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Bobby Fischer's Pathetic Endgame

Paranoia, hubris, and hatred—the unraveling of the greatest chess player ever

BY RENE CHUN

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Bobby Fischer was singing the blues. As he wailed along with a 1965 recording by Jackie ("Mr. Excitement") Wilson, his voice—a gravelly baritone ravaged by age but steeled by anger—rumbled through the microphone like a broken-down freight train on rusty wheels: "*You go walking down Broadway, watchin' people catch the subway! Take it from me, don't ask for a helping hand, mmm, 'cause no one will understand!*" With each note he became increasingly strident. "*Bright lights will find you, and they will mess you around! Let me tell you, millions will watch you! Have mercy now, as you sink right down to the ground!*" Even if you knew nothing about Bobby Fischer, listening to him sing this song would tell you all you needed to know. "*There just ain't no pity. No, no, no, in the naked city, yeah—New York City.*"

This unlikely duet, featuring Jackie Wilson and the world's first and only chess grand master fugitive from justice, was broadcast live, on July 6, 2001, by DZSR Sports Radio, a Manila-based AM station that has embraced Fischer as a ratings booster. In exchange for these rare interviews (Fischer hasn't given a magazine or TV interview in thirty years), Sports Radio management has happily provided Fischer with hours of free airtime to spin his classic R&B records and to lash out at his enemies, both real and imagined. Fischer categorizes these enemies—including the former New York mayor Ed Koch, both Presidents Bush, and the Times Mirror Corporation—as "Jews, secret Jews, or CIA rats who work for the Jews."

This radio broadcast was Fischer's seventeenth in the Philippines. The bizarre karaoke interlude was a departure of sorts, but otherwise the broadcast was no different from the previous sixteen. Fischer's talking points never vary.

- Bobby Fischer is being persecuted by world Jewry.

✍ The United States government is a "brutal, evil dictatorship" that has falsely accused Bobby Fischer of a crime and forced him to live in exile.

✍ Bobby Fischer has been swindled out of a "vast fortune" in royalties by book publishers, movie studios, and clock manufacturers (yes, clock manufacturers), who have brazenly pilfered his brand name, patents, and copyrights.

✍ The Jews are a "filthy, lying bastard people" bent on world domination through such insidious schemes as the Holocaust ("a money-making invention"), the mass murder of Christian children ("their blood is used for black-magic ceremonies"), and junk food (William Rosenberg, the founder of Dunkin' Donuts, is singled out as a culprit).

For chess buffs who tune in for some shoptalk from the game's most revered icon, there is this:

✍ Chess is nothing more than "mental masturbation." Not only is the game dead, it's fixed. Gary Kasparov, the world's top-rated player, is a "crook" and a former KGB spy who hasn't played a match in his life in which the outcome wasn't prearranged.

The No. 1 transgression, however, the thing that has devastated Fischer, embittered him, and made him screech at night, alone in his apartment, is the "Bekins heist."

✍ Millions of dollars' worth of personal memorabilia, painstakingly collected and stockpiled by Bobby Fischer in a ten-by-ten-foot Bekins storage room in Pasadena, California, has been stolen from him in a secret plot involving the Rothschilds (Jews), Bill Clinton (a secret Jew), and unnamed Bekins executives (CIA rats who work for the Jews).

The international chess community, which tracks Fischer's downward spiral the way astronomers track the orbit of a dying comet, has been monitoring his radio interviews since the first one aired, back in January of 1999. For the most part chess people have for years downplayed the importance of his outlandish outbursts, explaining that Fischer's raging anti-Semitism, acute paranoia, and tenuous grasp on reality are hyped by the media and misunderstood by the public. In the early 1990s Fischer's girlfriend at the time said, "He's like a child. Very, very simple." A friend who spent a lot of time with him in the 1990s says, "Aside from his controversial views, as a person Bobby is very kind, very nice, and very human." Another friend, asked how he could stand by someone so blatantly anti-Semitic,

replies, "A lot of people wouldn't care if Michael Jordan was an anti-Semite if they could play a game of Horse with him."

Many Fischer apologists argue that Bobby Fischer is in fact deranged, and that as such he deserves not public castigation but psychiatric help. They are quick to point out that he was raised in a Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, has had close friends who were Jewish, and in fact had a Jewish mother (information he has gone to great lengths to deny). It seems hard to imagine that his hate-filled rhetoric isn't an unfortunate manifestation of some underlying illness.

But even the Fischer apologists had to throw up their hands when he took to the Philippine airwaves on September 11, 2001. In an interview broadcast this time by Bombo Radyo, a small public-radio station in Baguio City, Fischer revealed views so loathsome that it was impossible to indulge him any longer. Just hours after the most devastating attack on the United States in history, in which thousands had died, Fischer could barely contain his delight. "This is all wonderful news," he announced. "I applaud the act. The U.S. and Israel have been slaughtering the Palestinians, just slaughtering them for years. Robbing them and slaughtering them. Nobody gave a shit. Now it's coming back to the U.S. Fuck the U.S. I want to see the U.S. wiped out."

Fischer added that the events of September 11 provided the ideal opportunity to stage a long-overdue coup d'йtat. He envisioned, he said, a "*Seven Days in May* scenario," with the country taken over by the military; he also hoped to see all its synagogues closed, and hundreds of thousands of Jews executed. "Ultimately the white man should leave the United States and the black people should go back to Africa," he said. "The white people should go back to Europe, and the country should be returned to the American Indians. This is the future I would like to see for the so-called United States." Before signing off Fischer cried out, "Death to the U.S.!"

