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IN SEARCH OF NORMALCY

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Charles C. W. Cooke



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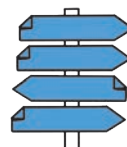


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THE WEEK

■ **"Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ICE."**

■ **What have the self-driving vehicles done to anyone?** Rioters across Los Angeles set Waymo cabs ablaze in a spasm of violence over federal immigration enforcement in the West Coast metropolis. As is always the case with "mostly peaceful protest," left-wing demonstrators have destroyed property, blocked traffic, and hurled objects at law enforcement. President Trump responded by activating California National Guard troops without a request by the governor, Gavin Newsom: a highly unusual move, but one within his legal authority. State and city officials are condemning the activation of the Guard as a "provocation," although usually the only people provoked by troops standing in front of a federal building to keep it from getting attacked are those who might want to attack it. There's much talk of what can be done to "de-escalate" the situation. The first step would be for L.A.'s left-wing activists to stop harassing and assaulting federal officers—and the police officers of their own city—for doing their jobs.

■ **Sometimes in the Trump administration,** doing the easy thing is hard. Regarding the celebrated case of Kilmar Abrego Garcia: Once he was deported to El Salvador in violation of a court order, the administration should have quickly brought him back to the U.S. and then legally deported him. After devoting countless man hours to obfuscating in courtrooms and legal briefs, the

administration has finally availed itself of this obvious option. That said, Abrego Garcia was never the father of the year, as the left tried to portray him, and the DOJ has now charged him with human smuggling. The administration will have to prove its case in court but is now unquestionably operating in accord with the law, which is the best way to do law enforcement.

■ **The House passed** its version of the reconciliation bill, which makes permanent the tax rates and the higher standard deduction signed into law by Trump in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, which are currently set to expire at the end of this year, shunning the demands from some on the populist right to raise taxes on the rich. It restores the child tax credit to the value it had after that act was passed. It simplifies and reduces spending on the federal student-loan program. It strengthens work requirements for Medicaid and SNAP. It defunds Planned Parenthood. All of this is good, and some of it, such as defunding the nation's largest abortion provider, is long overdue. The bill has two major problems: It increases deficits by too much, and it will generate hardly any economic growth. The Senate should address both of these concerns by cutting more spending and by permanently allowing businesses to write off the full cost of their investments when they make them. The revenue could be made up by brushing off demands for grossly enlarged deductions for the taxes imposed by spendthrift states. The Senate should also look to cut more of Joe Biden's so-called Inflation Reduction Act, implement site-neutral payments for Medicare, and remove handouts in the House bill such as the "Trump accounts" and the various tax deductions for overtime, seniors, car interest, etc. House members from high-tax states are threatening to vote down the bill if they do not get the huge tax break they want; let's see if they are really willing to let taxes increase for nearly all taxpayers because they're upset about one deduction.

■ **Opponents of Republicans' Medicaid plans** say that they will reduce enrollment in the program. They're correct, and that's a good thing. Medicaid enrollment is currently too high, for several reasons. The first, and most troubling no matter what you think of the efficacy of the program, is that millions of people who are not eligible for it because their incomes are too high are currently enrolled. The second is that some states have allowed illegal immigrants to enroll. Everyone should be on board with kicking those two groups of people off the program. The third reason, where opinions differ, is that Obamacare expanded Medicaid to cover able-bodied, working-age people, and the federal government pays states a higher reimbursement rate to cover them than it does to cover the children and disabled people that Medicaid is supposed to be for. That has led to the current situation, where the national Medicaid enrollment rate is double the poverty rate, and disabled people are on waiting lists while able-bodied people are covered. Medicaid is also the No. 1 program for improper payments. Getting Medicaid under control means spending less money on it and covering fewer people, and Republicans should not be ashamed of doing so.

■ **President Trump's acceptance** of a \$400 million Boeing 747-8—the "palace in the sky"—from Qatar would be indefensible even if the sharia-supremacist regime were not Hamas's lifeline and Iran's close

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ally. His attempt to defend it—as “a very public and transparent action” that benefits the Defense Department—has been pathetic. A bribe’s visibility can enhance its impact. That’s why Qatar spends openly and lavishly on American universities, institutions, and corporations. The constitutional prohibition against foreign emoluments unambiguously applies to presents “of any kind whatsoever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.” There is an exception only if Congress approves, which it has not. Trump pressed Doha for the “gift” because of irritation over the delays (until at least 2027) of Boeing’s delivery of the new Air Force One. The plane is for his personal use and ultimately to be transferred to his presidential library. As Hamilton observed in *Federalist* No. 22, “One of the weak sides of republics, among their numerous advantages, is that they afford too easy an inlet to foreign corruption.”

■ **Where does former special counsel** Robert Hur go to get his reputation back? Hur was known as a nonpartisan straight shooter before he accepted the assignment to investigate President Biden’s possession of classified documents in January 2023. In October 2023, Hur interviewed Biden, and as both the transcript and the newly released audio reveal, Hur accurately described the president when he said that “Biden would likely present himself to a jury . . . as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory.” When Hur released his report in February 2024, Democrats exploded over Hur’s characterization; Kamala Harris called Hur’s description “gratuitous, inaccurate, and inappropriate.” The president himself held an evening appearance before the cameras and claimed, falsely, that Hur had brought up the topic of Beau Biden’s death. Hur was right the whole time; Biden and Harris lied. The week that the audiotape was released, Biden’s office revealed that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. It is surprising, to say the least, to learn that within 15 months, Biden went from a sparkling clean bill of health—“fit for duty,” as Biden’s doctor characterized him—to a stage 4 metastasized cancer diagnosis. After the Biden team did everything possible to hide Biden’s faltering abilities throughout 2024, it is hard to blame anyone for not trusting declarations about his health.

■ **Ever since the massacres** of October 7, 2023, Hamas-sympathizing radicals have regularly chanted “Globalize the intifada” in protests that have taken over college campuses, blocked off city streets, disrupted traffic, and shut down access to airports. Now, radicals have turned those words into action. In late May in Washington, D.C., a gunman opened fire near the Capital Jewish Museum

as attendees were leaving an American Jewish Committee event for young diplomats. The gunman, who chanted “Free, free Palestine” when taken into custody, killed a young couple who were about to get engaged: 30-year-old Yaron Lischinsky, an Israeli Christian who served as a research assistant at the Israeli Embassy, and Sarah Milgrim, a 26-year-old Jewish Kansan who organized missions and delegation visits for the embassy. Less than two weeks later, a man shouting “Free Palestine” and ranting about Zionist killers used Molotov cocktails on a crowd of people in Boulder, Colo., injuring twelve. Those targeted were gathering as part of a weekly “Run for Their Lives” event calling for the return of the hostages that Hamas is still holding captive. There must now be a concerted strategy to make sure that America remains a safe place for Jews to live and worship—a strategy that starts by listening to, and taking seriously, what the protesters have been saying all along.

■ **It’s easy to forget**, amid a deluge of emergency petitions to the Supreme Court on nationwide injunctions against the Trump administration, that the Court also has a regular docket. On the emergency side, the Court’s conservative bloc has upheld the administration’s broad claims to fire even statutorily protected executive officials, audit executive accounts under the Department of Government Efficiency, and set broad immigration policy, but has drawn the line—to the president’s ire—at demanding that due process be provided to individual deportees. On the regular docket, however, the Court has been nearly unanimous in limiting judicial environmental activism; rejecting a two-tiered standard for employment discrimination depending on whether the plaintiff is a member of a minority group; quashing a Mexican government lawsuit aimed at regulating the American gun industry; and protecting Catholic Charities from losing a state tax exemption for religious activities simply because it provides charitable aid to nonbelievers. If it’s not a perfect record, it’s one that should do legal conservatives proud. But the hardest cases, as usual, are stacked in the term’s final month, which beckons.

■ **Double or nothing!** Trump announced right before they came into effect that the steel and aluminum tariffs would be 50 percent instead of the previously announced 25 percent. He said so in a speech at a steel plant in Pennsylvania, and the American Iron and Steel Institute applauded the move. What’s good for the steel industry is bad for just about everyone else, especially domestic manufacturing firms that will now have higher input prices. American businesses already pay almost double the world price for steel, and tariffs allow domestic steel producers to raise prices as well. Doubling the tariff rate right before enactment also discredits any “strategic” justification for this protectionism: What thoughtful strategy assigns no importance to the difference between one tariff rate and double that rate? But Trump enjoys tariffs, and no court has ruled against these. So American businesses will have to pay the price for his caprice.

■ **President Trump’s tariff policy**—declaring bogus national emergencies as a pretense to unilaterally author tax policy on all imports under the authority of a law that has never before been used to implement tariffs—was always unconstitutional. Congress should have acted against Trump’s usurpation of legislative authority, but it failed to do so. Big businesses that would have faced the most harm should have taken the administration to court, but they were more interested in

Popular CoQ10 Pills Leave Millions Suffering

Could this newly-discovered brain fuel solve America's worsening memory crisis?

PALM BEACH, FLORIDA — Millions of Americans take the supplement known as CoQ10. It's the coenzyme that supercharges the "energy factories" in your cells known as *mitochondria*. But there's a serious flaw that's leaving millions unsatisfied.

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Taking CoQ10 alone is not enough to solve this problem. Because as powerful as CoQ10 is, there's one critical thing it fails to do: it can't create new mitochondria to replace the ones you lost.

And that's bad news for Americans all over the country. The loss of cellular energy is a problem for the memory concerns people face as they get older.

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Dr. Sears explains, "This new discovery is so powerful, it can multiply your mitochondria by 55 percent in just a few weeks. That's the equivalent of restoring decades of lost brain power."

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The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and Dr. Sears receives countless emails from his patients and readers. "My patients tell me they feel better than they have in years. This is ideal for people who are feeling old and run down, or for those who feel more forgetful. It surprises many that you can add healthy and productive years to your life simply by taking **Ultra Accel Q** every day."

You may have seen Dr. Sears on television or read one of his 12 best-selling books. Or you may have seen him speak at the 2016 WPBF 25 Health and Wellness Festival in South Florida, featuring Dr. Oz and special guest Suzanne Somers. Thousands of people attended Dr. Sears's lecture on anti-aging breakthroughs and waited in line for hours during his book signing at the event.

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Dr. Sears reports, "The most rewarding aspect of practicing medicine is watching my patients get the joy back in their lives. **Ultra Accel Q** sends a wake-up call to every cell in their bodies... And they actually feel young again."

And his patients agree. "I noticed a difference within a few days," says Jerry from Ft. Pierce, Florida. "My endurance has almost doubled, and I feel it mentally, too. There's a clarity and sense of well-being in my life that I've never experienced before."

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cozying up to Trump than challenging him. So the task of holding the executive branch accountable fell to small businesses represented by libertarian public-interest law firms. One of those lawsuits, brought by Liberty Justice Center, succeeded at the U.S. Court of International Trade, with three judges, including one appointed by Reagan and one appointed by Trump, ruling unanimously that Trump's tariffs imposed under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act were unconstitutional. The court cited legal doctrines that have typically been championed by conservatives. The decision has been temporarily stayed pending appeal. But it's heartening to see that in the face of a massive power grab by the president, Americans can still go to court, point to the Constitution, and win.

■ **After the court's ruling**, Trump blamed, of all people, Leonard Leo. "I was new to Washington," Trump says, "and it was suggested that I use The Federalist Society as a recommending source on Judges." Now, Trump rues the "bad advice" he got "on numerous Judicial Nominations." Never mind that the one Trump appointee on the three-judge panel came recommended by Trump's U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and is a lifelong Democrat, not a Federalist Society stalwart. Not only is Trump's broadside an echo of left-wing smears against Leo—one of the right's most effective activists—it's also profoundly ungrateful. Exit polls in 2016 found that Trump owed his margin of victory to voters who ranked the Supreme Court as their top issue. Trump was able to bid successfully for those voters by aligning himself with Federalist Society views of the judiciary. Listening to the advice of Leo and other conservative legal-movement figures helped Trump send the Senate a steady pipeline of high-quality judicial nominees, resulting in an unprecedented number of confirmations to the federal appellate courts as well as three Supreme Court justices. Without the conservative majority on the Supreme Court, Trump might well have spent the summer and fall of 2024 on trial in federal courtrooms. Leo responded with characteristic grace; Trump could still learn something from him.

■ **The Food and Drug Administration** is supposed to protect consumer health. That often takes the form of an excess of paternalistic regulation of drugs, but it has done the opposite with the mifepristone-based abortion pill. Successive Democratic administrations—most recently using Covid as cover—have stripped away rules designed to ensure that the pill is used under close medical supervision. When *ProPublica* revealed cases of women who died following complications from the pill, it somehow blamed pro-life states—and was rewarded

Physician-assisted suicide corrupts medicine: Doctors who are supposed to swear to do no harm do the worst kind of harm there is.

with a Pulitzer. But those cases are not rare. In April, the Ethics and Public Policy Center released a study of over 865,000 insurance records—a sample 28 times larger than all the FDA-cited clinical trials put together—revealing that nearly 11 percent of women suffered a serious adverse effect from the drug. In response, at the insistence of Senator Josh Hawley (R., Mo.), Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. called on the FDA to change the warning label on the drug and conduct a top-to-bottom review of the pill's risks. FDA Commissioner Marty Makary is following through. Meanwhile, the attorneys general of California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York are petitioning the FDA to loosen the remaining restrictions—further proof that, where abortion advocates are concerned, the health and safety of women take a distant second place.

■ **American Catholics have known** for years that the FBI under President Biden considered the traditionalists within their ranks as domestic terror threats, but they did not know just how deep the suspicion went. In February 2023, a former FBI agent leaked a memo produced by the bureau's Richmond, Va., field office warning against the emerging threat posed by "radical traditionalist Catholic ideology." Called before Congress to answer for the memo, then-FBI Director Christopher Wray downplayed it as the product of a single office and insisted that it never led to any investigative operations. Now internal FBI documents obtained by Senator Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) suggest more widespread targeting of traditionalist Catholics. The memo, based largely on the findings of the left-wing Southern Poverty Law Center, was distributed to more than 1,000 agents and was the product of input from agents across the country. The memo also appears to have been part of what was supposed to be a sustained effort: A second anti-Catholic memo was being drafted when the first memo leaked. Beyond the memo, a presentation delivered by an analyst in the Richmond field office argued that "radical traditional" Catholicism's beliefs are "comparable to Islamist ideology." The comparison is unfair, as the Biden administration never showed so much hostility to the latter.

■ **A culture that values human life** is a fragile thing. The costs of abandoning it fall unevenly on those with disabilities or special needs, with mounting incentives to discount their lives to save the government money and effort. Physician-assisted suicide also corrupts medicine: Doctors who are supposed to swear to do no harm do the worst kind of harm there is. Assisted suicide is legal in ten blue states, Montana, and the District of Columbia. Campaigns to adopt it elsewhere depend on the support of pro-abortion Democrats. The Democrats who control New York's legislature have passed the "Medical Aid in Dying Act" over Republican opposition, with some—but too few—Democrats defecting. The bill's death warrant is limited to patients with a diagnosis that is



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believed incurable and with less than six months to live. Experience from other jurisdictions shows that there will be pressure to expand that either in law or in sub rosa practice. As we go to print, Governor Kathy Hochul has yet to commit herself. We have little faith in Hochul's record of bucking her party, but we hope she may not be diagnosed as incurable.

■ **New York City's Democratic candidates** for mayor met in a long, clamorous debate that changed no minds. Former Governor Andrew Cuomo still leads the field, with seven left-wing midjets biting his heels. Worst of these is Zohran Mamdani, socialist (he wants free bus rides, a rent freeze, and government-owned grocery stores) and Israel-hater (he supports BDS: boycott, divestment, and sanctions). Cuomo mocks his youth: "He has been in government for 27 minutes." Some of Cuomo's minutes in government—harassing female colleagues, putting Covid patients in nursing homes—haunt him. The Democratic primary employs ranked-choice voting, so there is always a chance for a dark horse to slip in front. To borrow a formula from a long-ago Louisiana election: Vote for the old hack, it's important.

■ **Executives at Citigroup** have discovered that conservatives use financial services, too. The company announced that it will no longer require retail clients to restrict gun sales as a condition of service—and clarified that it does "not discriminate on the basis of political affiliation in the same way we are clear that we do not discriminate on the basis of other traits such as race and religion." In the wake of the 2018 shooting in Parkland, Fla., Citi announced that it would no longer do business with retailers that sold guns to individuals under 21, among other restrictions. The decision to reverse the policy comes as Republicans have grown increasingly exercised about the prospect of political de-banking of the sort that was used against the Canadian truckers who protested lockdowns in 2022. President Trump raised the issue of de-banking at the World Economic Forum earlier this year, and Republicans have introduced legislation to prevent it. Our bankers should be our bankers, and not our tutors.

■ **According to many progressives**, fare evasion on public transit is just a fact of urban life, and efforts to clamp down on it are inherently racist. The District of Columbia City Council decriminalized fare evasion in 2018, and fare evasion on the Metrorail system became endemic. In 2022, a new general manager, Randy Clarke, took over the system. He has led a fare-enforcement

campaign that involved installing taller fare gates that are more difficult to jump over and changing the law to let transit police question fare evaders. "Not everyone who fare evades commits crimes, but almost universally, everyone who commits serious crimes fare evades," Clarke said. Transit police have scooped up dangerous criminals, and the Metro is now on pace for its safest year on record, as fare evasion has declined by over 80 percent from two years ago. There's a term for this approach that you're not supposed to say anymore, but it rhymes with "spoken pintos."

THE STAT

96%

96 percent—the proportion of the growth in total government employment since 1955 that is from state and local government employment, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

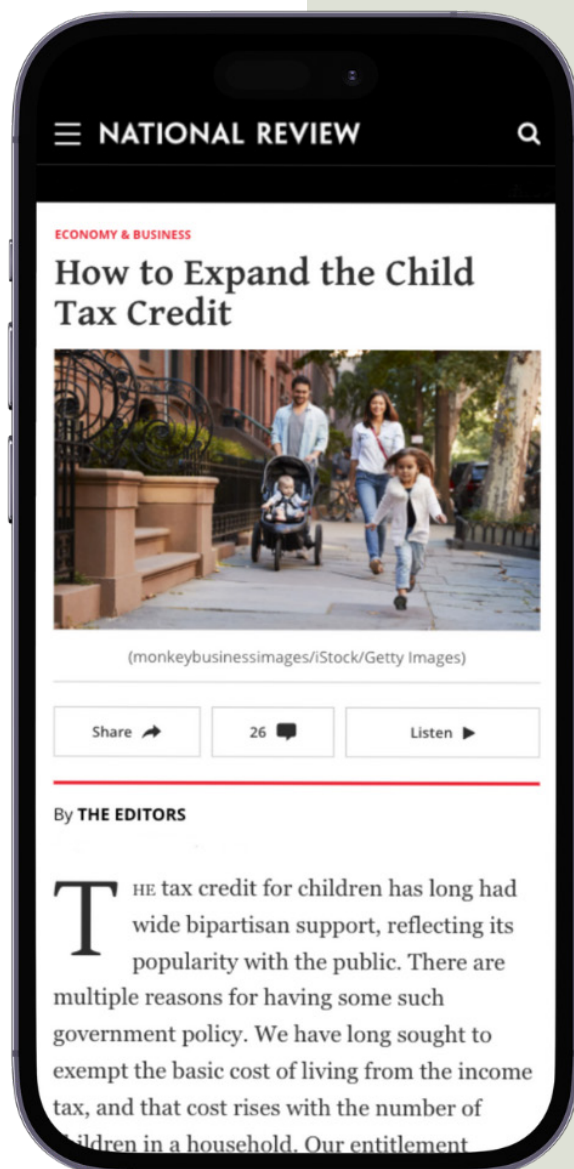
In 1955, the first year in which BLS data for federal, state, and local government employment are all available, there were 6.95 million civilian government employees in the United States. Today, there are 23.6 million. That 240 percent increase is much higher than the 127 percent increase in the U.S. population over that same time span. The enormous expansion of the federal welfare state in the 1960s and the continuous expansion of federal regulations over the decades might lead one to believe that most of the government employment surge is from the federal government, but of the 16.7 million additional government employees since 1955, 15.9 million are in state and local government. In percentage terms, state government employment has increased the most, 379 percent. Local government employment has increased by 329 percent. Federal civilian employment has increased by only 31 percent. Total state government employment was actually lower than federal civilian employment until 1972. State and local government employment accounted for 67 percent of total government employment in 1955; it accounts for 87 percent today. Almost the entire increase in government employment over the past several decades is at the state and local levels—the complete opposite of the trend in the balance of government power, which has shifted toward the federal government.

by Dominic Pino

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■ **“Russia holds all the cards,”** Trump told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in a tempestuous Oval Office exchange in March. Now that a Ukrainian operation 18 months in the making has culminated in spectacular success, we know why the latter was unfazed. Ukraine managed to smuggle into Russia a fleet of small quadcopter drones armed with explosives. Those drones were loaded into crates, which were piled onto modified shipping containers and trucked to locations throughout the Russian Federation. Each was parked adjacent to a key airfield and, at the appointed time, the drones executed simultaneous remote attacks on Moscow’s strategic long-range aircraft. The operation, innovative and daring, destroyed at least a dozen bombers, fighters, and reconnaissance planes. The targets, all military, accentuate the moral distinction between Ukraine’s tactics and Russia’s barbarous efforts to bomb Kyiv’s civilians into submission. Although the operation highlights America’s vulnerability to a similar asymmetric assault, it also demonstrates once again why Ukraine is a worthy as well as a righteous partner.

■ **“This offer won’t be around forever,”** said Secretary of State Marco Rubio in May following what the Trump administration billed as its final proposal for a new nuclear deal with Iran. “At some point, decisions will have to be made about more maximum pressure and other options because Iran can never have a nuclear weapon.” Yet weeks later, the offer is still there. Administration officials, including the president himself, repeatedly insisted that they would not accept a deal that allows Iran to enrich uranium on its soil. Yet multiple media reports indicated that the proposal sent to Tehran *would* allow it to enrich uranium to levels required for use in civilian reactors. Still, Iran rejected the overture, insisting that it must have indigenous enrichment capabilities. “They’re just asking for things that you can’t do,” Trump complained recently. “They seek enrichment. We can’t have enrichment.” Despite the president’s frustrations, the talks with Iran are ongoing, with new rounds of negotiations already slated to take place in Morocco. So far, the only party to these talks that has shown any flexibility is the United States. Trump clearly doesn’t want to resort to the military option should these talks conclusively fail. Yet, as the president himself once observed in a past life, the party that isn’t willing to walk away from a deal won’t strike a good one.

■ **A U.S.-backed charity,** supported by both private security and the Israel Defense Forces, embarked on an effort to distribute humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. With the help of a shockingly credulous press,

Greta Thunberg and other activists boarded a ‘Freedom Flotilla’ and set sail for Gaza with nothing more than the keffiyeh on their backs and a ‘symbolic’ amount of humanitarian aid. When detained by Israel, Thunberg immediately claimed to have been ‘kidnapped.’

a variety of international institutions have responded by retailing fabrications designed (and sometimes explicitly said) to show why *they* should have a monopoly on aid distribution. We were told the population was starving as a result of an IDF hold on aid—a fallacy exposed by the AFP’s observation that “residents have resorted to grinding lentils, pasta and rice for baking bread amid severe shortages of flour.” We were treated to the staggeringly innumerate claim that 14,000 infants would starve within 48 hours if action was not taken. And when the U.S.-Israeli aid program ramped up, U.N. officials and their stenographers regularly alleged that the distribution sites were kill boxes into which Israelis were luring civilians. There is a sense of dread pervading all this that the U.N. aid effort, which has been co-opted by Hamas, could be coming apart—and with it, the terrorists’ rule over the Strip.

■ **The Israeli military** thwarted erstwhile climate activist Greta Thunberg’s plan to sail to Gaza. Thunberg and eleven other celebrity activists boarded a “Freedom Flotilla” and set sail from Catania, Sicily, with nothing more than the keffiyeh on their backs and a “symbolic” amount of humanitarian aid (the ship was too small to carry anything significant). When the activists neared the Gaza coast, Israel promptly detained them for attempting to violate its naval blockade. Thunberg immediately claimed that the settler-colonialists in Israel had “kidnapped” her: inartful phrasing, given Hamas’s actual kidnapping of 251 civilians from Israel on October 7, 2023. Although eight activists chose to remain in Israeli custody and demand a trial, Thunberg and three other activists were voluntarily shipped back to their home countries. Israel has assured the activists that the “tiny amount of aid” they brought with them on their attention-seeking “selfie yacht” will be delivered to Gazans through the proper humanitarian channels. The activists’ stunt could have been more ridiculous only if they had tried to build a pier off Gaza.

■ **Hong Kong authorities** have stepped up their disgraceful harassment of pro-democracy figures. In May, they arrested the brother and father of Anna Kwok, a pro-democracy activist living in exile in America. The city’s police force accused them of financially supporting Kwok. Then they hit Joshua Wong, the imprisoned face of Hong Kong’s student movement, with new charges under the draconian national-security law that Beijing imposed on the city in 2020, accusing him of colluding with foreign governments. Once a free city, Hong Kong is now a Chinese city like any other, under the jackboot of the Communist Party. President Trump can do an immense amount of good by spreading the word about the party’s malign intentions and standing up for Kwok (a U.S. citizen), Wong, Jimmy Lai, and all others who have been targeted for their political activities.

That the International Olympic Committee allowed Imane Khelif to compete against women is, and always was, below the belt.

■ **Earlier this year**, Turkish-born Hamit Coskun stood outside the Turkish Consulate General in London, lit a Koran on fire, and shouted rude remarks about Islam. The protest was (Coskun says) against Turkish President Erdoğan's support for radical Islamism. A man emerged from a nearby building, exchanged angry words with Coskun, went back inside, and reemerged with a knife with which he started slashing at Coskun, who was also attacked by a second individual. Coskun was hospitalized and then arrested. The knifeman has also been charged. The other attacker fled. Under English law, there are strong (it was thought) protections for free speech on religious matters. But in this case, authorities circumvented these laws by charging Coskun with a separate public-order offense. His conduct was entirely peaceful, but a court found him guilty, because his actions were "provocative" and likely to harass, alarm, or distress someone who could see or hear them. The reaction of Coskun's assailants apparently proved this was the case. His fine was increased because the offense was "religiously aggravated." Supposedly, England repealed its blasphemy laws in 2008.

■ **PornHub's parent company Aylo** blocked service in France to protest a law that requires porn companies to verify the ages of their users, citing privacy concerns. In a statement, Aylo defended its "legal and regulated porn" as a better option than what is offered on "irresponsible porn sites." Aylo operates some of the most trafficked pornographic platforms in the world. The real story here is that the United States has been outflanked on pornography regulation—by *the French*. There's nothing wrong with restricting "adult entertainment" to adults.

■ **In other news from l'Hexagone**: France, the land of Gitanes dangling from the lips of tough guys, world-weary mistresses, and philosophers, will ban smoking on beaches, in parks, and outside schools beginning in July. The national stub-out is designed to protect youth from second-hand smoke. "Where there are children," said Catherine Vautrin, minister of labor, health, solidarity, and families, "tobacco must disappear." The reform acknowledges national character enough so that smoking will still be allowed on café terraces. *Dieu merci*. But if brandy and coffee are ever found to cause cancer . . .

■ **During the 2024 Paris Olympics**, Italy's Angela Carini quit 46 seconds into a women's boxing match against Algerian opponent Imane Khelif. Khelif was one of two competitors in the women's boxing division who was previously disqualified from the 2023 International Boxing Association's women's championships after failing a sex-identification test. Association president Umar Kremlev said in 2023 that Khelif and Taiwanese boxer Lin Yu-ting were ineligible for the women's championship because DNA tests had "proved they had XY chromosomes." Lin did not appeal the association's decision; Khelif appealed but then withdrew.

In defense of its "inclusive" policies, the Paris 2024 Boxing Unit and the International Olympic Committee asserted that, as was the case in previous competitions, "the gender and age of the athletes are based on their passport." Khelif and Lin were permitted to continue competing in the women's division, and each won a gold medal. Recently, American journalist Alan Abrahamson, who is a member of the IOC's press committee, published an excerpt of Khelif's 2023 lab test results stating that "chromosome analysis reveals male karyotype." That the IOC allowed Khelif to compete against women is, and always was, below the belt.

■ **Harvard has parted ways** with behavioral scientist Francesca Gino in the fallout from an inquiry into data falsification in her research. There have been dueling lawsuits. A rising star at Harvard Business School, Gino had been seen as an expert in the fields of honesty and ethical behavior. She also held tenure, and no Harvard professor has been known to have lost tenure since at least the 1940s. No longer a rising star, she may nonetheless be a trend-setter.

■ **After nearly 30 years**, Sam Tanenhaus has finally published his biography of William F. Buckley Jr., an epic 900-page project to match an epic life. Tanenhaus deserves credit for the care he took in the research and writing. But Tanenhaus is a center-left writer who pronounced conservatism dead nearly 15 years ago, and his preoccupations blight the book. He maintains that Buckley was a mere "intellectual entertainer," which significantly underrates his talent and achievement. Buckley obviously made an indispensable contribution to defining modern conservatism through his writing and advocacy, his friendship and correspondence with every conservative intellectual worth knowing (all of whom considered him at least a peer), through his institution-building, and through NR. Predictably, Tanenhaus dwells on Buckley's editorials in the 1950s favoring segregation. Those editorials were disgracefully wrong, but Buckley had changed on the underlying question by the 1960s. Tanenhaus is also fond of making, as Barton Swaim of the *Wall Street Journal* aptly put it in his review, "vague imputations of dishonesty," which tend to be loosely supported at best and tell us more about the worldview of the biographer than the integrity of his subject. Tanenhaus does grant that Buckley was a "great man." Still, his massive volume doesn't do justice to a man who lived a legendary life and changed the 20th century for the better.

■ **Alasdair MacIntyre began** his landmark 1981 work *After Virtue* asking us to imagine an apocalypse. Disasters occur, and science and scientists are blamed; angry nonscientists wipe out nearly all traces of ►

their work. Realizing later they had erred, they attempt to restore science, “but all that they possess are fragments” of prior knowledge. Such was the condition of the modern world, in the judgment of this preeminent philosopher: cut off from true sources of meaning, philosophically uncertain, morally adrift. He spent a prolific academic career—begun in his native United Kingdom, after 1969 carried out in America, and from 1985 onward at the University of Notre Dame—attempting to reanchor modernity by piecing together fragments of the truths he argued that it had discarded, and thereby to restore our ability to live well by something like the classical standard. His consistent sense of the profound brokenness of modern times brought him first to communism. He is not alone in leaving behind the god that failed, and thereafter finding succor in the Catholic faith. But his intellectual and academic achievements in rigorously, if sometimes diffusely, elucidating and challenging virtue ethics and reviving and reapplying Aristotelian and Thomistic thought stand unparalleled. Difficult to categorize politically, he had an abiding discomfort with liberalism, with many of whose precepts and progeny we have quarreled as well, in particular its autonomy monomania. Yet he defined it so expansively as to include—and thus to condemn—some of the foundations of this magazine, and perhaps even of this country. But ethics, philosophy, and modernity are better off for his work, and for his challenges. The work of answering them now belongs to new—doubtless very different—MacIntyres. Dead at 96. R.I.P.

