeptics of democracy—its softness would doom it to destruction when World War III broke out. If these hectoring pessimists were the sum of modern conservatism, the movement would have died of joylessness by 1960.

The libertarians were different. They slipped more easily into the American stream. In their insistence on freedom they could claim to be descendants of Locke, Jefferson, and the classical liberal tradition. Some of them interpreted the Constitution as a libertarian document for individual and states' rights under a limited federal government, not as a framework for the strengthened nation that the authors of *The Federalist Papers* thought they were creating. Oddly, the most influential libertarians were Europeans, especially the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, whose polemic against collectivism, *The Road to Serfdom*, was a publishing sensation in America in 1944, during the most dramatic mobilization of economic resources by state power in history.

What distinguished libertarians from conventional, pro-business Republicans was their pure and uncompromising idea. What was it? Hayek: "Planning leads to dictatorship." The purpose of government is to secure individual rights, and little else. One sip of social welfare and free government dies. A 1937 Supreme Court decision upholding parts of the New Deal was the beginning of America's decline and fall. Libertarians were in rebellion against the mid-century mixed-economy consensus. In spirit they were more radical than conservative. No compromise with Social Security administrators and central bankers! Death to Keynesian fiscal policy!

Despite or because of the purity of their idea, libertarians made common cause with segregationists, and racism informed their political movement from the beginning. Their first hero, Senator Barry Goldwater, ran for president in 1964 as an insurgent against his own party's establishment while opposing the civil-rights bill on states'-rights grounds.

The first two strands of the conservative movement—elitist traditionalism and anti-communism—remained part of its DNA for half a century. Eventually the American people made their preference for taking pleasures where they wanted clear and the first faded, while the end of the Cold War rendered the second obsolete. But libertarianism stretches all the way to the present. James Burnham is mostly forgotten, but I've met Ayn Rand fanatics everywhere—among Silicon Valley venture capitalists, at the office of the Tampa Bay Tea Party, on a road-paving crew. Former House Speaker Paul Ryan (who read *Atlas Shrugged* in high school) brought Rand's pitiless philosophy of egoism to policy making on Capitol Hill. Libertarianism speaks to the American myth of the self-made man and the lonely pioneer on the plains. (Glorification of men is a recurring feature.) Like Marxism, it is a complete explanatory system. It appeals to supersmart engineers and others who never really grow up.

How did Free America become the dogma of the Republican Party and set the terms of American politics for years? Like any great political change, this one depended on ideas, an authentic connection with people's lives, and timing. Just as there would have been no Roosevelt revolution without the Great Depression, there would have been no Reagan revolution without the 1970s. After years of high inflation with high unemployment, gas shortages, chaos in liberal cities, and epic government corruption and incompetence, by 1980 a large audience of Americans was ready to listen when Milton and Rose Friedman, in a book and 10-part public-television series called *Free to Choose*, blamed the country's decline on business regulations and other government interventions in the market.

But it took the alchemy of that year's Republican nominee to transform the cold formula of tax cuts and deregulation into the warm vision of America as "the shining city on a hill"—land of the Pilgrims, beacon to a desperate world. In Reagan's rhetoric, leveraged buyouts somehow rhymed with the spirit of New England town meetings. Reagan made Free America sound like the promised land, a place where all were welcome to pursue happiness. The descendants of Jefferson's yeoman farmers, with their desire for independence, became sturdy car-company executives and investment bankers yearning to breathe free of big government.

In 1980, the first year I cast a vote, I feared and hated Reagan. Listening to his words 40 years later, I can hear their eloquence and understand their appeal, as long as I tune out many other things. Chief among them is Reagan's half-spoken message to white Americans: Government helps only *those people*. Legal segregation was barely dead when Free America, using the libertarian language of individualism and property rights, pushed the country into its long decline in public investment. The advantages for business were easy to see. As for ordinary people, the Republican

Party reckoned that some white Americans would rather go without than share the full benefits of prosperity with their newly equal Black compatriots.

The majority of Americans who elected Reagan president weren't told that Free America would break unions and starve social programs, or that it would change antitrust policy to bring a new age of monopoly, making Walmart, Citigroup, Google, and Amazon the J.P. Morgan and Standard Oil of a second Gilded Age. They had never heard of Charles and David Koch—heirs to a family oil business, libertarian billionaires who would pour money into the lobbies and propaganda machines and political campaigns of Free America on behalf of corporate power and fossil fuels. Freedom sealed a deal between elected officials and business executives: campaign contributions in exchange for tax cuts and corporate welfare. The numerous scandals of the 1980s exposed the crony capitalism that lay at the heart of Free America.

The shining city on a hill was supposed to replace remote big government with a community of energetic and compassionate citizens, all engaged in a project of national renewal. But nothing held the city together. It was hollow at the center, a collection of individuals all wanting more. It saw Americans as entrepreneurs, employees, investors, taxpayers, and consumers—everything but citizens.

In the Declaration of Independence, freedom comes right after equality. For Reagan and the narrative of Free America, it meant freedom *from* government and bureaucrats. It meant the freedom to run a business without regulation, to pay workers whatever wage the market would bear, to break a union, to pass all your wealth on to your children, to buy out an ailing company with debt and strip it for assets, to own seven houses—or to go homeless. But a freedom that gets rid of all obstructions is impoverished, and it degrades people.

Real freedom is closer to the opposite of breaking loose. It means growing up, and acquiring the ability to participate fully in political and economic life. The obstructions that block this ability are the ones that need to be removed. Some are external: institutions and social conditions. Others are embedded in your character and get in the way of governing yourself, thinking for yourself, and even knowing what is true. These obstructions crush the individuality that freedom lovers cherish, making them conformist, submissive, a group of people all shouting the same thing—easy marks for a demagogue.

Reagan cared more about the functions of self-government than his most ideological supporters. He knew how to persuade and when to compromise. But once he was gone, and the Soviet Union not long after him, Free America lost the narrative thread. Without Reagan's smile and the Cold War's clarity, its vision grew darker and more extreme. Its spirit became flesh in the person of Newt Gingrich, the most influential politician of the past half century. There was nothing conservative about Gingrich. He came to Congress not to work within the institution or even to change it, but to tear it down in order to seize power. With the Gingrich revolution, the term *government shutdown* entered the lexicon and politics became a forever war. (Gingrich himself liked to quote Mao's definition of politics as "war without blood.") His tactics turned the goal of limited and efficient government into the destruction of government. Without a positive vision, his party used power to hold on to power and fatten corporate allies. Corruption—financial, political, intellectual, moral—set in like dry rot in a decaying log.

The aggressive new populism of talk radio and cable news did not have the "conservative orderly heart" that Norman Mailer had once found in the mainstream Republicans of the 1960s. It mocked self-government—both the political and the personal kind. It was rife with destructive impulses. It fed on rage and celebrity culture. The quality of Free America's leaders steadily deteriorated—falling from Reagan to Gingrich to Ted Cruz, from William F. Buckley to Ann Coulter to Sean Hannity—with no bottom.

While the sunny narrative of Free America shone on, its policies eroded the way of life of many of its adherents. The disappearance of secure employment and small businesses destroyed communities. The civic associations that Tocqueville identified as the antidote to individualism died with the jobs. When towns lost their Main Street drugstores and restaurants to Walgreens and Wendy's in the mall out on the highway, they also lost their Rotary Club and newspaper—the local institutions of self-government. This hollowing-out exposed them to an epidemic of aloneness, physical and psychological. Isolation bred distrust in the old sources of authority—school, church, union, bank, media.

Government, which did so little for ordinary Americans, was still the enemy, along with "governing elites." But for the sinking working class, freedom lost

RATHER THAN FINDING NEW POLICIES TO REBUILD DECLINING COMMUNITIES, REPUBLICANS MOBILIZED ANGER AND DESPAIR WHILE OFFERING UP SCAPEGOATS.

whatever economic meaning it had once had. It was a matter of personal dignity, *identity*. Members of this class began to see trespassers everywhere and embraced the slogan of a defiant and armed loneliness: *Get the fuck off my property. Take this mask and shove it.* It was the threatening image of a coiled rattlesnake: “Don’t tread on me.” It achieved its ultimate expression on January 6, in all those yellow Gadsden flags waving around the Capitol—a mob of freedom-loving Americans taking back their constitutional rights by shitting on the floors of Congress and hunting down elected representatives to kidnap and kill. That was their freedom in its pure and reduced form.

A character in Jonathan Franzen’s 2010 novel, *Freedom*, puts it this way: “If you don’t have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can’t afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life.” The character is almost paraphrasing Barack Obama’s notorious statement at a San Francisco fundraiser about the way working-class white Americans “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment, as a way to explain their frustrations.” The thought wasn’t mistaken, but the condescension was self-incriminating. It showed why Democrats couldn’t fathom that people might “vote against their interests.” Guns and religion *were* the authentic interests of millions of Americans. Trade and immigration *had* left some of them worse off. And if the Democratic Party wasn’t on their side—if government failed to improve their lives—why not vote for the party that at least took them seriously?

Free America always had an insurgent mindset, breaking institutions down, not building them up. Irresponsibility was coded into its leadership. Rather than finding new policies to rebuild declining communities, Republicans mobilized anger and despair while offering up scapegoats. The party thought it could control these dark energies on its quest for more power, but instead they would consume it.

2.

The new knowledge economy created a new class of Americans: men and women with college degrees, skilled with symbols and numbers—salaried professionals in information technology, computer engineering, scientific research, design, management consulting, the upper civil service, financial analysis, law, journalism, the arts, higher education. They go to college with one another, intermarry, gravitate to desirable neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas, and do all they can to pass on their advantages to their children. They are not 1 percenters—those are mainly executives and investors—but they dominate the top 10 percent of American incomes, with outsize economic and cultural influence.

They’re at ease in the world that modernity created. They were early adopters of things that make the surface of contemporary life agreeable: HBO, Lipitor, MileagePlus Platinum, the MacBook Pro, grass-fed organic beef, cold-brewed coffee, Amazon Prime. They welcome novelty and relish diversity. They believe that the transnational flow of human beings, information, goods, and capital ultimately benefits most people around the world. You have a hard time telling what part of the country they come from, because their local identities are submerged in the homogenizing culture of top universities and elite professions. They believe in credentials and expertise—not just as tools for success, but as qualifications for class entry. They’re not nationalistic—quite the opposite—but they have a national narrative. Call it “Smart America.”

The cosmopolitan outlook of Smart America overlaps in some areas with the libertarian views of Free America. Each embraces capitalism and the principle of meritocracy: the belief that your talent and effort should determine your reward. But to the meritocrats of Smart America, some government interventions are necessary for everyone to have an equal chance to move up. The long history of racial injustice demands remedies such as affirmative action, diversity hiring, and maybe even reparations. The poor need a social safety net and a living wage; poor children deserve higher spending on education and health care. Workers dislocated by trade agreements, automation, and other blows of the global economy should be retrained for new kinds of jobs.

Still, there's a limit to how much government the meritocrats will accept. Social liberalism comes easier to them than redistribution, especially as they accumulate wealth and look to their 401(k)s for long-term security. As for unions, they hardly exist in Smart America. They're instruments of class solidarity, not individual advancement, and the individual is the unit of worth in Smart America as in Free America.

The word *meritocracy* has been around since the late 1950s, when a British sociologist named Michael Young published *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. He meant this new word as a warning: Modern societies would learn how to measure intelligence in children so exactly that they would be stratified in schools and jobs according to their natural ability. In Young's satirical fantasy, this new form of inequality would be so rigid and oppressive that it would end in violent rebellion.

But the word lost its original dystopian meaning. In the decades after World War II, the G.I. Bill, the expansion of standardized tests, the civil-rights movement, and the opening of top universities to students of color, women, and children of the middle and working classes all combined to offer a path upward that probably came as close to truly equal opportunity as America has ever seen.

After the 1970s, meritocracy began to look more and more like Young's dark satire. A system intended to give each new generation an equal chance to rise created a new hereditary class structure. Educated professionals pass on their money, connections, ambitions, and work ethic to their children, while less educated families fall further behind, with less and less chance of seeing their children move up. By kindergarten, the children of professionals are already a full two years ahead of their lower-class counterparts, and the achievement gap is almost unbridgeable. After seven decades of meritocracy, a lower-class child is nearly as unlikely to be admitted to one of the top three Ivy League universities as they would have been in 1954.

This hierarchy slowly hardened over the decades without drawing much notice. It's based on education and merit, and education and merit are good things, so who would question it? The deeper injustice is disguised by plenty of exceptions, children who rose from modest backgrounds to the heights of society. Bill Clinton (who talked about "people who work hard and play by the rules"), Hillary Clinton (who liked the phrase *God-given talents*), and Barack Obama ("We need every single one of you to develop your talents and your skills and your intellect") were all products of the meritocracy. *Of course* individuals should be rewarded according to their ability. What's the alternative? Either collectivization or aristocracy. Either everyone gets the same grades and salaries regardless of achievement, which is unjust and horribly mediocre, or else everyone has to live out the life into which they're born, which is unjust and horribly regressive. Meritocracy seems like the one system that answers what Tocqueville called the American "passion for equality." If the opportunities are truly equal, the results will be fair.

But it's this idea of fairness that accounts for meritocracy's cruelty. If you don't make the cut, you have no one and nothing to blame but yourself. Those who make it can feel morally pleased with themselves—their talents, discipline, good choices—and even a grim kind of satisfaction when they come across someone who hasn't made it. Not "There but for the grace of God go I," not even "Life is unfair," but "You should have been more like me."

Politically, Smart America came to be associated with the Democratic Party. This was not inevitable. If the party had refused to accept the closing of factories in the 1970s and '80s as a natural disaster, if it had become the voice of the millions of workers displaced by deindustrialization and struggling in the growing service economy, it might have remained the multiethnic working-class party that it had been since the 1930s. It's true that the white South abandoned the Democratic Party after the civil-rights revolution, but race alone doesn't explain the epochal half-century shift of working-class white voters. West Virginia, almost all white, was a predominantly Democratic state until 2000. If you look at county-by-county national electoral maps, 2000 was the year when rural areas turned decisively red. Something more than just the Democrats' principled embrace of the civil-rights movement and other struggles for equality caused the shift.

In the early 1970s, the party became the home of educated professionals, nonwhite voters, and the shrinking unionized working class. The more the party identified with the winners of the new economy, the easier it became for the Republican Party to pull away white workers by appealing to cultural values. Bill and Hillary Clinton spoke about equipping workers to rise into the professional class through education and training. Their assumption was that all Americans could do what they did and be like them.

The narrative of Free America shaped the parameters of acceptable thinking for Smart America. Free trade, deregulation, economic concentration, and balanced budgets became the policy of the Democratic Party. It was cosmopolitan, embracing multiculturalism at home and welcoming a globalized world. Its donor class on Wall Street and in Silicon Valley bankrolled Democratic campaigns and was rewarded with influence in Washington. None of this appealed to the party's old base.

The turn of the millennium was the high-water mark of Smart America. President Clinton's speeches became euphoric—"We are fortunate to be alive at this moment in history," he said in his final State of the Union message. The new economy had replaced "outmoded ideologies" with dazzling technologies. The business cycle of booms and busts had practically been abolished, along with class conflict. In April 2000, Clinton hosted a celebration called the White House Conference on the New Economy. Earnest purpose mingled with self-congratulation; virtue and success high-fived—the distinctive atmosphere of Smart America. At one point Clinton informed the participants that Congress was about to pass a bill to establish permanent trade relations with China, which would make both countries more prosperous and China more free. "I believe the computer and the internet give us a chance to move more people out of poverty more quickly than at any time in all of human history," he exulted.

You can almost date the election of Donald Trump to that moment.

The winners in Smart America have withdrawn from national life. They spend inordinate amounts of time working (even in bed), researching their children's schools and planning their activities, shopping for the right kind of food, learning to make sushi or play the mandolin, staying in shape, and following the news. None of this brings them in contact with fellow citizens outside their way of life. School, once the most universal and influential of our democratic institutions, now walls them off. The working class is terra incognita.

The pursuit of success is not new. The Smart American is a descendant of the self-made man of the early 19th century, who raised work ethic to the highest personal virtue, and of the urban Progressive of the early 20th, who revered expertise. But there's a difference: The path now is narrower, it leads to institutions with higher walls, and the gate is harder to open.