The United States Chess Federation had always been willing to ignore Fischer's public antics, no matter how embarrassing. He was, after all, Bobby Fischer—the greatest player in the history of the game. But this was too much. On October 28 of last year the USCF unanimously passed a motion denouncing Fischer's incendiary broadcast. "Bobby has driven some more nails in his coffin," Frank Camaratta Jr., a USCF board member, says. The backlash has reached all the way to grassroots chess clubs. "It's because of Fischer that I'm involved in chess," says Larry Tamarkin, a manager at the Marshall Chess Club, a legendary New York parlor frequented by Fischer in his teens. "But I can't help feeling a sense of betrayal, anger, and sadness. You devote

your entire life to one player and find out he's completely off his rocker. It ruins everything. He's an embarrassment." Asked about the possibility of a Fischer comeback, Tamarkin can't conceal his disgust. "We prefer that he doesn't come back. Because if he does, it will destroy the last vestige of magic."

In reality the magic has been gone for some thirty years. That's how long it has been since Fischer played his first and only world-championship match. Why he stopped playing tournaments, and how his life unraveled so pathetically, is a story one can learn only by seeking out those who actually know Fischer. There are surprisingly few such people—and fewer yet are willing to talk. Fischer doesn't tolerate friends who give interviews. His address book is a graveyard of crossed-out names of people who have been quoted in articles about him.

But some formerly loyal Fischer associates, appalled at his recent behavior, are finally talking about him. They reveal that Fischer's story doesn't follow the usual celebrity-gone-to-seed arc. He has not been brought low by drugs or alcohol, by sex scandals or profligate spending. Instead he is a victim of his own mind—and of the inordinate attention that the world has given it. Fischer's paranoia, rage, and hubris have been enough to transform him into an enemy of the state; they have been enough to sabotage a brilliant career and turn a confident, charismatic figure into a dithering recluse; and, sadly, they have been enough to make us forget that when Bobby Fischer played chess, it was absolutely riveting theater, even for those who didn't play the game.

In many ways Fischer's story resembles that of the mentally unstable Nobel Prize winner John Forbes Nash Jr., the mathematician who inspired the book and Oscar-winning movie *A Beautiful Mind*, but without the happy ending. Both Fischer and Nash were the best at their chosen professions. Both were widely considered to be geniuses. Both were also supremely arrogant, rebellious, eccentric, and—although respected—not necessarily well liked by colleagues. Fischer left the United States to live in exile. So did Nash. Even eerier, while in the grip of schizophrenia Nash was an anti-Semite and was convinced that Communists (the men at MIT wearing red ties) were observing him.

Contrary to popular belief, Fischer didn't emerge from the womb a full-blown grand master. While he was learning the game, as a child in Brooklyn, he was essentially a hotshot club player—a prodigy, to be sure, but not obviously world-championship material. But at age thirteen, in 1956, Fischer made a colossal leap. That year he became the youngest player ever to win the U.S. Junior Championship. He also dominated the U.S.

tournament circuit. What was astounding wasn't simply that a gawky thirteen-year-old kid in blue jeans was suddenly winning chess tournaments. It was the way he was winning. He didn't just beat people—he humiliated them. The thing he relished most was watching his opponents squirm. "I like the moment when I break a man's ego," he once said, during a Dick Cavett interview.

Later in the year he played a game so remarkable that it was immediately dubbed "the Game of the Century." Fischer faced Donald Byrne, then one of the top ten U.S. players, at the Rosenwald Memorial Tournament, in New York. The now legendary battle was packed with more chess pyrotechnics than are typically seen during the course of an entire match. There were complex combinations, ingenious sacrifices, danger and apparent danger—enough to make Fischer, who won, a chess god overnight. Asked to explain his sudden emergence on the world stage of chess, Fischer shrugged and said, "I just got good."

The Fischer-Byrne duel was dissected in newspapers and magazines around the world and won Fischer the Brilliancy Prize, an annual chess award that recognizes particularly imaginative play. Chess analysts, a decidedly reserved lot not given to spasms of hyperbole, peppered their dry annotations with exclamation marks ("Be6!"). "While we have learned to distrust superlatives, this is one game that deserves all the praise lavished on it," wrote Fred Reinfeld, a leading chess journalist of the day. Even the Russians, loath to acknowledge so much as the existence of American players, grudgingly tipped their hats. After the Fischer-Byrne game, Mikhail Botvinnik, the reigning world champion, reportedly said, "We will have to start keeping an eye on this boy."

That is exactly what the chess world did from that moment forward. Fischer's achievements were staggering: In his time he was the youngest U.S. master (at fourteen years and five months), the youngest international grand master, and the youngest candidate for the world championship (at fifteen years and six months). He also won eight U.S. chess championship titles—a record not likely to be broken. In 1966 he co-authored *Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess*, the best-selling chess book ever, and in 1969 he published *My 60 Memorable Games*, arguably the best chess book ever.

Fischer also just won a lot of games—an impressive fact given that draws among grand masters are commonplace. At the highest level of competitive chess, players are so familiar with one another's games that they can practically read their

opponents' minds. The memorization of opening theory and the intensive study of an opponent's oeuvre so dominate the modern game that when two grand masters square off, the first twenty moves unfold like a stale sitcom plot. Players often lament that "draw death" is killing the game.

But Fischer didn't play for draws. He was always on the attack—even rhetorically. Of the Soviet champions who had dominated the game so completely, he said, "They have nothing on me, those guys. They can't even touch me."

The Soviets were not amused. They dismissed the young American upstart as *nyekulturni*—literally, "uncultured." This wasn't far from the truth, and Fischer knew it. He lacked education, and had always been insecure about this. His deficiency was particularly glaring now that most of his interaction was with adults, many of whom were sophisticated and well-read.

The answer, Fischer thought, was to upgrade his wardrobe. So at sixteen, using his chess winnings, he traded in his uniform of sneakers, flannel shirt, and jeans for luxurious bespoke suits. He reveled in his new Beau Brummell image. When he traveled abroad for tournaments, he frequently visited local tailors and had suits cut for his gangly, broad-shouldered physique. He liked to brag that he owned seventeen such suits, which he rotated to ensure even wear. "I hate ready-made suits, button-down collars, and sports shirts," he once said. "I don't want to look like a bum. I get up in the morning, I put on a suit."

