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JANUARY 6 WAS PRACTICE

BY

BARTON GELLMAN

The Atlantic
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"A Whole Different Ball Game"

HOW EDUCATION IS CHANGING

Illustrations by Oriana Fenwick

Osley Cook used to ignore the emails for digital teaching tools that appeared in his inbox. A music teacher and band director at Roosevelt High School in Dallas, Texas, who has worked in education for 27 years, Cook already knew how to help his students learn: put instruments in their hands, and hear them play. "We want to jam," he says.

The coronavirus pandemic forced Cook to adapt, adopting some of those same digital tools in order to facilitate remote and hybrid learning. And even after returning to in-person instruction, he's embracing new technology, like a smart classroom camera system.

"If I'm teaching a mixed class of brass, woodwind, and percussion, when I'm working with the woodwinds, the camera is over here with them," Cook says. "If I walk over to percussion, then the camera follows me. Whoever I have watching on the digital side, they see the entire lesson."

When it comes to change, Cook isn't alone. As the nation slowly moves forward from a once-in-a-lifetime disruption, many educators are reimagining the way they serve students.

Here are some of the ways education is changing. →

Parents Are Becoming "Co-teachers"

CLOSURES SCRAMBLED TRADITIONAL boundaries between school and home. Parents were working from their bedrooms. Children were learning from their kitchen tables. Educators were teaching from their living-room sofas.

The result? Educators were forced to collaborate with parents like never before, creating what some call a "co-teacher dynamic." That dynamic figures to outlast the pandemic—giving learning a shot in the arm, as research shows that parents can have a positive influence on academic achievement by supporting learning at home, especially in the case of low-income students.

"In the classroom, it's like 'Oh, you're the teacher; that's your job. And I'm the parent; this is my job,'" says Melissa Wendorf, an elementary-school teacher in Los Angeles. "But this year, it felt more like a team. Parents were more willing to listen to what you have to say. And several were much more vocal with helping me to help their child. That's how it should always be."

Education Is Becoming More Agile

CONSISTING OF MORE THAN 14,000 school districts across 50 states, the American primary-education system is sprawling, diverse, and decentralized. In normal times, all of that works against rapid change. But the pandemic proved that educators can pivot quickly and act creatively when empowered to do so.

At Rolling Hills Elementary School in Lancaster, Texas, principal Cherish Pipkins organized an event in which roughly 120 students and their families drove through the school's parking lot to collect books and take-home activities. "We called it 'The Greatest Books on Earth,'" she says. "Our high-school band came to play. We had our mascot there. It was just this full-blown, drive-through carnival."

Educators now see an opportunity to unleash what a 2020 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report calls the "enormous potential for innovation that is dormant in many education systems." That means addressing the segregation and socioeconomic inequalities that negatively effect academic and social outcomes; repairing aging buildings and facilities; creating deeper partnerships with community mental-health providers in order to offer more services to students in need; and even reconsidering the standardized testing that has been the bedrock of student assessment for nearly two decades.

"Last year, you're talking about a whole different ball game," says Latonia Johnson, an elementary-school reading teacher in Lancaster. "We can't regress. That's just not an option."

Securing the Future Has Never Been More Important

FOR MANY, the pandemic has placed a strain on retirement readiness, causing them to contribute less to their savings or deplete the savings they already have: according to the Federal Reserve, one in 10 Americans used money from their retirement savings account for non-retirement expenses in 2020.

And that stress hasn't been confined to individuals. Roughly 90 percent of U.S. public-school teachers are enrolled in defined-benefit pension plans. Prior to the pandemic, those plans already were underfunded in most states; over time, those funds are projected to have more difficulty meeting their return targets in a market changed by the economic shock of COVID-19.

Johnson is among the educators re-evaluating their financial future. Because of the pandemic, she has "begun to save more than ever before, and in the event that something happens, secure my assets."

And not only for herself. Recently, Johnson paid off a car loan held by her adult daughter, who is a high-school teacher. In return, she asked her daughter to put the money she was saving each month into a retirement account. "I want to make sure that she's able to take care of herself," Johnson says. "We're not looking for right now. We're looking at long-term goals." ●

To read the full version of this story—and hear more from educators about teaching through the pandemic and returning to classrooms—scan the QR code or visit **TheAtlantic.com/ChangingEducation.**

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By Barton Gellman

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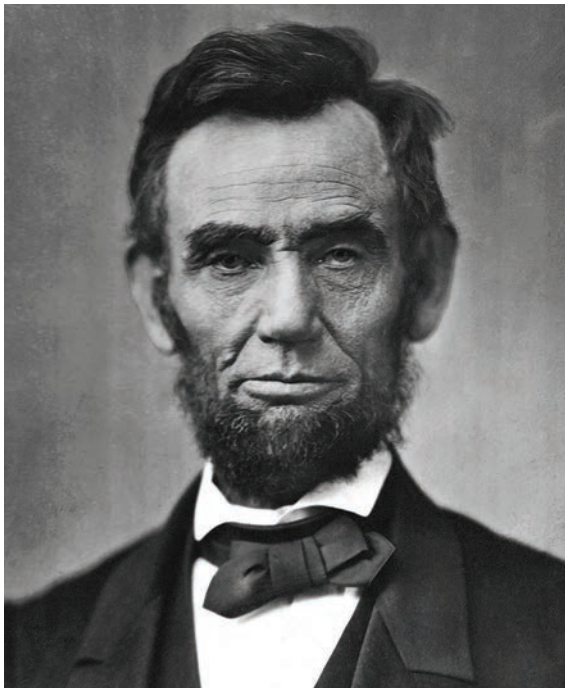
A PARTY, AND NATION, IN CRISIS

In October of 1860, *The Atlantic*'s first editor, James Russell Lowell, wrote of Abraham Lincoln that he "had experience enough in public affairs to make him a statesman, and not enough to make him a politician." Lowell, in his endorsement, was mainly concerned not with Lincoln's personal qualities but with the redemptive possibilities of his new party. The Republicans, Lowell wrote, "know that true policy is gradual in its advances, that it is conditional and not absolute, that it must deal with facts and not with sentiments."

There is insufficient space in any one issue of this magazine to trace the Republican Party's decomposition from Lincoln's day to ours. It is enough to say that its most recent, and most catastrophic, turn—toward authoritarianism, nativism, and conspiracism—threatens the republic that it was founded to save.

Stating plainly that one of America's two major parties, the party putatively devoted to advancing the ideas and ideals of conservatism, has now fallen into autocratic disrepute is unnerving for a magazine committed to being, in the words of our founding manifesto, "of no party or clique." Criticism of the Republican Party does not suggest an axiomatic endorsement of the Democratic Party, its leaders and policies. Substantive, even caustic, critiques can of course be made up and down the Democratic line. But avoiding partisan entanglement does not mean that we must turn away from the obvious. The leaders of the Republican Party—the soul-blighted Donald Trump and the satraps and lackeys who abet his nefarious behavior—are attempting to destroy the foundations of American democracy. This must be stated clearly, and repeatedly.

"There will be no recovery from this crisis until the Republican Party recommits itself to democracy," says this magazine's David Frum, who was one of the first writers to warn that America possessed no special immunities against demagoguery and authoritarianism.



In 2020, we asked another of our staff writers, Barton Gellman, to examine the ways in which Trumpism was weakening the norms and structures of American democracy. We published his cover story "The Election That Could Break America" before the election, and well before the insurrection of January 6. "Something far out of the norm is likely to happen," Gellman wrote. "Probably more than one thing. Expecting otherwise will dull our reflexes. It will lull us into spurious hope that Trump is tractable to forces that constrain normal incumbents."

As we know, the system held, but barely, America having been blessed, once again, by dumb luck. (The bravery of police officers on Capitol Hill, and the wisdom of a handful of state and local officials, also helped.) When President Joe Biden was safely inaugurated, two weeks after the attack on the Capitol, a belief took hold that Trump, and Trumpism, might very well go into eclipse.

But that belief was wrong. Which is why we asked Bart to examine, once again, the state of our democracy and the various attempts by Trump and other leading Republicans to claim power through voter suppression, subterfuge, and any other means necessary. His current cover story, "January 6 Was Practice," suggests that we are close—closer than most of us ever thought possible—to losing not only our democracy, but what's left of our shared understanding of reality.

You will find in this issue other essays and reporting that illuminate the political, moral, and epistemological challenges we face today, including an investigation by Vann R. Newkirk II into Republican voter-suppression efforts, and an article by Kaitlyn Tiffany on a child-sex-trafficking panic intensified by the far right's descent into conspiratorial thinking. The crisis is in good measure a crisis of the Republican Party. A healthy democracy requires a strong conservative party and a strong liberal party arguing for their views publicly and vigorously. What we have instead today is a liberal party battling an authoritarian cult of personality. As David Brooks writes in his essay "I Remember Conservatism": "To be a conservative today, you have to oppose much of what the Republican Party has come to stand for."

The Atlantic, across its long history, has held true to the belief that the American experiment is a worthy one, which is why we're devoting this issue, and so much of our journalism in the coming years, to its possible demise.

— Jeffrey Goldberg

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The Men Who Are Killing America's Newspapers

In November, McKay Coppins wrote about Alden Global Capital, the secretive hedge fund gutting newsrooms and damaging democracy.

Letters

I'm from Chicago originally and still a close reader of the *Tribune*. It's astonishing how bad things have gotten for a once-vibrant institution. The pages are thinner. Associated Press wire stories have replaced original reporting. There are spelling errors throughout.

I keep asking myself one question as more and more local and regional news outlets face cuts or fall completely: How do people know what's going on in their own backyard?

I think the answer is that they really don't, or they get their news from distorted sources. Some of my friends and family now get their Chicago coverage only from cable news or the latest viral Facebook post. Usually, it's painting the city as a crime-ridden hellhole or bashing the mayor for something partisan—no local nuance, no analysis, just a selective distortion of what's happening on the ground. Many of those same people used to get their news from the *Trib*'s center-right perspective. Now they get it from national outlets that couldn't care less about their city.

Alden Global Capital's track record has already shown that it is perfectly willing to destroy one of America's most storied papers for a quick buck. It's a shame no civic-minded, wealthy Chicagoan stepped up to save the paper from its slow but certain death, and the city is worse off because of that.

Patrick Wohl
Washington, D.C.

The growing prevalence of personalities like Randall Duncan Smith and companies like Alden Global Capital showcases the deep problems the United States is facing. Do we really value this kind of unbridled capitalism? How is it that we—by way of elected officials—tolerate behavior that is so destructive to our way of life?

Megan Pawlak
Oak Park, Ill.

Alden deserves the scorn it gets for its brutish (but profitable) approach. But American journalism faces a crisis bigger than nefarious hedge funds.

The real problem comes from the fall of America as a republic of letters. American civic education hasn't emphasized the vital role of journalism as the fourth estate, as important to the good society as the separation of powers or checks and balances in the federal government.

Now, Americans don't pay for news anymore and don't fund the local papers that kept communities intact and local governments in line.

Yes, Alden is killing off papers left and right. But why does the hedge fund buy these papers? Because previous owners didn't see a viable future

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thanks to an apathetic public. The media industry isn't blameless. But the problem goes deeper than the journalistic failures of recent years …

To save [the newspaper industry], we'll need an effort of renewal to restore local institutions and to restore respectability to journalism.

Anthony Hennen
Excerpt from a National Review *article*

The Atlantic's report highlights an important threat to journalism and civic awareness. But you overstate the impact on the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Trib*'s all-pro journalists, such as the veteran investigator Ray Long, continue to break major stories of political corruption. And the Springfield capitol bureau is staffed once again. The truth is bad enough. You shouldn't make it even worse.

Loren Wassell
St. Louis, Mo.

Every day I read the *Hartford Courant*, one of the papers that Alden Global Capital owns. Many people in Connecticut are concerned about the ongoing dismantling of the *Courant*, the oldest continuously published newspaper in the United States. However, we already have an alternative: a digital, nonprofit newspaper immune to the depredations of vultures. *The Connecticut Mirror* is now more than 10 years old, providing indispensable news to the public, not to mention state and local government. I read it every day alongside the *Courant*.

Toni Gold
Hartford, Conn.

McKay Coppins's article is troubling for the non-billionaires among us, which is why it's so important to acknowledge the organizations that are fighting to provide our communities with local accountability. Here in Illinois, ProPublica and the outlets that make up the Chicago Independent Media Alliance are rising stars in the shadow of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Many of my favorite news resources today are nonprofits that rely on the support of their readers for revenue. I may not have the funds to buy out Alden Global Capital's newspaper empire, but I hope that other readers will make it their mission to help a local news site thrive in whatever small way they are able.

Ben Suazo
Chicago, Ill.

MCKAY COPPINS REPLIES:

To respond to Loren Wassell's letter: There's no doubt that the Tribune*'s journalists continue to work heroically under adverse conditions to keep their readers informed. But when a paper loses a quarter of its newsroom virtually overnight, its quality will inevitably suffer, as I believe my reporting demonstrated. Those who remain in the* Trib*'s shrinking newsroom deserve credit. They—and their city—also deserve better management than Alden has provided.*

The New Meth

The drug is creating a wave of mental illness and contributing to homelessness. In November, Sam Quinones reported on how it spread and what it's doing to people.

Thank you for the excellent article on meth use. I've worked with crime victims for many years and seen the devastation that meth and other drugs cause victims, offenders, and the community at large. My local elected officials have swallowed hook, line, and sinker the idea that drug distribution is "victimless." Hopefully many people will read Sam Quinones's work, and a wider recognition of the need to both offer treatment and protect society will take root.

Kirsten Logan
Denver, Colo.

Sam Quinones's article confirmed what I know all too well as a family- and addiction-medicine physician working in Portland, Oregon. We have lost the War on Drugs, and we will be tallying the casualties for generations to come. Being on the I-5 corridor has kept the Pacific Northwest on the leading edge of the innovative, highly addictive, synthetic drugs manufactured by drug cartels. The devastation for our families and communities is laid out before us on the streets. And there seems to be no end in sight.

Now is the time for a fresh approach to the problems of illicit drugs and their effect on the health and wellness of our communities. Substance-use disorders, like many other chronic medical problems, are largely a result of system failures, including delayed intervention. Though many initially turn to illicit drug use as a means of coping with trauma, at a certain point, the unhealthy behavior is not a choice. It is time to decriminalize the behavior of using drugs.

Mr. Quinones makes another important point. If we desire healthy, vibrant communities rooted in peace, social justice, and sustainability, then we cannot turn away from these faces of "living addiction." We will need extraordinary outreach for those who are already marginalized because of mental-health issues, including substance-use disorders. After all, a community is only as strong as its most vulnerable member.

Christine Gray, M.D.
Portland, Ore.

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

Behind the Cover: In this month's issue, Barton Gellman reports on the forces that led to the January 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol and looks ahead to 2024, arguing that the events that transpired a year ago were just a warm-up (p. 24). The hand-scrawled cover line offers an urgent warning. On some occasions, typography speaks louder than any image could.

— Paul Spella, *Senior Art Director*

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DISPATCHES

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IMAGINE THE WORST

How to head off the next insurrection

BY GEORGE PACKER

A year after the insurrection, I'm trying to imagine the death of American democracy. It's somehow easier to picture the Earth blasted and bleached by global warming, or the human brain overtaken by the tyranny of artificial intelligence, than to foresee the end of our 250-year experiment in self-government.

The usual scenarios are unconvincing. The country is not going to split into two hostile sections and fight a war of secession. No dictator will send his secret police to round up dissidents in the dead of night.

Analogies like these bring the comfort of at least being familiar. Nothing has aided Donald Trump more than Americans' failure of imagination. It's essential to picture an unprecedented future so that what may seem impossible doesn't become inevitable.

Before January 6, no one—including intelligence professionals—could have conceived of a president provoking his followers to smash up the Capitol. Even the rioters livestreaming in National Statuary Hall seemed stunned by what they were doing. The siege felt like a wild shot that could have been fatal. For a nanosecond, shocked politicians of both parties sang together from the hymnal of democracy. But the unity didn't last. The past months have made it clear that the near miss was a warning shot.

If the end comes, it will come through democracy itself. Here's one way I imagine it could happen: In 2024, disputed election results in several states lead to tangled proceedings in courtrooms and legislatures. The Republican Party's long campaign of undermining faith in elections leaves voters on both sides deeply skeptical of any outcome they don't like. When the next president is finally chosen by the Supreme Court or Congress, half the country explodes in rage. Protests soon turn violent, and the crowds are met with lethal force by the state, while instigators firebomb government buildings. Neighborhoods organize self-defense groups, and law-enforcement officers take sides or go home. Predominantly red or blue counties turn on political minorities. A family with a BIDEN-HARRIS sign has to abandon their home on a rural road and flee to the nearest town. A blue militia sacks Trump National Golf Club Bedminster; a red militia storms Oberlin College. The new president takes power in a state of siege.

Few people would choose this path. It's the kind of calamity into which fragile societies stumble when their leaders are reckless, selfish, and shortsighted. But some Americans actually long for an armed showdown. In an article for the *Claremont Review of Books* imagining how the cultural conflict between blue California and red Texas might play out, Michael Anton, a former Trump White House adviser, recently wrote:

> If the Lone Star way of life is to survive, Texans must fight for it. Then we shall see whether California's long experiment with postmodern deracination and anti-masculinity can stand up to Texas's more robust embrace of the old virtues. I'm not a betting man, but were that conflict to erupt, my money would be on Texas.

Imagining the worst is a civic duty; cheering it on is political arson.

Another, likelier scenario is widespread cynicism. Following the election crisis, protests burn out. Americans lapse into acquiescence, believing that all leaders lie, all voting is rigged, all media are bought, corruption is normal, and any appeal to higher values such as freedom and equality is either fraudulent or naive. The loss of democracy turns out not to matter all that much. The hollowed core of civic life brings a kind of relief. Citizens indulge themselves in self-care and the metaverse, where politics turns into a private game and algorithms drive Americans into ever more extreme views that have little relation to reality or relevance to those in power. There's enough wealth to keep the population content. America's transformation into Russia is complete.

THE INSURRECTION AND THE LIE THAT INSTIGATED IT ARE NOT TOOLS THAT REPUBLICANS CAN PUT AWAY WHEN IT SUITS THEM.

WE KNOW WHAT'S driving us toward this cataclysm: not simply Trump, but the Republican Party. By the usual standards, Trump's postpresidency has been as pathetic as the forced exile of any minor dictator—Idi Amin poolside in Jeddah. Much of Trump's nongolfing time is devoted to fending off criminal charges against his business. Banned from Twitter and Facebook, he started a blog that was so anemic, he had to shut it down. His sore-loser rallies are desultory. And yet, in the year since the insurrection, the party has aligned itself so completely with his sense of grievance and lust for revenge that there's no room for dissent.

Establishment Republicans believe they've found a way to return to power: mollify the base and keep Trump at a distance, while appealing to suburban moderates with conventional issues such as education and inflation. Sooner or later, the party will be cleansed of Trump's stain. But this is wishful thinking, and not just because he's almost certain to run again in 2024. A party can't be half-democratic and half-authoritarian. The insurrection and the lie that instigated it are not tools that Republicans can put away when it suits them. The corruption is too deep.

Most Republican voters believe that the last election was stolen and that the next one likely will be too. Some have come to embrace the insurrection as a sacred cause. Ashli Babbitt, the invader killed by a Capitol Police officer, has become a martyr. Steve Bannon's podcast, which rallies the conspiracy-minded to take over the party from the ground up, has tens of millions of downloads. "Election security" (a euphemism for the myth of rampant fraud) has become the top issue for candidates in heavily Republican states like Oklahoma, where an extremist pastor named Jackson Lahmeyer is running against Senator James Lankford over his vote to certify President Joe Biden's win. Even the "moderate" Glenn Youngkin, Virginia's new governor, refused to acknowledge Biden as the legitimate president until after the state's Republican nominating convention. Republicans who dared to criticize Trump have become the objects of more visceral hatred than any Democrat; most have prudently gone silent. Those

few who have the temerity to tell the truth are being pushed out of the party.

Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers around the country have spent the year stacking state election offices with partisans who can be counted on to do Trump's bidding next time. State legislatures have tried, in many cases successfully, to pass laws that will make it easier to manipulate or overturn election results and intimidate nonpartisan officials by criminalizing minor infractions. In state after state, Republicans have tried to make it harder for Americans, especially Democratic constituencies, to vote. This tireless campaign of legislation and disinformation has set in motion an irreversible process of electoral sabotage.

In a sense, the Republican Party now functions like an insurgency. It has a legal, legitimate wing that conducts politics as usual and an underground wing that threatens violence. The first wing is made up of leaders such as Senator Mitch McConnell and Representative Kevin McCarthy, who oppose Democratic bills, stoke conservative anger over progressive policies, and try to stay clear of Trump's fantasies and vendettas. But every day they collaborate with party figures in the underground wing, whose lies mobilize the base, and whose goal is not so much to refight the last election as to give a pretext for fixing future ones. McConnell and Senator Lindsey Graham quietly bemoan Trump's obsession with fraud, as if "Stop the Steal" is just a personal fixation that hurts the party, not a path to power.

Not even Senator Mitt Romney will take a single step that could save democracy. The Freedom to Vote Act is a compromise bill between progressive and moderate Democrats that would establish national rules for voting rights—heading off state laws that limit ballot access and enable partisan attempts to throw out legitimate votes. But Romney won't join Democrats to pass it, or even let it be brought up for debate. (No Republican will—which is why the filibuster has become such a powerful weapon in the hands of antidemocrats.) Romney doesn't lack moral courage. He voted twice, once as the lone Republican, to throw Trump out of office. But after that crisis passed, he returned to the narrow thinking of a party man. It seems Romney can't bring himself to imagine that democracy is threatened not just by Trump, but by his own party.

DEMOCRATS SUFFER FROM a different failure of imagination. They regularly sound the alarm about the threat to democracy, but it is one of many alarms, along with those over the pandemic, child care,

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLE DEL PLATO

health care, criminal justice, guns, climate change. All of these deserve urgent attention, but they can't be equally urgent. Biden has spent far less of his political capital on saving democracy than on passing an infrastructure bill. According to a Grinnell College poll in October, only 35 percent of Democrats believe that American democracy faces a "major threat." The figure is twice as large for Republicans—whose belief in a major threat *is* the threat. Delusion about the danger prevails in both parties.

When Democrats talk about the threat, they focus on disenfranchisement, describing the new Republican election laws as "Jim Crow 2.0." The language, by provocatively invoking that terrible history, highlights the racial bias in the laws. But the threat we face is a new one; it requires new thinking. Through most of American history, both parties, while excluding large numbers of Americans from the franchise, basically accepted the choice of the electorate—and that is no longer true. The supreme danger now is not that voters in urban counties will have a harder time finding a drop box, or that some states will shorten the mail-ballot application window. The danger is that the express will of the American people could be overthrown.

FAILURES OF IMAGINATION result from the expectation that what has always happened will continue to happen, even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. They console us with the belief that the worst won't befall people like us. Europe had never known a Hitler, and so the Western powers thought they were dealing with a comic-opera maniac, even as he made no secret of his plans for a genocidal slave empire. The United States had never seen mass slaughter by foreign terrorists on its soil, and so the planes of September 11 seemed to come out of the blue, though al-Qaeda had been trying to kill Americans for a decade. Citizens of liberal democracies are particularly unequipped to see these eruptions in history coming, because our system of government is founded, as Jefferson wrote, on a belief in "the sufficiency of human reason for the care of human affairs." It's hard to accept that the foundation of democracy is quite this fragile.

> IF MITT ROMNEY AND SUSAN COLLINS ARE ALL THAT STAND BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC AND ITS FOES, WE'RE DOOMED.

For all the violence and oppression of American history, we've enjoyed the steadiest democratic run in the modern world. Political stability and national wealth allowed many Americans to go long periods relatively untouched by politics. The end of Trump's cruel and frenzied presidency seemed to promise a return to the old comforts of the private sphere. Realizing that his defeat gives no respite exhausts me even more than his years in office.

There is no easy way to stop a major party that's intent on destroying democracy. The demonic energy with which Trump repeats his lies, and Bannon harangues his audience, and Republican politicians around the country try to seize every lever of election machinery—this relentless drive for power by American authoritarians is the major threat that America confronts. The Constitution doesn't have an answer. No help will come from Republican leaders; if Romney and Susan Collins are all that stand between the republic and its foes, we're doomed.

THERE IS A third scenario, though, beyond mass violence or mass cynicism: a civic movement to save democracy. In an age of extreme polarization, it would take the form of a broad alliance of the left and the center-right. This democratic coalition would have to imagine America's political suicide without distractions or illusions. And it would have to take precedence over everything else in politics.

Citizens will have to do boring things—run for obscure local election offices and volunteer as poll watchers—with the same unflagging energy as the enemies of democracy. Decent Republicans will have to work and vote for Democrats, and Democrats will have to work and vote for anti-Trump Republicans or independents in races where no Democrat has a chance to win. Congressional Democrats and the Biden administration will have to make the Freedom to Vote Act their top priority, altering or ending the filibuster to give this democratic fire wall a chance to become law.

It will be no easy matter to defy the prevailing forces in American politics—those that continually push us toward the extremes, to the benefit of elites in technology, media, and politics. A cycle of mutual antagonism normalizes illiberal thinking on all sides. The illiberalism of progressives—still no match for that of the antidemocratic right—consists of an ideology of identity that tolerates little dissent. As a political strategy, it has proved self-destructive. Ignoring ordinary citizens' reasonable anxieties about crime, immigration, and education—or worse, dismissing them as racist—only encourages the real racists on the right, fails to turn out the left, and infuriates the middle. The ultimate winner will be Trump.

The overriding concern of democratic citizens must be the survival and strength of the alliance. They will have to resist going to the mat over issues that threaten to tear it apart. The point is not to abandon politics, but to pursue it wisely. Avoid language and postures that needlessly antagonize people with whom you disagree; distinguish between their legitimate and illegitimate views; take stock of their experiences. This, too, requires imagination.

Finding shared ground wherever possible in pursuit of the common good is not most people's favorite brand of politics. But it's the politics we need for the emergency that's staring us in the face, if only we will see it. *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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VIEWFINDER

The Warm-Up

Photograph by Peter van Agtmael

At a Donald Trump rally in Wildwood, New Jersey, on January 28, 2020, supporters turned to watch the president approach the podium. "I think it's more interesting to look at the movement he created than at the man himself," the photographer Peter van Agtmael says. He chose to capture the moment before the president's entrance, as members of the audience held their own cameras aloft in anticipation. This made "the intensity of the adulation for Trump," stoked by upbeat music and raucous chants, the focus of the image. A year later, van Agtmael photographed the crowd that gathered outside the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (see p. 7). "It felt like a culmination of what I'd seen," he says.

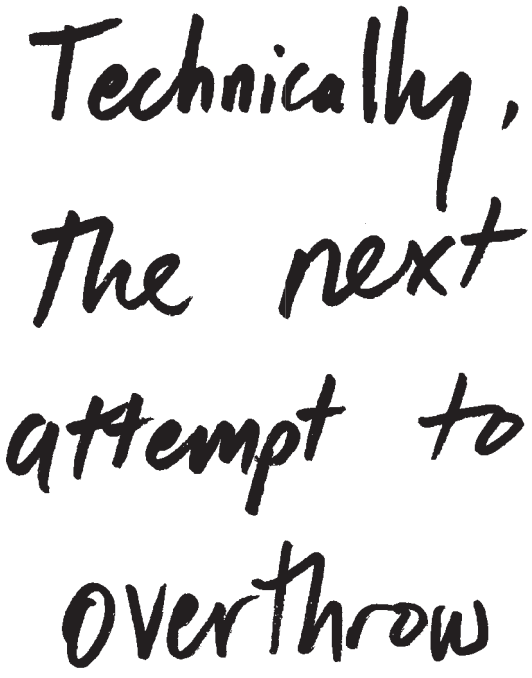
— Amy Weiss-Meyer

JANUARY 6

DONALD TRUMP IS BETTER POSITIONED TO SUBVERT AN ELECTION NOW THAN HE WAS IN 2020.

WAS PRACTICE

By Barton Gellman



a national election may not qualify as a coup. It will rely on subversion more than violence, although each will have its place. If the plot succeeds, the ballots cast by American voters will not decide the presidency in 2024. Thousands of votes will be thrown away, or millions, to produce the required effect. The winner will be declared the loser. The loser will be certified president-elect.

The prospect of this democratic collapse is not remote. People with the motive to make it happen are manufacturing the means. Given the opportunity, they will act. They are acting already.

Who or what will safeguard our constitutional order is not apparent today. It is not even apparent who will try. Democrats, big and small *D*, are not behaving as if they believe the threat is real. Some of them, including President Joe Biden, have taken passing rhetorical notice, but their attention wanders. They are making a grievous mistake.

"The democratic emergency is already here," Richard L. Hasen, a professor of law and political science at UC Irvine, told me in late October. Hasen prides himself on a judicious temperament. Only a year ago he was cautioning me against hyperbole. Now he speaks matter-of-factly about the death of our body politic. "We face a serious risk that American democracy as we know it will come to an end in 2024," he said, "but urgent action is not happening."

For more than a year now, with tacit and explicit support from their party's national leaders, state Republican operatives have been building an apparatus of election theft. Elected officials in Arizona, Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and other states have studied Donald Trump's crusade to overturn the 2020 election. They have noted the points of failure and have taken concrete steps to avoid failure next time. Some of them have rewritten statutes to seize partisan control of decisions about which ballots to count and which to discard, which results to certify and which to reject. They are driving out or stripping power from election officials who refused to go along with the plot last November, aiming to replace them with exponents of the Big Lie. They are fine-tuning a legal argument that purports to allow state legislators to override the choice of the voters.

By way of foundation for all the rest, Trump and his party have convinced a dauntingly large number of Americans that the essential workings of democracy are corrupt, that made-up claims of fraud are true, that only cheating can thwart their victory at the polls, that tyranny has usurped their government, and that violence is a legitimate response.

Any Republican might benefit from these machinations, but let's not pretend there's any suspense. Unless biology intercedes, Donald Trump will seek and win the Republican nomination for president in 2024. The party is in his thrall. No opponent can break it and few will try. Neither will a setback outside politics—indictment, say, or a disastrous turn in business—prevent Trump from running. If anything, it will redouble his will to power.

As we near the anniversary of January 6, investigators are still unearthing the roots of the insurrection that sacked the Capitol and sent members of Congress fleeing for their lives. What we know already, and could not have known then, is that the chaos wrought on that day was integral to a coherent plan. In retrospect, the insurrection takes on the aspect of rehearsal.

Even in defeat, Trump has gained strength for a second attempt to seize office, should he need to, after the polls close on November 5, 2024. It may appear otherwise—after all, he no longer commands the executive branch, which he tried and mostly failed to enlist in his first coup attempt. Yet the balance of power is shifting his way in arenas that matter more.

Trump is successfully shaping the narrative of the insurrection in the only political ecosystem that matters to him. The immediate shock of the event, which briefly led some senior Republicans to break with him, has given way to a near-unanimous embrace. Virtually no one a year ago, certainly not I, predicted that Trump could compel the whole party's genuflection to the Big Lie and the recasting of insurgents as martyrs. Today the few GOP dissenters are being cast out. "2 down, 8 to go!" Trump gloated at the retirement announcement of Representative Adam Kinzinger, one of 10 House Republicans to vote for his second impeachment.

Trump has reconquered his party by setting its base on fire. Tens of millions of Americans perceive their world through black clouds of his smoke. His deepest source of strength is the bitter grievance of Republican voters that they lost the White House, and are losing their country, to alien forces with no legitimate claim to power. This is not some transient or loosely committed population. Trump has built the first American mass political movement in the past century that is ready to fight by any means necessary, including bloodshed, for its cause.

AT THE EDGE of the Capitol grounds, just west of the reflecting pool, a striking figure stands in spit-shined shoes and a 10-button uniform coat. He is 6 foot 4, 61 years old, with chiseled good looks and an aura of command that is undimmed by retirement. Once, according to the silver bars on his collar, he held the rank of captain in the New York Fire Department. He is not supposed

to wear the old uniform at political events, but he pays that rule no mind today. The uniform tells the world that he is a man of substance, a man who has saved lives and held authority. Richard C. Patterson needs every shred of that authority for this occasion. He has come to speak on behalf of an urgent cause. "Pelosi's political prisoners," he tells me, have been unjustly jailed.

Patterson is talking about the men and women held on criminal charges after invading the Capitol on January 6. He does not at all approve of the word *insurrection*.

"It wasn't an insurrection," he says at a September 18 rally called "Justice for January 6." "None of our countrymen and -women who are currently being held are charged with insurrection. They're charged with misdemeanor charges."

Patterson is misinformed on that latter point. Of the more than 600 defendants, 78 are in custody when we speak. Most of those awaiting trial in jail are charged with serious crimes such as assault on a police officer, violence with a deadly weapon, conspiracy, or unlawful possession of firearms or explosives. Jeffrey McKellop of Virginia, for instance, is alleged to have hurled a flagpole like a spear into an officer's face. (McKellop has pleaded not guilty.)

Patterson was not in Washington on January 6, but he is fluent in the revisionist narratives spread by fabulists and trolls on social media. He knows those stories verse by verse, the ones about January 6 and the ones about the election rigged against Trump. His convictions are worth examining because he and the millions of Americans who think as he does are the primary source of Trump's power to corrupt the next election. With a sufficient dose of truth serum, most Republican politicians would likely confess that Biden won in 2020, but the great mass of lumpen Trumpers, who believe the Big Lie with unshakable force, oblige them to pretend otherwise. Like so many others, Patterson is doing his best to parse a torrential flow of political information, and he is failing. His failures leave him, nearly always, with the worldview expounded by Trump.

LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, PATTERSON IS DOING HIS BEST TO PARSE A TORRENT OF POLITICAL INFORMATION, AND HE IS FAILING. HIS FAILURES LEAVE HIM, NEARLY ALWAYS, WITH THE WORLDVIEW EXPOUNDED BY TRUMP.

We fall into a long conversation in the sweltering heat, then continue it for weeks by phone and email. I want to plumb the depths of his beliefs, and understand what lies behind his commitment to them. He is prepared to grant me the status of "fellow truth-seeker."

"The 'Stop the Steal' rally for election integrity was peaceful," he says. "I think the big takeaway is when Old Glory made its way into the Rotunda on January 6, our fearless public officials dove for cover at the sight of the American flag."

What about the violence? The crowds battling police?

"The police were seen on video in uniform allowing people past the bicycle-rack barricades and into the building," he replies. "I mean, that's established. The unarmed crowd did not overpower the officers in body armor. That doesn't happen. They were allowed in."

Surely he has seen other video, though. Shaky, handheld footage, taken by the rioters themselves, of police officers falling under blows from a baseball bat, a hockey stick, a fire extinguisher, a length of pipe. A crowd crushing Officer Daniel Hodges in a doorway, shouting "Heave! Ho!"