■ **Michael Ledeen’s signature cause** was the need for vigilance against the threat to liberty posed by totalitarian regimes. In his academic work as a historian, his popular books, his labors at the American Enterprise Institute and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, and his frequent essays and posts in our pages, he was ahead of his time. He exposed how the jihadist threat of Iran was interlocking with China, Russia, and North Korea, forming a formidable alliance against the United States. Beyond his erudition, his insights into Italian fascism and counterintelligence craft, and his bridge-playing prowess, he was skilled in the art of friendship. He and his wife, Barbara, a force in her own right as a longtime Senate Judiciary



Committee staffer, made their home an oasis off the Beltway, where thinkers, policymakers, and journalists convened to solve the world’s problems. It was also where they raised three remarkably accomplished children, all of whom served our country in the wars against antisemitic, anti-Western Islamic radicals. A loyal, learned friend, dead at 83. R.I.P.

■ **Bernard Kerik** had a hard-knocks early life: wastrel mother; high school dropout; father of an illegitimate child during an Army tour of South Korea. Policing saved him. New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani promoted him through the ranks to serve as commissioner of the Department of Corrections, then police commissioner. He was in the latter slot on 9/11, on which day he was showered by debris from the plane that hit the South Tower. President George W. Bush charged him with reconstructing Iraq’s Interior Ministry during the American occupation, and nominated him to be secretary of Homeland Security. Urbanist Fred Siegel believed that had Kerik been in that job, there would have been no dithering by Louisiana officeholders as Hurricane Katrina approached. But Kerik had a weak side. He pulled the plug on his DHS nomination, admitting to having employed an illegal immigrant. Other misdeeds came to light, some tawdry (he kept a love nest for two mistresses),

some felonious. He served three years in prison. President Trump gave him a retrospective pardon. Dead at 69. R.I.P.

POLITICS

The Musk Wears Off

Even casual observers of the parties involved were not surprised that the Trump–Musk bromance broke up. Donald Trump discards associates and allies like cracked golf balls. They take the fall for his as well as their own failures, earning demeaning nicknames on the way out. Elon Musk for his part became the world’s richest man via smarts, energy, and maniacal single-mindedness. Hubris plus hubris was bound to equal nemesis.

Musk initiated the spat by attacking the Big Beautiful Bill after stepping away from his role at DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency). It was as if he finally began to suspect truths about the federal government that he should have known before taking on the job of trimming it. Cuts are there to be made, but they often require the help of Congress (since Congress mandates many a bloated function in the first place). Federal jobholders, meanwhile, are well versed in the arts of survival, using civil-service protections and their own congressional allies.

Cutting all the waste, fraud, and abuse in the world cannot right the federal deficit, because the main drivers of overspending are Social Security, major health-care programs, and the interest costs to finance them.

But no one in Washington wants to tackle them, certainly not a White House or a GOP modeled on Trump populism.

Musk will lose the feud, if it continues, because he has other jobs—making electric vehicles, getting to Mars—and distraction entails loss of focus. Trump, however, has no other job apart from asserting dominance. He is president of the United States, of course, but he fills that office by commanding the news cycle, wooing, intimidating, and steamrolling all those about him.

It was a show while it lasted. On to the next.

Corrections:

In “A Cheat Sheet on Textualism and Originalism” (June issue), Bryan A. Garner wrote that the *New York Times* never apologized for misspelling “just deserts” as “just desserts” when quoting Justice Antonin Scalia. In fact, the *Times* did issue a correction on March 2, 2011.

In “Silicon Valley Finds Patriotism” (July issue), Jimmy Quinn incorrectly stated that the Pentagon has already awarded a contract for the Golden Dome project and that Anduril founder Palmer Luckey attended an event at the White House.

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The Long View

NSA DOCUMENT EXTRACT
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UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: Let's do some breathing, let's get in touch with where our bodies are at this moment. It takes several minutes for the lozenge to dissolve in the mouth and the medicine to reach the bloodstream.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: This is dumb. I'm not feeling anything.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: Fine. Let's not do it then. I have two businesses to run. I don't have to be here.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: No one is being forced to be here. We are here with intention and presence. We are here because there was a rupture in the relationship and you both want to find healing.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Is this going to turn me into a druggie like him?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: No, there is no evidence that psychoactive drugs like ketamine and MDMA and psilocybin lead to addiction or addictive behaviors.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Which one did you give me?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: A little of everything.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Like a dirty hippie.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: You sound like my dad.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Well I'm not your dad and I don't know why I'm doing this.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: For the money. You don't need me starting a third party.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Still not feeling anything.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: Do we need to up the dose? He's a very heavy guy. Maybe 200 milligrams won't do it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: I'm a lot slimmer now! Get me out of here. This isn't worth it. I don't need the money that much. He's the one who needs me, not the other way around. I should have kicked him out of the office months ago. Listen, you little piece of . . . piece of . . . piece . . . whoa. Wait. Wow. Okay, I'm feeling something. Something . . . something wonderful.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: This is good! Let's keep this energy going as the medicine gains momentum.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: This is good stuff, too. It's from RFK. He gets the really good stuff.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Okay I'm really feeling it. Hi, Elon. You're funny. You're a funny kind of person. Everything feels fuzzy.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: Good, right? Like someone is carrying you into bed as a child.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: I guess. That never happened to me.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: Me neither.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: I guess that's why I keep so many walls up around me. Am I a lovable person? Am I worthy of love?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: Just breathe. In and out. Nice deep breaths. Okay, now, Elon, what would you like to say to Donald?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: It really hurt when he said those things about me. About me being weird and the drugs and stuff. And about how having me around was a problem. That triggered me.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: And Donald?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Why did you say those things about my beautiful tax bill? It was like you were saying them about me.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: And why do you think it's hard for you to separate things, deals, accomplishments, from you, from who you are?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: I don't know. I wish I knew. It's like, my dad . . . it's just . . .

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: There are tissues in front of you if you need them.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: I was never enough, you know?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: You are enough, Donald.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: This is wonderful. Elon, do you see how important you are to Donald? And Donald, do you see how much Elon values your friendship? It's okay if neither of you wants to talk. Just nod and look into each other's eyes and communicate the healing that way.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: I want my friend back. I miss my friend.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: Donald, what do you think about what Elon just said?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: I think I'd like to hug him.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: Bring it in!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: Psych! I spit your drugs out when you were lighting the incense! What you said about Trump will never be forgiven. Have fun at your forensic IRS audit, loser.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE 2: But I thought . . .

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE: That's your problem in a nutshell, nerd. Too much thinking. Adios.

END EXTRACT

Who's Shrinking Whom?



DOGE takes a nibble
out of big government

BY JIM GERAGHTY



Begin with the upside: President Donald Trump was never much of a fiscal hawk in his first term, but at least for the first stretch of his second term, he established the Department of Government Efficiency and put the world's most energetic—probably hyperactive—billionaire in charge of it, and made cutting wasteful spending a priority.

As of this writing, according to DOGE's data, it has identified an estimated \$175 billion in savings—about \$1,086 per taxpayer—from a combination of “asset sales, contract/lease cancellations and renegotiations, fraud and improper payment deletion, grant cancellations, interest savings, programmatic changes, regulatory savings, and workforce reductions.”

That sounds good. But if you paid attention during Trump's big Madison Square Garden rally on October 27, 2024, you'll recall that Elon Musk pledged to future Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick that DOGE would save taxpayers “at least \$2 trillion.” By March, President Trump was boasting that DOGE was going to save so much money that the savings would be returned to taxpayers in the form of “DOGE checks.”

“They're saving billions and billions of dollars every single day, and there's even under consideration a new concept where we give 20 percent of the DOGE savings to American citizens, and 20 percent goes to paying down the debt, because the numbers are incredible,” Trump said during his address at Saudi Arabia's annual investment conference, held in Miami Beach.

On May 28, Musk announced on the social media platform he owns that his scheduled time as a special

government employee was coming to an end. While the work of DOGE will go on, \$175 billion represents 8.75 percent of Musk's bold stated goal. And according to Lutnick, recalling the episode during his appearance on the *All-In* podcast on March 20, Musk doubled the announced objective on a whim: “When I say to him, ‘How much are you going to cut?’ The deal was, he's going to cut \$1 trillion. And then he's supposed to say, ‘And how much are you going to earn?’ And I'm supposed to say, ‘\$1 trillion.’ And then we're supposed to say, ‘Together we're going to balance the budget of the United States of America!’”

As Lutnick recounts it, he asked Elon, “‘How much are you going to cut?’ Well, because we're in front of 22,000 people, and the place is erupting, he says ‘\$2 trillion!’ And then I'm sitting there going and I'm like”—Lutnick makes a nonplussed expression—“I think I said, ‘All righty then!’ or something like that. What was I supposed to say? . . . The answer was always that 25 percent of the waste, fraud, and abuse is a trillion dollars.”

Keep in mind, the U.S. federal budget's total discretionary spending in 2024 was \$1.8 trillion. Nondiscretionary spending is Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, ►

supplemental nutrition assistance, federal civilian and military retirement benefits, and unemployment insurance. Discretionary funding is everything else.

Musk's time at DOGE has been off the charts on theatrics, such as his waving a chain saw through the air alongside Argentine President Javier Milei at CPAC. The results are a less dramatic and less cheery story.

First, assessing the work of DOGE is complicated by the fact that some batches of data it released proved to be riddled with errors; in early March, DOGE erased or altered more than 1,000 contracts it claimed to have recommended for canceling, representing more than 40 percent of all the contracts listed on its site, including five of the seven largest.

To be clear, "DOGE does not cut spending. DOGE does not fire people. DOGE does not cancel contracts," Michael McConnell, director of the Constitutional Law Center at Stanford Law School and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, explained on an episode of the *We the People* podcast. "What DOGE does is it advises the agency head, and the agency head then exercises the authority that's been vested in him or her under the statutes. Now, it is true that DOGE is extremely influential, but DOGE does not actually do the canceling and the firing and the reductions."

At first glance, the DOGE website offers an impressive list of 10,781 canceled contracts—until you dig into the numbers and notice what's missing. For example, on March 1, a U.S. Agency for International Development contract worth \$283.7 million was canceled. The vendor's name is "unavailable," and the description of the contract is "unavailable for legal reasons." Quite a few USAID contracts share those unnamed contractors or descriptions. DOGE-targeted federal grants also often have "currently unavailable" as their description.

The incomplete data make it difficult to verify the administration's claims of cost savings. On May 20, Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Paul Atkins, speaking to the House Appropriations Committee about DOGE's efforts at his agency, said: "The savings is up to \$90 million that they've identified."

An independent calculation of the publicly available data on the DOGE website puts cost savings at the SEC at \$18.9 million.

Was Atkins getting bad information? Was the site not updated with another round of savings from recent cuts? Were some SEC savings misattributed to some other agency? It's impossible to know with the limited information disclosed by an administration that boasts "truly the most transparent, accessible president in American history."

Speaking of transparency, DOGE argued in court that its internal records were not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. In March, Obama-appointed U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper ruled that those documents were indeed covered by FOIA and concluded that DOGE's "operations thus far have been marked by unusual secrecy," and "the authority exercised by [DOGE] across the federal government and the dramatic cuts it has apparently made with no congressional input appear to be unprecedented."

DOGE is the new name of the United States Digital Service, established during the Obama years to provide consultation services to federal agencies on information technology. Unsurprisingly, the torrent of budget cuts and staff firings directed by what is supposed to be an advisory agency spurred a slew of legal challenges. (See Dan McLaughlin's "The DOGE Ate My Constitution" in the May 2025 issue.)

Take the U.S. Institute of Peace, a nonprofit institute funded by the federal government, established in 1984 by congressional legislation and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. The USIP employs about 600 people worldwide, had a budget of \$55 million in the 2024 fiscal year, and works out of an architecturally striking building at the corner of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street, across from the Lincoln Memorial. A February 19 Trump executive order called for the elimination of the institute's non-statutory components and functions; the administration terminated the board. When the board balked and refused to leave the building, DOGE called the cops.

In mid-May, another Obama appointee, U.S. District Judge Beryl A. Howell, ruled that the administration had acted

"without asking Congress to cease or reprogram appropriations or by recommending that Congress enact a new law to dissolve or reduce the Institute or transfer its tasks to another entity" and took over the building with "blunt force, backed up by law enforcement officers from three separate local and federal agencies." She ruled that while the Institute of Peace was part of the federal government, it was separate from the executive branch, and the president lacked the power to terminate its board at will. She reversed all the changes.

There is a Republican Congress that could legislatively eliminate the U.S. Institute of Peace, but there's no sign of action on that front.

And then there are the DOGE-recommended cuts that even the most ardent budget cutter might find difficult to justify. Scientists at the National Institutes of Health contend that the reduction in staff and the purchasing slowdowns are delaying the development of cell-based immunotherapy techniques for cancer. Eliminating two National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather balloon stations in Michigan and Wisconsin meant that local meteorologists had a smaller database to help them predict ice storms and tornadoes. And some cuts seem to contradict other administration priorities. If English is the official language of the United States, as Trump decreed, then it likely makes sense to have programs designed to teach kids English when it isn't their first language or spoken in the home. Waste is sometimes in the eye of the beholder.

At a cabinet meeting in February, Musk said, "We will make mistakes. We won't be perfect. But when we make mistakes, we'll fix it very quickly. So, for example, with USAID, one of the things we accidentally canceled, very briefly, was Ebola prevention. . . . So, we restored the Ebola prevention immediately, and there was no interruption." Some international aid workers contend that the USAID cuts did disrupt the U.S. response to an Ebola outbreak in Uganda this spring.

"Measure twice, cut once" isn't common advice in DOGE, where sweeping firings of federal workers are announced, then sometimes hastily reversed once the

Every administration has internal disputes, but Musk's brash, confrontational style likely further alienated cabinet officials whose cooperation would have made his task easier.

consequences are clear. In February, up to 350 employees at the National Nuclear Security Administration were abruptly laid off; a day later, “the agency’s acting director, Teresa Robbins, issued a memo rescinding the firings for all but 28 of those hundreds of fired staff members.” In April, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention research facility in Pleasant Hills, Pa., laid off 300 employees. One month later, the facility announced the rehiring of “dozens of respirator certification workers.” One employee at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has been fired twice and rehired twice. One DOGE effort to reduce the number of federal employees has been to offer buyouts; more than 15,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture employees took the deal. By May, Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins told the Senate Appropriations Committee that the department was “actively recruiting” to fill some of those empty positions. “If they want to come back, and if they were in a key position, then we would love to have that conversation,” she told the panel.

Referring to his fight with the U.S. Institute of Peace, Musk posted on X, “Any government institution is most likely to be the opposite of its name.” Indeed, the Department of Government Efficiency doesn’t always seem all that efficient.

Unsurprisingly, other Trump cabinet officials were less than thrilled that a billionaire and his team of wunderkind staffers with nicknames like “Big Balls” were attempting to force budget cuts and firings of people within agencies under their management.

The tensions led to a showdown in the Cabinet Room of the White House on March 6, featuring a clash between Musk and Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Musk reportedly complained that Rubio hadn’t

fired anyone, and Rubio accused Musk of not being truthful and ignoring more than 1,500 State Department officials who took early retirement in buyouts.

President Trump appeared to side with Rubio and the rest of his cabinet, declaring on Truth Social, “As the Secretaries learn about, and understand, the people working for the various Departments, they can be very precise as to who will remain, and who will go. We say the ‘scalpel’ rather than the ‘hatchet.’” In other words, DOGE would no longer be calling for the firing of federal workers without the agreement of the cabinet secretaries.

It didn’t help that Musk is incapable of holding his tongue when he thinks others are making a mistake. In the opening days of the administration, Trump happily announced the Stargate Project, “a new company which intends to invest \$500 billion over the next four years building new AI infrastructure for OpenAI in the United States,” a joint venture with SoftBank. Musk posted on X, “They don’t actually have the money.... SoftBank has well under \$10 [billion] secured. I have that on good authority.” (There has been long-standing tension between Musk and Sam Altman, OpenAI’s CEO.) During the fight about the “liberation day” tariffs, Musk posted that Trump’s primary adviser on trade, Peter Navarro, was a “moron.” According to one report, Musk and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent got into a profanity-laden screaming match in the White House over who the next IRS commissioner ought to be.

Every administration has internal disputes, but Musk’s brash, confrontational style likely further alienated cabinet officials whose cooperation would have made his task easier.

In a May interview with ABC News, the world’s richest man said of budget-cutting,

“It’s not easy. This is . . . a way to make a lot of enemies and not that many friends.” He said the ability to reduce spending depends on “how much pain is the cabinet and Congress willing to take. It can be done, but it requires dealing with a lot of complaints.” In a separate *Washington Post* interview, he lamented, “DOGE is just becoming the whipping boy for everything. So, like, something bad would happen anywhere, and we would get blamed for it even if we had nothing to do with it.”

The GOP-controlled Congress didn’t really buy into the Musk mindset, either. “I was disappointed to see the massive spending bill, frankly, which increases the budget deficit, not just decreases it, and undermines the work that the DOGE team is doing,” Musk told *CBS News Sunday Morning*.

In the ABC interview, Musk conceded, “I think we’ve been effective, not as effective as I’d like, . . . but our rate of savings per day is pretty good. You know, we’re like, \$1.6 billion a day, 100 days in.” (By the end of May, that was down to \$1.36 billion per day.)

The problem is that so far in the 2025 fiscal year, the U.S. government is spending \$11.4 billion per day.

Finally, firing people, offering buyouts, rehiring people, and fighting all those lawsuits costs money. One study by the Partnership for Public Service calculated that when you add up all the “firings, re-hirings, lost productivity and paid leave of thousands of workers,” it will cost taxpayers “upward of \$135 billion this fiscal year,” nearly eating up all of the savings generated by DOGE’s efforts. That figure may be an exaggeration, but there’s no denying that the tumult generated by DOGE is at least partially offsetting the savings it generates.

This year’s deficit will be higher than last year’s. Trump and the GOP Congress will get blamed, but little of it has to do with any decisions they’ve made so far (although tariffs that dampen economic growth would likely reduce U.S. tax revenues). The last of the Baby Boomers are retiring, meaning we’re paying out more in Social Security checks and spending more on Medicare. And when the national debt gets bigger, the U.S. must pay more in interest each year. ►

Eliminating a wasteful program is worthwhile on its own merits. But DOGE's recommended cuts are a drop in the bucket—perhaps \$200 billion in cuts, when the deficit for fiscal 2025 is projected to be \$1.9 trillion. The perception of DOGE's effectiveness is largely driven by innumeracy. ●

ARTICLES

Why 2026 Could Still Surprise Us



Republicans face poor midterm prospects, and yet ...

BY DAN McLAUGHLIN

The 2026 midterm elections look likely to go badly for Republicans. Appearances aren't deceptive; the portents are grim. But the conventional wisdom may be underrating the possibility of an election cycle that denies Democrats the big win they envision.

The party in the White House always starts off at a disadvantage, absent highly unusual circumstances such as those of 2002, 1998, 1962, or 1934. Turnout is lower in midterm elections, which favors the angrier party that can unify voters against the president. Special elections have thus far gone so badly for the GOP that Donald Trump pressured New York's Elise Stefanik to remain in the House and withdrew her nomination to be U.N. ambassador. A frustrated Stefanik has been

mullying a run for governor of her state instead.

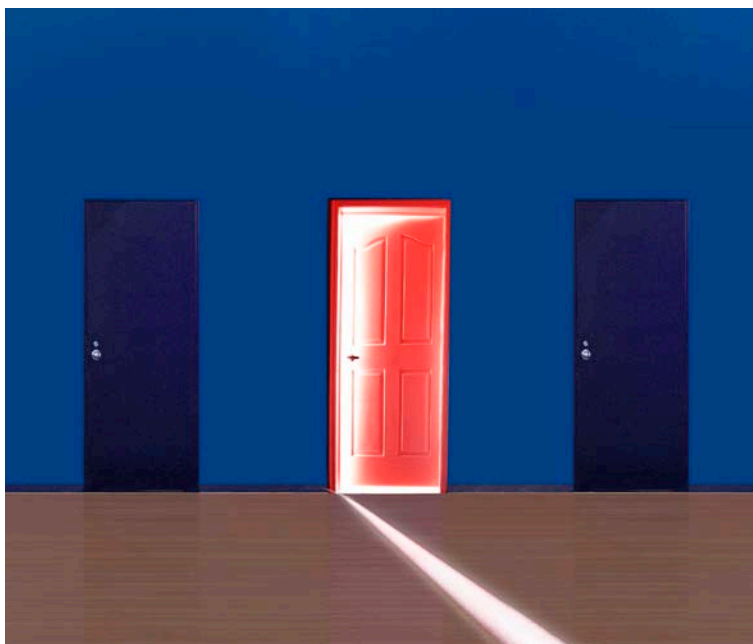
The natural midterm dynamic is accentuated when the party out of power has more voters who are educated, settled, and prosperous than the party in power—as was true of Obama-era Republicans and is true of Trump-era Democrats. Those are the most reliable midterm voters in any environment, most of whom turn out on their own without much prompting from the parties. Potentially worse, given Trump's tariff fights, Republican morale right now seems to be inversely related to the characteristics we typically associate with high voter turnout: the people who are fired up for a trade war are less likely to vote than the traditional Republican voters who are uneasy about tariffs. Elon Musk's acrimonious withdrawal from Republican politics cuts off a big spigot of voter-turnout cash that flowed lavishly in 2024.

At the start of his second term and until mid-March, Trump's approval rating was above water for the first time in his career, reflecting his 2024 popular mandate and a more traditional honeymoon than he had in 2017. Yet it sagged as he escalated his trade battles, placing him in the accustomed position he occupied presaging Republican defeats during his first term. In the *RealClearPolitics* average, he bottomed out in late April at

45.3 percent approval and 52.4 percent disapproval. American voters were plainly alarmed that Trump was not delivering on the promise of restoring the economic good times of his first term and, if anything, was headed in the wrong direction. His approval rating on the economy bottomed out at the same time, at 41 percent approval and 56.7 percent disapproval. That way could lie electoral Armageddon. Without Trump on the ballot, the likely losers will be the rest of his party.

In the House, Republicans have such a narrow majority that just a few lost seats could make Hakeem Jeffries the speaker. Further hostile redistricting is expected, at least in Wisconsin, after an April election locked in the progressive majority on the Wisconsin Supreme Court. If there's a silver lining for Republicans, it's that even in a good Republican environment in 2024, Democrats won 21 out of 36 House races decided by five or fewer points and 46 out of 68 House races decided by ten or fewer points.

The map in the Senate is more favorable for the GOP, making it likelier in the case of a bad but not disastrous midterm that Republicans will be mourning missed opportunities rather than a lost majority. Democratic senators are retiring in four



YUJI SAKAI / GETTY IMAGES

The Democrats' desperation to figure out how they lost their appeal to male voters has reached comical proportions.

states (New Hampshire, Michigan, Illinois, and Minnesota), three of which could be competitive in a good environment—but key recruits Brian Kemp in Georgia and Chris Sununu in New Hampshire have declined to run, and Ken Paxton's primary challenge to John Cornyn could put Texas in play. Only deep-red Kentucky and Alabama have retiring Republican incumbents, and appointed senators in Florida and Ohio have experience winning statewide elections. Aside from Susan Collins in Maine, only one Republican incumbent (Thom Tillis in North Carolina) is running in a state where Kamala Harris cleared 44 percent of the vote. Democrats will require a very blue environment to gain the four seats they need.

The gubernatorial races are tougher. Republicans will be defending ten open seats, many of them long held: Florida, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, Iowa, Oklahoma, Wyoming, and Alaska. They also have incumbents up in Nevada, New Hampshire, and Vermont. They may struggle to recapture swing-state governorships that have eluded them against Democratic incumbents in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Arizona and in open races in Maine, Michigan, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and California. Many state legislative chambers and statewide offices, such as those of state attorneys general, will be up for grabs, raising the stakes of a bad cycle.

For all of the potential for disaster, we should not overlook the reasons why 2026 could yet surprise us—just as 2022 and 1998 surprised those who expected big red waves that never quite materialized. Trump may not be immune to electoral

gravity, but his capacity for surprising resilience has been a constant of the past decade.

First, Trump is bouncing back—for now. Presidential approval ratings are traditionally the strongest determinant of midterm outcomes. As of this writing, Trump stands at 47.5 percent approval and 49.6 percent disapproval in the *RCP* average, although his approval rating on the economy remains ten points underwater. Though he's no longer in honeymoon territory, Trump's real electoral support has traditionally been a few points stronger than his approval in polls. Just about 44 percent say the country is on the right track. That's not an inspiring number until you realize that's the highest it has been in 16 years. It was below 30 percent for the last two and a half years of Joe Biden's tenure.

Second, the economy could save Republicans. The Clinton-era cliché about elections is that “it's the economy, stupid.” Trump's brand as a businessman, one of his greatest political assets, has been badly shaken by the tariff imbroglio. But if things look sunnier by the spring and summer of 2026 and are improving in the fall—and if Trump has a plausible argument for having negotiated his way out of the corner he painted himself into—voters may conclude that he has yet again done his “art of the deal” magic. That may not seem the likeliest outcome right now, and analogies to 1983 may feel strained, but it's not yet out of the question. Moreover, the courts may save Trump from himself. Decisions in late May from the Court of International Trade and a district judge in D.C. found that Trump exceeded the president's unilateral tariff-setting power. For now, the main injunction against the tariffs has been stayed.

If the courts reopen trade, Trump can claim the economic benefits and use judges as a scapegoat with protectionist voters.

Third, Democrats can still screw this up. The Democrats' Plan A is to sit back and pocket the winnings as Trump grows more unpopular. There doesn't seem to be a Plan B—and not everybody is onside with Plan A, for that matter.

Republicans in 2022 picked a bunch of terrible candidates for major statewide races. Democrats, traditionally, do not do this: their party establishment is powerful enough to run disaster candidates off the road. In 2024, Democratic primary voters in heavily black districts purged “Squad” lunatics Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush from Congress. This trend might not obtain in 2026. Populist anger is mounting on the left. One cause is rage at the Democrats' impotence in stopping Trump, which seems to be pushing a lot of Democrats to act out in ways that may be off-putting to swing voters. The presence of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jasmine Crockett on the nightly news doesn't exactly offer an alternative of sane, mature governance.

The Democratic brand hasn't improved at all. While Democrats at this writing are in the lead, 46.3 percent to 43.7 percent, in the *RealClearPolitics* average of the generic congressional ballot, they're a ways off from closing the sale. The party's approval rating has sagged as low as the 20s in polls this spring, and in spite of concerns about Trump's handling of the economy, multiple polls have found that Republicans have a double-digit edge over Democrats on the question of which party is more trusted on the economy. The public's onetime perception of the Democrats as the party of the middle class has evaporated. The Democrats' desperation to figure out how they lost their appeal to male voters has reached comical proportions, while the settling of a new, post-*Dobbs* status quo on abortion with the passage of time robs Democrats of one of the weapons they relied on in 2022.

Furthermore, Republicans suffered in 2022 because Trump remained a visible presence, allowing Democrats to run against him as if he were still an ►

incumbent. Joe Biden may be fading, but if Kamala Harris runs for governor of California in 2026, her public profile could give Trump a useful foil.

One risk for Democrats that could be hiding in plain sight is the nation's 250th birthday. Major patriotic milestones tend to offer a modest glow for the incumbent party. (The Bicentennial, in 1976, may have helped Gerald Ford's recovery from what polls showed to be a possible landslide loss.) It's possible that Trump will overplay his hand and put on a partisan Trumpcentennial. But the academic and cultural left is likely to gag at displays of old-timey flag-waving, and Democrats still struggle to disassociate themselves from that faction of their base.

Fourth, there's a sweet spot for Trump. The trick for Republicans is to motivate the low-propensity voters who like Trump but don't care that much about the rest of the party. In order to fire them up, Trump needs conflict, and he needs enemies. He has no shortage of either. While his efforts to pick fights with the courts may be ominous and bad legal strategy, they provide him with a foil as well as an excuse. Populist battles with fancy universities, and confrontations with riots in the streets, do the same.

Fifth, events still matter. Harold Macmillan's now hoary insight—"Events, dear boy, events"—is as relevant now as it was in Britain in the late 1950s. Some events are predictable: the Gaza war is likely to end by next fall, and it remains possible that the Ukraine war will, too—which could help Trump if he's seen as having helped make peace without totally selling out Kyiv to Moscow. Other events—like the recent spate of pro-Palestinian terror attacks in the U.S., including a Molotov cocktail spree by a man who had illegally overstayed his visa under Biden—can arise without warning. Foreign crises can sometimes lead midterm voters to rally around the flag, as they did in 2002 and 1962. A Supreme Court vacancy, planned or unplanned, could rally the Republican base. And then there are the truly unknown unknowns.

It's still a long way to next November. The smart money is on a bad midterm for Republicans. But don't bet the farm just yet. ●

ARTICLES

A Cold War Between the Sexes



The gender gap has become a chasm

BY CAROLINE DOWNEY

At a recent college reunion, I rendezvoused with an old professor, a wise classical liberal who inspired me to pursue a career in journalism. After inquiring about me and my class, he mentioned that he had just celebrated his 43rd wedding anniversary with his wife, who happens to be a Democrat.

I thought, "Fat chance of that today."

For my generation, Gen Z, reaching such a milestone is hard to fathom, in large part because of the diverging politics of young men and women. In the past 25 years, the gender partisan gap has nearly doubled. Donald Trump turned a predictable rift into a gaping chasm: In the 18-to-29 cohort, he won 56 percent of men but only 40 percent of women. Young men have gradually been ditching the Democrats for the past decade, but they really fled in the last year, a postelection Public Religion Research Institute survey reports, with 38 percent of Gen Z men now more likely to identify as Republican versus 20 percent of Gen Z women.