The change did wonders for Fischer's self-esteem. He boasted that once he had defeated the Russians and become the world champion, he'd take on all challengers. Like the boxing champ Joe Louis, he'd have his own bum-of-the-month club. He boldly promised that he was "gonna put chess on the map." He envisioned a rock-star existence for himself: a $50,000 custom-made Rolls-Royce, a yacht, a private jet, and a mansion—in either Beverly Hills or Hong Kong—"built exactly like a rook." Asked what his long-term goals were, he replied, "All I want to do, ever, is play chess."

But the sartorial façade of sophistication was a flimsy one. Those close to Fischer knew that when it came to art, politics, or anything else the cosmopolitan set talked about, he was at a total loss. "If you were out to dinner with Bobby in the sixties, he wouldn't be able to follow the conversation," says Don Schultz, a former friend. "He would have his little pocket set out and he'd play chess at the table. He had a one-dimensional outlook on life."

This limited world view prompted Fischer to drop out of Brooklyn's Erasmus Hall High School midway through his junior year. It was hardly a case of a promising academic life being cut short. Pulling courtesy *D*s, ostracized by the other students, Fischer was going nowhere. Many chess insiders have insisted that the poor grades were a direct result of an abnormally high IQ—that is, Bobby wasn't stupid, he was just bored. (Although Fischer was a poor student, he was regularly reading Russian chess journals.) It's a point that has long been debated. Everybody agrees that Fischer is no dummy, including Fischer himself (during one interview he said, "I object to being called a chess genius, because I consider myself to be an all-around genius who just happens to play chess"), but chess champions aren't necessarily geniuses. What they need for success is powerful memories, the ability to concentrate deeply, refined recognition and problem-solving skills, decisiveness, stamina, and a killer instinct.

When he dropped out of high school, Fischer was living in Brooklyn with his older sister, Joan, and his mother, Regina. Regina was a registered nurse, a secular Jew, and a single mother with a bohemian lifestyle that included leftist politics and social activism but not chess. (When Fischer was born, his mother was married to Hans-Gerhardt Fischer, a German biophysicist, who is generally assumed to be Bobby's father, although Bobby's paternity is the subject of some speculation.) Fischer's relationship with his mother was strained, in part because of her politics, her religious heritage, and her general eccentricity. "Bobby's mother was a cuckoo," the *New York Times* chess columnist Robert Byrne says. "She was an intelligent neurotic full of far-fetched ideas." As Fischer developed as a chess player, he distanced himself from his mother. In 1962, three years after dropping out of high school, he began living alone in the family apartment (his mother and Joan had moved out).

Fischer began to devote fourteen hours a day to studying chess. According to a 1962 interview in *Harper's*, he had some 200 chess books and countless foreign chess journals stacked on his floor. He had an exquisite inlaid chess table, made to order in Switzerland, and three additional boards, one beside each bed in his apartment. As part of a Spartan training regime he would play matches against himself that lasted for days, sleeping in the three beds in rotation. Asked how he spent his free time, Fischer once replied, "I'll see a movie or something. There's really nothing for me to do. Maybe I'll study some chess books."

As Fischer became more successful, he began to generate more and more criticism. In a very short time he managed to offend

and estrange almost everyone who was in a position to advance his career, including USCF officials, patrons, journalists, and sponsors. He frequently backed out of tournaments. He'd threaten a no-show unless the promoters ponied up more prize money. He also regularly groused about noise and light levels.

The press loved it. Fischer was labeled an insufferable diva and a psych-out artist who made life hell for tournament officials and tried to rattle opponents by complaining about, among other things, high-frequency sounds that only he and several species of non-human mammals could detect. The press also loved to talk about his greed. But Fischer never cared about money per se. "Bobby wanted to get all kinds of money for everything," says Arnold Denker, a former U.S. chess champion, "and yet when he got it, he pissed it away. In Reykjavik [the site of the 1972 world-championship match between Fischer and Boris Spassky] the maids who cleaned up his room made thousands of dollars because he left money under the pillows and all over. He wanted money because to him it meant that people thought he was important."

Fischer demanded richer purses not only to validate his self-worth but because he was convinced that tournament promoters were out to fleece him. He would sign a tournament contract only to obsess later about how quickly his demands had been met. Although the prize money involved was always more than fair, Fischer's paranoia invariably got the best of him. "Away from the board, Bobby suffered from a terrible inferiority complex," says Allan Kaufman, the former director of the American Chess Foundation. "In his mind he concocted lots of excuses: people were taking advantage of him; they were smarter than he was; if he had only had their education, he would know what to ask for in negotiations." Often before the ink on a contract was dry, Fischer would refuse to play unless the purse was raised. Promoters would cave, only to receive word later that Fischer was demanding even more money. Frequently the negotiations became so impossible that frustrated promoters simply walked. These confrontations prolonged his quest for the world title. "A couple of times Bobby dropped out of tournaments that would have led to him playing for the world championship earlier," says Shelby Lyman, a chess pundit who analyzed Fischer's famous 1972 match with Boris Spassky on PBS.

The Russians certainly weren't willing to lend support to Fischer's title bid—especially after *Sports Illustrated* in 1962 published an interview with Fischer in which he accused the Soviet chess establishment of cheating in an effort to deny him what he viewed as his birthright: the world chess championship.

In the interview, titled "The Russians Have Fixed World Chess," Fischer alleged that Soviet grand masters were forced to lose or draw games in order to advance the careers of favored players who were being groomed as potential world champs. Fischer argued that he was at a great disadvantage, because during a tournament he had to endure a grueling schedule of games while several anointed Soviet grand masters cruised from one victory to the next, conserving their strength for the real competition—which more often than not was Fischer himself in the finals.