Does Patterson know that January 6 was among the worst days for law-enforcement casualties since September 11, 2001? That at least 151 officers from the Capitol Police and the Metropolitan Police Department suffered injuries, including broken bones, concussions, chemical burns, and a Taser-induced heart attack?

Patterson has not heard these things. Abruptly, he shifts gears. Maybe there was violence, but the patriots were not to blame.

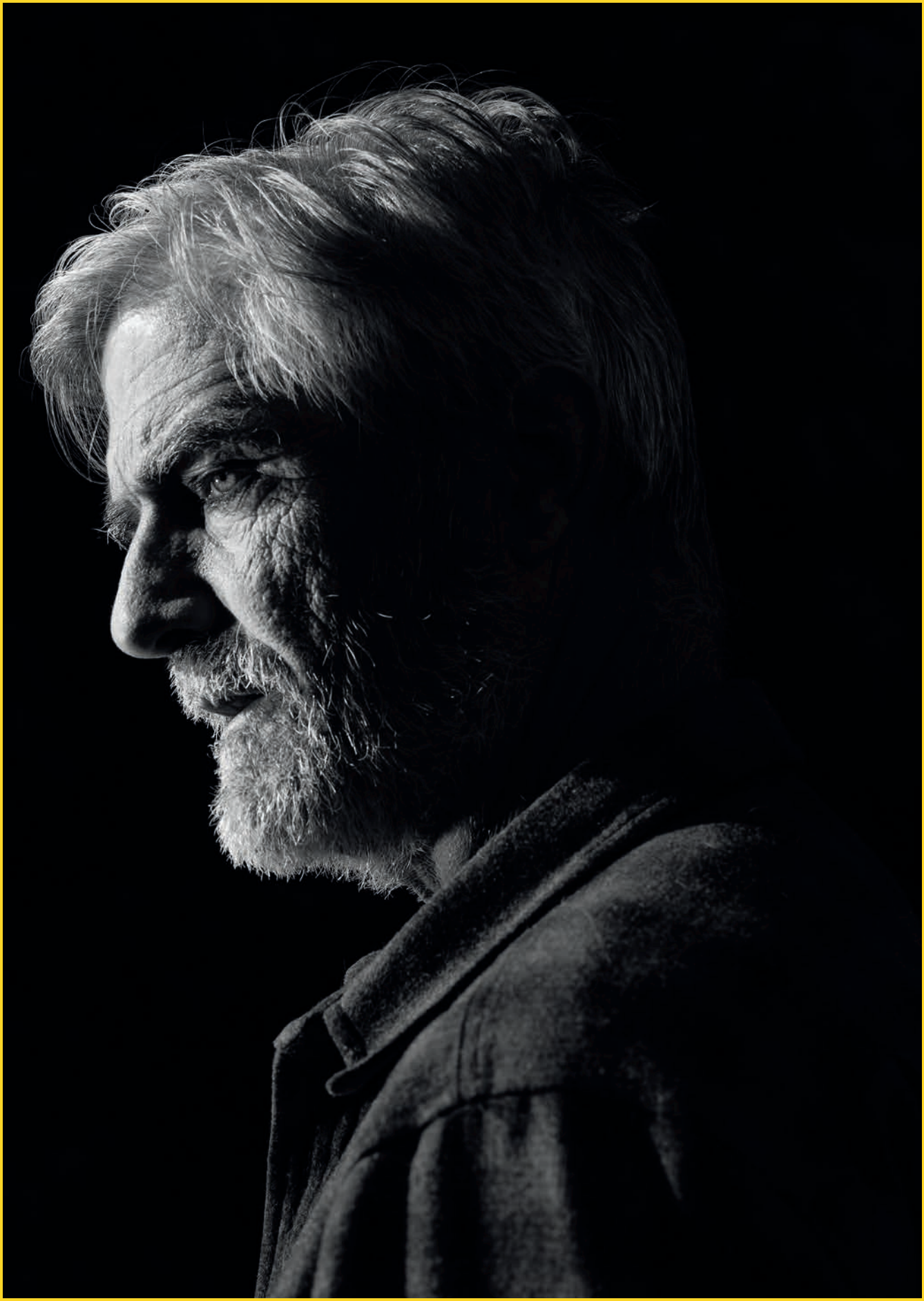
"There were people there deliberately to make it look worse than what it was," he explains. "A handful of ill-behaved, potentially, possibly agents provocateur." He repeats the phrase: "Agents provocateur, I have on information, were in the crowd … They were there for nefarious means. Doing the bidding of whom? I have no idea."

"'On information'?" I ask. What information?

"You can look up this name," he says. "Retired three-star Air Force General McInerney. You got to find him on Rumble. They took him off YouTube."

Sure enough, there on Rumble (and still on YouTube) I find a video of Lieutenant General Thomas G. McInerney, 84, three decades gone from the Air Force. His story takes a long time to tell, because the plot includes an Italian satellite and Pakistan's intelligence service and former FBI Director James Comey selling secret U.S. cyberweapons to China. Eventually it emerges that "Special Forces mixed with antifa" combined to invade the seat of Congress on January 6 and then blame the invasion on Trump supporters, with the collusion of Senators Chuck Schumer and Mitch McConnell, along with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

In a further wrinkle, Pelosi, by McInerney's account, became "frantic" soon afterward when she discovered that her own



false-flag operation had captured a laptop filled with evidence of her treason. McInerney had just come from the White House, he says in his monologue, recorded two days after the Capitol riot. Trump was about to release the Pelosi evidence. McInerney had seen the laptop with his own eyes.

It shook me that Patterson took this video for proof. If my house had caught fire 10 years before, my life might have depended on his discernment and clarity of thought. He was an Eagle Scout. He earned a college degree. He keeps current on the news. And yet he has wandered off from the empirical world, placing his faith in fantastic tales that lack any basis in fact or explicable logic.

McInerney's tale had spread widely on Facebook, Twitter, Parler, and propaganda sites like We Love Trump and InfoWars. It joined the January 6 denialist canon and lodged firmly in Patterson's head. I reached the general by phone and asked about evidence for his claims. He mentioned a source, whose name he couldn't reveal, who had heard some people saying "We are playing antifa today." McInerney believed they were special operators because "they looked like SOF people." He believed that one of them had Pelosi's laptop, because his source had seen something bulky and square under the suspect's raincoat. He conceded that even if it was a laptop, he couldn't know whose it was or what was on it. For most of his story, McInerney did not even claim to have proof. He was putting two and two together. It stood to reason. In truth, prosecutors had caught and charged a neo-Nazi sympathizer who had videotaped herself taking the laptop from Pelosi's office and bragged about it on Discord. She was a home health aide, not a special operator. (As of this writing, she has not yet entered a plea.)

The general's son, Thomas G. McInerney Jr., a technology investor, learned that I had been talking with his father and asked for a private word with me. He was torn between conflicting obligations of filial loyalty, and took a while to figure out what he wanted to say.

"He has a distinguished service record," he told me after an otherwise off-the-record conversation. "He wants what's best for the nation and he speaks with a sense of authority, but I have concerns at his age that his judgment is impaired. The older he's gotten, the stranger things have gotten in terms of what he's saying."

I tell all of this and more to Patterson. McInerney, the *Military Times* reported, "went off the rails" after a successful Air Force career. For a while during the Obama years he was a prominent birther and appeared a lot on Fox News, before being fired as a Fox commentator in 2018 for making a baseless claim about John McCain. Last November, he told the WVW Broadcast Network that the CIA operated a computer-server farm in Germany that had helped rig the presidential vote for Biden, and that five Special Forces soldiers had just died trying to seize the evidence. The Army and U.S. Special Operations Command put out dutiful statements that no such mission and no such casualties had taken place.

Of course, Patterson wrote to me sarcastically, "governments would NEVER lie to their OWN citizens." He did not trust the Pentagon's denials. There are seldom words or time enough to lay a conspiracy theory to rest. Each rebuttal is met with a fresh round of delusions.

Patterson is admirably eager for a civil exchange of views. He portrays himself as a man who "may be wrong, and if I am I admit it," and he does indeed concede on small points. But a deep rage seems to fuel his convictions. I asked him the first time we met if we could talk "about what's happening in the country, not the election itself."

His smile faded. His voice rose.

"There ain't no fucking way we are letting go of 3 November 2020," he said. "That is not going to fucking happen. That's not happening. This motherfucker was stolen. The world knows this bumbling, senile, career corrupt fuck squatting in our White House did not get 81 million votes."

He had many proofs. All he really needed, though, was arithmetic. "The record indicates 141 [million] of us were registered to vote and cast a ballot on November 3," he said. "Trump is credited with 74 million votes out of 141 million. That leaves 67 million for Joe; that doesn't leave any more than that. Where do these 14 million votes come from?"

Patterson did not recall where he had heard those figures. He did not think he had read Gateway Pundit, which was the first site to advance the garbled statistics. Possibly he saw Trump amplify the claim on Twitter or television, or some other stop along the story's cascading route across the right-wing mediaverse. Reuters did a good job debunking the phony math, which got the total number of voters wrong.

I was interested in something else: the worldview that guided Patterson through the statistics. It appeared to him (incorrectly) that not enough votes had been cast to account for the official results. Patterson assumed that only fraud could explain the discrepancy, that all of Trump's votes were valid, and that the invalid votes must therefore belong to Biden.

"Why don't you say Joe Biden got 81 million and there's only 60 million left for Trump?" I asked.

Patterson was astonished.

"It's not disputed, the 74 million vote count that was credited to President Trump's reelection effort," he replied, baffled at my ignorance. "It's not in dispute … Have you heard that *President Trump* engaged in cheating and fraudulent practices and crooked machines?"

Biden was the one accused of rigging the vote. Everybody said so. And for reasons unspoken, Patterson wanted to be carried away by that story.

Opposite page: Richard Patterson, a retired firefighter, in the Bronx. Like tens of millions of other Trump supporters, Patterson firmly believes that the 2020 election was stolen.

ROBERT A. PAPE, a well-credentialed connoisseur of political violence, watched the mob attack the Capitol on a television at home on January 6. A name came unbidden to his mind: Slobodan Milošević.

Back in June 1989, Pape had been a postdoctoral fellow in political science when the late president of Serbia delivered a notorious speech. Milošević compared Muslims in the former Yugoslavia to Ottomans who had enslaved the Serbs six centuries

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

before. He fomented years of genocidal war that destroyed the hope for a multiethnic democracy, casting Serbs as defenders against a Muslim onslaught on "European culture, religion, and European society in general."

By the time Trump unleashed the angry crowd on Congress, Pape, who is 61, had become a leading scholar on the intersection of warfare and politics. He saw an essential similarity between Milošević and Trump—one that suggested disturbing hypotheses about Trump's most fervent supporters. Pape, who directs the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats, or CPOST, called a staff meeting two days after the Capitol attack. "I talked to my research team and told them we were going to reorient everything we were doing," he told me.

Milošević, Pape said, inspired bloodshed by appealing to fears that Serbs were losing their dominant place to upstart minorities. "What he is arguing" in the 1989 speech "is that Muslims in Kosovo and generally throughout the former Yugoslavia are essentially waging genocide on the Serbs," Pape said. "And really, he doesn't use the word *replaced*. But this is what the modern term would be."

Pape was alluding to a theory called the "Great Replacement." The term itself has its origins in Europe. But the theory is the latest incarnation of a racist trope that dates back to Reconstruction in the United States. Replacement ideology holds that a hidden hand (often imagined as Jewish) is encouraging the invasion of nonwhite immigrants, and the rise of nonwhite citizens, to take power from white Christian people of European stock. When white supremacists marched with torches in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, they chanted, "Jews will not replace us!"

Trump borrowed periodically from the rhetorical canon of replacement. His remarks on January 6 were more disciplined than usual for a president who typically spoke in tangents and unfinished thoughts. Pape shared with me an analysis he had made of the text that Trump read from his prompter.

"Our country has been under siege for a long time, far longer than this four-year period," Trump told the crowd. "You're the real people. You're the people that built this nation." He famously added, "And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

Just like Milošević, Trump had skillfully deployed three classic themes of mobilization to violence, Pape wrote: "The survival of a way of life is at stake. The fate of the nation is being determined now. Only genuine brave patriots can save the country."

Watching how the Great Replacement message was resonating with Trump supporters, Pape and his colleagues suspected that the bloodshed on January 6 might augur something more than an aberrant moment in American politics. The prevailing framework for analyzing extremist violence in the U.S., they thought, might not be adequate to explain what was happening.

When the Biden administration published a new homeland-security strategy in June, it described the assault on the Capitol as a product of "domestic violent extremists," and invoked an intelligence assessment that said attacks by such extremists come primarily from lone wolves or small cells. Pape and his colleagues doubted that this captured what had happened on January 6. They set about seeking systematic answers to two basic questions: Who were the insurgents, in demographic terms? And what political beliefs animated them and their sympathizers?

Pape's three-bedroom house, half an hour's drive south of Chicago, became the pandemic headquarters of a virtual group of seven research professionals, supported by two dozen University of Chicago undergraduates. The CPOST researchers gathered court documents, public records, and news reports to compile a group profile of the insurgents.

"The thing that got our attention first was the age," Pape said. He had been studying violent political extremists in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East for decades. Consistently, around the world, they tended to be in their 20s and early 30s. Among the January 6 insurgents, the median age was 41.8. That was wildly atypical.

Then there were economic anomalies. Over the previous decade, one in four violent extremists arrested by the FBI had been unemployed. But only 7 percent of the January 6 insurgents were jobless, and more than half of the group had a white-collar job or owned their own business. There were doctors, architects, a Google field-operations specialist, the CEO of a marketing firm, a State Department official. "The last time America saw middle-class whites involved in violence was the expansion of the second KKK in the 1920s," Pape told me.

Yet these insurgents were not, by and large, affiliated with known extremist groups. Several dozen did have connections with the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, or the Three Percenters militia, but a larger number—six out of every seven who were charged with crimes—had no ties like that at all.

Kathleen Belew, a University of Chicago historian and co-editor of *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, says it is no surprise that extremist groups were in the minority. "January 6 wasn't designed as a mass-casualty attack, but rather as a recruitment action" aimed at mobilizing the general population, she told me. "For radicalized Trump supporters … I think it was a protest event that became something bigger."

Pape's team mapped the insurgents by home county and ran statistical analyses looking for patterns that might help explain their behavior. The findings were counterintuitive. Counties won by Trump in the 2020 election were less likely than counties won by Biden to send an insurrectionist to the Capitol. The higher Trump's share of votes in a county, in fact, the lower the probability that insurgents lived there. Why would that be? Likewise, the more rural the county, the fewer the insurgents. The researchers tried a hypothesis: Insurgents might be more likely to come from counties where white household income was dropping. Not so. Household income made no difference at all.

Only one meaningful correlation emerged. Other things being equal, insurgents were much more likely to come from a county where the white share of the population was in decline. For every one-point drop in a county's percentage of non-Hispanic whites from 2015 to 2019, the likelihood of an insurgent hailing from that county increased by 25 percent. This was a strong link, and it held up in every state.

Trump and some of his most vocal allies, Tucker Carlson of Fox News notably among them, had taught supporters to fear that

Black and brown people were coming to replace them. According to the latest census projections, white Americans will become a minority, nationally, in 2045. The insurgents could see their majority status slipping before their eyes.

The CPOST team decided to run a national opinion survey in March, based on themes it had gleaned from the social-media posts of insurgents and the statements they'd made to the FBI under questioning. The researchers first looked to identify people who said they "don't trust the election results" and were prepared to join a protest "even if I thought the protest might turn violent." The survey found that 4 percent of Americans agreed with both statements, a relatively small fraction that nonetheless corresponds to 10 million American adults.

In June, the researchers sharpened the questions. This brought another surprise. In the new poll, they looked for people who not only distrusted the election results but agreed with the stark assertion that "the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and Joe Biden is an illegitimate president." And instead of asking whether survey subjects would join a protest that "might" turn violent, they looked for people who affirmed that "the use of force is justified to restore Donald Trump to the presidency."

Pollsters ordinarily expect survey respondents to give less support to more transgressive language. "The more you asked pointed questions about violence, the more you should be getting 'social-desirability bias,' where people are just more reluctant," Pape told me.

Here, the opposite happened: the more extreme the sentiments, the greater the number of respondents who endorsed them. In the June results, just over 8 percent agreed that Biden was illegitimate and that violence was justified to restore Trump to the White House. That corresponds to 21 million American adults. Pape called them "committed insurrectionists." (An unrelated Public Religion Research Institute survey on November 1 found that an even larger proportion of Americans, 12 percent, believed both that the election had been stolen from Trump and that "true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.")

Why such a large increase? Pape believed that Trump supporters simply preferred the harsher language, but "we cannot rule out that attitudes hardened" between the first and second surveys. Either interpretation is troubling. The latter, Pape said, "would be even more concerning since over time we would normally think passions would cool."

In the CPOST polls, only one other statement won overwhelming support among the 21 million committed insurrectionists. Almost two-thirds of them agreed that "African American people or Hispanic people in our country will eventually have more rights than whites." Slicing the data another way: Respondents who believed in the Great Replacement theory, regardless of their views on anything else, were nearly four times as likely as those who did not to support the violent removal of the president.

The committed insurrectionists, Pape judged, were genuinely dangerous. There were not many militia members among them, but more than one in four said the country needed groups like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys. One-third of them owned guns, and 15 percent had served in the military. All had easy access to the organizing power of the internet.

"THIS REALLY IS A NEW, POLITICALLY VIOLENT MASS MOVEMENT," PAPE TOLD ME. HE DREW AN ANALOGY TO NORTHERN IRELAND IN THE LATE 1960s, AT THE DAWN OF THE TROUBLES.

What Pape was seeing in these results did not fit the government model of lone wolves and small groups of extremists. "This really is a new, politically violent mass movement," he told me. "This is collective political violence."

Pape drew an analogy to Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, at the dawn of the Troubles. "In 1968, 13 percent of Catholics in Northern Ireland said that the use of force for Irish nationalism was justified," he said. "The IRA was created shortly thereafter with only a few hundred members." Decades of bloody violence followed. And 13 percent support was more than enough, in those early years, to sustain it.

"It's the community's support that is creating a mantle of legitimacy—a mandate, if you would, that justifies the violence" of a smaller, more committed group, Pape said. "I'm very concerned it could happen again, because what we're seeing in our surveys … is 21 million people in the United States who are essentially a mass of kindling or a mass of dry wood that, if married to a spark, could in fact ignite."

THE STORY OF Richard Patterson, once you delve into it, is consonant with Pape's research. Trump appealed to him as an "in-your-face, brash 'America First' guy who has the interest of 'We the People.'" But there was more. Decades of personal and political grudges infuse Patterson's understanding of what counts as "America" and who counts as "we."

Where Patterson lives, in the Bronx, there were 20,413 fewer non-Hispanic white people in the 2020 census than in 2010. The borough had reconfigured from 11 percent white to 9 percent.

Patterson came from Northern Irish stock and grew up in coastal Northern California. He was a "lifetime C student" who found ambition at age 14 when he began to hang around at a local fire station. As soon as he finished high school he took the test to join the Oakland fire department, earning, he said, outstanding scores.

"But in those days," he recalled, "Oakland was just beginning to diversify and hire females. So no job for the big white kid." The position went to "this little woman … who I know failed the test."

Patterson tried again in San Francisco, but found the department operating under a consent decree. Women and people of color, long excluded, had to be accepted in the incoming cohort. "So, again, the big white kid is told, 'Fuck you, we got a whole fire department of guys that look just like you. We want the department to look different because diversity is all about an optic.'" The department could hire "the Black applicant instead of myself."

Patterson bought a one-way ticket to New York, earned a bachelor's degree in fire science, and won an offer to join New York's Bravest. But desegregation had come to New York, too, and Patterson found himself seething.

In 1982, a plaintiff named Brenda Berkman had won a lawsuit that opened the door to women in the FDNY. A few years later, the department scheduled training sessions "to assist male firefighters in coming to terms with the assimilation of females into their ranks." Patterson's session did not go well. He was suspended without pay for 10 days after a judge found that he had called the trainer a scumbag and a Communist and chased him out of the room, yelling, "Why don't you fuck Brenda Berkman and I hope you both die of AIDS." The judge found that the trainer had "reasonably feared for his safety." Patterson continues to maintain his innocence.

Later, as a lieutenant, Patterson came across a line on a routine form that asked for his gender and ethnicity. He resented that. "There was no box for 'Fuck off,' so I wrote in 'Fuck off,'" he said. "So they jammed me up for that"—this time a 30-day suspension without pay.

Even while Patterson rose through the ranks, he kept on finding examples of how the world was stacked against people like him. "I look at the 2020 election as sort of an example on steroids of affirmative action. The straight white guy won, but it was stolen from him and given to somebody else."

Wait. Wasn't this a contest between two straight white guys?

Not really, Patterson said, pointing to Vice President Kamala Harris: "Everybody touts the gal behind the president, who is currently, I think, illegitimately in our White House. It is, quote, a woman of color, like this is some—like this is supposed to mean something." And do not forget, he added, that Biden said, "If you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't Black."

What to do about all this injustice? Patterson did not want to say, but he alluded to an answer: "Constitutionally, the head of the executive branch can't tell an American citizen what the fuck to do. Constitutionally, all the power rests with the people. That's you and me, bro. And Mao is right that all the power emanates from the barrel of a gun."

Did he own a gun himself? "My Second Amendment rights, like my medical history, are my own business," he replied.

Many of Patterson's fellow travelers at the "Justice for January 6" protest were more direct about their intentions. One of them was a middle-aged man who gave his name as Phil. The former Coast Guard rescue diver from Kentucky had joined the crowd at the Capitol on January 6 but said he has not heard from law enforcement. Civil war is coming, he told me, and "I would fight for my country."

Was he speaking metaphorically?

"No, I'm not," he said. "Oh Lord, I think we're heading for it. I don't think it'll stop. I truly believe it. I believe the criminals—Nancy Pelosi and her criminal cabal up there—is forcing a civil war. They're forcing the people who love the Constitution, who will give their lives to defend the Constitution—the Democrats are forcing them to take up arms against them, and God help us all."

Gregory Dooner, who was selling flags at the protest, said he had been just outside the Capitol on January 6 as well. He used to sell ads for AT&T Advertising Solutions, and now, in retirement, he peddles MAGA gear: $10 for a small flag, $20 for a big one.

Violent political conflict, he told me, was inevitable, because Trump's opponents "want actual war here in America. That's what they want." He added a slogan of the Three Percenters militia: "When tyranny becomes law, rebellion becomes duty." The Declaration of Independence, which said something like that, was talking about King George III. If taken seriously today, the slogan calls for a war of liberation against the U.S. government.

"Yo, hey—hey," Dooner called out to a customer who had just unfurled one of his banners. "I want to read him the flag."

He recited the words inscribed on the Stars and Stripes: "A free people ought not only to be armed and disciplined but they should have sufficient arms and ammunition to maintain a status of independence from any who might attempt to abuse them, which would include their own government."

"George Washington wrote that," he said. "That's where we're at, gentlemen."

I looked it up. George Washington did not write anything like that. The flag was Dooner's best seller, even so.

OVER THE COURSE of Trump's presidency, one of the running debates about the man boiled down to: menace or clown? Threat to the republic, or authoritarian wannabe who had no real chance of breaking democracy's restraints? Many observers rejected the dichotomy—the essayist Andrew Sullivan, for instance, described the former president as "both farcical *and* deeply dangerous." But during the interregnum between November 3 and Inauguration Day, the political consensus leaned at first toward farce. Biden had won. Trump was breaking every norm by refusing to concede, but his made-up claims of fraud were getting him nowhere.

In a column headlined "There Will Be No Trump Coup," the *New York Times* writer Ross Douthat had predicted, shortly before Election Day, that "any attempt to cling to power illegitimately will be a theater of the absurd." He was responding in part to my warning in these pages that Trump could wreak great harm in such an attempt.

"Stop the Steal" protesters in Detroit on November 6, 2020. Republican county authorities later attempted to rescind their votes to certify Detroit's election results.

PHILIP MONTGOMERY

One year later, Douthat looked back. In scores of lawsuits, "a variety of conservative lawyers delivered laughable arguments to skeptical judges and were ultimately swatted down," he wrote, and state election officials warded off Trump's corrupt demands. My own article, Douthat wrote, had anticipated what Trump *tried* to do. "But at every level he was rebuffed, often embarrassingly, and by the end his plotting consisted of listening to charlatans and cranks proposing last-ditch ideas" that could never succeed.

Douthat also looked ahead, with guarded optimism, to the coming presidential election. There are risks of foul play, he wrote, but "Trump in 2024 will have none of the presidential powers, legal and practical, that he enjoyed in 2020 but failed to use effectively in any shape or form." And "you can't assess Trump's potential to overturn an election from *outside* the Oval Office unless you acknowledge his inability to effectively employ the powers of that office when he had them."

That, I submit respectfully, is a profound misunderstanding of what mattered in the coup attempt a year ago. It is also a dangerous underestimate of the threat in 2024—which is larger, not smaller, than it was in 2020.

It is true that Trump tried and failed to wield his authority as commander in chief and chief law-enforcement officer on behalf of the Big Lie. But Trump did not need the instruments of office to sabotage the electoral machinery. It was citizen Trump—as litigant, as candidate, as dominant party leader, as gifted demagogue, and as commander of a vast propaganda army—who launched the insurrection and brought the peaceful transfer of power to the brink of failure.

All of these roles are still Trump's for the taking. In nearly every battle space of the war to control the count of the next election—statehouses, state election authorities, courthouses, Congress, and the Republican Party apparatus—Trump's position has improved since a year ago.

To understand the threat today, you have to see with clear eyes what happened, what is still happening, after the 2020 election. The charlatans and cranks who filed lawsuits and led public spectacles on Trump's behalf were sideshows. They distracted from the main event: a systematic effort to nullify the election results and then reverse them. As milestones passed—individual certification by states, the meeting of the Electoral College on December 14—Trump's hand grew weaker. But he played it strategically throughout. The more we learn about January 6, the clearer the conclusion becomes that it was the last gambit in a soundly conceived campaign—one that provides a blueprint for 2024.

THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE of nearly every move by the Trump team after the networks called the election for Joe Biden on November 7 was to induce Republican legislatures in states that Biden won to seize control of the results and appoint Trump electors instead. Every other objective—in courtrooms, on state election panels, in the Justice Department, and in the office of the vice president—was instrumental to that end.

Electors are the currency in a presidential contest and, under the Constitution, state legislators control the rules for choosing them. Article II provides that each state shall appoint electors "in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct." Since the 19th century, every state has ceded the choice to its voters, automatically certifying electors who support the victor at the polls, but in *Bush v. Gore* the Supreme Court affirmed that a state "can take back the power to appoint electors." No court has ever said that a state could do that after its citizens have already voted, but that was the heart of Trump's plan.

Every path to stealing the election required GOP legislatures in at least three states to repudiate the election results and substitute presidential electors for Trump. That act alone would not have ensured Trump's victory. Congress would have had to accept the substitute electors when it counted the votes, and the Supreme Court might have had a say. But without the state legislatures, Trump had no way to overturn the verdict of the voters.

Trump needed 38 electors to reverse Biden's victory, or 37 for a tie that would throw the contest to the House of Representatives. For all his improvisation and flailing in the postelection period, Trump never lost sight of that goal. He and his team focused on obtaining the required sum from among the 79 electoral votes in Arizona (11), Georgia (16), Michigan (16), Nevada (6), Pennsylvania (20), and Wisconsin (10).

Trump had many tactical setbacks. He and his advocates lost 64 of 65 challenges to election results in court, and many of them were indeed comically inept. His intimidation of state officials, though it also failed in the end, was less comical. Trump was too late, barely, to strong-arm Republican county authorities into rejecting Detroit's election tally (they tried and failed to rescind their "yes" votes after the fact), and Aaron Van Langevelde, the crucial Republican vote on Michigan's Board of State Canvassers, stood up to Trump's pressure to block certification of the statewide results. Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger refused the president's request to "find" 11,780 votes for Trump after two recounts confirming Biden's win. Two Republican governors, in Georgia and Arizona, signed certificates of Biden's victory; the latter did so even as a telephone call from Trump rang unanswered in his pocket. The acting attorney general stared down Trump's plan to replace him with a subordinate, Jeffrey B. Clark, who was prepared to send a letter advising the Georgia House and Senate to reconsider their state's election results.

Had Trump succeeded in any of these efforts, he would have given Republican state legislators a credible excuse to meddle; one success might have led to a cascade. Trump used judges, county boards, state officials, and even his own Justice Department as stepping-stones to his ultimate target: Republican legislators in swing states. No one else could give him what he wanted.

Even as these efforts foundered, the Trump team achieved something crucial and enduring by convincing tens of millions of angry supporters, including a catastrophic 68 percent of all Republicans in a November PRRI poll, that the election had been stolen from Trump. Nothing close to this loss of faith in democracy has happened here before. Even Confederates recognized Abraham Lincoln's election; they tried to secede because they knew they had lost. Delegitimating Biden's victory was a strategic win for Trump—then and now—because the Big Lie became the driving passion of the voters who controlled the fate of Republican legislators, and Trump's fate was in the legislators' hands.

Even so, three strategic points of failure left Trump in dire straits in the days before January 6.

First, although Trump won broad rhetorical support from state legislators for his fictitious claims of voter fraud, they were reluctant to take the radical, concrete step of nullifying the votes of their own citizens. Despite enormous pressure, none of the six contested states put forward an alternate slate of electors for Trump. Only later, as Congress prepared to count the electoral votes, did legislators in some of those states begin talking unofficially about "decertifying" the Biden electors.

The second strategic point of failure for Trump was Congress, which had the normally ceremonial role of counting the electoral votes. In the absence of action by state legislatures, the Trump team had made a weak attempt at a fallback, arranging for Republicans in each of the six states to appoint themselves "electors" and transmit their "ballots" for Trump to the president of the Senate. Trump would have needed both chambers of Congress to approve his faux electors and hand him the presidency. Republicans controlled only the Senate, but that might have enabled Trump to create an impasse in the count. The trouble there was that fewer than a dozen Republican senators were on board.

Trump's third strategic setback was his inability, despite all expectations, to induce his loyal No. 2 to go along. Vice President Mike Pence would preside over the Joint Session of Congress to count the electoral votes, and in a memo distributed in early January, Trump's legal adviser John Eastman claimed, on "very solid legal authority," that Pence himself "does the counting, including the resolution of disputed electoral votes … and all the Members of Congress can do is watch." If Congress would not crown Trump president, in other words, Pence could do it himself. And if Pence would not do that, he could simply disregard the time limits for debate under the Electoral Count Act and allow Republicans like Senator Ted Cruz to filibuster. "That creates a stalemate," Eastman wrote, "that would give the state legislatures more time."

Time. The clock was ticking. Several of Trump's advisers, Rudy Giuliani among them, told allies that friendly legislatures were on the brink of convening special sessions to replace their Biden electors. The Trump conspiracy had made nowhere near that much progress, in fact, but Giuliani was saying it could be done in "five to 10 days." If Congress went ahead with the count on January 6, it would be too late.

ON THE AFTERNOON of January 5, Sidney Powell—she of the "Kraken" lawsuits, for which she would later be sanctioned in

one court and sued in another—prepared an emergency motion addressed to Justice Samuel Alito. The motion, entered into the Supreme Court docket the next day, would go largely unnoticed by the media and the public amid the violence of January 6; few have heard of it even now. But it was Plan A to buy Trump some time.

Alito was the circuit justice for the Fifth Circuit, where Powell, on behalf of Representative Louie Gohmert, had sued to compel Mike Pence to take charge of validating electors, disregarding the statutory role of Congress. The vice president had "exclusive authority and sole discretion as to which set of electors to count or even whether to count no set of electors," Powell wrote. The Electoral Count Act, which says quite otherwise, was unconstitutional.

Powell did not expect Alito to rule on the merits immediately. She asked him to enter an emergency stay of the electoral count and schedule briefs on the constitutional claim. If Alito granted the stay, the clock on the election would stop and Trump would gain time to twist more arms in state legislatures.

Late in the same afternoon, January 5, Steve Bannon sat behind a microphone for his live *War Room* show, backswept gray hair spilling from his headphones to the epaulets on a khaki field jacket. He was talking, not very guardedly, about Trump's Plan B to buy time the next day.

"The state legislatures are the center of gravity" of the fight, he said, because "people are going back to the original interpretation of the Constitution."

And there was big news: The Republican leaders of the Pennsylvania Senate, who had resisted pressure from Trump to nullify Biden's victory, had just signed their names to a letter averring that the commonwealth's election results "should not have been certified by our Secretary of State." (Bannon thanked his viewers for staging protests at those legislators' homes in recent days.) The letter, addressed to Republican leaders in Congress, went on to "ask that you delay certification of the Electoral College to allow due process as we pursue election integrity in our Commonwealth."

For weeks, Rudy Giuliani had starred in spurious "fraud" hearings in states where Biden had won narrowly. "After all these hearings," Bannon exulted on air, "we finally have a state legislature … that is moving." More states, the Trump team hoped, would follow Pennsylvania's lead.

Meanwhile, the Trumpers would use the new letter as an excuse for putting off a statutory requirement to count the electoral votes "on the sixth day of January." Senator Cruz and several allies proposed an "emergency" 10-day delay, ostensibly for an audit.

This was a lawless plan on multiple grounds. While the Constitution gives state legislatures the power to select electors, it does not provide for "decertifying" electors after they have cast their ballots in the Electoral College, which had happened weeks before. Even if Republicans had acted earlier, they could not have dismissed electors by writing a letter. Vanishingly few legal scholars believed that a legislature could appoint substitute electors by any means after voters had made their choice. And the governing statute, the Electoral Count Act, had no provision for delay past January 6, emergency or otherwise. Trump's team was improvising at this point, hoping that it could make new law in court, or that legal niceties would be overwhelmed by events. If Pence or the Republican-controlled Senate had fully backed Trump's maneuver, there is a chance that they might in fact have produced a legal stalemate that the incumbent could have exploited to stay in power.

> NOTHING CLOSE TO THIS LOSS OF FAITH IN DEMOCRACY HAS HAPPENED HERE BEFORE. EVEN CONFEDERATES RECOGNIZED LINCOLN'S ELECTION; THEY TRIED TO SECEDE BECAUSE THEY KNEW THEY HAD LOST.

Above all else, Bannon knew that Trump had to stop the count, which was set to begin at 1 p.m. the next day. If Pence would not stop it and Alito did not come through, another way would have to be found.

"Tomorrow morning, look, what's going to happen, we're going to have at the Ellipse—President Trump speaks at 11," Bannon said, summoning his posse to turn up when the gates opened at 7 a.m. Bannon would be back on air in the morning with "a lot more news and analysis of exactly what's going to go on through the day."