The widening of the Gen Z partisan gender gap has coincided with the decline of marriage, which young men and women continue to postpone or forgo altogether. The Institute for Family Studies reports that while 85 percent of 25-year-old

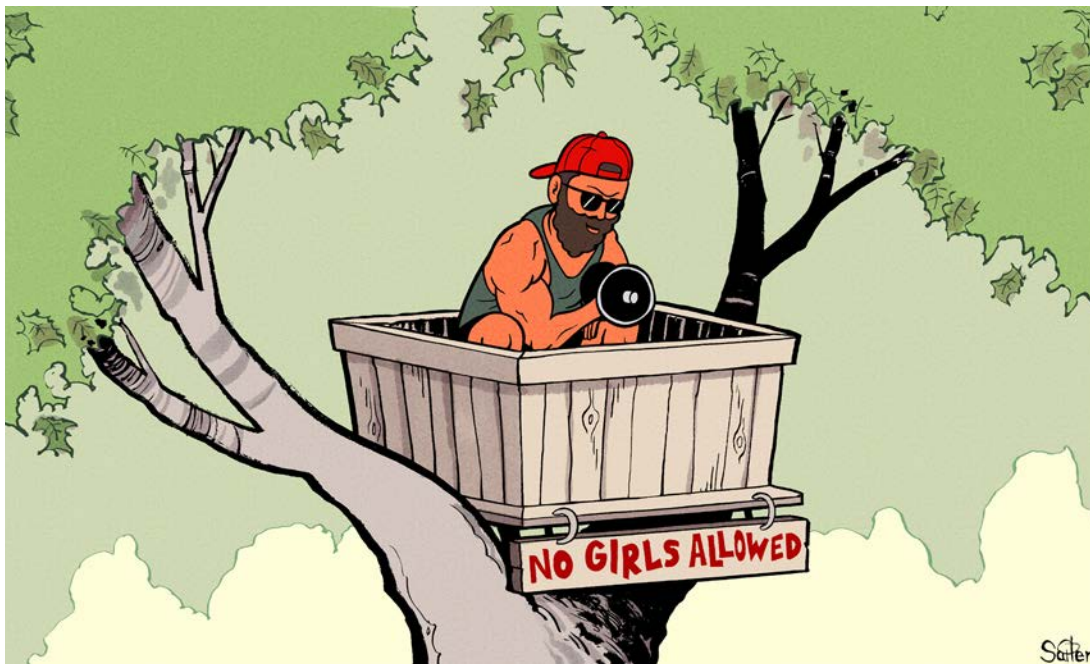
women and 75 percent of 25-year-old men were married in 1967, just 20 percent and 23 percent respectively are married today.

Unwed women without children have moved toward the Democrats for several years. Without marriage as a financial and emotional anchor, young women have started to view the state as a "backup husband," as author Louise Perry has suggested. While young women develop more trust in government as a replacement for a spouse's support, young men grow more antiestablishment.

Since the GOP victory in November, when young men turned out in droves for President Trump, Democrats have been scratching their heads over young men's disgust with their party. Tim Walz insists that he's the bro-whisperer. On the campaign trail, videos featured Kamala Harris's running mate gallivanting in camo gear and clumsily handling a shotgun during a pheasant hunt—cringe pandering to young men that proved unpersuasive. Progressive whippersnapper and Democratic National Committee upstart David Hogg is duking it out with veteran strategists over whether the old or new guard connects better with the next generation.

Democratic heavyweights have poured \$20 million into an effort, called "Speaking with American Men: A Strategic Plan" (or SAM), to influence the male psyche through ad placements in video games. But when they're not conducting political reconnaissance on young men, treating them like a dissident group in need of reprogramming rather than voters capable of rationality, they're in denial. Perhaps, they think, the problem is not their failure to resonate with young men; it's that they haven't offered them enough theatrics. Walz's son says that young men voted for Trump for the entertainment and sports-like camaraderie rather than for policy and a reprieve from cultural shaming.

Democrats are determined to crack the code of young men; it's crucial for their electoral viability. But they got themselves into this mess by ostracizing young men as the problem. Most recently, the left has decried men's interest in eating red meat, fitness, and other self-improvement activities as fringe pursuits. But to discover the roots of the disdain, we must go back to the 1970s.



Speaking of the leftward lurch in economics, Milton Friedman once remarked, “We’re all Keynesians now.”

For decades, the culture has said, “We’re all feminists now.”

Though it started with suffrage, equal opportunity, and other advancements of women’s rights, feminism lost the plot around the 1970s, when it told young men to repent for the sins of the patriarchy and then shelve themselves. By the mid-2010s, circa Me Too, mainstream feminism had devolved into an indictment of “toxic masculinity.” Over time, young men began to believe that feminism’s goal was not equality but their displacement and punishment. Today, only 43 percent of Gen Z men identify as feminists compared with 61 percent of Gen Z women, according to the Survey Center on American Life.

Over the years, colleges, awash in DEI and cancel culture, have become pressure cookers for young men. In 2024, young women out-enrolled young men in college by 2.4 million. Gender studies, which teaches that men have privilege to atone for, has become a popular discipline in academia, especially among young women.

President Obama’s Title IX witch hunts against college sexual misconduct dismantled due process for young men and fueled

their suspicion of women. While it was important to hold young men accountable for treating women like toys, that too often turned into falsely accusing them of rape. The ripple effects of the Me Too movement can be spotted today in bars across America, where young men no longer approach young women for a conversation, let alone to try to court them. I also speak anecdotally as someone with a twin brother who is romantically jaded in a way our parents were not at his age. Men and women of older generations, even when their political registrations differed, were cut from a similar cloth and shared a mutual respect that’s lost among today’s young adults.

For many young men, the disengagement from society started with negative experiences in K-12 and pediatricians’ offices. There, they’re often judged against girls despite their different nervous systems, leading to overdiagnosis of ADHD and priming them for resentment. Therapy culture and medicine have pathologized young men for being themselves. Tired of being the permanent fall guys, young men craved role models who legitimized their manhood.

Cue: Trump. Brash and bold, he was an archetype of audacity and success that many young men idolized. To be sure,

Trump’s arrival on the political scene polarized young men and women, with the gender gap passing ten points in 2017, the year he took office. While many young men saw a mouthpiece for their struggles and a chance of socioeconomic redemption, many young women saw only a philanderer, misogynist, and bigot. But, as with working-class anxiety in “flyover country,” Trump tapped into a discontent that Democrats had overlooked in a demographic they had long forsaken. The grievances of young men found an online home, spawning an entire content universe.

For the past few years, the “manosphere”—a spectrum of both productive and sinister male digital spaces and personalities—has given young men a refuge from scapegoating and shifted them rightward. On the destructive end, there’s Andrew Tate and personalities who lobby against monogamy, belittle women, and frame marriage as a trap for young men. On the constructive side, there’s Father Mike Schmitz, Jordan Peterson, and even personal finance guru Dave Ramsey, who urge men to be virtuous, responsible providers and protectors. Amid a Christian revival driven mainly by young men, a mini religious manosphere for social conservatives has emerged as well. ►

Where there's an online corner for right-leaning young men, there's a zone for left-leaning young women. That is: all mainstream female-focused entertainment. From the sex podcast *Call Her Daddy* to *Cosmopolitan* magazine, most pop culture spaces for young women reinforce "intersectionality" and "sex positivity." A few years ago, even the American Girl product line, known for its wholesome historical dolls and stories, introduced a book for young girls that included a transgender pride flag and a section promoting gender ideology. These are the symptoms of radical feminism, which most young women take for granted and scarcely challenge.

But many young women, who report higher rates of anxiety and depression than young men, are in therapy, according to scientific papers published by the National Institutes of Health. While mental health problems are common among Gen Z generally, young women are more likely to receive treatment, according to the CDC. Feminist therapy, rising in popularity, emphasizes to female patients that men are irrelevant and not worth the trouble. Social media abounds with young women who lament that they're dating narcissists.

The sexual revolution was launched to liberate women from their reproductive nature and unlock greater sexual experiences for both genders, but it has made young men and women view each other as disposable. While young women instinctively crave commitment as the price of sex, modern feminism forfeited that by offering up sex on a silver platter, so long as there's consent. Departing from courtship, many young adults engage in non-committal hookup culture made possible

by contraception and abortion—modern feminism's crown jewels.

And there's no doubt about it: Crossing the sexual Rubicon corrupted the mating rituals of young people. It killed romance and chivalry and replaced them with dehumanizing habits. For those who are older, it can be difficult to understand the dire straits of the Gen Z dating scene. Young men have no incentive to be gentlemanly—the licentious culture does not require it, and it might be misconstrued as sexist anyway.

A few years ago, my brother told me a story of how he struck up a conversation with a girl in a bar in New York City. After they exchanged numbers, he wished her well and said he'd be in touch. The girl proceeded to throw a fit because he wouldn't ask her to go home with him that night, a baffling scenario to anyone born before 1980.

In 2022, a Twitter account went viral for the tweet "Do married people watch gen z dating and feel like they caught the last chopper out of Nam?"

Dating for Gen Z is indeed like dancing in a minefield, where the last few of the traditionally minded without war stories or baggage try to find the other survivors. It's brutal to navigate this perverse sexual culture and the many souls broken by it. The majority learn the sad lingo that has come to characterize our nihilistic generation: *situationship*, *ghosting*, *benching*, *zombieing*, *cookie-jarring*.

Yes, many young men and women have indulged in the libertine zeitgeist. On the campaign trail, Democratic content creators placed crude get-out-the-vote notes at basketball games, above urinals, and in bars that essentially told

Gen Z men: *You are free to be reprobates under our regime.*

"Trump gives girls the ick. Vote Harris, Get Laid," one card read. Others said, "Republicans Want to Ban OnlyFans. Search Project 2025," and "Your Girlfriend Isn't Safe in Donald Trump's America. Abortion Bans Kill."

But it wasn't a compelling pitch to young men, since they aren't happy on pleasure island. They want meaning and purpose, someone to work and live for. Young women aren't happy either, most of all progressive women. Gen Z is far more likely to be single than any other generation. Young people are having less sex than their parents' and grandparents' generations did, according to the Association for Psychological Science. The sexual interactions they do share are often tainted by pornography and its violent, degrading trends such as choking. Dating apps and other technology have exacerbated the loss of dignity and have destroyed the hope for mutual care among young men and women.

Amid the chaos, some young men have become disciples of Andrew Tate or have disengaged from dating. Young men overall are bitter and disillusioned, but Trump's reelection has put a pep in their step, probably because of the rollback of DEI and gender ideology in America's public and private institutions. Indeed, young men may be the group that is most optimistic of all Americans about the next four years. According to a CBS News poll earlier this year, 60 percent of voters said they felt generally optimistic about the new administration, but that figure rose to 67 percent among under-30s.

Young women have doubled down on progressivism. As young men and women move further apart politically, it's not just the electoral math for both parties that becomes uncertain but the creation of families and therefore—though this may sound grandiose—the continuation of our civilization.

The right-wing activist and manosphere figure Charlie Kirk was once asked by a male student at a college event what to do about his girlfriend's having opposite political beliefs. "Do not marry this girl," Kirk responded. "Build a life with

For those who are older, it can be difficult to understand the dire straits of the Gen Z dating scene. Young men have no incentive to be gentlemanly—the licentious culture does not require it, and it might be misconstrued as sexist anyway.

someone where you have agreement on the macro issues.”

While Kirk is correct that interpolitical marriages, which might have worked among older generations, are going to be less successful now, he misses the fact that many young men don’t have a choice. Many feel that their options are to compromise their values or be lonely forever. For them, finding a woman with a conservative worldview is increasingly like finding a needle in a haystack. And until the Gen Z gender partisan gap is bridged, they’ll be searching for a while longer yet.

As a quip often attributed to Henry Kissinger (though he was probably not its originator) has it, “Nobody will ever win the battle of the sexes, because there’s just too much fraternizing with the enemy.”

It was a cynical quip, but it has turned out to be too optimistic. ●

ARTICLES

China and the American Campus



The Trump administration intends to clean up a corrupt relationship

BY JIMMY QUINN

Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s announcement on May 28 that the Trump administration intends to “aggressively revoke” visas held by Chinese students sent a shock wave through higher education.

With Rubio’s statement, the Trump administration staked out a commitment to fundamentally reorienting U.S. universities away from the status quo that has allowed Beijing to exploit the open nature of American society.

It’s a status quo that amounts to a cash cow for universities: large foreign gifts and the revenue that comes from the 277,000 students from China who studied in America last year (the vast majority of whom are paying full freight). In 2023, China was the largest foreign consumer of American education services, according to the Institute of International Education, at \$14 billion—a figure often cited by advocates of unfettered and unquestioned academic exchange between the U.S. and China.

Yet Rubio’s critics do not quite know what they are criticizing, since the State Department has rolled out few details about the new policy: It released only a 60-word press release promising that the U.S. would target “those with connections to the Chinese Communist Party or studying in critical fields.” As of early June, what the administration means by “forbidden” CCP connections remains unclear, though it has said that by “critical fields” it is primarily referring to those that are on the list of high-tech innovation-intensive sectors in Beijing’s Made in China 2025 plan for industrial rejuvenation.

These targeted measures are hardly “xenophobic” or “reminiscent of the Chinese Exclusion Act,” as Representative Judy Chu (D., Calif.) described Rubio’s statement. And the White House is certainly not embracing “paranoia” about China, as some other critics have contended, in similarly histrionic tones.

The good-faith critics of the nascent policy—that is, those who have not accused the White House of bigotry—have termed the announcement a fatal blow to U.S. scientific research and technological development. They have warned that it would drive prospective Chinese applicants away from American universities and cause Chinese researchers in STEM fields to leave the U.S. But while these naysayers are more focused on the policy implications, they share with the bad-faith critics a similarly premature assessment

of these prospective measures. There is not yet a single report that a visa has been revoked under the new policy; nor are there new details about the criteria that officials will use to implement it.

Given Rubio’s hawkish instincts toward China, and that a portion of the MAGA base and a few members of Congress want to deport all Chinese students, the scope of the final policy could be sweeping. But it doesn’t sound like the president intends to implement a generalized ban on students from China. In the Oval Office a week after Rubio’s announcement, President Trump said that America has the “honor” of hosting students from China, adding: “Chinese students are coming. No problem, no problem.”

In fact, the announcement may have been timed to serve the particular purpose of moving the ball forward on the president’s trade negotiations with China. By all accounts, including his own on Truth Social, Trump, after the trade talks in Geneva, had grown frustrated with Chinese intransigence on lifting export bans on critical minerals. Rubio’s visa-revocation announcement was followed a week later by a call between Trump and General Secretary Xi. If U.S. officials were hoping to catch Beijing’s attention with the Rubio statement, they succeeded. Party propaganda organs piped in outraged reactions across their numerous English-language social media channels, and the spokesperson at China’s foreign ministry called the new policy “fully unjustified.” (As this issue went to press, Trump confirmed this purpose, saying the U.S. would continue Chinese students’ access to universities as part of a deal struck with China on June 11.)

Whatever the specific contours of the updated visa policy that will follow Rubio’s announcement, though, what’s clear is that the crackdown it set in motion will continue. That short statement was tantamount to an official declaration that Washington plans to revoke accommodations for universities that have turned a blind eye to malign behaviors.

The most egregious of these is the repression that pro-Beijing partisans have inflicted on their Chinese classmates who have run afoul of CCP doctrine. The poster child of this variety of harassment ►

In Trump's Washington, higher education's pro-China advocates are clearly starting to lose the China fight in a meaningful, potentially irreversible way.

is Xiaolei Wu, a former student at Berklee College of Music in Boston who was convicted in early 2024 and sentenced to nine months in prison for cyberstalking and harassing another Chinese student who in the fall of 2022 had criticized Beijing's draconian Covid policies.

"Post more, I will chop your bastard hands off," Wu wrote in a group chat for Chinese students at the music conservatory. Wu's actions were the most egregious, but about 40 people joined in on the harassment. Wu was released early and sent back to China, apparently as part of a prisoner swap last year. The victim's friends told me that Berklee failed to protect Chinese nationals on campus who had criticized the CCP during this episode.

At Columbia's campus that fall, during a vigil for the victims of China's harsh "zero Covid" lockdown policy, a woman was punched in the face by an unidentified assailant in front of the university's Low Memorial Library. Wearing a mask for fear of China's retribution, the victim's friend testified before Congress about the assault: "No action was taken aside from a suggestion to seek 'mental health support.'"

These might seem to be merely individual incidents that erupted at a challenging moment for the Chinese diaspora, but the underlying factors that enable them and other instances of repression are present at nearly every major university in America: a Chinese Students and Scholars Association group that colludes with China's diplomatic corps, a university administration that leaps to embrace every left-wing social fad but fails to protect Chinese students who have run afoul of Beijing, and joint academic programs with Chinese institutions. Expelling students who advance the CCP's repression is as much about restoring America's

sovereignty on U.S. campuses as it is about ensuring the safety of their students.

Instead of mitigating their vulnerabilities to Chinese pressure, universities have lobbied the U.S. government against stricter rules for disclosing foreign gifts and embraced the CCP, in ways subtle and otherwise. "The role of China in the world is increasing and should increase," former Columbia President Lee Bollinger said in an interview with the *People's Daily* during a visit to Beijing in 2017. When prompted by the newspaper, which is the CCP's flagship propaganda outlet, he said of Xi's China: "I am detecting a level of optimism about the country that is quite striking."

In December 2024, one of his successors at Columbia, Katrina Armstrong, then the interim president, led an event at Low Memorial Library, steps from the 2022 assault, with Ronnie Chan; Chan is a wealthy Hong Kong real estate developer with an avowedly pro-Beijing perspective and ties to the CCP.

In perhaps the most glaring example this year, Harvard chose Yurong "Luan-na" Jiang, who graduated from the Harvard Kennedy School in May, to be its 2025 commencement speaker. According to the *Daily Caller*, Jiang is affiliated with a different CCP front, an environmental organization founded by a general in the People's Liberation Army. "Humanity rises and falls as one," she said, conveying the theme of her address: "our shared humanity." Some China watchers interpreted the phrase as a version of Xi's signature slogan, "community of common destiny for mankind." Nathan Law, the Hong Kong pro-democracy campaigner, rebuked her for such language.

It is not just the Ivy League that has questionable ties with Xi's regime. Max Baucus, President Obama's former envoy

to Beijing, uses his current perch at the University of Montana to send a delegation of students to China every year for an exchange program coordinated by a reputed Chinese propaganda front on whose board Chan sits.

Unlike Wu, Jiang, and the unidentified assailant at Columbia, most students from China have not publicly advanced Xi Jinping Thought or made life miserable for those who do not live according to it. But Rubio's announcement has been met with contempt from many in higher ed and the elite professional milieu. They see heightened measures to screen for students like Wu—and, accordingly, to crack down on the Beijing-tied campus organizations that enable them—as draconian abuses of power.

The dominance of that narrative, however, does not correspond to the political strength of the faction that's pushing it. In Trump's Washington, higher education's pro-China advocates are clearly starting to lose the China fight in a meaningful, potentially irreversible way—and not just because of the looming visa revocations.

House Republicans have been methodically investigating joint educational-exchange programs, with the aim of pressuring schools to shutter them. This tactic has worked in several cases so far. One of these, between UC Berkeley and Tsinghua University, was alleged to have facilitated the transfer of critical technologies. Berkeley cut off the partnership, and now the Department of Education is investigating.

In addition to tech transfer, there are other potential counterintelligence concerns that emanate from these programs, as illustrated by a recent incident in which five students at the University of Michigan were found taking photographs at the site of sensitive military exercises at Camp Grayling, Mich. They were enrolled in a joint degree program with Shanghai Jiao Tong University, another program that is now being unwound. Somewhere between their admission to that program and their arrival in the U.S., the visa vetting process failed.

What this all amounts to is an aggressive program to clean up the mistakes that universities have made in becoming

financially dependent on vast numbers of Chinese students. Universities have enriched themselves while recklessly turning American campuses into hunting grounds and open stores for the Chinese Communist Party. The architects of that corrupt system, not its opponents, deserve derision. ●

ARTICLES

Notes from Underground



How local heavy metal keeps live music alive

BY VAHAKEN MOURADIAN

Denver

Flyers led me to a dive on East Colfax. A stretch of central Denver where the cleanest storefront belongs to the Champagne Tiger, host of the city's "Most Luxurious Drag Brunch." Six local brews on tap. Their labels: hieroglyphic, alien-looking, Martian roulette. Pull a lever at random, Scotty, see if we get beamed up. At first sip I hear a familiar, sing-along-able chorus.

"Astro Zombies." It's played live by a Misfits cover band as a guy tries to slam-dance while wearing a banana costume. An LED sign implores, PLEASE DON'T DO COKE IN THE BATHROOM. I don't think this crowd is the sign-reading type. A golden retriever, stuffed in a T-shirt with the logo of a local skate punk band, leans against my leg, openly asserting a natural right to human affection. Everyone's coming out these days. Punk is fun and fast and

hooky. Devil-may-care. Until a skinhead joins the party: his dome inked in the front (SKINS) and the back (a solar cross), tagged like a bus stop billboard. Do white bootlaces mean anything? They mean it's time to get off Colfax. Besides, a fellow says there's another, must-see gig. "Blackened doom metal," he explains, twiddling the bicycle chain around his neck: "*eyvant-gart* stuff." Seems to know what he's talking about. Close my tab.

Small music venues are big in this city. They're big in all big cities. The biggest American cities have more than ten times as many small music venues as movie theaters. You're several times more likely to wander into an ambient deathcore jam session than into a Greek Orthodox liturgy. Extreme music, too, is cathartic and intimate: made for close quarters. Hold onto the camaraderie of the crowd. Let the city's siren symphonies and lawn mower librettos be cleansed from your aural palette. These are uneasy times for Big Beats and for the hit-single-industrial complex. So what? Metal hasn't been mainstream since Mötley Crüe sounded good, last rumored to have been the case around 1989. Spotify and Instagram favor the self: self-production and self-publication and self-promotion. Also, experimentation, genre-bending, and niche fandom. In brief: small DIY gigs are back. And metalheads have always been there.

The bouncer at Hi-Dive, in Denver's historic Baker neighborhood, checks my

ID and hands me a rainbow wristband. No, thank you: I'm not religious. Barstools are working overtime to prop up large dudes who prop up small businessmen who prop up the local metal scene. Bright stickers on the bar top trample one another for your attention: "Johnny Cash was woke," "I ain't going to f***ing El Salvador," "TRUMP is a clear and present danger," "Make a ska album, you coward." Hey, friend, give me a break. I expected politics on Colfax. Not *here*. Punk is bare, brief, worldly. It has about two and a half minutes to speak its mind, to give it to you straight. Was punk born from our need to sing the punchy political slogans of the Seventies? Or did it reduce that decade's politics to punchy slogans? Both: a Darwinian adaptation. If the leadership of the Democratic Socialists of America was worth its salt, it'd have convinced the "Squad" to drop a riot grrrrl album by now. Bumper-sticker lyrics gain in musicality what they lack in substance. (And substances associated with, say, the Sex Pistols weren't lyrical.) The mood at Hi-Dive is different. Metal can be sober, contemplative, geeky. Kelly Schilling, who's in tonight's prime slot, orders only ice water before set time but clinks glasses with me anyway. "Enjoy the show."

I buy a beer for the only, lonely guy who's not in uniform (no leather, no denim, no battle vest, not even a local-band-logo T-shirt). The opening act, on tour from Philadelphia, is called Witching. ►



Deep grooves, fuzzy bluesy riffs, and a whiff of the psychedelic. It trudges on, meandering, unhurried. It slows down to a slurry; picks up with unexpected accents. Guitars groan, tuned down to produce baritone bellows.

A sonic brute. Its frontwoman has an explosive stage presence; inhuman vocals, produced by the false cords and controlled by a stalwart diaphragm. We're all in the blast radius. Nonuniform Guy, who looked as though he had intended to see a pop country number and drifted into this club on the wrong night, says he had intended to see a pop country number and drifted into this club on the wrong night. I buy him another beer. As does a Saudi girl (in top-notch uniform and bilateral nose rings chained with delicate gold).

You wouldn't expect doom metal to have bloomed under the Colorado sun. It's a heavy, heady sound as old as Black Sabbath, who in Birmingham (Old England) in the winter of 1970 awakened ancient demons by playing three notes in a certain sorcerous order. Tony Iommi, the chief composer, was an evil Beatle. New England took a cue. The American bands Pentagram, the Obsessed, and Internal Void defined the "Maryland doom sound": gritty and lo-fi. It spread naturally in the Eighties and Nineties around the hexed capital swamp. Art imitates climate. My neck of the woods was wreathed with a different kind of growth. Get enough creative types with a nose for weed within headbanging distance of each other and you have what's sometimes called "stoner metal." Doom's doppelgänger. Deep grooves, fuzzy bluesy riffs, and a whiff of the psychedelic. It trudges on, meandering, unhurried. It slows down to a slurry; picks up with unexpected accents. Guitars groan, tuned down to produce baritone bellows. If punk is a rush, stoner-doom is a trip. As close a relation to punk as the 17th-century Bohemian violinist Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber is to Justin Bieber.

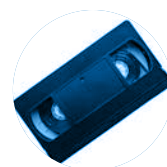
Dreadnought, the headlining quintet, is about to end a weeklong West Coast tour in its hometown. Kelly Schilling rises like the moon, side-lit against the black backdrop of the stage. A chaos agent in chiaroscuro. She's a madwoman. Imagine if Adele had spent a formative summer in juvie for resisting arrest in Salem and then studied applied mathematics. She has an iron larynx and a seven-string Gibson. In "Worlds Break," her clean singing voice slides frictionlessly into a false-cord rasp, hypnotic and wicked. The interlude in "Gears of Violent Endurance" is polyphonic, syncopated, a cappella. A Gaelic incantation. Where did *that* come from? Nonuniform Guy and Saudi Girl, half-leaning against the bar, are now swaying back and forth as if on invisible rocking chairs.

"Transpiration" is doom and jazz. Some sections sound as though Deep Purple had gone through a deep blue period with Yanni on keys and session guitar by Boz Scaggs in the midst of an anaphylactic shock. Did I imagine that the drummer, halfway through the eleven-minute track, produced a saxophone? The song crescendoes to a *nasty* beat. A few experiences like this, and you too would jump in a circle pit. Already you get a sense of what those in a moshing trance must feel. It's the opposite of claustrophobia: the draw of the heaving enclosure. You can catch household names such as Metallica and Pantera at the Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara or the Empower Field in Denver or the NRG Stadium in Houston or Villa Park in Birmingham (the site, this summer, of Black Sabbath's final performance). But the stadium concert is a spectator sport. Local metal shows are full contact.

It strikes me like static: the best views in the city are underground. This kind of music is live in a way typical concerts typically are not. It's live as a wire. As an electric current by which you're temporarily seized and animated. Your vision is a mosaic of flickering faces-flashes-shadows-highlights. No wonder some of us chronophobes, who wallow in the finitude of time, derive comfort from extreme music. Its fullness seems to arrest the clock. It affords the hope that we might just be able to pull off a life that sounds like this: complexly layered and vigorous and grand. So, here we are, in some industrial prefab or warehouse that might soon be bought by Star Buds and turned into a commercial weed packaging center. For now, these are the darkened labs of mad maestros. ●

ARTICLES

The Lost Tapes



What we gave up when we stopped making home movies

BY JUDSON BERGER

I came to a jarring realization sometime last year. Thumbing through family videos on my iPhone, which really reside not *on* my iPhone but inside an ethereal cabinet whose key is kept in Cupertino, I grasped that I possess only several-second clips of our son's march through childhood.

There he is crawling clumsily. There he is laughing at my funny noises. Walking. Reading. Duckpin bowling. Telling a joke.

**It's fun to play the clips on our phones.
But it's an *event* to cue up a home video
and watch it with others.**

Opening birthday presents. Reciting lines at his school play.

These are treasures. But what I don't have—surely like many other parents—is anything approaching a home movie with my kid. Something, if not feature-length, long enough to sit down and really *watch*. With this realization came another: The smartphone is wiping out an entire genre of family record-making.

It's not just that the medium changed, the videos we keep of our growing families moving from tapes to SD cards and hard drives to cloud storage. The change in format, and device, dramatically changed how we record, what we record, and for how long we record it.

When I was a kid, in the '80s and '90s, my dad shot home videos on the camcorder with a documentarian's commitment. The holiday-season visits to extended family in Ohio are on tape, still stored in a drawer in my parents' basement. So, too, are the summer camping trips, usually in Northeastern locales with similar flora as a backdrop. We recorded, for reasons lost to history, a lengthy video of the addition being built on our house in New Jersey. Bigger-deal vacations merited, notoriously, hours of footage rarely edited down to something digestible. These events, our childhood and all that was awkward and dated and beautiful about it, will be archived for as long as the physical tapes last, playable for as long as the devices function to play them.

Of course, it's considerably easier to record these kinds of experiences now. But the smartphone as a tool encourages the capture of discrete, shareable snippets over the creation of something more coherent and meaningful. Because the device typically starts a new file each

time we hit record, without extra editing there's little continuity in the social-ready footage we collect. It's isolated moments. The bike ride. The fun run. The silly song. In the modern age, those clips are all many of us have in our virtual basement drawer.

And what a shame that is.

A camcorder, enthusiasts will recall, encourages a very different product. The tape itself beckoned the shooter to use it up, as one would a roll of film, and so on every family trip, for every school concert or graduation that had to be memorialized, we would create one long, continuous record of the Historic Event. Interviews would be conducted, narration provided. Each had a beginning and an end, sometimes with a cool fade. The product, then, was something like a movie, rough edges and all, hence the name. We didn't make a conscious, collective decision to stop producing home movies. Our attention was diverted. Only in writing this piece did I recollect that the last one I made was in 2008—one year after the year of the iPhone. Philip Klein wrote in the last issue of this magazine about the slow death of moviegoing; add home moviemaking to the list of casualties from technological shifts driving consumer habits.

There is one piece of positive news for the trusted accessory of 1980s vacations: The rise of "content creators" has fueled renewed demand for camcorders (digital, of course). According to Straits Research, the international market size for digital camcorders was valued at \$2.5 billion in 2024 and estimated to hit \$4.56 billion by 2033. While the industry competes, perhaps hopelessly, against the convenience and advanced camera tech

of smartphones, a recent report from the market research firm said that the popularity of social media platforms and video content creation is driving camcorder sales. America leads the market, "with a growing number of content creators and increasing adoption of live-streaming platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, and Facebook Live."

But this points to filming more for the creation of a commodity than for the preservation of a memory. With the exception of, say, wedding videography, camcorders generally are not being used in 2025 to record scenes of family life for posterity.