Published after Fischer had finished a disappointing fourth in the 1962 Curaзao Candidates tournament, the interview was denounced by the Soviets as a classic case of sour grapes. Those familiar with the palace intrigue of the Soviet Chess Federation, however, knew better. Nikolai Krogius, a Soviet grand master now living in Staten Island, acknowledges that Fischer's allegations of foul play were valid. "There were some agreed draws at Curaзao," he admits. According to Arnold Denker, beating the Soviet chess machine during that era was all but impossible. "In 1946," he says, "I had an adjourned game with Mikhail Botvinnik in which I was ahead. During the break I saw Botvinnik eating dinner and relaxing. I didn't have dinner. I went to my room and studied. When the game resumed, Botvinnik remarkably found the only move to draw the game. I said, 'How is that possible?' Someone told me, 'Listen, young man, all of these people were analyzing for him while he was having his dinner.' I was naive in those days."

"I'll never play in one of those rigged tournaments again," Fischer fumed after losing to the Soviet Armenian champion Tigran Petrosian at Curaзao. "[The Soviets] clobber us easy in team play. But man to man, I'd take Petrosian on any time." The five-time U.S. chess champion Larry Evans agrees that the Soviets were less than good sportsmen when it came to defending their world title. But he also believes that Fischer was looking for a convenient excuse for losing. "The fact of the matter is," Evans says, "that in '62 at Curaзao, Bobby just wasn't good enough yet."

After Curaзao, Fischer dropped out of international competition for several years. His cash flow, which was about $5,000 a year, slowed to a trickle. Money was so scarce that he began living at a YMCA. When he couldn't afford that, he moved in with friends, hopping from apartment to apartment and running up phone bills he couldn't pay. Broke and feeling increasingly detached from New York's insular chess community, he moved to California in the spring of 1968. He was twenty-five years old.

Fischer's move to the West Coast has sometimes been considered the beginning of his so-called "wilderness years." Although he wasn't playing in many tournaments, his work ethic never wavered: he continued studying chess during most of his waking hours. But late at night, Arnold Denker recalls, Fischer began prowling parking lots, slipping white-supremacist pamphlets under windshield wipers. He began studying anti-Semitic classics such as *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He became obsessed with German history and the Third Reich, and collected Nazi memorabilia. It was rumored that he slept with a picture of Adolf Hitler hanging over his bed. Larry Evans says that Fischer's admiration for the Fьhrer had less to do with anti-Semitism than with insatiable ego. "We once went to see a documentary on Hitler," Evans recalls. "When we came out of the theater, Bobby said that he admired Hitler. I asked him why, and he said, 'Because he imposed his will on the world.'" (Fischer has never made an effort to conceal his distaste for Jews. As early as 1962, in the *Harper's* interview, he expressed his prejudice, mentioning what he perceived to be a growing problem affecting the upper ranks of his profession. "Yeah, there are too many Jews in chess," he said. "They seem to have taken away the class of the game. They don't seem to dress so nicely. That's what I don't like.")

In the fall of 1968 Fischer walked out of the Chess Olympiad in Switzerland. He refused to play for another eighteen months, and some feared that his competitive drive had stalled, but that wasn't the case. He was still training fourteen hours a day and playing chess privately. And in 1970 and 1971 he returned to public competition and had the longest winning streak in tournament chess, when he won twenty consecutive outright victories against the world's top grand masters, a record unrivaled in the modern era.

By 1972 Fischer had reached his peak. That year the reigning world champion, Boris Spassky, agreed to meet him in Reykjavнk to play what would be the most carefully scrutinized match ever, a contest the press heralded as "the chess match of the century."

Inescapably, the match became a Cold War battleground. The world's two superpowers were about to lock horns across a chess board. The political stakes were high enough that President Richard Nixon ordered Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to intercede personally when Fischer began hinting that he might not play. "In short," Kissinger reportedly said at the time, "I told Fischer to get his butt over to Iceland." According to the *Boston Globe* chess columnist Harold Dondis, however, "Kissinger tried to call Bobby, but Bobby wouldn't take the call."

Although Fischer had worked his entire life for an opportunity to play for the world chess crown, now that he finally had the chance, he began to be taken over by anxiety, self-doubt, and paranoia (he feared the Soviets would shoot down his plane). All the youthful bravado and swagger—the bum-of-the-month club, the taunting of the Russians—was a memory. "They had to drag Bobby kicking and screaming to play in Iceland," Shelby Lyman says.

The prize money troubled Fischer too. Up to this point the world-championship chess purse had not been particularly noteworthy. When Spassky won the world title, in 1969, his take was a paltry $1,400. The promoters in Iceland were willing to pump the prize money up some, but not to a level Fischer deemed sufficient. When a handsome five-figure purse was suggested, Fischer balked and threatened a no-show. When Spassky and his entourage were in Reykjavик for the opening festivities, Fischer was still in New York, grumbling about indentured servitude.

After a series of escalating demands, Fischer managed to drive up the match's prize money to $250,000 and was guaranteed a considerable slice of film or TV revenues. But even then the match hit a snag. Fischer refused to play because his favorite television program, *The Jack LaLanne Show*, wasn't available on Icelandic TV. It was Lina Grumette, a Los Angeles chess promoter and Fischer's "chess mother" at the time, who finally managed to talk Fischer into playing.

Fischer's performance in Iceland was no disappointment. He put on a show that was equal parts Ionesco play, soap opera, and political potboiler. Between acts he managed to play some brilliant chess. The games were an instant hit. "World Chess Championship," the Shelby Lyman program created by PBS to cover the tournament, was at the time the highest-rated PBS show ever—an amazing fact, considering that it consisted of little more than a giant wall-mounted chess board on which each move was recorded and then discussed by several analysts.