Under the watchful eye of their parents, the children of Smart America devote exhausting amounts of energy to extracurricular activities and carefully constructed personal essays that can navigate between boasting and humility. The goal of all this effort is a higher education that offers questionable learning, dubious fulfillment, likely indebtedness, but certain status. Graduation from an exclusive school marks the entry into a successful life. A rite endowed with so much importance and involving so little of real value resembles the brittle decadence of an aristocracy that's reached the stage when people begin to lose faith that it reflects the natural order of things. In our case, a system intended to expand equality has become an enforcer of inequality. Americans are now meritocrats by birth. We know this, but because it violates our fundamental beliefs, we go to a lot of trouble not to know it.

A common refrain, in places like southeastern Ohio and southern Virginia and central Pennsylvania, is that the middle class no longer exists. I once heard a woman in her 60s, a retired municipal employee in Tampa, Florida, who had made and then lost money in real estate, describe herself as a member of "the formerly middle class." She meant that she no longer lived with any security. Her term could apply to a nonunion electrician making $52,000 a year and to a home health aide making $12 an hour. The first still belongs financially to the middle class, while the second is working-class—in fact, working-poor. What they share is a high-school degree and a precarious prospect. Neither of them can look with confidence on their future, less still on their children's. The dream of leaving their children better educated and better off has lost its conviction, and therefore its inspiration. They can't possibly attain the shiny, well-ordered lives they see in the houses of the elite professionals for whom they work. The espresso maker on the quartz countertop, the expensive art hanging on the living-room walls, the shelves of books lining the children's bedrooms are glimpses of a foreign culture. What professionals actually do to earn the large incomes that pay for their nice things is a mystery. All those hours spent sitting at a computer screen—do they contribute something to society, to the family of an electrician or a home health aide (whose contributions are obvious)?

So these two classes, rising professionals and sinking workers, which a couple of generations ago were close in income and not so far apart in mores, no longer believe they belong to the same country. But they can't escape each other, and their coexistence breeds condescension, resentment, and shame.

As a national narrative, Smart America has a tenuous sense of the nation. Smart America doesn't hate America, which has been so good to the meritocrats. Smart Americans believe in institutions, and they support American leadership of military alliances and international organizations.

THE WINNERS IN SMART AMERICA HAVE LOST THE CAPACITY AND THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL IDENTITY, WHICH IS WHY THEY CAN'T GRASP ITS IMPORTANCE FOR OTHERS.

But Smart Americans are uneasy with patriotism. It's an unpleasant relic of a more primitive time, like cigarette smoke or dog racing. It stirs emotions that can have ugly consequences. The winners in Smart America—connected by airplane, internet, and investments to the rest of the globe—have lost the capacity and the need for a national identity, which is why they can't grasp its importance for others. Their passionate loyalty, the one that gives them a particular identity, goes to their family. The rest is diversity and efficiency, heirloom tomatoes and self-driving cars. They don't see the point of patriotism.

Patriotism can be turned to good or ill purposes, but in most people it never dies. It's a persistent attachment, like loyalty to your family, a source of meaning and togetherness, strongest when it's hardly conscious. National loyalty is an attachment to what makes your country *yours*, distinct from the rest, even when you can't stand it, even when it breaks your heart. This feeling can't be wished out of existence. And because people still live their lives in an actual place, and the nation is the largest place with which they can identify—world citizenship is too abstract to be meaningful—patriotic feeling has to be tapped if you want to achieve anything big. If your goal is to slow climate change, or reverse inequality, or stop racism, or rebuild democracy, you will need the national solidarity that comes from patriotism.

That's one problem with the narrative of Smart America. The other problem is that abandoning patriotism to other narratives guarantees that the worst of them will claim it.

3.

In the fall of 2008, Sarah Palin, then the Republican nominee for vice president, spoke at a fundraiser in Greensboro, North Carolina. Candidates reserve the truth for their donors, using the direct language they avoid with the press and the public (Obama: "cling to guns or religion"; Romney: the "47 percent"; Clinton: "basket of deplorables"), and Palin felt free to speak openly. "We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit," she said, "and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hardworking, very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this great nation. Those who are running our factories and teaching our kids and growing our food and are fighting our wars for us."

What made Palin alien to people in Smart America prompted thousands to stand in line for hours at her rallies in "Real America": her vernacular ("You betcha," "Drill, baby, drill"); her charismatic Christianity; the four colleges she attended en route to a degree; her five children's names (Track, Bristol, Willow, Piper, Trig); her baby with Down syndrome; her pregnant, unwed teenage daughter; her husband's commercial fishing business; her hunting poses. She was working-class to her boots. Plenty of politicians come from the working class; Palin never left it.

She went after Barack Obama with particular venom. Her animus was fueled by his suspect origins, radical associates, and redistributionist views, but the worst offense was his galling mix of class and race. Obama was a Black professional who had gone to the best schools, who knew so much more than Palin, and who was too cerebral to get in the mud pit with her.

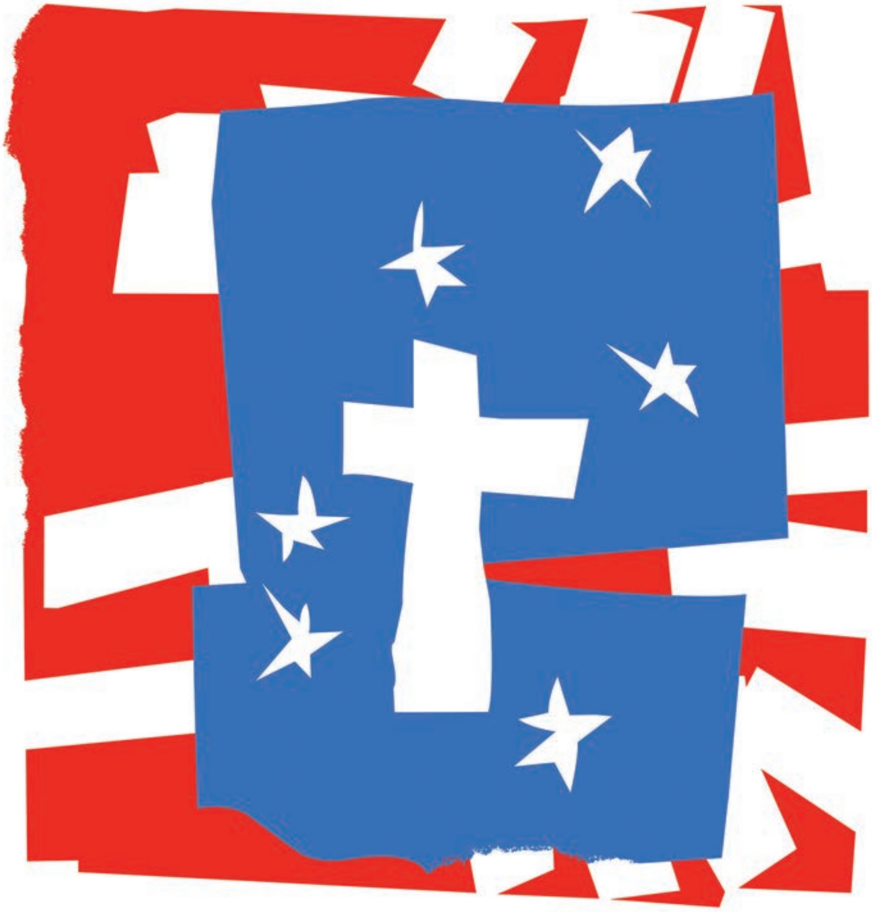
Palin crumbled during the campaign. Her miserable performance under basic questioning disqualified her in the eyes of Americans with open minds on the subject. Her Republican handlers tried to hide her and later disowned her. In 2008, the country was still too rational for a candidate like Palin. After losing, she quit being governor of Alaska, which no longer interested her, and started a new career as a reality-TV personality, Tea Party star, and autographed-merchandise saleswoman. Palin kept looking for a second act that never arrived. She suffered the pathetic fate of being a celebrity ahead of her time. Because with her candidacy something new came into our national life that was also traditional. She was a western populist who embodied white identity politics—John the Baptist to the coming of Trump.

Real America is a very old place. The idea that the authentic heart of democracy beats hardest in common people who work with their hands goes back to the 18th century. It was embryonic in the founding creed of equality. "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor," Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787. "The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules." Moral equality was the basis for political equality. As the new republic became a more egalitarian society in the first decades of the 19th century, the democratic creed turned openly populist. Andrew Jackson came to power and governed as champion of "the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers," the Real Americans of that age. The Democratic Party dominated elections by pinning the charge of aristocratic elitism on the Federalists, and then the Whigs, who learned that they had to campaign on log cabins and hard cider to compete.

The triumph of popular democracy brought an anti-intellectual bias to American politics that never entirely disappeared. Self-government didn't require any special learning, just the native wisdom of the people. "Even in its earliest days," Richard Hofstadter wrote, "the egalitarian impulse in America was linked with a distrust for what in its germinal form may be called political specialization and in its later forms expertise." Hostility to aristocracy widened into a general suspicion of educated sophisticates. The more learned citizens were actually less fit to lead; the best politicians came from the ordinary people and stayed true to them. Making money didn't violate the spirit of equality, but an air of superior knowledge did, especially when it cloaked special privileges.

The overwhelmingly white crowds that lined up to hear Palin speak were nothing new. Real America has always been a country of white people. Jackson himself was a slaver and an Indian-killer, and his "farmers, mechanics, and laborers" were the all-white forebears of William Jennings Bryan's "producing masses," Huey Long's "little man," George Wallace's "rednecks," Patrick Buchanan's "pitchfork brigade," and Palin's "hardworking patriots." The political positions of these groups changed, but their Real American identity—their belief in themselves as the bedrock of self-government—stayed firm. From time to time the common people's politics has been interracial—the Populist Party at its founding in the early 1890s, the industrial-labor movement of the 1930s—but that never lasted. The unity soon disintegrated under the pressure of white supremacy. Real America has always needed to feel that both a shiftless underclass and a parasitic elite depend on its labor. In this way, it renders the Black working class invisible.

From its beginnings, Real America has also been religious, and in a particular way: evangelical and fundamentalist, hostile to modern ideas and intellectual authority. The truth will enter every simple heart,



and it doesn't come in shades of gray. "If we have to give up either religion or education, we should give up education," said Bryan, in whom populist democracy and fundamentalist Christianity were joined until they broke him apart at the Scopes "monkey trial" in 1925.

Finally, Real America has a strong nationalist character. Its attitude toward the rest of the world is isolationist, hostile to humanitarianism and international engagement, but ready to respond aggressively to any incursion against national interests. The purity and strength of Americanism are always threatened by contamination from outside and betrayal from within. The narrative of Real America is white Christian nationalism.

Real America isn't a shining city on a hill with its gates open to freedom-loving people everywhere. Nor is it a cosmopolitan club to which the right talents and credentials will get you admitted no matter who you are or where you're from. It's a provincial village where everyone knows everyone's business, no one has much more money than anyone else, and only a few misfits ever move away. The villagers can fix their own boilers, and they go out of their way to help a neighbor in a jam. A new face on the street will draw immediate attention and suspicion.

By the time Palin talked about "the real America," it was in precipitous decline. The region where she spoke, the North Carolina Piedmont, had lost its three economic mainstays—tobacco, textiles, and furniture making—in a single decade. Local people blamed NAFTA, multinational corporations, and big government. Idle tobacco farmers who had owned and worked their own fields drank vodka out of plastic cups at the Moose Lodge where Fox News aired nonstop; they were missing teeth from using crystal meth. Palin's glowing remarks were a generation out of date.

This collapse happened in the shadow of historic failures. In the first decade of the new century, the bipartisan ruling class discredited itself—first overseas, then at home. The invasion of Iraq squandered the national unity and international sympathy that had followed the attacks of September 11. The decision itself was a strategic folly enabled by lies and self-deception; the botched execution compounded the disaster for years afterward. The price was never paid by the war's leaders. As an Army officer in Iraq wrote in 2007, "A private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war." The cost for Americans fell on the bodies and minds of young men and women from small towns and inner cities. Meeting anyone in uniform in Iraq who came from a family of educated professionals was uncommon, and vanishingly rare in the enlisted ranks. After troops began to leave Iraq, the pattern continued in Afghanistan. The inequality of sacrifice in the global War on Terror was almost too normal to bear comment. But this grand elite failure seeded cynicism in the downscale young.

The financial crisis of 2008, and the Great Recession that followed, had a similar effect on the home front. The guilty parties were elites—bankers, traders, regulators, and policy makers. Alan Greenspan, the Federal Reserve chairman and an Ayn Rand fan, admitted that the crisis undermined his faith in the narrative of Free America. But those who suffered were lower down the class structure: middle-class Americans whose wealth was sunk in a house that lost half its value and a retirement fund that melted away, working-class Americans thrown into poverty by a pink slip. The banks received bailouts, and the bankers kept their jobs.

The conclusion was obvious: The system was rigged for insiders. The economic recovery took years; the recovery of trust never came.

Ever since the age of Reagan, the Republican Party has been a coalition of business interests and less affluent white people, many of them evangelical Christians. The persistence of the coalition required an immense amount of self-deception on both sides. As late as 2012, the Republican National Convention was still a celebration of Free America and unfettered capitalism. Mitt Romney told donors at the infamous fundraiser that the country was divided into makers and takers, and those 47 percent of Americans who took would never vote for him. In fact, the takers included plenty of Republicans, but the disorganization of life in the decaying countryside was barely noticed by politicians and journalists.

Christians who didn't attend church; workers without a regular schedule, let alone a union; renters who didn't trust their neighbors; adults who got their information from chain emails and fringe websites; voters who believed both parties to be corrupt—what was the news story? Real America, the bedrock of popular democracy, had no way to participate in self-government. It turned out to be disposable. Its rage and despair needed a target and a voice.

When Trump ran for president, the party of Free America collapsed into its own hollowness. The mass of Republicans were not free-traders who wanted corporate taxes zeroed out. They wanted government to do things that benefited *them*—not the undeserving classes below and above them. Party elites were too remote from Trump's supporters and lulled by their own stale rhetoric to grasp what was happening. Media elites were just as stupefied. They were entertained and appalled by Trump, whom they dismissed as a racist, a sexist, a xenophobe, an authoritarian, and a vulgar, orange-haired celebrity. He was all of these. But he had a reptilian genius for intuiting the emotions of Real America—a foreign country to elites on the right and left. They were helpless to understand Trump and therefore to stop him.

Trump violated conservative orthodoxy on numerous issues, including taxes and entitlements. "I want to save the middle class," he said. "The hedge-fund guys didn't build this country. These are guys that shift paper around and they get lucky." But Trump's main heresies were on trade, immigration, and war. He was the first American politician to succeed by running against globalization—a bipartisan policy that had served the interests of "globalists" for years while sacrificing Real Americans. He was also the first to succeed by talking about how shitty everything in America had become. "These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they *are* forgotten," he said at the 2016 Republican National Convention. "But they're not going to be forgotten long." The nationalist mantle was lying around, and Trump grabbed it. "*I am your voice.*"

Early in the campaign, I spent time with a group of white and Black steelworkers in a town near Canton, Ohio. They had been locked out by the company over a contract dispute and were picketing outside the mill. They faced months without a paycheck, possibly the loss of their jobs, and they talked about the end of the middle class. The only candidates who interested them were Trump and Bernie Sanders.

A steelworker named Jack Baum told me that he supported Trump. He liked Trump's "patriotic" positions on trade and immigration, but he also found Trump's insults refreshing, even exhilarating. The ugliness was a kind of revenge, Baum said: "It's a mirror of the way *they* see *us*." He didn't specify who *they* and *us* were, but maybe he didn't have to. Maybe he believed—he was too polite to say it—that people like me looked down on people like him. If educated professionals considered steelworkers like Baum to be ignorant, crass, and bigoted, then Trump was going to shove it in our smug faces. The lower his language and behavior sank, and the more the media vilified him, the more he was celebrated by his people. He was their leader, who could do no wrong.

Trump's language was effective because it was attuned to American pop culture. It required no expert knowledge and had no code of hidden meanings. It gave rise almost spontaneously to memorable phrases: "Make America great again." "Drain the swamp." "Build the wall." "Lock her up." "Send her back." It's the way people talk when the inhibitors are off, and it's available to anyone willing to join the mob. Trump didn't try to shape his people ideologically with new words and concepts. He used the low language of talk radio, reality TV, social media, and sports bars, and to his listeners this language seemed far more honest and grounded in common sense than the mincing obscurities of "politically correct" experts. His populism brought *Jersey Shore* to national politics. The goal of his speeches was not to whip up mass hysteria but to get rid of shame. He leveled everyone down together.