Then a knowing smile crossed Bannon's face. He swept a palm in front of him, and he said the words that would capture attention, months later, from a congressional select committee.

"I'll tell you this," Bannon said. "It's not going to happen like you think it's going to happen. Okay, it's going to be quite extraordinarily different. All I can say is, strap in." Earlier the same day, he had predicted, "All hell is going to break loose tomorrow."

Bannon signed off at 6:58 p.m. Later that night he turned up in another war room, this one a suite at the Willard Hotel, across the street from the White House. He and others in Trump's close orbit, including Eastman and Giuliani, had been meeting there for days. Congressional investigators have been deploying subpoenas and the threat of criminal sanctions—Bannon has been indicted for contempt of Congress—to discover whether they

In the mayhem of January 6, at least 151 police officers suffered injuries, including broken bones, concussions, and chemical burns. *Above:* A law-enforcement officer is attacked.

were in direct contact with the "Stop the Steal" rally organizers and, if so, what they planned together.

SHORTLY AFTER BANNON signed off, a 6-foot-3-inch mixed martial artist named Scott Fairlamb responded to his call. Fairlamb, who fought under the nickname "Wildman," reposted Bannon's war cry to Facebook: "All hell is going to break loose tomorrow." The next morning, after driving before dawn from New Jersey to Washington, he posted again: "How far are you willing to go to defend our Constitution?" Fairlamb, then 43, answered the question for his own part a few hours later at the leading edge of a melee on the West Terrace of the Capitol—seizing a police baton and later punching an officer in the face. "What patriots do? We fuckin' disarm them and then we storm the fuckin' Capitol!" he screamed at fellow insurgents.

Less than an hour earlier, at 1:10 p.m., Trump had finished speaking and directed the crowd toward the Capitol. The first rioters breached the building at 2:11 p.m. through a window they shattered with a length of lumber and a stolen police shield. About one minute later, Fairlamb burst through the Senate Wing Door brandishing the baton, a teeming mob behind him. (Fairlamb pleaded guilty to assaulting an officer and other charges.)

Another minute passed, and then without warning, at 2:13, a Secret Service detail pulled Pence away from the Senate podium, hustling him out through a side door and down a short stretch of hallway.

Pause for a moment to consider the choreography. Hundreds of angry men and women are swarming through the halls of the Capitol. They are fresh from victory in hand-to-hand combat with an outnumbered force of Metropolitan and Capitol Police. Many have knives or bear spray or baseball bats or improvised cudgels. A few have thought to carry zip-tie wrist restraints. Some are shouting "Hang Mike Pence!" Others call out hated Democrats by name.

These hundreds of rioters are fanning out, intent on finding another group of roughly comparable size: 100 senators and 435 members of the House, in addition to the vice president. How long can the one group roam freely without meeting the other? Nothing short of stunning good luck, with an allowance for determined police and sound evacuation plans, prevented a direct encounter.

MEL D. COLE

The vice president reached Room S-214, his ceremonial Senate office, at about 2:14 p.m. No sooner had his entourage closed the door, which is made of opaque white glass, than the leading edge of the mob reached a marble landing 100 feet away. Had the rioters arrived half a minute earlier, they could not have failed to spot the vice president and his escorts speed-walking out of the Senate chamber.

Ten minutes later, at 2:24, Trump egged on the hunt. "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution," he tweeted.

Two minutes after that, at 2:26, the Secret Service agents told Pence again what they had already said twice before: He had to move.

"The third time they came in, it wasn't really a choice," Marc Short, the vice president's chief of staff, told me. "It was 'We cannot protect you here, because all that we have between us is a glass door.'" When Pence refused to leave the Capitol, the agents guided him down a staircase to a shelter under the visitors' center.

In another part of the Capitol, at about the same time, a 40-year-old businessman from Miami named Gabriel A. Garcia turned a smartphone camera toward his face to narrate the insurrection in progress. He was a first-generation Cuban American, a retired U.S. Army captain, the owner of an aluminum-roofing company, and a member of the Miami chapter of the Proud Boys, a far-right group with a penchant for street brawls. (In an August interview, Garcia described the Proud Boys as a drinking club with a passion for free speech.)

In his Facebook Live video, Garcia wore a thick beard and a MAGA cap as he gripped a metal flagpole. "We just went ahead and stormed the Capitol. It's about to get ugly," he said. He weaved his way to the front of a crowd that was pressing against outnumbered police in the Crypt, beneath the Rotunda. "You fucking traitors!" he screamed in their faces. When officers detained another man who tried to break through their line, Garcia dropped his flagpole and shouted "Grab him!" during a skirmish to free the detainee. "U.S.A.!" he chanted. "Storm this shit!"

Then, in an ominous singsong voice, Garcia called out, "Nancy, come out and play!" Garcia was paraphrasing a villain in the 1979 urban-apocalypse film *The Warriors*. That line, in

the movie, precedes a brawl with switchblades, lead pipes, and baseball bats. (Garcia, who faces six criminal charges including civil disorder, has pleaded not guilty to all counts.)

"It's not like I threatened her life," Garcia said in the interview, adding that he might not even have been talking about the speaker of the House. "I said 'Nancy.' Like I told my lawyer, that could mean any Nancy."

Garcia had explanations for everything on the video. "Storm this shit" meant "bring more people [to] voice their opinion." And "'get ugly' is 'we're getting a lot of people coming behind.'"

But the most revealing exegesis had to do with "fucking traitors."

"At that point, I wasn't meaning the Capitol Police," he said. "I was looking at them. But … I was talking about Congress." He "wasn't there to stop the certification of Biden becoming president," he said, but to delay it. "I was there to support Ted Cruz. Senator Ted Cruz was asking for a 10-day investigation."

Delay. Buy time. Garcia knew what the mission was.

Late into the afternoon, as the violence died down and authorities regained control of the Capitol, Sidney Powell must have watched reports of the insurgency with anxious eyes on the clock. If Congress stayed out of session, there was a chance that Justice Alito might come through.

He did not. The Supreme Court denied Powell's application the next day, after Congress completed the electoral count in the early-morning hours. Plan A and Plan B had both failed. Powell later expressed regret that Congress had been able to reconvene so quickly, mooting her request.

For a few short weeks, Republicans recoiled at the insurrection and distanced themselves from Trump. That would not last.

BALLROOM A at the Treasure Island Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas is packed with college Republicans. There is a surfeit of red ties, vested suits, and pocket squares. A lot more young men than women. Two Black faces in a sea of white. No face masks at all. None of the students I ask has received a COVID vaccine.

The students have gathered to talk about the Second Amendment, the job market, and "how to attack your campus for their vaccine mandates," as incoming Chair Will Donahue tells the crowd. Representative Paul Gosar of Arizona, a featured speaker, has another topic in mind.

"Let's talk about January 6," he proposes, and then, without further preamble: "Release the tapes!"

There is a scattering of applause, quickly extinguished. The students do not seem to know what he is talking about.

"The 14,000-plus hours," Gosar says. "Let's find out who actually—who caused the turmoil. Let's hold accountable. But let's also make sure that the people who are innocently charged are set free. But let's also hold those responsible for what happened accountable."

Gosar is not a natural orator, and it is often difficult to parse what he is saying. He bends at the waist and swings his head as he speaks, swallowing words and garbling syntax. No one in the Las Vegas audience seems to be following his train of thought. He moves on.

"We're in the middle of a verbal and cultural war," he says. "Very much like a civil war, where it's brother against brother … We are the light. They are the darkness. Don't shy away from that."

A little sleuthing afterward reveals that 14,000 hours is the sum of footage preserved from the Capitol's closed-circuit video cameras between the hours of noon and 8 p.m. on January 6. The Capitol Police, according to an affidavit from their general counsel, have shared the footage with Congress and the FBI but want to keep it out of public view because the images reveal, among other sensitive information, the Capitol's "layout, vulnerabilities and security weaknesses."

Gosar, like a few fellow conservatives, has reasoned from this that the Biden administration is concealing "exculpatory evidence" about the insurrectionists. The January 6 defendants, as Gosar portrays them in a tweet, are guilty of no more than a "stroll through statuary hall during non-business hours." Another day he tweets, baselessly, "The violence was instigated by FBI assets."

This is the same Paul Gosar who, in November, tweeted an anime video, prepared by his staff, depicting him in mortal combat with Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In it he raises a sword and kills her with a blow to the neck. For incitement of violence against a colleague, the House voted to censure Gosar and stripped him of his committee assignments. Gosar, unrepentant, compared himself to Alexander Hamilton.

It's the same Paul Gosar who, twice in recent months, has purported to be in possession of secret intelligence about vote-rigging from a source in the "CIA fraud department," which does not exist, and from the "security exchange fraud department," and also from someone "from Fraud from the Department of Defense," all of whom were somehow monitoring voting machines and all of whom telephoned to alert him to chicanery.

Gosar has become a leading voice of January 6 revisionism, and he may have more reason than most to revise. In an unguarded video on Periscope, since deleted but preserved by the Project on Government Oversight, Ali Alexander, one of the principal organizers of the "Stop the Steal" rally, said, "I was the person who came up with the January 6 idea with Congressman Gosar" and two other Republican House members. "We four schemed up putting maximum pressure on Congress while they were voting."

"Stop the Steal" organizers created and later tried to delete a website called Wild Protest that directed supporters to trespass on the Capitol steps, where demonstrations are illegal: "We the People must take to the US Capitol lawn and steps and tell Congress #DoNotCertify on #JAN6!" Gosar was listed on the site as a marquee name. In the final days of the Trump administration, CNN reported that Gosar (among other members of Congress) had asked Trump for a preemptive pardon for his part in the events of January 6. He did not get one. (Tom Van Flein, Gosar's chief of staff, said in an email that both the pardon story and Alexander's account were "categorically false." He added, "Talking about a rally and speeches are one thing. Planning violence is another.")

Assembled in one place, the elements of the revisionist narrative from Gosar and his allies resemble a litigator's "argument in the alternative." January 6 was a peaceful exercise of First Amendment rights. Or it was violent, but the violence came from antifa and FBI plants. Or the violent people, the ones charged in court, are patriots and political prisoners.

Or, perhaps, they are victims of unprovoked violence themselves. "They get down there, and they get assaulted by the law-enforcement officers," Gabriel Pollock said in an interview from behind the counter at Rapture Guns and Knives in North Lakeland, Florida, speaking of family members who are facing criminal charges. "It was an ambush, is really what it was. All of that is going to come out in the court case."

The most potent symbol of the revisionists is Ashli Babbitt, the 35-year-old Air Force veteran and QAnon adherent who died from a gunshot wound to the left shoulder as she tried to climb through a broken glass door. The shooting came half an hour after the mob's near-encounter with Pence, and was an even closer call. This time the insurgents could see their quarry, dozens of House members clustered in the confined space of the Speaker's Lobby. Rioters slammed fists and feet and a helmet into the reinforced glass of the barricaded doorway, eventually creating a hole big enough for Babbitt.

Whether the shooting was warranted is debatable. Federal prosecutors cleared Lieutenant Michael Byrd of wrongdoing, and the Capitol Police exonerated him, saying, "The actions of the officer in this case potentially saved Members and staff from serious injury and possible death from a large crowd of rioters who … were steps away." The crowd was plainly eager to follow Babbitt through the breach, but a legal analysis in *Lawfare* argued that the unarmed Babbitt personally would have had to pose a serious threat to justify the shooting.

Gosar helped lead the campaign to make a martyr of Babbitt, who was shot wearing a Trump flag as a cape around her neck. "Who executed Ashli Babbitt?" he asked at a House hearing in May, before Byrd's identity was known. At another hearing, in June, he said the officer "appeared to be hiding, lying in wait, and then gave no warning before killing her."

"Was she on the right side of history?" I asked Gosar this summer.

"History has yet to be written," he replied. "Release the tapes, and then history can be written."

As word spread in right-wing circles that the then-unidentified officer was Black, race quickly entered the narrative. Henry "Enrique" Tarrio, the leader of the Proud Boys, shared a Telegram message from another user that said, "This black man was waiting to execute someone on january 6th. He chose Ashli Babbitt." An account called "Justice for January 6" tweeted that Byrd "should be in jail for the execution of Ashli Babbitt, but instead he is being lauded as a hero. The ONLY racial injustice in America today is antiwhiteism."

The penultimate stage of the new narrative held that Democrats had seized upon false accusations of rebellion in order to unleash the "deep state" against patriotic Americans. Dylan Martin, a student leader at the Las Vegas event at which Gosar spoke, adopted that view. "The Democratic Party seems to be using [January 6] as a rallying cry to persecute and completely use the force of the federal government to clamp down on conservatives across the nation," he told me.

Trump himself proposed the final inversion of January 6 as a political symbol: "The insurrection took place on November 3, Election Day. January 6 was the Protest!" he wrote in a statement released by his fundraising group in October.

It is difficult today to find a Republican elected official who will take issue with that proposition in public. With Trump loyalists ascendant, no room is left for dissent in a party now fully devoted to twisting the electoral system for the former president. Anyone who thinks otherwise need only glance toward Wyoming, where Liz Cheney, so recently in the party's power elite, has been toppled from her leadership post and expelled from the state Republican Party for lèse-majesté.

> AT 2:26, THE SECRET SERVICE AGENTS TOLD PENCE AGAIN THAT HE HAD TO MOVE. "THE THIRD TIME THEY CAME IN," THE VICE PRESIDENT'S CHIEF OF STAFF TOLD ME, "IT WASN'T REALLY A CHOICE."

IN THE FIRST DAYS of January 2021, as Trump and his legal advisers squeezed Pence to stop the electoral count, they told the vice president that state legislatures around the country were on the cusp of replacing electors who'd voted for Biden with those who would vote for Trump. They were lying, but they were trying mightily to make it true.

Marc Short, Pence's closest adviser, did not think it would happen. "In any sort of due diligence that we did with a Senate majority leader, a House minority leader, or any of those people, it was clear that they had certified their results and there was no intention of a separate slate of electors or any sort of challenge to that certification," he told me. Trump might have support for his maneuver from "one or two" legislators in a given state, "but that was never something that actually garnered the support of a majority of any elected body."

The letter from wavering Pennsylvania state senators suggests that the situation wasn't quite so black-and-white; the dams were

First, third, and fourth photos (left to right): Protesters rally in Michigan in the days after the election. *Second photo:* A woman bears a flag inscribed with the Second Amendment at a gun-rights rally in Virginia earlier in 2020.

beginning to crack. Even so, Trump's demand—that statehouses fire their voters and hand him the votes—was so far beyond the bounds of normal politics that politicians found it difficult to conceive.

With the passage of a year, it is no longer so hard. There is precedent now for the conversation, the next time it happens, and there are competent lawyers to smooth the path. Most of all, there is the roaring tide of revanchist anger among Trump supporters, rising up against anyone who would thwart his will. Scarcely an elected Republican dares resist them, and many surf exultantly in their wake.

A year ago I asked the Princeton historian Kevin Kruse how he explained the integrity of the Republican officials who said no, under pressure, to the attempted coup in 2020 and early '21. "I think it did depend on the personalities," he told me. "I think you replace those officials, those judges, with ones who are more willing to follow the party line, and you get a different set of outcomes."

Today that reads like a coup plotter's to-do list. Since the 2020 election, Trump's acolytes have set about methodically identifying patches of resistance and pulling them out by the roots. Brad Raffensperger in Georgia, who refused to "find" extra votes for Trump? Formally censured by his state party, primaried, and stripped of his power as chief election officer. Aaron Van Langevelde in Michigan, who certified Biden's victory? Hounded off the Board of State Canvassers. Governor Doug Ducey in Arizona, who signed his state's "certificate of ascertainment" for Biden? Trump has endorsed a former Fox 10 news anchor named Kari Lake to succeed him, predicting that she "will fight to restore Election Integrity (both past and future!)." *Future*, here, is the operative word. Lake says she would not have certified Biden's victory in Arizona, and even promises to revoke it (somehow) if she wins. None of this is normal.

Arizona's legislature, meanwhile, has passed a law forbidding Katie Hobbs, the Democratic secretary of state, to take part in election lawsuits, as she did at crucial junctures last year. The legislature is also debating an extraordinary bill asserting its own prerogative, "by majority vote at any time before the presidential inauguration," to "revoke the secretary of state's issuance or certification of a presidential elector's certificate of election." There was no such thing under law as a method to "decertify" electors when Trump demanded it in 2020, but state Republicans think they have invented one for 2024.

In at least 15 more states, Republicans have advanced new laws to shift authority over elections from governors and career officials



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in the executive branch to the legislature. Under the Orwellian banner of "election integrity," even more have rewritten laws to make it harder for Democrats to vote. Death threats and harassment from Trump supporters have meanwhile driven nonpartisan voting administrators to contemplate retirement.

Vernetta Keith Nuriddin, 52, who left the Fulton County, Georgia, election board in June, told me she had been bombarded with menacing emails from Trump supporters. One email, she recalled, said, "You guys need to be publicly executed … on pay per view." Another, a copy of which she provided me, said, "Tick, Tick, Tick" in the subject line and "Not long now" as the message. Nuriddin said she knows colleagues on at least four county election boards who resigned in 2021 or chose not to renew their positions.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, excommunicated and primaried at Trump's behest for certifying Biden's victory, nonetheless signed a new law in March that undercuts the power of the county authorities who normally manage elections. Now a GOP-dominated state board, beholden to the legislature, may overrule and take control of voting tallies in any jurisdiction—for example, a heavily Black and Democratic one like Fulton County. The State Election Board can suspend a county board if it deems the board to be "underperforming" and replace it with a handpicked administrator. The administrator, in turn, will have final say on disqualifying voters and declaring ballots null and void. Instead of complaining about balls and strikes, Team Trump will now own the referee.

"The best-case scenario is [that in] the next session this law is overturned," Nuriddin said. "The worst case is they start just pulling election directors across the state."

The Justice Department has filed suit to overturn some provisions of the new Georgia law—but not to challenge the hostile takeover of election authorities. Instead, the federal lawsuit takes issue with a long list of traditional voter-suppression tactics that, according to Attorney General Merrick Garland, have the intent and effect of disadvantaging Black voters. These include prohibitions and "onerous fines" that restrict the distribution of absentee ballots, limit the use of ballot drop boxes, and forbid handing out food or water to voters waiting in line. These provisions make it harder, by design, for Democrats to vote in Georgia. The provisions that Garland did not challenge make it easier for Republicans to fix the outcome. They represent danger of a whole different magnitude.

The coming midterm elections, meanwhile, could tip the balance further. Among the 36 states that will choose new governors

in 2022, three are presidential battlegrounds—Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan—where Democratic governors until now have thwarted attempts by Republican legislatures to cancel Biden's victory and rewrite election rules. Republican challengers in those states have pledged allegiance to the Big Lie, and the contests look to be competitive. In at least seven states, Big Lie Republicans have been vying for Trump's endorsement for secretary of state, the office that will oversee the 2024 election. Trump has already endorsed three of them, in the battleground states of Arizona, Georgia, and Michigan.

Down in the enlisted ranks, Trump's army of the dispossessed is hearing language from Republican elected officials that validates an instinct for violence. Angry rhetoric comparing January 6 to 1776 (Representative Lauren Boebert) or vaccine requirements to the Holocaust (Kansas House Representative Brenda Landwehr) reliably produces death threats by the hundreds against perceived enemies—whether Democratic or Republican.

The infinite scroll of right-wing social media is relentlessly bloody-minded. One commentator on Telegram posted on January 7 that "the congress is literally begging the people to hang them." Another replied, "Anyone who certifies a fraudulent election has commited treason punishable by death." One week later came, "The last stand is a civil war." In response, another user wrote, "No protests. To late for that." The fire burns, if anything, even hotter now, a year later.

Opposite page: A participant in a September 2020 Proud Boys rally in Portland, Oregon, in support of Donald Trump

AMID ALL THIS FERMENT, Trump's legal team is fine-tuning a constitutional argument that is pitched to appeal to a five-justice majority if the 2024 election reaches the Supreme Court. This, too, exploits the GOP advantage in statehouse control. Republicans are promoting an "independent state legislature" doctrine, which holds that statehouses have "plenary," or exclusive, control of the rules for choosing presidential electors. Taken to its logical conclusion, it could provide a legal basis for any state legislature to throw out an election result it dislikes and appoint its preferred electors instead.

Elections are complicated, and election administrators have to make hundreds of choices about election machinery and procedures—the time, place, and manner of voting or counting or canvassing—that the legislature has not specifically authorized. A judge or county administrator may hold polls open for an extra hour to make up for a power outage that temporarily halts voting. Precinct workers may exercise their discretion to help voters "cure" technical errors on their ballots. A judge may rule that the state constitution limits or overrides a provision of state election law.

Four justices—Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Clarence Thomas—have already signaled support for a doctrine that disallows any such deviation from the election rules passed by a state legislature. It is an absolutist reading of legislative control over the "manner" of appointing electors under Article II of the U.S. Constitution. Justice Amy Coney Barrett, Trump's last appointee, has never opined on the issue.

The question could arise, and Barrett's vote could become decisive, if Trump again asks a Republican-controlled legislature to set aside a Democratic victory at the polls. Any such legislature would be able to point to multiple actions during the election that it had not specifically authorized. To repeat, that is the norm for how elections are carried out today. Discretionary procedures are baked into the cake. A Supreme Court friendly to the doctrine of independent state legislatures would have a range of remedies available to it; the justices might, for instance, simply disqualify the portion of the votes that were cast through "unauthorized" procedures. But one of those remedies would be the nuclear option: throwing out the vote altogether and allowing the state legislature to appoint electors of its choosing.

Trump is not relying on the clown-car legal team that lost nearly every court case last time. The independent-state-legislature doctrine has a Federalist Society imprimatur and attorneys from top-tier firms like BakerHostetler. A dark-money voter-suppression group that calls itself the Honest Elections Project has already featured the argument in an amicus brief.

"One of the minimal requirements for a democracy is that popular elections will determine political leadership," Nate Persily, a Stanford Law School expert on election law, told me. "If a legislature can effectively overrule the popular vote, it turns democracy on its head." Persily and UC Irvine's Hasen, among other election-law scholars, fear that the Supreme Court could take an absolutist stance that would do exactly that.

One sign that legislative supremacy is more than a hypothetical construct is that it has migrated into the talking points of Republican elected officials. On ABC's *This Week*, for example, while refusing to opine on whether Biden had stolen the election, House Minority Whip Steve Scalise explained in February 2021, "There were a few states that did not follow their state laws. That's really the dispute that you've seen continue on." Trump himself has absorbed enough of the argument to tell the *Washington Post* reporters Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, "The legislatures of the states did not approve all of the things that were done for those elections. And under the Constitution of the United States, they have to do that."

THERE IS A clear and present danger that American democracy will not withstand the destructive forces that are now converging upon it. Our two-party system has only one party left that is willing to lose an election. The other is willing to win at the cost of breaking things that a democracy cannot live without.

Democracies have fallen before under stresses like these, when the people who might have defended them were transfixed by disbelief. If ours is to stand, its defenders have to rouse themselves.

Joe Biden looked as though he might do that on the afternoon of July 13. He traveled to the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, which features on its facade an immense reproduction of the Preamble in 18th-century script, to deliver what was billed as a major address on democracy.

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What followed was incongruous. Biden began well enough, laying out how the core problem of voting rights had changed. It was "no longer just about who gets to vote" but "who gets to count the vote." There were "partisan actors" seizing power from independent election authorities. "To me, this is simple: This is election subversion," he said. "They want the ability to reject the final count and ignore the will of the people if their preferred candidate loses."

He described the means by which the next election might be stolen, though vaguely: "You vote for certain electors to vote for somebody for president" and then a "state legislator comes along … and they say, 'No, we don't like those electors. We're going to appoint other electors who are going to vote for the other guy or other woman.'"

And he laid down a strong marker as he reached his rhetorical peak.

"We're facing the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War. That's not hyperbole," he said. "I'm not saying this to alarm you. I'm saying this because you should be alarmed."

But then, having looked directly toward the threat on the horizon, Biden seemed to turn away, as if he doubted the evidence before his eyes. There was no appreciable call to action, save for the bare words themselves: "We've got to act." Biden's list of remedies was short and grossly incommensurate with the challenge. He expressed support for two bills—the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act—that were dead on arrival in the Senate because Democrats had no answer to the Republican filibuster. He said the attorney general would double the Department of Justice staff devoted to voting-rights enforcement. Civil-rights groups would "stay vigilant." Vice President Kamala Harris would lead "an all-out effort to educate voters about the changing laws, register them to vote, and then get the vote out."

And then he mentioned one last plan that proved he did not accept the nature of the threat: "We will be asking my Republican friends—in Congress, in states, in cities, in counties—to stand up, for God's sake, and help prevent this concerted effort to undermine our elections and the sacred right to vote."

So: enforcement of inadequate laws, wishful thinking about new laws, vigilance, voter education, and a friendly request that Republicans stand athwart their own electoral schemes.

DONALD TRUMP CAME CLOSER THAN ANYONE THOUGHT HE COULD TO TOPPLING A FREE ELECTION A YEAR AGO. HE IS PREPARING IN PLAIN VIEW TO DO IT AGAIN.

Conspicuously missing from Biden's speech was any mention even of filibuster reform, without which voting-rights legislation is doomed. Nor was there any mention of holding Trump and his minions accountable, legally, for plotting a coup. Patterson, the retired firefighter, was right to say that nobody has been charged with insurrection; the question is, why not? The Justice Department and the FBI are chasing down the foot soldiers of January 6, but there is no public sign that they are building cases against the men and women who sent them. Absent consequences, they will certainly try again. An unpunished plot is practice for the next.

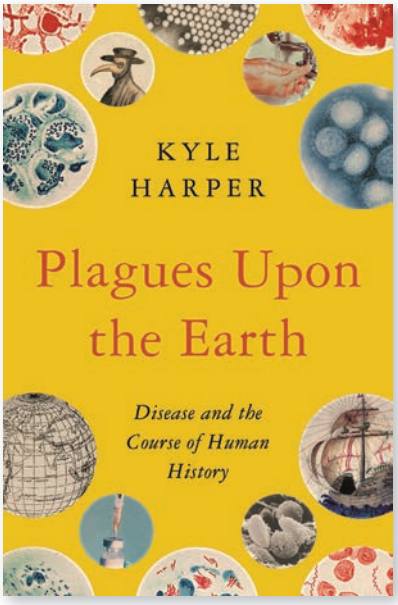
DONALD TRUMP came closer than anyone thought he could to toppling a free election a year ago. He is preparing in plain view to do it again, and his position is growing stronger. Republican acolytes have identified the weak points in our electoral apparatus and are methodically exploiting them. They have set loose and now are driven by the animus of tens of millions of aggrieved Trump supporters who are prone to conspiracy thinking, embrace violence, and reject democratic defeat. Those supporters, Robert Pape's "committed insurrectionists," are armed and single-minded and will know what to do the next time Trump calls upon them to act.

Democracy will be on trial in 2024. A strong and clear-eyed president, faced with such a test, would devote his presidency to meeting it. Biden knows better than I do what it looks like when a president fully marshals his power and resources to face a challenge. It doesn't look like this.

The midterms, marked by gerrymandering, will more than likely tighten the GOP's grip on the legislatures in swing states. The Supreme Court may be ready to give those legislatures near-absolute control over the choice of presidential electors. And if Republicans take back the House and Senate, as oddsmakers seem to believe they will, the GOP will be firmly in charge of counting the electoral votes.

Against Biden or another Democratic nominee, Donald Trump may be capable of winning a fair election in 2024. He does not intend to take that chance. *A*

Barton Gellman is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *Joe Stephens contributed research and reporting.*



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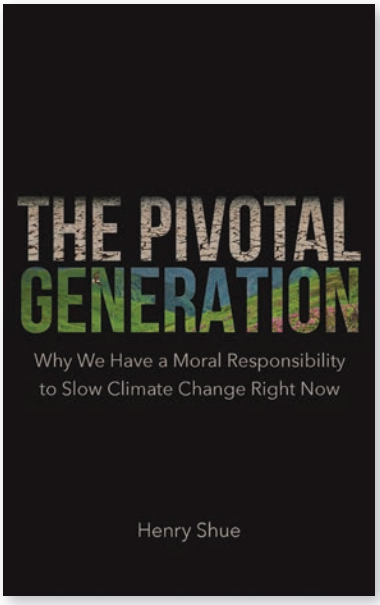

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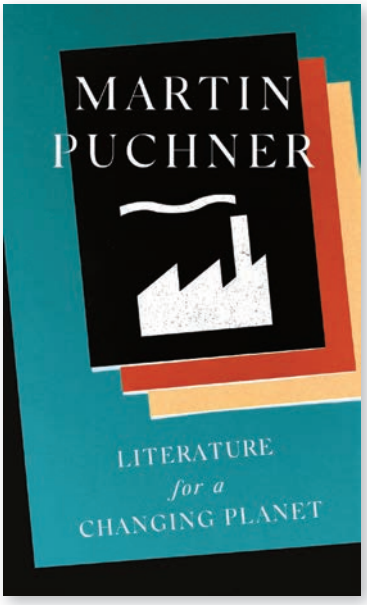

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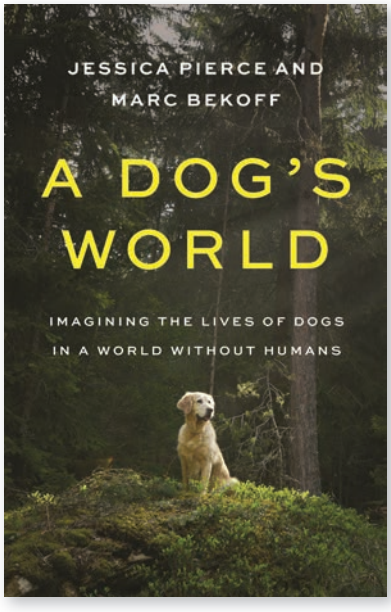

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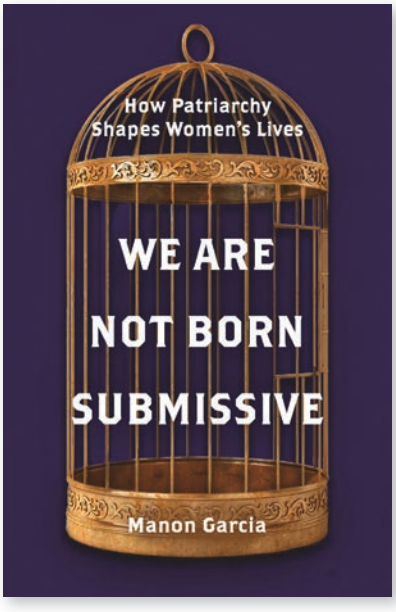


"A rare achievement of accessibility and rigor, this is an excellent book on Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy and contemporary relevance."

—Kate Kirkpatrick, author of *Becoming Beauvoir*

THE

AFTER JANUARY 6, PETER MEIJER THOUGHT HE COULD HELP LEAD THE GOP AWAY FROM AN ABYSS. NOW HE LAUGHS AT HIS OWN NAÏVETÉ.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KHOLOOD EID FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

FRESHMAN

By Tim Alberta

the second Tuesday of January, Peter Meijer, a 33-year-old freshman congressman from West Michigan, paced the half-unpacked rooms of his new rental apartment in Washington, D.C., dreading the decision he would soon have to make.

Six days earlier, Meijer had pulled a smoke hood over his face and fled the U.S. House of Representatives as insurgents broke into the lower chamber. They were attempting to prevent Congress from certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election. Meijer had been on the job for all of three days. Once the Capitol was secured, he cast his vote to certify the election results. It was his first real act as a federal lawmaker—one he believed was perfunctory. Except that it wasn't. The majority of his fellow House Republicans refused to certify the results, launching an assault on the legitimacy of American democracy.

That entire day—the vote, as much as the attack—had caught Meijer unprepared. His party's leadership had provided no guidance to its members, leaving everyone to navigate a squall of rumor and disinformation in one-man lifeboats.

The next week, when Democrats introduced an article of impeachment and promptly scheduled a vote, seeking to hold President Donald Trump accountable for inciting the mob's siege of the Capitol, Meijer steeled himself for some tough conversations within his party. But those conversations never happened: Most of Trump's staunchest defenders were too shell-shocked to defend him, even behind closed doors, and the Republican leadership in the House was once again AWOL. There were no whipping efforts, no strategy sessions, no lectures on procedure or policy. Barreling toward one of the most consequential votes in modern history, everyone was on their own.

For Meijer, the stillness was unsettling. He felt that impeachment was warranted—"The vice president and the next two in the line of succession were inside the Capitol as it was being assaulted," he says, "and for three hours the president was nowhere to be found"—but he longed for a dialogue. Growing up, he'd heard the legend of how a family friend, President Gerald Ford, had pardoned Richard Nixon in an act of mercy after Nixon had resigned to avoid the humiliation of being impeached and removed. Meijer's first political memory was made watching the impeachment of Bill Clinton. Even as a kid, he sensed that it was trouble for the country. Now, after just over a week in office, he was bracing himself to vote to impeach the president of the United States—a president from his own party—without so much as a caucus meeting where competing cases might be presented.

Meijer felt angry and betrayed, "like I'd seen something sacred get trampled on." He told himself that Trump needed to pay. But he worried that a rash impeachment of the president might unleash an even uglier convulsion than the one he'd just survived. And he knew that by voting to impeach he might be committing "career suicide before my career ever began." In the days leading up to the vote, Meijer says, he barely slept.

"It was the worst 96 hours of my life," he says.

Whatever his final decision, Meijer didn't want to blindside the people back in his district. So he began making calls. The conversations did not go well. Meijer remembers one man, "a prominent business leader in Grand Rapids," arguing that the election had been stolen, that Trump was entitled to a second term, that Meijer was a pawn of the "deep state." The man went "full QAnon," spouting conspiracy theories and threatening him with vague but menacing consequences if he voted to impeach. Meijer was well acquainted with that kind of talk; one of his own siblings was fully in the grip of right-wing conspiracies. Even so, the conversation "shook me to my core," Meijer says, "because the facade had been stripped away. It showed me just how bad this had gotten."

After Meijer hung up, he leafed through a copy of *The Federalist Papers*, hoping for an epiphany. He texted with friends. He talked with his wife. Finally, he consulted a list he'd compiled of like-minded members with whom he wanted to compare notes. It was a short list, and Meijer had already talked with most of them: Liz Cheney of Wyoming; Adam Kinzinger of Illinois; Fred Upton, who represented a neighboring district in Michigan. But there was one he had yet to connect with: Anthony Gonzalez, a second-term congressman from Ohio.