Fischer played poorly in the beginning, and Spassky easily won the first game, on July 12. Fischer refused to play the second game unless all cameras were removed from the hall. The match organizers tried to minimize the intrusiveness of the cameras, but still he refused to play. Finally Fischer was warned that if his demands didn't stop, game two would be awarded to Spassky. Fischer thought, wrongly, that they were bluffing, and ended up forfeiting the game. Suddenly he was in a hole, with Spassky ahead 2 to 0. At this juncture Spassky could easily have retreated to Moscow still in possession of his crown, and nobody would

have blamed him because of Fischer's behavior.

To placate Fischer the third game was played in another room and broadcast to the dismayed audience on closed-circuit television. He won handily. The players returned to the exhibition hall for the rest of the match, and Fischer soon grabbed the lead and held it, albeit still complaining about the presence of cameras (in the end very little of the match was filmed), the surface of the chess board (too shiny), the proximity of the audience (he insisted that the first seven rows of seats be removed), and the ambient noise. Distressed at their countryman's poor showing, members of the Soviet delegation began to make their own unreasonable demands, hoping to unnerve Fischer. They accused him of using a concealed device to interfere with Spassky's brain waves. The match was halted while police officers searched the playing hall. Fischer's chair was taken apart, light fixtures were dismantled, the entire auditorium was swept for suspicious electronic signals. Nothing was found. (In a subsequent investigation a Soviet chemist waved a plastic bag around the stage and then sealed it for lab analysis. The label affixed to the bag read "Air from stage.")

Fischer wasn't flustered. If anything, his play became stronger. As the week wore on, Spassky began slowly to crack, and on September 1 he resigned.

Fischer's accomplishment cannot be overstated. A brash twenty-nine-year-old high school dropout, armed with little more than a pocket chess set and a dog-eared book documenting Spassky's important games, had single-handedly defeated the Soviet chess juggernaut. Spassky had a wealth of resources at his disposal to help him plot moves, including thirty-five grand masters back in the Soviet Union. Fischer, on the other hand, had two administrative seconds who served essentially as companions, and Bill Lombardy, a grand master, whose role was to help analyze games. However, Fischer did almost all the analysis himself—when he bothered to do anything. "After the games were adjourned, all the Soviets would go back to Spassky's hotel room to plan for the next position," recalls Don Schultz, one of the seconds. "Lombardy said to Fischer, 'That's a difficult position. Let's go back to the hotel and analyze it.' Fischer said, 'What do you mean, analyze? That guy's a fish. Let's go bowling.'"

Fischer returned home to a hero's welcome. In a televised ceremony at New York's City Hall, Mayor John Lindsay presented him with the key to the city. Shelby Lyman recalls, "Here's Bobby in his great moment of triumph. He's resplendent in this beautiful suit. The world is his: he's young,

handsome, women adore him, there's all this money if he wants it. And he later said to a reporter, 'The creeps are beginning to gather.' He was referring to press, lawyers, agents—everyone he thought was out to take advantage of him. After that his whole life was about avoiding the creeps."

Fischer didn't in fact get the full hero treatment. "I was never invited to the White House," he said in one of his radio interviews. "They invited that Olympic Russian gymnast—that little Communist, Olga Korbut." In his notorious September 11 interview he elaborated. "Look what I have done for the U.S.," he said. "Nobody has single-handedly done more for the U.S. than me. When I won the world championship, in 1972, the United States had an image of, you know, a football country, a baseball country, but nobody thought of it as an intellectual country. I turned all that around single-handedly, right? But I was useful then because there was the Cold War, right? But now I'm not useful anymore. You see, the Cold War is over and now they want to wipe me out, steal everything I have, and put me in prison."

Following the City Hall ceremony Fischer returned to Pasadena, leaving $5 million worth of unsigned endorsement contracts on his lawyer's desk. It wasn't that he didn't want the extra income; he just couldn't deal with the creeps.

He also stopped playing tournament chess. And in 1975 the World Chess Federation (known by its French acronym, FIDE) stripped him of his world-championship title for failure to defend his crown against the Russian grand master Anatoly Karpov. Such stonewalling was difficult for chess people to fathom, given that Fischer was so much stronger than the competition. The truth was that Bobby Fischer was running scared. "Bobby was always afraid of losing," Arnold Denker says. "I don't know why, but he was. The fear was in him. He said that if he played Karpov, he was going to insist on a long match. After not playing for three years, he was very concerned about how good he would be." Shelby Lyman echoes that assessment. "Hating to lose, and having the myth destroyed," he says, "was a big part of him not playing."

Instead of playing tournaments, Fischer retreated to the protective cocoon of the Worldwide Church of God, an apocalyptic cult that predicted the end of the world every four to seven years and whose members tithed up to 30 percent of their income. Such protection came at a steep price. It was reported that out of his $200,000 income that year he donated $61,200 to the WCG. "They cleaned out my pockets," he later said. "Now my only income is a few royalty checks from my books. I was

really very foolish." To show its appreciation for such a generous contribution, the WCG treated Fischer almost as if he were the very deity the Church's members had been waiting for. He lived in WCG-owned apartments, was entertained at fancy restaurants, and flew to exotic spots in the Church's private jet. And Fischer was set up on the first dates of his life, with attractive WCG members. A fellow WCG member, Harry Sneider, says that this hedonistic lifestyle had a detrimental effect on Fischer: "He got pampered and got a lot of attention. It made him soft."