In a piece for the *New York Times* 15 years ago, the tech writer David Pogue observed the broader and inexorable shift away from consumer videotape, a vision that by now has been fully realized. In transferring his own tapes to a hard drive in anticipation, he put his finger on what was special about watching the home movie: "My children shriek with glee at the old haircuts, the cute things they said when they were toddlers, the funny dances they used to do around the house. 'Oh, I remember that!' my wife and I keep shouting."

It's fun to play the clips on our phones. But it's an *event* to cue up a home video and watch it with others. Years ago, after my maternal grandfather died, we were hours into a lightly intoxicated gathering at our relatives' place outside Tampa when my uncle dug up what today would be immediately recognized as kompromat: a feature-length film, showing the now-adult cousins competing in what our elders had conceived to be the "Beach Olympics," carried out on a Lake Erie shoreline in the summer of 1994. Up-roariously embarrassing, the home movie contained a succession of increasingly absurd competitions (rock-skipping, raft-racing, sandcastle-destroying) while my grandfather, mother, and aunts and uncles provided commentary, impressions, and Gilda Radner references that went unappreciated by us at the time. Grandpa's wit and unflappably deadpan delivery carried the cast—whom we heckled across time—and helped to preserve one grainy Ohio afternoon as our lasting ►

memory of him. Not the more difficult final period of his life, but the golden age, right there on TV, of a vibrant, outrageously funny man with all the time and patience in the world for his grandkids trying so hard and failing to be as funny as he was.

Could we have captured the same essence in a 45-second iPhone clip? No. Nor would we have sat around the living room television to watch it.

Each generation has its medium for record-making, it must be said. The earliest known voice recordings (sorry, Edison), from around 1860, include 20 seconds of a French folk song captured on a phonograph. This was more a glimmer of what was possible than the start of a rapid evolution in consumer recording technology; in the case of “Au clair de la lune,” it took 148 years for audio historians to discover and actually play it back. But over time, the evolution did happen. Kodak founder George Eastman put his first camera to market in 1888. Polaroid came out with an instant version in 1948. Sony began marketing consumer camcorders in 1983.

To each his own. My dad kept slides, including a collection of his early cross-country trips. When I did my first such tour, during a college winter break, I documented those memorable weeks on a clunky camcorder and gave copies to my traveling buddies. I’m sure the slides meant as much to my dad as my tapes did to me. This is to say: Maybe kids growing up today will find similar value in and sentimental attachment to the smartphone clips (or, more likely, AI-generated simulacra of moments they forgot to record). In one small sign of continuity, the hit show that first tapped into our obsession, *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, still runs today—though even in the 1990s, what the show really pioneered was the promotion of viral clips.

Back to those cross-country tapes: I did lose them, eventually. A house fire in 2012 wiped out most of our home videos. Stipulated, this never would have happened had they been stored on the cloud. But it turned out that, in a primitive sense, I had the data backed

up: I later discovered a stash of original Hi8 cassettes in an old leather case. A breakthrough. The cross-country videos weren’t among them, but, critically, our lost wedding video was, along with a home movie of the trip to India where I had proposed. I quickly imported them to VHS.

One day, I’ll sit our son down to watch them, and he can giggle at our clothing and haircuts and how young and silly we were. But—and this is the part that gets me—he won’t be on any of the tapes. And the curse of new tech is that we know what it’s taken from us, but the convenience is too overpowering for us to take it back. Our family is going to the U.K. later this summer. Will I fish out the camcorder and record a proper video? Of course not, because I can’t fit that in my pocket, or check email and use OpenTable on it. My wife would kill me, besides, for lugging it around. But the arguments about the very device *would* make for great footage, something precious to revisit in a couple decades—the kind of moment I’d never bother to record on a dumb smartphone. ●

ARTICLES

The Age of Feelings



Recovering the truth

BY ROBERT P. GEORGE

Some historians divide the epochs into the “age of this” and the “age of that.” And so we are sometimes told that the

medieval period, at least in Europe, was the Age of Faith. The general idea is that in that era the touchstone of truth was conformity to religious doctrines. Now, this is certainly an oversimplification, at least to the extent that it suggests that the medievals—especially the great Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers of that period—did not hold natural reason and the power of human intellect in high esteem. They certainly did. Still, it is not flatly false.

Faith mattered to the people of the Middle Ages. The great thinkers of the era—Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Sina, Anselm of Canterbury, Maimonides, just to name a few particularly influential ones—were people of faith. They believed (as I myself believe) that there is harmony, rather than conflict or even tension, between faith and reason, and that faith can and should be reasoned and reasonable. What’s more, they regarded the apparent incompatibility of a proposition with the doctrines of their faith as indicating a problem with the proposition, just as they regarded a proposition’s apparent incompatibility with a principle of logic or other norm of rationality as indicating a problem with the proposition.

Then we are sometimes told that the Enlightenment period was the Age of Reason (or the Age of Science). The idea here is that in that era the touchstone of truth was conformity to what reason establishes or confirms. This, too, of course, is an oversimplification, at least insofar as it suggests that people in the period of the Enlightenment (or, better, the period of the various European and British Enlightenments) were all strict rationalists who saw no legitimate role for faith in the quest for truth. Still, the idea of the period of the Enlightenments as an Age of Reason is not flatly false. Even the religiously observant among the great thinkers of the era placed an extremely high premium on rational inquiry, deliberation, and judgment in every domain of knowledge, including the theological.

Well, if the medieval period was, at least in some meaningful sense, the Age of Faith and the Enlightenment era was

It is incumbent upon all of us to resist the temptation—and the social pressure—to say that there is only ‘my’ truth and ‘your’ truth and no such thing as *the* truth.

the Age of Reason, what should be said of our own time? How might we label our age? My answer is that we are living in the Age of Feeling—and of Feelings. A great many people today have come to suppose that the touchstone of truth is not faith or reason (or, as I myself believe, faith and reason) but rather feeling and feelings.

Because feelings are subjective, what this development has produced is a widespread subjectivism or relativism. But to say *that* is itself to oversimplify and potentially mislead. Things are more complicated. That is because most people today do not believe that their personal values and convictions, though the products of feeling, are subjective or relative. They believe, or are at least prepared to act on the belief, that those convictions are, in some sense, objectively true. And not only that, in practice many people treat their beliefs as *infallibly* true and thus treat their feelings as if they are infallible sources of truth. And so, we witness the spectacle of many people embracing a fierce moral absolutism based on beliefs that are the products of nothing more than subjective feelings. It is this aggressive—and, let me add, rationally indefensible and dangerous—absolutism that undergirds people’s willingness to toss out basic civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, and to join “cancellation” mobs determined to ruin the reputations and destroy the careers and lives of people whose ideas they regard, often quite absurdly, as “hateful” and “harmful.”

The antidote to all this is a renewed commitment to getting at the truth of things—especially the great moral and

political questions that divide and vex our fractured society. *The* truth, not “my” truth or “your” truth—because, contrary to what many influential voices in our culture, politics, and even our institutions of higher education would have you believe, the truth about even the most controversial matters can be objectively known and cannot be altered by one’s subjective feelings or “lived experiences.” Indeed, one’s acknowledgment of truth’s objectivity is essential if one is to be what we should all strive to be, namely, committed truth seekers and courageous truth speakers. From the morality of intentional killing and the meaning of marriage to more abstract philosophical and theological propositions, there are right and wrong answers to these questions.

It is incumbent upon all of us to resist the temptation—and the social pressure—to say that there is only “my” truth and “your” truth and no such thing as *the* truth. Moral subjectivism, though self-refuting (the proposition that there is only “my” truth and “your” truth and no objective truth is itself asserted as not merely “my” or “your” truth but *the* truth, whether or not you or I like or accept it), is not something that people try to reason or argue their way to these days; rather it functions as an unspoken, and ordinarily unnoticed, premise of the Age of Feeling. In my view, moral subjectivism is a direct impediment to earnest and honest truth-seeking, whether by persons or institutions. My own academic home, Princeton University, despite being a non-sectarian institution, rightly apprehends truth’s objectivity in its recognition, within its principles of general conduct and

regulations, that the central purpose of the university—its telos—is the “pursuit of truth.”

Now, none of this takes away from the fact that truth-seeking is a collaborative enterprise. That’s in no small part because all of us are frail, fallen, fallible human beings. Any of us can be wrong, and all of us are wrong sometimes. And we can be, and sometimes are, wrong not only about the comparatively minor, trivial, superficial things of life but also about the big, important things: human nature, the human good, human rights, human dignity, human destiny.

By challenging others and by allowing others to challenge us, especially on the big issues, we can deepen our understanding, correct errors, and get nearer to the fullness of truth. Of course, progress is not inevitable. Decline can happen. What were once securely held truths can be abandoned or displaced. But the proper response to the possibility of decline is not to insulate one’s ideas and beliefs, or the dominant ideas and beliefs of some group or of a certain time and place, from challenge and criticism. That is the straight road to obscurantism, dogmatism, tribalism, and groupthink. Don’t go there—we must not become like the evil we deplore.

The free exchange or marketplace of ideas, supported by principles of freedom of thought, inquiry, and discussion, cannot guarantee the attainment of truth or the avoidance of error. In this vale of tears, nothing can give us such a guarantee. Intellectual freedom, open inquiry, robust civil discourse, and openness to genuine dialogue with people who see things very differently from the ways we ourselves see them nevertheless provide our best shot at getting to the truth. We should tolerate—and in a truth-seeking spirit engage—ideas we think are wrong, even badly, indeed tragically, wrong. And we should do that, not because there is no truth, but precisely because the free exchange of ideas gives us the best shot at getting to the truth, deepening our knowledge and understanding of truth, and achieving that rarest and most precious of all categories of truth, namely, *wisdom*. ●

IN SEARCH OF NORMALCY

What the two parties aren't giving America

By Charles C. W. Cooke



Before I lodge the complaint that is currently burning a hole in my pocket, I wish to make one thing clear to those who might add a ghostly *ergo* to its gist: that, for all my sins and foibles, and despite the squishy mood of the case I'm about to offer up, I am not—and never will be—one of *them*.

You know the type to which I refer: that guy at the bar or cookout or watercooler who believes that the current configuration of our politics is wholly irrational, and that, if it were only to be replaced with the alternative that he has cleverly sketched out, we would swiftly be ushered into a Better America. I am, as I shall soon relate, profoundly irritated by the conduct of the two parties that dominate our constitutional system. But this irritation by no means implies an enthusiasm for the arrival of a bloodless “third way.” I am not an opponent of America’s two-party system—which I think is probably inevitable. I do not think that abolishing the Democratic or Republican Party would improve our situation. I do not favor proportional representation, ranked-choice voting, or the abolition of the Senate or the Electoral College. I do not romanticize independent voters. I do not believe moderation to be a virtue per se. I do not yearn for some fabled lost era of comity and cooperation. And I am not, Lord help me, a fan of the epicene No Labels movement, which, in its typical form, is less an attempt to protect principle from partisanship than an experiment in abandoning conviction altogether.

With that out of the way, we can now move on to the point—which is that, at present, both of America’s major parties are feckless, impatient, cliquy, myopic, rabid, and suicidal, and that, in large part, these defects are the direct result of the failings of their leaders and tastemakers, who have no useful conception of history and no earthly clue as to what normal Americans are actually *like*. In recent years, a friend of mine has taken to suggesting ruefully that if either the Republicans or the Democrats were simply to stop being so “weird,” they would dominate elections for 30 years. That, I suspect, is an overstatement. But the core observation is obviously correct. As much as anything else, America’s swing voters are motivated in their voting habits by the extent to which the figures on offer are deemed *peculiar*. Sometimes, that peculiarity is attributable to ideology or philosophy, but, just as often, it flows from affect, rhetoric, attitude, or the sense that something ineffable is just *off*. It is no exaggeration to suggest that, over the last decade, the rise and fall of the two parties’ fortunes have been inextricable from the question of which was seen as the more bizarre. In 2022, the Republicans’ decision to nominate a cadre of creeps cost them their chance at the Senate majority and a larger margin in the House. In 2024, the Democrats’ selection of Kamala Harris made Donald Trump seem normal by comparison. Such matters can be overdetermined, but the elevation of the kooky over the commonplace has cost Republicans in Arizona and Georgia, and cost Democrats in Wisconsin, Florida, and Texas. Historically, the definition of a political party was an institution that sought to acquire power. In the contemporary era, that aim has often been subordinated to a host of other concerns. The results, thus far, have been poor.

It is common nowadays to hear commentators of all stripes declare that the country’s deep political divisions do not, in fact, exist. When presented by the devotees of either of the two parties, this notion reflects self-interested wishful thinking: If only the Democrats or the Republicans would *go away*, the conceit runs, then the intellectual energy that is being channeled through them would disappear, too, and the surviving faction would be unopposed. When presented by the politically

homeless, this notion reflects the belief that the country is full of sober moderates, whose sensible prescriptions are being continually thwarted by an illegitimate duopoly that is sustained by nefarious means. But neither of these views is true. The two parties are *expressions* of our preexisting divisions rather than the drivers of them, while the majority of the persistent problems within our politics—our endlessly rising debt, our schizophrenic foreign policy, our inability to reform our immigration system, and so forth—are the products of our incoherent public sentiments being channeled not inadequately but too well. It would certainly be nice if there existed a silent majority that had both a systematic agenda and a tenacious enthusiasm for its enactment, but, alas, there does not. Instead, we have a polity that wants low taxes *and* high spending, that wants a strong America *and* an isolationist America, and that wants mass deportations *and* to be a nation that welcomes immigrants. And so, this being a democratic republic, that is exactly what the people get.

What, then, is the problem? If the two parties are indeed maintained organically—and if the great middle is not being ignored—then, surely, people ought to be happier than they are with the status quo?

Well, yes—and no. Yes, in that life in the United States is far, far better than one might imagine if one were to listen to the routine catastrophizing of our more vocal politicians. No, in that, though life is pretty good, our politics is currently dominated by strange and maladjusted zealots who treat public service as if it were a sport, and who engage with each and every problem that arises as if its being resolved on their precise terms were necessary for the survival of the republic. I can tell that, merely by writing these words in this tone of voice, I am inviting all manner of hyperbolic condemnations to rain down on me. How can I possibly be so CALM, when we are in such a CRISIS, and everything is so ALARMING? Do I not know WHAT TIME IT IS? Do I not comprehend WHERE WE ARE? Is it not obvious to me that if the current administration does not succeed in EVERY ONE OF ITS GOALS—or, alternatively, if it is not THWARTED IN EVERY ONE OF ITS GOALS—the country as we have known it is FINISHED? Oughtn’t I to GET OFF THE STAGE and let the people who understand the STAKES take over?

That is not satire. It really is how contemporary American politics looks to the average observer: Frenetic, unyielding, angry, eschatological, and performed in all caps. Naturally, there are a great number of important questions facing the country—questions that voters ought to take seriously. But those questions ought to be posed and addressed within the general ►

understanding that the United States is the most stable, dynamic, prosperous, and free nation in the history of the world. Instead, in Washington, D.C., and beyond, we have what appears to the average citizen to be a rolling Battle of the Somme—with the same volume of bombardment and the same rates of attrition irrespective of how much land is at stake. Conducted properly, quotidian politics should be varied—more like a Beethoven symphony than a maxed-out album of death metal. If, instead, every last minute is filled with *prestissimo con forza* activity, the audience will soon plug its ears.

I do not intend to lionize median voters, or to pretend that they possess special insight into our national affairs—which, usually, they do not. But I *do* think that it matters that, seen through the eyes of the rank-and-file members of our democracy, most of our political actors seem absolutely *bonkers*. Take a look at the most engaged groups in our republic—the Trump acolytes, the Bernie fans, the #Resistance, the alt-righters, the wokesters—and compare them with the couple that lives next door to you. Imagine members of one

of those groups meeting your neighbors, and having even a cursory conversation about politics. The Trump acolytes would be obliged to explain why it is a good thing that the president marked this year's Memorial Day with a message that began, "HAPPY MEMORIAL DAY TO ALL, INCLUDING THE SCUM THAT SPENT THE LAST FOUR YEARS TRYING TO DESTROY OUR COUN-

TRY"; the Bernie fans would be required to expound upon the evils of American "oligarchy" and to lament the many ills that have resulted from there being too many brands of deodorant in American stores; the #Resistance types would be compelled to utter a series of diatribes against Trump ("Drumpf") and his legion of "MAGAts," who have brought us to the very edge of banning women from existing and turning the United States into the Third Reich; and, while (sometimes) coming at the issue from different sides, both the alt-righters and the wokesters would proceed from the assumption that the immutable characteristics of each person in the room were of endless fascination to everyone else, and that, if anything went wrong, it was probably the fault of the Jews.

Your neighbors? They'd likely be completely and utterly baffled by the spectacle—not because they are completely uninterested in politics, but because the vehemence with which these ideas were being expressed, along with the unashamedly totalitarian scope of their implications, would be confusing and alarming in

equal measure. Add in the outlandish lingo that would inevitably be on display—"cuck," "genocide," "red-pilled," "elevating narratives," "based," "late-stage capitalism," "invasion," "BIPOC"—and it would be a bloody miracle if nobody in the room had a stroke.

Given that normal people dramatically outnumber fanatics, one might assume that, in any contest between your neighbors and their tormenters, your neighbors would win every time. Unfortunately, however, there is a significant advantage to being a fanatic who subordinates everything else to his political goals. Fanatics *show up*. They join. They agitate, proselytize, and harangue. Fanatics go to meetings, they donate money, they knock on doors, and—crucially—they vote in primaries. In theory, primary elections are a mechanism by which informed citizens choose candidates who they think will broadly represent the party *and* have the best shot at winning a general election. In practice, though, this outcome is increasingly rare. Regardless of whether they are on the left or the right, average Americans tend to be interested in achieving the same ends: They want a booming economy, good schools, safe streets, affordable health care, and a stable world. Fanatics, by contrast, have other aims in mind—aims such as "owning the libs," or "advancing the equity agenda," or ensuring that a figure from a slightly different part of the coalition is blocked from further advancement.

It was fanaticism that led the Arizona Republican Party to nominate Kari Lake for the

Senate, even *after* she had lost a gubernatorial race, and *after* it had become obvious to anyone with eyes that she was unelectable statewide. It was fanaticism that pushed the Democratic Party to allow its entire political agenda to be hijacked by a bunch of fringe interest groups who wished to abolish the police, outlaw private health insurance, and allow men to compete in women's sports. It was fanaticism that led the Biden administration to effectively open the southern border despite knowing that his most likely opponent in 2024 was Donald Trump, and fanaticism that led the Trump administration to begin fixing that issue with a deliberate and unpopular violation of the law. It was fanaticism that led Joe Biden to start off his presidency with a promise to completely remake the economy of the United States, and it was fanaticism that led Donald Trump to commence his second presidency with an attempt to unilaterally rearrange world trade. None of these decisions made any sense, and none of them would have been made by a leader whose party was interested in retaining the support of the political middle. In all cases, the protagonists' assumptions were the same: that, because the other team was so toxic, they could get away with anything.

They didn't, of course. Kari Lake lost in 2022 and 2024; the Democrats won the presidency narrowly in 2020, lost the House in 2022,

Seen through the eyes of the rank-and-file members of our democracy, most of our political actors seem absolutely *bonkers*.

and lost everything in 2024; Biden's spending spree caused the worst inflation in four decades, while his border policy put Trump back in the White House; and public opinion forced Trump to back off his tariff agenda. Because American politics is intrinsically cyclical, there will always be some room for our political parties to eschew responsibility and simply wait for their opponents to screw up. But the degree to which this has become the default mode of operation is absurd. Between 1896 and 2016, there was only one presidential election in which partisan control shifted after just a single term. Since 2016, we have had two. This, I'd venture, is no accident. The parties have given up on being popular, and the public, which is more discerning than is believed, has responded appropriately to the abdication.

It would be nice if there were One Weird Trick that could narrow the gap between the fanatics and the normies, rid the two parties of their self-destructive attitudes, and lower the volume in our politics as a result. But there is not. Ultimately, this problem will be solved by a rebellion of the voters, not by tweaking our constitutional order, tossing a bloodless third party into the mix, or fetishizing bipartisanship. That a handful of activists in each party enjoys such remarkable influence is regrettable, but it is the natural result of the choices that have been made by everyone else. A Republican Party in which more Americans participate would be a Republican Party that does not nominate Herschel Walker, Tudor Dixon, Don Bolduc, Doug Mastriano, or Dr. Oz. A Democratic Party in which more Americans participate would be a Democratic Party whose presidential candidate is not tied down by on-camera promises to completely nationalize the health-care system, usher in reparations, prohibit fracking, ban the most popular rifle in America via executive order, and make taxpayers fund sex-change operations for prisoners. As a general matter, I have a great deal of sympathy for the tens of millions of Americans who look at the leading lights within our roiling national debate and gag in horror and disgust. But, plucky little realist that I am, I also want them to understand that, if they are tired of hearing the discordant, irritating, insistent tunes that now pass for our contemporary politics, they're going to have to get busy writing their own. ●

MARGARET THATCHER IS HAVING A MOMENT

The mummy returns for her centenary

by John O'Sullivan

Speaking at a Conservative Party election rally at Plymouth in May 2001, almost exactly ten years after her defenestration from the party's leadership and premiership, Margaret (by then Lady) Thatcher addressed the cheering Tory faithful in confidential terms: "I was told beforehand that my arrival was unscheduled, but on my way here I passed a local cinema and it turns out that you were expecting me after all."

"The [cinema] billboard read *The Mummy Returns*."

It was a joke with sly implications. She was endorsing the common judgment that her political murder of ten years before had been a case of matricide. She had been killed in broad daylight by "Thatcher's children," whom she had raised to the cabinet, with a stake driven through her heart (contrary to rumors that she didn't have one), and buried at the crossroads at dead of night, a mixture of salt and garlic scattered over her grave. Yet now, not only had she risen from that grave, but before arriving in Plymouth, she showed she had lost none of her taste for blood—sorry, controversy—by venturing on a sharp criticism of multiculturalism.

"A multicultural society will never be a united society," she had said in the election campaign, to the consternation of Tory modernizers who wanted the party to disown her remarks. William Hague, then Tory leader, refused to do so yet managed not to provoke hostile reactions. As *The Guardian* lamented seven years later, arch-modernizer David Cameron had since reiterated her criticism of multiculturalism to zero public outrage. But the main message of her arch little joke was that the mummy was politically immortal: she had the power not only to rise again but also to kill again—and perhaps other mystical powers too.

As good as her word, the mummy rose again in the first quarter of this year, called forth from the vasty deep by desperate Tories hoping she could perform a double miracle—raise not only herself but also the party from the dead—on the pretext of celebrating her 100th birthday.

Conveniently enough, Margaret Thatcher, born in October 1925, left them a second significant anniversary to celebrate this year, and doubtless more if the Tories can unearth them. The second is the 50th anniversary of her defeat of Edward Heath in the first round of the Tory leadership contest on February 4, 1975.

She didn't become Tory leader until February 11, when she was elected handsomely over four other contenders in the second round. But the first round was the decisive one. Tories then felt chivalrously that they couldn't deny the girl the reward of her courage in taking on the party ►

One very clear lesson from Thatcher's career is the vital importance of preparation—or, to put it in slightly different language, of intellectual investment in formulating policy.

establishment. Tories today rightly sense that her first-round success marked a decisive victory for her brand of conservatism over the anti-traditional managerial style of Heath's corporate conservatism—"Heathco" to the satirical magazine *Private Eye*—and they have resolved to celebrate it as a major moment in Tory history.

They have been doing so in nostalgic events, which bring together three interesting and overlapping but distinct groups: the surviving veterans of the three Thatcher administrations (1979–90), Tory organizations that have special links to her legacy, such as right-wing women's groups, and those active politicians and apparatchiks who believe that Thatcherism must be part of any conservative phoenix that rises from the ashes of the last election and—just as important—is then able to fly.

The Thatcher centenary began with three celebrations blending policy debates with nostalgia. Women2Win, a group within the Conservative Party that promotes Tory women candidates, produced a documentary about the 1974 leadership election in which figures on both sides amiably recalled the battle. The Centre for Policy Studies—a think tank that Thatcher and Keith Joseph founded in 1974 to promote (in descending order) her leadership campaign, anti-inflationary economics, and the then-infant concept of Thatcherism—held a conference on how to pull off a similar revival in the even more daunting political environment of the 2024 landslide defeat. A post-Thatcherite think tank, Policy Exchange, where her official biographer, Charles (now Lord) Moore, is now a visiting scholar, began its coverage of the centenary with a panel on the 1975 leadership campaign. That event brought Thatcher and Heath partisans together for a good-humored post-mortem on how she won and what it meant historically.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to all three occasions, less as a veteran of these Tory wars—that came later—than as a parliamentary sketch writer for the *Daily Telegraph* who was reporting on them at the time. In that role, I had helped to organize a dinner at a London club for four *Telegraph* editorial writers and then-candidate Thatcher, which my late and fearless colleague,

Frank Johnson, opened as follows: "What will you do when the leadership election is over, Mrs. Thatcher?" She answered, "Well, Frank, I shall be leader of the Conservative Party." "No," he said, "I mean, *seriously*." She replied: "If I didn't think I could win, I wouldn't be standing. I don't take on hopeless battles. I prepare and win."

Which, of course, she did, and not just during the leadership battle. When in government, she had to cope with the

Falklands War, the miners' strike, inflation, and the Cold War. All of those ended in victories for her, but the miners' strike was an especially significant one. When the miners first challenged her government, in 1981, she had looked at the odds, decided they were unfavorable, and instructed her energy minister to settle on the miners' terms. Then she instructed her cabinet to prepare for another such challenge down the road by building up stocks of coal and ensuring they could be moved to power stations, and by empowering the police to restrain "flying pickets" from keeping miners from work by force. When the second miners' strike duly came, in 1984, she prevailed outright, entrenching her labor union reforms and the constitutional authority of the elected government in one stroke. One very clear lesson from Thatcher's career is the vital importance of preparation—or, to put it in slightly different language, of intellectual investment in formulating policy.

We can see that at present because, by comparison, Britain's new Labour government made very little intellectual investment during its 14 years in opposition. It shows, too. Labour entered office with few "joined up" ideas of how to govern in a socialist vein, and its first attempts to do so have already been embarrassingly reversed. Last summer's budget, which added billions in extra public spending, has been followed by a "Don't say emergency" spring budget that increased taxes *and cut benefits to the disabled*. Those are at best half-socialist priorities that in part clash with the interests of the modern Labour Party's base—namely, the administrators and recipients of an expanded welfare state.

Despite these cuts, the latest forecasts predict that this year's *deficit* will be an astounding 5 percent of GDP. Going ahead, Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government looks likely to be a shuttlecock batted back and forth between the bond markets and radically statist Labour activists who, in a post-budget poll, pushed Starmer and his chancellor of the exchequer, Rachel Reeves, deep into negative popularity. They also gave top billing to the net-zero fanatic, Energy Minister Ed Miliband, whose ministerial days are probably numbered. All of which suggests that Labour's governance will combine public unpopularity, schizophrenia on policy, and an endless economic crisis for several years to come.

That's the political atmosphere—likely to be receptive to the financial and economic realism of Thatcherism—in which Tories have now embarked on their own policy rethink. But they will have to solve a range of problems before they can reinsert Thatcherism seamlessly into the next "New Toryism." The first obstacle they face is the hostile caricature of Thatcher's economic and social record drawn by a still-angry left, relentlessly regurgitated by the U.K.'s progressive media-academic-cultural complex, and (highly inconveniently) embraced by some conservatives in or near the Tory and Reform Parties. The caricature argues that her anti-inflationary and labor market reforms created an economy



MARGARET THATCHER (1925–2013)

in which British workers are “left behind” in run-down, crime-ridden, “sink” housing estates, living on disability benefits, while low-paid immigrants take the unskilled jobs in a deindustrialized economy lagging behind its neighbors. That economy, in turn, is said to have spawned a mass of social problems, from crime to family breakdown. These criticisms echo arguments leveled against Ronald Reagan and Reaganism by some U.S. conservatives.

Such criticisms ignore the massive contrast between the outcomes of Thatcher’s (and Reagan’s) policies and those of later governments. Thatcher was elected in June 1979, when the nation was still reeling from the “winter of discontent” of spreading strikes. By the mid-1980s, her reforms had lifted the U.K. economy to the world’s fifth largest, increased its obdurate productivity rate, and revived a spirit of energy and enterprise in the British people. Thatcher’s successful economic policies were continued under John Major’s administration, until Labour’s 1997 victory, when a Treasury official briefing Gordon Brown, the incoming Labour chancellor, on the state of the U.K. economy, said happily: “These are wonderful figures.” (“What do you want me to do?” Brown replied. “Send them a thank-you note?”)

Thatcher and Major had kept immigration to an economically manageable and socially assimilable 50,000 individuals a year. Along with labor market reforms, stable finances, and taxation reform, leading to lower rates and higher revenues, this level of immigration filled local labor shortages and played a modest part in helping the economy grow under Tory and Labour governments. But Tony Blair’s Labour government deliberately increased the numbers of immigrants sharply in order to “dish the Tories” (i.e., shape an electorate that would make their opponents unelectable). Tory governments failed to reverse that course—indeed they aggravated it, admitting almost a million immigrants into Britain in the party’s last year in office. A contributory factor was that, from the turn of the century, the U.K. Treasury believed

that mass immigration was a surer and cheaper path to prosperity than higher investment in technically advanced industries. As a result, when Reeves, Labour’s new chancellor, took over from Rishi Sunak’s outgoing Conservatives last July, no thanks were necessary. The U.K. economy was reeling from Covid, the lockdown, net zero, inflation, high levels of mass immigration, and much else—though it was still outperforming the major European economies both pre- and post-Brexit.

If this bipartisan responsibility for the failures of Britain’s economy is denied, as the left understandably denies it, it’s but a small step to attribute increased crime, family breakdown, the growth of the underclass, and other social evils to Thatcher’s neglect of society and social provision. As a critique of

Thatcherism, however, that attack runs slap-bang into the fact that government social spending rose sharply in the Thatcher years. So when did these pathologies start? When did crime start to rise? Illegitimacy to increase? Family breakdown to get seriously worse? Divorce figures to rocket?

As it happens, we know the answer to these questions. In his book *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*, the late Christie Davies, a distinguished Welsh sociologist, established that these major changes started in the 1950s and early 1960s, almost 20 years before Thatcher entered Downing Street. Another expert witness is the socialist writer Jeremy Seabrook, who lamented in his 1978 book *What Went Wrong?* that low-income council estates (what Americans call public housing) were squalid and crime-ridden, crime was increasingly endemic, illegitimacy was rising, families were being weakened, and an underclass had been created.