When Meijer reached Gonzalez on the phone, the call turned into a therapy session. Meijer kept debating with himself; meanwhile, Gonzalez, who had also been ambivalent, grew ever more adamant that Trump must be impeached. Meijer asked his colleague to explain the source of his certainty. "I can convince myself not to vote for impeachment," Gonzalez said. "But if my son asks me in 20 years why I didn't vote for impeachment, I couldn't convince him."

The next morning, January 13, Meijer received an encrypted message just as he was arriving at the Capitol. It was from a senior White House official, someone who'd heard he was on the fence,

urging the new congressman to vote for impeachment. Meijer was stunned, but he'd already made up his mind anyway. Later that day, he joined Gonzalez and eight other House Republicans in voting to impeach Trump. Meijer was the only freshman among them—and the only freshman in U.S. history to vote to impeach a president of his own party.

"Of the 10, I've got the most respect for Peter—because he was brand-new," Kinzinger, one of the GOP's anti-Trump ringleaders, told me. "There were other freshmen who talked a big game, but the pressure got to them. Honestly, on the day before the vote, I thought we'd have 25 with us. Then it fell apart; I'm surprised we wound up with 10. But what I recognized with Peter, during our conversations, was that he never talked about the political implications. And that was rare. If someone brought up the political implications, that was a good indicator that they weren't going to vote with us. But the people who never brought it up, I knew they would follow through. And Peter was one of them."

Meijer figured there could be no turning back. And he was fine with that. The country needed a come-to-Jesus conversation about political extremism. The Republican Party needed an intervention over its addiction to Trump. He was going to help facilitate both—even if it meant forfeiting his career. He might lose his next election, he thought, but at least his group of 10 could offer "hope for some who wanted to [see] the Republican Party get past the darkness and the violence and that sense of foreboding and doom."

MEIJER FIGURED THERE COULD BE NO TURNING BACK. AND HE WAS FINE WITH THAT. THE REPUBLICAN PARTY NEEDED AN INTERVENTION.

After the vote, Meijer's congressional office—still barely staffed—was inundated with calls and messages. His cellphone throbbed with furious texts and emails. Meijer knew he had to get away. January 6 had ushered in a new era of political mayhem, and one week later, he had put a bull's-eye on his own back. He rented a small place off the grid, packed his bags, and departed Washington with his wife. As he left town, something he'd said to Gonzalez earlier that day echoed through his mind.

"We're in this together," Meijer had told him.

PETER MEIJER DIDN'T RUN for Congress to fight for the sanity of the country or the soul of the Republican Party. If anything, he'd hoped to represent a cease-fire. Justin Amash, the congressman who represented Michigan's Third District for a decade, had by virtue of his constant criticism of Trump worn out his welcome with many Republican voters. When Amash made it known in the summer of 2019 that he'd be leaving the party to become an independent, Meijer announced that he would seek the Republican nomination. Convinced that Trumpism was a distraction from the country's most pressing problems, Meijer ran a campaign that reflected a certain strategic detachment. He pledged to work with the president wherever possible, and ignore him whenever necessary. He denounced Amash's calls for Trump's first impeachment—for soliciting Ukraine's assistance in his reelection campaign—telling a local news outlet, "I think the American people deserve better than political theater in the House of Representatives."

Meijer had been born into nearly universal name recognition in Michigan: His great-grandfather Hendrik Meijer had founded the Meijer grocery-store chain there, which his grandfather and father grew into a behemoth, with nearly 250 stores throughout the Midwest. As a teen, he tried to avoid the attention and expectations that came with his last name by spelling it *Meyer* at East Grand Rapids High School. He left home for Columbia University, where he interrupted his undergraduate studies to deploy to Iraq as an Army intelligence specialist. Later, after spending 18 months in Afghanistan as a conflict analyst, he finished graduate school at NYU and found work doing urban redevelopment in Detroit. By then—and, he swears, without meaning to—he'd compiled quite the political résumé.

When he was elected with a six-point margin in November 2020, Meijer had no plans to become a troublemaker. He hoped to prioritize economic competitiveness with China. He wanted more oversight and accountability for troop deployments. He saw himself as a sober-minded person, someone who wasn't heading to Congress for the culture wars or the tribal showdowns.

And then he got to Washington. Freshman orientation was a blur of propaganda and innuendo and state-sanctioned conspiracy mongering. Meijer watched, from a hotel lounge, as the president's lawyers Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell held a deranged press conference at the headquarters of the Republican National Committee. New members listened to powerful lawmakers leveling accusations that had no apparent basis in fact. They compared the crazed voicemails they were getting from friends and

family members and swapped stories of the intimidation they were subjected to by voters demanding that they overturn the presidential-election result.

Dismayed, a group of freshman Republicans asked for a meeting with Kevin McCarthy shortly after their swearing-in. According to multiple people who attended that meeting, the House minority leader refused to give them advice, explicit or implicit, about how to vote on the election certification. Whereas Mitch McConnell was whipping furiously for certification in his Senate caucus, McCarthy left his new House members without a clue as to the party's position on whether Congress should obey the Constitution. When they pressed him—one of the freshmen asked whether Trump was crazy enough to believe that decertification would somehow keep him in office—McCarthy replied, "The thing you have to understand about Donald Trump is that he hasn't been in government that long. He doesn't know how these things work."

As word got around that the freshmen were up for grabs, a lobbying blitz commenced. Some of the House hard-liners who sought to block certification—Mo Brooks, Jim Jordan, Matt Gaetz—shared discredited YouTube testimonies and Fox News clips to emphasize how the issue was playing with the conservative base. Countering that influence were the likes of Kinzinger and Cheney, who sat down with rookie lawmakers for one-on-one conversations, warning them of the precedent they would set by objecting to the election results. Meijer remembers one longtime member—who confessed that he did not believe the election had been stolen but said he would vote against certification anyway—telling him: "This is the last thing Donald Trump will ever ask you to do."

MEIJER REMEMBERS ONE LONGTIME MEMBER TELLING HIM: "THIS IS THE LAST THING DONALD TRUMP WILL EVER ASK YOU TO DO."

Meijer knew that some Republicans had sincere concerns about election integrity; he himself feared that Democratic officials had taken advantage of the coronavirus pandemic and exceeded their authority to enroll absentee voters. But whatever issues he had with the way certain states had administered the election, those states had since ratified their results and submitted slates of electors to Congress to be counted. Under the Constitution, there was nothing left to do but count them and certify the final tally. Meijer says his colleagues chose to embrace a bad-faith interpretation of basic law; rather than a ministerial duty, the certification vote became "just another way to make your base happy" and humor the president, he says. "A lot of these people were just shrugging. But, I mean, we'd be basically destroying the Electoral College."

On January 6, when both bodies of Congress convened in the House chamber, Speaker Nancy Pelosi asked most of the lawmakers to move up to the gallery as the proceedings began. Not long after that, Representative Paul Gosar announced his objection to the results in his home state of Arizona, the third in the alphabetical roll call. The senators adjourned to their side of the Capitol to deliberate, and Meijer excused himself for a bathroom break. Wandering, lost on his third day at work, he eventually found an elevator, which took him all the way down to the subbasement, where he discovered a restroom. When he walked out a few minutes later, he saw a Capitol Police officer sprinting down the corridor, yelling into his radio: "Hallway clear!"

Meijer's gut told him something was very wrong. But his brain dissented. *This is the United States Capitol*, he told himself. *Nobody's getting in here*. Walking back with barely a brisker pace to the gallery, he discovered another officer guarding the door. "You want to be locked in," he asked Meijer, "or locked out?" That seemed like an easy call. "I said to myself, *There's no safer place to be than inside the chamber*," Meijer remembers. It was his final moment of political innocence. Inside, members were fielding panicked calls from staff and sharing reports of the complex being breached and of tear gas in the Rotunda. As the rioters approached the chamber, their chanting now audible, Capitol Police shouted warnings for members to stay away from the windows.

The sergeant at arms had been pleading for calm, but suddenly his tone changed. He announced that smoke hoods were under the chairs and told members to put them on. Then he ordered an evacuation of the chamber. As Meijer helped a colleague with her hood, the mob was banging on the doors. Then a window shattered. While they looked down on some of their senior-most colleagues being rushed off the floor, Stephanie Bice, a fellow Republican freshman from Oklahoma, told Meijer that they were witnessing history. Stunned, she suggested that he take a photo. Meijer was already recording video on his iPhone. "Sad, sad, sad fucking history," he told her.

The Capitol Police herded members into elevators and sent them down to the sub-basement. For a few minutes—it felt much longer—they were on their own. "What's going through my mind is, what happens if we turn the corner and see a group of rioters? We're a large percentage of the House of Representatives, and we have no police presence with us. We're wandering through a tunnel system that connects to buildings that have been evacuated," Meijer recalls. "Nobody was in control of the situation."

They found their way to a cafeteria in the Rayburn Building. But as soon as Capitol Police discovered them and noticed the windows facing out to the ground floor, they ordered another evacuation. This time, Capitol Police escorted them into the Longworth Building, to the Ways and Means Committee room, and set up a security perimeter outside. Catching his breath, Meijer felt like he was back in a war zone.

Inside the committee room, there was "a lot of tension, a lot of suspicion" among the members. There was no fraternizing across party lines; Democrats huddled with Democrats and Republicans with Republicans. But there was a shared sense of dread. "The folks who whipped up [the violence] were just as terrified as everyone else; they fled like everyone else," Meijer says. "That was not 'Oh, our plan worked!' That was 'Oh, good God.'"

Meijer remembers straining to hear Nancy Pelosi giving a speech through a thick mask. He remembers raiding a refrigerator in the office of Kevin Brady, the ranking Republican on the committee, and drinking a beer to pass the time. And he remembers walking into a small side room and encountering two House Republican colleagues. "They were discussing the Twenty-Fifth Amendment—talking about phone calls they made to the White House, encouraging officials to invoke the Twenty-Fifth Amendment," Meijer says. "Neither of them voted for impeachment a week later."

When the Capitol was finally secured and members returned to the House chamber, Meijer expected an outraged, defiant House of Representatives to vote in overwhelming numbers to certify the election results, sending a message to the mob that Congress would not be scared away from fulfilling its constitutional obligations. But as he began talking with his colleagues, he was shocked to realize that more of them—perhaps far more of them—were now preparing to object to the election results than before the riot.

On the House floor, moments before the vote, Meijer approached a member who appeared on the verge of a breakdown. He asked his new colleague if he was okay. The member responded that he was not; that no matter his belief in the legitimacy of the election, he could no longer vote to certify the results, because he feared for his family's safety. "Remember, this wasn't a hypothetical. You were casting that vote after seeing with your own two eyes what some of these people are capable of," Meijer says. "If they're willing to come after you inside the U.S. Capitol, what will they do when you're at home with your kids?"

Meijer glanced down at his phone. It was crackling with messages from people in his district—some checking on his well-being; others warning him not to blow the insurrection out of proportion, arguing that it was little more than a spontaneous tour of the Capitol. He swiped past most of the missives. But one, from a longtime activist he'd gotten to know, caught his eye. "You better not buckle and wimp out to the liberals," the man wrote. "Those who stormed the Capital today are True American Heroes. This election was a fraud and you know that's true. Peter, don't sell us out!!!"

"Those who stormed the Capitol attacked our republic today," Meijer replied. "They trampled on the Constitution. We have a rule of law, courts, and peaceful means of resolving disputes."

"No Sir. They are showing their God Given America Right," the man texted back. "When the truth is being hidden, the Second Amendment gives every one of those people the right to do what they did today."

Meijer silenced his phone and cast his vote to certify the election.

FOR ALL THE NEGATIVES that defined Meijer's first weeks on the job—the incompetence and the cravenness, the violence and the threats—he emerged from the gantlet relieved that at least now he was liberated to speak his mind about the GOP's decay.

Meijer had never been a Trump guy. Like so many Republican candidates seeking to pass muster with the president's base, he had been careful to say the right things. He'd touted Trump's economic record. He'd ignored, or downplayed, much of his extreme rhetoric. But all the while, Meijer had studied Trump with trepidation. He viewed the 45th president as a manifestation of America's psychological imbalance, someone who reflected our anger and insecurities instead of our confidence and aspirations. He feared Trump's authoritarian instincts, but clung to a belief that the president's grip on the American right would soon loosen.

After the impeachment vote, Meijer felt he was positioned to advocate for what he believed would be an imminent, sweeping overhaul of the party. He threw himself into the public debate surrounding January 6. He became a fixture on national news programs. He accepted every invitation—especially those that seemed hostile—to address local party chapters. At every stop, in every setting, Meijer forced the issue, believing that he was on the right side of history, and that an awakening was at hand.

"As of late January," he says, "I thought there was the opportunity to have a harsh confrontation with reality. It was going to be a very unpleasant 18 months, 24 months, but maybe we would do the necessary soul-searching and reconstruction."

His optimism didn't last long. In February, two of the county-level Republican Parties in Meijer's district—Calhoun and Barry—voted to formally censure him. (Calhoun's leaders accused Meijer of having "betrayed the trust of so many who supported you and violate[d] our faith in our most basic constitutional values and protections.") The next month, as other local parties across Michigan were debating similar reprimands of both Meijer and Fred Upton, the state GOP chair joked with party activists that "assassination" was one remedy for dealing with the two of them.

By April, Meijer had a primary challenger. The criticism back home was unceasing; the only praise he received was whispered. National polls showed that tens of millions of Republican voters

Meijer (*right*) with Representative Kelly Armstrong of North Dakota (*left*) and Representative Stephanie Bice of Oklahoma (*center*) in the gallery of the House chamber shortly before rioters attempted to break in on January 6

TOM WILLIAMS / GETTY

still believed the election had been stolen. Looking around, Meijer saw that he was a leader without any following and realized how Pollyannaish he'd been. "It's like, 'All right, this is going to be a longer, deeper project than I thought,'" he says.

Meijer's sense of urgency gradually gave way to self-doubt. He began to wonder whether his appeals to decency and democracy came across as "pearl clutching." He could tell he was rubbing some of his constituents the wrong way—they could stomach a disagreement with their congressman; what they couldn't tolerate was the lecturing and the finger-wagging. He sensed that he might be doing more harm than good with his high-minded rhetoric. "I've come to realize the limitations of performative outrage," he says.

So he backed off. He took voters' earfuls in stride. He says he decided that "by actively trying to correct them, I may have been inadvertently postponing the self-correction" that would come with some distance from Trump's presidency.

Over time, the threats ebbed, the antagonistic encounters subsided, and Meijer got some semblance of his life back. He was able to spend more time on the policy issues he cared about. For most of his constituents, discussions of election integrity and January 6 and Meijer's vote for impeachment had become redundant—and boring. "We had a moment in one of our town halls [when] there were all these people who said, 'Can we talk about something else now?'" Meijer recalls.

In August, when I accompanied Meijer on a swing through his district during the congressional recess, something strange happened. A woman raised her hand, after Meijer's luncheon talk at a Grand Rapids country club, and asked him about "the insurrection" on January 6. Everyone fell still; the room full of old friends who'd been buying raffle tickets and cracking jokes was suddenly on edge. Meijer had once offered lively commentary on the matter. But on this day, he was restrained, giving a brief synopsis of his whereabouts when the Capitol was overrun.

In the parking lot a few minutes later, Meijer turned to me. "I haven't gotten that question in a long time," he said. Sure enough, in more than a dozen stops across his district over the summer and fall, this was the only one where I saw anyone ask Meijer about the madness of January. Most of the questions he got were about the "socialist" Democratic agenda, the GOP's prospects for taking back control of Congress in 2022, and President Joe Biden's disastrous exit from Afghanistan. (This last topic allowed Meijer numerous victory laps for the unauthorized trip he took to Kabul during the U.S. evacuation. Having been in the crosshairs of his own party for so long, Meijer was delighted to be rebuked by the White House.)

In October, Meijer stood inside a classroom at his alma mater, East Grand Rapids High School, taking questions from constitutional-studies students. This was the very class that had fueled Meijer's political imagination as a teenager. The sophomores and juniors he stood before were studying the same curriculum that had informed his core beliefs about America and the responsibilities of government. The students listened to Meijer warily. Finally, George, a shy-sounding student in the back of the room, raised his hand and announced that he had a question on behalf of his friends. "What we're wondering," George said sheepishly, "is how do you define what it means to be a Republican right now?"

Meijer thought for a moment. Then he launched into a soliloquy about how local control of political institutions produces

Photos from Meijer's iPhone: The House chamber being evacuated, and the January 7 newspapers delivered to his office, where he slept on the couch after voting to certify Biden's victory

more accountability, more efficiency, and better results. This was the answer to a question that George was not asking. The young man clearly wanted to understand how Meijer's version of Republicanism differed from the Trumpist one, how the congressman might distinguish his vision for the party from the current MAGA model. George told me, after class, that he was frustrated by Meijer's evasive response.

Later, over beers at a nearby pub, I reminded Meijer of his burden in the aftermath of the impeachment vote: He and the other nine dissenters were supposed to be "the hope" for their party's future. He had just spoken to a group of soon-to-be voters whose notions of Republicanism were formed by red hats and angry chants and crazed tweets. Meijer had just looked the party's future in the eye and acted as though all of that was normal. "How do you explain to George," I asked, "the difference between the Republican Party that fills his imagination and that scares him, versus the Republican Party that you want to represent?"

"Well, my Republican Party wouldn't scare him," Meijer said with a shrug.

I asked if he understood why George and his friends might be scared right now. He smirked. "The inability to affirmatively and consistently reject anti-Semitism and white supremacy?"

The fundamental problem, Meijer said, is that Republicans are offering no plans for improving lives and making the future a more promising place. Instead, the party continues to rely on grievance and fear—and misinformation—to scare voters into their ranks. But he didn't say any of this to George.

After our interview, Meijer went upstairs to a private lounge at the pub to mingle with small-business owners. For a guy who talks a lot about the "militants" in his party, he doesn't engage with them much. Meijer benefits from representing wealthy and well-educated pockets of West Michigan, an area where pious Dutch sensibilities tend to dull the partisan discourse. This means that he's relatively insulated from the hysteria some of his colleagues deal with daily. Meijer insists he's not numb to the enduring threat—he can still picture the man at a fairgrounds screaming "Motherfucking traitor!" at him—but he does believe, at least in his district, that the worst has passed.

"For a lot of people here, they swore that impeachment vote was the end for Peter Meijer," says Ben Geiger, the chair of the Barry County Republican Party, which voted in February to censure the congressman. "But I'll tell you, it hasn't come up much since [February]. He's been working hard on a lot of other things. I don't know if he's trying to make people forget—he's doing his job. But I do think some people have let it go."

This might be the best-case scenario for Meijer's own career—Republican voters forgiving and forgetting, politely moving on, putting January 6 behind them. It might also be the worst-case scenario for America.

HERE'S THE THING: Some people have not let it go. Large pluralities of Republican voters—depending on the poll, sometimes outright majorities of them—believe that the election was stolen. Thousands of demonstrators have protested at state-capitol buildings, demanding forensic audits of the 2020 results. Scores of local election officials nationwide have been run out of office, many of them replaced by people who insist that the system they're now charged with overseeing is rigged.

Meijer knows lots of people who can't let it go. There's one he thinks of every day: his sister.

PETER MEIJER

Haley Meijer is two years older than her brother. Along with a younger sister, they were close as children but grew into very different people: Peter the quiet, straitlaced rule follower; Haley the rebel. She was a hippie who bashed the family's conservative politics, then an avid Trump supporter eager for culture wars with the elitist left. More recently, she's become a QAnon follower and devout conspiracy theorist.

When Meijer announced his run for Congress, he said, Haley was enthusiastic. Which stood to reason: He was running against a Democrat—to the QAnon crowd, the party of pedophiles and cannibals—while promising to partner with Donald Trump to make America great again. Not long after his victory in November, however, Haley became fixated on the idea that the election had been rigged. She peppered him with bad stats and debunked rumors and thirdhand accounts of cheating. Meijer had checked with local officials in Michigan to confirm that everything—registration numbers, voter turnout, down-ballot patterns—added up. He tried telling her as much. "But she was down the rabbit hole, watching all the testimony from these cases brought by Rudy Giuliani. I'm watching the same hearings, trying to find anything that resembles sanity," he says. "And she's addicted."

When the mob invaded the Capitol on January 6, Meijer received a text message from his sister: "Sending love and prayers." He thanked her and confirmed that he was safe. But she was silent after he voted to certify the election that night, and after he voted to impeach Trump and was deluged with death threats. Soon after, Haley, a singer and songwriter based in Los Angeles, began commenting favorably on the Facebook posts of Tom Norton, who announced a campaign to defeat Meijer in the 2022 Republican primary. (Haley Meijer said in a statement that she loves and admires her brother, though they "have differing beliefs on certain subjects.")

In her worldview, Meijer says, "there's no room for disagreements. It's good versus evil. You have the side of light and the side of dark. You have God and you have Satan. And if you're not on the side of God, then what side are you on?"

This has been perhaps the most trying aspect of Meijer's job. While grieving his sister's obsession with conspiracy theories, he has to work alongside the very people, like fellow freshman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who are pushing those lies. "They make folks like my sister think they're on her team," Meijer says. "And that's what pisses me off. They aren't the ones paying the price when the consequences come due. Paul Gosar wasn't shot on January 6—Ashli Babbitt was."

I was surprised to hear Meijer mention Gosar, the conspiracy-spreading, white-nationalist-sympathizing congressman who in November was censured by the House for sharing an animated video that depicted him murdering Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In our many hours of conversation, Meijer had declined to call out any of his colleagues by name. (Watching him contort himself to avoid criticizing Kevin McCarthy was the closest I've come to seeing a man tortured.) This reticence, he explained, is his way of trying to bring down the temperature. Meijer is convinced that there are more Republicans like him—rational, pragmatic, disgusted by the turn the party has taken—than there are like Gosar. Because they have the numbers, he says, there's no need to engage in guerrilla tactics. They can reason and debate like adults. They can take the high road. They can play the long game.

WATCHING MEIJER CONTORT HIMSELF TO AVOID CRITICIZING KEVIN McCARTHY WAS THE CLOSEST I'VE COME TO SEEING A MAN TORTURED.

Maybe he's right. Or maybe this will prove a ruinous miscalculation. Whatever the numbers, the reality is that Meijer's side is getting quieter while the other side is getting louder. His side is letting go while the other side is digging in. His side is unilaterally disarming while the other side is escalating every day.

IN THE MIDDLE of September, Anthony Gonzalez announced that he was retiring from Congress. Describing the strain on his family—his wife and children required a police escort due to the threats against him—Gonzalez told *The New York Times* that seeking reelection wasn't worth it. I texted Meijer about the news. "Gutting," he wrote back.

When we spoke next, a few weeks later, Meijer sounded defeated. Although Gonzalez was the first of the 10 House Republican impeachment supporters to fall by the wayside, he wouldn't be the last. The stress of the past nine months had ground down the others in the group—which, he argued, is exactly what Trump and his cronies wanted. "What that faction is banking on is exhaustion," Meijer said. "They want life in the shoes of the 10 of us to be miserable." The question he and his friends now ask of themselves isn't just "Can I win reelection?" Instead, he said, "It's 'Am I going to have to talk for the next few years about Italian

military satellites and bamboo ballots and whatever [MyPillow CEO] Mike Lindell says?'"

In the days after January 6, Meijer believed he was part of a mission to rescue the Republican Party from itself. Now he laughs at his own naïveté. Ten people isn't a popular movement. And in truth, only two of them—Cheney and Kinzinger—have shown the stomach for the sort of sustained offensive that would be required to rehabilitate the GOP. The other eight, having glanced over their shoulders and seen no reinforcements on the way, chose varying degrees of retreat.

"I don't blame them. They did their tour in Vietnam; why would they want to go back?" Kinzinger told me in mid-October. "The responsibility for fixing the party isn't on the 10 of us; it's on the 180 who didn't do anything. It's kind of like Flight 93: If only a few people fight back, that plane hits the Capitol. But because everyone fought back, it didn't."

Two weeks after we spoke, Kinzinger announced his retirement from Congress.

In light of his side's attrition—Cheney kicked out of the GOP leadership, Gonzalez and Kinzinger quitting Congress—I asked Meijer how he now thinks about the divisions in his party. "There are people who are part of the problem," he said. "There are people who are actively trying to fight the problem. And then there are people who have become acutely aware of the problem, but don't know how to fight it."

Meijer wants to believe that he's in the second group. But more and more, he belongs in the third. He can see the foundational threats facing American self-government—but he can't decide how best to counteract them. If he now views the struggle to rebuild his party as a long-term proposition, then part of his job is "just surviving," he says, sticking around long enough to recruit allies and gain momentum to take back control of the GOP. It's a common instinct, and a dangerous one, because the party is playing its own long game.

In the fall, a bundled donation of $25,000 was deposited into Meijer's campaign account, courtesy of the National Republican Congressional Committee, which named him to its "Patriot Program." It was an honor not bestowed upon some of the others who'd voted for impeachment. Maybe this was Kevin McCarthy and the party leadership mending fences, signaling to Meijer that they value him despite his breaking rank. Or maybe it was the party rewarding his recent good behavior—and reminding him of the benefits of being a team player.

Meijer will face multiple primary challengers in 2022, including a Trump-administration official, John Gibbs, who already has the former president's endorsement against "RINO Congressman Peter Meijer." Because of the district's moderate makeup and his ample finances, Meijer is favored to win reelection. What comes next is murkier. It's already rumored in Michigan Republican circles that Meijer will run for U.S. Senate in 2024. Rising that quickly in today's GOP—from unknown Millennial to statewide nominee in the space of four years—will demand playing to the party base. That won't necessarily require the overt delegitimization of American democracy. A blind eye here, some radio silence there, will do the trick.

This is the essence of Meijer's struggle. He still wants to do the right thing; this fall, he was one of just nine House Republicans to vote to hold Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress for defying a subpoena issued by the committee investigating the January 6 insurrection. But Meijer also wants a future in a party that is controlled by the president he voted to exile. GOP elders have told Meijer that because he barely overlapped with Trump, he may not be on Mar-a-Lago's radar like some of the Republican stalwarts who voted to impeach. It's better not to poke the bear, they tell him; better to let Trump and his loyalists forget the name Peter Meijer altogether.

In this sense, the Republican Party is embracing that old definition of *insanity*. Its leaders believed they could wait out Trump's candidacy in 2016. Then they believed they could wait out his presidency. Now they believe they can wait him out yet again—even as the former president readies a campaign to reclaim his old job and makes clear his intent to run not just against a Democratic opponent but against democracy itself.

Meijer says he's "pretty much" resigned to Trump winning his party's nomination in 2024, and worries that the odds of Trump returning to the White House are growing stronger as Biden's presidency loses steam. Meijer knows the strain Trump's candidacy might place on a system that nearly buckled during the last election cycle. What's worse: Meijer sees Trump inspiring copycats, some of them far smarter and more sophisticated, enemies of the American ideal who might succeed where Trump failed.

"The real threat isn't Donald Trump; it's somebody who watched Donald Trump and can do this a lot better than he did," Meijer says.

The powerlessness in his voice when he says this is unnerving. In the space of a year, he transformed from a political romantic to an emboldened survivor to a daunted skeptic. He tried to force a reckoning on his party; now the reckoning is coming for Republicans like him.

At one point, Meijer described to me the psychological forces at work in his party, the reasons so many Republicans have refused to confront the tragedy of January 6 and the nature of the ongoing threat. Some people are motivated by raw power, he said. Others have acted out of partisan spite, or ignorance, or warped perceptions of truth and lies. But the chief explanation, he said, is fear. People are afraid for their safety. They are afraid for their careers. Above all, they are afraid of fighting a losing battle in an empty foxhole.

Meijer can't blame them. "I just feel lonely," he told me, sighing with exasperation.

Most of his colleagues, Meijer believes, want to be with him. They pat him on the back and whisper encouragement into his ear. They say they're rooting for his side. But they don't think his side can win. So they do nothing, convincing themselves that the problem will take care of itself, while guaranteeing that it will only get worse. *A*

Tim Alberta is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

THE CHILDREN ARE IN DANGER!

By Kaitlyn Tiffany

ACROSS AMERICA, WELL-MEANING CITIZENS ARE RAISING MONEY AND AWARENESS ABOUT A CHILD-SEX-TRAFFICKING EPIDEMIC THAT DOESN'T EXIST.

DES MOINES REGISTER / USA TODAY NETWORK; GHISLAIN AND MARIE DAVID DE LOSSY / GETTY; PETER BAKER / GETTY

A poster in the window

of Cahoots Corner Cafe—great potatoes, good coffee—advertised a family event at the Oakdale, California, rodeo grounds. There would be food trucks, carnival games, live music, a raffle, and the opportunity to support the cause of "freeing child sex slaves."

The event, called the Festival of Hope, was a fundraiser for the anti-child-sex-trafficking group Operation Underground Railroad, which was founded in Utah in 2013 and has achieved immense popularity on social media in the past year and a half, attracting an outsize share of attention during a new wave of concern about imperiled children. It is beloved by parenting groups on Facebook, lifestyle influencers on Instagram, and fitness guys on YouTube, who are impressed by its muscular approach to rescuing the innocent. (The nonprofit group is known for taking part in overseas sting operations in which it ensnares alleged child sex traffickers; it also operates a CrossFit gym in Utah.) Supporters commit to "shine OUR light"—the middle word a reference to the group's acronym—and to "break the chain," which refers to human bondage and to cycles of exploitation.

Oakdale, a small city near Modesto, is set among ever-dwindling cattle ranches and ever-expanding almond farms. By 9:30 a.m. on a Saturday in late summer, more than 100 booths lined the perimeter of the rodeo arena. Vendors sold crepes and jerky and quilts and princess makeovers and Cutco knives. (They paid a fee to participate, a portion of which went to OUR, as did the proceeds from raffle tickets.) Miniature horses with purple dye on their tails were said to be unicorns. A man with a guitar played "Free Fallin'" and then a twangier song referring to alcohol as "heartache medication," which was notable only because it was so incongruously depressing; everyone else was enjoying a beautiful day in the Central Valley. The air was filled with the perfect scent of hot dogs, and with much less wildfire smoke than there had been the day before.

At the OUR information booth and merchandise tent, stickers and rubber BREAK THE CHAIN bracelets were free, but snapback hats reading FIND GARDY—a reference to a Haitian boy who was kidnapped in 2009—cost $30. Shellie Enos-Forkapa had planned the day's event with help from three other Operation Underground Railroad volunteers, two of whom she had originally met through the local parent-teacher association. She was wearing an official FESTIVAL OF HOPE BENEFITING OPERATION UNDERGROUND RAILROAD T-shirt and earrings shaped like red X's, a symbol often paired with the anti-trafficking hashtag #EndItMovement. "Oakdale has been so welcoming," Enos-Forkapa told me. "They're behind the cause."

The women were busy dealing with festival logistics, but during a brief lull another volunteer, Ericka Gonzalez, drew me over to a corner of the tent to show me a video on her phone, which she thought might be called "Death to Pedos" but wasn't. It was called "Open Your Eyes," and Gonzalez pulled it up in the Telegram messaging app. "From the time we were little kids we revered the rich and famous," the voice-over began, as images of celebrities and of battered children flashed on the screen. As I started to take notes, she pulled the phone away and wondered aloud if she had done something she shouldn't have.

I watched the rest of the video a few minutes later, on my own phone. "We are digital soldiers, fighting the greatest war the world has never seen," the voice-over explained. The bad guys: Barack Obama, Ellen DeGeneres, Lady Gaga, Chuck Schumer, Tom Hanks, Oprah Winfrey, Hillary Clinton. The good guys, a much smaller team: Donald Trump, Ivanka Trump, Barron Trump, Jesus, and an unidentified soldier holding a baby swaddled in an American flag. And, by implication, me, the viewer. "Our weapon is truth," the voice-over continued as music swelled in the background. "We'll never give up, even if we have to shake everyone awake one by one."

The provenance of the video was unclear—it was not affiliated with Operation Underground Railroad and bore no resemblance to the official materials its volunteers had been handing out—but the term *digital soldier* rang a bell. It was a reference to a QAnon conspiracy theory that emerged in 2017 on an out-of-the-way message board and describes Donald Trump as a lone hero waging war against a "deep state" and a cabal of elites who are pedophiles and child murderers; these conspirators will soon be exposed—and perhaps brutally executed—during a promised "storm." Notably, the video isn't asking for money, and isn't presenting an argument. It's more like a daily devotional for people who already believe in its premise, or something like it.

Anxiety about the nation's children, which is at a steady simmer in the best of times, boiled over in the summer of 2020, when the digital soldiers of QAnon occupied the otherwise innocuous hashtag #SaveTheChildren. Around the same time, major social-media platforms had started blocking overt QAnon accounts and hashtags. From their new beachhead, the digital soldiers were able to disseminate a cascade of false information about child trafficking on Instagram and Facebook: Children were being trafficked on the hospital ship USNS Comfort, then docked in New York City, and through tunnels underneath Central Park.

As outrageous as these allegations were, their timing may have made them sound less fantastical to some. They coincided with the release of popular documentaries about the real sex-trafficking crimes allegedly committed by Jeffrey Epstein, the

disgraced financier who was arrested in July 2019 and committed suicide that August, and who was known for his wide circle of rich and famous acquaintances. (His death had set off a new slew of conspiracy theories.) In this context, the suddenly ubiquitous #SaveTheChildren posts created the illusion of an organic movement rising up to confront a massive social problem. Americans who knew little about QAnon became heavily involved, and when QAnon moved on to other concerns—a stolen election, a poisonous vaccine—these volunteers stayed devoted to the cause of opposing child sex trafficking.

Today, buying a raffle ticket to support this effort feels as natural to many people as picking up a LIVESTRONG bracelet at a car-wash cash register did 15 years ago. Small businesses sponsor fundraisers. Happy couples add Operation Underground Railroad donation links to their online wedding registries. All over the country, community volunteers promote awareness of child sex trafficking: In Colorado, at a Kentucky Derby party. In Arkansas, at an Easter bake sale. In Texas, at a "Big A$$ Crawfish Bash." In Idaho, at a Thanksgiving-morning "turkey run." In Utah, at an annual winter-holiday fair.

In some ways, this is just the most recent expression of a fear that has been part of the American landscape since the early 20th century—roughly the moment, as the sociologist Viviana Zelizer has argued, when children came to be viewed as "economically useless but emotionally priceless." As in previous moral panics, messages about the threat of child sex trafficking are spread by means of friendly chitchat, flyers in the windows of diners, and coverage on local TV news.

But the present panic is different in one important respect: It is sustained by the social web. On Facebook and Instagram, friends and neighbors share unsettling statistics and dire images in formats designed for online communities that reward displays of concern. Because today's messaging about child sex trafficking is so decentralized and fluid, it is impervious to gatekeepers who would knock down its most outlandish claims. The phenomenon suggests the possibility of a new law of social-media physics: A panic in motion can stay in motion.