Fischer's relationship with the WCG, like all the others in his life, didn't last. In 1977, after a bitter falling-out that led Fischer to claim that the WCG was taking its orders from a "satanical secret world government," he cut all ties with the Church. Then he crawled even further into his own netherworld. He began dressing like a hobo. He took up residence in seedy hotels. He began worrying about the purity of his bodily fluids. He bought great quantities of exotic herbal potions, which he carried in a suitcase, to stave off the toxins he feared might be secretly put in his food and water by Soviet agents. According to a 1985 article in *Sports Illustrated*, Fischer medicated himself with such esoteric remedies as Mexican rattlesnake pills ("good for general health") and Chinese healthy-brain pills ("good for headaches"). His suitcase also contained a large orange-juice squeezer and lots and lots of vitamins. He always kept the suitcase locked, even when he was staying with friends. "If the Commies come to poison me, I don't want to make it easy for them," he explained to a friend. Perhaps the most telling sign of his rapid mental deterioration was that he insisted on having all his dental fillings removed. "If somebody took a filling out and put in an electronic device, he could influence your thinking," Fischer confided to a friend. "I don't want anything artificial in my head."

The low point of Fischer's California sojourn came on May 26, 1981, when two Pasadena police officers stopped him for an ID check. By then he had unkempt hair, a scraggly beard, and tattered clothes, and looked like an aging hippie down on his luck. He also generally fit the description of a man who had recently committed two bank robberies in the neighborhood. He refused to answer questions and was taken to jail, where he spent forty-eight hours. "All he had to do was tell the police he was Bobby Fischer, the chess player, and the whole thing would have been over," a friend says. "But he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Submitting to authority is a foreign concept to Bobby." A year later Fischer privately published a fourteen-page pamphlet titled "I Was Tortured in the Pasadena Jailhouse!" The pamphlet, which became a surprise best seller in chess shops across the country, is a melodramatic account of Fischer's confinement. The subheadings say it all: "Brutally Handcuffed." "Choked."

"Isolation & Torture." "Sick Cop."

Meanwhile, he was turning down big money to come out of retirement. Caesars Palace in Las Vegas offered him $250,000 for a single exhibition game. After Fischer had agreed to the terms and a date had been set, he reneged. "I'm risking my title," he griped. "I should get a million dollars." According to a 1992 article in *Esquire*, despots and rogue millionaires were also willing to pay outrageous purses to Fischer: Ferdinand Marcos offered him $3 million to play a tournament in the Philippines; the Shah of Iran offered $2 million; Qatar, South Africa, Chile, and Argentina are believed to have put similar deals on the table. When a Francoist millionaire from Spain offered $4 million, Fischer replied, "Nah. The figure's too low."

What Fischer craved far more than wealth was anonymity. To achieve it he assumed a new identity and began carrying a Nevada driver's license and a Social Security card bearing the pseudonym Robert D. James. This is the name that appears on the 1981 Pasadena police report. (His full name is Robert James Fischer.)

To generate income, however, he resorted to selling himself to chess fans and curiosity seekers. The going rate for an hour's phone conversation was $2,500. Bob Dylan is said to have received a call from Fischer as a gift from his manager. For $5,000 a personal meeting could be arranged. A student of the three-time U.S. chess champion Lev Alburt once paid $10,000 for several "chess consultations." Alburt says his student considered the money well spent.

In the years to come insiders knew that Fischer was still the man to beat. In 1981 the grand master Peter Biyiasas played seventeen straight games of speed chess against Fischer and lost every one. "He was too good," Biyiasas said at the time. "There was no use in playing him. It wasn't like I made this mistake or that mistake. It was like I was being gradually outplayed from the start. He wasn't taking any time to think. The most depressing thing about it is that I wasn't even getting out of the middle game to an endgame. I don't ever remember an endgame."

In 1992 Fischer came out of retirement to play Boris Spassky in a $5 million rematch that commemorated the twenty-year anniversary of their meeting in Reykjavik. Aficionados dismissed the match as meaningless, since Fischer was no longer the world champion, and Spassky was then ranked ninety-ninth in the world. But the press had reason to celebrate: Fischer was a big draw; there was the nostalgic superpower angle; and the setting was Yugoslavia. United Nations sanctions had been

imposed in an effort to halt the fighting in the country, and Americans were forbidden to do any business there, even in the form of a chess match. Fischer spoke arrogantly to the press about the irrelevance of the sanctions, and practically dared the United States to keep him from playing. Annoyed, Washington decided to make an example of him; the Department of the Treasury issued a cease-and-desist letter to Fischer, stating that if he played chess in Yugoslavia, he would be in violation of Executive Order 12810. The penalty for defying the order was a $250,000 fine, ten years in prison, or both. Fischer appeared untroubled.

He had signed on for the match because he desperately needed money. This was to be his big payday. After all the missed endorsements and spurned multimillion-dollar matches, he was prepared to play one last time, to ensure his financial security: the winner's share would be $3.65 million.

In the end, though, Fischer didn't play for money. He played for love. Not for love of the game but for the love of Zita Rajcsanyi, an eighteen-year-old Hungarian chess prodigy who had leveraged a pen-pal relationship with Fischer into a full-fledged romance. With glasses, a long ponytail, and Converse high-tops, Rajcsanyi was hardly a goddess. But she was exactly what was needed to coax Fischer out of his shell. "Zita wrote Bobby beautiful letters telling him how wonderful it was for her to be inspired by his great genius," Harry Sneider, the WCG member, says. "She had a lot to do with him coming back. Actually, it was she who inspired him."

That Rajcsanyi was able to talk Fischer out of his apartment, much less onto a plane bound for Yugoslavia, is miraculous. By this time his paranoia had intensified. Several months before the match Darnay Hoffman, who produced a 1972 TV exposй about Fischer and was working on another TV project about him, had tracked Fischer to Orange Street—in the heart, curiously, of the Fairfax district, then L.A.'s largest Jewish neighborhood. When a film-crew member knocked on the door to request an interview, he heard Fischer inside frantically dialing a rotary phone and screaming into the receiver, "They've found me!"

Once Fischer arrived in Yugoslavia, however, he showed not the slightest indication of mental trouble. He wore a suit and appeared healthy, robust, almost happy. "Bobby is so kind, so friendly," Spassky marveled at the time. "He is normal!" Lev Alburt ventures an explanation. "Chess is a game that forces you to be objective and to take into account an opponent's views," he says. "It forces you to make reasonable judgments and to be sane. When Bobby quit playing, it was really the end of his

rational existence. And he began filling that void with crazy ideas."