Throughout his adult life, Trump has been hostile to Black people, contemptuous of women, vicious about immigrants from poor countries, and cruel toward the weak. He's an equal-opportunity bigot. In his campaigns and in the White House, he aligned himself publicly with hard-core racists in a way that set him apart from every other president in memory, and the racists loved him for it. After the 2016 election, a great deal of journalism and social science was devoted to finding out whether Trump's voters were mainly motivated by economic anxiety or racial resentment. There was evidence for both answers.

Progressives, shocked by the readiness of half the country to support this hateful man, seized on racism as the single cause and set out to disprove every alternative. But this answer was far too satisfying.

TRUMP'S POPULISM BROUGHT *JERSEY SHORE* TO NATIONAL POLITICS. THE GOAL OF HIS SPEECHES WAS NOT TO WHIP UP MASS HYSTERIA BUT TO GET RID OF SHAME. HE LEVELED EVERYONE DOWN TOGETHER.

Racism is such an irreducible evil that it gave progressives commanding moral heights and relieved them of the burden to understand the grievances of their compatriots down in the lowlands, let alone do something about them. It put Trump voters beyond the pale. But racism alone couldn't explain why white men were much more likely to vote for Trump than white women, or why the same was true of Black and Latino men and women. Or why the most reliable predictor for who was a Trump voter wasn't race but the combination of race and education. Among white people, 38 percent of college graduates voted for Trump, compared with 64 percent without college degrees. This margin—the great gap between Smart America and Real America—was the decisive one. It made 2016 different from previous elections, and the trend only intensified in 2020.

The issues Trump had campaigned on waxed and waned during his presidency. What remained was the dark energy he unleashed, binding him like a tribal leader to his people. Nothing was left of the optimistic pieties of Free America. Trump's people still talked about freedom, but they meant blood and soil. Their nationalism was like the ethno-nationalisms on the rise in Europe and around the world. Trump abused every American institution—the FBI, the CIA, the armed forces, the courts, the press, the Constitution itself—and his people cheered. Nothing excited them like owning the libs. Nothing convinced them like Trump's 30,000 lies.

More than anything, Trump was a demagogue—a thoroughly American type, familiar to us from novels like *All the King's Men* and movies like *Citizen Kane*. "Trump is a creature native to our own style of government and therefore much more difficult to protect ourselves against," the Yale political theorist Bryan Garsten wrote. "He is a demagogue, a popular leader who feeds on the hatred of elites that grows naturally in democratic soil." A demagogue can become a tyrant, but the people put him there—the people who want to be fed fantasies and lies, the people who set themselves apart from and above their compatriots. So the question isn't who Trump was, but who we are.

4.

In 2014, American character changed.

A large and influential generation came of age in the shadow of accumulating failures by the ruling class—especially by business and foreign-policy elites. This new generation had little faith in ideas that previous ones were raised on: All men are created equal. Work hard and you can be anything. Knowledge is power. Democracy and capitalism are the best systems—the only systems. America is a nation of immigrants. America is the leader of the free world.

My generation told our children's generation a story of slow but steady progress. America had slavery (as well as genocide, internment, and other crimes) to answer for, original sin if there ever was such a thing—but it *had* answered, and with the civil-rights movement, the biggest barriers to equality were removed. If anyone doubted that the country was becoming a more perfect union, the election of a Black president who loved to use that phrase proved it. "Rosa sat so Martin could walk so Barack could run so we could all fly"—that was the story in a sentence, and it was so convincing to a lot of people in my generation, myself included, that we were slow to notice how little it meant to a lot of people under 35. Or we heard but didn't understand and dismissed them. We told them they had no idea what the crime rate was like in 1994. Smart Americans pointed to affirmative action and children's health insurance. Free Americans touted enterprise zones and school vouchers.

Of course the kids didn't buy it. In their eyes "progress" looked like a thin upper layer of Black celebrities and professionals, who carried the weight of society's expectations along with its prejudices, and below them, lousy schools, overflowing prisons, dying neighborhoods. The parents didn't really buy it either, but we had learned to ignore injustice on this scale as adults ignore so much just to get through. If anyone could smell out the bad faith of parents, it was their children, stressed-out laborers in the multigenerational family business of success, bearing the psychological burdens of the meritocracy. Many of them entered the workforce, loaded with debt, just as the Great Recession closed off opportunities and the reality of planetary destruction bore down on them. No wonder their digital lives seemed more real to them than the world of their parents. No wonder they had less sex than previous generations. No wonder the bland promises of middle-aged liberals left them furious.

Then came one video after another of police killing or hurting unarmed Black people. Then came the election of an openly racist president. These were conditions for a generational revolt.

Call this narrative "Just America." It's another rebellion from below. As Real America breaks down the ossified libertarianism of Free America, Just America assails the complacent meritocracy of Smart America. It does the hard, essential thing that the other three narratives avoid, that white Americans have avoided throughout history. It forces us to see the straight line that runs from slavery and segregation to the second-class life so many Black Americans live today—the betrayal of equality that has always been the country's great moral shame, the heart of its social problems.

But Just America has a dissonant sound, for in its narrative, justice and America never rhyme. A more accurate name would be Unjust America, in a spirit of attack rather than aspiration. For Just Americans, the country is less a project of self-government to be improved than a site of continuous wrong to be battled. In some versions of the narrative, the country has no positive value at all—it can never be made better.

In the same way that libertarian ideas had been lying around for Americans to pick up in the stagflated 1970s, young people coming of age in the disillusioned 2000s were handed powerful ideas about social justice to explain their world. The ideas came from different intellectual traditions: the Frankfurt School in 1920s Germany, French postmodernist thinkers of the 1960s and '70s, radical feminism, Black studies. They converged and recombined in American university classrooms, where two generations of students were taught to think as critical theorists.

Critical theory upends the universal values of the Enlightenment: objectivity, rationality, science, equality, freedom of the individual. These liberal values are an ideology by which one dominant group subjugates another. All relations are power relations, everything is political, and claims of reason and truth are social constructs that maintain those in power. Unlike orthodox Marxism, critical theory is concerned with language and identity more than with material conditions. In place of objective reality, critical theorists place subjectivity at the center of analysis to show how supposedly universal terms exclude oppressed groups and help the powerful rule over them. Critical theorists argue that the Enlightenment, including the American founding, carried the seeds of modern racism and imperialism.

The term *identity politics* was born in 1977, when a group of Black lesbian feminists called the Combahee River Collective released a statement defining their work as self-liberation from the racism and sexism of "white male rule": "The major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives … This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity." The statement helped set in motion a way of thinking that places the struggle for justice within the self. This thinking appeals not to reason or universal values but to the authority of identity, the "lived experience" of the oppressed. The self is not a rational being that can persuade and be persuaded by other selves, because reason is another form of power.

The historical demand of the oppressed is inclusion as equal citizens in all the institutions of American life. With identity politics, the demand became different—not just to enlarge the institutions, but to change them profoundly. When Martin Luther King Jr., at the March on Washington, called on America to "rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,'" he was demanding equal rights within the framework of the Enlightenment. (In later years, his view of the American creed grew more complicated.) But in identity politics, *equality* refers to groups, not individuals, and demands action to redress disparate outcomes among groups—in other words, *equity*, which often amounts to new forms of discrimination. In practice, identity politics inverts the old hierarchy of power into a new one: bottom rail on top. The fixed lens of power makes true equality, based on common humanity, impossible.

And what is oppression? Not unjust laws—the most important ones were overturned by the civil-rights movement and its successors—or even unjust living conditions. The focus on subjectivity moves oppression from the world to the self and its pain—psychological trauma, harm from speech and texts, the sense of alienation that members of minority groups feel in their constant exposure to a dominant culture. A whole system of oppression can exist within a single word.

By the turn of the millennium, these ideas were nearly ubiquitous in humanities and social-science departments. Embracing them had become an important credential for admittance into sectors of the professorate. The ideas gave scholars an irresistible power, intellectual and moral, to criticize institutions in which they were comfortably embedded. In turn, these scholars formed the worldview of young Americans educated by elite universities to thrive in the meritocracy, students trained from early childhood to do what it takes to succeed professionally and socially. "It is a curious thing, but the ideas of one generation become the instincts of the next," D. H. Lawrence wrote. The ideas of critical theorists became the instincts of Millennials. It wasn't necessary to have read Foucault or studied under Judith Butler to become adept with terms like *centered*, *marginalized*, *privilege*, and *harm*; to believe that words can be a form of violence; to close down a general argument with a personal truth ("You wouldn't understand," or just "I'm offended"); to keep your mouth shut when identity disqualified you from speaking.

Millions of young Americans were steeped in the assumptions of critical theory and identity politics without knowing the concepts. Everyone sensed their power. Not everyone resisted the temptation to abuse it.

Just America emerged as a national narrative in 2014. That summer, in Ferguson, Missouri, the police killing of a Black 18-year-old, whose body was left to lie in the street for hours, came in the context of numerous incidents, more and more of them caught on video, of Black people assaulted and killed by white police officers who faced no obvious threat. And those videos, widely distributed on social media and viewed millions of times, symbolized the wider injustices that still confronted Black Americans in prisons and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces—in the sixth year of the first Black presidency. The optimistic story of incremental progress and expanding opportunity in a multiracial society collapsed, seemingly overnight. The incident in Ferguson ignited a protest movement in cities and campuses around the country.

What is the narrative of Just America? It sees American society not as mixed and fluid, but as a fixed hierarchy, like a caste system. An outpouring of prizewinning books, essays, journalism, films, poetry, pop music, and scholarly work looks to the history of slavery and segregation in order to understand the present—as if to say, with Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The most famous of this work, *The New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project, declared its ambition to retell the entire story of America as the story of slavery and its consequences, tracing contemporary phenomena to their historical antecedents in racism, sometimes in disregard of contradictory facts. Any talk of progress is false consciousness—even "hurtful." Whatever the actions of this or that individual, whatever new laws and practices come along, the hierarchical position of "whiteness" over "Blackness" is eternal.

Here is the revolutionary power of the narrative: What had been considered, broadly speaking, American history (or literature, philosophy, classics, even math) is explicitly defined as white, and therefore supremacist. What was innocent by default suddenly finds itself on trial, every idea is cross-examined, and nothing else can get done until the case is heard.

Just America isn't concerned only with race. The most radical version of the narrative lashes together the oppression of all groups in an encompassing hell of white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, plutocracy, environmental destruction, and drones—America as a unitary malignant force beyond any other evil on Earth. The end of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015 and hugely influential in establishing the narrative of Just America, interprets global warming as the planet's cosmic revenge on white people for their greed and cruelty.

There are too many things that Just America can't talk about for the narrative to get at the hardest problems. It can't talk about the complex causes of poverty. Structural racism—ongoing disadvantages that Black people suffer as a result of policies and institutions over the centuries—is real. But so is individual agency, and in the Just America narrative, it doesn't exist. The narrative can't talk about the main source of violence in Black neighborhoods, which is young Black men, not police. The push to "defund the police" during the protests over George Floyd's murder was resisted by many local Black citizens, who wanted better, not less, policing. Just America can't deal with the stubborn divide between Black and white students in academic assessments. The mild phrase *achievement gap* has been banished, not only because it implies that Black parents and children have some responsibility, but also because, according to anti-racist ideology, any disparity is by definition racist. Get rid of assessments, and you'll end the racism along with the gap.

I'm exaggerating the suddenness of this new narrative, but not by much. Things changed astonishingly quickly after 2014, when Just America escaped campuses and pervaded the wider culture. First, the "softer" professions gave way. Book publishers released a torrent of titles on race and identity, which year after year won the most prestigious prizes. Newspapers and magazines known for aspiring to reportorial objectivity shifted toward an activist model of journalism, adopting new values and assumptions along with a brand-new language: *systemic racism*, *white supremacy*, *white privilege*, *anti-Blackness*, *marginalized communities*, *decolonization, toxic masculinity*. Similar changes came to arts organizations, philanthropies, scientific institutions, technology monopolies, and finally corporate America and the Democratic Party. The incontestable principle of inclusion drove the changes, which smuggled in more threatening features that have come to characterize identity politics and social justice: monolithic group thought, hostility to open debate, and a taste for moral coercion.

Just America has dramatically changed the way Americans think, talk, and act, but not the conditions in which they live. It reflects the fracturing distrust that defines our culture: *Something is deeply wrong; our society is unjust; our institutions are corrupt*. If the narrative helps to create a more humane criminal-justice system and bring Black Americans into the conditions of full equality, it will live up to its promise. But the grand systemic analysis usually ends in small symbolic politics. In some ways, Just America resembles Real America and has entered the same dubious conflict from the other side. The disillusionment with liberal capitalism that gave rise to identity politics has also produced a new authoritarianism among many young white men. Just and Real America share a skepticism, from opposing points of view, about the universal ideas of the founding documents and the promise of America as a multi-everything democracy.

But another way to understand Just America is in terms of class. Why does so much of its work take place in human-resources departments, reading lists, and awards ceremonies? In the summer of 2020, the protesters in the American streets were disproportionately Millennials with advanced degrees making more than $100,000 a year. Just America is a narrative of the young and well educated, which is why it continually misreads or ignores the Black and Latino working classes. The fate of this generation of young professionals has been cursed by economic stagnation and technological upheaval. The jobs their parents took for granted have become much harder to get, which makes the meritocratic rat race even more crushing. Law, medicine, academia, media—the most desirable professions—have all contracted.

The result is a large population of overeducated, underemployed young people living in metropolitan areas.

The historian Peter Turchin coined the phrase *elite overproduction* to describe this phenomenon. He found that a constant source of instability and violence in previous eras of history, such as the late Roman empire and the French Wars of Religion, was the frustration of social elites for whom there were not enough jobs. Turchin expects this country to undergo a similar breakdown in the coming decade. Just America attracts surplus elites and channels most of their anger at the narrative to which they're closest—Smart America. The social-justice movement is a repudiation of meritocracy, a rebellion against the system handed down from parents to children. Students at elite universities no longer believe they deserve their coveted slots. Activists in New York want to abolish the tests that determine entry into the city's most competitive high schools (where Asian American children now predominate). In some niche areas, such as literary magazines and graduate schools of education, the idea of merit as separate from identity no longer exists.

But most Just Americans still belong to the meritocracy and have no desire to give up its advantages. They can't escape its status anxieties—they've only transferred them to the new narrative. They want to be the first to adopt its expert terminology. In the summer of 2020, people suddenly began saying "BIPOC" as if they'd been doing it all their lives. (*Black, Indigenous, and people of color* was a way to uncouple groups that had been aggregated under *people of color* and give them their rightful place in the moral order, with people from Bogotá and Karachi and Seoul bringing up the rear.) The whole atmosphere of Just America at its most constricted—the fear of failing to say the right thing, the urge to level withering fire on minor faults—is a variation on the fierce competitive spirit of Smart America. Only the terms of accreditation have changed. And because achievement is a fragile basis for moral identity, when meritocrats are accused of racism, they have no solid faith in their own worth to stand on.

The rules in Just America are different, and they have been quickly learned by older liberals following a long series of defenestrations at *The New York Times*, *Poetry* magazine, Georgetown University, the Guggenheim Museum, and other leading institutions. The parameters of acceptable expression are a lot narrower than they used to be. A written thought can be a form of violence. The loudest public voices in a controversy will prevail. Offending them can cost your career. Justice is power. These new rules are not based on liberal values; they are post-liberal.

Just America's origins in theory, its intolerant dogma, and its coercive tactics remind me of 1930s left-wing ideology. Liberalism as white supremacy recalls the Communist Party's attack on social democracy as "social fascism." Just American aesthetics are the new socialist realism.

The dead end of Just America is a tragedy. This country has had great movements for justice in the past and badly needs one now. But in order to work, it has to throw its arms out wide. It has to tell a story in which most of us can see ourselves, and start on a path that most of us want to follow.

ALL FOUR OF the narratives I've described emerged from America's failure to sustain and enlarge the middle-class democracy of the postwar years. They all respond to real problems. Each offers a value that the others need and lacks ones that the others have. Free America celebrates the energy of the unencumbered individual. Smart America respects intelligence and welcomes change. Real America commits itself to a place and has a sense of limits. Just America demands a confrontation with what the others want to avoid. They rise from a single society, and even in one as polarized as ours they continually shape, absorb, and morph into one another. But their tendency is also to divide us, pitting tribe against tribe. These divisions impoverish each narrative into a cramped and ever more extreme version of itself.