"PEDOPHILES CAN BE ANYONE," Laura Pamatian, at the time a Palm Beach–based volunteer team leader for Operation Underground Railroad, wrote on Facebook in June. "They look just like you and me. They work with us … they sit next to us at our favorite restaurant … they are shopping with us at the grocery store." To raise awareness, and funds, for Operation Underground Railroad, Pamatian helped organize a statewide motorcycling event. "It's about saving children who are being raped and abused by pedophiles 10, 20, 30 times a day!" she wrote. "And I don't say that to sensationalize the topic, I say it because it's TRUE and it's happening and NO ONE is talking about it!" Her volunteer chapter claimed that "upwards of 300,000" children are victims of sex trafficking in the United States every year.

All over the country, well-meaning Americans are convinced that human trafficking—and specifically child sex trafficking—is happening right in their backyard, or at any rate no farther away than the nearest mall parking lot. A 2020 survey by the political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Adam Enders found that 35 percent of Americans think the number of children who are victims of trafficking each year is about 300,000 or higher; 24 percent think it is "much higher." Online, people read that trafficking is a problem nobody else is willing to discuss: The city they live in is a "hot spot," their state one of the worst in the country. Despite what the mainstream media are saying, this is "the real pandemic."

THE SUDDENLY UBIQUITOUS #SAVETHECHILDREN POSTS CREATED THE ILLUSION OF AN ORGANIC MOVEMENT RISING UP TO CONFRONT A MASSIVE SOCIAL PROBLEM.

Of course, child sex trafficking does happen, and it is horrible. The crime is a serious concern of human-rights organizations and of governments all over the world. Statistically, however, it is hard to get a handle on: The data are often misleading, when they exist at all. Whatever the incidence, sex trafficking does not involve Tom Hanks or hundreds of thousands of American children.

When today's activists talk about the problem of trafficking, knowing exactly what they're referring to can be difficult. They cite statistics that actually offer global estimates of all forms of labor trafficking. Or they mention outdated and hard-to-parse figures about the number of children who go "missing" in the United States every year—most of whom are never in any immediate danger—and then start talking about children who are abducted by strangers and sold into sex slavery.

While stereotypical kidnappings—what you picture when you hear the word—do occur, the annual number hovers around 100. Sex trafficking also occurs in the United States. The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline has been operated by the

anti-trafficking nonprofit Polaris Project and overseen and partially funded by the Department of Health and Human Services since 2007. In 2019, it recorded direct contacts with 14,597 likely victims of sex trafficking of all ages. (The average age at which these likely victims were first trafficked—"age of entry," as the statistic is called—was 17.) The organization itself doesn't regard its figure for direct contacts as one that should be used with too much confidence—it is probably low, but no more solid data exist.

There is a widely circulated number, and it's even bigger than the one Laura Pamatian and her volunteer chapter publicized: 800,000 children go missing in the U.S. every year. The figure shows up on T-shirts and handmade posters, and in the captions of Instagram posts. But the number doesn't mean what the people sharing it think it means. It comes from a study conducted in 1999 by the Justice Department, and it's an estimate of the number of children who were reported missing over the period of a year for any reason and for any length of time. The majority were runaways, children caught up in custody disputes, or children who were temporarily not where their guardians expected them to be. The estimate for "nonfamily abductions" reported to authorities was 12,100, which includes stereotypical kidnappings, but came with the caveat that it was extrapolated from "an extremely small sample of cases" and, as a result, "its precision and confidence interval are unreliable." Later in the report, the authors noted that "only a fraction of 1 percent of the children who were reported missing had not been recovered" by the time they were counted for the study. The authors also clarified that a survey sent to law-enforcement agencies found that "an estimated 115 of the nonfamily abducted children were victims of stereotypical kidnapping." The Justice Department repeated the study in 2013 and found that reports of missing children had "significantly decreased."

> TODAY'S MESSAGING ON SOCIAL MEDIA ABOUT CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING IS IMPERVIOUS TO GATEKEEPERS WHO WOULD KNOCK DOWN ITS MOST OUTLANDISH CLAIMS.

Plenty of news outlets have pointed out how misleading the 800,000 figure is. Yet it has been resilient. It appeared on colorful handmade posters at hundreds of Save the Children marches that began taking place in the summer of 2020, many of which were covered credulously by local TV news. Narrating footage of a march in Peoria, Illinois, a reporter for the CBS affiliate WMBD did not mention the QAnon hashtags on some of the signs and passed along without comment information from the organizer, Brenna Fort: "Fort says her research shows that at least 800,000 children go missing every year." The segment ended by zooming in on a plastic baby doll wearing a cloth diaper on which someone had written NOT FOR SALE in red marker.

THE LAST MORAL PANIC centered on widespread physical dangers to America's children began in the early 1980s. Several high-profile and disturbing stories became media spectacles, including the 1981 murder (and then beheading) of 6-year-old Adam Walsh, who was abducted from a Sears department store in Hollywood, Florida. The Adam Walsh story was made into a TV movie that aired on NBC in October 1983, the same year that the 1979 disappearance of 6-year-old Etan Patz was fictionalized in the theatrically released movie *Without a Trace*.

Adam's father, John Walsh, who later spent more than two decades as the host of *America's Most Wanted*, claimed that 50,000 children were abducted "for reasons of foul play" in the United States every year. He warned a Senate subcommittee in 1983: "This country is littered with mutilated, decapitated, raped, strangled children." In response, Congress passed two laws—establishing a nationwide hotline and creating the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The panic prompted the building of shopping-mall kiosks where parents could fingerprint or videotape their children to make them easier for police to identify. According to the sociologist David Altheide, it also led to the advertising of dental-identification implants for people who did not yet have their permanent teeth, as well as the creation of a cottage industry of missing-child insurance to cover the cost of private detectives in the event of an abduction. As a 1986 story in *The Atlantic* recounted, the nonprofit National Child Safety Council printed photos of missing children on 3 billion milk cartons; a person would have had to be paying close attention to notice that all the photos were of the same 106 faces. (The photos also appeared on grocery bags, Coca-Cola bottles, thruway toll tickets, and pizza boxes.) "Ordinary citizens may have encountered explicit reminders of missing children more often than for any other social problem," the sociologist Joel Best wrote in 1987.

The fear of stranger abduction was partly a product of the cultural environment at the time. "Family values" political rhetoric

drove paranoia about the drug trade, pornography, and crime. Second-wave feminism had encouraged more women to enter the workforce, though not without societal pressure to feel guilt and anxiety about leaving their children at home alone, or in the care of strangers. The divorce rate was rising, and custody battles were becoming more common, leading to the complicated legal situation of "family abduction," or "child snatching."

Yet there was still a backstop, a way for the panic to end. *The Denver Post* won a Pulitzer Prize for its 1985 story laboriously debunking the statistics that had caused such widespread alarm. The actual number of children kidnapped by strangers, according to FBI documentation, turned out to be 67 in 1983, up from 49 in 1982. A two-part PBS special explained the statistics and addressed the role that made-for-TV movies and media coverage had played in stoking the fire; a study conducted in 1987 by Altheide and the crime analyst Noah Fritz found that three-quarters of viewers who had previously considered "missing children" a serious problem changed their minds immediately after watching it. With the arrival of better information, the missing-children panic faded.

But decades later, fears have flared again. "You know how they used to have the kids on the milk cartons way back in the day?" Jaesie Hansen, a Utah-based mother of four who sells Operation Underground Railroad and #SaveOurChildren decals on Etsy, asked me in July. "That wouldn't even be a possibility now, because there's so many kids. There's not enough milk cartons to put them on."

"THE GOVERNMENT CAN control a vaccine and a virus, but they can't control this," Ashley Victoria, a sixth-grade teacher and designer of rhinestone-covered denim jackets, told me at her booth at the Oakdale festival. The powerful are failing, or the powerful don't care, or the powerful are part of it all, she suggested. "I am a conspiracy theorist," she went on, before referencing persistent internet rumors of Hillary Clinton's involvement in sex crimes committed by Jeffrey Epstein. "I'm not going to sit here and say it's all true, but it's going to come out somehow."

As I looked over a display of hoop earrings decorated with giant pom-poms at a neighboring booth, Victoria chatted with their maker about the supposedly suspicious deaths of the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, the fashion designer Kate Spade, and the DJ Avicii. "They were trying to expose Hollywood, and they all committed suicide," she said. "Mm-hmm."

The earring designer promised to send Victoria a copy of the 10-part documentary *The Fall of the Cabal*, which is full of QAnon-related theories and has been scrubbed from social-media and video-hosting platforms but still circulates in group chats and Telegram channels. The conversation then turned to a popular conspiracy theory about the online home-goods retailer Wayfair, which had spread across social media in the summer of 2020. The two of them discussed it excitedly, the way a pair of friends might riff on an underrated TV show or a deep cut from a beloved album. "Nobody talks about it anymore," the earring designer complained. Victoria countered that she had been talking about it just the other day.

ANTON PETRUS / GETTY; HAROLD M. LAMBERT / GETTY; JENS KALAENE / PICTURE ALLIANCE / GETTY; STEPHEN MATUREN / GETTY

The Wayfair rumor they were referring to had taken flight in response to confusing listings on the retail site; some throw pillows were priced absurdly high due to an error, while industrial-size cabinets appeared overpriced to those with little knowledge of that market. On Twitter, some suggested that the listings were actually for the purchase of children. That notion—that a major American corporation was selling children online, more or less in plain sight—was also discussed in conspiracy forums on Reddit, where it was subsumed into the broader QAnon mythology about a ravenous sex-trafficking cabal. ("There is, of course, no truth to these claims," a Wayfair spokesperson said at the time.)

QAnon may have catalyzed the spread of the Wayfair speculations, but the story had independent sources of energy. It was passed along by mom influencers who might otherwise post about manicures or nutritional supplements; it was shared among circles of women marketing essential oils or specialty shampoos, and on Instagram, where friends happily reposted one another's well-designed Stories or infographics. Many of these women, when I spoke with them, emphatically denied supporting QAnon or even having a good understanding of what it was.

Jaesie Hansen, the Etsy seller, traced her interest in the child-sex-trafficking cause to the Wayfair theory, which she had come across mostly because she'd been stuck at home during the pandemic and was spending more of her day on social media. "I have no idea if that was true," she said. "But I do know that that went viral, and that was when I started to look into it a lot more … If I hadn't dove deeper into the whole Wayfair scandal last year, I probably wouldn't have understood how big of a problem [child sex trafficking] actually is." While Hansen acknowledges that the coronavirus is a serious issue, child sex trafficking around the world seems at least equally serious to her, and she doesn't feel that it's receiving adequate attention from the media. "I want to hear as much about that as I do about people dying of COVID," she said.

Yet the panic and the pandemic are inextricably intertwined. Rumors of child sex trafficking shot across the internet during the months when pandemic shutdown measures were first implemented, a time when parents and children alike found themselves with more opportunities for idle digital browsing and emotion-led sharing. Referring to the dangers of kids being out of school and chattering online all day, Operation Underground Railroad's founder and president, Tim Ballard, has regularly described this period as a "pedophile's dream," and claimed that predators were thinking of it as "harvest time." The threat of trafficking became a pet cause for anti-vaccine groups that recruit by exploiting every kind of parental concern. (As a Florida state senator noted in August 2020, some in the anti-mask movement falsely claim that "wearing a mask increases the risk of kidnapping and child sex trafficking.")

The new panic also provided an alternative to the Black Lives Matter protests happening around the country last summer, for those who may not have been sympathetic to that movement or its methods. (One Facebook graphic showed the phrase "Defund the police" altered to read "Defend the children.") More recently, the panic has intersected with paranoia about immigration and the increase of migrants at the southern border, echoing arguments

DAVIDOFF STUDIOS / GETTY; HADI NURSEHA / GETTY; MRS / GETTY; STEPHEN MATUREN / GETTY

that a wall between the United States and Mexico would be a humanitarian effort to prevent child trafficking.

Though social-media platforms have made significant progress in removing QAnon from spaces where a well-intentioned person might stumble across it, disproportionate concern about child trafficking has already been absorbed and normalized—sustained by shocking rumors on social platforms (Were children being trafficked on the Walmart app? Were they suffering, hidden, on the container ship Ever Given, stuck in the Suez Canal?) and by word of mouth among circles of trust. This past August, in Magnolia, Texas, a suburb northwest of Houston, Tisha Butler and her family celebrated back-to-school season with a chili cook-off to benefit Operation Underground Railroad, hosted in the front yard of the martial-arts school they own and operate. Butler conducts women's self-defense workshops every Saturday and invites survivors of domestic violence to take private lessons for free. "I've worked with survivors of trafficking," she told me. "It's very empowering for someone that survived something like that to learn the skills to protect yourself." The chili-cook-off teams were mostly local business owners or the parents of students at the dojo; one was a group of moms who had started taking their kids to tae kwon do. Some of them had learned about OUR through Butler and were willing to support the cause because of their belief in her as a person who genuinely cares about helping children and women stay safe.

"We always think, *Oh, it's not me; I live in a good neighborhood; I come from a safe area*, but it happens every day," Butler told me, sitting in her office after a secret round of voting to determine the winner of the cook-off. "If you're not aware, then you are a prime target." Like many other volunteers, Butler brought up her own children when discussing her interest in the child-sex-trafficking cause. "Having daughters, imagining them being forced to have sex with 10 to 50 people a day—it's sickening."

Amid normal conversations about an understandable worry, startling pieces of misinformation can appear without warning. In July, I attended a benefit motorcycle ride in Clearwater, Florida, organized with the help of a women's biker group called the Diva Angels. The members meet weekly at a Quaker Steak & Lube, in part to raise awareness about the charity group rides. Rebecca Haugland, a Diva Angel and an OUR supporter, talked with me straightforwardly about her long-standing concern for her son and daughter and, now, her two granddaughters; she'd raised her kids to understand that she'd support them if they spoke up about an adult who was making them uncomfortable, and she wants to help make the state of Florida a better place. "One of the biggest things that's going on right now," she also told me, "is the organ harvesting—children's organs. They'll take them and feed them and take care of them and raise them for their organs."

> "YOU KNOW HOW THEY USED TO HAVE THE KIDS ON THE MILK CARTONS?" ONE MOTHER TOLD ME. "THAT WOULDN'T EVEN BE A POSSIBILITY NOW ... THERE'S NOT ENOUGH MILK CARTONS."

THE RELIANCE OF the present panic on social media suggests a largely leaderless phenomenon. But Operation Underground Railroad has won out as a favorite of the new activists, and serves as an authority, a common reference point, and a center of gravity. The group was founded by Ballard almost a decade ago, well before the crescendo of interest in child trafficking. In his early career, Ballard says, he spent a short time working for the CIA, then 11 years as an undercover operator and special agent for the Department of Homeland Security, partly as a member of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. (Spokespeople for the CIA and DHS said they could not confirm Ballard's employment record without his written permission, which he did not provide.) Ballard has frequently explained that he became frustrated with the limitations of American legal jurisdiction and decided to strike out on his own. Operation Underground Railroad would not be confused for a government operation; it quickly made its name conducting sting operations overseas in which Ballard or a colleague posed, often hammily, as an American pedophile. The team coordinated with local law enforcement, then contacted suspected traffickers, arranged a meeting, and lay in wait. When the marks arrived and accepted payment, law enforcement stormed in and arrested the suspects. The entire episode was generally captured on film, and much of the footage has been posted on YouTube or has appeared in feature-length documentaries. (In its early years, the group was known for inviting minor celebrities, including *The Walking Dead* star Laurie Holden, to participate in rescue operations.)

While no one doubts Ballard's enthusiasm for the work, critics have questioned the efficacy of OUR's "raid and rescue" approach, which was popularized in the 1990s by various anti-trafficking NGOs, notably the Christian nonprofit International Justice Mission. Trafficking experts note that, while dramatic, such operations

fail to address the complex social and economic problems that create the conditions for trafficking. If the goal is to stamp out international child trafficking, they argue, the raids are of little value. As OUR's own footage demonstrates, the group's strategy involves asking targets to bring it the youngest children possible in exchange for large amounts of cash—in other words, potentially provoking the very behavior the group is ostensibly attempting to curb.

In the United States, OUR does not conduct "missions"—it is careful to avoid coming off as a vigilante group—but it does donate money to police departments. The funds are earmarked for child-trafficking-related resources, including dogs trained to sniff out hidden portable hard drives (because they might contain child-sex-abuse material). But as *Vice*'s Tim Marchman and Anna Merlan detailed in a recent investigation, police departments have not found OUR's contributions particularly useful. Many of the donations are insubstantial, and one state law-enforcement agency told the reporters that the money wasn't worth the trouble of being associated with OUR. A more significant challenge to OUR's reputation: The district attorney of Davis County, Utah, opened a criminal investigation into the organization last year; according to a source close to the investigation, one focus of the probe is on potentially misleading statements made in OUR fundraising materials, including exaggerations about the group's involvement in arrests made by law enforcement. The Utah attorney general's office—which had received $950,000 over four years from OUR for a wellness program for personnel in its Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force—cut all ties to the group when it learned of the Davis County investigation. (An Operation Underground Railroad spokesperson declined to answer in detail a list of questions related to its record, and Ballard did not return requests for an interview. With respect to the ongoing Davis County investigation, the organization provided this response: "O.U.R. has not been asked to cooperate with any investigation regarding its business operations but will do so if asked.")

Still, over the past year and a half, OUR has become the go-to organization to invoke when planning an awareness-raising golf tournament or bake sale or 10-mile truck pull. As John Walsh did in the 1980s, Ballard commands attention with graphic, emotional appeals; he peppers speeches with terms like *child rape* and *pedophiles* and *bad guys*, and apologizes for not apologizing for saying what he means. He is the author of several books, including one arguing that Abraham Lincoln was able to win the Civil War because he had read the Book of Mormon. (Ballard is himself a Mormon.) Fans regard him as an action hero: a real-life Batman, or a real-life Captain America. These are natural comparisons, because Ballard is charismatic and physically imposing—his extreme biceps, extreme blue eyes, and extreme bleach-blond hair represent a notable update of Walsh's furrowed brow and Joe Friday cadence. "He's just a badass," Rhandi Allred, a Utah mother of five, told me. "When I grow up, I want to be like Tim Ballard."

Ballard is now a celebrity with a national fandom. In his capacity as OUR's founder, he was invited by President Trump to join a White House anti-trafficking advisory board. He has been the CEO of Glenn Beck's Nazarene Fund, which purports to rescue Christians and other religious minorities overseas from captivity and refugee camps. He has been befriended by the Pittsburgh Steelers head coach, Mike Tomlin, who wrote the foreword for Ballard's 2018 book, *Slave Stealers*. OUR's annual fundraising has risen steadily with its founder's profile, from $6.8 million in 2016 to $21.2 million in 2019, the last year for which tax records are available.

> WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT A DELUDED UNDERSTANDING OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IS NOW THE PET CAUSE OF THE LOCAL FLORIST AND LAW FIRM AND MORTGAGE BROKERAGE?

At the end of July, Ballard was the star of Operation Underground Railroad's second annual Rise Up for Children event, for which volunteer teams across the country organize marches and fundraisers. He spoke during a concert held in Lehi, Utah, which I watched via a livestream available on YouTube. The comments section quickly filled with heart and prayer-hand emoji. Onstage, he announced that OUR would soon be releasing another documentary, about its rescue missions in Colombia, and then played the trailer, which was cut like an action thriller—guns, beaches, boats, a crack of thunder, the puff of a cigar. "There are people out there who would mock us and point at us, 'Oh, you're just trying to be famous,'" Ballard said after it finished, "those with other agendas that would put obstacles in our way to rescue children, which is absolutely insane to me."

Ballard clearly relishes the role of the hero, and he cannily repays his followers for their admiration. Their participation in the cause is framed as itself heroic, even historic. At the Rise Up concert, Ballard explained to the audience that the abolitionist movement of the 19th century had been driven by people just

like them. "They got loud. Then they got louder. Then they got so loud that it reached the ears of leaders like President Abraham Lincoln." For a monthly $5 donation, OUR boosters can earn the designation "abolitionist"; missing children are pointedly described as victims of "modern-day slavery." This, too, seems to provide relief for supporters who may take issue with the Black Lives Matter movement but still yearn to be on the right side of history.

Another key to OUR's appeal is its capacious attitude toward truth. After the Wayfair conspiracy theory surfaced, dozens of anti-trafficking organizations signed an open letter stating that "anybody—political committee, public office holder, candidate, or media outlet—who lends any credibility to QAnon conspiracies related to human trafficking actively harms the fight against human trafficking." Operation Underground Railroad was conspicuously not among the signatories. Rather than dispel the Wayfair rumor, Ballard flirted with it. In July 2020, he posted an Instagram video in which he spoke directly to the camera while an American flag rippled behind his right shoulder. "Children are sold that way," he said. "For 17 years, I've worked as an undercover operator online. No question about it, children are sold on social-media platforms, on websites, and so forth." The video has been viewed more than 2.7 million times.

This August, a spokesperson for Operation Underground Railroad wrote in an email: "O.U.R. does not condone conspiracy theories and is not affiliated with any conspiracy theory groups, like QAnon, in any way, shape, or form." Yet Ballard himself seems at home in this milieu. A forthcoming Ballard biopic, *Sound of Freedom*, will star Jim Caviezel, the actor who played Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*. In the spring, Caviezel appeared at a "health and freedom" conference alongside various right-wing figures—including L. Lin Wood, a lawyer and key architect of the 2020 election-fraud conspiracy theories, and Mike Lindell, the MyPillow founder and a major Trump donor, who famously tried to pitch the former president on a COVID-19 miracle cure made from a highly poisonous shrub. Video of Caviezel's speech was shared by OUR supporters on YouTube and Facebook. In it, Caviezel told the audience that Ballard had planned to come with him for the interview but was unable to attend, because he was "pulling kids out of the darkest recesses of hell right now." He then explained how adrenaline can be harvested from children's bodies as they scream and die.

THE SOCIOLOGIST STANLEY COHEN coined the term *moral panic* in his 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Cohen presented panics as intense but temporary—specifically, as "spasmodic." (His interest in the phenomenon was piqued by an overreaction, on the part of the British media, to youth subcultures that favored motorcycle jackets and beachside fistfights.) He posited that moral panics run out of steam because people get bored; or they go out of fashion, like a cut of pants or a type of salad; or it becomes clear that the instigators are crying wolf; or whatever they're saying is accepted as a fact that most people can live with.

Yet even fleeting moral panics can have lasting consequences. The white-slavery panic of the early 1900s led to the passage of the Mann Act—a law that criminalized transporting across state lines "any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery." It was wielded against Black men who traveled with white women, and later against sex workers who were accused of trafficking themselves. The 1980s hysteria about child sex abuse preceded the Child Protection and Obscenity Enforcement Act, which made sharing child-sex-abuse material over a computer illegal, but also broadened the list of crimes for which the government could obtain wiretaps. Today, the difficult problem of child-sex-abuse material on the internet is being offered as a rationale for law enforcement to obtain backdoor access to encrypted communication, or for Congress to obligate social-media companies to constantly surveil their users' posts and private messages.

A panic can leave a mark even if it falls short of changing the law. Among other things, as Cohen wrote, it can change "the way the society conceives itself." What does it mean that a deluded understanding of child trafficking is now the pet cause of the local florist and law firm and mortgage brokerage and foam-insulation contractor? What does it mean if American communities are cleaved along a neat divide, separating those who see themselves as caring about the lives of children from those who, because they reject the conspiracy theories and inflated numbers, apparently do not?

And what does it mean if a moral panic doesn't prove to be spasmodic? Cohen floated the idea of "a permanent moral panic resting on a seamless web of social anxieties," then swatted down his own suggestion, pointing out that *permanent panic* is an oxymoron. Cohen died in 2013 and never had the opportunity to consider the way the internet gives each of us the power to take on work as champions of morality and marketers of fear. His analysis of prior panics can tell us only so much about what to expect from this one.

I don't want to panic about a panic. Not all, or anywhere close to all, of the organizers or attendees of events like the Festival of Hope are invested in the issue of child sex trafficking because of sinister rumors they've heard or inflated statistics they've repeated. Many of them are expressing casual support for an obviously correct moral position—the same way you might buy a brownie to help homeless vets or drop a canned good in a collection box to help poor families. Most of the people I met were simply happy to support "anything to do with kids" or "goodness in the world," which they seemed to feel was in short supply. They were warm and friendly, the kind of people you'd hope to have around if you got a flat tire or had a fainting spell.

If there was a sentiment that almost everyone shared, it was that child trafficking is a disgusting problem at any scale, and that ignoring it speaks ill of us all. The undeniable truth of that statement points to another reason this panic may not soon recede. There are too many issues on which Americans can't agree, such as how (or whether) to manage a deadly pandemic and how (or whether) to confront racism. But one type of justice isn't complicated, and one definition of freedom is clear. If children are disappearing from all over the country, how could we possibly think about anything else? *A*

Kaitlyn Tiffany is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

THE SMALL LIE

By Vann R. Newkirk II

TO SUPPORT THE REPUBLICAN MYTH THAT OUR ELECTIONS ARE RIFE WITH FRAUD, SOMEONE NEEDS TO TAKE THE FALL.

CRYSTAL MASON AT HOME IN OCTOBER

PHOTOGRAPH BY YAEL MALKA FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

When I met with Crystal Mason

recently at her home in Rendon, Texas, we sat on a wide couch that served as the center of her domain, with plenty of space for children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces. Their photographs filled the house. Mason's mother called to her from another room, needing advice; later, her eight-month-old grandson, Carter, joined us on the couch after waking up from an afternoon nap. For hours that day, Mason spoke candidly about the illegal-voting case that has consumed her life for half a decade. With us was one of her lawyers, Alison Grinter Allen.

If there is an individual in America who epitomizes one central aspect of our political moment, it might well be Crystal Mason. The story of Mason, a Black woman, illuminates the extraordinary efforts the Republican Party has made to demonstrate that fraud is being committed by minority voters on a massive scale. That false notion is now an article of faith among tens of millions of Americans. It has become an excuse to enact laws that make voting harder for everyone, but especially for voters of color, voters who are poor, voters who are old, and voters who were not born in the United States.

Mason watches the news diligently and can recount the details of prosecutions that have resulted thus far from the attack on the Capitol on January 6—an attack that was stoked by conspiracy theories about fraudulent voters. She can't help but wonder about punishments meted out for the insurrection as compared with the one she has already received for, she says, unwittingly violating a Texas voting law. "These people," Mason said of the participants in the January 6 assault, "came to do and commit dangerous crimes." When she and I spoke, only two of them had been sentenced to jail or prison, and neither for more than eight months. Mason was sentenced to five years. She is currently out on bond while she appeals her conviction.

The idea that systemic fraud has subverted the democratic process demands a search for evidence of such fraud. The point of this effort is not merely to support spurious claims that Donald Trump won the 2020 election or to stockpile spurious arguments in advance of 2024. It is to lay a foundation for the resurgence of a specific form of Jim Crow–style disenfranchisement. Jim Crow relied on outright bans at the ballot box and threats of violence to ensure white political power. But eliminating the Black vote during that era was accomplished in subtler ways as well: by undermining community cohesion, by sapping time and energy, by sheer frustration. The modern effort relies on similar tactics. The so-called Big Lie is built on small lies, about the actions and intentions of individuals—the kinds of lies that can destroy lives and families.

CRYSTAL MASON'S ROLE in this story began during the 2016 presidential election. She was 41 and readjusting to life at home after serving most of a five-year sentence in federal prison for tax fraud. Mason had run a tax-preparation business with her then-husband and had been charged with inflating their clients' refunds. Mason pleaded guilty and paid the penalty; after four years, a supervised-release program allowed her to return to her home. She has publicly "owned up," as she has said, to her mistakes.

Mason has three adult children, and cares for other members of the family. She had been putting her life back together, working at a Santander bank in nearby Dallas and taking classes to become an aesthetician. Around this same time, Donald Trump was making his ascent: calling Mexican immigrants "rapists," brandishing casual racism and xenophobia, and asking Black voters what the hell they had to lose by voting for him. Texas was not expected to be a swing state, but in this menacing atmosphere, Mason's mother told Crystal it was her duty to vote.

On Election Day, Mason drove to her polling place, the Tabernacle Baptist Church. She was coming from work, and almost didn't make it. "It was raining," Mason told me, remembering the night. "It was right at 7 o'clock, when it was about to be closing up. I went with my name and my ID—who I was—to where I was supposed to go." But a volunteer there, a 16-year-old neighbor of hers named Jarrod Streibich, couldn't find her name on the rolls, which happens sometimes. Streibich suggested that she use a provisional ballot. "They offered it to me," Mason recalled, "and I said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'Well, if we're at the right location, it'll count. If you're not, it won't.'" There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the interaction. Like tens of thousands of Texas voters, and millions of Americans across the country, Mason cast a provisional ballot, and went home.

Mason's provisional ballot was destined to be rejected, however. Texas law requires all terms of any felony sentence to be completed before a person once again becomes eligible to vote, and Mason had not fully completed her sentence for the tax-fraud conviction. Mason says she didn't know that ineligibility extended to the period of supervised release; she made a simple mistake. Many provisional ballots are rejected because of ineligibility, often

for reasons potential voters are unaware of. Mason was sent a letter after the election stating that her provisional ballot had been disallowed.

By any reasonable measure, Mason's experience at the polls amounted to a meaningless misunderstanding that had no effect on anything. Donald Trump carried Tarrant County, which includes Rendon, and all of Texas by a healthy margin on his way to winning the White House in 2016. Republicans in Texas retained control of most of the political system in the state. Trump was inaugurated in January. Mason continued her court-mandated check-ins with her supervision officer.

Without realizing it, however, Mason had become the subject of an investigation. After the polls closed, Streibich, the neighbor who had suggested that she use a provisional ballot in the first place, told an election judge on the scene—who was also a neighbor of Mason's—something he had just remembered: that he thought Mason might still be on supervised release for a federal offense. The judge, Karl Dietrich, a local Republican Party official, informed the Tarrant County district attorney, Sharen Wilson. On February 16, 2017, Crystal Mason was arrested for illegal voting.

FEAR OF VOTER FRAUD, or at least the pretense of fear, has been a centerpiece of conservative objections to the expansion of voting rights going back, in the modern era, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Taking steps to curb alleged illegal voting tends to boost Republican electoral fortunes by disenfranchising people of color.

In 2008, the increase in Black turnout that helped put Barack Obama in office—and raised hopes among Democrats for a "demographic revolution" that would aid their cause for years to come—gave voter suppression new urgency. Then, in 2013, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* granted states more power to keep people from the polls. The decision effectively eliminated the system of preemptive federal oversight that had been in place since the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In the absence of new legislation at the national level, state laws restricting the right or ability to vote could now be blocked only if courts found them to be discriminatory *after* their passage. In other words, governments could be elected under legal regimes that might ultimately prove to be unconstitutional; once in office, they would be free to further restrict voting.

Meanwhile, the Court made clear in other cases that it was inclined to take states at their word if they said restrictive voting laws were simply intended to combat fraud and had no racist intent—even if the predictable consequence of those laws was to create greater burdens for voters of color. Taking states at their word provided a lot of cover. The result was a surge of democracy-limiting measures in Republican-led states: restrictive voter-ID laws, tighter guidelines for registration, and wholesale purges of voters from the electoral rolls, conducted in such a way that people of color have been disproportionately affected. According to the nonprofit Brennan Center for Justice, 33 restrictive laws were passed in 19 states in the first nine months of 2021. The laws, which will make casting a ballot more difficult in 2022, reveal how central voter suppression has become as a mobilizing issue for the GOP.

It must be underscored: There is no evidence that illegal voting of any kind occurs at a level capable of influencing elections. Nor is there evidence that the scattered violations that do take place have been increasing in frequency or severity. Common kinds of election violations include local candidates fudging signatures to get on the ballot, partisans politicking too close to polling places, and people accidentally voting at the polls after forgetting that they had already mailed in a ballot—a glitch easily corrected by administrative procedures that already exist.

IT MUST BE UNDERSCORED: THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT ILLEGAL VOTING OCCURS AT A LEVEL CAPABLE OF INFLUENCING ELECTIONS.

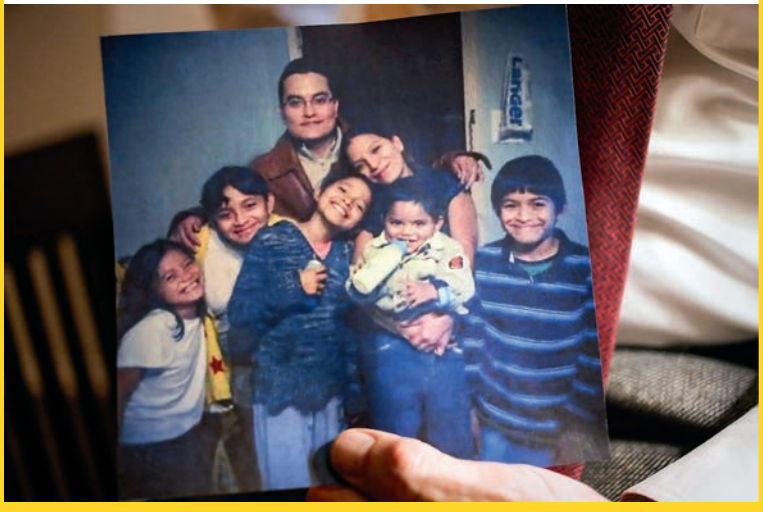
Most of the new laws, however, are aimed at violations that are exceedingly rare: impersonation of one person by another, or noncitizens attempting to vote. Such violations are already illegal, yet their specter is raised to make the case for, among other measures, voter-ID laws. Voting-rights advocates and federal courts have agreed that such laws tend to target and disenfranchise people of color, older folks, and students—groups less likely to have identification documents of the kind that many of the new laws require.

In 2012, before *Shelby County* allowed Texas to implement a strict new voter-ID law without federal oversight, Greg Abbott, then the Texas attorney general, railed against a decision by the Department of Justice to block the law from going into effect. "I know for a fact that voter fraud is real, that it must be stopped," he said. When he made that statement, the official rate of alleged election violations reported to his office over the previous decade—allegations, not convictions—was seven for every 1 million votes cast in the state. Data from Abbott's own office showed

that, over the same period, in all Texas elections at every level, 26 people had been convicted of some form of election violation. Only two of those cases involved someone impersonating another voter, which is what the voter-ID law was ostensibly supposed to address. Rather than attempting to prove the impossible—that illegal voting was truly a problem—Abbott and other GOP officials across the country chose to make public examples of the very few cases of alleged voter fraud they could find.