This was made painfully evident when Fischer kicked off the pre-match festivities in Yugoslavia with a press conference on September 1. After the usual battery of chess-related questions a journalist finally asked the question that was on everybody's mind: "Are you worried by U.S. government threats over your defiance of sanctions?" Fischer calmly reached into a briefcase, pulled out the Treasury Department letter, held it up, and said, "Here is my reply to their order not to defend my title here." He then spat on the paper.

Fischer proceeded to rattle off a series of astonishing proclamations: he hadn't paid his taxes since 1976 (and wasn't about to start now); he was going to write a book that would prove that Russian grand masters ("some of the lowest dogs around") had "destroyed chess" through "immoral, unethical, prearranged games"; he really wasn't an anti-Semite, because he was pro-Arab, and Arabs are Semites too. His assertion that Soviet communism was "basically a mask for Bolshevism, which is a mask for Judaism" elicited the most quizzical expressions.

The old Bobby Fischer was back, and more bizarre than ever. This was made eminently clear when Fischer informed tournament officials that he wanted the toilet in his bathroom to rise higher in the air than anyone else's.

Fischer played beautifully in the first game. Spassky resigned on his forty-ninth move. Considering that Fischer had been away from formal competitive chess for two decades, this was no small accomplishment. But the rest of the match featured less-inspiring play. Although Spassky was clearly outclassed, the contest dragged on for almost six weeks before Fischer was finally declared the victor, with ten wins, five losses, and fifteen draws. Today Fischer attacks critics who dismiss the significance of the rematch. "I hadn't played in twenty years!" he bellowed during one of his Philippine radio broadcasts. "I did what was utterly impossible. It's still my greatest match."

The Bush Administration wasn't impressed. Fischer was immediately indicted, and an arrest warrant was issued. He hasn't returned to the United States since.

Fischer stayed in Yugoslavia after the rematch, and began promoting what he called Fischer Random Chess—a tweaked version of shuffle chess, in which both players' back-row pieces are arranged according to the same random shuffle before play begins. Although not revolutionary, the

premise of FRC is compelling: with 960 different starting positions, opening theory becomes obsolete, and the strongest player—not necessarily the player who has memorized more strategies or has the most expensive chess-analysis software—is assured victory.

Fischer envisioned FRC as a means of democratizing chess and as a lucrative business venture—and as an easy way to reinsert himself into the world of competitive chess without having to immerse himself in opening theory. He had designed and patented two electronic devices that he hoped to sell to FRC enthusiasts: a clock for timing games, and a pyramid-shaped "shuffler" to determine the starting positions. A 1996 press release described the two instruments as "essential to playing according to the new rules for the game of chess." Fischer desperately wanted the Tokyo-based watch company Seiko to manufacture his FRC products but couldn't generate interest.

Worse than Seiko's snub was the loss of Zita. After less than a year she left Fischer and, against his protestations, eventually wrote a book that chronicled their relationship. After the book's release he accused Zita of being a spy hired by the Jews to lure him out of retirement.

Following the breakup Fischer roamed around Central Europe for several years. He ended up being befriended by Susan and Judit Polgar, two young Hungarian Jews who were at the time the Venus and Serena Williams of the chess world. "I first met Bobby with my family," Susan recalls. "I told him rather than spending the rest of his life hiding ... he should move to Budapest, where there are a lot of chess players."

Fischer did, and was welcomed as a guest in the Polgar household. He appears to have behaved himself. "I remember happy times in the kitchen cutting mushrooms," Susan says. "He's very normal in that sense, very pleasant." Although Fischer refused to play classic chess, he graciously helped the Polgar sisters with their games. When he wasn't sharing his expert analysis with them, he was playing FRC games against them. He was astounded at how accomplished the sisters were. Seeing that he was impressed by the Polgars' play, a friend of Fischer's suggested a publicized match to promote FRC. Fischer agreed.

Fischer was well aware that a high-stakes match pitting the game's strongest male player (in his own mind, anyway) against Judit Polgar, the game's strongest female player (now ranked in the top ten in the world), would interest the media. But the battle-of-the-sexes extravaganza was not to be. "The Jewish-nonsense stuff caused a problem between Bobby and the girls' father," says

a Fischer confidant. "One day Bobby just changed his mind. He said, 'No, they're Jewish!' He just couldn't handle it and walked away."

Would Fischer be able to beat a top grand master in an FRC match today? Doubtful. He played numerous FRC games with Susan, who concedes that the results were "mixed." She isn't optimistic about the prospect of a Fischer comeback either. "He's not that young anymore," she says.

This may explain why Fischer now lives in Tokyo, where chess buffs are virtually nonexistent and he can live in complete anonymity. He walks into bars unrecognized and converses with women who have no idea who he is. "Bobby has always liked Japan," says Larry Evans, the five-time U.S. chess champion. "He likes their subservient women." The culture, too, is a draw, according to Harry Sneider. "Bobby loves Japanese food," Sneider says, "the great mineral baths, and the electronics." Others, however, insist that Fischer chose Japan for a different reason. "Bobby needs to be in a place away from the Jews," one woman says.

But Tokyo is only a home base. Fischer spends much of his time traveling around the world, spreading his gospel of hate. Live radio is his medium of choice. His modus operandi is to lull his audience into a false sense of security by reminiscing about past chess glories. Then, like clockwork, five minutes into the interview the conversation takes a detour—as it did on January 13, 1999, during Fischer's very first live blitzkrieg, on Budapest's Radio Calypso. After politely answering the stock questions, Fischer became noticeably agitated and launched into his now familiar diatribe.