Note that Seabrook’s book was published the year *before* Thatcher’s election and four years *after* Sir Keith Joseph was almost driven out of politics for giving the speech in which he identified these very same social evils as a “cycle of deprivation,” called for policies to tackle them, and suggested (very hesitantly and with moral qualms) that state-supplied contraception might be a “bridge” to the more fundamental cultural and moral changes that were necessary. Britain’s media, the progressive left, “the great and the good” all the way down to the bishops, and critics in all the parties promptly joined in denouncing Joseph for proposing to “sterilize the lower classes.” Serious reformers were ►

frightened off, and the problems of the underclass were fenced off from serious consideration for another decade.

Could Thatcher have tackled these pathologies more vigorously in the years that followed? I doubt it. She and her governments *did* tackle them, in health and education, with different levels of success. Some of their solutions, e.g., in educational reform, ran into the obstacle of the civil service “blob” that weakened essentially conservative reforms by “adding on” quite different objectives. Health reforms, too, multiplied managerial complexities because simpler proposals were considered too controversial. In addition, Blairite ministers reversed some of Thatcher’s reforms—and then reversed them back again. If a case is to be made against her on such grounds, it would have to be that her governments shrank from more fundamental reforms because, as the anti-Joseph hysteria had shown, they carried a high risk of calumny, unpopularity, and defeat.

If Thatcher didn’t make the reform of the welfare state the signature policy of her administration, however, she had at least the excuse that she first needed to tackle the larger and more pressing problems of economic decline, inflation, overmighty labor unions, and the Soviet threat. Whatever your judgment on that, Thatcherism can hardly be held

responsible for failures that either began a quarter of a century before Thatcher entered office or resumed 18 years after she left it.

What is the excuse of later governments?

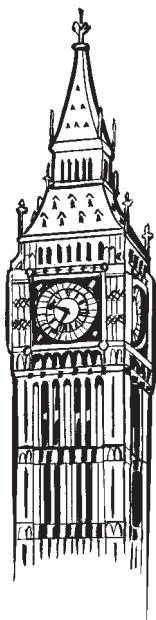
If Thatcherism is to play a serious part in any revival of the Tory party, the leftist myths about Thatcher’s record will have to be rebutted by serious historians and by party leaders. Her *real* record is well worth defending. That’s important for the Tories, because Thatcher is one their few remaining serious assets. Keeping her as their sole property is vital for them. Since they lost last year’s election in a landslide, emerging with only 121 seats in a Parliament of 650, they are frequently dismissed as being on their way to extinction. Recent opinion polls have shown Reform to be the most popular of the three leading parties, followed by Labour, with the Tories lagging in third place. In the recent local elections, Reform won hands down, with almost a third of the national total, drawing votes not only from the Tories but also from Labour. It also looked like a more substantial threat to Labour than the Tories, which is a political factor in itself. It negates the main weakness of a new party—namely, that the votes it gains are “wasted” because it can’t win. That fate now threatens the Tories.

One unnoticed factor, however, is that Thatcherism has supporters in both of the conservative parties. Reform’s leader, Nigel Farage, in addition to being a naturally gifted politician, is the nearest thing to the perfect Thatcherite outside her old party. Between now and the next election, both conservative parties will be fighting for predominance in every special election and local election. Only as the election looms will they have the evidence of which is stronger *and where*, which they need if they are to discuss an electoral pact between them at all seriously. That will be a tall order at any time. But one can’t dismiss ideological sympathy when estimating its chances.

Even without the challenge of Reform from the right, however, the Tories know that they have to change drastically. That realization undercuts the prediction (made immediately after the general election) that, because the surviving 121 Tory members of Parliament tended to be drawn from the liberal wing of Toryism, they would tilt the party leftward in order to woo the Liberal Democratic vote rather than Reform’s. Most of these “one nation” Tories have since realized that if they were to go down that road, they would lose their party outside Parliament and probably even more votes than last time. The Liberal Democratic pool of votes is smaller than Reform’s, moreover, and every other political party is fishing in it.

Also, liberal Toryism is suffering an even deeper identity crisis than the party as a whole. Its traditional concept of political imagination has long been limited to “catching the Whigs bathing and running off with their clothes,” i.e., adopting a more moderate version of the policies of the left. Liberal Tories pursued that policy to destruction, all too well represented by net zero and uncontrolled mass immigration, under the last government. What they cling to now, in policy terms, can best be described as symbolic totems of “niceness” and “moderation” that have nasty consequences, such as continued U.K. membership of the European Court of Human Rights. Liberal Toryism is now—and for some time will be—an exhausted political tradition in need of convalescence and a regime of reading and reflection (and, some would add, penance).

Where does that leave other Tory factions? Paradoxically, though the fortunes of the Tory party are low, there is a festive upsurge of many conservative intellectual and moral traditions and organizations all debating what being conservative means and should mean today. Their debates were exemplified by the two think tanks whose conferences I attended, mentioned above, but also by the books, pamphlets, conferences, and podcasts of such new insurgent groups as Peter Whittle’s New Culture Forum, “communitarian” Tory MP Danny Kruger’s New Conservatives, and former Prime Minister Liz Truss’s Popular Conservatism. Oversimplifying greatly, these three groups represent, respectively, the defense of Britain’s history, culture, and identity; the love of home, family, neighborhood,



nation—and, in terms of sensibility, religion and beauty; and the defense of democracy and popular liberties against Leviathan at home and in Brussels. All of these themes and memes overlap, interweave, and enrich one another, and they are encouraged to do so by an overlooked social reality: namely, though political parties in a two-party system contain different and potentially quarrelsome groups, the daily experience of working, talking, and “fighting” (i.e., campaigning) together creates a common identity and tradition that have an independent value for all of them. Each then wills the success of the others.

Under the influence of such camaraderie, I would argue that the Tory party is capable of bringing all these factions together in three broad groups—“one nation” liberal Tories, Thatcherites, and national conservatives—and then uniting them in a single, largely harmonious party. Liberal Toryism I have already dispatched to a sanatorium for a rest cure, where it can consider its eventual reactions to the likely national and international events that will redraw political and ideological boundaries. Those events are, first, Britain’s serious economic and financial difficulties described above, and, second, a general international shift from global bodies to nation-states and national governments, from liberal institutions to democratic ones, and from elites to voters and their representatives.

As I argue above, the first set of challenges plainly advantages the Thatcherites within conservatism. As the word is currently used, Thatcherites are the devotees of economic and financial realism. To borrow a U.S. metaphor about the Fed, they are the people who take away the punch bowl when the party is really getting going. Fortunately for party unity, a significant number of liberal Tories are also *market* libertarians, which is one of the two ways of being a Thatcherite in the U.K. Enough of them will hold senior positions on the parliamentary front bench to soothe liberal distress and to remind other Tory factions of the need to contain their communitarian and cultural ambitions within the laws of economics.

The second shift of political priorities means that the Tory Party will have to adapt its future policies in the direction of a more populist national conservatism, with a stress on patriotism, respect for Britain’s religious and constitutional traditions, opposition to open borders and mass immigration, commonsense skepticism of gender theory, and most obviously the restoration of national democratic sovereignty over supranational technocracy. That national conservatism—inside which most of the smaller factions mentioned above would fit quite comfortably—is what conservative voters plainly want, and they are fed up with not getting it. And all of the above positions are ideas that Thatcher either liked or would have liked if they had been on the political agenda of her day. It will be a long time before the voters take a serious interest in the Tories again. Until then, they should forswear febrile leadership-swapping, invest time and thought into creating a modern political organization and rethinking policies along post-Brexit lines, and give the party’s current able and unorthodox leader Kemi Badenoch the chance to succeed—as the party did in 1974–79.

An undeniable Thatcherite who realized very clearly that Thatcherism encompassed all the aforementioned different Tory traditions—indeed, that they helped one another to survive and prosper in good times and bad—was Nigel Lawson, one of her two great chancellors. He defined Thatcherism early and prophetically as follows: “A mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism, ‘Victorian values’ (of the Samuel Smiles self-help variety), privatization and a dash of populism.”

Would Nigel Farage dissent from that? His only known deviation from this right-wing orthodoxy is on gender identity. He thinks he could become an Iron Lady. ●

TRUMP’S APOLOGY TOUR

And the good news it obscures

by Noah Rothman

Within the first 100 days of his presidency, Barack Obama set out on a whirlwind public relations campaign in which he promoted the notion that the only thing wrong with America was all the presidents who preceded him.

“America has acted unilaterally, without regard for the interests of others,” he confessed in an address to the United Nations General Assembly. American hubris “fed an almost reflexive anti-Americanism” among our nation’s partners abroad. But who could blame them?

The United States, he told an audience in France, “has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive.” In Cairo, he criticized his hidebound countrymen who “continue to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights.” The speech represented an extension of remarks he provided *Al Arabiya* within a week of his inauguration. “We sometimes make mistakes,” the president admitted. “We have not been perfect.”

Obama’s defenders insisted these were merely overdue gestures of “respect” toward our allies and partners abroad, but his critics branded it an “apology tour.” At the time, Republicans seemed genuinely revulsed by Obama’s supplicative posture, but it was not to last. Of all the foreign policy projects Obama undertook in his eight years in the White House, his embarrassment at the country he led may be his most lasting achievement—if only because Republicans have surrendered to the idea that Obama was right all along. ►

The first foreign trip of Donald Trump's second term took the president on a swing through the Middle East. In a major address before the Saudi-U.S. Investment Forum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the president outlined something like a doctrinal approach to foreign affairs. Trump's vision prioritized tangible objectives, such as pursuing investment opportunities abroad, over promoting American ideals. In it, the president's speechwriters took a variety of Obama-like swipes at Trump's political opponents in his own party, many of whom happen to be the same people Obama set out to repudiate.

In the speech, Trump hailed what he saw as a grand commercial transformation of the Middle East—progress most readily apparent in the skyscrapers he referred to and with which he seemed genuinely impressed. There's no obvious reason why that observation was used as an opportunity to belittle the president's fellow Americans, but that is where he went: "It's crucial for the wider world to note this great transformation has not come from Western interventionists or flying people in beautiful planes giving you lectures on how to live and how to govern your own affairs," the president declared. "No, the gleaming marvels of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were not created by the so-called nation-builders, neocons, or liberal nonprofits like those who spent trillions and trillions of dollars failing to develop Kabul, Baghdad, so many other cities."

"In the end," Trump continued, "the so-called nation-builders wrecked far more nations than they built, and the interventionists were intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves. They told you how to do it, but they had no idea how to do it themselves."

The president's gratuitous jab at the MAGA movement's Emmanuel Goldstein—the "neocons" and "nation-builders" who are simultaneously vanquished forever and yet somehow also a looming menace nefariously plotting their restoration to power—may not prove especially controversial. It should be, though, if only because the president is dead wrong.

The glittering Arabian skylines, the region's political and commercial integration, and the relative regional peace necessary to create this "modern miracle," the "Arabian way"—all these wonders are due in no small part to the efforts made by the Americans whom Trump and his movement seem to enjoy denigrating.

Saudi Arabia no longer has to defend itself against the barrage of ballistic missiles that Saddam Hussein's Iraq rained down on the country in the first Gulf War. Indeed, thanks to the second war on his regime, it no longer has to worry about Saddam at all. That all-consuming regional threat, which necessitated U.S. military intervention in 1991, 1993, 1998, and 2003 (to say nothing of the two no-fly zones that required constant and dangerous policing), is no more.

With the end of the Baathist regime in Baghdad, the region has experienced dramatic economic growth fueled not just by the export of hydrocarbons but also by the development of sophisticated commercial interests, ranging from logistical firms to tech start-ups and financial-services providers.

Trump can say what he will about Kabul. The city was lost to the Taliban during Joe Biden's hapless tenure in the Oval Office. But Trump wanted to withdraw, too, and it's not clear that he would have engineered a more satisfying retreat. He is, however, simply wrong about Baghdad.

Once a war-torn city defined by checkpoints and no-go zones, substandard or nonexistent public services, and crumbling infrastructure, Baghdad has been reborn. Today, "consumerist spaces like malls and restaurants have become a dominant feature of postwar reconstruction," architecture writers Azadeh Mashayekhi and Rend Beirut observed last year. Foreign investment in commercial and civil-engineering projects has exploded in recent years—projects that are no longer complicated by an armed insurgency but by the messy, fractious politics that typify relatively free societies.

Trump and his coterie may regard the Iraq War as a mistake. But they prefer the status quo that prevails today as a result of Saddam's ouster, if only because they seem to want to take credit for the results that flowed from it.

That wasn't the only dissonant moment of the speech. Trump's denunciation of "interventionism" rings discordant given the extent to which he praised his own style of interventionism. "Together we had obliterated the killers of ISIS," the president said with all due pride. But the rise of the Islamic State was enabled by American *non*intervention, thus affording him the opportunity to engineer a critical military victory.

The ISIS caliphate emerged in eastern Syria several years into that country's civil war. It was incubated by the Bashar al-Assad regime, which purchased its own oil from the terrorist proto-state while it crushed relatively pro-Western rebel factions. That cynical game allowed the last Baathist regime in the Middle East to claim that its opponents were, to a man, Islamists.

ISIS spilled over the Syrian border in 2014 and collapsed the Iraqi Security Forces because America allowed it to metastasize unchecked. Obama had bugged out of Iraq less than three years earlier, relying on Iran-backed Shiite militias to fill America's gaps. The Islamic State caliphate ceased to exist when the United States applied the muscle to it that skeptics of U.S. interventionism had withheld for years.

Obama's expedient effort to make Iran into the foremost steward of U.S. interests in Iraq might have been delusional, but it advanced his goal of securing a nuclear agreement with Tehran. The deal that emerged from negotiations with the Islamic Republic looked past Tehran's ballistic missile program and its support for terrorism. It legitimized Iran's ability to enrich uranium to weapons grade, and it flooded the Islamic Republic with liquid capital. Iran's regional opponents, including representatives from the countries Trump lauded in his address in Riyadh, were duly spooked.

Trump 1.0 capitalized on Obama's mistakes. The Abraham Accords were an outgrowth of the first Trump administration's skillful exploitation of the Sunni states' hostility toward Iran, as well as the evidence



and forcing American diplomats to take shelter in safe rooms. It was then that Trump responded with commensurate force, ordering the strike that took out Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander Qasem Soleimani.

Iranian retaliation for that surprisingly bold maneuver took the form of an unprecedented barrage of missiles into Iraq from Iranian territory, but officials in Tehran also signaled their desire to secure a face-saving de-escalation even as the missiles were in the air. With that, the Abraham Accords suddenly had teeth.

Trump's speech in Riyadh made a point of holding out an olive branch to Iran by leaving open the prospect of a new Iran nuclear deal. But there was little indication in the text that the president sought an agreement to finalize America's divorce from the region. He did not dance around the

(apparent in Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign) that the U.S. would once again serve as a reliable partner in the region's effort to contain Iranian aggression. The accords were not just a triumph of American diplomacy. Would the region have been capable of that evolution if Saddam's regime were still paying bounties for dead Israeli civilians, elevating the Palestinian question to the point that Israel's Sunni neighbors couldn't ignore it? In the absence of the Iraq War and subsequent support for "democracy promotion" provided to local actors, would there have been an Arab Spring? Those demonstrations did not beget a more liberal social order in the Middle East, but they did give way to economic reforms that produced a more egalitarian commercial culture, the results of which Trump now finds so impressive.

The campaign to constrain Iran and frustrate its ambitions was not defined by sanctions alone. By the middle of Trump's first term, it was clear that Iran was spoiling for a fight, and it wasn't getting one. It shot down U.S. surveillance drones, an act to which America did not respond. It seized and sabotaged commercial shipping vessels in the Strait of Hormuz. It organized a brazen and dramatic drone assault on the world's largest petroleum-processing facility inside Saudi Arabia—an attack to which America reacted only by releasing an unspecified amount of oil from its strategic reserves, stabilizing global energy markets, and foreclosing on the need for armed retaliation. But Trump's refusal to respond directly to Iran's provocations ensured that the regime would become only more reckless.

In the final months of 2019, Iran's terrorist proxies rained rockets down on the U.S. positions inside Iraq. Trump was reluctant to respond to those attacks until one U.S. contractor died and three soldiers were wounded. The U.S. retaliated, albeit proportionately, by striking sites from which the attacks on U.S. forces originated. But Iran was not deterred. Tehran organized a mob that laid siege to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, breaching its outer walls, setting fire to a reception area,

regime's fundamental illegitimacy, and he castigated both Obama's and Biden's attempts to bribe Iran into complicity. Disengagement doesn't seem to be the president's goal as it relates to Iran.

The same could be said of his stance on Syria. In the speech, Trump shocked the world by announcing that he would extend the hand of friendship to the provisional government in Damascus, the forces of which ousted the Assad regime late last year. It was a grand gesture, one incentivized by the new government's hostility toward the Palestinian and Iranian terror groups that once populated Assad's Syria. It was also a repudiation of his administration's most vocal skeptics of America's extroverted posture on the world stage and a victory for the forces of internationalism.

Within the Trump administration, the vanguard of a movement that argues for "restraint" in the application of American soft and hard power abroad had advocated a wait-and-see approach to determine if the formerly terrorist-affiliated group in power in Damascus had truly changed its stripes. Opponents of that approach warned that dithering in this moment could scuttle the potential for a genuinely anti-Iranian bulwark to emerge in the Levant.

That was the faction represented by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, and former National Security Adviser Mike Waltz. They won that argument against counterterrorism director ►

Sebastian Gorka and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard. “So, I say good luck, Syria,” Trump declared. “They’re going to show us something special. Very good people.”

Trump deserves to be proud of America’s achievements in the region. We all do. They are the culmination of generations of efforts by America and its Western allies to create the world we inhabit today. We helped collapse pan-Arabism and Baathism. We imported a commercial culture that was not guaranteed to take hold in the Middle East when the region was dominated by Soviet client states. We fought radical Islamism and made Wahhabism an impractical proposition. These are civilizational successes that have given way to a more stable and prosperous international environment. To someone surveying the geopolitical landscape from the perspective of September 2001, the state of play that prevails today would appear to be a partial victory at the very least.

That’s why Trump’s jab at the hated “neocons” sounded so out of place. It was a triumphalist assertion of dominance from the nationalists and “restrainers” for whom the promotion of liberty abroad is the great bugbear. But the speechwriters’ victory celebration rings hollow, if only because the policies Trump wants to take credit for—namely, the successful kind—were not a result of the global retrenchment that a policy of “restraint” was supposed to beget.

America made plenty of mistakes in its post-9/11 wars, but to conclude that America *only* made mistakes in Iraq would lead observers to the confused conclusion that the modern Middle East sprang ex nihilo from Mohammed bin Salman’s forehead. Such an outlook would be no less blinkered than the caricatured worldview supposedly embraced by the reviled “neocons.” Maybe those who thought Trump would engineer America’s retreat from the world needed a confidence boost. If so, they can have it. A sop to their pretensions is a small price to pay for policies that advance American interests overseas. ●



THE NORTH KOREA CONUNDRUM

How will Trump meet the challenge this time around?

by Daniel R. DePetrìs

In 2018, at the urging of then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Trump decided to do what no sitting American president had done before: meet the head of North Korea’s Kim dynasty face-to-face. His national security advisers at the time were gobsmacked at the idea and advised against it. But there was some logic in Trump’s diplomatic gamble. First, diplomacy was better than the alternatives. Second, everything else had been tried and produced nothing but disappointment. And third, there was only one man in North Korea who could sign off on an agreement anyway, and his name was Kim Jong-un. Why not test the proposition?

By now, we all know the story. Much like the presidential diplomacy of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, which took a more bottom-up approach to the North Korean nuclear problem, Trump’s top-level interaction with a North Korean leader, which included two summits and a historic step into the Hermit Kingdom by a sitting U.S. president, couldn’t produce a comprehensive deal. Although Kim agreed to suspend nuclear and long-range missile tests as long as talks were progressing, the negotiations ultimately ran into the same big obstruction that prior efforts met with: The positions of the two sides were irreconcilable, and neither man was willing to walk away with half a loaf. Trump wanted North Korea to hand over its nuclear warheads for destruction, and Kim wanted to keep his warheads and have a blossoming bilateral relationship with the United States at the same time. Working-level discussions collapsed in October 2019, turning the joint garden strolls and cordial photo opportunities into an odd interlude.

Yet Trump never forgot about the experience. In fact, he consistently reminded anybody who would listen that his personal relationship with Kim was great, that his summitry was the right move despite the naysayers, and that he single-handedly averted what could have been a catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula. Whether any or all of this is true is beside the point; the president clearly believes it.

The obvious question arises: How will Trump tackle the North Korea challenge in his second term? By all indications,

it appears the president wants to pick up where he left off. Part of this strategy revolves around using the media to telegraph his intentions to his old pal Kim. “He liked me and I got along with him,” Trump told Sean Hannity in a Fox News interview days after his inauguration. Asked in March whether he plans to reach out to North Korea, Trump replied in the affirmative, adding, again, that his ties with Kim were terrific. “There is communication,” Trump told reporters on March 31. “I think it’s very important. . . . I will probably do something at some point.”

If Trump had his way, the talks would already be happening. Yet while Trump may be the most powerful individual on earth, he isn’t calling the shots here. As Trump likes to say, “it takes two to tango,” and Kim Jong-un is in no mood to dance. He has spent the last four years stewing as Washington has solidified a trilateral military arrangement with South Korea and Japan, the two closest U.S. allies in Northeast Asia, and he has deployed additional military hardware in the region. Trump won’t admit it openly, but any diplomacy with North Korea in 2025—assuming diplomacy even starts—is likely to be more difficult than it was in 2018 and 2019.

RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE HAS BEEN THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING FOR THE NORTH KOREANS.

The international environment has changed in Pyongyang’s favor. Back in 2018, when Trump was preparing for his first summit, North Korea was in dire straits economically and geopolitically. Stronger U.N. Security Council sanctions, pushed by the Trump administration, were strangling a North Korean economy whose dependence on China was one of the Kim regime’s most glaring vulnerabilities. South Korea’s central bank assessed that North Korean exports declined by nearly 90 percent in 2018, helping to shrink the North Korean economy by 4.1 percent, the biggest contraction in 21 years.

The Kim regime’s international relationships at the time were virtually nonexistent. More than six years into his rule, Kim had yet to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, a reflection of Beijing’s irritation with how North Korea had behaved up to that point. Yes, North Korea and China technically had a long-standing friendship treaty that required Beijing to come to Pyongyang’s aid in the event of a crisis. But the reality was that Xi wasn’t going to sacrifice Chinese troops to save Kim’s skin. Nor was he going to go to war against the United States if Pyongyang picked a fight.

Russia’s Vladimir Putin wasn’t much help, either. Moscow supported Washington’s sanctions drive at the U.N. Security Council in 2016 and 2017, was still officially committed to denuclearizing Kim’s regime, and warned Pyongyang to tone down the warlike invective. After the North Koreans threatened preventive war against the United States and

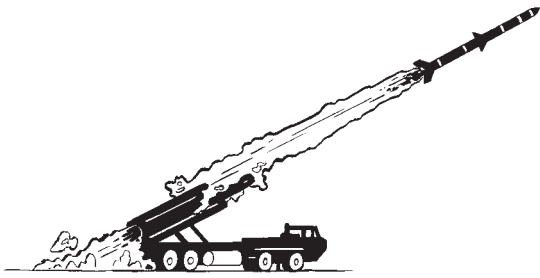
South Korea in 2016, the Russian Foreign Ministry tersely replied that Pyongyang was making it easier for other states to cite self-defense as a rationale if they chose to take military action against North Korea’s nuclear and missile facilities.

Today, China and Russia have evolved to become North Korea’s major defenders in international forums. This is a marked contrast to their previous status as cautious proponents of Washington’s maximum pressure campaign. Thanks to the collective vetoes of Russia and China, the U.N. Security Council has been unable to adopt additional sanctions on Pyongyang. In March 2024, Russia killed the Security Council’s sanctions-monitoring team. Now, Moscow can violate its own economic restrictions, and Kim can import crude oil and gas without prying eyes. Washington and its East Asian allies have been forced to cobble together another multilateral sanctions-enforcement mechanism on the fly.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, meanwhile, has been the gift that keeps on giving for the North Koreans. Although the Russians hold approximately 20 percent of Ukrainian territory, the costs to the Russian army have been some of the highest in modern warfare. Putin’s war of choice, which entered its fourth year this past February, was riddled with false assumptions about Ukrainian military prowess, Western military support, and the competence of his own troops. The result has been Russian casualties in the hundreds of thousands, diplomatic isolation from Europe, and a growing reliance on China and India to take the crude oil and pipeline natural gas exports the West has shunned.

Kim, however, is a beneficiary of this war. He has muscled his way into the conflict and has used Putin’s desperation for weapons, men, and military support to North Korea’s advantage. Since 2023, the North Koreans have been mass-producing and shipping tons of matériel, including artillery munitions, short-range ballistic missiles, self-propelled howitzers, and multiple rocket launchers, to aid the Russian army’s war of attrition. North Korean military supplies have given Russia’s defense industry more time to ramp up its own production. In June 2024, after their second face-to-face meeting in less than a year, Putin and Kim signed a defense treaty that committed both to come to the defense of the other if attacked. Kim, for his part, has lived up to his word; approximately 12,000 North Korean troops were deployed to Russia’s Kursk region, helping the Russian army push the Ukrainian army back across the border after a six-month counteroffensive. (According to open sources, those North Korean personnel are still there.) The strong Russia–North Korea relationship, in turn, has caused concern in Beijing and forced the Chinese Communist Party to take a more hand-in-glove approach to Pyongyang, if only to retain China’s historic influence on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea’s weapons programs are also increasing in both quantity and quality. Since U.S.–North Korea ►



talks broke down in 2019, Kim has directed his country's military technicians, engineers, and scientists to ramp up the development, testing, and production of defense platforms as varied as attack and surveillance drones, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles with multiple warheads, submarines, and hypersonic glide vehicles. In October 2024, North Korea conducted its longest intercontinental ballistic missile test ever. The International Atomic Energy Agency, meanwhile, is increasingly worried about the lack of eyes and ears over Pyongyang's nuclear program. "You cannot have a country like this, which is completely off the charts with this nuclear arsenal . . . with all these facilities, without us having any clue of any safety or security measures which are being applied to it," IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi told a Washington, D.C., conference in April.

You don't need an international relations degree to comprehend what all this means. If Trump manages to restart a diplomatic process with North Korea after a four-year hiatus, then he's going to be playing with a new deck of cards. Kim Jong-un has a better hand today than he did when he sat down with Trump seven years ago. North Korea's weapons arsenal is larger, its economy is less isolated, China and Russia are no longer cogs in Washington's North Korea policy, and Pyongyang's Rolodex of international relationships is a bit fuller. As a consequence, the North Koreans are likely to ask for more U.S. concessions, above and beyond the typical U.S. sanctions relief and political normalization that Kim's father and grandfather prioritized.

This presumes Kim is even interested in negotiations to begin with. He spent four years stiff-arming Biden's overtures, partly over doubts about whether Washington would settle for anything other than total capitulation. It's difficult to see Kim's resistance softening as long as Russia and China remain on Pyongyang's side. Those relationships are a major commodity for Kim, affording him the flexibility to keep the United States twisting in the wind for as long as he finds it prudent to do so.

Trump's options are therefore limited. First, he could write off the North Korean nuclear issue as a lost cause, which is essentially the course Obama took during his second term. This would spare him the indignity of having to endure another round of diplomacy with one of America's foremost adversaries while freeing his foreign policy team to concentrate on higher strategic priorities. Yet kicking the can down the road is not exactly a synonym for success. The North Koreans are likely to exploit the absence of a negotiation by ramping up their conventional and nuclear capabilities to an even greater degree than they have already.

Alternatively, Trump could settle on the path of least resistance by doubling down on Washington's long-standing status quo policy: ratcheting up the sanctions pressure, deploying more U.S. military assets around the Korean Peninsula as a pressure tactic, and accelerating U.S. military exercises with Seoul until Pyongyang is forced to enter a negotiation to denuclearize. But every U.S. administration since George W. Bush has tried this numerous times—without success. North Korea is now a more challenging nuclear power than it was when the maximum pressure strategy was gamed out two decades ago, and maximum pressure at the hands of Washington is usually met in Pyongyang with more weapons development and missile tests. Moreover, Kim has reiterated again and again that North Korea's nuclear warheads are not to be traded away under any circumstances. U.S. officials can continue doubting the sincerity of such statements, but eventually they will have to conclude that Kim means what he says.

Trump's third option would be to overturn the entire paradigm by ditching denuclearization for arms control. The costs associated with such a drastic U.S. policy change are easy to see. The U.S. foreign policy elite, for starters, would have nightmares that an American president was jeopardizing Washington's commitment to nonproliferation. Trump would have to deal with a torrent of bad press about his negotiating acumen, which would grate on a man who considers himself the world's best dealmaker. Some separation is also bound to occur between the White House and Republican lawmakers usually in lockstep with Trump.

But the political consequences of such a deal would be acceptable if the result is a stabler Korean Peninsula and the removal of the North Korean nuclear problem from Washington's foreign policy to-do list. Trump would hardly be the first U.S. president in history to ditch a popular yet stale and unproductive foreign policy. There was once another Republican president who was pilloried by senior members of his party for negotiating arms control accords with an adversary. That man was Ronald Reagan. His diplomacy with the Soviets proved to be one of the finest achievements of his eight-year tenure.

Of course, Trump is no Reagan, Kim Jong-un is no Mikhail Gorbachev, and North Korea is no superpower like the Soviet Union. But a nuclear-armed North Korea that is contained and deterred would surely be a better outcome for U.S. interests than a nuclear-armed North Korea that is free of limitations.

Will Trump's second roll of the dice on North Korea policy prove more successful than his first? Nobody should rule out this scenario. Whether successful or not, the entire endeavor is bound to be more excruciating than it was in 2018–19. And an accord, if one is signed, is likely to be less impressive than many would like. North Korea is a problem to be managed, not solved. ●

BAD BETS

The new culture of sports gambling

by Jack Butler

America doesn't have a sports-betting problem, we are told. Now legal in most U.S. states, wagering on games, matches, and other events has increased interest in professional and collegiate athletics, generated more profits for gaming companies and sports institutions, and increased revenues for state and local governments. In a March press release estimating that Americans would bet \$3.1 billion on that month's college basketball tournaments (up from \$2.7 billion the year before), the American Gaming Association, a trade-industry lobbying group, claimed that this growth reflected "the expanding legal sports betting market and the growing trust in legal wagering options."