All four narratives are also driven by a competition for status that generates fierce anxiety and resentment. They all anoint winners and losers. In Free America, the winners are the makers, and the losers are the takers who want to drag the rest down in perpetual dependency on a smothering government. In Smart America, the winners are the credentialed meritocrats, and the losers are the poorly educated who want to resist inevitable progress. In Real America, the winners are the hardworking folk of the white Christian heartland, and the losers are treacherous elites and contaminating others who want to destroy the country. In Just America, the winners are the marginalized groups, and the losers are the dominant groups that want to go on dominating.

I don't much want to live in the republic of any of them.

It's common these days to hear people talk about sick America, dying America, the end of America. The same kinds of things were said in 1861, in 1893, in 1933, and in 1968. The sickness, the death, is always a moral condition. Maybe this comes from our Puritan heritage. If we are dying, it can't be from natural causes. It must be a prolonged act of suicide, which is a form of murder.

I don't think we are dying. We have no choice but to live together—we're quarantined as fellow citizens. Knowing who we are lets us see what kinds of change are possible. Countries are not social-science experiments. They have organic qualities, some positive, some destructive, that can't be wished away. Our passion for equality, the individualism it produces, the hustle for money, the love of novelty, the attachment to democracy, the distrust of authority and intellect—these won't disappear. A way forward that tries to evade or crush them on the road to some free, smart, real, or just utopia will never arrive and instead will run into a strong reaction. But a way forward that tries to make us Equal Americans, all with the same rights and opportunities—the only basis for shared citizenship and self-government—is a road that connects our past and our future.

Meanwhile, we remain trapped in two countries. Each one is split by two narratives—Smart and Just on one side, Free and Real on the other. Neither separation nor conquest is a tenable future. The tensions within each country will persist even as the cold civil war between them rages on. *A*

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Culture & Critics

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ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SPELLA

Infomercial for America

The timeless appeal of Top Gun

By Megan Garber

In 1983, the Swedish aerospace and auto company Saab ran an ad with an old premise—sports cars are sexy—and a new twist: Saab's cars, the ad suggests, are as sexy as its fighter jets. The spot makes its case by splicing slo-mo shots of a car and a plane emerging from their respective hangars. The soundtrack is orchestral, the effect vaguely voyeuristic. The crescendo comes when the car and the plane meet on a shared runway, the jet hovering over the car, each pulsing with raw power.

The ad was the handiwork of the British director Tony Scott. On the strength of it, he was hired to create another ode to high-velocity machismo, this one at feature length. *Top Gun* premiered in May 1986, when the pain of Vietnam had receded, the Cold War was on the wane, and people had embraced the hope that it was morning in America. Scott's film answered the moment by attempting to sell not a car, but a country: Love the U.S. again. Buy the U.S. again.

Top Gun marked its 35th anniversary this spring, and its decades-in-the-making sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick*, originally set to be a summer blockbuster, is now scheduled to premiere later this year. While we wait, I rewatched the original—and promptly experienced the whiplash that comes when a dated movie feels, somehow, utterly timely. Advertising strips away the world and its complications until all that's left is want. *Top Gun*, an ad with a 110-minute run time, retains its allure in part because it is selling a desire that remains, all these years later, unfulfilled: an America that proves worthy, finally, of its immense power.

***TOP GUN*'S STORY** is simple enough: Lieutenant Pete Mitchell, call sign Maverick, is a hotshot Navy pilot who is as rebellious as he is talented. He won't listen to orders. He's an unreliable wingman. He'll go rogue at Mach 2, which is pretty much the worst time for someone to decide that the rules do not apply to them. But genius is genius, and so Maverick—played by Tom Cruise—and his best friend, Goose (Anthony Edwards), get chosen to attend Top Gun, the Navy's ultra-elite flight-training school in Miramar, California. (A bit like the film that bears its name, Top Gun is both forward-looking and fusty: It is meant to train pilots for future engagements in "the lost art of aerial combat.") At the school, Maverick and Goose compete as a two-man team, mostly via combat maneuvers against fellow trainees, to win the Top Gun trophy and the Navy-wide bragging rights that come with it. When people in this world talk about "the top 1 percent," they do so with no ambivalence.

Maverick's closest rival at Top Gun is Iceman (Val Kilmer), a by-the-book pilot who answers Mav's natural talent with tactical skill. But Iceman, crucially, is not Maverick's adversary. Nor, really, are the Navy's military foes—all we know of those faceless pilots is that they fly Soviet-made MiGs. Maverick's real enemy, *Top Gun* makes clear, is Maverick himself. The son of a pilot who lost his life and his reputation in the fog of war, Maverick wrestles with his inheritance. He confuses bravery, often, with recklessness. Iceman puts it best. "Maverick, it's not your flying; it's your attitude," he says. "The enemy's dangerous, but right now you're worse. Dangerous and foolish. You may not like who's flying with you, but whose side are you on?"

The story of Maverick, at once officer and outlaw, shares themes with the Western, its frontier shifted from the ground to the sky. *Top Gun* is also, via Maverick's relationship with his civilian flight instructor, Charlie (Kelly McGillis), a screwball-inflected romance. And a workplace drama. And a product of preening propaganda. (The Navy, which provided equipment and training for the production and reportedly shaped some of its story lines, set up recruitment booths outside theaters showing the film. Applications to Annapolis soared.) The film is also, however, an epic. *Top Gun* takes elemental themes—parents and children, humans and nature, individual desires and communal demands—and funnels them into its hero's journey.

I GREW UP IN THE '80S, so nostalgia, for me, helps explain more than a little of *Top Gun*'s abiding appeal. The film was, for a time, everywhere. (In some ways it still is. See: jokes about "wingmen" in bars; aviators as always-trending fashion accessories; Tom Cruise's ongoing megastardom.) Part of *Top Gun*'s draw is also that it is exceptionally well made. Its cinematography captures the kinetic thrill of being airborne, the thrust of the engines, the thrum of the drive against gravity. *Top Gun* operates in the tradition of Yeats's "tumult in the clouds" and 1927's *Wings* and 1982's *Firefox*: It bursts with awe for the small miracle of human flight, for earthbound creatures who soar across a limitless sky.

Top Gun also gives us the gift of its volleyball scene, the narratively expendable but spiritually crucial affair in which Mav and Goose join Iceman and his flying partner for some sweaty sets on the beach. ("I didn't have a vision of what I was doing other than just doing soft porn," Scott later joked, adding that before filming he sprayed the actors

Top: *Maverick (Tom Cruise) takes the lead as he and his flying partner, Goose (Anthony Edwards), flout Navy rules.* Bottom: *Mav's civilian flight instructor, Charlie (Kelly McGillis), dares to criticize him, but of course can't resist his charm.*

with baby oil.) Some of *Top Gun*'s other contributions include the delightful "Great Balls of Fire" sing-along; the multiple locker-room scenes featuring extremely brawny men in extremely tiny towels; the balletic elegance of the USS Enterprise crew members as they engage in full-body semaphore; the sublimely silly moment—a successor to Scott's Saab ad—in which Maverick races a fighter jet while he's on his motorcycle, becoming so overwrought with the joy of it all that he thrusts his fist in the air. (*Planes! Fast! Yeah!*) And then here come Mav and Goose, striding in their flight gear, uttering a line so transcendently prosaic that it tips over into poetry: "I feel the need—the need *for speed*."

Are you looking to consider the grim realities of war, or to acknowledge the humanity of "the enemy"? *Top Gun* elides those inconvenient complications. If you are in search of some full-throttle patriotism, however, this film has you covered. *Top Gun* indulges in its metaphors. A hero who is young and arrogant and attempting to come to terms with his legacy might remind you of a country you know. And again and again, that hero is absolved. Maverick disobeys orders; he gets sent to Top Gun anyway. His antics get Goose in trouble with their superior; Goose forgives him. A series of scenes with Charlie goes roughly like this: She criticizes one of Mav's flight maneuvers; unable to tolerate the negative review, he throws a tantrum and drives away on his motorcycle; she chases after him in her car, almost causing a pileup on a busy street; she catches up to him; he braces for her outrage; instead, she tells him she's falling in love with him. There are many versions of this exchange in *Top Gun*. Maverick is someone who fails not just upward, but skyward.

The Navy set up recruitment booths outside theaters. Applications to Annapolis soared.

To watch *Top Gun* now, freshly aware of how easily rugged individualism can take a turn toward the toxic, is to appreciate anew the film's dicey feat: For its redemption story to land, its hero must be arrogant but not malignant, culpable but capable, infuriating but also easy to love. Maverick's is a load-bearing charm. And his film's willingness to pamper him raises still-fraught questions about selfish entitlement. Who gets the gift of multiple second chances, and who does not? Who has to follow the rules? Who is allowed to break them?

"Every screenplay eventually gets to: whose movie is this?" Jack Epps Jr., one of *Top Gun*'s screenwriters, said in a 2012 interview. *Top Gun* is about Maverick, but it is also, more simply, *for* him. In this universe, everyone—Mav's best friend, his girlfriend, his teachers, even his competitors—serves his needs. They give to him, selflessly. They want him to get what he wants, whether the desire in question involves his love interest (half of Miramar, it seems, is ready to drop what they're doing to help Mav serenade Charlie) or his destiny. The Mav-centric tendencies are so great that in *Top Gun*'s pivotal twist—Goose dies, in a plane Maverick piloted—the loss is both a tragedy and a narrative necessity. Its pain is what leads Maverick, the film suggests, to put away childish things. Goose dies so that Maverick might live.

It's not your fault, everyone tells Maverick. "To be the best of the best means you make mistakes and then you go on," Charlie says. Finally, Maverick listens. *Top Gun* ends triumphantly—for Maverick and therefore, the implication goes, for everybody else. He is vindicated in his exceptionalism. His father, Mav learns, died valiantly. His own battle, waged against unnamed foes, is won. Authority has integrity again. It's morning in America again. This is how you sell a country to itself. *It's not your fault*: Few messages are more seductive. *A*

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BOOKS

The Weird Science of Edgar Allan Poe

Known as a master of horror, he also understood the power—and the limits—of empiricism.

By Daniel Engber

In the early and macabre days of coronavirus shutdowns, Edgar Allan Poe was trending. "The Masque of the Red Death," his Gothic tale from 1842, became in March of 2020 a go-to source for allegory: A prince whose state is overrun with something like hemorrhagic fever invites 1,000 noble friends to stay inside his well-stocked keep. They amuse themselves for months in quarantine with dancers and buffoons until, one night, a ghost appears and kills them all. This parable felt apropos during the early phase of COVID-19's spread, when billionaires were hiding on their super-yachts and posting pics on Instagram. "Isolated in the Grenadines avoiding the virus," the record producer David Geffen captioned one such photo. "I'm hoping everybody is staying safe."

A Red Death wish for the ultrarich soon gave way to other, less parochial concerns, and "Masque" turned out to be less apt than some of Poe's other writings on disease. Take "The Sphinx." The story is set "during the dread reign of the Cholera in

ILLUSTRATION BY KENSUKE KOIKE

New York" in 1832, and the narrator has just bolted to a rustic cottage in the Hudson Valley. That summer, Manhattan was indeed abandoned to a morbid silence, according to Charles E. Rosenberg's history *The Cholera Years*. Church bells went unrung, pedestrians disappeared, and tufts of grass sprouted from the streets. "By the end of the first week in July, almost everyone who could afford to had left the city," Rosenberg writes.

Poe's narrator is one of these well-heeled refugees, holed up for several weeks and hosted by a relative. The pair are pleasantly occupied inside and outdoors, but horrid news keeps wafting into their retreat: "The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death," the narrator says. "That palsying thought, indeed, took entire possession of my soul. I could neither speak, think, nor dream of anything else."

Then, one day, he is seated by the window, a book in his hand, musing on the epidemic's toll as he gazes out across the Hudson River. On the far, denuded bank he sees something terrible: a "living monster of hideous conformation," darting toward the trees. It's the size of a great ship, he says, with a proboscis sprouting from a mass of shaggy hair and two giant, gleaming tusks below; it has two pairs of wings, each nearly 100 yards in length and clothed in metal scales. When the monster opens its jaws and shrieks across the valley, the narrator collapses in a faint.

The vision recurs a few days later, and the narrator takes it as an omen of his coming death. His relative, a scientific man, tells him not to worry. The narrator, the host explains, has been the victim of "the principle source of error in all human investigations": namely, the tendency to lose one's sense of proportion. Rather than a giant beast scuttling along the banks of the Hudson, the narrator must have spotted something small and near at hand, and then misjudged its "propinquity."

The relative pulls a natural-history book from his shelf to make his point. He reads aloud a scientific description of *Acherontia atropos*—the death's-head hawk moth. It matches the vision: four membranous wings covered with metallic scales, downy palpi, a proboscis, and so forth. Then he steps over to the window and, like Sherlock Holmes, plops down in the chair, mimicking the narrator's posture and position. "Ah, here it is!" he cries. He's found the moth in question—wriggling along the window sash, just about a 16th of an inch away, he says, from the pupil of his eye.

This reads, at first, as a triumphal tale of science in which phantasmal fear is tamed by cool and calculating method. But on closer look, the story's message is ambivalent. While its final line pretends to be the culmination of a careful proof—elementary, my dear Watson—that's not the case at all: If a hawk moth had really spread its wings two millimeters from the narrator's pupil, he wouldn't have perceived a monster. He wouldn't have been able to distinguish anything at all. The vision that's ascribed to him is instead the microscopic view—a dissector's terrifying, supernormal closeness to the facts. (Think of a dust mite, captured at 300x: a dimpled, pincered blob on hairy stilts.) This is a specimen, not an omen—one that illustrates the rival modes by which science changes our perception. It may help us organize and simplify the world, but it also has the power to derange us with its details.

Poe, a master of horror (and detective) fiction, is far less well known for his fascination with empirical methods, and the mysteries they reveal. As he wrote in another context, his era's brand-new tools of image-making represented the "most important, and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science." Technology revealed hidden facts at "inaccessible elevations," he wrote—it ginned up propinquity—and cast a light on "truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection."

So the story of the terror on the riverbank leaves us with a puzzle: Is the vision of the moth—this massive microbe creeping up the waterway from cholera-stricken New York City—really just an error of inflation, as the relative suggests? Or might it be some message sent from hidden elevations, a scientific signal of its own?

A war on science raged across America in the early 19th century. Poe battled for both sides.

A war on science raged across America in the early 19th century. Poe, as a writer, critic, and thinker, battled for both sides. A new biography—*The Reason for the Darkness of the Night: Edgar Allan Poe and the Forging of American Science*, by the historian John Tresch—situates its subject in a maelstrom of competing tides, as a new class of engineers and experimentalists splashed up against philosophers, theologians, and cranks. "Understanding his life and work," Tresch maintains, "demands close attention to his multiform engagements with" scientific thought and discoveries.

Poe certainly had a scientific cast of mind: In 1830, at the age of 21, he was admitted to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point—a scientific school, modeled on the École Polytechnique, in France, and meant to be a training ground for top-flight engineers. Poe showed promise, too. Before dropping out, he placed 17th in math out of 87 cadets. A few years later, he helped produce a textbook on conchology that sold more copies during his life than any other volume bearing his name. Among its selling points were several hundred color illustrations of seashells.

By 1840, Poe was working at a men's magazine, where he launched a feature called "A Chapter on Science and Art," consisting of the sorts of squibs on innovation later found in *Popular Mechanics*. ("A gentleman of Liverpool announces that he has invented a new engine," one entry started.) With this column, Tresch suggests, "Poe made himself one of America's first science reporters." He also made himself one of

America's first popular skeptics—a puzzle master and a debunker, in the vein of Martin Gardner. Poe wrote a column on riddles and enigmas, and he made a gleeful habit of exposing pseudoscience quacks.

D. H. Lawrence once said that Poe engaged in "an almost chemical analysis of the soul and consciousness." It's true that his art was scientific, in a way. At times this was explicit, as in his science-fiction tales that took the form of medical case histories, or travelogues and news reports about ballooning. But as a critic, too, Poe searched for meaning in mechanics. He often railed against Romantic verse and the Boston clique of transcendentalists with their Yoda-like adherence to the sanctity of nature. In print, he called Ralph Waldo Emerson (one of this magazine's co-founders) a "mystic for mysticism's sake" and James Russell Lowell (this magazine's first editor) "a fanatic for the sake of fanaticism." Poe also provoked his readers with disquisitions on the technological basis for his literary work, laying out how he would take a poem "step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem."