Abbott was elected governor in 2014. His successor as attorney general, Ken Paxton, eagerly took up the cause. One of Paxton's allies was District Attorney Sharen Wilson. In 2015, she began investigating Rosa Maria Ortega, a 35-year-old mother of four who lived in the Dallas suburbs. Ortega had been born in Mexico and came to the U.S. as a baby. She held permanent-resident status. As a noncitizen, she was not eligible to vote, but she had registered (as a Republican) and had cast ballots in several elections in Dallas County, including for Paxton as attorney general, before she moved to Tarrant County. Her new voter-registration application was rejected because she had correctly indicated her citizenship status. Ortega then sent in another application, this time identifying herself as a citizen. She had done the same thing in Dallas County, and voted without issue; she has said that when Tarrant County accepted her registration, she assumed she was allowed to vote again.

Rosa Maria Ortega with her family



Ortega was indicted and declined a plea deal, which, her lawyers warned, would likely result in deportation. In court, the defense cited Ortega's professed misunderstanding of election law as it applied to permanent residents, and her lack of a motive for purposefully breaking the law. The prosecution presented her actions as part of a disturbing statewide pattern. As Wilson said after Ortega's indictment, "People insist this kind of thing doesn't happen, but it's happening right here at home."

Wilson's office has denied in the past that its work has been politically motivated or employed as a "scare tactic." In a statement, a spokesperson for the district attorney wrote that Wilson "didn't go out looking for the voter fraud cases against Crystal Mason and Rosa Maria Ortega." The spokesperson also noted that Ortega had been offered probation, but had turned it down. In February 2017, she was convicted of illegal voting and sentenced to eight years in prison. When the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reviewed hundreds of voting-related cases in Texas from 2005 to 2018, it found that Ortega's sentence was the longest one handed down. A prosecutor praised the jury, saying it had secured the "floodgates" that kept illegal voting under control. Ortega's case fit a familiar narrative: that immigrant voters are subverting democracy. She served nine months in prison before being paroled, then spent nearly two months in the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. She is currently on parole and living in Dallas, according to Wilson's office.

ONE WEEK AFTER ORTEGA'S CONVICTION, Crystal Mason was arrested, and found her life newly upended. Mason's family had often been in conflict with other residents in their predominantly white community—for a variety of reasons, including, Mason and her lawyers believe, outright racism. When her children were younger, she told me, a neighbor had once brandished a shotgun as her son passed by; her then-husband reported the incident, and she said that local authorities added a bus stop closer to her home so that her children could keep away from the neighbor's house. Now she faced charges brought by the local district attorney. There was no way to keep a low profile. She lost her job.

The district attorney offered a deal: 10 years' probation. But the deal required an admission of guilt, which Mason could not accept. It also would have put her back in prison: The mere fact of a conviction would mean that she had violated the terms of her supervised release. The only way for Mason to remain free was to prove her innocence. She chose a trial before a judge.

As prosecutors presented it, Mason was a felon who had ignored notifications sent by election officials to her home, warning that she was no longer a registered voter. Despite those warnings, she had nevertheless signed an affidavit when accepting her provisional ballot, affirming that she was indeed a registered voter. Her crime was not accidental, prosecutors argued, but a purposeful subversion of democracy.

Mason's legal team countered that the notices about illegal voting had been sent to her home while she was in prison, and therefore she had never received them. They argued, too, that, unlike people returning from state prisons on parole or probation, who typically receive official instruction about voting eligibility, as a federal inmate, she had been given no such instruction when starting her supervised release. (The person who oversaw the officer responsible for Mason's supervision confirmed this in court testimony: "That's just not something we do.") As Mason recalled when I spoke with her, the affidavit was just another thing to sign, and she hadn't really read it closely. She was focused on providing the personal information that the same sheet of paper

DYLAN HOLLINGSWORTH / *THE NEW YORK TIMES* / REDUX

was requesting. She said to me, "Do you have a mortgage? Have you read all your mortgage papers and all the closing [documents]?" What bothers her most is that there was no serious attempt to establish any sort of criminal motive. "They said I tried to circumvent the system," Mason said. "And for what? For a sticker?" Alison Grinter Allen, her attorney, echoed the point: "Why would you risk two to 20 years in the penitentiary in order to shout your opinion into the wind, basically?"

The arguments on Mason's behalf proved unavailing. She was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. The prosecution had argued for "a stern prison sentence" in order to "send a message." Mason subsequently appealed to a three-judge panel, which upheld her conviction. Her case is now under review by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals.

The ACLU of Texas has been assisting with Mason's defense, and its data suggest a racial double standard in cases like hers. A 2021 study by the group found that nearly three-quarters of prosecutions by the state's Election Integrity Unit appear to have been brought against people of color. Almost half of the total cases appear to have been brought against Black and Latina women, two of the core groups of Democratic voters in the state.

Of course, facts and circumstances differ from case to case, and rules and procedures differ from one legal setting to another. But it is worth recalling the treatment accorded to some white officials who have had encounters with election law. In 2018, Russ Casey, a Republican judge in Tarrant County, pleaded guilty to falsifying signatures in order to get his name on the ballot. Casey held a position of public trust, his actions were egregious, and he admitted that the accusations were true. In a plea deal, he received five years' probation, with no prison time. In 2016, Sharen Wilson herself was accused of an election-related violation: using the personal information of her subordinates in the D.A.'s office to invite them to a fundraiser and solicit donations from them for her reelection campaign. Her case was dismissed by the district attorney in a nearby county for "insufficient evidence of criminal intent." Wilson has acknowledged that including her employees on the invitation list for the fundraiser was a mistake.

In Mason's case, the ACLU of Texas argues that the illegal-voting charge is inappropriate on its face because Mason did not, strictly speaking, ever vote. Her provisional ballot was not counted. According to Tommy Buser-Clancy, an ACLU staff attorney, Mason's prosecution could theoretically open the door to felony charges against any potential voter whose provisional ballot is rejected: "If you start to criminalize people who make mistakes, [who think] they're eligible and then find out they're not, then that guts the provisional-balloting system—turns it into a trap." The D.A.'s office has publicly dismissed the possibility that Mason's prosecution poses any danger of precedent to people who make simple mistakes or act unknowingly; the decision by the three-judge panel in the Mason case articulated a different view. It declared that, under Texas law, prosecutors did not need to establish that Mason knew she was ineligible.

Because of her conviction, Mason's supervised release was revoked, and in September 2018 she was returned to prison. One of Mason's lawyers launched a crowdfunding effort to help provide for her immediate and extended family; health insurance was a particular concern. (She has been able to raise $81,000.) "It was devastating," Mason told me. "I was like, 'Are you serious? I'm a mother.'" She recalled her original experience of emerging from prison into the supervised-release program. "I was embarrassed. I was. Because when I got out of prison, I wanted my kids to know that, yeah, I hit that bump in the road. But you can get your life back on track. And that's what I did." She was working. She was going to school. And then she was back in prison. Mason was released in May 2019 and was able to return home in June.

As we spoke, the practiced cheerfulness in her voice drained away. "This isn't supposed to be happening to me. This is not right."

ONLY DAYS AFTER his inauguration in 2017, Trump declared that millions of fraudulent votes had been cast, implying that many had been cast by noncitizens or by citizens of color mobilized by Democrats to vote more than once. His evidence for widespread fraud was nonexistent, and his anecdotal accounts, and those of others, collapsed under scrutiny. Gregg Phillips, a Texas businessman and self-proclaimed voter-fraud sleuth, tweeted that he and the Tea Party–associated group True the Vote had identified 3 million noncitizen voters. The source of this information was an unnamed private database, and Trump declared that he would order a full investigation. I spoke with Phillips at the time, and in that conversation he provided no supporting evidence and backed away from any specific number of illegal voters. He told me, "The work that we're doing could create a foundation for looking at elections moving forward." I interpreted his statement to be a kind of face-saving fallback. Now I understand it to have been prophetic.

Crystal Mason's lawyers believe that Trump's claim of mass voter fraud created an environment in which actions against Mason could be especially punitive. Clark Birdsall, a lawyer for Rosa Maria Ortega, made the same argument, describing Trump's comments about millions of fraudulent voters as "the 800-pound gorilla sitting in the jury box."

Trump established a Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, an ostensibly bipartisan body designed to uncover "those laws, rules, policies, activities, strategies, and practices that undermine the American people's confidence in the integrity of voting processes used in Federal elections." It fell apart in 2018 after it tried to push states to turn over massive amounts of voter data—including Social Security numbers, party affiliations, and voting histories. Even many Republican politicians believed that the voter data might be used for nefarious purposes. Resistance to handing over the data helped kill the commission.

It had found no evidence of any widespread election violations. But in Republican-led states, investigations proliferated. Kris Kobach, then the Kansas secretary of state and a vice chair of the presidential commission, had provided a blueprint. Even before Trump's election, he had claimed that there were thousands of fraudulent or dead voters on the rolls in Kansas. He would later claim to have identified more than 100 noncitizen voters in his state. In 2015, leveraging the hysteria he had begun to create, Kobach persuaded the state legislature to give him the power to

directly prosecute election-violations cases. (In every other state, only an attorney general or a local district attorney has such authority.) Yet over a period of four years, Kobach brought forward just 15 illegal-voting cases, most of which involved people who had accidentally voted in two places. He secured a single conviction involving a noncitizen voter.

In Texas, besides Ortega's case, there has been only one other successful prosecution by the state attorney general for voting as a noncitizen since 2005. Five people have been successfully prosecuted for impersonating other voters. Fourteen people—including Crystal Mason—have been successfully prosecuted for voting as felons with unresolved sentences. Only 11 people have been sent to prison by the state for voting violations of any kind. In 2020, Paxton's office almost doubled the working hours spent on election-violations cases and resolved only 16 of them. All stemmed from voters giving false addresses. (Paxton's office did not respond to multiple queries related to this article.)

Since 2005, nearly 90 million votes have been cast in Texas. Even if the true number of fraudulent voters is double what the state has prosecuted, the prevalence of election violations—the majority of which involve bad addresses—is about three ten-thousandths of a percent. As for voter impersonation, it is more common for a person to be struck by lightning twice than it is for voter impersonation to happen in Texas.

Those involved in investigating allegations of voter fraud argue that the detection of a small number of violations just means we aren't as good at detecting the larger number that must be out there somewhere—thus the need for new laws. But laws that make the process of registering and casting a ballot even more convoluted also increase the likelihood that people will make mistakes—the kinds of mistakes that can land them in jail.

It's a vicious cycle—which is exactly the point. First gin up fear about fraud, then use that fear to aggressively prosecute voting infractions, then use those prosecutions to create stricter laws, then use the stricter laws to induce more examples of fraud, then use those examples to gin up even more fear. The potential impact on turnout is bad enough. But the cumulative effect of restrictive laws corrodes the democratic process itself. In Texas, the narrative fueled in part by Mason's conviction has given Republicans the momentum to pass laws that restrict voting by mail, permit forms of interference by partisan poll watchers at election sites, and create new classes of felonies for engaging in common forms of voter assistance, such as explaining written instructions to people who don't speak English. (This last measure is currently facing a lawsuit brought by the Department of Justice.)

Crystal Mason is not the same person she was in 2017, when she was indicted. At the time, she was fearful; her impulse was to lie low. She eventually came to realize that her unwanted notoriety could be leveraged, not only for her own cause but for the cause of voting rights nationwide. When I spoke with her at her home, she had just gotten back from a voting-rights rally in Washington, D.C. She wore a shirt that read CRYSTAL MASON: THE FIGHT AGAINST VOTER SUPPRESSION.

If she serves her five-year sentence, her infant grandson, who was sitting on her lap, will be reading and at school by the time she gets out. She is thinking about how to prepare family members for what may lie ahead. Her adult children have been deputized to run the house in her absence.

THE FEAR OF BEING CAUGHT UP IN A PUNITIVE ADMINISTRATIVE LABYRINTH ADDS ANOTHER VARIABLE TO THE CALCULUS OF DECIDING WHETHER TO VOTE AT ALL.

Demagogues and insurrections are not the only—or even the primary—threats to our democracy. The slow, relentless erosion of individual civic agency is at least as dangerous, and perhaps more so. Most of the people accused of "voter fraud" have made mistakes with no provable malicious intent as they navigate voting systems that grow ever more byzantine and frustrating. Their lives may be derailed by reputational damage, by time and money spent in court, by prohibitive fines, and by jail or prison. The people who bear this burden may be the cornerstones of their social worlds. Their fates stand as warnings to others in already fragile communities. In a country where the influence of Black and Latino voters is purposefully diluted by gerrymandering, and where poorer, overworked folks must contend with long lines and short hours at sparse polling locations, the fear of being caught up in a punitive administrative labyrinth adds another variable to the calculus of deciding whether to vote at all.

That is why there is something in this moment reminiscent of the insidious bureaucratic character of Jim Crow. As all-encompassing as we know it to have been, Jim Crow was not imposed by a single stroke. It was built community by community, year by year, ruined life by ruined life, law by law, and lie by lie. *A*

Vann R. Newkirk II is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

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Culture & Critics

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ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SPELLA

John Milton's Hell

Cast into political exile, and into darkness by his failing eyesight, the poet was determined to accomplish "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme."

By James Parker

Take us back, little time machine, with your bleepings and your flashings; take us back to crusty old London in the late 1650s, so we can clap the electrodes onto the sleeping head of blind John Milton. Let's monitor the activity in the poet's brain. Let's observe its nocturnal waves. And let's pay particular attention as his sightless eyes begin to flick and roll in deepest, darkest, dream-friendliest REM sleep, because it is at this point (we presume) that the spirit whom he calls Urania, a nightly visitor with a perfect—not to say Miltonic—command of blank verse, will manifest before his unconscious mind and give him the next 40 lines of *Paradise Lost*.

Is that really how it happened? Is it possible that the most monumental and cosmically scaled poem in the English language, nearly 11,000 lines of war in heaven, snakes in the garden, and the slamming of the gates behind Adam and Eve, was dictated by a voice in a dream? Did Milton—to put it another way—write *Paradise Lost* in his sleep? We've got only his word for it, of course, although it appears to be a fact that he arose each morning with lines of verse fully formed and ready for transcription. (For this task Milton seems to have availed himself of whoever happened to be around—to have "employed any casual visitor in disburthening his memory," as Dr. Johnson wrote in his short biography.) Another fact: If he tried composing later in the day, he'd have no luck.

The conditions of the composition of *Paradise Lost*, we learn from Joe Moshenska's new *Making Darkness Light: A Life of John Milton*, are a crucial part of the poem itself. Supernaturally inspired, spoken in darkness to one who lived in darkness, to an elected poet who also happened to be a disappointed revolutionary, this epic about the Fall of Man intimately concerns the fall of a man—one John Milton—and what he chose to do about it.

So who was he? Moshenska, in 11 chapters, gives us 11 ways of looking at Milton, from the brilliant son of a musician father to the traveling polyglot (he visits Galileo in Tuscany) to the theological crank to the ferocious propagandist pamphleteer to the blind man sitting in his house, reeling off the staves of his great poem. His times were, to put it mildly, rather polarized: He was 36 when Oliver Cromwell smashed the forces of King Charles at the Battle of Naseby. Milton, as a radical Protestant and a republican, was on Cromwell's side. It's an item worth remembering about the English that they once chopped their own king's head off; John Milton was very much in favor of said head-chopping. His 1649 tract *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* proclaimed the lawfulness of trying and putting to death "a Tyrant, or wicked King." It was published shortly after Charles's execution in London, by which time Milton was well on his way to a post in the new republican government: secretary for foreign tongues to the Council of State.

Brief triumph. To quote the not-completely-un-Miltonic English band The Fall, "Over the hill goes killer civil servant." Over the hill goes the regicidal secretary. By 1652 his eyesight, already weak, is completely destroyed: Milton is blind. His enemies will exult in his infirmity. In 1658 Cromwell dies; in 1660 Charles II is restored to the throne, and Milton goes into hiding. Reappearing, he is arrested and briefly imprisoned. He returns to his house and sits there.

When exactly he began work on *Paradise Lost*, or it began work on him, is unclear. ("It seems likely," writes Moshenska, "that the bulk of it was composed between the late 1650s and the early 1660s.") The poem's first sentence ("Of Man's first disobedience," it begins) is an exhibition of pure technique and audacity. Like a long electric-guitar note fringed by slowly intensifying feedback, it builds through five lines, shimmering over the line breaks, before it arrives at its verb—*sing*—and goes another 11 lines before it slides ringing against its period, fittingly concluding with the promise of "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." T. S. Eliot, who held that Milton had generally been a bad influence on English poetry, testified nonetheless to the "peculiar feeling, almost a physical sensation of a breathless leap," produced in him by these extended Miltonic runs.

The action begins in hell, as hell gets to know itself for the first time. The rebel angel Satan and his legions, defeated by God, have been tossed off the shining battlements of heaven, "hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky," and are now lying stunned and smoldering in a region of nameless, measureless, combustible obscurity: "no light, but rather darkness visible." Already the poem is moving in an obsessive but magisterially controlled pattern between extremes of light and dark, of seeing and unseeing, as Milton begins—via a supreme creative act—to reconcile his physical blindness with the apocalyptic magnificence of his inner vision.

Milton believed, utterly, in a humorless and imperial God; he also knew that he was a genius. "You ask

This epic about the Fall of Man intimately concerns the fall of a man—one John Milton—and what he chose to do about it.

what I am thinking of?" he once wrote to a friend. "Of immortality! And what am I doing? *Growing my wings* and meditating flight." As a young man he could hear the wind woofing under his pinions. And here he was, in his 50s, rewriting the Book of Genesis. How to cope, morally, with the godlikeness of his own imagination, and the scale of his ambition? Give it to a fallen angel. Give it to one who, like him, had been flung from the ramparts into exile, into a chasm as dark as no sight at all, with defeated armies spread around and only his magnificent ego to sustain him.

"A mind that dilates outward as far as it can take itself in every direction so that it can retract, back to where it started, but with a new sense of its own being"—this, Moshenska writes very beautifully, is "the mind that Milton both desires and wants his audience to desire." The shadow image of this mind, in *Paradise Lost*, is Satan in flight: an autarch in the abyss, superbly aloft, beating his way in splendor through total celestial-political isolation. His revolution has failed, but his wings are spread. "The mind is its own place," Satan tells his sidekick, Beelzebub, and when he takes off on his anti-mission to the just-created Earth he seems to be mental power itself: He "puts on swift wings, and toward the gates of hell / Explores his solitary flight: sometimes / He scours the right hand coast, sometimes the left, / Now shaves with level wing the deep, then soars / Up to the fiery concave towering high." They are fantastically exciting, these Satanic zoomings. They are what make the first four books of *Paradise Lost* such a gorgeous and perspective-demolishing experience: The mind's eye must constantly refocus. But guess what, Satan—wherever you go, there you are. "Which way I fly is hell," laments the arch-demon after a bit more veering and swooping, "myself am hell."

Because Milton's theology and perhaps his soul demanded it, Satan had to be reduced. Imagination gone aerial in the gulf of blindness—it had to be brought back under the eye of God. What Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his notes on *Paradise Lost*, calls "the alcohol of egotism" had to be resisted. Satan journeys vastly through the void, wings beating; having reached the Garden of Eden, he assumes for his first encounter with Eve the form of a toad. Ithuriel and Zephon, angelic bouncers on the orders of Gabriel, are not deceived: Ithuriel gives the toad a poke with his spear. Stung by the spear tip, Satan, "as when a spark / Lights on a heap of nitrous powder," flares up into his own satanic nature, his own shape. He is revealed. The angels step back, "half amazed / So sudden to behold the grisly king." Only half-amazed: The devil, wings folded, has been cut down to size. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

The Unspoken
By Ada Limón

If I'm honest, a foal pulled chest-level
close in the spring heat, his every-which-way
coat reverberating in the wind, feels
akin to what I imagine atonement might
feel like, or total absolution. But what
if, by some fluke in the heart, an inevitable
wreckage, congenital and unanswerable,
still comes, no matter how attached
or how gentle every hand that reached
out for him in that vibrant green field
where they found him looking like he
was sleeping, the mare nudging him
until she no longer nudged him? Am I
wrong to say I did not want to love
horses after that? I even said as much driving
back from the farm. Even now, when
invited to visit a new foal, or to rub the long
neck of a mare who wants only peppermints
or to be left alone, I feel myself resisting.
At any moment, something terrible could
happen. It's not gone, that coldness in me.
Our mare is pregnant right now,
and you didn't even tell me until someone
mentioned it offhandedly. One day, I will
be stronger. I feel it coming. I'll step into
that green field stoic, hardened, hoof first.

Ada Limón's 2018 collection of poems, The Carrying*, received the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her new collection,* The Hurting Kind*, will be published this spring.*

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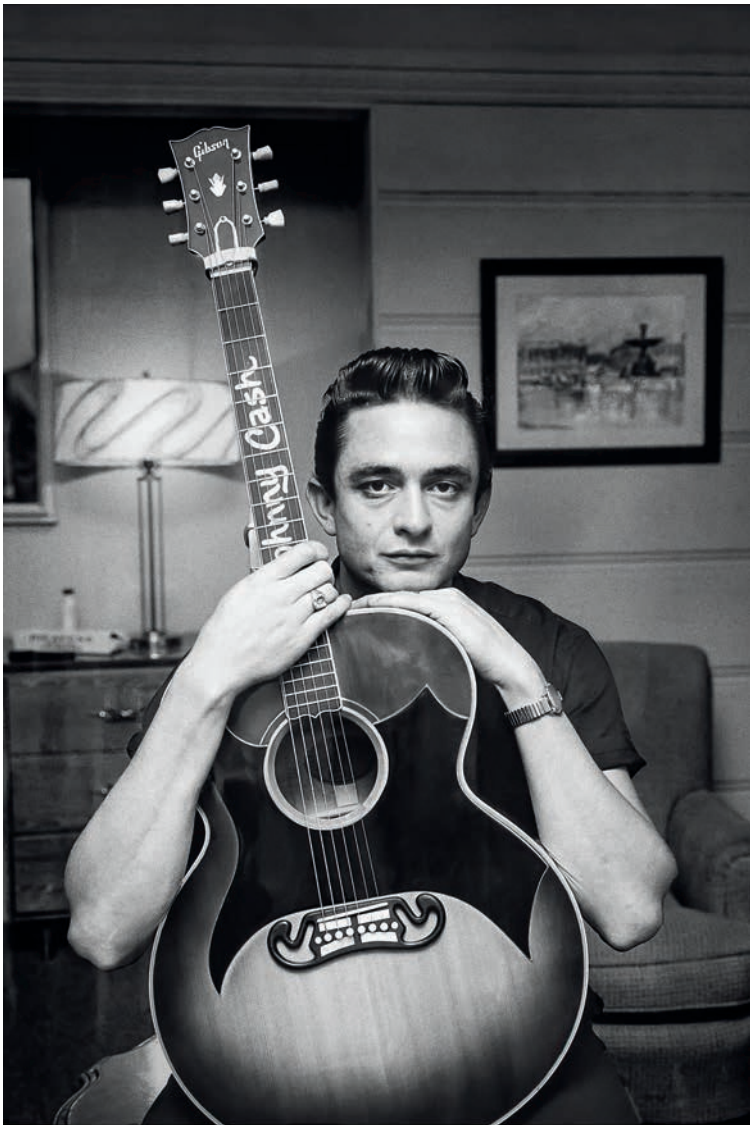
MUSIC

He Walked the Line

Johnny Cash was beloved by Americans who could agree on little else. Was he too eager to please?

By Stephen Metcalf



JOHN R. HAMILTON / TRUNK ARCHIVE

Johnny Cash, so the standard line goes, was a man of many parts. "There was no one single Cash," the scholar Leigh H. Edwards has argued. "He was always multiple, changing, inconsistent." He was both "Saturday night and Sunday morning" is how the rock journalist Anthony DeCurtis put it; he was a "walkin' contradiction," Kris Kristofferson, Cash's sometime collaborator and running buddy, sang in a song.

To work my way past the cliché and remember what a high-wire act his once was, I recently rewatched footage of Cash at the Newport Folk Festival. It's 1964, and he looks almost like Montgomery Clift, a beautiful and half-broken man. He is so lean and angular from abusing amphetamines, he no longer fills out his signature black suit; his eyes are set alarmingly deep. But the unbroken half? It's downright magnificent, how he chews his gum and carelessly plays his guitar, dead-strumming it like it's a washboard.

He'd been scheduled to appear Friday night with Joan Baez and Phil Ochs, but missed his flight—a bad omen, considering the shape he was in. His film career was a joke, his marriage in shambles. Some nights he'd "drive recklessly for hours," he later wrote, "until I either wrecked the car or finally stopped from exhaustion." And drugs were now overruling his mind. He'd started with a few "diet pills" to pep himself up, but they'd turned him on "like electricity flowing into a lightbulb," Cash admitted. By the early '60s, he was in such sorry shape that he once mumbled and paced, zombielike, around the executive suites of Columbia Records.

The executives had seen enough and threatened to drop him. Worse than the embarrassing behavior—banging on doors in the middle of the night, smashing chandeliers—he was no longer *selling*. The first of his so-called concept albums hadn't broken out commercially and had gone all but unnoticed by the music press. And so Cash had come to Newport to win over a new, and potentially lucrative, audience—the kids now flocking to Bob Dylan.

The drugs, however, were drying out his vocal cords. Those days, when Johnny Cash opened his mouth to sing, no one was sure what would come out, least of all Johnny Cash. At Carnegie Hall—a previous proving-ground gig—he could only muster a desiccated whisper. When Cash finally appeared, everyone at Newport gathered to see him. Would he lift them up as one? Or would they need to catch him when he collapsed?

And then, out came the voice—*that* voice, the old umami and gravel, with all its fragile grandeur intact. Was he perfect that night? No, but this was Johnny fucking Cash, product of Sun Records, where the perfect was the enemy of the sublime. He played "I Walk the Line" and a cover of Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and then "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," from his forthcoming album, *Bitter Tears*. After the show, he

and a giddy Dylan traded songs and a guitar. Everyone—the college kids, *The New York Times*—agreed: He'd blown them all away.

The paradox had lived to see another day.

IN A SENSE, the paradox lives to see yet another day in *Citizen Cash: The Political Life and Times of Johnny Cash*, which sets Cash's contrariness in a new light. Cash, the cultural historian Michael Stewart Foley argues, was not just a country-music icon, but a rare kind of political figure. He was seldom a partisan in any traditional sense, and unlike Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, he rarely aligned his music with a progressive agenda. Nonetheless, "Cash, without really intending it, fashioned a new model of public citizenship, based on a politics of empathy."

For Foley, Cash's status as an artist whose music deeply engaged otherwise incompatible audiences gives him a special relevance to us now. He is a radically unsorted man speaking to our radically sorted times. Just as there are two Americas, there are two Johnny Cashes. One is likely better remembered by older fans in red states as the country artist who aligned himself with Richard Nixon and Billy Graham, who sneered at the "hippahs" and wrote the lines "I do like to brag, 'cause I'm mighty proud of that ragged old flag." The other is the acceptably blue-state Cash, the antiestablishment rebel flipping the bird at a camera in San Quentin; the Cash of Native American rights.

Foley's method is to remind each set of fans of the other Cash, the Cash they've conveniently forgotten, and then show how he made up a single human being, one who did his own justice to the complex task of being an American. The argument has a certain wishfulness to it. To begin with, there's the faith Foley places in "empathy," or Cash's tendency to be "guided by his own emotional and visceral responses to the issues." What thinking person in 2022—amid the outrage and umbrage Olympics that is American life—still wants an emotional response? We prefer, I think, respect, health care, and a living wage. The case made by Cash is less on behalf of "empathy" than of a world in which partisan affiliation isn't a depressingly strong predictor of—well, everything else, including musical taste.

In its selection of guests, Cash's TV show (on the air from June 1969 through March 1971) willfully mixed Neil Young, still giving off the hippie aroma, with such Grand Ole Opry standbys as Tammy Wynette. But how well does such a delightful miscellany translate into an everyday politics? Foley doesn't say, though he has a maddening tendency to construe the most modest gesture of allyship as a profile in courage. When Odetta, the folk singer and civil-rights activist, appeared on the show, Cash sang a duet with her. A lovely moment, yes, and not without its significance.

Nobody appealing to the rock-and-roll audience was more country than Cash, and nobody making country music was more rock and roll.

Opposite page: Johnny Cash in 1958

Foley's reading? "By telling the world he had been buying her records for years, he said, in effect, that he had been on the side of Black lives from the start."

Some readers may walk away convinced that Cash was a Whitmanesque giant, containing multitudes. I often found myself wondering if he wasn't a two-faced equivocator. The book is a welcome corrective to the tendency to treat the man as so internally contrary as to be a complete enigma. But the cost of rescuing Cash from the metaphysical fog has been to turn him into a plaster saint. Neither does justice to the actual extent of his weirdness.

JOHNNY CASH grew up in Dyess, Arkansas, otherwise known as "Colonization Project No. 1," a New Deal development built virtually overnight in 1934. The Cash house was No. 266, on Road 3—five rooms, no electricity, no running water—and it had been plunked down on bad land, all thicket on the surface, waterlogged muck underneath.

Cash lived the Old South archetype of working hard and close to the soil, under conditions of endemic rural poverty, combined with another, quite different archetype of the New Deal as personal savior. The Dyess project had its own full-time home economist to help with canning, sewing, and quilting, as the biographer Robert Hilburn writes in *Johnny Cash: The Life*; a farm manager approved the choice of seeds. The radio that first brought Johnny Cash the sounds of country music was purchased with Federal Emergency Relief Administration loan money. Even as the South began urbanizing and suburbanizing, the Cash family remained living anachronisms, smallholders whose pluck went hand in hand with a deep-seated dependence. By the time he graduated high school in 1950, Cash was desperate to leave.

His childhood was *Little House on the Prairie* crossed with Levittown. (There were 500 government-fabricated houses in the Dyess project.) This may help explain a peculiar quality of Cash's, of being, as Kristofferson put it, "partly truth and partly fiction"; of seeming firmly anchored in himself, and utterly at sea. At a loss for what to do after stints working in a car-parts factory in Pontiac, Michigan, and cleaning vats in an oleomargarine plant close to Dyess, he joined the Air Force. Able to hear subtle differences in sounds, he was trained as a radio intercept operator; and for three years, at least eight hours a day, he sat in a room outside Munich, listening to Soviet transmissions, distinguishing signal from noise.

His base was in the same town where Hitler had written *Mein Kampf*. It lay less than 100 miles from the Russians, who could overrun it at will. Surrounded by rural beauty and a lot of bad juju, Cash took up the guitar, playing with barracks buddies and putting his feelings of exile and confinement into his first attempts at songwriting. He had a quick and stiletto

wit, a comprehensive mind. This "was no hillbilly stereotype," Hilburn quotes a fellow airman saying.

And yet. On a couple of occasions, Cash got drunk and harangued a Black man. "Honey," he wrote to his future wife Vivian, "some N— got smart and I asked him to go outside and he was too yellow." The letter is sickening, and having read it, some people will understandably never recover a taste for Cash's music. I did, though, and what follows may help explain why.

FROM THE BEGINNING, rock and roll was notable for the sheer variety of talents and types it could encompass. If Elvis Presley was the lovable dodo, Roy Orbison was a nightingale; if Jerry Lee Lewis was the virtuoso magpie, Johnny Cash was—well, a kind of crow, a spectral oddity with dubious pipes.

He had the rockabilly look (quiffed-up hair, black duds) and carried himself with some of the insolence and swagger of Elvis while keeping a watchful reserve. After leaving the Air Force, he headed to Memphis, where he hoped to break into radio. But the cosmos had other ideas. The day after he stepped off the plane, in July 1954, Sam Phillips recorded Elvis Presley's first single, "That's All Right." Elvis was one of those astonishing young men who is naked even when he's clothed. Seeing him perform on the flatbed of a truck—the sexual charisma, the utter lack of guile—persuaded Cash to approach Phillips, the founder of Sun Records, and beg him for an audition.

Cash had, at best, rudimentary musical talent, but he had exquisite taste. He gravitated to Memphis's Beale Street, to a store called the Home of the Blues, where he bought his first record by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and where he said he discovered the blues and folk recordings made by the folklorist Alan Lomax in the South. Lomax's astonishing *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, an album of "Authentic Field Recordings of Negro Folk Music," became a major influence on Cash's songwriting. The revelation for Cash, Foley suggests, was how uniquely brutal the experience of Black artists had been, especially those living on prison farms and in levee camps, and also how close it was to that of sharecropping whites. Having worked, hard and by hand, a land they did not own, both shared a keen sense of our country's ability to break a promise.

Cash's career was a variation on the master rock-and-roll narrative, of white musicians plagiarizing from Black musicians: He envied but, by and large, he did not steal. He wanted to make gospel records, but Phillips said no. He forced Cash to speed up "I Walk the Line" and "Folsom Prison Blues," turning him into a (sort of) rock and roller; he turned him into a (sort of) teen idol by changing his name from John to Johnny. By the summer of 1958, Cash had sold more than 6 million records. As was true for Elvis, it was inevitable that he'd graduate from the upstart Sun Records to a major label, and for Cash, that meant recentering his career in Nashville.

In 1969, he outstripped the Beatles, but just as he took ownership of the mainstream, the mainstream began falling apart.

Johnny Cash and booming Nashville were a terrible match, and not only because seasoned engineers and easygoing sidemen began to cut, polish, and brighten what was, in its essence, a rough, dark thing. By the late '50s, Memphis and Nashville were, as music capitals, antitheses. Memphis was the blues, Sun Records, Elvis; Nashville was country music, steel guitars, choral "ooh"s and "aah"s. You see where this is going. As Memphis took so-called hillbilly and race music, and combined them into rock and roll, country music became more self-consciously white. Sam Phillips said as much; Nashville said as much.

Nobody appealing to the rock-and-roll audience was more country than Cash, and nobody making country music was more rock and roll. This made his commercial prospects vast, and his musical identity fragile. Here was a man who'd stayed a homesteader while the nation suburbanized, who could play the blues without thieving style or attitude from Black artists, who always sounded country but never defensively white. In Nashville, the equilibria got lost. The president of Columbia Records thought of Cash as a folk singer and, eyeing the success of Burl Ives and Harry Belafonte, Cash's manager agreed. Cash embarked on a series of Americana "concept" albums, on which he too often sounded like a museum tour guide. They flatlined commercially. It was in this period that Cash's drug use amped up.

Even a zogged-out Johnny Cash could still generate a single as good as "Ring of Fire." But the truth is, Cash's best work—the Sun sides, his turn at Newport—all involved some kind of courtship of the rock audience. And then there is *At Folsom Prison*, from 1968. Unlike any other, the album brought together the spirit of country music with all the eros and paranoia of the '60s. *Folsom* and its equally remarkable sequel, *At San Quentin*, are of a piece with Hank Williams and Jimmie Rodgers and the Louvin Brothers, but also *Beggars Banquet* and Haight-Ashbury and My Lai. Song after song, you hear the gyres widening.