Or so proponents of the vastly expanded practice of sports gambling would have us believe.

Such advocates bet that we will take these claims at face value, while they also belittle or dismiss the possibility of severe costs. It is their right to make this case. And it is our right to interrogate it. Doing so reveals that the push for sports gambling has had many corporate and athletic beneficiaries. But there have also been huge losses for many of the participants—and not just from the bets that haven't gone their way. Moreover, those who do not suffer personally or financially, as well as

those who do, may be contributing to a long-term corrosion of sports—a degradation in which sports themselves are now complicit.

It was not always this way. In 1992, Congress passed the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, which effectively prohibited most forms of sports gambling. It was undoubtedly still happening, but in the shadows. For a time, the sporting mainstream, which had once driven famed Cincinnati Reds player Pete Rose into the MLB's outer darkness for betting on the team (which he was managing), sought to keep it that way. It wasn't just baseball. This legal regime helped keep Las Vegas, long known and grudgingly (or not so grudgingly) accepted as a kind of quarantine for games of chance, from having an NFL team. In 2003, the league even rejected an ad from the city's tourism commission. In 2012, however, this environment began to change. That's when New Jersey, home to Atlantic City, legalized the activity. A legal battle ensued. The National Collegiate Athletic Association claimed that New Jersey violated the law; New Jersey countered that the law was an unconstitutional usurpation by the federal government of powers belonging to the states. When the state's challenge, begun under Republican Governor Chris Christie and continued under his Democratic successor Phil Murphy, reached the Supreme Court, the Court sided 6-3 with New Jersey.

It was a jackpot for sports betting. Over the succeeding seven years, the practice has become legal in 39 states and Washington, D.C. Legalization was—and remains—popular and bipartisan. Legal wagers have totaled around \$500 billion, with almost a third of that coming in 2024. Numbers of that size ►



translate to substantial revenues for the sports-betting industry: \$13.71 billion in 2024 alone. Sports franchises and leagues see some dough as well, from lucrative sponsorship deals with companies such as FanDuel and DraftKings, and from advertising. Gambling companies spent \$434.4 million on commercials for sportsbooks (places, physical or digital, that enable wagering on athletics) in 2024. And the tax man now gets a cut: In 2024, that was a cool \$2.8 billion. The Las Vegas quarantine has broken down completely: Super Bowl LVIII was played just outside the city, which got its own NFL team in 2020. The face of sports has changed in other ways. Those millions of dollars in ads are all over the broadcasts of professional games. They brandish the sanction of a wide array of celebrities, including former athletes. Analysis of spreads and odds has crept into coverage of games. Sportsbook parlors encircle many major event venues. Some arenas and stadiums now prompt spectators to bet during the events themselves.

BETWEEN 2018 AND MID-2023, AMERICANS LOST SOME \$245 BILLION ON SPORTS BETTING. THAT MONEY HAS TO COME FROM SOMEWHERE.

Beyond mere legalization, cultural and economic pressures contributed to the spread. The profit motive of companies and the revenue hunger of governments, particularly during the Covid anomaly (when both suffered in each area), played a role. As did another major change in American life between 1992 and 2018, one that has continued since: the ubiquity of smartphones, on which virtually all sportsbooks are present. With sports betting not only legal but also digital, whatever dodgy stigma it may have once had from suspect bookies or dilapidated parlors has vanished. Gamblers don't even have to leave their homes or even see anyone to do it, if they don't want to. "Now, you have a casino in your pocket, 24 hours a day," Lia Nower, who studies gambling and addiction at Rutgers University, says.

Not all gamblers choose the route of anomic isolation. It has a lure either way. The demographic for whom sports betting has proven particularly attractive is young males. Gambling of all kinds tends to be a man's game; sports betting is often a young man's. They're the ones who grow up playing and watching sports, frequently in social settings. Nothing wrong with that. Issues emerge, however, when you throw in the young man's poor impulse control and tendency toward what Isaac Rose-Berman calls "financial nihilism." Rose-Berman is a professional sports bettor who nonetheless worries about the excessive spread of the activity and studies it for the American Institute of Boys and Men. He believes young men with a small amount of disposable income, but not yet able to afford major life purchases, figure that, essentially, they

could have much to gain while they don't have much to lose.

Oh, but they do. And they're not the only ones. The profits for gambling companies, sports franchises, and leagues are real. The tax revenues, however, can be unreliable and are overstated. But it is the costs that are most understated. Between 2018 and mid-2023, Americans lost some \$245 billion on sports betting. That money has to come from somewhere. The result, as Charles Fain Lehman pointed out in *The Atlantic*, is reduced household savings, increased maxing out of credit cards and bank overdrafts, and higher rates of personal bankruptcy. One study even found a strong connection between the legalization of sports gambling and increases in domestic violence. Sports betting also serves as a funnel to forms of gambling that are even more addictive and higher risk. The leading sports-betting companies have a vested interest in encouraging gamblers to try other, more lucrative forms. Many travel down this precarious path. "I view sports betting particularly as the on-ramp into gambling addiction, especially for young men," Rob Minnick says. Minnick, a recovering gambling addict in his mid-20s, now runs a YouTube channel called ODAAT ("One Day at a Time") Gambling Awareness, where he tries to reach out to problem gamblers who don't think there's anything wrong. That is, people like him in 2022, when, in a memorable incident he recently recounted in *The Nation*, he found himself playing baccarat on his phone while in a Parisian bathroom and accepted that he might have a problem.

Individual cases such as Minnick's are reason enough to wonder if the headlong rush into legalization has been a good idea. The role that sports leagues have played in integrating with sports betting is an indictment unto itself. But there is a darker undercurrent that suggests sports themselves may end up regretting their union with their onetime scourge. A growing stigma of impropriety is now attaching itself to athletic contests. On the professional level, coaches and athletes alike can now invite suspicion about whether they are altering their performances for the sake of some wager, either for themselves or for some predesignated beneficiary. This concern is sometimes vindicated. Last year, Jontay Porter, a gambling-indebted NBA player, received a lifetime ban from the league for betting on his own games when playing for the Toronto Raptors; he has also pleaded guilty to criminal charges. Cases such as Porter's cast doubt, whether deserving or not, on non-offending parties. Many of the fans, either newly stimulated by sports gambling or new to the sport *because of* gambling, have gained an additional and unhealthy investment in the performance of the teams they watch.

An excessive devotion to game outcomes is, of course, not uncommon for sports fans. But parlays, which allow bets on multiple in-game outcomes to be strung together, and spreads, that take into account margins of victory and defeat, increase the range of bets far beyond mere victory or defeat. So spectators now get incensed by player performances that defy their bets. On *The Pat McAfee Show*, Indiana Pacers player Tyrese Haliburton speculated, of his social media mentions, that “the majority of them are about me f***ing up somebody’s parlay.” Gambling-driven fandom “might be good in the short run,” Rose-Berman says. But leagues might be starting to wonder whether, “in the long run, are you creating a generation of sports fans, or gambling fans?” Would the latter be the kind of fans they want?

Professional athletes, while not fond of such pressure, are at least inured to forms of it. College athletes are in a different position. Many sports powerhouses in the formerly betting-resistant NCAA have accommodated the new sports-betting landscape. When Louisiana State first finalized an arrangement with Caesars Sportsbook in 2021, the school sent a mass email (to some students under 21), promising \$300 in free bets after an initial \$20 wager. (A company executive claimed that the email was sent out by mistake.) College athletes are now also the targets of gambling-driven rage. Shortly after Ohio legalized sports gambling, college athletes in the state began receiving requests from peers on the money-sharing app Venmo when their performances didn’t meet expectations, according to *The Guardian*.

They sometimes get worse than that. Messages such as “You deserve to get unalive for blowing my bet” and “You cost me two grand—I hope your dog gets cancer” made their way to Ohio college athletes. There’s even evidence that the effect has trickled down to high school athletics. A public school official in Cincinnati blamed recent outbreaks of violence at high school football games on the fact that wagers of up to \$5,000 were being placed on them, according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. It’s enough to make one wonder whether the rise of sports betting has begun to compromise the virtues associated with sports.

As this behemoth social tide rolls on, conservatives are in what is, unfortunately, a familiarly beleaguered position. We could start by admitting that sports betting is at least a questionable addition to American life in its current form. Understandable—and, in most cases, laudable—commitments to free markets map uneasily onto an activity in whose expansion governments are now complicit. It’s governments, not just private companies, that prosper when sports-betting companies succeed in undermining classical virtues such as restraint, moderation, and thrift. We might then take some strange solace in the fact that there may be unexpected political allies on the left just as leery of gambling. What began as a bipartisan cause could have its excesses restrained by one as well.

The realities of politics and of the current sports-betting landscape suggest a two-pronged approach. First, addressing the problems of individuals, such as those that Minnick attempts to reach through his YouTube channel. That may require more dollars, private and (gulp) public. But it is worth doing. And not just at the level of treatment. Education matters, too. Teaching children about the risks of sports gambling “has to start in elementary school,” Nower argues. “These kids that are eight and nine years old are betting with their parents. So this education

has to be at parity with the education we give them.” Second, addressing sports betting itself. A reversal of legalization does not seem to be in the cards, for now, though states—such as California and Texas—that have not yet legalized it might reconsider. Failing that, they ought at least to ensure that their legal regime resembles that of states which have legalized the practice more carefully. Ohio, for example, forbids bets linked to particular collegiate athletes (known as “prop bets”), prevents sports-betting promotion on college campuses, and mandates that all sports-betting advertisements mention in-state resources to address problem gambling.

A reduction in the nearly omnipresent entangling of sports-betting advertisements with sports broadcasts, an increase in transparency on apps (so that bettors know how much they’re up—or, likelier, down), and other, similar steps are worth pursuing. These will, in some cases, be opposed by the now firmly entrenched interests who support sports gambling, frequently with a nigh-extortive recourse to the shadows from which gambling supposedly emerged safer, and to which it could dangerously return. That may or may not be a persuasive argument against completely reversing legalization. It’s less potent when used against sensible standards for the practice. Both of these approaches, at the individual level and at the level of society itself, have something in common: They require admitting there’s a problem. That’s no easy thing. “It’s really getting people to come to that conclusion, that’s the difficult part,” Minnick says of the problem gamblers he tries to reach. This will also be true of society, particularly while we are still at the point where the apparent benefits of sports gambling are more public than the costs. The odds may be against anyone who tries to do something about all of this before it’s obvious that the latter outweighs the former. But reaching that perilous point is not a risk worth taking. It’s not just money we’re gambling with. ●





Athwart

Verities

After a hot summer day in Rome, you wonder why they didn't conquer England first. Just march straight north until things cool off. Modern Rome has its cool spots, of course—the churches provide climatological sanctuary along with the extraordinary art and hushed mood of peace eternal, and the aqueducts pipe cold potable water to the drinking fountains that might have been used by Keats. (Googling “can you get tuberculosis from a Roman fountain” . . . whew.) You can always enjoy the mist that rises from the pounding streams at the Trevi Fountain, if you can get close. On this day you could not, in fact, get close. Too many people throwing money away.

It was explained to us thus by a local: Throw a coin over your shoulder backward, and you will return to Rome. Throw two coins and you will find love. Throw three coins and you will get a divorce. The last one was new to me, and it seems odd for the seat of the church, no? It's like learning that throwing four coins assures a voluntary pregnancy termination . . . hey now, wait a minute, you're just adding new legends to make extra money. Confess: there's a Council of Trevi that rolls out new legends every few years to goose the tourist revenue. Coming in 2035: toss ten coins over your shoulder for permanent refugee status!

None of these legends are legally binding, of course, and some are self-evidently fanciful. Take the drain cover that was turned into Mr. Truth Mouth. It's a round stone disk with the face of Oceanus, dad of the river gods. It's thought that he was located in the nearby Temple of Hercules, the earliest-surviving marble temple in the city. For some reason, in the twelfth century someone rolled the drain cover over to the church across the street.

As a contemporary account notes: “When the workmen had leaned the mask of Oceanus against the wall, Benedetto di Gingoillo stated that one day a million small replicas of the face would be bought in Rome and carried all over the world, and by means of a special magical metal, would stick to the boxes in which people stored their perishable food.” He was later burned as a heretic for insisting that these replicas would be bought in “the great shed where men ascend into the heavens in galleys, winged like great storks.” But he was right!

The legend is as simple as it is implausible: You put your hand in the Mouth of Truth, and if you speak a verity, you may withdraw it unmolested. If you lie, the mouth closes and mangles your mitt. The absence of dried blood and flies, as well as the lack of hideous shrieks echoing through the loggia, indicates that either people all speak the shining truth or the story is a fiction, or perhaps the mechanism is out of order. Or it was disabled for legal reasons.

When we ambled over after a brief nod to Hercules' temple, there was a long line of well-broiled Japanese tourists, triple-masked and shaded with parasols, waiting to put their hand in the Mouth. The women posed primly with their hand on the lip, performing some sort of tourist ritual detached from the history and legend. The guide book says go here and do this and so that's what they do. Box ticked. Instagram obligation fulfilled. Out of a hundred people in line, one guy went with the bit and mimed great pain. Should've brought some ketchup packets to complete the effect.

Why is the Bocca a hit? Because in a way it reveals the essence of politics and society. We know it's just a story, but we line up to participate anyway. It's important to pretend to believe for the sake of the moment and continuity of tradition. We do so knowing that no one else believes, or believes that we believe, but the gesture respects the past, when they didn't believe it either, and as long as we all believe that we're part of something, then truth and falsehood will sort themselves out over the long run, and anyway, it's a fun story and it could be true. You never know. One day someone will put his hand in the mouth of the stone and there will be blood. It will be a big drama for a day and then people will line up again as if it never happened.

Or because it might happen again. ●



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH CLOWNS AND ALIENS

*Sights, frights, and mysterious
lights along the Extraterrestrial
Highway and beyond*

by Andrew Stuttaford

Tonopah, Nev.

Just beyond the reception area where thrill-seekers or merely the clown-curious can check in at the Clown Motel in Tonopah, Nev., a (mainly) former mining town of about 2,000 in the middle of nowhere, there is a room infested with clowns. They are not for sale, but they line the shelves, sit on the floor, and hang from the ceiling. *Please do not touch.* What madman would?

Many look bland enough in a simpering, smiling, “tears of a . . .” sort of way; others are sharp of tooth and mean of eye, not bothering to conceal the darkness that coulrophobes will suspect must lie within. Had Chucky (not a clown, to be a doorman) ►

about it) crashed the party? Certainly, his portrait was just outside (the motel has a Chucky room, too). And there is another sinister figure, Ronald McDonald, still waving, still confident that RFK Jr. will leave him untouched. Clown.

A T-shirt for sale was stamped with a roundel celebrating two Nevada territories: Clown Territory and Alien Territory. Clown Territory was marked by an image of *something*—only its inhuman hands can be seen—clutching the giant sign outside the “world famous” motel, “America’s scariest.” Alien Territory was symbolized by a “grey” making a peace sign, a flying saucer, and “Warning. Area 51.”

Equating these territories is a folie de grandeur, *circus maximus*. In what passes for reality in these parts, the clowns’ domain extends as far as the motel’s forecourt, and, possibly, the old cemetery adjacent to it, although some say the cemetery’s more restless residents have other ideas. By contrast, the alien realm covers a decent portion of the ground between Tonopah and Las Vegas, 200 miles to the southeast. Nevada, with its keen eye on the tourist trade, has honored the aliens with an Extraterrestrial Highway. Tonopah’s clowns don’t even merit a street in Tonopah.

The Extraterrestrial Highway (more prosaically State Route 375) was given its name in 1996 after growing speculation about alien-related activity in or near “Area 51.” A tantalizingly secret facility within the U.S. Air Force’s Nevada Test and Training Range, it had attracted interest and, more important, visitors to a region not known for having had many. Most were taking SR 375 to get there. Giving this tall tale “official” recognition—Roswell, N.M., has pulled off a similar stunt—can’t have hurt: Southern Nevada is now an established destination on the UFO trail, a role that has fostered and is in turn fostered by a good number of alien-themed businesses, including (Nevada!) a brothel. What happens in Amargosa Valley stays in Amargosa Valley.

The notion that “Area 51” (a.k.a. Paradise Ranch, Homey Airport, Groom Lake, Dreamland) had an extraterrestrial connection was likely set in motion by a TV interview in 1989 with Bob Lazar (Wikipedia: “American conspiracy theorist”), although there are suggestions that U.S. disinformation played its part, too. Previously, it was known, if at all, as a place where the Air Force developed and tested (man-made) experimental aircraft—U-2s, A-12s, that sort of thing. Lazar claimed to have worked on a project connected to Area 51 that involved reverse-engineering extraterrestrial technology. Strange lights in the sky had been seen around there for a long while—in all likelihood sightings of novel, sometimes exotically shaped American aircraft—but now that there was (supposedly) evidence that something alien had been going on, those lights seemed to shine in a different way.

As a myth in the making and remaking, Area 51 was perfect for its time, a secret government base deep in the desert, conspiracies deep in the government (to be fair,



DENIZENS OF THE CLOWN MOTEL, TONOPAH, NEV.

the stuff of American mistrust in any era), aliens, weird science—ours and *theirs*—and an ever-evolving legend promoted by the delusional and the entrepreneurial that was reflected and amplified in old media of all types, and, critically, new. After the launch of easy-to-use web browsers in 1993, anyone could chip in, and did, accelerating the feedback loop to eleven.

Later that year, *The X-Files* debuted. Its second episode featured a secret base (in Idaho, for variety), one of several in which, Agent Mulder tells Agent Scully, the Air Force has reverse-engineered technology from the UFO that had (*ed.*: not) crashed near Roswell in 1947. This added to the talk of a link with ufology’s ground zero that was already spreading Area 51’s fame yet further. One of the items on sale at a gas station near the Crystal Springs junction with the Extraterrestrial Highway is a baseball cap with another peace-signing alien (do they think we will fall for this?) and the slogan “51 since 47” (work at Area 51 didn’t begin until 1955).

Not far from the gas station is the latest iteration of the sign denoting the Extraterrestrial Highway’s starting point. It’s closer to the sky than when I was last here, in August 2002, when I wrote about it for NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE. Earlier versions had been abducted, or otherwise mistreated. One of them, heavily stickered, can be seen at the Alien Research Center, the “gateway to Area 51,” a minute or two on (it’s the building behind the towering alien effigy). There are no obvious indications of research activity, but an impressive selection of space-related items is for sale. Its range, extending beyond souvenirs of Area 51 and the usual alien paraphernalia to *Star Trek* and *The X-Files* to NASA, neatly demonstrates UFOs’ curious niche in the popular imagination, somewhere between fact and fiction, and, to some, the supernatural, a belief, a half belief, a puzzle, a what-if, a game, a threat, a laugh.

Disappointingly, there’s no desiccated extraterrestrial flesh to chew on at the nearby E.T. Fresh Jerky, a boxy outlet elongated by the attachment of a Western-themed alien mural. But other than its “universally admired” jerky, there are snacks and soft drinks for sale along with the inevitable alien memorabilia. An alien Donald Trump in a glass box is meant to opine for a dollar. The machine was broken, but the Trump within would sporadically speak out nonetheless.



THE TONOPAH CEMETERY



THE MIZPAH HOTEL

The hub for Area 51 intrigue is Rachel, Nev. It is the least inconvenient jumping-off point for those wanting to get as close as they can—which is not very close—to a facility where security and surveillance begin well before its perimeter. The last remaining (legal) way to catch a real-life glimpse—albeit at a distance—of a small portion of the base concludes with a bit of a hike. No thanks.

Over the years, I have driven thousands of miles through Southwestern emptiness, with the window down, no company, no AC, no radio, just silence: it's the way to go. But the Extraterrestrial Highway to Rachel stands out. There's little traffic, less cellphone cover, and the landscape hints at Elon's Martian Eden. On the bright side, the latest black mailbox to act as an Area 51 landmark has not yet been stolen.

Rachel itself is a dusty, untidy high-desert settlement—"town" would be a wild exaggeration—with a touch of Mad Max about it. It was founded in the early 1970s, and its population, which peaked at around 500 when a local tungsten mine was still in operation, is now about 50. Despite the odd excitement, such as 2019's Alienstock, one of two farcical events (the other was held at the Alien Research Center) tied to viral chatter of a mass "storming" of Area 51, not much seems to have changed since 2002. The Quik Pik convenience store has been replaced by the Alien Cowpoke, which sells snacks and alien memorabilia and features some alien décor, too.

The automatic station that monitors the weather and radiation levels (they're fine), a reminder of past nuclear tests hereabouts, is still doing what it does. And the hub's hub, the Little A'Le'Inn (formerly the Rachel Bar and Grill), renamed and repurposed when, very early on in this saga, the owners shrewdly saw the way things were going, is still serving Alien Burgers. And it is still selling alien tchotchkes. I don't remember seeing the Alien Autopsy (peach schnapps, Irish cream, grenadine) on the menu before but gave it a go this time. It hit the spot. Here and there the décor has changed. A different alien is peering out of the window, a couple of new ones are out in front, and the anti-Clinton materials have disappeared. The saucer still hangs from the tow truck. I ask one of the inn's staff whether she has seen any UFOs. Just "lights," she replies.

I stay overnight, my room in a mobile home that's set up for three. Only one other guest is there. He drives from site to site and enjoys the conventions—McMinnville, Ore., that's the one, he says, but concedes he has yet to go to Roswell's. Madness! Night falls. I go for a wander, running into two Californians, in from L.A. on a lark. The heavens are open for revelation, a gorgeous sprinkling of stars. One of them is moving erratically (no, no, I had only one Alien Autopsy). Still a staunch skeptic, I decide it's Starlink. There's the sound of a jet at high speed. "Low-flying aircraft," warn signs by the highway.

The next day I cross into clown territory, checking into a room renowned for its pictures of the clown-Elvis, Clownvis to those in the know, writer and singer of "Clown Motel":

Well, I know where I'll go baby when I die,
I know where I'm gonna spend my afterlife when I die,
I'm gonna haunt the Clown Motel . . .

Clownvis happily lives on, but the motel (supposedly haunted, after all) cautions that the room "has also been known to attract a malevolent entity who has a tendency of waking our guests in the early hours of the morning." Splendid!

The night darkens, and so, in another sense, do the clown murals and the tall clown cutouts attached to the building. A few of us are gathered in the evocative old cemetery, the one by the motel. It's where the father of the founders (two siblings) is buried. The motel was established as a tribute to him. His clown collection is said to be the nucleus of the current horde. When the haunting began is unclear, but, channeling the verve of the Area 51 state, the next owner appreciated that ►

spookiness could sell, as do his successors, who are planning to expand the place and its supernatural themes.

We're on the ghost tour. Some have rented the electromagnetic field meters that reputedly help reveal the presence of various types of . . . entity. Nothing much happens, but afterward I encounter one of our group sitting by his RV, working on a computer hooked up to some device. This, he explains, gives more precise readings. Had I noticed the biggest clown, the one near the registration area? I had. Nasty. He gestures toward a black blob on the screen. Nasty.

I walk along the side of the road toward the desert, searching for darker skies. A large truck approaches, giving off an eerie sound. A cargo of cattle, heading nowhere good. After a while, I return to the motel. The man from the RV is back with the dead, taking more readings. I sleep soundly, undisturbed by any entity, as the Clownvises look on.

Our ghost-hunting guide had told us that the motel was not haunted. The spirits from the cemetery just liked to visit. I mentioned that my next stop was the Mizpah Hotel. Now *that*, she informed me, was haunted, not least by a grim presence in the basement. Less than 24 hours later, I'm in that warren, the site of some vintage unpleasantness (two miners moonlighting as bank robbers, murdered by a third), with, at points, the look of a serial killer's lair. We've all been issued EMF meters, our guide has dowsing rods, and one of our party sports a large cross. He's too young to have seen enough horror movies to have learned that this rarely does the trick. Lights are flickering on many meters, not mine.

The Mizpah was built in 1907 (its name is a Hebrew word borrowed from a Bible verse and Tonopah's most productive mine) as a luxury hotel befitting a town that had suddenly become the biggest producer of silver in the U.S. Its five stories made it, jointly with the building opposite, the tallest in Nevada. Contrary to legend, Wyatt Earp never kept bar in the Mizpah and Howard Hughes never got married there (he opted for the other motel built by the siblings who would subsequently send in the clowns). Jack Dempsey was (probably) never one of the hotel's bouncers. But surely there was a "Lady in Red," a prostitute (or maybe someone's mistress) who went by the name of Rose, murdered in her boudoir on the fifth floor, in either 1914 or during the 1920s? Let's just say there's little evidence that she ever lived.

That has not, allegedly, stopped her from enjoying a busy afterlife, roaming around the hotel, leaving the occasional single pearl on pillows, riding the elevator, and, along with a team of resident specters only a few archetypes short of the Village People, generally doing her bit to persuade *USA Today's* readers to vote the Mizpah America's top haunted hotel in 2018. "This acknowledgment means so much to me," said the Mizpah's co-owner, half of the husband-and-wife team that acquired and renovated the then-closed hotel in 2011. There's a lavish,



very red Lady in Red Suite on the fifth floor: "You'll be haunted by the comfort and grandeur of its appointments." The hotel sells a Lady in Red Zinfandel. A note to the suspicious: Reports that the Mizpah is haunted long predate 2011.

Our ghost hunt reaches the fifth floor. No show from the lady. The guide tells us the third floor—my floor—is next. To the amazement of my parents, who over the years had somewhat carelessly bought no fewer than three purportedly haunted houses, I don't believe in ghosts, despite some hard-to-explain moments. Nevertheless, I was keen, very keen, to hear who or what was meant to be on the third floor. I asked the guide. Two young children, apparently. Footsteps, some laughter, some childish chatter, that's all. Ah.

Souvenirs are for sale by the registration desk. Hoodies proclaim their wearers to have been "an official ghost hunter of the Mizpah Hotel" or to have been "ghosted at the Mizpah." I went on the basic ghost tour, but others, more elaborate, are on offer. Ghosts, like UFOs, are good business, and the challenge they pose to the nature of belief is not entirely dissimilar, even if the stakes are more personal, and therefore higher. Establishing that extraterrestrial beings have come calling would be quite something (between one-third and two-thirds of Americans claim to believe that they have) but ghostly proof of an afterlife would hit, quite literally, closer to home. Oh look, my late parents are laughing at me. According to a 2021 YouGov poll, approximately 40 percent of Americans believe in ghosts. On the other hand, according to a Pew survey the same year, around twice as many believe in life beyond the grave. This ought to make it easier to accept the existence of ghosts, and yet they remain objects of unease as well as fascination, possibly benign, possibly not—an unresolved question. Most of the participants in the Clown Motel's ghost hunt admitted they would never stay there. In movies and on TV, evil ghosts appear to have the upper, grasping hand.

I retrace my journey to Las Vegas from Tonopah ("no gas station for 163 miles": this is not electric vehicle country). Over lunch at the Little A'Le'Inn, I notice a bottle of Lady in Red guarded by a tiny Captain Kirk.

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS



DETAIL OF PORTRAIT OF ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE (1850), BY THÉODORE CHASSÉRIAU

BOOK REVIEW

The Sovereignty of Excellence

DANIEL J. MAHONEY

True Conservatism: Reclaiming Our Humanity in an Arrogant Age,
by Anthony T. Kronman (Yale, 328 pp., \$30)

At the beginning of his well-written, erudite, and humane book, Anthony T. Kronman, now approaching a half century of teaching at Yale Law School, suggests that contemporary conservatism “has lost its way.” “True conservatism,” he argues, must above all remain faithful to the “sovereignty of excellence.” It must not be loud and shrill, defining itself by what it rejects or, even worse, emulating the frenzied anger of the party of negation. Nor should it lose sight of enduring verities because of an inordinate preoccupation with short-term political effectiveness. Kronman wants conservatism to avoid vulgarity and an excessive preoccupation with quotidian politics, and to place at its center the ennobling ideals of civilization.

The meaning and relevance of conservatism in an age marked by the unremitting conflict between an ever “more strident and self-assured” radicalism dedicated to the repudiation of our civilized inheritance, and an increasingly “ferocious response” to such “moral madness” from its populist critics, puts philosophically minded conservatives in a difficult position. Kronman’s moderating counsels are a welcome contribution. Yet he arguably desires a conservatism that is too “intellectual” and not spirited enough. No less a “conservative” authority than Aristotle argued that anger in the right manner, at the right time, and for the right reason is “in accord with virtue,” with a role to play in defending against assaults on one’s own and on what is true, good, and beautiful. The great conservative thinker and agent, Edmund Burke, likewise showed that one can be both wise and spirited in a way that is principled, firm, and judicious. Kronman’s conservatism runs slightly too cool for our heated times.

To his credit, Kronman does not hesitate to take on progressivist shibboleths that in his view have degraded the culture, corrupted our politics, and undermined truly liberal education. Early in the book, and building on his 2019 work, *The Assault on Academic Excellence*, he takes aim at intellectual and academic elites who are incapable of explaining “their own commitment to excellence and refinement in a democratic culture.” “Bullied by an aggressive and unstable egalitarianism,” this secular clerisy has “done massive damage to themselves, to the men and women who rely on them, and to their country.”

Kronman forcefully rejects the conceit that the “remaining problems” facing the rich, still largely free societies of the modern West “are mainly due to the half-hearted application of our enlightened ideals” of equality and freedom. Without undue polemics, ►

Kronman challenges the transformation of equality from a good, even an inestimably precious one, into the highest good, “sovereign over every other.” The modern prejudice toward dogmatic egalitarianism “makes it difficult to justify the place of institutions of high culture which honor excellence and promote the enjoyment of beauty.” The crucial link “between equality of opportunity and brilliance of achievement” is erased, as is the “ancient truth that freedom is for the sake of excellence, not the other way around.” Not surprisingly, these institutions are now dedicated to moral and cultural “deconstruction” and the celebration of “transgression.”

In addressing this debasement of equality, Kronman takes as his guide Alexis de Tocqueville, who recognized both that modern democracy was “more just” than the stratified aristocracies of the European Old Regime, and that this in no way required “the extension of the principle of equality,” perfectly legitimate within its own sphere, “beyond the realm of politics and law to that of cultural fabrication and enjoyment,” or to the higher spheres of the soul. For Tocqueville, democracy, even of the most decent kind, tends to encourage “a leveling of appraisal and appreciation in which distinctions of beauty and character become more difficult to appreciate and see,” and he understood that the denial of a “hierarchy among persons and things”—of genuine gradations of beauty, virtue, and character in the human soul and the human world—“can only produce a world that is thin, banal, unfulfilling—inhuman in an elemental sense.” In this way, he anticipated Nietzsche’s critique of the degraded “Last Man,” who looks up to nothing noble or great and prides himself on his mediocrity, as well as the danger of “tutelary despotism”—a “providential state” that spares human beings “the trouble of thinking and the pain of living.” In contrast to these two terrible potential outcomes, Tocqueville was an eloquent advocate of what he called, in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), “liberty under God and the laws.” The great American exemplar of such liberty, as Kronman shows,

was Abraham Lincoln, who provided a model for conjugating the truth of equality, the requirements of human excellence, and high prudence in applying the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence. Kronman follows Tocqueville and Lincoln in refusing to choose between democracy and human greatness.