Yet promoting and defending science, as Poe often did, could be a tricky matter. The word *scientist* wasn't coined until 1833, Tresch notes, and the American research community lacked formal leadership and guidance. Some of Poe's contemporaries—including another former student from West Point, Alexander Dallas Bache—aimed to fix this problem. Science should be standardized and federalized, Bache insisted, and put to public use. To this end, he and his colleagues drafted scientific safety regulations for boilers and flues; they established networks for observing weather and the stars; they tried to strengthen science education.

THE REASON FOR THE DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT: EDGAR ALLAN POE AND THE FORGING OF AMERICAN SCIENCE

John Tresch

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Central to their project was the invention of a new, rational elite—an *authority* for science. Bache and his peers saw a landscape of untamed infotainment in America, where charlatans gathered paying crowds for old-timey TED Talks with magic-lantern slides. "We must put down quackery or quackery will put down science," Bache told the electromagnetism expert Joseph Henry. So the two devised an "aristocratical" (Henry's word) regime of oversight, which in 1848 became the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Poe subscribed to their endeavor on the whole, and supported its particulars in print. But he also chafed at the strictures of empiricism and its delimited scope. Tresch describes his tendency to champion research at the quackish margins—claiming, in one case, that phrenology had "assumed the majesty of a science; and, as a science, ranks among the most important." He seemed just as taken with the life-force theories of the mesmerists. He was as obsessed as they were, Tresch writes, with "the shadowy relations between matter and spirit, observation and imagination."

Indeed, the dialogue between the two men in the cottage of "The Sphinx" plays out across Poe's work—in his fiction and essays alike. In places, he will take the part of the relative, debunking and dismissive—the sort of guy who'd write a book about more than 200 types of seashells. Elsewhere, he's instead that story's narrator, hitching flights of fancy—and mystical revelations—to the scientific method.

Often he played both parts at once. His paeans to the scientific method, as in the essay likening poetry to mathematics, dangled weirdly on the edge of spoof. They can be read in earnest, or as caricature. Or, Tresch suggests, they can be seen as endorsements of a synthesis of science and Romanticism, in which perfect, sublime laws of nature—and perfect, sublime laws of verse—are set in motion (in the manner of the divine watchmaker) by an all-supreme creative force.

This same interpretation helps illuminate one of Poe's final works, an esoteric treatise on cosmology called *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*. Scholars have long debated whether this, like many of his other writings, was meant to be a hoax. Certainly it's ironic, satirical, and silly. (The essay starts with fragments of a letter written in the year 2848.) But it also holds some striking scientific intuitions—Poe describes a collapse of space and time, for instance, and a universe that begins with a "primordial particle" exploding in all directions. Poe himself insisted that the essay should be taken as a "poem," and he believed that it was a work of genius. "I have no desire to live since I have done 'Eureka,'" he wrote to his aunt Maria in the summer of 1849. "I could accomplish nothing more."

By that point, though, Poe's wretched tendency to "sip the juice" had derailed his every opportunity, and he found himself in Philadelphia, deranged and destitute, as a second wave of cholera crashed across the Eastern Seaboard. His debunker aspect was no more. Around this time he had an evil vision, not unlike the one he'd given to the narrator of "The Sphinx" just a few years earlier: He told a friend he'd seen a monstrous black bird flying above the city, spreading its wings so wide that a shadow fell upon the streets below, and from this bird's feathers, big, inky drops began to fall in a pestilential rain. The bird turned its beak toward Poe and screeched, "I am the Cholera." Poe was dead, from unknown causes, a few months later.

FOR CHOLERA in the 1830s and '40s, as last year for COVID-19, even basic scientific facts were in dispute. The disease was new to North America and Europe, and scientists had yet to spot its causal agent on a slide. One prominent clinician pictured a swarm of "poisonous, invisible, aerial insects." Only later did others find the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae* with their microscopes.

And what about contagion? Did the plague fan out through vapor, as Poe's story hints with "the very air … redolent with death," or was it waterborne instead? Should the sick be doused with brandy, or rubbed with cayenne pepper, or given enemas of tobacco smoke? Even efforts to self-isolate—flights of terror to the Hudson Valley—were dismissed by certain scientific journals of the time as needless and irrational, and the source of much more harm than good.

Doctors, *leading* doctors, disagreed on all these details, and when public-health officials tried to suss out the consensus view—when they deferred to expertise—many of their policies were wrong.

It was Poe's contemporary, and in temperament his mirror image, who brought some light to this confusion. In 1854, the British physician John Snow demonstrated, through a stunning feat of epidemiological reasoning, that cholera was spread through tainted water. Now he's taken as a scientific hero. Last autumn, when a coterie of academic experts—today's aristocratical elite, speaking for science as an institution—attacked the Trump administration's view of herd immunity, they called their statement of dissent the "John Snow Memorandum."

But Snow's own views about disease, and the theory that he proved with data, were guided by his passions too. If he blamed polluted water for the cholera pandemic, it was at least in part because he was so pious, mystical—even quackish—in his faith in water's healing power. While Poe dissolved in alcohol, Snow became a fervent teetotaler, preaching about "the water which comes gurgling from the hills in unrivalled softness and purity." In speeches, he would frame this notion in Romantic terms, linking water to "the unassisted powers of nature inherent in the body."

Snow was right about the source of cholera; his work saved countless lives. But this science couldn't have happened by itself. It did not proceed, like Poe's imagined poem, "step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." Nor, of course, has the science of our pandemic proceeded that way. We're still responding to *impressions* of the data, and crude measurements of propinquity. Witness all the experts' flip-flops and mistakes since the spring of 2020: on face masks, dexamethasone, asymptomatic and aerosol transmission, convalescent plasma, and the rest.

"The Sphinx" reminds us that scientific revelation distorts and magnifies in equal measure, and that it must be understood, in part, through intuition. What, then, does it mean to "follow the science," as we like to say today? That's the riddle of Poe's story, and it hasn't yet been solved. *A*

Daniel Engber is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

The Theater
By Jana Prikryl

We browsed and as usual that one I hadn't read.
At showtime we lay down between the stacks
where we could only listen to the actors. Our faces close,
my hands tucked under my chin and legs drawn up
like an animal's. I felt such tenderness for you and knew
it wasn't returned—this as usual I couldn't understand.
When, earlier, our plane landed in the river
behind another that had done the same,
dunked its passengers before pulling itself
up and over to the gate with no casualties,
you weren't surprised. You had that
confidence we wouldn't sink. I couldn't understand it
but both of us were walking through the gate by then,
untouched by danger. Surprise was my own possession.

Jana Prikryl's most recent collection is No Matter *(2019).*

ILLUSTRATION BY DANNY

The Trees Are Talking

Pioneering research has revealed how social cooperation thrives in the forest.

By Rebecca Giggs

Above all else in the plant kingdom, trees make good trellises for our self-regarding thoughts. Robert Frost knew this when he wrote "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood." A woodland is the right spot to yield to reflection. Though the life of a tree has little in common with the life of a person, we are accustomed to approaching trees on personal, even introspective, terms. As *trunk* is a synonym for *torso*, as *branch* can be interchangeable with *limb*, trees of great variety (especially the old ones) give body to human concerns.

Consider the coastal eucalyptus, forced by sea winds to grow prostrate along the ground—how the maxim "Better bend than break" takes shape in its supplicating posture. Or meditate on *Sakura*, the cherry blossom, and its instructive transience. We look to trees for their symbolism, and to have our own comparatively stunted existence put into perspective. High up in the Sierra Nevada mountains, bristlecone pines preside—seemingly more stone than wood, partly fossilized. Some rise from saplings at a tempo so slow that they endure through generations, even whole civilizations—thousands of years—living off the ephemeral sustenance that all trees rely on: light, water, a smattering of nutrients drawn from the soil. These ancient pines have been called sages and sentinels, as though it were their edict to stand watch over cycles of human progress and folly.

Yet have we ever really understood trees in the plural? Since the turn of the millennium, a remarkable recasting of our attention—away from the gravitas of individual trees and toward the question of what trees do together, as a collective—has been under way. What passes between trees, the nuance of their exchanges, and the seemingly delicate mechanism of their connections—that mystery has inspired a rich new realm of research, and along with it, a subgenre of literature dedicated to spreading a revised conception of the powers and processes that allow arboreal plants to thrive. The title of the German forester Peter Wohlleben's hugely popular 2015 book, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries From a Secret World*, sums up the paradigm shift and captures the tone of awed revelation shared by researchers and readers alike. What a tree *is*—tree botany in its essentials—feels utterly changed. Will our self-centered thoughts, as we stand in the never-silent forest, change too, and how?

MEG LOWMAN AND SUZANNE SIMARD are two pathfinders who have worked for decades in this field (that is, the forest), and they have now written books not just to instruct, but to reorient and inspire. Lowman—who goes by "Canopy Meg" in educational settings—is an ecologist and a conservationist on a mission to correct trunk bias, our myopic attachment to the tree's upright midsection. For a plant to be considered a tree—as distinct from a shrub or a vine—it must have a woody stem of cellulose made rigid by an organic polymer, lignin. Reasons for fixating on tree trunks are not hard to come by. The commercial worth of a tree (aside from the fruit-bearing and oil-producing types) principally depends on its timber. Trunk appeal surely also lies in the eye of the beholder. Being ground-dwelling mammals, we live closer to tree trunks than to boughs or roots—and the mind readily personifies their surface, seeing eyes in knots, dimples and dewlaps in folds of bark. The result, Lowman argues, is a failure to engage with the expansive wilderness above: the floating world of the forest canopy, a mantle of enormous significance, as the subtitle of Lowman's new book, *The Arbornaut: A Life Discovering the Eighth Continent in the Trees Above Us*, conveys.

Lowman's focus zooms in on the foliage. Having grown up in a cottage built around the girth of an elm tree—a fairy-tale prologue to the lifelong pursuit in store—she devoted her early scientific career to a deceptively simple ambition: She aimed to study leaves in the wild, from budburst to drop. As Lowman describes the venture, she improvised with slingshots, weights, and caving tackle to rig a tree's branches for a low-impact ascent, reverse spelunking (as cat-footed as is humanly possible), up into the greenery. There she discovered the fascinations of the "phylloplane," the surface of a leaf, and its little occupants—weevils and walking sticks, moths, fly larvae, bees, caterpillars. How eerie to think that more than half the planet's terrestrial animals live up there, overlooked—underlooked?—by most of us.

The array of leaves is staggering, too. In the tropical canopies Lowman surveys, the shape of a leaf is typically governed not only by a tree's DNA, she reveals, but by that leaf's position in the forest. Leaves in the understory are blackish-green platters, often dusty with pollen, and thinner than those above. Leaves cresting into the sky are liable to be yellower, smaller, and leathery. The middle strata are a mixed salad: Leaves that catch sun flecks are distinct from their dimly lit neighbors, though they may emanate from the same bough. If insects roost in nearby air plants, a tree's leaves may be more prone to getting skeletonized. If a tree sustains nests of ants, the ants may prey on leaf-eating grubs, resulting in more intact leaves. Elevation and wind can vary a leaf; moisture can increase its likelihood of being burdened with moss and lichen. In turn, trees together can engineer the weather they grow in; Amazonian canopies induce rain by releasing enough water droplets through transpiration to create low-level clouds. Showers from these clouds change the air temperature, triggering winds that draw additional moist air inland from the oceans, watering the trees with further rain.

Though we often talk of trees as though they were nature's metronomes, observing the steady tick of time in their corrugated rings, Lowman's research makes clear that a single tree is not all one age. In nondeciduous forests—those that don't undergo a seasonal fall—the leaves on an individual tree have staggered life spans. The lifetime of a leaf offers clues to its function, and to the tree's overall strategies for survival. On the coachwood, darker, larger leaves live longer; more nutrients go into their production, so retaining them makes sense. The foliage of other trees turns over quickly—perhaps because the tree has evolved to keep pace with high levels of insect defoliation. Leaves on the giant stinging tree of eastern Australia (a nettle capable of growing to 40 meters) last only four to six months; nearly half of the tree's leaf-area disappears into the maw of the single beetle species that is impervious to its sting. Trees possibly gain secondary benefits from herbivory. Leaves may, in effect, be sacrificed so as to bring "frass" (insect excrement) to enrich the ground around a tree's base. Each leaf has its biography, its society, and—with the aid of Lowman's pen—an obituary. If a tree was once understood as a mostly static living object, here we see it rippling with change, configured by its surroundings.

Trees can engineer the weather they grow in; Amazonian canopies induce rain by releasing enough water droplets to create low-level clouds.

Fashioned by a host of extrinsic factors, a tree also exerts its influence in previously invisible ways. Leaves collect light, of course, and thereby beget the energy a tree needs for fresh growth, regeneration, and reproduction. But leaves, including their stems and buds, also emit airborne biochemicals. Some plant matter, having caught fire, releases smoke that signals to certain seeds that conditions are conducive to germination. Leaves assailed by grazers might effuse what some scientists call "wound hormones"—in certain trees, this response can convey more than the fact of injury. A beech leaf torn by the mouth of a munching deer and a beech leaf snipped mechanically, for example, release different concoctions of chemicals; deer saliva is the trigger in the first case. Studies done on other plants exposed to vapors from damaged leaves have shown that unharmed neighbors begin to ramp up production of defensive toxins, targeted to deter specific herbivores. On Lowman's continent high above, she gathers evidence to show that, besides being a habitat for tree-living creatures, a canopy is the lively and fluctuating expression of tree interaction and strategy.

SUZANNE SIMARD, a preeminent forest ecologist who teaches at the University of British Columbia, goes underground to uncover camaraderie in tree plantations in *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. Like Lowman's, her imagination was kindled in childhood, during an emergency that she recounts early in the book. The family dog had fallen into a lakeside outhouse, and frantic digging ensued to extract the pet from the pit. Entranced, Simard watched as leaf litter—shed by birches, hemlocks, cedars, and firs—was raked back to expose a swath of fungal tendrils glistening like spun sugar. Pickaxes cut through humus (a fermenting paste of dead plant life), the wickerwork of tree roots, a narrow band of white mineral sand, and yet more fungi tangled below. It is to this surprisingly vital world that Simard has returned, again and again, throughout the course of her professional life.

Simard's transformative contribution to arboreal science has been to explain the function of mycorrhizal networks—a webbing of thready fungi, reticulated through and expanding beyond tree roots, fastening trees to one another in the soil. Picture a mirror canopy beneath the forest floor. This subsurface layer is composed not of leaves, but of more filamentous stuff: a cross-hatching of fungal fibers, milk-pale, inky, or translucent. To the trees' advantage, these organic structures act as conduits for shuttling water, carbon, nitrogen, and biochemical information between trees that are related (progenitor and seedling), between trees of the same species (say, beech to beech), and even between trees of different species (alder to pine). The fungi—there are thousands of varieties—benefit from absorbing sugars in the exchange, which their cells could not otherwise obtain. By linking multiple trees, each fungus diversifies its source of nutriment and hedges against the demise of a single tree or species. The trees leverage the fungi, the fungi exploit the trees: a relationship of co-cultivation.

As Simard frames it, the trees she and her team study are engaged in a kind of mutual aid. Resources are rerouted from trees in the sunlight to those that grow in their shade, from trees that have surplus water to those that are dehydrated. Signals are telegraphed from bug-infested trees to adjacent, healthy trees. Saplings detached from the network fail to thrive. As an aged tree reaches its terminus, it might use mycorrhizal linkages to entrust sizable carbon stores to its young; these, Simard names "Mother Trees" (mothering here being tantamount to self-sacrifice). Rather than being competitive organisms, each tree invests in the well-being of the forest as a whole, via mycorrhizae.

SIMARD'S AND LOWMAN'S explorations have ushered in a new kind of tree, or a new vision of tree life, different from the tree life that poets have romanticized: the solitary, singular tree, a heavy anchor flung into the past, emblematic of fortitude or witness. This newfound tree is networked, sensitive, companionate, and communicative; it matters as part of a conjoined whole, the canopy or a mycorrhizal woodlot. It displays caretaking toward offspring and, far from being siloed in its own world, it engages in a dynamic exchange. Such findings make trees seem capable of so much more than we once imagined. The notion that plants "do" anything, outside of surging toward the light and siphoning water, would imply threshold competencies that have long been regarded as mental, or at the very least sensory. Biologists have traditionally held that the faculties required for communication belong to life-forms with brains, eyes, ears, nostrils, and tongues (at a minimum, skin), not to plant life. Can something made mostly of wood demonstrate an awareness of other organisms nearby? Can it be strategically responsive, and exhibit kinship, or a sense of self? Is a tree intelligent? In stories, trees that interact are declared anthropomorphic, because fellow feeling is considered a human trait. To speak of trees as social beings remains, in some quarters, heretical.