A wildness flows from Cash to the inmates and back again, until, on the latter record, the place verges on a riot—one that, the producer Bob Johnston believed, would have left Cash dead. The prisoners didn't riot and Johnny Cash lived. *Folsom* was reckoned a masterpiece by everyone from the underground press to *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The wager made at Newport had paid off handsomely, and *Rolling Stone*'s co-founder Jann Wenner laid the jackpot on the table: "Cash, more than any other contemporary [country] performer, is meaningful in a rock and roll context." He declared him the artistic peer of Dylan.

Cash and Phillips—piety in their hearts, dollar signs in their eyes—once talked about making music whose

appeal was "universal." Cash had done it: He'd united the rock, pop, folk, and country audiences. In 1969, he outstripped the Beatles, selling 6.5 million records worldwide. But just as he took ownership of the mainstream, the mainstream began falling apart. In 1968, Richard Nixon won the presidency, eking out a plurality in the South, thanks to his careful courtship of white voters resentful of civil rights. And, flattering the white southerner not only as the most reliably conservative voter but as the most "authentic" American, Nixon went on to embrace country music.

This was Cash's core audience, the country audience, made up largely of white southerners. Their devotion to Cash allowed him to hit the country charts, even when he put out his laziest, most mediocre work. But everyone else helped him outsell the Beatles. Here he faced yet another dilemma, as painful as pitting Memphis against Nashville. As one of the biggest country superstars of the Nixon era, he might have addressed the silent majority and said something important, something concrete and true to his own experience as a white southerner. He could have said: "My bootstraps? They were government-issue. And you know what? Yours were too."

I know; easy for me to say. But political courage doesn't begin with introducing a Tammy Wynette fan to Neil Young's "The Needle and the Damage Done." It begins with your own ox getting gored. And as exceptional as it was—drawing a living from the gumbo soil—Cash's childhood was also typical; along with the Cashes, the postwar South got pulled out of poverty by the federal government. Beginning with the New Dealers, who'd labeled the poorer parts of the region "a belt of sickness, misery, and unnecessary death," through to Pearl Harbor and the Cold War, the federal government poured money into the South, making benefits available—as with Colonization Project No. 1—almost exclusively to white people.

Drawing on his own experience, Cash might have broken up the central falsity of the archipelago of glass and steel known as the New South: its equation of whiteness with self-sufficiency and Blackness with dependency. What did he do instead? He smiled grimly and talked out of both sides of his mouth. When Nixon asked Cash to play the White House, he accepted the invite, but politely refused the White House's request to cover "Welfare Cadillac," a racist novelty song.

He persisted in trying to be all things to all people, until, a living effigy in black frock coat and jabot, he rivaled Elvis for losing any evidence of his younger self. In 1976, he served as grand marshal of the bicentennial parade in the nation's capital, the perfect representative for a country nearing the absolute nadir of its self-respect.

"The people are his audience," a *Billboard* editor wrote. But "the people" were at one another's throats. During a live show in 1990, looking strangely like Nixon—jowly, surreptitious, fundamentally unhappy—he introduced his song "Ragged Old Flag." "I thank God for all the freedoms we've got in this country," he said, as the arena went quiet. "Even the rights to burn the flag." Instantly, the crowd turned on him, booing loudly. He silenced them with a single "Shhh," adding: "We've also got a right to bear arms, and if you burn my flag, I'll shoot you." And the crowd let out a bloodlust roar.

CITIZEN CASH: THE POLITICAL LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHNNY CASH

Michael Stewart Foley

BASIC BOOKS

WHEN RICK RUBIN, the hip-hop and metal impresario, began reviving Cash's career in 1993, the country legend was languishing on the scrap heap of showbiz. His upcoming gig was a residency at the Wayne Newton Theater (capacity 3,000) in Branson, Missouri. He couldn't even fill that. Here was a man whose own legend was waiting for him to die. But Rubin understood two things: that Johnny Cash was a living encyclopedia of American song, not a museum piece; and that his voice deserved to be presented unadorned.

Their resulting album, *American Recordings*, features Cash alone, accompanied by just his acoustic guitar. The simplicity worked—artistically, but also in rinsing Cash clean of Nashville, Nixon, and Billy Graham. Rubin had taken him away from the NASCAR dads and handed him over to fans of *MTV Unplugged*. He re-sorted him.

Thanks in no small part to Rubin, Cash has been a blue-state hero ever since. *Citizen Cash* pulls, in a salutary way, a reverse Rubin and reminds us that the hipster-acceptable Cash, who hung with Bono and premiered his *American Recordings* songs at the Viper Room on the Sunset Strip, represents less than half the man. But Foley amasses exactly the right facts, only to draw exactly the wrong conclusion.

Cash wasn't any kind of a politician. He was an American artist of the very first magnitude. Listening to him, unrelentingly, for months now, I think he did have something to tell us. It may be idiosyncratic, but here is what I heard: Ironically, for a country built on the promise of owning your own land, among the truest Americans are those who worked the earth without owning a single crumb of it. Dispossessed, they were forced to take possession of themselves another way: They sang. Denied, substantively, the right to happiness, they declared instead an absolute right to personality. This was most true of Black people, but it could also be true of poor white people. However you apportion credit, together they created a common inheritance we all live off to this day. Upon that commonality, Cash seemed to believe, we might form a less grossly imperfect union. The hope is very beautiful, and I think, in its way, true. But it is not enough. *A*

Stephen Metcalf, the host of Slate's Culture Gabfest *podcast, is at work on a book about the 1980s.*

BOOKS

Dangerous Prophecies

The assumption that civil war is inevitable in America is inflammatory and corrosive.

By Fintan O'Toole

In January 1972, when I was a 13-year-old boy in Dublin, my father came home from work and told us to prepare for civil war. He was not a bloodthirsty zealot, nor was he given to hysterical outbursts. He was calm and rueful, but also grimly certain: Civil war was coming to Ireland, whether we wanted it or not. He and my brother, who was 16, and I, when I got older, would all be up in Northern Ireland with guns, fighting for the Catholics against the Protestants.

What made him so sure of our fate was that the British army's parachute regiment had opened fire on the streets of Derry, after an illegal but essentially peaceful civil-rights march. Troops killed 13 unarmed people, mortally wounded another, and shot more than a dozen others. Intercommunal violence had been gradually escalating, but this seemed to be a tipping point. There were just two sides now, and we all would have to pick one. It was them or us.

The conditions for civil war did indeed seem to exist at that moment. Northern Irish society had become viciously polarized between one tribe that felt itself to have suffered oppression and another one fearful that the loss of its power and privilege would lead to annihilation by its ancient enemies. Both sides had long-established traditions of paramilitary violence. The state—in this case both the local Protestant-dominated administration in Belfast and the British government in London—was not only unable to stop the meltdown into anarchy; it was, as the massacre in Derry proved, joining in.

Yet my father's fears were not fulfilled. There was a horrible, 30-year conflict that brought death to thousands and varying degrees of misery to millions. There was terrible cruelty and abysmal atrocity. There were decades of despair in which it seemed impossible that a polity that had imploded could ever be rebuilt. But the conflict never did rise to the level of civil war.

However, the belief that there was going to be a civil war in Ireland made everything worse. Once that idea takes hold, it has a force of its own. The demagogues warn that the other side is mobilizing. They are coming for us. Not only do we have to defend ourselves, but we have to deny them the advantage of making the first move. The logic of the preemptive strike sets in: Do it to them before they do it to you. The other side, of course, is thinking the same thing. That year, 1972, was one of the most murderous in Northern Ireland precisely because this doomsday mentality was shared by ordinary, rational people like my father. Premonitions of civil war served not as portents to be heeded, but as a warrant for carnage.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GEORGE HADDAD

COULD THE SAME THING happen in the United States? Much of American culture is already primed for the final battle. There is a very deep strain of apocalyptic fantasy in fundamentalist Christianity. Armageddon may be horrible, but it is not to be feared, because it will be the harbinger of eternal bliss for the elect and eternal damnation for their foes. On what used to be referred to as the far right, but perhaps should now simply be called the armed wing of the Republican Party, the imminence of civil war is a given.

Indeed, the conflict can be imagined not as America's future, but as its present. In an interview with *The Atlantic* published in November 2020, two months before the invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, the founder of the Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, declared: "Let's not fuck around." He added, "We've descended into civil war." The following month, the FBI, warning of possible attacks on state capitols, said that members of the so-called boogaloo movement "believe an impending insurgency against the government is forthcoming and some believe they should accelerate the timeline with armed, antigovernment actions leading to a civil war."

After January 6, mainstream Republicans picked up the theme. Much of the American right is spoiling for a fight, in the most literal sense. Which is one good reason to be very cautious about echoing, as the Canadian journalist and novelist Stephen Marche does in *The Next Civil War: Dispatches From the American Future*, the claim that America "is already in a state of civil strife, on the threshold of civil war." These prophecies have a way of being self-fulfilling.

Admittedly, if there were to be another American civil war, and if future historians were to look back on its origins, they would find them quite easily in recent events. It is news to no one that the United States is deeply polarized, that its divisions are not just political but social and cultural, that even its response to a global pandemic became a tribal combat zone, that its system of federal governance gives a minority the power to frustrate and repress the majority, that much of its media discourse is toxic, that one half of a two-party system has entered a postdemocratic phase, and that, uniquely among developed states, it tolerates the existence of several hundred private armies equipped with battle-grade weaponry.

It is also true that the American system of government is extraordinarily difficult to change by peaceful means. Most successful democracies have mechanisms that allow them to respond to new conditions and challenges by amending their constitutions and reforming their institutions. But the U.S. Constitution has inertia built into it. What realistic prospect is there of changing the composition of the Senate, even as it becomes more and more unrepresentative of the population? It is not hard to imagine those future historians defining American democracy as a political life form that could not adapt to its environment and therefore did not survive.

Premonitions of civil war in Ireland served not as portents to be heeded, but as a warrant for carnage.

It is one thing, however, to acknowledge the real possibility that the U.S. could break apart and could do so violently. It is quite another to frame that possibility as an inevitability. The descent into civil war is always hellish. America has still not recovered from the fratricidal slaughter of the 1860s. Even so, the American Civil War was relatively contained compared with what happened to Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, to Bosnia after the breakup of Yugoslavia, or to Congo from 1998 to 2003. The idea that such a catastrophe is imminent and unavoidable must be handled with extreme care. It is both flammable and corrosive.

MARCHE CLEARLY does not intend to be either of these things, and in speculating about various possible catalysts for chaos in the U.S., he writes more in sorrow than in anger, more as a lament than a provocation. Marche's thought experiment begins, however, with two conceptual problems that he never manages to resolve.

The first of these difficulties is that, as the German poet and essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger put it in his 1994 book *Civil Wars*, "there is no useful Theory of Civil War." It isn't a staple in military school—Carl von Clausewitz's bible, *On War*, has nothing to say about it. There are plenty of descriptions of this or that episode of internal conflict. Thucydides gave us the first one, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2,500 years ago. But as Enzensberger writes, "It's not just that the mad reality eludes formal legal definition. Even the strategies of the military high commands fail in the face of the new world order which trades under the name of civil war. The unprecedented comes into sudden and explosive contact with the atavistic."

This mad reality is impossible to map onto a country as vast, diverse, and demographically fluid as the United States already is, still less onto how it might be at some unspecified time in the future. Marche has a broad notion that his putative civil war will take the form of one or more armed insurrections against the federal government, which will be put down with extreme violence by the official military. This repression will in turn fuel a cycle of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Under the strain, the U.S. will fracture into several independent nations. All of this is quite imaginable as far as it goes. But such a scenario does not actually go very far in defining this sort of turmoil as a civil war. Indeed, Marche himself envisages that, while "one way or another, the United States is coming to an end," this dissolution could in theory be a "civilized separation."

But this possibility does not sit well with the doom-saying that is his book's primary purpose. Nor is it internally coherent. Marche seems to think that a secession

by Texas might be consensual because Texas is a "single-party state." This would be news to the 46.5 percent of its voters who supported Joe Biden in the 2020 election. How would they feel about losing their American citizenship and being told that they now owe their allegiance to the Republic of Texas? If we really do want to imagine a future of violent conflict, would it not be just as much within seceding states as among supposedly discrete geographic and ideological blocs?

The secession of California as well as Texas is just one of five "dispatches" that Marche writes from his imagined future. He begins with an eminently plausible and well-told tale of a local sheriff who takes a stand against the government's closure for repair of a bridge used by most of his constituents. The right-wing media make him a hero figure, and he exploits the publicity brilliantly. The bridge becomes a magnet for militias, white supremacists, and anti-government cultists. The standoff is brought to an end by a military assault, resulting in mass casualties and creating, on the right, both a casus belli and martyrs for the cause. Marche's other dispatches describe the assassination of a U.S. president by a radicalized young loner; a combination of environmental disasters, with drought causing food shortages and a massive hurricane destroying much of New York; and the outbreak of insurrectionary violence and the equally violent responses to it.

All of these scenarios are well researched and eloquently presented. But how they relate to one another, or whether the conflicts they involve can really be regarded as a civil war, is never clear. Civil wars need mass participation, and how that could be mobilized across a subcontinent is not at all obvious. Marche seems to endorse the claim of the military historian Peter Mansoor that the pandemonium "would very much be a free-for-all, neighbor on neighbor, based on beliefs and skin colors and religion." His scenarios, either separately or cumulatively, do not show how or why the U.S. arrives at this Hobbesian state.

Marche's other conceptual problem is that, in order to dramatize all of this as a sudden and terrible collapse, he creates a ridiculously high baseline of American democratic normalcy. "A decade ago," he writes, "American stability and global supremacy were a given … The United States was synonymous with the glory of democracy." In this steady state, "a president was once the unquestioned representative of the American people's will." The U.S. Congress was "the greatest deliberative body in the world."

These claims are risible. After the lies that underpinned the invasion of Iraq and the abject failures of Congress to impose any real accountability for the conduct of the War on Terror, the beacon of American democracy was pretty dim. Has the sacred legitimacy of any U.S. president been unquestioned, ever? Did we imagine the visceral hatred of Bill Clinton among Republicans or Donald Trump's insistence that Barack Obama was not even a proper American, let alone the embodiment of the people's will?

This failure of historical perspective means that Marche can ignore the evidence that political violence, much of it driven by racism, is not a new threat. Even if we leave aside the actual Civil War, it has long been endemic in the U.S. Were the wars of extermination against American Indians not civil wars too? What about the brutal obliteration of the Black community in Greenwood, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921—should that not be seen as an episode in a long, undeclared war on Black Americans by white supremacists? The devastating riots in cities across America that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and in Los Angeles after the beating of Rodney King in 1992, sure looked like the kind of intercommunal violence that Marche conjures as a specter from the future. Arguably, the real problem for the U.S. is not that it can be torn apart by political violence, but that it has learned to live with it.

This is happening again—even the attempted coup of January 6 is already, for much of the political culture, normalized. Marche is so intent on the coming catastrophe that he seems unable to focus on what is in front of his nose. He writes, for example, that the assault on the Capitol cannot be regarded as an insurrection, because "the rioters were only loosely organized and possessed little political support and no military support." The third of these claims is broadly true (though military veterans featured heavily among the attackers). The first is at best dubious. The second is bizarre: The attack was incited by the man who was still the sitting president of the United States and had, both at the time and subsequently, widespread support within the Republican Party.

In this context, feverish talk of civil war has the paradoxical effect of making the current reality seem, by way of contrast, not so bad. The comforting fiction that the U.S. used to be a glorious and settled democracy prevents any reckoning with the fact that its current crisis is not a terrible departure from the past but rather a product of the unresolved contradictions of its history. The dark fantasy of Armageddon distracts from the more prosaic and obvious necessity to uphold the law and establish political and legal accountability for those who encourage others to defy it. Scary stories about the future are redundant when the task of dealing with the present is so urgent. *A*

THE NEXT CIVIL WAR: DISPATCHES FROM THE AMERICAN FUTURE

Stephen Marche

AVID READER PRESS

Fintan O'Toole writes for The Irish Times *and is the author of the forthcoming* We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland.

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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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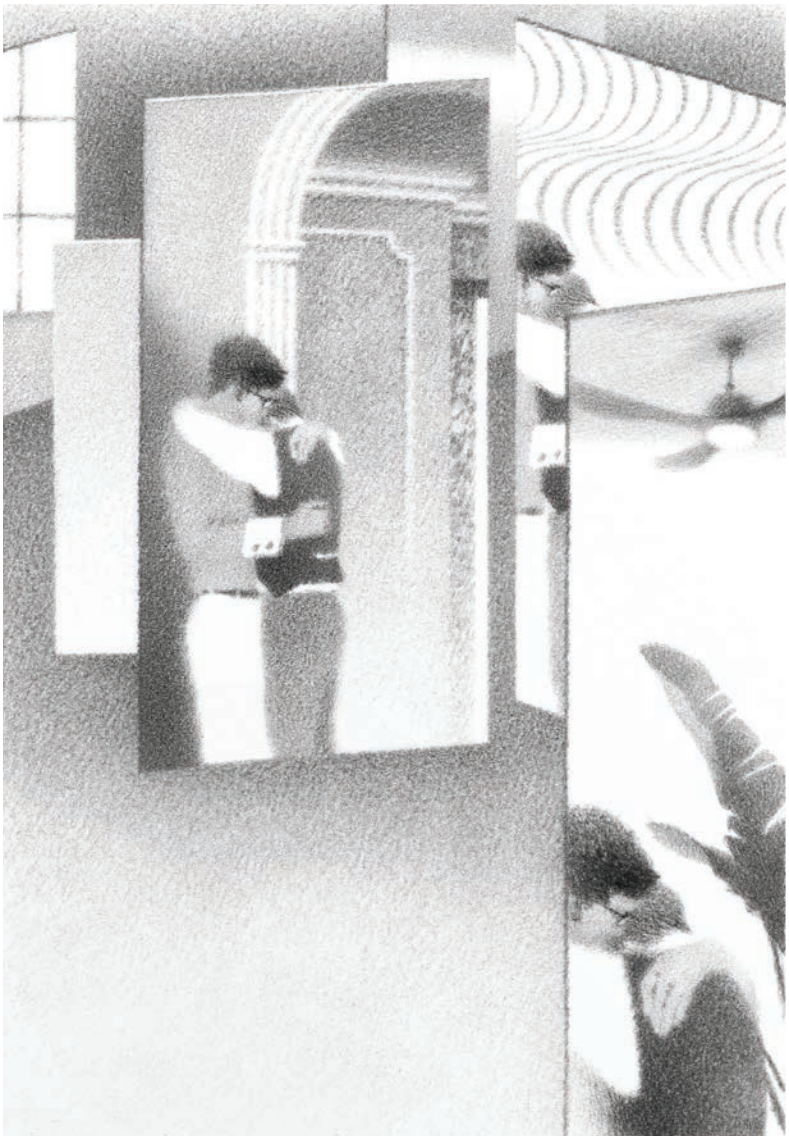
BOOKS

Hanya Yanagihara's Haunted America

Her new novel experiments with alternative versions of history, upending personal and national destinies.

By Jordan Kisner



While reading *To Paradise*, Hanya Yanagihara's gigantic new novel, I felt the impulse a few times to put down the book and make a chart—the kind of thing you see TV detectives assemble on their living-room walls when they have a web of evidence but no clear theory of the case. *To Paradise*, which is in fact three linked novels bound in a single volume, is constructed something like a soma cube, with plots that interlock but whose unifying logic and mechanisms are designed to baffle. The first book, "Washington Square," takes place in the early 1890s in a New York City that the reader quickly realizes is off-kilter. There the prominent Bingham family runs the primary bank of the Free States, one of a patchwork of nations (including the southern Colonies, the Union, the West, and the North) sustaining an uneasy coexistence after the War of Rebellion. In the Free States, homosexuality and gay marriage are perfectly ordinary, but Black people are not welcomed as citizens—the Free States are white, and committed only to giving Black people safe passage to the North and the West. David, the sickly grandson of the Bingham clan, falls in love with a poor musician named Edward, though his grandfather is attempting to arrange his marriage to a steady older man named Charles.

Book 2, "Lipo-Wao-Nahele," also follows a David Bingham, this time a young Hawaiian man living with his older lover, Charles, in the same house on Washington Square owned by the Binghams in the previous book. David is a descendant of the last monarch of Hawaii, whose legacy is defended by a Hawaiian-independence movement. It is the 1990s, and AIDS is ravaging David and Charles's world in New York, an erasure of a generation that is counterposed to David's ambivalent denial of his homeland, his lineage, and his father—who narrates half the book.

Book 3, which, at nearly 350 pages, constitutes almost half of the entire novel, tells the story of a United States that slides into a totalitarian dictatorship in response to recurrent pandemics and climate disasters. "Zone Eight," as it's titled, unfolds from 2043 to 2094, again in Greenwich Village (now Zone Eight), and is narrated, alternately, by Charles, a Hawaiian-born virologist and influential adviser to the government, and Charlie, the daughter of Charles's son, David. Charlie survived one pandemic as a child but lives with lasting neurological effects. These are, I promise, the barest possible bones of the trilogy.

To Paradise, though its plots are too various and intricate to even begin to capture in summary, moves smoothly and quickly. Yanagihara's previous novel, *A Little Life*, also a bulky page-turner,

ILLUSTRATION BY SOOMYEONG KIM

amassed critical praise and a near-frantic fandom on the strength of her gift for mapping deeply felt lives on an epic scale, and for dramatizing the way that people are driven, and failed, by their love for one another. *To Paradise* shares these qualities. Yet Yanagihara avoids the gratuitous violence and abjection that set the tone of *A Little Life*, a dark saga of four college friends who make their tormented way into middle age. *To Paradise* is a softer book, with a classic, almost old-fashioned set of plot arcs (a wealthy, fragile man is taken in by an opportunistic lover; a father longs for the son he alienated; utopian dreams produce a dystopia). It is executed with enough deftness and lush detail that you just about fall through it, like a knife through layer cake.

BUT WHAT is Yanagihara doing with all these Davids and Charleses?

A few notes from my TV-detective chart: Characters called David, Charles, Peter, and Edward appear in all three books of the novel. Surnames repeat as well—though sometimes those who share surnames across centuries seem to be related, and sometimes not. Two of the books prominently feature Hawaii; all have butlers named Adams. All three are anchored by the same townhouse on Washington Square. Though the first and third books take place in a version of America that is notably speculative, it is not clear whether these alternative Americas are meant to be continuous, shared across the novel. Each book could just as plausibly be playing out its own version of history.

Two have powerful grandfathers who fail in their efforts to protect their legacy and their vulnerable grandchildren (often from themselves). All center gay men. All dramatize the horrors of illness, horrors that reverberate through generations. Two follow men whose frailty leads them to throw their life into the hands of untrustworthy men; a different two books are set amid plagues. Every book ends with the same phrase and the same image: a character reaching out to someone else through time and space, willing or imagining their way "to paradise." None seems to imagine paradise in quite the same way.

The further I read, the more I suspected that the challenge Yanagihara sets for the reader isn't so much to decode a puzzle as to survive a plunge into chaos theory. The warped harmonies of the three plotlines seem engineered to reveal how ensnared humans are in inscrutable coincidences and consequences, how oblivious we are to the long arcs of causation. *To Paradise* evokes the dizzying way that minor events and personal choices might create countless alternative histories and futures, both for individuals and for society. Reading the novel delivers the thrilling, uncanny feeling of standing before an infinity mirror, numberless selves and rooms turning uncertainly before you, just out of reach.

The challenge Yanagihara sets for the reader isn't so much to decode a puzzle as to survive a plunge into chaos theory.

The butterfly effect—an underlying principle of chaos theory—holds that tiny, apparently inconsequential changes can produce enormous, globally felt repercussions. The butterfly effect was formalized by the meteorologist Edward Lorenz, who noticed, while running data through his weather models, that even the seemingly insignificant rounding up or down of initial inputs would create a big difference in outcomes: A flap of a wing, as he once put it, would be "enough to alter the course of the weather forever."

Yanagihara plays with shifts on different scales in the altered Americas that populate the novel. What if, after the Civil War, race and class had still been fulcrums of injustice and oppression in society, but sexuality had not? What if Hawaii declared independence, a jolt of a less systemic degree? What if, in the face of devastating pandemics, the American government prioritized virus containment and maximizing lives saved, forcibly isolating the ill and ignoring concerns about civil liberties and human rights? How much would have to change for the world to be different? What seemingly momentous changes would leave the world fundamentally the same?

In Book 2, David is struck, looking at his lover, Charles, by how partially they know each other, and how circumstantial their relationship is. He finds himself reflecting that "each of them wanted the other to exist only as he was currently experiencing him—as if they were both too unimaginative to contemplate each other in a different context." His thoughts begin to spiral outward.

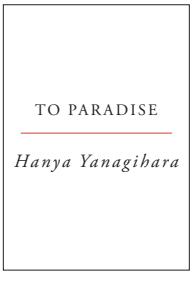
> But suppose they were forced to? Suppose the earth were to shift in space, only an inch or two but enough to redraw their world, their country, their city, themselves, entirely? What if Manhattan was a flooded island of rivers and canals … Or what if they lived in a glittering, treeless metropolis rendered entirely in frost … ? Or what if New York looked just as it did, but no one he knew was dying, no one was dead, and tonight's party had been just another gathering of friends.

THESE KINDS OF "what if"s haunt all three plot arcs. Story after story within each book focuses on missed gestures of care and thwarted intimacy: If the grandfather in Book 1 had shared his doubts about Edward earlier, would that have rescued or stifled David? What if the David in Book 2 had been honest about his family background when he moved in with Charles? What if the Charles in Book 3 had been gentler when David got in trouble at school? Would their relationship have retained the possibility of repair? What if Charlie had told *her* Edward, the husband she acquired in an arranged marriage, that she loved him? Again and again, the question arises: What if this or that interchange had

gone *just a little differently*? What swerve might have followed? What could have been saved?

The book that grapples most directly with this torturous uncertainty is "Zone Eight." It is written, in part, as letters from the scientist Charles Griffith to a friend and colleague named Peter over nearly five decades, updating Peter on his life—an account interwoven with his granddaughter, Charlie's, narration of a year of her adult life, after Charles's death. We meet Charles first as a young husband and father who has accepted a position at a prestigious lab in New York. His husband resents the move, but Charles feels he can do good at this new lab, which is engaged in the crucial work of anticipating and preventing pandemics. As his son grows up, as Charles and his husband grow apart, as global pandemics grow more dire, the reader begins to see in Charles's letters the incremental nature of disaster.

His decisions—to collaborate with the government, to avoid confronting his son in an argument, to behave poorly at a dinner—are barely noticeable in the course of the weeks and months that his letters relate. But slowly, they accumulate into something all wrong. Many years into the correspondence, when the United States has become a totalitarian regime that Charles—trying to save lives—helped build, and when the islands around Manhattan serve as brutal internment camps for the ill, he confesses to his friend: "I have always wondered how people knew it was time to leave a place, whether that place was Phnom Penh or Saigon or Vienna." He knows he has missed his window to escape the state he played a part in creating.



> I had always imagined that that awareness happened slowly, slowly but steadily, so the changes, though each terrifying on its own, became inoculated by their frequency, as if the warnings were normalized by how many there were. And then, suddenly, it's too late. All the while, as you were sleeping, as you were working, as you were eating dinner or reading to your children or talking with your friends, the gates were being locked, the roads were being barricaded, the train tracks were being dismantled, the ships were being moored, the planes were being rerouted.

At every step, Charles writes, he was trying to do the right thing. But "I made the wrong decisions, and then I made more and more of them." That some of those missteps led to the devastation of his family, the transformation of Roosevelt Island into a crematorium, the supplanting of neighborhoods by militarized zones—and ultimately to a generation of children who can remember neither the internet nor civil liberties—is harder to contemplate, because this man is a normal enough man, a concerned scientist. As he made his decisions, none of them seemed to hold the potential for fatal error.

Small choices leading to unforeseen consequences are a conventional feature of fiction, but Yanagihara's execution of this trope feels compelling and chilling because Charles's world is so plausibly near to our own possible future. We, too, live in a world rocked by pandemics and storms, well aware that more are coming. We, too, live in a country that is vulnerable to authoritarianism. Charles arrives in New York in the early 2040s, and the setting looks reasonably like the New York of today. What apparently insignificant choices are we making, or not making, that will determine the disasters—or disasters averted—of our future? What vital relationships are in the balance at school pickup? Yanagihara taps into the anxieties of a moment crowded with warnings about apocalypses that might be narrowly avoided if we (who?) take action (what action?) now. One has the feeling, as an American in 2021, of being both the butterfly and the storm.

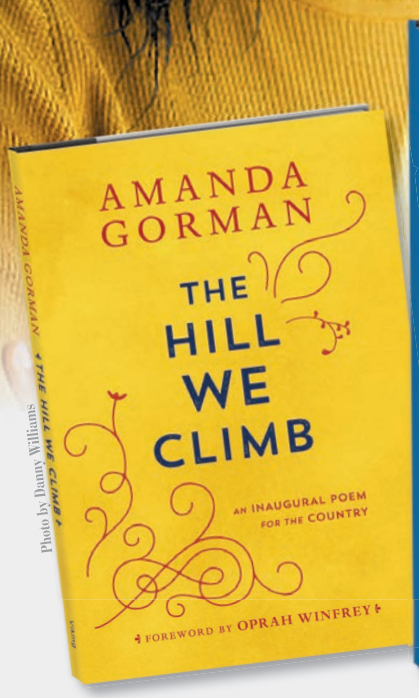
Yanagihara's feat in *To Paradise* is capturing the way that the inevitable chaos of the present unrolls into the future: It happens on both global and intimate levels, always. The potential and kinetic energies that drive massive political shifts are also at work within the private push and pull of a marriage, between generations. The nature of energy is not to appear and disappear; it simply transfers. That invocation of continuity and possibility can sound hopeful, but here it is also daunting, entrapping. No matter what century, no matter which shifting variables—no matter how compellingly we spin stories out of uncertainties—chaos (the chaos of love, of crisis, of injustice, of alienation) is inescapable, uncontrollable. In the novel, as in life, humans are both the architects and the refugees of that chaos, determined to pursue meaning and connection no matter how impossible we have made that pursuit.

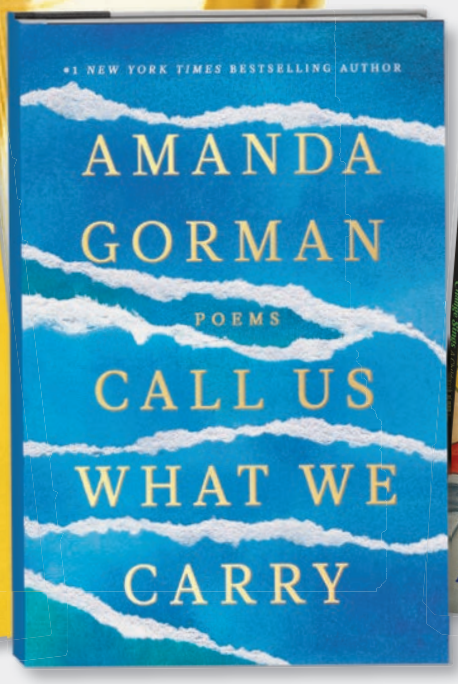
"For just as it was the lizard's nature to eat, it was the moon's nature to rise, and no matter how tightly the lizard clamped its mouth, the moon rose still," goes a fable that Charles relays in Book 3, one he learned from his grandmother, who learned it from her grandmother. The voracious lizard in the tale consumes everything on Earth until there is nothing left, and then he eats the moon. But the moon rises inexorably and the lizard, unable to contain it any longer, explodes. "The moon burst forth from the earth and continued its path."

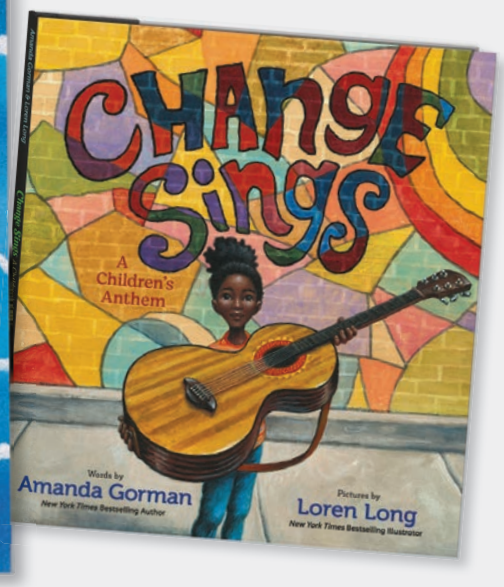
"We are the lizard, but we are also the moon," Charles writes. "Some of us will die, but others of us will keep doing what we always have, continuing on our own oblivious way, doing what our nature compels us to, silent and unknowable and unstoppable in our rhythms." *A*

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

Hope. Change. Heal.







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The United States Has a Dirty-Money Problem

High-level corruption, long associated with faraway autocracies, couldn't thrive without American enabling.

By Anne Applebaum

In 2010, things started going wrong at the steel plant in Warren, Ohio, a Rust Belt town that went on to cast its votes twice for Donald Trump. A cooling panel started leaking, and the furnace operator didn't see the leak in time; the water hit molten steel, leading to an explosion that sent workers to the hospital with burns and severe injuries. A year later, another explosion caused another round of destruction. A federal regulatory investigation turned up dozens of safety violations. "They just kept cutting corners," one employee said. "They were running a skeleton crew. They would not hire more help." A few years later, the plant halted operations. In January 2016, it shut down for good. Some 200 people lost their jobs.

Here, as Casey Michel writes in *American Kleptocracy*, is what the Warren Steel plant looks like now:

> Cavernous holes gouge the siding, with peeling yellow and blue paint giving way to swaths of rust and sloshes of mud. Vacant lots and missing windows, crumpled cabinets and offices in disarray—whether trashed by looters or former employees is unclear—round out the place. The mill sits like something out of a dystopic future—or like something out of certain parts of the Soviet Union.

Michel, an American journalist, has chosen his words with care. As his book makes brilliantly clear, the mill actually is "something out of certain parts of the Soviet Union." At the time of its demise, Warren Steel was owned by Ihor Kolomoisky, a Ukrainian oligarch. Kolomoisky is alleged to have bought it, along with hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of other midwestern properties, as part of a money-laundering operation. According to Michel, who said that Kolomoisky declined to comment on any of the allegations in the book, the oligarch needed to move cash that had been obtained illegally into something "real," in order to hide its origins (and perhaps use it as collateral for legitimate loans). He may also have hoped that desperation for investment in the American Rust Belt meant that the origins of his money would be overlooked. Unlike bankers, real-estate professionals in the U.S. have not always been required to examine closely the source of funds used to buy property, which is why the sector has become such a magnet for money launderers.