The second modernist prejudice that Kronman challenges is the one that sees in the past “only a storehouse of resources to be used for present needs.” Such a view is marked by ingratitude and a unilateral preference “for the values we now hold.” Kronman’s critique of this naïve confidence in the present, of the living over the dead, and of the blind faith in inevitable progress that informs it, leads him to a sustained encounter with Burke. Kronman respects Burke and draws on him freely. At the same time, he detects in Burke an anti-philosophical spirit, an excessive suspicion of “speculative abstraction as a threat to political order.” But Kronman goes too far when he states categorically that Burke was “at best indifferent and often hostile toward” philosophy. Contemptuous of much of excessively skeptical or excessively rationalistic modern philosophy, surely. But Kronman does not sufficiently appreciate that Burke’s defense of sound practice against corrosive theory was in fact fulfilling one of the highest and noblest practical tasks of political philosophy. Burke’s attack on tyrannical ideological abstractions and militant, politicized atheism was rooted in a keen understanding of the centrality of prudence, or practical wisdom, to free, decent, and civilized human life. Prudence has epistemic value precisely because it is attentive to both the concrete circumstances confronting citizens and statesmen and to the reason implicit in sound tradition and ordinary experience. A critique that shows the limits of a certain kind of theorizing is among the most needful things in a world saturated, as ours is, with tyrannical abstractions and clichés. Kronman’s declaration that “Burke’s celebrated paean to prudence is not very useful as a maxim of conservative thought” confuses this high prudence with mere caution or calculation.

Still, Kronman acknowledges the “many Burkean themes” to be found in the pages of his book: “friendship for the dead,”

Kronman’s democratized modification of Burke’s call for reverence toward the wisdom and “the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth” passed on by our forebears; the “good of patriotism” (a theme intelligently explored in a chapter of the book); “the value of delay”; and above all distrust of ideological abstractions.

Burke and Kronman also share a respect for religion and for the “claims of eternity.” But Kronman is rather too sure that Burke addressed the Christian religion mainly, if not exclusively, from the point of view of the statesman. My own view is that Burke was a Christian of conviction, an adherent of natural law tethered by prudence in the political sphere, and a keen opponent of atheism on religious, philosophical, and political grounds. “Atheism by establishment” filled him with horror as a Christian, an Englishman, and a partisan of Western civilization. The three are not exclusive.

For his part, Kronman defends “the eternal and divine” against facile relativism and dogmatic atheism. His book is filled with elegant and thought-provoking passages about “the longing for a connection to eternity that is part of any recognizably human existence.” He sees in the Christian religion, specifically, a salutary “corrective” to the aristocratic bias of classical philosophy, with charity crucially imparting “humility and concern for others.”

But he is not always sure-footed in his discussion of these matters. In a particularly revealing discussion, Kronman claims that the Christian “reinterpretation of transcendence as will” (a strange rendering of the Logos of John 1:1–18 who gives meaning and structure to creation) “distorts the explanatory order of values and impoverishes our lives by discrediting the idea of excellence as a standard of judgment,” since excellence is in the end subordinated to equality (before God). In place of the Divine Word, Kronman installs the Divine Will—opaque and all-powerful, if all-just. Kronman goes on to argue that the Christian “distortion” is clearest in the “disenchanted heirs of Christian belief who today aggressively defend the priority of autonomy in strictly secular terms and wear their contempt for the sovereignty of excellence as a badge

of anti-pride”—that is, the effectual truth of Christianity is to be found in those who most aggressively reject it by declaring war on the created natural order!

Yet any thoughtful adherent of orthodox Christianity will readily agree with Kronman that such desiccated appeals to human “autonomy” are “weightless in comparison with a single page of Homer and Plato!” I am sure that on some level he knows this. Christian affirmations of human equality before the divine have a long history of admiring and engaging the pagan classics. And this Christian affirms with Kronman the truth and limits of justice as equality, the fact that “equal things are on a par,” and that “beauty is another name for excellence.” Kronman’s questionable theology is thus a dubious extension of a generally persuasive understanding of moral and political things. He is right to argue that “what happens in time” must ultimately be “explained by its relation to something that is not in time at all.” And as he notes, the West has provided a full range of options, from Plato’s Form of the Good to Nietzsche’s Eternal Return.

Kronman himself opts for Spinoza’s natural theology as the most compelling way of reconciling eternity and human achievements, philosophy and conservatism. But when the world is God, as it is for Spinoza, religion and atheism become indistinguishable. It was the same Spinoza who denied free will and insisted in his *Ethics* that man is in no way “a kingdom within the kingdom.” In light of this, where in Spinoza is there room for a spiritual soul that is the home of agency, consciousness, responsibility, and the “divine spark” in man? All this has no place in a world defined by pure necessity and mechanical causation.

Kronman is also silent about the fact that his beloved Tocqueville detested his beloved Spinoza. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville berated Spinoza for believing in the “eternity of the world” (thus banishing a providential God in one fell swoop) and the French philosopher Cabanis, another materialist, for asserting that “the brain secretes thought.” Tocqueville recognized that human dignity could not survive pantheism—the conflation of God,

human beings, and non-human nature—because neither God nor man can survive their collapse into an “immense” natural being that has no room for individuality or personhood, for what the tradition calls the *imago dei*.

These difficulties aside, Kronman has written a sparkling book, a tribute to the essential connection between true conservatism and deep engagement with, and respect for, “the best that has been thought and said.” His learning is impressive, his writing pellucid, his ratiocination lacking neither courage nor civic spirit. As a corrective to one-sided conservative activism, Kronman has written a book whose best moments might even persuade inquisitive conservatives and lukewarm liberals. And if Kronman and Tocqueville do not agree about whether Spinoza can provide the metaphysical grounds of conservatism or of a compelling natural theology, Kronman more than succeeds in shining valuable light on the Tocquevillean epigraph that opens the book: “It is necessary for all those who are interested in the future of democratic societies to unite, and for all in concert to make continuous efforts to spread within these societies a taste for the infinite, a sentiment of greatness, and a love of immaterial pleasures.”

That is no mean achievement on either the theoretical or the practical plane. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Out of Focus

CHRISTINE ROSEN

The Sirens’ Call: How Attention Became the World’s Most Endangered Resource, by Chris Hayes (Penguin, 336 pp., \$32)

The crisis of attention is a subject of long-standing public interest. New technologies, from the printing press to the novel to the television, have sparked critical analyses of the potential dangers and

rewards of how humans spend their limited time.

The latest analyst is MSNBC host Chris Hayes, whose book, *The Sirens’ Call*, takes its title from the *Odyssey*. “The Sirens of lore and the sirens of the urban streetscape both compel our attention against our will,” Hayes writes. “And that experience, having our mind captured by that intrusive wail, is now our permanent state, our lot in life. We are never free of the sirens’ call.” Circe’s role in the *Odyssey* is to warn Odysseus of the danger of listening to the call of the Sirens. Mine is to warn readers who might be interested in the subject of attention to take theirs somewhere other than Hayes’s book.

The problem begins with how Hayes frames the question of attention—namely, as one of moral panic rather than moral choice. “The debate over our digital lives, at least as it’s been reflected in the discourse, basically comes down to this: Is the development of a global, ubiquitous, chronically connected social media world more like comic books or cigarettes?” Later, describing the way our attention has been hijacked, he adds, “The reason our behavior has changed is because someone has taken something from us. Someone has subtly, insidiously, coerced us.” This framing assumes an absence of discipline, virtue, or free will that people might cultivate to resist such coercion.

This approach might work if Hayes delivered on the argument he claims to be making. “What I want to argue here is that the scale of transformation we’re experiencing is far more vast and more intimate than even the most panicked critics have understood,” he writes. Unfortunately, the book is merely a rehash of what other, better technology critics have said more deftly.

For example, his frequent use of the phrase “attention capitalism” borrows heavily from the much more rigorous investigations of Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Although Hayes enjoys quoting the occasional philosopher, readers will find far richer philosophical explorations of attention in Matthew Crawford’s *The World Beyond Your Head*, or in D. Graham Burnett’s essays. They can find greater practical ►

wisdom in Cal Newport's *Deep Work* and Oliver Burkeman's *Four Thousand Weeks*. As for the pursuit of attention, Nicholas Carr's recent book, *Superbloom* (reviewed in NATIONAL REVIEW's March 2025 issue), is a much deeper and more rewarding discussion of the history and cultural import of the cultivation of social attention—and the many technologies that have abetted it.

Nor need anyone read Hayes's summary of the great technology critic Neil Postman. Just go read Postman, who rewards rereading more than Hayes's book ever will. You will also be spared Hayes's dismissive asides. "There's something more than a bit 'I don't even own a TV' snobby about the Postman argument, to be sure," Hayes writes about Postman's 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. There is something sophomoric about Hayes's inability to respect his intellectual elders.

As a summary of the work of others, the book might be useful to students who have never encountered the literature on attention; alas, it is otherwise baggy and repetitive. Hayes likes to tell readers what he is trying to do rather than doing it. Throat-clearing phrases such as "What I want to argue here" and "What I'm arguing here" litter the narrative. He frequently repeats points made just a few pages earlier, like a glorified SparkNotes summary ("So, to review what we've established . . ."). A book that makes a sustained, compelling argument shouldn't require an author to drop endless gideposts.

Many of the examples are shopworn: Hayes likens smartphones to slot machines and reminds readers of the Screen Time function on our iPhones. The book ricochets between bland sweeping statements, such as, "Every single aspect of human life across the broadest categories of human organization is being reoriented around the pursuit of attention," to odd, unnecessary tangents, such as his comparison of a Flemish missionary's experience of drinking fermented horse milk made by 13th-century Tartars to our contemporary attention crisis. And Hayes frequently lapses into the forced, casual patter too common in nonfiction

writing these days: "That's pretty wild!" he gushes, after describing a well-known social science experiment. "And boy do they try," he writes about technology companies eager to capture our time.

There are moments when Hayes makes sharp observations but fails to explore them further. He notes, for example, "The Western intellectual tradition spent millennia maintaining a conceptual boundary between public and private—embedding it in law and politics, norms and etiquette, theorizing and reinscribing it." How this breakdown of public and private intersects with the rise of demands on individuals' attention is worth exploring, but Hayes merely says, "With the help of a few tech firms, we basically tore it down in about a decade." This is a missed opportunity, and also not quite correct. Before Facebook, there was the state, which encroached on family decision-making, structuring and rewarding and punishing various private behaviors via incentives in the tax code and the passage of laws and regulations. Hayes does not appear to be interested in the challenges of character formation in a world where long-standing social institutions have fractured or where the state has assumed the role once played by the family.

Also worth greater attention is his use of the idea of "alienation" as the best description of our current moment: "The core of alienation is a subjective experience of something that should be part of us seeming foreign or alien to us. . . . It's a sensation that ebbs and flows but persists, looming and ubiquitous." This slightly clunky description hints at a much more interesting analysis of the formation of a sense of self in the modern world. "Maybe there are multiple selves that want different things—a self that wants to read, a self that wants to scroll," Hayes suggests. But he takes the exploration no further. Instead, he blames capitalism: "The worker under capitalism is haunted by a subjective feeling of alienation." He argues that it is fundamentally alienating to live in a world where one's attention can be bought and sold but offers readers little guidance as to what to do about this situation.

This might be because he has trouble seeing beyond his own immediate

surroundings. "Every waking moment of my work life revolves around answering the question of how we capture attention," he writes. As a cable news television host, he has interesting insights about, for example, the power of the crawl at the bottom of the television screen to help supply the unceasing demand to hold viewers' attention, night after night. His digressions on the meaning of fame are among the most interesting parts of the book: "I can speak with some expertise on the inescapable strangeness, the constant vertigo, of the experience of being known by strangers." He adds, "I have, as a core constitutive feature of my personality, the desire for an audience. I want people to pay attention to me, and more than that I want them to like me." Readers should appreciate his honesty and self-awareness here; it is a rare commodity among denizens of cable news.

Hayes is not unaware that he himself is a member of the class of "attention capitalists" he decries. Perhaps this is why he feels the need to invoke Karl Marx so often, as an expiation of his own capitalist sins. Discussing Marx's theory of the alienation of labor, Hayes writes, "Even today, these words feel fresh." Unfortunately for the reader, by the umpteenth mention of Marx it feels more like being trapped in a college dorm room with a newly declared philosophy major. He cites Marx so often that at one point late in the book he feels compelled to inform the reader that he's not a Marxist. It might have been more interesting if he were.

There is, of course, plenty of partisan signaling in the book to satisfy his cable news fans. Nearly 200 pages in, we are told, "It is, sadly, at this point in the book that I am forced to talk at some length about Donald Trump." Here Hayes lapses into the hero-martyr role familiar to MSNBC viewers: "I've spent more than eight years of my one precious life covering Donald Trump basically full time," he laments, without noting that since 2016, he and his MSNBC peers have been among the biggest winners of Trump's redistribution of capital of the attention economy.

The problem isn't primarily Hayes's partisanship, about which he is forthright throughout the book. It is that it leads to

inattentive blindness on his part about the deeper human impulse to direct others' attention and the power our technologies give us to do that at scale. He decries the attention-seeking "trolling" of Trump and Elon Musk but calls Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez "a serious, smart politician" who "also has a true gift for attention." Anyone who has suffered through an AOC Instagram reel knows her "true gift" is attention-seeking.

Likewise, the book has nothing to say about the fact that a Democratic administration under President Joe Biden worked with social media platforms to suppress the speech of ordinary Americans during the pandemic and direct their attention away from information critical of the administration's policies. Or that the category of "misinformation" has been weaponized to political ends, such as when mainstream media outlets, dutifully parroting the White House, denounced as "cheap fakes" images indicating Biden's cognitive and physical impairments.

For all his concerns about the coercion of our attention, Hayes is in an odd position. He is a member of the coercive class, tasked with getting as many people as possible to keep their eyes glued to the screen. Yet he is also among the cohort of enthusiastic but naïve early believers in the goodness of the internet: "When I was in my early twenties, I and so many of my cohort truly believed in the power of the Internet to fundamentally alter the power dynamics of American political life. We were angry, sometimes despairing, but we also felt that, at least at a technological level, the future belonged to us." He is far less optimistic now.

Hayes is clearly a thoughtful writer whose concern for the world of fractured attention that his children will inherit is genuine and heartfelt—and yet, too often he avoids the tougher questions about *why* we choose to give our attention to the things we do, and how we might redirect it to better ends. "How do you capture people's attention?" Hayes asks at one point in the book. "First you need to grab attention. . . . And once you have their attention, you need to hold it." Unfortunately, despite its best efforts, this book doesn't deliver on that advice. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Dangling Men

NICK RIPATRAZONE

The Last Supper: Art, Faith, Sex, and Controversy in the 1980s, by Paul Elie
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 496 pp., \$33)

In 1961, Flannery O'Connor sent a question to Roslyn Barnes, "the only scientist I am acquainted with," about an intriguing phrase from the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The Jesuit paleontologist wrote that "everything that rises must converge," and while O'Connor could "easily see its moral, historical and evolutionary significance," she wondered whether it was also "a true proposition in physics."

O'Connor was taken with the French priest. "He was alive to everything there is to be alive to and in the right way," she noted later that year. His enigmatic claim became the title of one of her most famous stories; she applied his proposition "to a certain situation in the Southern states & indeed in all the world."

Her curiosity was inborn. Fiction writers flock to research like the rest of us toward oxygen. Save for the blessed epiphanies that surprise us in life (and can never be planned), few things are as generative for fiction writers as wide, deep research. A good writer will forget most of it, of course; a story is not a treatise. All the writer needs is a concept or theme that captures a moment.

O'Connor was drawn toward convergence. For Teilhard, it was "in the nature of things [that] everything that is faith must rise," and ultimately the Holy Spirit would wed believers and unbelievers alike. Convergence is a writing locus for Paul Elie, a former editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Robert Giroux edited O'Connor at Harcourt, Brace & Company, and she followed him to Farrar, Straus). The theme anchored his first book, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, a deft consideration of how the lives

of O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy, and Dorothy Day demonstrate that "art, life, and religious faith converge."

Among Elie's gifts is a knack for noticing, and capturing, how disparate lives draw together in ways that reverberate with mystery and power. His new book, *The Last Supper: Art, Faith, Sex, and Controversy in the 1980s*, is another story of convergence, but on an even more ambitious scale: a frenetic decade in the world's post-secular nexus, New York City. Elie characterizes the city in the early Eighties as chaotic, teeming with celebrity nightlife: "discos, launch parties, black limousines, lines of cocaine on the counters of mirrored bathrooms." The city was "defined by squalor and decay," a place "famed for hedonism," and also "a hive of asceticism" where "many thousands of people lived alone."

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, Elie framed his four mid-century Catholics as rather ordinary in appearance, a quartet who "don't look like people who might make you want to change your life." Yet they "glimpsed a way of life in their reading and evoked it in their writing, so as to make their readers yearn to go and do likewise." In *The Last Supper*, Elie starts and stays big—with celebrities, or perhaps the more traditional and accurate moniker: stars.

His decade is framed by two guest appearances on *Saturday Night Live*: Bob Dylan, in 1979, and Sinéad O'Connor, in 1992. Dylan was "*the* voice of the sixties counterculture," but now, at the end of the 1970s, "a born-again Christian, marking his conversion with a set of songs dealing with spiritual warfare and holy submission." His new persona and project were cryptic in purpose and yet clearly the sign of a new, complex artistic mode. Sinéad O'Connor's appearance is infamous: "She produced a photograph of Pope John Paul II, held it up the way a priest elevates the Eucharist, tore it in half and then again and again, scattering the pieces on the stage."

A provocative action, certainly. Yet also an emblematic one. In the epoch that Elie frames, "figures in what we call popular culture engaged questions of faith and art and the ways they fit together with an intensity seldom seen before or since." Elie is especially drawn to figures who are "crypto-religious," a term he borrows ►

from the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. In the final weeks of 1958, Thomas Merton reached out to Miłosz to praise the poet's book *The Captive Mind*. "The lamentable, pitiable emptiness of so much Catholic writing, including much of my own," Merton wrote, "is only too evident." The priest thanked Miłosz for his work and hoped to offer something in return: "The most obvious thing I can give you is the deep and friendly interest of a kindred mind and a will disposed for receptiveness and collaboration. And of course, my prayers."

It took over a month for Merton's letter to go from his Cistercian monastery to Miłosz, who was in Paris. The poet was thankful for the monk's effusive praise—albeit a little embarrassed. He responded with a qualification: "I have always been crypto-religious and in a conflict with the political aspect of Polish Catholicism." Their correspondence continued for years, and Miłosz returned to the phrase. "I cannot proclaim myself a Catholic, if I do not know whether I am one," he explained, affirming that he found himself bereft in a "world of contingencies." He wondered: "How many people in the world today are crypto-religious?"

Elie's answer: Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, William Kennedy, Toni Morrison, Leonard Cohen, Patti Smith, Madonna, Prince, Bruce Springsteen, and Martin Scorsese, among many others. (Most, but not all, of Elie's subjects in the book are Catholic.) For those who lived through the 1980s, the cast rushes back. They were not mere cameos; they were the central characters.

Elie offers his own gloss on Miłosz's term: "Crypto-religious art is work that incorporates religious words and images and motifs but expresses something other than conventional belief." Such work "raises the question of what the person who made it believes, so that the question of what it means to believe is crucial to the work's effect—so that as you see it, hear it, read it, listen to it, you wind up reflecting on your own beliefs."

Crypto-religious artists enact belief in unorthodox ways. For these artists,

"prayer, scripture, image, and ritual are material they claim as their own via the imagination and seek to complicate and deepen, not to do away with." Across various genres and styles, these crypto-religious artists "proudly cite their religious roots; they count themselves as believers and regard their work as the expression of convictions formed through intense self-scrutiny." Sometimes "seen as 'bad,' they see themselves and their approach to religion as more faithful to the core truths of faith than the clerics, and they hope the public will agree."

These are big claims. Elie anchors them in specific lives, including his own. In the late 1980s, he was a student at Fordham:

If I look closely, I can locate myself in that moment: riding the D train with *The Village Voice* and the *Pensées* in a black messenger bag, . . . going to Mass at Corpus Christi Church near Columbia University, . . . brooding in the medieval rooms of the Metropolitan Museum—a Catholic dangling man, caught in the disjunct between belief as it was taught and written about and belief as it was enacted in the city."

He is a minor member of a large cast, though one that never feels scant. His most persuasive figures, though, are Warhol and Scorsese. Warhol "saw and felt presence everywhere," including "the New York City of Madison Avenue, Checker cabs, Coca-Cola signs, and tabloid newspapers." Elie explains that Warhol's "attention to the 'presence' of the ordinary" put him "squarely in a line of twentieth-century writers and artists with Christian preoccupations—made him traditional, not outré."

Elie's consideration of Warhol is a welcome rejoinder to Blake Gopnik's 2020 biography of the artist. Gopnik characterized Warhol's belief as superficial. Elie corrects this mischaracterization. He mines Warhol's diary to show the centrality of the artist's faith. Warhol was often praying, and "his sense of religious observance was strong enough for him to be upset when it was violated." (Warhol's last hire at his Factory, Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni, once told me, "Almost everyone who remained relevant in Andy's life was Catholic.")

Warhol's driven, almost frenzied approach toward a commissioned series on *The Last Supper* propels Elie's book forward. Warhol was a tireless worker, and the Last Supper was his ultimate subject. "In the Catholic scheme of things, the Last Supper is the moment in the gospels when the ordinary is identified as extraordinary once and for all," Elie writes. "When Christ blesses bread and wine and tells the disciples, 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood,' he affirms the goodness of ordinary things, as God had done in incarnating him as a carpenter's son at the edge of the Roman Empire—as an ordinary man."

Juxtaposition is perhaps Elie's trademark literary move. When writing of Scorsese, he offers a formative contrast: "The vast interior of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mott Street was a contrast to the family's apartment on Elizabeth, the Latin Mass a counterpoint to their mealtime banter." Crypto-religious artists are fluent in authentic faith. Elie is especially cogent here: "Firm beliefs have softened, rituals been left behind, faith in a personal God thinned out or chipped away—but the sense of a supernatural presence remains, often made more intense by its separation from formal religion." Scorsese "depicted the old neighborhood as an underworld where the eternal verities of fall and redemption were still in play." Elie identifies the Catholic themes in Scorsese's earliest works, including *Mean Streets*, where Harvey Keitel's character discovers—after going to confession—that "he was going to have to work out the terms of salvation or damnation in the mean streets, not in the cool quiet of the church."

For Elie, controversy is endemic to religion because of religion's "power to divide us inwardly against ourselves and to set us apart from one another in society." Elie reminds us that controversy comes from "the Latin *controversus*, 'turned against.'" True controversy is not pomp; "it's a personal state as much as a social one, rooted, for many of us, in the recognition that we are controverts—people turned against ourselves." Here we might revise one of the most famous dictums of W. B. Yeats: we make, out of the quarrel with ourselves, faith. ●

Deconstructing Woody

PETER TONGUETTE

Woody Allen: A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham, by Patrick McGilligan
(Harper, 848 pp., \$50)

Recently, in need of an undemanding laugh, I turned to the directorial debut of America's preeminent canceled filmmaker. In his 1969 film *Take the Money and Run*, Woody Allen is Virgil Starkwell, a social misfit whose attempts to establish himself as a bank robber are foiled by bad planning and, in the case of a haphazardly written holdup note, shoddy penmanship. The mockumentary-style film operates on the principle that the more absurd the situation, the more gravely it should be presented. For example, the deathly serious-sounding narrator describes the birth of Virgil's son this way: "They name the boy Jonathan Ralph Starkwell, after Virgil's mother"—implying without even the hint of a wink that Virgil's mother is named "Jonathan Ralph." Later, while on the run, Virgil and his family are said to be "living like hunted animals," the visual proof of which is offered when Virgil, whom Allen plays with stoical blankness, produces a slice of deli meat that he has been keeping in his wallet.

Alas, at this late date, most people are less familiar with Woody Allen the Hilarious than with Woody Allen the Accused. Undeniably, Allen transgressed against familial boundaries and convention when, sometime in 1991, he pursued a romance with Soon-Yi Previn, the grown adopted daughter of the woman who had served as his chief muse and personal companion, Mia Farrow. But there is little evidence to support Farrow's allegation, leveled the following year, that Allen had sexually abused their own seven-year-old adopted daughter, Dylan—

a charge that Allen has unswervingly denied.

Yet because our cultural commissars have decreed Allen guilty of all alleged misdeeds, the act of enjoying his comedies has become plainly subversive. Cancel culture types claim that to laugh at someone is to "normalize" them. So to acknowledge that Allen can be side-splitting is to cede too much.

In his new biography, Patrick McGilligan furthers this dangerous business of normalizing the once-honored filmmaker—by treating him as just another biographical subject. The most remarkable feature of this biography is its ordinariness: its subject is dealt with simply as an interesting showbiz figure, albeit one marked by scandal. With his dutiful research, instinct for telling details, and clear, functional prose, McGilligan is Allen's ideal biographer for the present environment: neither partisan nor judge. This evenhandedness will not surprise readers familiar with the author's volumes on Hollywood subjects ranging from Fritz Lang to Alfred Hitchcock to Robert Altman. He has seen it all. "I am long past dividing ordinary people, much less famous movie people, into sinner or saint categories," McGilligan writes. (Full disclosure: McGilligan is a longtime acquaintance who serves as the editor of a series of film books to which I have contributed.)

That is not to say that McGilligan writes unaware of the times. In a prologue-like "fanfare," he notes that Allen, famously fearful of his earthly demise, has defied one very real kind of death—"the living death," as McGilligan puts it, "of being declared an 'unperson' by the Woke Generation, the most militant of whose representatives do not care if he has ever been charged or convicted of a crime."

In both its fresh analysis and its effective restatement of the facts of Allen's well-documented life, this book is a bulwark against its subject's cancellation. Born to Jewish parents in New York in 1935, Allan Stewart Konigsberg seems to have been a relatively unexceptional boy who developed rather distinctive interests, including the plays of Kaufman and Hart, which he encountered in the third grade; magic, which he pursued into

adolescence with his younger sister, Letty, functioning as his assistant in shows at the East Midwood Jewish Center; jazz, sports, and, of course, motion pictures. After seeing Bob Hope in the comedy *The Road to Morocco*, Allen knew "from that moment on exactly what I wanted to do with my life."

With this precocious mix of influences, and without the benefit of serious formal education (he spent a brief, unsuccessful spell at New York University), Allen managed to construct a career remarkably free of compromise. He has spent his life plying his trade—as a stand-up comic, television writer, and gag man (whose early contributions to a *New York Daily Mirror* column include such lines as: "This ugly girl had a mink coat on, but the only trouble was that she wasn't wearing it . . . she was growing it"). Long before he started hoarding awards (he has four Oscars), Allen was acquiring fortune, glory, and an education in taste. By the mid-1960s, McGilligan writes, he was earning a weekly nightclub salary of \$1,000, which he could supplement with a further \$1,500 by providing other comics with dribs and drabs of material. A few years later, he accepted a then-astonishing \$66,000 for his rather frivolous work on 1966's parody *What's Up, Tiger Lily?*—"easy money," as McGilligan puts it, for dreaming up humorous English dialogue to accompany a feeble Japanese spy movie. From the well-to-do family of his second wife, Louise Lasser, Allen got a lesson in aesthetics: her family's home, he said, was "sleek with every lamp, ashtray, chair, and table, understated and tasteful, arranged with a gentle simplicity." This account summons to mind the set design in his many films set among the upper classes, such as *Alice* (1990) or *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996).

"He presented himself as a brainy, neurotic Jewish bumbler, a physical coward, a loser with women," McGilligan writes of Allen's public face. But the truth was deeper. "In time his persona evolved to become more enigmatic and complex, yet the fiction mixed with shards of autobiography was always its special alchemy." Indeed, Allen's maturation—his insistence on adding notes of complexity to his work—makes him one of the all-time great ▶

bootstrappers. Dissatisfied with the chore of writing and acting in, but not directing, his first film, *What's New Pussycat?* (1965), Allen amassed creative control in service to grade A ambition. Even on *Take the Money and Run*, whose distinguishing feature is its irreverence, Allen had to be talked out of what editor Ralph Rosenblum termed his "enduring need to communicate emotional anguish." Allen suppressed this instinct in his first wave of comedies, including *Sleeper* (1973) and *Love and Death* (1975), but the tension between facetiousness and seriousness ultimately led to a major course correction. "I want to do more risky films, less conventional ones, films I'm not secure with," he told the *New York Times* before commencing work on the first such film, a romantic comedy splintered with flashbacks, touched by melancholy, and carved out of what was initially a far more free-form script: the Oscar-winning *Annie Hall* (1977).

Riskier still was Allen's follow-up, *Interiors* (1978), which presented three sisters in states of despondency over the abandonment of their father and the mental breakdown of their mother. It was a sign of Allen's self-assurance that while he conceded he "was not, never had been, nor could ever be" in the same league as his directorial idol, Ingmar Bergman, he nonetheless insisted that *Interiors* was superior to Bergman's contemporaneous film *Autumn Sonata*. He achieved the right formula in his masterly *Manhattan* (1979), which, in the words of longtime Allen producer Charles H. Joffe, is "a serious film that's a drama with comedy rather than a comedy with drama." Such was the mold for a number of masterpieces to follow—*Stardust Memories* (1980), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Radio Days* (1987)—the makings of which are detailed by McGilligan with care, offering an overall view of Allen's working methods: an inspired idea, often drawn from life; top-flight crews; and large and eclectic casts who were granted substantial latitude, with long takes and an unobtrusive director.