No wonder, though, that this account of a forest has also struck many as beguiling. The portrayal of resource-sharing in the woods sounds so benevolent, so wise, in a world where inequality continues to increase. While strife and delusion travel with terrifying speed in our networked, online existence, the spectacle of intricate, protective arboreal cooperation beckons as blissful, utopian. The discovery of a covert unity and nurturance among separate trees acquires a special resonance against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. What looks lone and immobile is, in fact, linked and supportive. Squint, and qualities once deemed anthropomorphic begin to seem, well, vegetalmorphic.

Yet perhaps we haven't truly let go of trunk bias and the narcissism of seeing ourselves in trees. Maybe we have only shifted to looking for messages of community resilience over spiritual salvage. We are discrete beings and know no other way of life so intimately as we know our own. As social mammals, we make a virtue of parental ministration where other life-forms appear to have no need for it. By choice, we seek dialogues; we enter into collective arrangements that many hold to be a common good; we tend to our communities. Trees do not make this choice; almost certainly they do not consider themselves *selves*; they know no ideology of mutual aid.

Indeed, some trees are, biologically speaking, monastic—secluded in small groves, they profit from dispersing their seeds into rivers to be carried far away by ocean currents. Others, such as the strangler fig, are innately parasitic. Tree flourishing doesn't necessarily entail solidarity. Lowman makes the point that tropical trees in high-diversity rain forests may not benefit from germinating near their "conspecifics" (their parents), because then a population of devouring insects, adapted to feed off one plant species, could more readily hop between adult and sapling. So mycorrhizal fostering of young trees would not be advantageous in a biodiverse environment: It would bond new trees to old in a proximity that increases the chance of defoliation, and also the spread of species-specific pathogens. What looks, to us, like ruthlessness and self-interest might best serve a tree's genetic inheritance in the long run.

Returning from a hike recently, I glimpsed red hemorrhaging from the base of a tree set back from the trail, and an instinct released a bleat of adrenaline within me so swiftly—*pain, there's pain*—that I stumbled on the path. I drew the brush aside and saw that the bleeding thing was a bloodwood tree, its vivid "blood" only sap. A tree has no nervous system, no pain receptors, no neurons, and very likely the bloodwood was only extruding a borer insect by inundating it with fluid. What any tree "feels," what it "wills" or "wants," is so far removed from our reality that even to use scare quotes is misleading. Plant intelligence remains staunchly nonhuman. And yet, in that moment, I could not stop sympathy from welling up, a response that felt more animal than cerebral. For a second, I touched the gleaming sap, glossy but solidifying in the air. It gave off no warmth. I thought then of fungi, a flickering presence in this landscape, appearing spasmodically as puffballs, conks, and earthstars, only to melt away back underground: hidden organisms, dainty, deathly. That a tree's durability might rest on such a fragile life raft seemed the most important message to hear. *A*

THE ARBORNAUT: A LIFE DISCOVERING THE EIGHTH CONTINENT IN THE TREES ABOVE US

Meg Lowman

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

FINDING THE MOTHER TREE: DISCOVERING THE WISDOM OF THE FOREST

Suzanne Simard

KNOPF

Rebecca Giggs is the author of Fathoms: The World in the Whale.

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BOOKS

A New Hope for *Star Wars*

What The Mandalorian *teaches us about the true power of George Lucas's galaxy—and how to restore it*

By Spencer Kornhaber

When I look out my window, a few floors up in New York City, I see *Star Wars*. Rooftop bouquets of dirty satellite dishes, jumbled architectural styles united by peeling paint, variously shaped (and largely face-masked) life-forms jostling on the sidewalk—each sign of shabby modernity feels like something I glimpsed in childhood while hypnotized by George Lucas. In the director's 1977 space fantasy, wizards lived in what appeared to be crumbling stucco huts, and moon-size superweapons had onboard trash compactors. As a kid, I believed that Earth was just another planet in Lucas's universe. Today, I'm still susceptible to that lovely illusion.

The *Star Wars* franchise offers action and escapism, but re-enchanting our own world was always its greatest trick. As Luke Skywalker rises from backwater farmhand to galactic savior over the course of the first three films, audiences gain a visceral sense of why the galaxy he lives in is worth

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDAY

saving. Debris-strewn sets convey that exotic planets have history and commerce. Silly-looking critters and robots carry themselves with dignity and purpose. A supernatural "Force" hums throughout the interstellar menagerie. Viewers come to feel a humanistic, or even animistic, connection. *Star Wars* immerses you in the awesome knowledge that peripheral things—the neighbors you don't understand, the buildings you don't notice—have their own sagas.

Right now, *Star Wars* is at a turning point. Lucas's original vision famously inspired an era of big-budget blockbuster movies whose creators, just as famously, eventually ran out of new ideas and came to rely on sequels and spin-offs. Inevitably, *Star Wars* itself succumbed to that fate. After releasing a divisive trio of prequels around the turn of the millennium, in 2012 Lucas sold his franchise to Disney, Hollywood's chief recycler of old stories. Fresh *Star Wars* films began to roll out in 2015. Though early acclaim and profits were impressive, creative troubles began to hurt the bottom line. In 2019, dismayed reviews and relatively soft ticket sales greeted *The Rise of Skywalker*, the finale of a trilogy set 30 years after the action of the first films. Around that time, Disney's CEO, Bob Iger, announced a moviemaking "hiatus" for *Star Wars*.

Had Lucas's galaxy lost its power, or had its new stewards simply mismanaged it? The recent success of a remarkable *Star Wars* television series suggests the latter. When the streaming-TV service Disney+ launched in late 2019, it featured *The Mandalorian*, which picks up five years after the events of the original trilogy, and follows the adventures of a mysterious mercenary who has sworn never to take off his helmet. By the end of Season 2, a critical consensus had emerged: It was the best live-action *Star Wars* product to arrive since the early 1980s. Millions of viewers cooed over the short-statured enigma known to fans as Baby Yoda, who has a price on his adorable head for unknown reasons. As *The Mandalorian*'s laconic and lethal hero travels from one planet to the next, the sublime feeling of immersion that laced Lucas's early movies reemerges. To watch the show and then look back at the sweep of *Star Wars* history is to understand where that feeling comes from—and why most of Hollywood's hero-driven, special-effects-laden fantasies never attain it.

The Star Wars *franchise offers action and escapism, but re-enchanting our own world was always its greatest trick.*

THE PLOT of *The Mandalorian* unspools like a thin, near-invisible thread: Each week, the protagonist completes a discrete quest that unobtrusively points the way toward the next quest. The pleasure of watching lies very much in the journey and not the destination. This episodic, open-ended style of entertainment is a hallmark of dramatic TV—but it's also very *Star Wars*. Soon after its initial success, the first movie was retitled *Episode IV—A New Hope* because Lucas wanted viewers to feel as though the film were one chapter in an ongoing Saturday-morning serial. In the new book *Secrets of the Force: The Complete, Uncensored, Unauthorized Oral History of* Star Wars, by Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, Lucas says this of his work on the first film: "It's always been what you might call a good man in search of a story."

What Lucas means is that when conceiving *Star Wars*, he dreamed first of visuals, concepts, and feelings—not of plot. He felt drawn to make "a movie in outer space like *Flash Gordon* used to be. Ray guns, running around in spaceships, shooting at each other." He also wanted to mash up tropes from samurai films, Westerns, and spy flicks. Above all, he wanted a look and feel that prized "credibility" rather than the "clean," sleek sci-fi of 1950s serials and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. His own days working in a greasy mechanics' shop, plus the thought of NASA's Apollo capsule returning from the moon full of "candy wrappers and old Tang jars," informed that vision.

Without a narrative he was burning to tell, Lucas had trouble turning such notions into a workable screenplay. He wrote multiple, overlong drafts that each radically refigured its characters, arcs, and themes. Eventually, he arrived at a relatively straightforward tale modeled on ancient legends. Lucas had been reading the work of Joseph Campbell, a literary scholar who identified a "monomyth," with a predictable structure, occurring across cultures throughout the centuries. *Star Wars* would be a Chosen One story; Luke Skywalker was like King Arthur or Siddhartha Gautama. This blueprint, with its prescribed wise-mentor figures, talismanic weapons, and trusty sidekicks, helped make the mess of a script gel.

Lucas's reverse-engineered fairy tale resonated with audiences, but *Star Wars* aficionados tend to overrate plot when explaining his success; books have been written about the profundity of Luke's search for identity. In the new oral history, the critic Roy Morton articulates conventional wisdom when he argues that Lucas's "most significant creative decision in crafting the script" was to draw from myths. Disney's chief *Star Wars* executive, Kathleen Kennedy, says that "what was really important to [Lucas]—and certainly important to me—was story." Whenever *Star Wars* films have faltered with audiences, commentators have blamed shoddy storytelling: the needless complexity of Lucas's prequels, the inconsistent logic of Disney's sequels.

Yet the hero's journey in the original movies was always sketchy. The opening 15 minutes of *A New Hope* feature strikingly few recognizable human characters, and Luke Skywalker is usually the least interesting thing in any scene that follows. A lot of the film's suspense derives more from wondering what the movie's *about*—the touristic curiosity of "Where is this going?"—than from tracking clues to how Luke will fulfill his destiny. *Secrets of the Force* documents that the trilogy's iconic twists, which would seem key to choreographing a monomyth, nearly weren't filmed. In the shooting script for *A New Hope*, the mentor figure, Obi-Wan Kenobi, survives to the end rather than dying midway through. Some drafts of the second film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, don't indicate that the evil Darth Vader is Luke's father. Glorious though such surprises are, Lucas's work wasn't driven by them.

In fact, the story crescendos are compelling because they double as world-building. Learning who Darth Vader really is raises a host of tantalizing questions about the history of the galaxy (not least, how does someone become Darth Vader?). Kenobi's early-movie references to mysterious concepts such as "the dark times"—exposition left unfinished once he dies—also spark rich intrigue. "Lucas makes movies that are intentionally designed to have holes in them that need to be filled later," the producer Brian Volk-Weiss says in the oral history. He's right except for one thing: Do they need to be filled in? Many a mediocre *Star Wars* product has arisen from trying to define every entry in the galactic glossary. The original films work precisely because of the holes.

They also work because Lucas, as a filmmaker, was fastidious about blending novelty with naturalism. Directing the initial movie, he insisted that the sets be streaked with scum and scorch marks. He spliced together footage of World War II dogfights and then invented special effects to make space battles look like those dogfights. When the time came to shoot, Mark Hamill (who plays Luke) first delivered his lines with campy panache—but Lucas encouraged him to be more low-key. "These actors believed the world they were in," Liam Neeson, a star of 1999's *The Phantom Menace*, says in *Secrets of the Force*. "Mark Hamill jumps into his speeder and—phooph!—he's off … To them, it was everyday stuff."

Such far-out realism has rarely been achieved since then. In the dreary prequels, Lucas went overboard with then-novel computer-generated imagery, losing the lived-in feel he'd once prized. The Disney sequels are too frantically paced—and too packed with winks to old *Star Wars* films—for viewers to settle in with the new sets, creatures, and costumes. Both of those later trilogies told strenuously mythic stories: The prequels followed the tragic transformation of a hero into a villain, and the Disney movies amounted to another Chosen One tale. The flaws of their scripts have been rightly scrutinized, but fixing those flaws would not solve the more fundamental failures of execution. When *Star Wars* is bad, its galaxy feels like a thing on a screen—not a place you can go.

SECRETS OF THE FORCE: THE COMPLETE, UNCENSORED, UNAUTHORIZED ORAL HISTORY OF *STAR WARS*

By Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman

ST. MARTIN'S

THE WORLD of *The Mandalorian*, thankfully, is sturdy, like well-worn concrete. The hero flies a rickety spaceship modeled on a '70s warplane. Baby Yoda's twitching puppet ears convey the expressive range of actual toddlers. Most important, the showrunner, Jon Favreau, has absorbed the take-your-time, exploratory ethos of Lucas's first trilogy. One early episode spends 10 dialogue-free minutes following the Mandalorian as he tries to survive on an arid planet. Two episodes later, the Mandalorian arrives in a forested village where locals harvest bioluminescent krill from ponds. He doesn't just save the village from a hostile tribe's attacks. He moves in to live the *Star Wars* simple life for a few weeks.

Such wanderings do have a mythic quality. The Mandalorian and Baby Yoda are an odd couple: protector and charge, father and son, man and beast. There is also a running plot, involving a black-armored arch-villain, that fulfills the demands of modern blockbusters to set up future spin-offs (10 other *Star Wars* TV shows were announced in December). When the second season culminated in a CGI-assisted cameo from the original-trilogy cast, some critics fretted that the show was about to devolve into Hollywood hackery. But thus far, archetypal storytelling and serialized intrigue—ingredients often misused in franchise-driven entertainment—have mainly just anchored Favreau's careful creative riffing. If the miracle of *The Mandalorian* continues, viewers of future seasons will only rarely notice an overdetermined hand of fate guiding the action. They'll instead continue to be caught up in individual moments.

To cheer for a Hollywood product that emphasizes look and feel rather than story and character may sound superficial. But in life, aesthetics are not incidental. The dents on a vehicle tell a story. So does the glint in a stranger's eyes. Tidy plots are scarce, and populations do not readily divide into Chosen Ones and Unchosen Ones. *Star Wars* has proved that mass entertainment can wake us up to such realities. My favorite of the many arcs in *The Mandalorian* involves a froglike creature carrying her unhatched eggs to another planet. Because the alien doesn't speak his language, the Mandalorian treats her coldly—until she commandeers a droid's translation system and delivers a desperate plea for help. Watching that scene jangled my empathy so much that I began to look even at subway rats with a sense of wonder. They are characters in this galaxy too.

Spencer Kornhaber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

• BOOKS

A lively, entertaining, and philosophical guide to time and time management

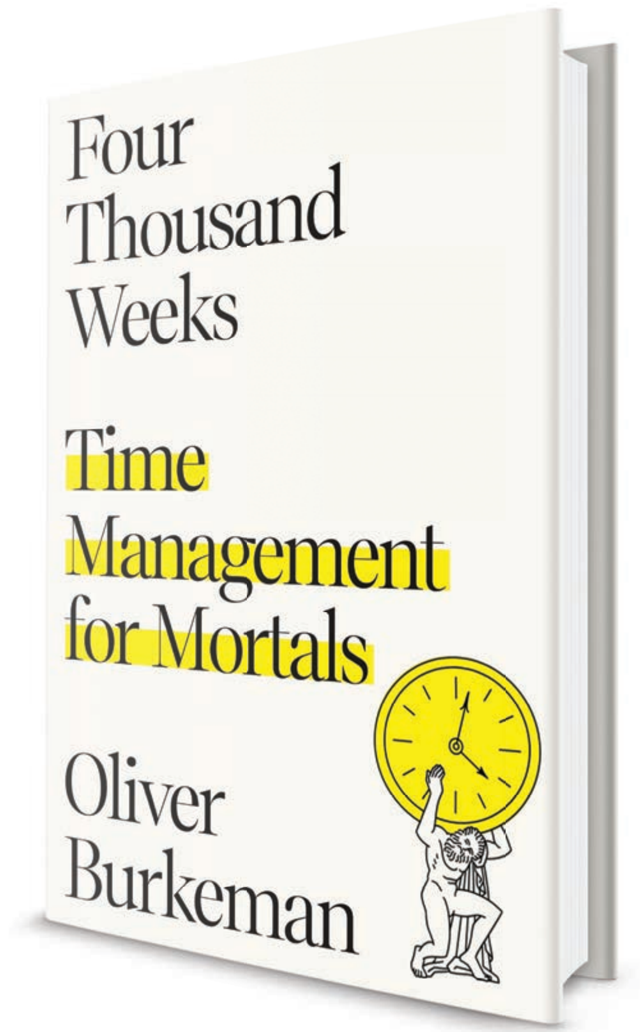
The acclaimed *Guardian* writer Oliver Burkeman sets aside superficial efficiency solutions in favor of reckoning with and finding joy in the finitude of human life

Excerpted from *Four Thousand Weeks*
by Oliver Burkeman

The average human lifespan is absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short. Here's one way of putting things in perspective: the first modern humans appeared on the plains of Africa at least 200,000 years ago, and scientists estimate that life, in some form, will persist for another 1.5 billion years or more, until the intensifying heat of the sun condemns the last organism to death. But you? Assuming you live to be eighty, you'll have had about four thousand weeks.