These were not small investments. From 2006 to 2016, companies linked to Kolomoisky acquired half a dozen steel mills, four office buildings and a hotel conference center in Cleveland, an office park in Dallas, a mothballed Motorola factory near Chicago. Money for the purchases allegedly came from the coffers of PrivatBank, a Ukrainian bank owned by Kolomoisky—and, according to Ukrainian investigators, defrauded by Kolomoisky. The money flowed into the Midwest via shell companies in Cyprus, the British Virgin Islands, and Delaware, with the assistance of the American arm of Deutsche Bank. In 2016, the flow ground to a halt. The Ukrainian government nationalized PrivatBank after determining that Kolomoisky and his inner circle had used fraudulent loans to rob the bank's shareholders of $5.5 billion. (Kolomoisky has denied wrongdoing and is fighting the nationalization in Ukrainian court.)

This was a typical post-Soviet scheme. But it was made possible by a whole series of American front men. One of them, Chaim Schochet of Miami, was 23 when he started buying Cleveland real estate, to the utter delight of the city's leaders. Mordechai Korf, also of Miami, became the CEO of Optima Specialty Steel, the company that held the industrial property purchased with Kolomoisky's money. Both Korf and Schochet used the services of an American lawyer, Marc Kasowitz, who represented Donald Trump during the Russia probe, among other legal battles.

On their behalf, Kasowitz has claimed that they had no knowledge of wrongdoing by Kolomoisky. One Optima Specialty board member has even said publicly that he had no idea that the source of the money for the investment was in Ukraine.

If this alleged scheme took a long time to uncover, that's partly because such an arrangement makes no sense to ordinary businesspeople, or to anyone who buys properties in order to manage them well and make a profit. Kolomoisky, Schochet, and Korf all live far away from Warren, Cleveland, and the other places where they invested; they felt no special responsibility for the people who live and work there. Because the point of their investments was, allegedly, to legitimize money removed from a Ukrainian bank and not to rescue dying factories, the owners were uninterested in the health and safety of their employees.

But the scheme does make sense within the arcane world of international kleptocracy, an alternative universe whose rules are so clearly different from those of the everyday economy that many have sought to find a name for it. In a book published in 2019, the British journalist Oliver Bullough calls this universe Moneyland. Tom Burgis, an investigative reporter for the *Financial Times*, calls it Kleptopia in his 2020 book by the same title. Inside this domain, shell companies, anonymously owned companies, and funds based in offshore tax havens like Jersey or the Cayman Islands hide what some believe could be as much as 10 percent of global GDP—money earned from narcotics operations, stolen from legitimate institutions, or simply hidden with the aim of avoiding taxation. In this world, theft is rewarded. Taxes are not paid. Law enforcement is impotent and underfunded. Regulation is something to be dodged, not respected.

Offshore havens like the Cayman Islands hide what some believe could be as much as 10 percent of global GDP.

MOST VOTERS and citizens in the world's democracies are vaguely aware of this realm, but they imagine it exists in faraway autocracies or on exotic tropical islands. They are wrong. In October 2021, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists published excerpts from the Pandora Papers, a large cache of documents detailing the operations of tax havens and the people who keep money in them. Among other things, the records make clear how much clandestine financial traffic goes not through the Caribbean, but through the U.S. and the U.K. Wealthy Nigerians secretly own £350 million worth of British property; the king of Jordan used shell companies perfectly legally to purchase homes in London and Ascot, England. The ICIJ investigation also showed, for the first time in such an accessible manner, how Delaware, Nevada, South Dakota, and Wyoming—nice, normal American states, full of nice, normal Americans—have created financial instruments that nameless investors can use to hide their money from the world. Casey Michel's subtitle, *How the U.S. Created the World's Greatest Money Laundering Scheme in History*, gets the map right. So does Tom Burgis's, *How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World*.

The contrast between the tiny number of winners in the kleptocratic economy and the immense number of losers—not just the workers of Warren but the shareholders of PrivatBank and the taxpayers of Ukraine—is so stark that the persistence of this system now constitutes one of the most important modern political mysteries: Why doesn't the U.S., instead of abetting the elaborate arrangements, exert its leverage to help change the rules and eradicate the system? Part of the answer is obvious. Powerful people benefit from it, and they are intent on keeping it in place. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island has long campaigned against the prevailing disorder, emphasizing that the same shell companies used to hide money from taxation can also be used to hide political donations. He told me last year that "the interests who make money off of these schemes fight back quite hard, often through traditional lobbying groups." Michel writes that Kolomoisky himself reportedly sought to preserve his empire by winning influence in the Trump administration, among other things by offering "dirt" on Joe and Hunter Biden, some of which was passed to Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

Very rich people have also been known to use violence to protect what they have. Burgis describes in great detail what happened when an investigation into one African money-laundering operation homed in on its targets. In a relatively short period, hospitalizations, car explosions, and unexpected heart attacks eliminated several people who knew how the operation worked.

The world of kleptocracy is protected by its own complexity as well. Money-laundering mechanisms are hard to understand and even harder to police. Anonymous transactions can move through different bank accounts in different countries in a matter of seconds, while anyone seeking to follow the money may need years to pursue the trail. Governments, meanwhile, are often ambivalent about prosecuting powerful people. Civil servants charged with tracking complex, secretive billion-dollar deals earn low salaries themselves, and may not want to tangle with people of much greater wealth and influence. Burgis tells at length the story of a British man named Nigel Wilkins, who worked as a compliance officer at the London branch of BSI, a Swiss bank, and then for British regulators. Wilkins came to suspect that BSI was helping its high-net-worth clients launder money, and he gathered the evidence to prove it.

But when he produced the clues, he was accused of violating client confidentiality. He lost his job with British regulators. A few years later, he was proved right. BSI was linked to a massive corruption scandal and forced to close.

Journalists are hamstrung too. They may need to spend months or years learning how a particular money-laundering scheme functions, across countries and often continents, without the tools available to government investigators—and without any guarantee that the articles they produce will generate the clicks and likes that newspapers and magazines now need to survive. That's why all but the largest publications have now mostly abandoned this kind of work. Full investigations require big investments, large consortia like the ICIJ, or else groups like the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, funded by philanthropists. The Pandora Papers investigation, like several other investigations before it, was made possible by leaks. Even then, the task of understanding the significance of the documents and their relationship to real people demanded the resources of the ICIJ, which comprises 140 media organizations and hundreds of journalists working all over the world.

And when reporters do the work, the nature of these stories can make them daunting to read. The Pandora Papers report, like the Panama Papers report, caught readers' attention because the journalists involved could focus on a few sensational stories: the apartment owned by Putin's supposed mistress in Monaco, for example, or the villa in the south of France secretly purchased by the prime minister of the Czech Republic. (Both the Kremlin and the prime minister have dismissed the claims.) But conveying the full picture of corruption, from a scheme's inception to its long-term ramifications, is a big challenge. *American Kleptocracy* and *Kleptopia* required years of careful reporting; they both, in turn, require concentration to read.

AMERICAN KLEPTOCRACY: HOW THE U.S. CREATED THE WORLD'S GREATEST MONEY LAUNDERING SCHEME IN HISTORY

Casey Michel

ST. MARTIN'S

KLEPTOPIA: HOW DIRTY MONEY IS CONQUERING THE WORLD

Tom Burgis

HARPER

WHAT IS MISSING, particularly in the U.S. and the U.K., is a political movement that would not just identify these scourges but seek to remove them. The only major political figure who has successfully and consistently publicized the extent and impact of kleptocracy in his country is the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who has made a series of crowdfunded documentary films, posted on YouTube, tying the leaders of Russia to long-standing, far-reaching financial scams and broad networks of enablers. The videos succeed because they are carefully made, because they include juicy details—purporting to show aerial photographs of Putin's palace, a huge Black Sea residence with its own ice-hockey rink, for example—and because they link the stories to the poverty of Russian teachers, doctors, and civil servants. Navalny himself is a charismatic camera presence, which also helps.

In the U.S., Senator Whitehouse and others have successfully advocated for stricter rules governing anonymous companies. More recently, the Biden administration has said that it will begin using additional resources to audit high earners, especially those who are suspected of employing schemes to hide money from the IRS. But why stop there? Why not ban the use of tax havens and anonymous trusts altogether, including those now operating in so many American states? We can create better systems to detect abuse, better institutions to carry out oversight, better laws and better enforcement of the ones that exist.

Good government is not the only thing at stake. The links between autocracy and corruption are strong. Autocrats and would-be autocrats—whether Hugo Chávez, Vladimir Putin, or Donald Trump—attack and undermine the independent press, the civil service, and the judiciary in order to erode democratic political norms. But they also do it to ensure that nobody will discover that they or their friends have broken the law. Michel notes that Trump pushed hard against the enforcement of anti-corruption laws, even reportedly telling then–Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in the spring of 2017, to "get rid of" the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which bars American companies from bribing foreign officials. Although Trump failed to eliminate the law entirely, he did slow down investigations and prosecutions. He also used the office of the presidency for personal gain, turning political power into cash, just as kleptocrats around the world have long done. Anonymous purchases of Trump properties skyrocketed once he became the Republican nominee for president. As Michel writes, "We have no idea who the vast majority of these purchasers were, or where they came from, or where they got their money, or what they wanted—or how they impacted American policy."

By the time Trump left office, the story had come full circle. Trump was elected in part by people who had been ripped off by the international kleptocracy in places like Warren. He used his four years in office to weaken any institutions—ombudsmen and inspectors general, as well as the press—that would have held him, his family, and his company more accountable. His presidency should serve as a warning: If democratic societies do not wake up to the spread of corruption among self-interested rulers and their enablers, they may find themselves not just broke and impoverished, but voiceless and unfree. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

I Remember Conservatism

The rich philosophical tradition I fell in love with has been reduced to Fox News and voter suppression.

By David Brooks

I fell in love with conservatism in my 20s. As a politics and crime reporter in Chicago, I often found myself around public-housing projects like Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes, which had been built with the best of intentions but had become nightmares. The urban planners who designed those projects thought they could improve lives by replac-

STEFANI REYNOLDS / CNP / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; SEPIA TIMES / UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP / GETTY

neighborhoods with a series of neatly ordered high-rises.

But, as the sociologist Richard Sennett, who lived in part of the Cabrini-Green complex as a child, noted, the planners never really consulted the residents themselves. They disrespected the residents by turning them into unseen, passive spectators of their own lives. By the time I encountered the projects they were national symbols of urban decay.

Back then I thought of myself as a socialist. But seeing the fallout from this situation prompted a shocking realization: *This is exactly what that guy I read in college had predicted*. Human society is unalterably complex, Edmund Burke argued. If you try to reengineer it based on the simplistic schema of your own reason, you will unintentionally cause significant harm. Though Burke was writing as a conservative statesman in Britain some 200 years earlier, the wisdom of his insight was apparent in what I was seeing in the Chicago of the 1980s.

I started reading any writer on conservatism whose book I could get my hands on—Willmoore Kendall, Peter Viereck, Shirley Robin Letwin. I can only describe what happened next as a love affair. I was enchanted by their way of looking at the world. In conservatism I found not a mere alternative policy agenda, but a deeper and more resonant account of human nature, a more comprehensive understanding of wisdom, an inspiring description of the highest ethical life and the nurturing community.

What passes for "conservatism" now, however, is nearly the opposite of the Burkean conservatism I encountered then. Today, what passes for the worldview of "the right" is a set of resentful animosities, a partisan attachment to Donald Trump or Tucker Carlson, a sort of mental brutalism. The rich philosophical perspective that dazzled me then has been reduced to Fox News and voter suppression.

I recently went back and reread the yellowing conservatism books that I have lugged around with me over the decades. I wondered whether I'd be embarrassed or ashamed of them, knowing what conservatism has devolved into. I have to tell you that I wasn't embarrassed; I was enthralled all over again, and I came away thinking that conservatism is truer and more profound than ever—and that to be a conservative today, you have to oppose much of what the Republican Party has come to stand for.

THIS ESSAY is a reclamation project. It is an attempt to remember how modern conservatism started, what core wisdom it contains, and why that wisdom is still needed today.

Our political categories emerged following the wars of religion of the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries. It was a time of bitterness, polarization, and culture war—like today, but a thousand times worse. The Reformation had divided Europe into hostile Catholic and Protestant camps. The wars were a series of massacres and countermassacres, vicious retributions, and even more vicious counter-retributions. Blaise de Monluc, a French commander, was a characteristic figure. In 1562, as Sarah Bakewell recounts in her book *How to Live*, he was sent to pacify the city of Bordeaux after a Protestant mob had attacked the town hall during a riot. Monluc's method was mass murder. He hanged Protestants in the street without trial. His suppression was so bloodthirsty that his troops ran out of gallows and had to hang people from trees. So many Protestants were killed and thrown into a well that their bodies entirely filled the deep shaft. In 1571, Monluc was shot in the face, and he spent the rest of his life behind a mask—a disfigured man from a disfigured age.

Eventually many Europeans became exhausted and appalled. The urgent task was this: how to construct a society that wouldn't devolve into bitter polarization and tribal bloodbaths. One camp, which we associate with the French Enlightenment, put its faith in reason. Some thought a decent social order can be built when primitive passions like religious zeal are marginalized and tamed; when individuals are educated to use their highest faculty, reason, to pursue their enlightened self-interest; and when government organizes society using the tools of science.

Another camp, which we associate with the Scottish or British Enlightenment of David Hume and Adam Smith, did not believe that human reason is powerful enough to control human selfishness; most of the time our reason merely rationalizes our selfishness. They did not believe that individual reason is powerful enough even to comprehend the world around us, let alone enable leaders to engineer society from the top down. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small," Burke wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

This is one of the core conservative principles: epistemological modesty, or humility in the face of what we don't know about a complex world, and a conviction that social change should be steady but cautious and incremental. Down the centuries, conservatives have always stood against the arrogance of those who believe they have the ability to plan history: the French revolutionaries who thought they could destroy a society and rebuild it from scratch, but who ended up with the guillotine; the Russian and Chinese Communists who tried to create a centrally controlled society, but who ended up with the gulag and the Cultural Revolution; the Western government planners who thought they could fine-tune an economy from the top, but who ended up with stagflation and sclerosis; the European elites who thought they could unify their continent by administrative fiat and arrogate power to unelected technocrats in Brussels, but who ended up with a monetary crisis and populist backlash.

If conservatives don't think reason is strong enough to order a civilization, what human faculty do they trust enough to do the job? Here we have to resort to a classic 18th-century concept—the "sentiments." An early book of Burke's was on aesthetics. When you look at a painting, you don't have to rationally calculate its beauty or its power, the sadness or the joy it inspires. Sentiments are automatic aesthetic and emotional judgments about things. They assign value. They tell you what is beautiful and what is ugly, what to want and what is worth wanting, where to go and what to aim for.

Rationalists put a lot of faith in "I think therefore I am"—the autonomous individual deconstructing problems step by logical step. Conservatives put a lot of

faith in the latent wisdom that is passed down by generations, cultures, families, and institutions, and that shows up as a set of quick and ready intuitions about what to do in any situation. Brits don't have to think about what to do at a crowded bus stop. They form a queue, guided by the cultural practices they have inherited.

The most important sentiments are moral sentiments. Conservatism certainly has an acute awareness of sin—selfishness, greed, lust. But conservatives also believe that in the right circumstances, people are motivated by the positive moral emotions—especially sympathy and benevolence, but also admiration, patriotism, charity, and loyalty. These moral sentiments move you to be outraged by cruelty, to care for your neighbor, to feel proper affection for your imperfect country. They motivate you to do the right thing.

Your emotions can be trusted, the conservative believes, when they are cultivated rightly. "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," David Hume wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. "The feelings on which people act are often superior to the arguments they employ," the late neoconservative scholar James Q. Wilson wrote in *The Moral Sense*.

The key phrase, of course, is *cultivated rightly*. A person who lived in a state of nature would be an unrecognizable creature, scarcely fit for life in society, locked up within and slave to his own unruly desires. The only way to govern such an unformed creature would be through a prison state. If a person has not been trained by a community to tame his passions from within, then the state would have to continuously control him from without.

Fortunately, people do not generally bring themselves up alone. The state of nature as imagined by John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau has never existed. People are raised within families and communities, traditions and nations—within the civilizing webs of a coherent social order. Over time, humans have evolved arrangements, traditions, and customs that not only help them address practical problems, but also help them form their children into decent human beings. The methods and mores that have stood the test of time have usually endured for good reason. "The world is often wiser than any philosopher," the journalist Walter Bagehot wrote in the mid-19th century.

Some of the wisdom passed down through the ages is transmitted through books and sermons. But most of the learning happens by habituation. We are formed within families, churches, communities, schools, and professional societies. Each institution has its own stories, standards of excellence, ways of doing things. When you join the Marines, you don't just learn to shoot a rifle; you absorb an entire ethos that will both help you complete the tasks you will confront and mold you into a certain sort of person: fierce against foes, loyal to friends, faithful to the Corps.

True conservatism's great virtue is that it teaches us to be humble about what we think we know; it gets human nature right.

If someone asked you how to treat a woman whose husband has just died, your instinctive response would probably not be "Induce her to host an open house for the next week." But the Jewish shiva customs are a brilliant set of practices to help people collectively deal with grief, in part by giving everybody something basic and purposeful to do. The shiva rituals nurture a certain way of caring for one another, instantiate a certain sort of family life. They help turn individuals into a people. Institutions instill habits, habits become virtues, virtues become character.

Burkean conservatism inspired me because its social vision was not just about laws, budgets, and technocratic plans; its vision was about soulcraft, about how we build institutions that produce good citizens—people who are moderate in their zeal, sympathetic to the marginalized, reliable in their diligence, and willing to sacrifice the private interest for public good. Conservatism resonated with me because it recognized that culture is more important than the state in driving history. "Manners are of more importance than laws," Burke wrote.

> Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in. They give their whole form and color to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.

Conservatives thus spend a lot of time defending the "little platoon[s]," as Burke called them, the communities and settled villages that are the factories of moral and emotional formation. If, as Burke believed, reason alone cannot find the one true answer to any social problem, each community must improvise its own set of solutions to intricate human concerns. The conservative seeks to defend this wonderful heterogeneity from the forces of bigness and the centralizing arrogance of rationalism—to protect these little platoons when government tries to perform roles best done in families, when the federal government takes power from local government, when big corporations suck the vitality out of local economies.

True conservatism's great virtue is that it teaches us to be humble about what we think we know; it gets human nature right, and understands that we are primarily a collection of unconscious processes, deep emotions, and clashing desires. Conservatism's profound insight is that it's impossible to build a healthy society strictly on

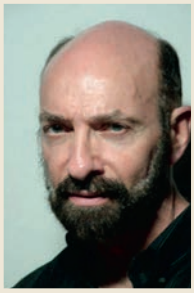
the principle of self-interest. It's an illusion, as T. S. Eliot put it, to think that a society in which people don't have to be good can thrive. Life is essentially a moral enterprise, and the health of your community will depend on how well it does moral formation—how well it nurtures ordered inner lives and helps balance sentiments, desires, and motivations. Finally, conservatism welcomes you into a great procession down the ages. Society "is a partnership in all science," Burke wrote,

> a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

BY THE EARLY 1990S, I was living in Brussels, covering Europe, Africa, and the Middle East for *The Wall Street Journal* and continuing my conservative self-education. I became fascinated by a British statesman named Enoch Powell. If you were to design the perfect conservative, Powell would seem to be it—a classics scholar, veteran, poet, and man of faith, and the product of the finest Tory training grounds the U.K. had to offer. And yet in 1968, Powell had given his notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech, which was blatant in its racism and shocking in its anti-immigrant message. How, I wondered, had conservatism, which was developed in response to sectarian war, produced a statesman who was trying to start one?

I realized that every worldview has the vices of its virtues. Conservatives are supposed to be epistemologically modest—but in real life, this modesty can turn into a brutish anti-intellectualism, a contempt for learning and expertise. Conservatives are supposed to prize local community—but this orientation can turn into narrow parochialism, can produce xenophobic and racist animosity toward immigrants, a tribal hostility toward outsiders, and a paranoid response when confronted with even a hint of diversity and pluralism. Conservatives are supposed to cherish moral formation—but this emphasis can turn into a rigid and self-righteous moralism, a tendency to see all social change as evidence of moral decline and social menace. Finally, conservatives are supposed to revere the past—but this reverence for what was can turn into an abject deference to whoever holds power. When I looked at conservatives in continental Europe, I generally didn't like what I saw. And when I looked at people like Powell, I was appalled.

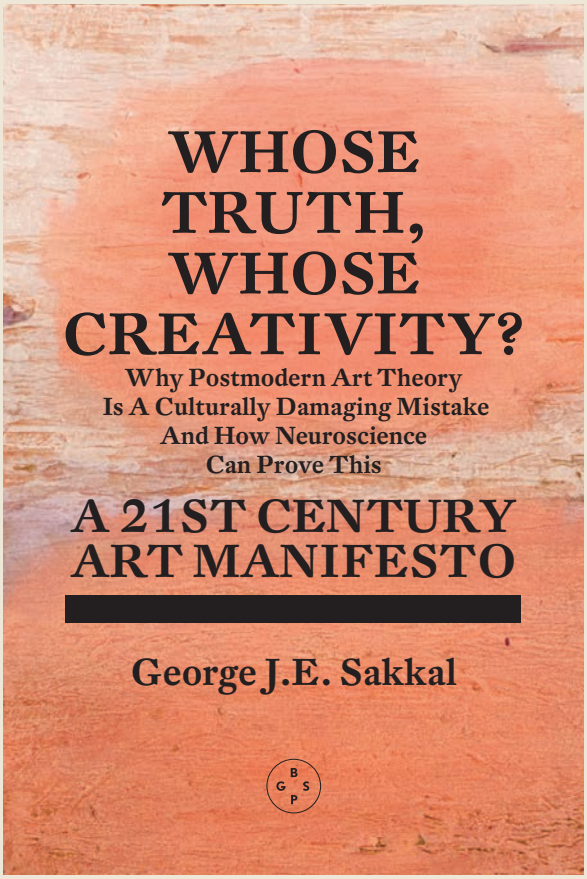
CAN ART THEORY BE SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN?



Whose Truth, Whose Creativity? is an expert analysis of neuro-science and art theory — this new book delves into the source of all art and creativity, from ancient cave paintings to contemporary art. It explores why postmodern art theory has had a damaging impact on the art world and explains how neuroscience can prove this. Does talent spring from the unconscious mind as Paul Cézanne believed? Or does it, as Marcel Duchamp theorized, come from conceptual thinking at the conscious level?

Cognitive neuroscientific psychology, a fairly new field of psychology, explains a natural, mental basis for human creativity. This book exposes the many falsehoods and distortions of postmodern reasoning to demonstrate how, by following this disturbing, unnatural direction for decades, the art establishment has been responsible for initiating an era of damaging cultural chaos.

George J. E. Sakkal: For over fifty years, his avocation has been the practice of Fine Art. In addition to winning several national and regional competitions and exhibiting his work throughout the Baltimore / Washington D.C. region, he has lectured and taught collage and his discovery, CUVISM, at the University of Maryland's Community College in Columbia, Maryland. Sakkal has served as a Peace Corps Volunteer architect from 1966 to 1968 and an Associate Peace Corps Director from 1968 to 1971, both in Iran. He has a Bachelor's in Architecture from the School of Architecture at Texas A&M University and a Master's in City Planning from Harvard's Graduate School of Design.



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His first article, *The Problem with Postmodern Art Theory*, was published by the *American Arts Quarterly Journal* in the summer of 2009. Examining the validity of the theories of contemporary art's Postmodern era resulted in his first book, *CUVISM (Cognitive Unconscious Visual Creativity): The Human Creative Response*, published in 2015.

VISIT THE AUTHOR / ARTIST AT **WWW.SAKKALCUVISM.COM**

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Fortunately, I didn't have to live within the confines of blood-and-soil European conservatism; I had the American kind. Because conservatism is so rooted in the local manners and mores of each community, there is no such thing as international conservatism. Each society has its own customs and moral practices, and so each society has its own brand of conservatism.

American conservatism descends from Burkean conservatism, but is hopped up on steroids and adrenaline. Three features set our conservatism apart from the British and continental kinds. First, the American Revolution. Because that war was fought partly on behalf of abstract liberal ideals and universal principles, the tradition that American conservatism seeks to preserve is liberal. Second, while Burkean conservatism puts a lot of emphasis on stable communities, America, as a nation of immigrants and pioneers, has always emphasized freedom, social mobility, the Horatio Alger myth—the idea that it is possible to transform your condition through hard work. Finally, American conservatives have been more unabashedly devoted to capitalism—and to entrepreneurialism and to business generally—than conservatives almost anywhere else. Perpetual dynamism and creative destruction are big parts of the American tradition that conservatism defends.

If you look at the American conservative tradition—which I would say begins with the capitalist part of Hamilton and the localist part of Jefferson; extends through the Whig Party and Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt; continues with Eisenhower, Goldwater, and Reagan; and ends with Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign—you don't see people trying to revert to some past glory. Rather, they are attracted to innovation and novelty, smitten with the excitement of new technologies—from Hamilton's pro-growth industrial policy to Lincoln's railroad legislation to Reagan's "Star Wars" defense system.

American conservatism has always been in tension with itself. In its prime—the half century from 1964 to 2012—it was divided among libertarians, religious conservatives, small-town agrarians, urban neoconservatives, foreign-policy hawks, and so on. And for a time, this fractiousness seemed to work.

American conservatives were united, during this era, by their opposition to communism and socialism, to state planning and amoral technocracy. In those days I assumed that this vibrant, forward-looking conservatism was the future, and that the Enoch Powells of the world were the receding roar of a sick reaction. I was wrong. And I confess that I've come to wonder if the tension between "America" and "conservatism" is just too great. Maybe it's impossible to hold together a movement that is both backward-looking and forward-looking, both in love with stability and addicted to change, both go-go materialist and morally rooted. Maybe the postwar American conservatism we all knew—a collection of intellectuals, activists, politicians, journalists, and others aligned with the Republican Party—was just a parenthesis in history, a parenthesis that is now closing.

DONALD TRUMP is the near-opposite of the Burkean conservatism I've described here. How did a movement built on sympathy and wisdom lead to a man who possesses neither? How did a movement that put such importance on the moral formation of the individual end up elevating an unashamed moral degenerate? How did a movement built on an image of society as a complex organism give rise to the simplistic dichotomies of manipulative populism? How did a movement based on respect for the wisdom of the past end up with Trump's authoritarian campaign boast "I alone can fix it," perhaps the least conservative sentence it is possible to utter?

The reasons conservatism devolved into Trumpism are many. First, race. Conservatism makes sense only when it is trying to preserve social conditions that are basically healthy. America's racial arrangements are fundamentally unjust. To be conservative on racial matters is a moral crime. American conservatives never wrapped their mind around this. My beloved mentor, William F. Buckley Jr., made an ass of himself in his 1965 Cambridge debate against James Baldwin. By the time I worked at *National Review*, 20 years later, explicit racism was not evident in the office, but racial issues were generally overlooked and the GOP's flirtation with racist dog whistles was casually tolerated. When you ignore a cancer, it tends to metastasize.

Second, economics. Conservatism is essentially an explanation of how communities produce wisdom and virtue. During the late 20th century, both the left and the right valorized the liberated individual over the enmeshed community. On the right, that meant less Edmund Burke, more Milton Friedman. The right's focus shifted from wisdom and ethics to self-interest and economic growth. As George F. Will noted in 1984, an imbalance emerged between the "political order's meticulous concern for material well-being and its fastidious withdrawal from concern for the inner lives and moral character of citizens." The purpose of the right became maximum individual freedom, and especially economic freedom, without much of a view of what that freedom was for, nor much concern for what held societies together.

But perhaps the biggest reason for conservatism's decay into Trumpism was spiritual. The British and American strains of conservatism were built on a foundation of national confidence. If Britain was a tiny island nation that once bestrode the world, "nothing in all history had ever succeeded like America, and every American knew it," as the historian Henry Steele Commager put it in 1950. For centuries, American and British conservatives were grateful to have inherited such glorious legacies, knew that there were sacred things to be preserved in each national tradition, and understood that social change had to unfold within the existing guardrails of what already was.

By 2016, that confidence was in tatters. Communities were falling apart, families were breaking up, America was fragmenting. Whole regions had been left behind, and many elite institutions had shifted sharply left and driven conservatives from their ranks. Social media had instigated a brutal war of all against all, social trust was cratering, and the leadership class was growing more isolated, imperious, and condescending. "Morning in America" had given way to "American carnage" and a sense of perpetual threat.

I wish I could say that what Trump represents has nothing to do with conservatism, rightly understood. But as we saw with Enoch Powell, a pessimistic shadow

conservatism has always lurked in the darkness, haunting the more optimistic, confident one. The message this shadow conservatism conveys is the one that Trump successfully embraced in 2016: Evil outsiders are coming to get us. But in at least one way, Trumpism is truly anti-conservative. Both Burkean conservatism and Lockean liberalism were trying to find ways to gentle the human condition, to help society settle differences without resort to authoritarianism and violence. Trumpism is pre-Enlightenment. Trumpian authoritarianism doesn't renounce holy war; it embraces holy war, assumes it is permanent, in fact seeks to make it so. In the Trumpian world, disputes are settled by raw power and intimidation. The Trumpian epistemology is to be anti-epistemology, to call into question the whole idea of truth, to utter whatever lie will help you get attention and power. Trumpism looks at the tender sentiments of sympathy as weakness. Might makes right.

On the right, especially among the young, the populist and nationalist forces are rising. All of life is seen as an incessant class struggle between oligarchic elites and the common *volk*. History is a culture-war death match. Today's mass-market, pre-Enlightenment authoritarianism is not grateful for the inherited order but sees menace pervading it: You've been cheated. The system is rigged against you. Good people are dupes. Conspiracists are trying to screw you. Expertise is bogus. Doom is just around the corner. I alone can save us.

WHAT'S A Burkean conservative to do? A lot of my friends are trying to reclaim the GOP and make it a conservative party once again. I cheer them on. America needs two responsible parties. But I am skeptical that the GOP is going to be home to the kind of conservatism I admire anytime soon.

Trumpian Republicanism plunders, degrades, and erodes institutions for the sake of personal aggrandizement. The Trumpian cause is held together by hatred of the Other. Because Trumpians live in a state of perpetual war, they need to continually invent existential foes—critical race theory, nongendered bathrooms, out-of-control immigration. They need to treat half the country, metropolitan America, as a moral cancer, and view the cultural and demographic changes of the past 50 years as an alien invasion. Yet pluralism is one of America's oldest traditions; to conserve America, you have to love pluralism. As long as the warrior ethos dominates the GOP, brutality will be admired over benevolence, propaganda over discourse, confrontation over conservatism, dehumanization over dignity. A movement that has more affection for Viktor Orbán's Hungary than for New York's Central Park is neither conservative nor American. This is barren ground for anyone trying to plant Burkean seedlings.

American conservatism began with the capitalist part of Hamilton and the localist part of Jefferson and ended with Mitt Romney in 2012.

I'm content, as my hero Isaiah Berlin put it, to plant myself instead on the rightward edge of the leftward tendency—in the more promising soil of the moderate wing of the Democratic Party. If its progressive wing sometimes seems to have learned nothing from the failures of government and to promote cultural stances that divide Americans, at least the party as a whole knows what year it is. In 1980, the core problem of the age was statism, in the form of communism abroad and sclerotic, dynamism-sapping bureaucracies at home. In 2021, the core threat is social decay. The danger we should be most concerned with lies in family and community breakdown, which leaves teenagers adrift and depressed, adults addicted and isolated. It lies in poisonous levels of social distrust, in deepening economic and persisting racial disparities that undermine the very goodness of America—in political tribalism that makes government impossible.

There is nothing intrinsically anti-government in Burkean conservatism. "It is perhaps marvelous that people who preach disdain for government can consider themselves the intellectual descendants of Burke, the author of a celebration of the state," George F. Will once wrote. To reduce the economic chasm that separates class from class, to ease the financial anxiety that renders life unstable for many people, to support parenting so that children can grow up with more stability—these are the goals of a party committed to ameliorating, not exploiting, a growing sense of hopelessness and alienation, of vanishing opportunity. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's brilliant dictum—which builds on a Burkean wisdom forged in a world of animosity and corrosive flux—has never been more worth heeding than it is now: The central conservative truth is that culture matters most; the central liberal truth is that politics can change culture. *A*

David Brooks is a contributing writer at The Atlantic *and a columnist for* The New York Times. *His most recent book is* The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life.

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ODE

— *to* —

AMERICA

By James Parker

"Pretty good nose you got there! You do much fighting with that nose?"

New Orleans, 1989. I'm standing on a balcony south of the Garden District, and a man—a stranger—is hailing me from the street. He looks like Paul Newman, if Paul Newman were an alcoholic housepainter. I don't, as it happens, do much fighting with this nose, but that's not the point. The point is that something about me, the particular young-man way I'm jutting into the world—physically, attitudinally, beak first—is being recognized. The actual contour of me, or so I feel, is being saluted. For the first time.

America, this is personal. I came to you as a cramped and nervous Brit, an overwound piece of English clockwork, and you laid your cities before me. The alcoholic housepainter gave me a job, and it worked out pretty much as you might expect, given that I had never painted houses before and he was an alcoholic. Nonetheless, I was at large. I was in American space. I could feel it spreading away unsteadily on either side of me: raw innocence, potential harm, beckoning peaks, buzzing ions of possibility, and threading through it, in and out of range, fantastic, dry-bones laughter. No safety net anywhere, but rather—if I could only adjust myself to it, if I could be worthy of it—a crackling, sustaining buoyancy.

I blinked, and the baggage of history fell off me. Neurosis rolled down the hill. (It rolled back up later, but that's another story.) America, it's true what they say about you—all the good stuff. I'd be allowed to do something here. I'd be encouraged to do something here. It would be demanded of me, in the end, that I do something here.

Later that year I'm in San Francisco, ripping up the carpets in someone's house. Sweaty work. Fun work, if you don't have to do it all the time: I love the unzipping sound of a row of carpet tacks popping out of a hardwood floor. On our lunch break, my co-ripper and I gaze at the city skyline, at the rippling spires, the dewy pavilions of San Francisco, and I say something about how good I'm feeling. He turns to me: "Man, you should get paid just for *that*. They should pay you just for walking around this city with your head up." Only in America, believe me, do people say things like this.

So listen: Right now your space, your beautiful space, your ungovernable American ether, is going bloody haywire. No denying it. The imagination that big-bangs you into being every morning is … unwell. It's time to reroute those noble energies of yours, redirect them, with a noise like the drums of Elvin Jones as he explodes behind John Coltrane. Perturbed country, heal yourself! I know you can. Because in the wildness of your generosity, you once healed me. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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