"We might as well get to the heart of the matter and then we can come back to chitchat," he curtly said to his host. "What is going on is that I am being persecuted night and day by the Jews!" Fischer proceeded to recite his bizarre list of grievances: the emergence and sale of FRC-clock knockoffs; a fortune owed him in unpaid book royalties; the unauthorized use of his name to promote the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. His rage reached a peak when he began detailing the precious memorabilia allegedly stolen from his Bekins storage room in Pasadena. Lost treasures supposedly include a book from President Nixon and a letter from Ferdinand Marcos.

Fischer's claims range from suspect to spurious. All U.S. book royalties due him have been paid (since 2000 they have been held in escrow by the State of California, because Fischer has not provided a taxpayer-identification number). A movie can be

titled *Searching for Bobby Fischer* without his consent. Unauthorized "Fischer Method" clocks, which he claims infringe on his patent (expired in November of 2001, because of overdue maintenance fees), may or may not be legal. But the issue is irrelevant, because Fischer refuses to file suit ("The Jews control the courts").

As for the Bekins theft, it, too, is a fiction. He did maintain a Bekins storage room in Pasadena for twelve years, and the memorabilia inside it were confiscated, but not in some nefarious plot. The contents of the storage room were sold at a public auction, because Fischer's account—maintained by a Pasadena businessman named Bob Ellsworth, whom Fischer had met through the Worldwide Church of God—was in arrears. The Pasadena storage facility had been sold in the late 1990s, and the new owners noticed that the account was overdue. "It was my responsibility to pay the bill, and I didn't pay it because I didn't know there were new owners," Ellsworth says. "So they put Bobby's stuff up for auction. I felt really bad and spent about eight thousand dollars of my own money buying back all the significant memorabilia."

The storage room was not a treasure trove worth "hundreds of millions of dollars," as Fischer has claimed. "A lot of it," Ellsworth says, "was old magazines and things that were of personal interest to Bobby: books on conspiracy theories, racy Mexican comics, lots of John Gunther books. Things you could go down to Olvera Street and replace for a dime a copy. That stuff I passed on. But anything of intrinsic value I snagged." At the auction Ellsworth acquired "about 80 percent" of the various lots.

Harry Sneider corroborates Ellsworth's story, and says that his son personally delivered the reclaimed memorabilia to Fischer in Budapest. When a list of the numbered lots was read off to him, Sneider confirmed that each one is again in Fischer's possession. Lot 151: Box Lot of Telegrams to Bobby Fischer During World Chess Championship. "Delivered." Lot 152: Box Lot of Books Inscribed to Bobby Fischer (not by authors). "Delivered." Lot 153: From the People of New York given to Bobby Fischer—Leather Scrapbook with Letter and Telegram from Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York City. "Delivered."

Fischer denies all of this, and would like nothing better than to see Ellsworth drop dead—literally. During a Philippine radio interview broadcast on January 27, 1999, he instructed the host to read Ellsworth's home address on the air. "Some Filipino who loves me should say hello to that motherfucker," Fischer said. "Bob Ellsworth is worthy of death for this shit he pulled on me,

in cahoots with Bekins. This was all orchestrated by the Jewish world governments."

Despite such conduct, friends in recent years have thought they detected a glimmer of light amid the darkness of Fischer's tortured psyche. For one thing, he has a girlfriend—Justine, a twenty-two-year-old Chinese-Filipina living in Manila, who couldn't care less about chess and has no intention of writing a tell-all memoir. And Fischer is now a parent: Justine gave birth to a baby girl in 2000. Fischer's fatherhood has until now been a well-kept secret, shared by his Philippine friends, who hope that this child will fill the void in Fischer's life that chess once occupied.

But their hope appears to be in vain. Fischer is a far cry from being a doting papa. According to one source, he "regularly sends money to his girlfriend and child" but visits them only "once every two months." Nobody has rescued him from his paranoid fantasies either. During his most recent radio interview, broadcast live from Reykjavik on January 27, 2002, Fischer rattled off the same Bekins "mega-robbery" drivel. He described the fictitious crime as "probably, in monetary terms, one of the biggest, if not the biggest robbery, in the history of the United States." He also encouraged the Icelandic government to close the local U.S. naval base. "If they refuse to go," Fischer said, "send them some letters with anthrax. They'll get the message."

For all the anti-American bluster, those closest to Fischer say he'd secretly like to return to his homeland. Sam Sloan, a chess writer and longtime friend of Fischer's, says, "If he knew he wouldn't be prosecuted for this executive order, I think he'd come back." It seems that Fischer has a sentimental side. Difficult as it is for some former friends to believe, he still thinks about them. "Bobby called someone in New York recently," says Stuart Margulies, a co-author (with Fischer and Donn Mosenfelder) of *Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess* (1966). "He wanted to know how all his old friends were doing."

This covert homesickness may explain why for a time Fischer continued to pay property taxes on a piece of Florida real estate he was unable to set foot on. But returning to America is no more real a possibility than the rook-shaped house he once dreamed of building. The federal arrest warrant issued in 1992 will not expire, and it is unlikely that Fischer will be shown much leniency—especially since he referred to George W. Bush during one of his radio interviews as "borderline retarded."

It's almost certain that he won't play chess competitively again. But the chess world continues to sing his praises. Last December,

for example, the World Chess Hall of Fame opened for business—a rook-shaped building situated on an unlikely strip of land just off the Florida Turnpike, in South Miami-Dade County—and inducted the initial five members. One of them was Bobby Fischer.

Nevertheless, Fischer is now more alone than ever before. His mother and sister both died in the late 1990s. According to friends, he was extremely close to Joan and had reconciled with Regina; not being able to attend their funerals is said to have been a great blow to him. The New York chess players he periodically inquires about have broken all contact with him. As for Justine and his daughter, they appear to be an inconvenience, a distraction best kept at arm's length. Once one of the most famous men in the world, Fischer is now nothing more than a ghost—a shrill, disembodied voice heard only in faraway countries.

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