It follows from this that time management, broadly defined, should be everyone's chief concern. Arguably, time management is all life is. Yet the modern discipline known as time management—like its hipper cousin, productivity—is a depressingly narrow-minded affair, focused on how to crank through as many work tasks as possible, or on devising the perfect morning routine, or on cooking all your dinners for the week in one big batch on Sundays. These things matter to some extent, no doubt. But they're hardly all that matters. The world is bursting with wonder, yet it's the rare productivity guru who seems to have considered the possibility that the point of all our frenetic *doing* might be to experience more of that wonder. The world also seems to be heading to hell in a handcart—our civic life has gone insane, a pandemic has paralyzed society, and the planet is getting hotter and hotter—but good luck finding a time management system that makes any room for engaging productively with your fellow citizens, with current events, or with the fate of the environment.

This book is an attempt to redress the balance. It is written in the belief that time management as we know it has failed miserably. Productivity is a trap. Becoming more efficient just makes you more rushed. Nobody in the history of humanity has ever achieved "work-life balance," whatever that might be.



On Sale August 10
FourThousandWeeksBook.com
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

The day will never arrive when you finally have everything under control—when the flood of emails has been contained; when your to-do lists have stopped getting longer; when you're meeting all your obligations at work and in your home life; and when the fully optimized person you've become can turn, at last, to the things life is really supposed to be about. Let's start by admitting defeat: none of this is ever going to happen.

But you know what? That's *excellent* news.

"We all know our time is limited. What we don't know—but what Oliver Burkeman is here to teach us—is that our control over that time is also limited. This profound (and often hilarious) book will prompt you to rethink your worship of efficiency, reject the cult of busyness, and reconfigure your life around what matters."
—DANIEL H. PINK, author of *When, Drive,* and *To Sell Is Human*

ESSAY

Drinking Alone

A little alcohol can boost creativity and strengthen social ties. But there's nothing moderate, or convivial, about the way many Americans drink today.

By
Kate Julian

Few things are more American than drinking heavily. But worrying about how heavily other Americans are drinking is one of them.

The Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock because, the crew feared, the Pilgrims were going through the beer too quickly. The ship had been headed for the mouth of the Hudson River, until its sailors (who, like most Europeans of that time,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHELSEA KYLE

preferred beer to water) panicked at the possibility of running out before they got home, and threatened mutiny. And so the Pilgrims were kicked ashore, short of their intended destination and beerless. William Bradford complained bitterly about the latter in his diary that winter, which is really saying something when you consider what trouble the group was in. (Barely half would survive until spring.) Before long, they were not only making their own beer but also importing wine and liquor. Still, within a couple of generations, Puritans like Cotton Mather were warning that a "flood of RUM" could "overwhelm all good Order among us."

George Washington first won elected office, in 1758, by getting voters soused. (He is said to have given them 144 gallons of alcohol, enough to win him 307 votes and a seat in Virginia's House of Burgesses.) During the Revolutionary War, he used the same tactic to keep troops happy, and he later became one of the country's leading whiskey distillers. But he nonetheless took to moralizing when it came to other people's drinking, which in 1789 he called "the ruin of half the workmen in this Country."

Hypocritical though he was, Washington had a point. The new country was on a bender, and its drinking would only increase in the years that followed. By 1830, the average American adult was consuming about three times the amount we drink today. An obsession with alcohol's harms understandably followed, starting the country on the long road to Prohibition.

What's distinctly American about this story is not alcohol's prominent place in our history (that's true of many societies), but the zeal with which we've swung between extremes. Americans tend to drink in more dysfunctional ways than people in other societies, only to become judgmental about nearly any drinking at all. Again and again, an era of overindulgence begets an era of renunciation: Binge, abstain. Binge, abstain.

Right now we are lurching into another of our periodic crises over drinking, and both tendencies are on display at once. Since the turn of the millennium, alcohol consumption has risen steadily, in a reversal of its long decline throughout the 1980s and '90s. Before the pandemic, some aspects of this shift seemed sort of fun, as long as you didn't think about them too hard. In the 20th century, you might have been able to buy wine at the supermarket, but you couldn't drink it in the supermarket. Now some grocery stores have wine bars, beer on tap, signs inviting you to "shop 'n' sip," and carts with cup holders.

Actual bars have decreased in number, but drinking is acceptable in all sorts of other places it didn't used to be: Salons and boutiques dole out cheap cava in plastic cups. Movie theaters serve alcohol, Starbucks serves alcohol, *zoos* serve alcohol. Moms carry coffee mugs that say things like THIS MIGHT BE WINE, though for discreet day-drinking, the better move may be one of the new hard seltzers, a watered-down malt liquor dressed up—for precisely this purpose—as a natural soda.

Even before COVID-19 arrived on our shores, the consequences of all this were catching up with us. From 1999 to 2017, the number of alcohol-related deaths in the U.S. doubled, to more than 70,000 a year—making alcohol one of the leading drivers of the decline in American life expectancy. These numbers are likely to get worse: During the pandemic, frequency of drinking rose, as did sales of hard liquor. By this February, nearly a quarter of Americans said they'd drunk more over the past year as a means of coping with stress.

Explaining these trends is hard; they defy so many recent expectations. Not long ago, Millennials were touted as the driest generation—they didn't drink much as teenagers, they were "sober curious," they were so admirably focused on being *well*—and yet here they are day-drinking White Claw and dying of cirrhosis at record rates. Nor does any of this appear to be an inevitable response to 21st-century life: Other countries with deeply entrenched drinking problems, among them Britain and Russia, have seen alcohol use drop in recent years.

Media coverage, meanwhile, has swung from cheerfully overselling the (now disputed) health benefits of wine to screeching that *no* amount of alcohol is safe, ever; it might give you cancer and it will certainly make you die before your time. But even those who are listening appear to be responding in erratic and contradictory ways. Some of my own friends—mostly 30- or 40-something women, a group with a particularly sharp uptick in drinking—regularly declare that they're taking an extended break from drinking, only to fall off the wagon immediately. One went from extolling the benefits of Dry January in one breath to telling me a funny story about hangover-cure IV bags in the next. A number of us share the same (wonderful) doctor, and after our annual physicals, we compare notes about the ever nudgier questions she asks about alcohol. "Maybe save wine for the weekend?" she suggests with a cheer so forced she might as well be saying, "Maybe you don't need to drive nails into your skull *every* day?"

What most of us want to know, coming out of the pandemic, is this: Am I drinking too much? And: How much are other people drinking? And: Is alcohol actually that bad?

The answer to all these questions turns, to a surprising extent, not only on how much you drink, but on how and where and with whom you do it. But before we get to that, we need to consider a more basic question, one we rarely stop to ask: Why do we drink in the first place? By *we*, I mean Americans in 2021, but I also mean human beings for the past several millennia.

LET'S GET THIS out of the way: Part of the answer is "Because it is fun." Drinking releases endorphins, the natural opiates that are also triggered by, among other things, eating and sex. Another part of the answer is "Because we can." Natural selection has endowed humans with the ability to drink most other mammals under the table. Many species have enzymes that break alcohol down and allow the body to excrete it, avoiding death by poisoning. But about 10 million years ago, a genetic mutation left our ancestors with a souped-up enzyme that increased alcohol metabolism 40-fold.

This mutation occurred around the time that a major climate disruption transformed the landscape of eastern Africa, eventually leading to widespread extinction. In the intervening scramble for food, the leading theory goes, our predecessors resorted to eating fermented fruit off the

PREVIOUS PAGE: PROP STYLIST: AMY ELISE WILSON; FOOD STYLIST: SUE LI rain-forest floor. Those animals that liked the smell and taste of alcohol, and were good at metabolizing it, were rewarded with calories. In the evolutionary hunger games, the drunk apes beat the sober ones.

But even presuming that this story of natural selection is right, it doesn't explain why, 10 million years later, I like wine so much. "It should puzzle us more than it does," Edward Slingerland writes in his wide-ranging and provocative new book, *Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced, and Stumbled Our Way to Civilization*, "that one of the greatest foci of human ingenuity and concentrated effort over the past millennia has been the problem of how to get drunk." The damage done by alcohol is profound: impaired cognition and motor skills, belligerence, injury, and vulnerability to all sorts of predation in the short run; damaged livers and brains, dysfunction, addiction, and early death as years of heavy drinking pile up. As the importance of alcohol as a caloric stopgap diminished, why didn't evolution eventually lead us away from drinking—say, by favoring genotypes associated with hating alcohol's taste? That it didn't suggests that alcohol's harms were, over the long haul, outweighed by some serious advantages.

Versions of this idea have recently bubbled up at academic conferences and in scholarly journals and anthologies (largely to the credit of the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar). *Drunk* helpfully synthesizes the literature, then underlines its most radical implication: Humans aren't merely built to get buzzed—getting buzzed helped humans build civilization. Slingerland is not unmindful of alcohol's dark side, and his exploration of when and why its harms outweigh its benefits will unsettle some American drinkers. Still, he describes the book as "a holistic defense of alcohol." And he announces, early on, that "it might actually be good for us to tie one on now and then."

Slingerland is a professor at the University of British Columbia who, for most of his career, has specialized in ancient Chinese religion and philosophy. In a conversation this spring, I remarked that it seemed odd that he had just devoted several years of his life to a subject so far outside his wheelhouse. He replied that alcohol isn't quite the departure from his specialty that it might seem; as he has recently come to see things, intoxication and religion are parallel puzzles, interesting for very similar reasons. As far back as his graduate work at Stanford in the 1990s, he'd found it bizarre that across all cultures and time periods, humans went to such extraordinary (and frequently painful and expensive) lengths to please invisible beings.

In 2012, Slingerland and several scholars in other fields won a big grant to study religion from an evolutionary perspective. In the years since, they have argued that religion helped humans cooperate on a much larger scale than they had as hunter-gatherers. Belief in moralistic, punitive gods, for example, might have discouraged behaviors (stealing, say, or murder) that make it hard to peacefully coexist. In turn, groups with such beliefs would have had greater solidarity, allowing them to outcompete or absorb other groups.

In the evolutionary hunger games, the drunk apes beat the sober ones.

Around the same time, Slingerland published a social-science-heavy self-help book called *Trying Not to Try*. In it, he argued that the ancient Taoist concept of *wu-wei* (akin to what we now call "flow") could help with both the demands of modern life and the more eternal challenge of dealing with other people. Intoxicants, he pointed out in passing, offer a chemical shortcut to *wu-wei*—by suppressing our conscious mind, they can unleash creativity and also make us more sociable.

At a talk he later gave on *wu-wei* at Google, Slingerland made much the same point about intoxication. During the Q&A, someone in the audience told him about the Ballmer Peak—the notion, named after the former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, that alcohol can affect programming ability. Drink a certain amount, and it gets better. Drink too much, and it goes to hell. Some programmers have been rumored to hook themselves up to alcohol-filled IV drips in hopes of hovering at the curve's apex for an extended time.

His hosts later took him over to the "whiskey room," a lounge with a foosball table and what Slingerland described to me as "a blow-your-mind collection of single-malt Scotches." The lounge was there, they said, to provide liquid inspiration to coders who had hit a creative wall. Engineers could pour themselves a Scotch, sink into a beanbag chair, and chat with whoever else happened to be around. They said doing so helped them to get mentally unstuck, to collaborate, to notice new connections. At that moment, something clicked for Slingerland too: "I started to think, *Alcohol is really this very useful cultural tool*." Both its social lubrications *and* its creativity-enhancing aspects might play real roles in human society, he mused, and might possibly have been involved in its formation.

He belatedly realized how much the arrival of a pub a few years earlier on the UBC campus had transformed his professional life. "We started meeting there on Fridays, on our way home," he told me. "Psychologists, economists, archaeologists—we had nothing in common—shooting the shit over some beers." The drinks provided just enough disinhibition to get conversation flowing. A fascinating set of exchanges about religion unfolded. Without them, Slingerland doubts that he would have begun exploring religion's evolutionary functions, much less have written *Drunk*.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHELSEA KYLE; PROP STYLIST: AMY ELISE WILSON; FOOD STYLIST: SUE LI

WHICH CAME FIRST, the bread or the beer? For a long time, most archaeologists assumed that hunger for bread was the thing that got people to settle down and cooperate and have themselves an agricultural revolution. In this version of events, the discovery of brewing came later—an unexpected bonus. But lately, more scholars have started to take seriously the possibility that beer brought us together. (Though *beer* may not be quite the word. Prehistoric alcohol would have been more like a fermented soup of whatever was growing nearby.)

For the past 25 years, archaeologists have been working to uncover the ruins of Göbekli Tepe, a temple in eastern Turkey. It dates to about 10,000 B.C.—making it about twice as old as Stonehenge. It is made of enormous slabs of rock that would have required hundreds of people to haul from a nearby quarry. As far as archaeologists can tell, no one lived there. No one farmed there. What people did there was party. “The remains of what appear to be brewing vats, combined with images of festivals and dancing, suggest that people were gathering in groups, fermenting grain or grapes,” Slingerland writes, “and then getting truly hammered.”

Over the decades, scientists have proposed many theories as to why we still drink alcohol, despite its harms and despite millions of years having passed since our ancestors’ drunken scavenging. Some suggest that it must have had some interim purpose it’s since outlived. (For example, maybe it was safer to drink than untreated water—fermentation kills pathogens.) Slingerland questions most of these explanations. Boiling water is simpler than making beer, for instance.

Göbekli Tepe—and other archaeological finds indicating very early alcohol use—gets us closer to a satisfying explanation. The site’s architecture lets us visualize, vividly, the magnetic role that alcohol might have played for prehistoric peoples. As Slingerland imagines it, the promise of food and drink would have lured hunter-gatherers from all directions, in numbers great enough to move gigantic pillars. Once built, both the temple and the revels it was home to would have lent organizers authority, and participants a sense of community. “Periodic alcohol-fueled feasts,” he writes, “served as a kind of ‘glue’ holding together the culture that created Göbekli Tepe.”

Things were likely more complicated than that. Coercion, not just inebriated cooperation, probably played a part in the construction of early architectural sites, and in the maintenance of order in early societies. Still, cohesion would have been essential, and this is the core of Slingerland’s argument: Bonding is necessary to human society, and alcohol has been an essential means of our bonding. Compare us with our competitive, fractious chimpanzee cousins. Placing hundreds of unrelated chimps in close quarters for several hours would result in “blood and dismembered body parts,” Slingerland notes—not a party with dancing, and definitely not collaborative stone-lugging. Human civilization requires “individual and collective creativity, intensive cooperation, a tolerance for strangers and crowds, and a degree of openness and trust that is entirely unmatched among our closest primate relatives.” It requires us not only to put up with one another, but to become allies and friends.

As to how alcohol assists with that process, Slingerland focuses mostly on its suppression of prefrontal-cortex activity, and how resulting disinhibition may allow us to reach a more playful, trusting, childlike state. Other important social benefits may derive from endorphins, which have a key role in social bonding. Like many things that bring humans together—laughter, dancing, singing, storytelling, sex, religious rituals—drinking triggers their release. Slingerland observes a virtuous circle here: Alcohol doesn’t merely unleash a flood of endorphins that promote bonding; by reducing our inhibitions, it nudges us to do other things that trigger endorphins and bonding.

Over time, groups that drank together would have cohered and flourished, dominating smaller groups—much like the ones that prayed together. Moments of slightly buzzed creativity and subsequent innovation might have given them further advantage still. In the end, the theory goes, the drunk tribes beat the sober ones.

But this rosy story about how alcohol made more friendships and advanced civilization comes with two enormous asterisks: All of that was before the advent of liquor, and before humans started regularly drinking alone.

THE EARLY GREEKS watered down their wine; swilling it full-strength was, they believed, barbaric—a recipe for chaos and violence. “They would have been absolutely horrified by the potential for chaos contained in a bottle of brandy,” Slingerland writes. Human beings, he notes, “are apes built to drink, but not 100-proof vodka. We are also not well equipped to control our drinking without social help.”

Distilled alcohol is recent—it became widespread in China in the 13th century and in Europe from the 16th to 18th centuries—and a different beast from what came before it. Fallen grapes that have fermented on the ground are about 3 percent alcohol by volume. Beer and wine run about 5 and 11 percent, respectively. At these levels, unless people are strenuously trying, they rarely manage to drink enough to pass out, let alone die. Modern liquor, however, is 40 to 50 percent alcohol by volume, making it easy to blow right past a pleasant social buzz and into all sorts of tragic outcomes.

Just as people were learning to love their gin and whiskey, more of them (especially in parts of Europe and North America) started drinking outside of family meals and social gatherings. As the Industrial Revolution raged, alcohol use became less leisurely. Drinking establishments suddenly started to feature the long counters that we associate with the word *bar* today, enabling people to drink on the go, rather than around a table with other drinkers. This short move across the barroom reflects a fairly dramatic break from tradition: According to anthropologists, in nearly every era and society, solitary drinking had been almost unheard-of among humans.

The social context of drinking turns out to matter quite a lot to how alcohol affects us psychologically. Although we tend to think of alcohol as reducing anxiety, it doesn’t do so uniformly. As Michael Sayette, a leading alcohol researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, recently told me, if you packaged alcohol as an anti-anxiety serum and submitted it to the FDA, it would never be approved. He and his onetime graduate student Kasey Creswell, a Carnegie Mellon professor who studies solitary drinking, have come to believe that one key to understanding drinking’s uneven effects may be the presence of other people. Having combed through decades’ worth of literature, Creswell reports that in the rare experiments that have compared social and solitary alcohol use, drinking with others tends to spark joy and even euphoria, while drinking alone elicits neither—if anything, solo drinkers get more depressed as they drink.

Sayette, for his part, has spent much of the past 20 years trying to get to the bottom of a related question: why social drinking can be so rewarding. In a 2012 study, he and Creswell divided 720 strangers into groups, then served some groups vodka cocktails and other groups nonalcoholic cocktails. Compared with people who were served nonalcoholic drinks, the drinkers appeared significantly happier, according to a range of objective measures. Maybe more important, they vibed with one another in distinctive ways. They experienced what Sayette calls "golden moments," smiling genuinely and simultaneously at one another. Their conversations flowed more easily, and their happiness appeared infectious. Alcohol, in other words, helped them enjoy one another more.

This research might also shed light on another mystery: why, in a number of large-scale surveys, people who drink lightly or moderately are happier and psychologically healthier than those who abstain. Robin Dunbar, the anthropologist, examined this question directly in a large study of British adults and their drinking habits. He reports that those who regularly visit pubs are happier and more fulfilled than those who don't—not because they drink, but because they have more friends. And he demonstrates that it's typically the pub-going that leads to more friends, rather than the other way around. Social drinking, too, can cause problems, of course—and set people on a path to alcohol-use disorder. (Sayette's research focuses in part on how that happens, and why some extroverts, for example, may find alcohol's social benefits especially hard to resist.) But solitary drinking—even with one's family somewhere in the background—is uniquely pernicious because it serves up all the risks of alcohol without any of its social perks. Divorced from life's shared routines, drinking becomes something akin to an escape from life.

Southern Europe's healthy drinking culture is hardly news, but its attributes are striking enough to bear revisiting: Despite widespread consumption of alcohol, Italy has some of the lowest rates of alcoholism in the world. Its residents drink mostly wine and beer, and almost exclusively over meals with other people. When liquor is consumed, it's usually in small quantities, either right before or after a meal. Alcohol is seen as a food, not a drug. Drinking to get drunk is discouraged, as is drinking alone. The way Italians drink today may not be quite the way premodern people drank, but it likewise accentuates alcohol's benefits and helps limit its harms. It is also, Slingerland told me, about as far as you can get from the way many people drink in the United States.

AMERICANS MAY not have invented binge drinking, but we have a solid claim to bingeing alone, which was almost unheard-of in the Old World. During the early 19th century, solitary binges became common enough to need a name, so Americans started calling them "sprees" or "frolics"—words that sound a lot happier than the lonely one-to-three-day benders they described.

In his 1979 history, *The Alcoholic Republic*, the historian W. J. Rorabaugh painstakingly calculated the stunning amount of alcohol early Americans drank on a daily basis. In 1830, when American liquor consumption hit its all-time high, the average adult was going through more than nine gallons of spirits each year. Most of this was in the form of whiskey (which, thanks to grain surpluses, was sometimes cheaper than milk), and most of it was drunk at home. And this came on top of early Americans' other favorite drink, homemade cider. Many people, including children, drank cider at every meal; a family could easily go through a barrel a week. In short, Americans of the early 1800s were rarely in a state that could be described as sober, and a lot of the time, they were drinking to get drunk.

Rorabaugh argued that this longing for oblivion resulted from America's almost unprecedented pace of change between 1790 and 1830. Thanks to rapid westward migration in the years before railroads, canals, and steamboats, he wrote, "more Americans lived in isolation and independence than ever before or since." In the more densely populated East, meanwhile, the old social hierarchies evaporated, cities mushroomed, and industrialization upended the labor market, leading to profound social dislocation and a mismatch between skills and jobs. The resulting epidemics of loneliness and anxiety, he concluded, led people to numb their pain with alcohol.

The temperance movement that took off in the decades that followed was a more rational (and multifaceted) response to all of this than it tends to look like in the rearview mirror. Rather than pushing for full prohibition, many advocates supported some combination of personal moderation, bans on liquor, and regulation of those who profited off alcohol. Nor was temperance a peculiarly American obsession. As Mark Lawrence Schrad shows in his new book, *Smashing the Liquor Machine: A Global History of Prohibition*, concerns about distilled liquor's impact were international: As many as two dozen countries enacted some form of prohibition.

Yet the version that went into effect in 1920 in the United States was by far the most sweeping approach adopted by any country, and the most famous example of the all-or-nothing approach to alcohol that has dogged us for the past century. Prohibition did, in fact, result in a dramatic reduction in American drinking. In 1935, two years after repeal, per capita alcohol consumption was less than half what it had been early in the century. Rates of cirrhosis had also plummeted, and would remain well below pre-Prohibition levels for decades.

The temperance movement had an even more lasting result: It cleaved the country into tipplers and teetotalers. Drinkers were on average more educated and more affluent than nondrinkers, and also more likely to live in cities or on the coasts. Dry America, meanwhile, was more rural, more southern, more midwestern, more churchgoing, and less educated. To this day, it includes about a third of U.S. adults—a higher proportion of abstainers than in many other Western countries.

What's more, as Christine Sismondo writes in *America Walks Into a Bar*, by kicking the party out of saloons, the Eighteenth Amendment had the effect of moving alcohol into the country's living rooms, where it mostly remained. This is one reason that, even as drinking rates decreased overall, drinking among women became more socially acceptable. Public drinking establishments had long been dominated by men, but home was another matter—as were speakeasies, which tended to be more welcoming.

After Prohibition's repeal, the alcohol industry refrained from aggressive

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I asked what kind of family Amina wanted. She said, 'A family like yours.' That's when I knew I had to adopt her.

Denise, adopted 17-year-old Amina

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marketing, especially of liquor. Nonetheless, drinking steadily ticked back up, hitting pre-Prohibition levels in the early ’70s, then surging past them. Around that time, most states lowered their drinking age from 21 to 18 (to follow the change in voting age)—just as the Baby Boomers, the biggest generation to date, were hitting their prime drinking years. For an illustration of what followed, I direct you to the film *Dazed and Confused*.

Drinking peaked in 1981, at which point—true to form—the country took a long look at the empty beer cans littering the lawn, and collectively recoiled. What followed has been described as an age of neo-temperance. Taxes on alcohol increased; warning labels were added to containers. The drinking age went back up to 21, and penalties for drunk driving finally got serious. Awareness of fetal alcohol syndrome rose too—prompting a quintessentially American freak-out: Unlike in Europe, where pregnant women were reassured that light drinking remained safe, those in the U.S. were, and are, essentially warned that a drop of wine could ruin a baby’s life. By the late 1990s, the volume of alcohol consumed annually had declined by a fifth.

AND THEN BEGAN the current lurch upward. Around the turn of the millennium, Americans said *To hell with it* and poured a second drink, and in almost every year since, we’ve drunk a bit more wine and a bit more liquor than the year before. But why?

One answer is that we did what the alcohol industry was spending billions of dollars persuading us to do. In the ’90s, makers of distilled liquor ended their self-imposed ban on TV advertising. They also developed new products that might initiate nondrinkers (think sweet premixed drinks like Smirnoff Ice and Mike’s Hard Lemonade). Meanwhile, winemakers benefited from the idea, then in wide circulation and since challenged, that moderate wine consumption might be good for you physically. (As Iain Gately reports in *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol*, in the month after *60 Minutes* ran a widely viewed segment on the so-called French paradox—the notion that wine might explain low rates of heart disease in France—U.S. sales of red wine shot up 44 percent.)

But this doesn’t explain why Americans have been so receptive to the sales pitches. Some people have argued that our increased consumption is a response to various stressors that emerged over this period. (Gately, for example, proposes a 9/11 effect—he notes that in 2002, heavy drinking was up 10 percent over the previous year.) This seems closer to the truth.

Even drinking in bars has become less social in recent years. Striking up conversations with strangers has become almost taboo.

It also may help explain why women account for such a disproportionate share of the recent increase in drinking.

Although both men and women commonly use alcohol to cope with stressful situations and negative feelings, research finds that women are substantially more likely to do so. And they’re much more apt to be sad and stressed out to begin with: Women are about twice as likely as men to suffer from depression or anxiety disorders—and their overall happiness has fallen substantially in recent decades.

In the 2013 book *Her Best-Kept Secret*, an exploration of the surge in female drinking, the journalist Gabrielle Glaser recalls noticing, early this century, that women around her were drinking more. Alcohol hadn’t been a big part of mom culture in the ’90s, when her first daughter was young—but by the time her younger children entered school, it was everywhere: “Mothers joked about bringing their flasks to Pasta Night. *Flasks?* I wondered, at the time. Wasn’t that like *Gunsmoke*?” (Her quip seems quaint today. A growing class of merchandise now helps women carry concealed alcohol: There are purses with secret pockets, and chunky bracelets that double as flasks, and—perhaps least likely of all to invite close investigation—flasks designed to look like tampons.)

Glaser notes that an earlier rise in women’s drinking, in the 1970s, followed increased female participation in the workforce—and with it the particular stresses of returning home, after work, to attend to the house or the children. She concludes that women are today using alcohol to quell the anxieties associated with “the breathtaking pace of modern economic and social change” as well as with “the loss of the social and family cohesion” enjoyed by previous generations. Almost all of the heavy-drinking women Glaser interviewed drank alone—the bottle of wine while cooking, the Baileys in the morning coffee, the Poland Spring bottle secretly filled with vodka. They did so not to feel good, but to take the edge off feeling bad.

Men still drink more than women, and of course no demographic group has a monopoly on either problem drinking or the stresses that can cause it. The shift in women’s drinking is particularly stark, but unhealthier forms of alcohol use appear to be proliferating in many groups. Even drinking in bars has become less social in recent years, or at least this was a common perception among about three dozen bartenders I surveyed while reporting this article. “I have a few regulars who play games on their phone,” one in San Francisco said, “and I have a standing order to just refill their beer when it’s empty. No eye contact or talking until they are ready to leave.” Striking up conversations

with strangers has become almost taboo, many bartenders observed, especially among younger patrons. So why not just drink at home? Spending money to sit in a bar alone and not talk to anyone was, a bartender in Columbus, Ohio, said, an interesting case of "trying to avoid loneliness without actual togetherness."

LAST AUGUST, the beer manufacturer Busch launched a new product well timed to the problem of pandemic-era solitary drinking. Dog Brew is bone broth packaged as beer for your pet. "You'll never drink alone again," said news articles reporting its debut. It promptly sold out. As for human beverages, though beer sales were down in 2020, continuing their long decline, Americans drank more of everything else, especially spirits and (perhaps the loneliest-sounding drinks of all) premixed, single-serve cocktails, sales of which skyrocketed.

Not everyone consumed more alcohol during the pandemic. Even as some of us (especially women and parents) drank more frequently, others drank less often. But the drinking that increased was, almost definitionally, of the stuck-at-home, sad, too-anxious-to-sleep, can't-bear-another-day-like-all-the-other-days variety—the kind that has a higher likelihood of setting us up for drinking problems down the line. The drinking that decreased was mostly the good, socially connecting kind. (Zoom drinking—with its not-so-happy hours and first dates doomed to digital purgatory—was neither anesthetizing nor particularly connecting, and deserves its own dreary category.)

As the pandemic eases, we may be nearing an inflection point. My inner optimist imagines a new world in which, reminded of how much we miss joy and fun and other people, we embrace all kinds of socially connecting activities, including eating and drinking together—while also forswearing unhealthy habits we may have acquired in isolation.

But my inner pessimist sees alcohol use continuing in its pandemic vein, more about coping than conviviality. Not all social drinking is good, of course; maybe some of it should wane, too (for example, some employers have recently banned alcohol from work events because of concerns about its role in unwanted sexual advances and worse). And yet, if we use alcohol more and more as a private drug, we'll enjoy fewer of its social benefits, and get a bigger helping of its harms.

Throughout history, drinking has provided a social and psychological service. At a moment when friendships seem more attenuated than ever, maybe it can do so again.

Let's contemplate those harms for a minute. My doctor's nagging notwithstanding, there is a big, big difference between the kind of drinking that will give you cirrhosis and the kind that a great majority of Americans do. According to an analysis in *The Washington Post* some years back, to break into the top 10 percent of American drinkers, you needed to drink more than two bottles of wine every night. People in the next decile consumed, on average, 15 drinks a week, and in the one below that, six drinks a week. The first category of drinking is, stating the obvious, very bad for your health. But for people in the third category or edging toward the second, like me, the calculation is more complicated. Physical and mental health are inextricably linked, as is made vivid by the overwhelming quantity of research showing how devastating isolation is to longevity. Stunningly, the health toll of social disconnection is estimated to be equivalent to the toll of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

To be clear, people who don't want to drink should not drink. There are many wonderful, alcohol-free means of bonding. Drinking, as Edward Slingerland notes, is merely a convenient shortcut to that end. Still, throughout human history, this shortcut has provided a nontrivial social and psychological service. At a moment when friendships seem more attenuated than ever, and loneliness is rampant, maybe it can do so again. For those of us who do want to take the shortcut, Slingerland has some reasonable guidance: Drink only in public, with other people, over a meal—or at least, he says, "under the watchful eye of your local pub's barkeep."

After more than a year in relative isolation, we may be closer than we'd like to the wary, socially clumsy strangers who first gathered at Göbekli Tepe. "We get drunk because we are a weird species, the awkward losers of the animal world," Slingerland writes, "and need all of the help we can get." For those of us who have emerged from our caves feeling as if we've regressed into weird and awkward ways, a standing drinks night with friends might not be the worst idea to come out of 2021. *A*

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It's a negative state.

There's no getting around that.

When I'm procrastinating, stalling, temporizing, I am defined at the metabolic level by the thing that I am not doing. The commitment I'm resisting. My whole being is somehow involved in this nonproject: There's a niggling in the brain, a whining in the body, some kind of invisible celestial countdown going on somewhere.

And it's an artificial state. A kind of lie. Outwardly, I'm at ease: I'm pottering about, I'm picking up books and putting them down again, I'm chatting gaily on the phone, I'm eating tortilla chips. But inwardly, inwardly, I'm in violent Luciferian rebellion against the angels of adulthood, of responsibility, of unfreedom. I'm clenched, I'm sulfurous. I brood, with fiery pinions. I *won't* go to the bloody bank. I won't go to the post office. I might not shave. Expecting something from me? Feedback? A prompt reply? A timely handling of something or other? Good luck.

That's Phase One: clinically interesting, but no fun. Sloth, like every sin worth the name, disquiets me and divides me from myself.

The horizon brightens, however, in Phase Two. In Phase Two, you get busy. Mountains of energy are suddenly available to you. Straining to avoid one particular thing, dawdling mightily, you can do five others. You can clean the house. You can exercise. You can work on a book. The wrong book, but still—a book. If you organize yourself skillfully, you can be productive and even sort of professional while not doing what you're supposed to be doing. My friend Josh calls this "the virtuous circle of procrastination."

In Phase Three, it ends. It has to. Strangely built into the procrastinatory moment is the consciousness that eventually, finally, you are going to do this thing. You may have dallied with magical thinking (perhaps they'll forget about it … perhaps somebody *else* will do it), but you know there's no way out. So bring on the Red Bull, bring on the thrash metal, the freak-out and the perspiration, whatever it takes.

And now it's over. You've emerged. You have been a weird little god, playing with Time. You've been Max von Sydow, playing chess with Death. And while you haven't won, exactly, you haven't lost, either. You've been flirting with finality. You've been fiddling with foreclosure. You've been testing yourself against the mystery of your own cessation. Ridiculous, and yet—heroic. You have stood athwart the currents of life and felt them rush against you. And you'll do it again, even as they carry you to the last great deadline of all. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

ODE

to

PROCRASTINATION

By James Parker