Yet Allen's professional success, born of innate talent, impeccable taste,

and profound industriousness, is countered by personal failings. McGilligan attends to Allen's failed marriages to Harlene Rosen and Lasser; his questionable involvement in romances or would-be romances with several young women under 20; and his subsequent relationship with Farrow, with whom he achieved an uneasy détente. Allen took full advantage of Farrow's screen presence—he was so galvanized by her gifts as an actress that most of his 1980s films revolve around her—but seemed at odds with her desire for commitment. "I want to have your baby," she told him early in their romance, while Allen, years later, lamely said: "A relationship is always better if you don't actually have to live with another person." This arrangement culminated (or exploded) in the improprieties, confirmed or alleged, of 1991 and 1992, which McGilligan sorts through with admirable precision and dispassion. Allen sounds clueless when he says that "Soon-Yi and I thought we could have our little fling, keep it secret, since Soon-Yi wasn't living at home and I lived alone like a bachelor." On the other hand, the evidence—such as the exculpatory report issued by Yale New Haven Hospital and authorities' decision to forgo charges—weighs strongly against the charge that Allen abused Dylan.

Admittedly, there is a fog-of-war quality to the conflicting accounts of Allen, Farrow, and Previn. According to Farrow's nanny, Kristi Groteke, Allen feared that Farrow would poison his food, while Farrow wondered whether Allen would hire a hitman, à la the plot of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). The truth is muddy, but McGilligan is crystal clear in his denunciation of those who, in the heat of the Me Too movement, reckoned that they knew exactly who did what. He derides the "flippancy" of, among many others, *New York Times* critic Glenn Kenny, who, post-Me Too, judged the widely acclaimed *Blue Jasmine* (2013) "a not very good movie"—missing the elementary point that Allen could be the embodiment of evil (though this book proves no such thing) and also a major talent.

McGilligan deserves credit for his biographical bravery. To those determined to eject Allen from acceptable society, this book's workmanlike

nonchalance—its implicit assumption that Allen's story, whatever one makes of it, is worth telling over nearly a thousand pages—is an offense as grave as laughing at its subject's jokes. ●

ART

Art Across the Nation

BRIAN T. ALLEN

For America's 250th, the National Gallery sends treasures to ten museums

Among American art museums, there are haves and have-nots, with big-city, legacy galleries owning boatloads of great art—much of it in storage—and smaller, newer places in the provinces making do with nary a Renoir, Rothko, or Rembrandt. The National Gallery of Art in Washington is aiming for a fairer balance. Its new initiative, Across the Nation, sends some of its treasures to ten museums, from Anchorage, Alaska, to Charlotte, N.C., as part of its 2026 United States Semiquincentennial celebration.

The NGA's initiative isn't perfect, but it's a show of good citizenship and one more step in what should be a cause and a movement. Big, rich museums, nearly all along the Acela Corridor, should be sharing their marquee treasures. These institutions are on endowment income and massively subsidized by taxpayers across the country through federal tax exemptions on gifts of art and money. The National Gallery has taken a stand.

The ten partner museums are the Anchorage Museum, the Boise Art Museum, the Nevada Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, the lovely Figge Art Museum in Iowa's Davenport, the Flint Institute in Michigan, the Mint Museum in Charlotte, N.C., the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut, Salt Lake City's

Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Wash. There wasn't an open competition but, instead, a fluid approach with much back-and-forth, which is fine. Rigid rules don't suit the art world.

The NGA wanted geographical balance, which is good, though this group skews west. Some of these places are in art deserts. The Nevada Art Museum in Reno is the state's only accredited art museum, though Vegas is a work of art: architecture, performance art, material culture, and there's the Mob Museum, Liberace's house, and the Burlesque Hall of Fame. Boise is a boom town, "part rugged and part refined," as its marketers say, but it's a clean, vibrant, friendly place, as is Anchorage. Flint's Flint. The people there need more beauty.

The NGA is covering costs, which include crating, transit, and installation, as well as local marketing, which is a boon and a beacon light of generosity. None of these places is loaded. The loans run for as long as two years. Nearly all the art is on view now.

The Nevada museum smartly borrowed an entire exhibition—*Dorothea Lange: Seeing People*—that was on view at the NGA in 2024. Each of the ten museums has its own curatorial vision and, of course, what they borrow is in part a function of what the NGA was willing to lend.

Some of the loans spotlight a few great facts of life in American museology. Collectors and museums in the Northeast got a massive head start in wealth, a taste for high culture, and the availability of deluxe Old Masters. Rich Americans from the Northeast and as far west as Chicago loaded up with works by the Old Masters, Impressionists, Postimpressionists, and European Modernists. Most of this art came to East Coast and Midwest museums in major cities. (The blue-chip contemporary art market has always been based in New York.) Of course, there are exceptions in Houston and Dallas–Forth Worth, San Francisco, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Los Angeles, but by the time most Southern and west-of-the-Mississippi cities got money and culture, pickings were slim. At one time New Englanders may have thought the Wild West started in Saratoga, or perhaps Cleveland, the center of

the Western Reserve. So we can understand the foundation of our have and have-not museum collections.

The Figge in Davenport asked for—and got—a very nice Van Dyck portrait from 1638, along with a Hals portrait and a Cranach the Elder. It will do a Northern Renaissance and Baroque show with the NGA art turbocharging a selection of the Figge's own things, among them its few Rembrandt prints. Denver is borrowing a Studio of Rembrandt self-portrait from 1650 and *A Woman Holding a Pink*, a splendid, bona fide Rembrandt from 1656, to be shown in compare-and-contrast mode. Denver's own Old Master collection is very weak. For years, Denver's rich were either transplants or transients who reserved their philanthropy for their old hometowns. That's not true now, but it did miss the Old Master gold rush.

Anchorage is going modern. It opened in 1968 and focuses art-wise on Alaskan themes, including its ecology and history, and local creatives. It's borrowing a splendid, big, red-and-white Mark Rothko that will be part of a modern American masterworks series showing pieces by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and other big-wigs, loaned in rotation from other museums. Alaska doesn't see much of these artists' work. Since they'll have the Rothko for two years, it'll spend part of its stay

in an exhibition the museum is organizing called, somewhat enigmatically, *Cold War to the Cosmos*, which will juxtapose free expression in America in the 1950s and '60s against communist dystopia. The museum sounds entrepreneurial and clever. It's doing an exhibition now on dogs in the circumpolar North.

The contemporary art museum in Salt Lake City now has a smashing Sol LeWitt wall drawing in its lobby, courtesy of the NGA. LeWitt wall drawings are outliers in art. The accessioned work of art—what the museum owns—isn't the drawing on the wall but the design and installation instructions. The LeWitt transforms the visitor's entrance experience. The NGA should let them keep it.

Some of the loans are more inspired than others, which might be a curatorial defect or might mean that the NGA's will to lend things like Renoir's *Pont Neuf*, *Paris* had limits. The Whatcom Museum is borrowing a Renoir, a Cézanne, and a Matisse—three modest items—and the Mint is taking a Georgia O'Keeffe flower picture from 1930, a middling Degas dancer, and an everyday Alma Thomas painting. It's a mixed bag.

Flint is borrowing religious pictures by Memling and Botticelli and a Warhol acrylic-and-silk-screen portrait of godless Mao from 1973—a puzzling mix. ►



UNTITLED (1950), BY MARK ROTHKO

TV REVIEW

Big Cat

MARTHA BAYLES

Going to Boise are a mediocre Thomas Eakins, a so-so Berthe Morisot, and, perhaps for comparison purposes, a 1948 Rothko (before he was really Rothko) and a peak Rothko.

New Britain has a superb, comprehensive American-only collection, so, in borrowing, it seemed to want to work on the margins and to go PC. It took a spare, elegant, fruit still life from the late 1840s by Robert Duncanson, a black Hudson River landscapist who did nice things but is coveted today mostly for reasons of race. New Britain bought a big, serene, pretty Duncanson lake scene in 2022, spending a ton of money for a picture that, as the Hudson River School goes, is no Frederic Edwin Church or George Inness, nice as it is. Comparing the still life with the lake scene is weak tea. It also took *East Hampton Beach, Long Island* (1874), by Winslow Homer, which hangs in a gallery of scenes by Homer, Eastman Johnson, and others, depicting middle-class women at leisure. A big, gaudy John Singer Sargent or a group of Sargent drawings and watercolors might've worked better.

The National Gallery's initiative ought to inspire—and embarrass—treasure troves like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others. The Met, for example, owns a million and a half objects, the MFA half a million; the NGA owns 160,000.

Our big, blessed, rich museums with packed vaults should share the wealth. "Adopt-a-Museum" is trite, but dozens of museums, and tens of thousands of Americans, could use a little love from, say, the Met, which does far too many exhibitions at its Fifth Avenue campus and would benefit the entire country, which supports its work, by sending art and exhibitions, free of charge, to Huntsville, Nashville, Albuquerque, Phoenix, Tacoma, Sacramento, and on and on. Shake loose those Watteaus and Van Goghs, Monets and Murillos. And not for a few months but long-term. Why stow art away when it's easily shown? ●

A new adaptation of an Italian masterpiece restores its heart and soul

In **Palermo**, the capital of Sicily, shortly after World War II, a lonely, middle-aged man in poor health could be seen making the rounds of the city's bookshops and cafés, stuffing himself with words and pastries but rarely conversing with another soul. His name was Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, and before the world could forget him, his loneliness was relieved by a young cousin, who together with a few friends sought him out.

They did so for two reasons. First, because they were curious about literature, and Giuseppe was thought to be Palermo's most well-read citizen. Second, because they were intrigued by the older man's title: Prince of Lampedusa, which he inherited from his great-grandfather, Don Fabrizio Tomasi. Inspired by these acolytes, Giuseppe wrote his first and only novel, *Il Gattopardo* (1958), about Don Fabrizio's life during the Risorgimento of 1860–61, which resulted in Sicily's becoming (more or less) part of a (more or less) unified Italy.

Gattopardo is actually the name of a wildcat native to North Africa—and to Lampedusa, the largest of the Pelagian Islands and closer in distance to Tunisia than to either Sicily or Italy. In 1843, Lampedusa was sold to the Bourbon king, but the Tomasi family in Sicily retained their title, along with the image of a crowned cat on their family crest. So while a *gattopardo* is not technically a leopard, the novel's English title, *The Leopard*, fits perfectly. The world's surviving leopards are as beautiful and ferocious as ever. But their numbers are dwindling because of the encroachment of Homo sapiens. The same could be said of Giuseppe and his fictionalized great-grandfather.

The pervading mood of the novel is fatalistic—and pessimistic. But just as the nocturnal gloom of great palaces before electricity was softened by candelabras, so, too, is Don Fabrizio's gloom softened by an undercurrent of mordant humor. Here, for example, is his rumination on the priorities of the family's beloved Great Dane, Bendicò:

[Don Fabrizio] was sitting on a bench, inertly watching the devastation wrought by Bendicò in the flower beds; every now and again the dog would turn innocent eyes toward him as if asking for praise at labor done: fourteen carnations broken off, half a hedge torn apart, an irrigation canal blocked. How human! "Good! Bendicò, come here." And the animal hurried up and put its earthy nostrils into his hand, anxious to show that it had forgiven this silly interruption of a fine job of work.

The humor is the author's, of course. And without it, the novel would be a cold dish. Unfortunately, this is a fair description of the 1963 film directed by Luchino Visconti (himself descended from a noble family in Milan) and starring Burt Lancaster as Don Fabrizio. Also titled *The Leopard*, the film was produced in Italy but badly edited and dubbed by the distributor, Twentieth-Century Fox, upon its initial release in America. That botching was later corrected, and a better version (with English subtitles) is now available on Amazon Prime. But this version, too, suffers from the director's stated assumption that the lead character—the Leopard—is "a Sicilian prince who has no sense of the people." That could not be further from the truth.

To be sure, Don Fabrizio tries to stop Tancredi, his charming, high-spirited nephew, from joining the volunteers, called "redshirts," who in the spring of 1860 fought with the republican revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi against the army of the Sicilian Bourbon king. When first hearing of Tancredi's intention, Don Fabrizio objects: "You're mad, my boy, to go with those people! They're all in the *mafia*, all troublemakers. . . . [You] should be with us, for the King."



KIM ROSSI STUART AS DON FABRIZIO IN *THE LEOPARD*

The most oft-quoted line in the novel is Tancredi's reply: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." The standard interpretation of this line is that the progressive nephew is rebuking his conservative uncle, descended from three centuries of Sicilian nobility and lord of vast estates, for opposing a revolution that will threaten the family's power and privilege.

But if this is the case, why does Tancredi preface the line by saying, "*Which king?* . . . Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a *republic* on us!" Garibaldi's original goal was for Italy to become a democratic republic. But as he quickly learned, most Italians did not share that ideal—but might, after many battles, go along with the goal of uniting Italy's separate principalities under a single king. In the novel, it is clear that Tancredi shares this goal, not least because it dovetails with his personal ambition. And that is why Don Fabrizio supports him, even though it means overthrowing the Bourbon dynasty through which his family traces its noble lineage.

Which brings us to the Netflix series, also titled *The Leopard*. A lavish Italian-British production, it has been faulted for trading historical accuracy for a passionate love story focused on Concetta (Benedetta Porcaroli), who is the eldest daughter of Don Fabrizio (Kim Rossi Stuart) and his devout Catholic wife, Maria (Astrid Meloni). In both the novel and the Visconti film, Concetta is a minor character. But here she takes center stage as her

father's favorite, not just for her beauty but for her character and wit. Indeed, their intimacy, with its confidences and private jokes, restores much of the novel's warmth.

Concetta is enamored of Tancredi, but in a plot twist worthy of Jane Austen, he marries the gorgeous Angelica (Deva Cassel), whose low-born father has become very wealthy by the conniving and corruption that are all too common in Sicily past and present. Don Fabrizio encourages the marriage because, as a classic alliance of rank and riches, it ensures the future of both families. But he does so at a cost to his own honor. And for Tancredi, the cost is regret at having chosen ambition over love.

As for Concetta, she retreats into a convent. But then, feeling betrayed by her father, she makes the acquaintance of his long-term mistress, whose morals she deplores but whose independent spirit she admires—and eventually emulates. This anachronistic lesson in female empowerment comes close to upstaging Don Fabrizio. But thanks to a masterly performance by Stuart, the Leopard does not yield an inch.

Don Fabrizio may be an aristocrat, but he is Sicilian to the bone. Intellectually, he understands how profoundly the Sicilian character has been shaped by 2,000 years of absentee rule by foreign powers who thought nothing of exploiting and enslaving its people. And he does not expect an improvement in that character—which is also his own—any more than he expects

an improvement in the scorching Sicilian summer, which (as he tells a northern visitor) is "as long and glum as a Russian winter and against which we struggle with less success."

So yes, the liberties taken in this latest version of *The Leopard* depart rather drastically from the novel. But they do so in a way that, by powerfully dramatizing not just the Leopard's pessimism but his stoicism, vitality, and joy, captures the true heart and soul of the novel. Or to put it another way, everything has been changed so the big cat can stay as he is. ●

FILM REVIEW

Cruising Time

ROSS DOUTHAT

The age-defying hero of the *Mission: Impossible* series reaches a final reckoning

In the last few years I've read more scenarios than I can count spinning out a near-future world where artificial intelligence slips free of our frail mortal attempts to align it with our interests, lifts off into Skynet levels of self-interested power, and decides that it doesn't need to keep the human race around. Some of these scenarios are vividly detailed, rich in imaginary incident. But none of them, so far as I can tell, addresses the counterpoint that the *Mission: Impossible* franchise poses to any vision of human obsolescence: *What about Tom Cruise?*

"I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail." That line belongs to William Faulkner, accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950, at the dawn of the atomic age. But I choose to believe that Faulkner had been graced, through the agency of some muse or daemon, with a vision of *Mission: Impossible: The Final Reckoning*—the back half of 2023's *Mission: Impossible: Dead Reckoning*, which together complete the eight-movie *Mission: Impossible* series, ►



TOM CRUISE HANGS ON IN *MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: THE FINAL RECKONING*.

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

a three-decade-long experience of watching one very specific man not only endure but prevail.

That man is technically known as Ethan Hunt—but more than any other action hero, Hunt, the oft-betrayed, ever-resilient leader of the Impossible Mission Force, is inseparable from the actor who embodies him, the age-defying, stunt-embracing, absolutely self-believing Cruise. Which means that the plot of the final two pictures in this septology, the victory of Hunt over a malignant artificial mind known as the Entity—“an anti-God that thinks it’s God,” to quote the movie, which doesn’t exactly stint on Christian tropes—really feels like the triumph of Tom Cruise over the robots, and a promise that no matter what the nerds in their silicon labyrinths create, a strenuous and indomitable form of physical exertion will always defeat the merely virtual.

I appreciate this hopeful theme, and there’s no denying the entertainment value of the franchise, but I do wish that its final portions were a little bit less fattened up. I looked up the running time of the original *Mission: Impossible*, the only truly great stand-alone movie in the sequence, and it came in at a tidy one hour and 50 minutes—nothing wasted,

every sequence memorable. Whereas the war against the Entity occupies more than five and a half hours across two movies, and I’m not even going to pretend that I remember more than a few sequences from the first installment.

In *The Final Reckoning*, the promise of an actual ending supplies some extra energy, but there is also a sense of absence, with both femininity and villainy somewhat underpowered. In casting a mostly sexless franchise, Cruise has displayed a great eye for female talent, but by the finale we’ve lost the dynamic trinity of Rebecca Ferguson, Vanessa Kirby, and Michelle Monaghan, and we’re left with Hayley Atwell as the female lead, who’s in the dictionary next to “pleasant.”

Meanwhile there’s disappointingly little development of the Entity itself, and its human emissaries, led by Esai Morales’s assassin Gabriel and joined by various doomsday cultists, never register as true competitors for Cruise. Perhaps this is true to the likely nature of a sinister AI, and in the end the digital anti-God will prove to be a little short on personality. But there is a cinematic standard here, from Agent Smith in *The Matrix* and the various iterations of the Terminator to 2001’s HAL, and the digital bad guy in *The Final Reckoning* doesn’t meet it.

There are compensations for these deficiencies, including welcome callbacks to the gold-standard original in the CIA characters (from Henry Czerny as the snake-like Kittridge to Rolf Saxon as the hapless agency employee who featured in Ethan’s suspended-from-the-Langley-ceiling caper way back in 1996) and late arrivals like Shea Whigham as an agent pursuing Hunt, and Tramell Tillman, brilliant in the TV hit *Severance*, as a submarine captain.

But the callbacks also slightly undermine the theme of human indomitability, by reminding us that the 1990s existed once but no longer, that the Tom Cruise of the 1990s really was younger than the Tom Cruise of today, and indeed—as Matt Feeney points out in an elegiac essay for *UnHerd*—that the primary reason why we have reached a “final reckoning” for the franchise is that Cruise himself can’t credibly go on hanging off airplanes for all that much longer, because at 62 years old he’s about to remind us that “he hasn’t mastered time.”

Meanwhile his enemy is still gathering its strength. “Everyone Is Already Using AI (and Hiding It)” runs the headline of a recent *New York* magazine story on Hollywood’s romance with artificial intelligence. Cruise can still seemingly run faster, leap farther, and fight harder than any movie star alive. But the Entity can wait; it has time on its side. ●



City Desk

Knees

K

nees are the alarm clock that tells you when you are a septuagenarian, and it must work best for residents of the city. We walk more than our countrymen, because we don't own cars (too expensive to garage) and the city is so dense we don't need them anyway (what is 15 minutes and

three miles away down the hill in the country, here is around the corner). What we walk on is not the bosom of earth but concrete and asphalt, surfaces from which the shocks of every stride go straight up the tibia to the knee joint, where they settle until they form a colony, an outpost, a guerrilla haven of pain. It notifies me every time I squat down to retrieve a paper clip or pull a plug from a wall socket and realize, as I strain back to vertical, that the way up is most definitely not the same as the way down. My wife is a harder case. Her steps, like her judgments, are more decided than mine, so every two years or so she must submit to the ministrations of a physical therapist—a Tibetan, judging by his surname and the picture of him with the Dalai Lama that sits on his side table—who grips and scrunches the hard nodules where there should be smooth muscles and tendons, with the goal of breaking up the scar tissue until her next pit stop.

Gardeners kneel. In a flat garden with raised beds it is a simple action, made trying only by repetition. Harvesting a meal's worth of lettuce is easy; poking holes and putting in seeds for a season's crop of beans is not. In soil that is unkempt and uneven, everything becomes knee ballet: finding the plant to snip or the spot to put a new one, positioning yourself between stones and the plants you mean not to disturb, staying in place long enough to work the clippers or the trowel, then lifting yourself up without spreading destruction like a garden Godzilla. Your feet sometimes feel bad afterwards, if you have tucked your toes under your forelegs; your knees, always.

Kneeling is a sacrament of reverence. I never belonged to a church that prescribed it. Only when I attended the weddings or funerals of Catholics or more-than-Catholic Anglicans did I experience it. The flip-down kneelers in their pews always seemed fragile and somehow tacky, like clumsy props for a magic act. If you let them up too fast, they made an unpleasant bang. Only when I saw our neighbors to the south walking on their knees

down the aisle of the sanctuary toward the altar where hung the icon of their country, did I think this is the real deal.

Kneeling can be a mark of submission. South of the worshippers, the president's favorite other president displays the gangbangers he has imprisoned squatting or kneeling in endless bare-chested, crop-headed ranks. Based! Do that to the judicial coup! Kneeling is a posture favored by executioners for their prey, whether jihadists about to slit the throats of Coptic martyrs, neo-samurai preparing to decapitate Australian or American POWs, or Jacobins trussing up royals, priests, or ordinary folk guilty of whatever offense and thrusting them to the guillotine. We are not what they are; when we execute we give the condemned their last meals, then lay them on gurneys for a parody of a medical procedure.

Kneeling is an expression of ardor. All the surprise offerings of engagement rings to cheerleaders during halftime shows have not banished the kneeling proposal's air of devotion and mutual surrender: the would-be fiancé says, I am yours; should she accept, the fiancée says, and I am yours. Pornography and those who model it preserve the posture if nothing else. The president's aspirant mistress reportedly said that she had readied her presidential kneepads before going to work for him. One hopes that all America's knowledge of this and a hundred other details taught discretion.

In the fairy tale the prince must kneel to see whose foot fits the slipper left at the ball. Kings of England once knelt on Holy Thursday to wash the feet of beggars. When we were children our parents knelt to help us on and off with our snow boots. When I was a sophomore a young woman astonished me by kneeling to untie my shoes. I had not deserved any such thing, nor can I ever. It was pure generosity. ●

Garner the Grammarian



'Nobody Ever Thought It Meant That'

Last time, we explored some misconceptions about originalism in legal interpretation. They have led to the besmearing of what in most contexts is an anodyne doctrine: that we need a good glossary to read Chaucer and Shakespeare and can undoubtedly benefit from a historical dictionary when reading 18th- and 19th-century texts whose language may be unfamiliar—or, worse, seem familiar but actually denote things other than what we might superficially think.

That's why textualists often mention *text and tradition*. As Justice Antonin Scalia wrote when dissenting in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992)—a sequel to *Roe v. Wade* (1973)—“Texts and traditions are facts to study, not convictions to demonstrate about.” He added:

If in reality our process of constitutional adjudication consists primarily of making value judgments; if we can ignore a long and clear tradition clarifying an ambiguous text, as we did, for example, five days ago in declaring unconstitutional invocations and benedictions at public high school graduation ceremonies, . . . then a free and intelligent people's attitude toward us can be expected to be (ought to be) quite different. The people know that their value judgments are quite as good as those taught in any law school—maybe better.

Ouch.

Text and tradition. The phrase is so closely linked to Scalia that Professor Ralph A. Rossum, when writing a career study, titled his 2006 book *Scalia's Jurisprudence: Text and Tradition*.

In conversation, Scalia loved to say, “Nobody ever thought it meant that!” He objected to the idea that constitutional law—especially in the discovery of newfound constitutional rights—had come to have little to do with the Constitution itself. He recoiled at the idea that *interpret* had lost its role as a transitive verb. Judges interpret, yes, but what are they interpreting? They should be interpreting a *text*.

By way of disclaimer, I might note, as Scalia's co-author of *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts*, that he and I

differed politically on many points. I have a strong libertarian bent. Before various audiences, Scalia jokingly called me his “bleeding-heart co-author.”

My own views on these matters should be irrelevant, but they're a prelude to saying that he and I never disagreed about the outcome of the more than 600 cases we analyzed together to write the book. That's because we were both committed textualists: We defended the idea that a judge's personal political beliefs shouldn't affect the judge's fair reading of a statute, contract, or other text. Value judgments shouldn't come into play much—ideally, not at all. The goal is to have neutral principles of judging.

If value judgments are welcomed, then judicial predilections left and right will skew interpretation. Courts will then depart from fair readings of the texts they're interpreting. Take, for example, a case decided by a state supreme court last year. In Alabama, the 1872 Wrongful Death of a Minor Act gives personal representatives the right to bring a lawsuit “when the death of a minor child is caused by the wrongful act, omission, or negligence of any person.” Somebody sued arguing that “minor child” includes a frozen embryo created through IVF.

Overriding both text and tradition, Alabama's high court held that frozen embryos are indeed “minor children.” Did anyone in 1872 think the text meant that?

Of course, distortions can occur on both sides of the political spectrum. Think of the lawyers who in 2011 filed a lawsuit against SeaWorld in San Diego, arguing that the 13th Amendment's prohibitions of slavery make the aquarium's keeping of orcas unconstitutional. Did anyone ever think the text meant that?

Other fascinating linguistic matters come into play, not least of which is the terminology denoting the various modes of interpretation. *Originalism* sounds alarmingly like *creationism*—so it tends to scare people on the left. Meanwhile, the term *living Constitution*, dating from the 1920s, is really a euphemism for a constitution that is amended not as provided for in the document itself but instead, term after term, by the Supreme Court. Of course, the expression *living Constitution* was invented and propagated by progressives who favor that kind of amendment.

(In fairness, the Founding Fathers did make the U.S. Constitution much too difficult to amend. In practice, amendment is extraordinarily hard to achieve. And so we've left it to the Court instead of the People.)

But think again about the *living Constitution*. What's the antonym? Well, of course, it's the *dead*

Constitution. Scalia used to joke that the Constitution is dead.

In my kitchen in January 2013, I suggested to him that attacking something called the *living Constitution* was a mistake: “Find another name for it,” I said.

“But everyone calls it the living Constitution.”

“You’re losing the debate in the minds of the American people. They don’t want the opposite of a living Constitution.”

“Are you saying I’ve made a mistake over the past 30 years by using the other side’s terminology?”

“I think so. If you instead asked the American people whether they’d rather have a stable Constitution or a highly volatile one that morphs without amending it, what would they say?”

“Stable, no doubt,” he said. “I can’t believe I’ve never thought of this before.”

That evening, Scalia and I made a presentation to a large audience at Southern Methodist University. Midway through our talk, he said: “I used to say that the Constitution is not a living document. It’s dead, dead, dead. But I’ve gotten better. I no longer say that. The truth is that the Constitution is not one that morphs. It’s an enduring Constitution, not a changing Constitution.” I was keenly aware of his words, and I made a note of them the next morning.

That note became important when, two days after the event, the *Dallas Morning News* ran an article about our presentation. It quoted Scalia as saying about the Constitution: “It’s not a living document. It’s dead, dead, dead.” End of quotation.

When I shared the article with my co-author, he replied by email: “Apparently the print media in Texas are as biased as the print media elsewhere.”

More than three weeks later, after a fair amount of wrangling, the *Morning News* ran an inconspicuous correction: “The article quoted Scalia as calling the U.S. Constitution ‘dead, dead, dead.’ He went on to say he believes it is not a document that ‘morphs’ but rather an ‘enduring’ one.”

But the damage had been done when the original piece ended the quotation with “dead, dead, dead.” I can assure you that nobody in the audience, nobody hearing his words that night, thought he meant that. ●

POEM

BY BRIAN J. BUCHANAN

Tennessee Graveyard

We suffered long, a long hard dream
Of paradise, the cold magnolias
Heaped with wind,
Lace of ice in the scuppernong.

Cohere, declared the morning bird,
Cohere, cohere, cohere.
Beyond our death, the black bedsheets,
It piped its hopeless song.

Graveyard cold with blossom bursts.
One stone touch
And a granite nymph begins to run
And ran she days on days, and runs, and long.



Happy Warrior

Where Have You Gone, John Hancock?

W

hen autograph seekers approached Steve Martin in the early 1980s, the comedian would produce a business card and hand it to his fans. The card, which included his handwritten signature, said, “This certifies that you have had a personal encounter with me and that you found me warm, polite, intelligent, and funny.”

Today, the coveted status of the celebrity autograph seems to be slipping away. Fans’ desire still lives, but as much of our media resides in digital form on our phones, the scrawling of a signature with an actual pen on actual paper seems quaint. Good luck finding something to write on if you spot Emma Stone on the street and she’s willing to indulge your request. Gone are the days of having a musician sign a record sleeve, and asking John Grisham to sign your Kindle would be awkward.

Of course, the signature has always served as a person’s legally binding commitment or agreement. In fact, the nation itself owes its existence to 56 signatures affixed to the Declaration of Independence—most notably that of John Hancock, an attention vampire known almost exclusively for his ability to write his name larger than everyone else’s.

But the reality is that autographs are now an antiquated technology in a digital world. I once saw that the actor Mark Hamill had retweeted me, and my Luke Skywalker-loving self felt like I was seven years old again. I didn’t even have to sit by my mailbox waiting for my self-addressed, stamped envelope to arrive. Within minutes, I had something more valuable—more personal—than a name scrawled on a piece of notebook paper with a Bic.

Celebrity autographs have been supplanted by photographic evidence that one has met a person of importance. For some, a selfie with Dave Chappelle is fandom apotheosis. Autographs, after all, are transferable—they can be bought and sold, so owning an autographed napkin doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve had a personal conversation with Paul McCartney about the White Album over drinks. But a photo of you with the former Beatle shows that you’ve rubbed shoulders with one of the greats. (That is, until photo-faking technology gets so accurate that I can plausibly provide evidence I was a member of the Velvet Underground.)

In the digital age, autograph-collecting is dying. In 2019, lifelong autograph collector Randall Salas of Caracas, Venezuela, told *Time* that when he used to send copies of the magazine to the celebrities featured on the cover, around 80 percent were returned with a signature. Since his first request in 1963, he had collected over 1,500 signed copies of the magazine. But Salas said that the number of returned magazines had fallen to only 10 percent of those he sent out. Jaded celebrities, loaded up with publicists and managers in ways they weren’t until the 1990s, worry that people seek autographs only to make money on the resale market.

Historically, an item signed by an author, musician, artist, or celebrity would have a higher purchase price. For me, this never made sense. An autograph is not evidence that the guy who owns a guitar signed by Jimmy Page rode on the Led Zeppelin tour bus. On the other hand, an unsigned guitar used by Page to record, say, the *Physical Graffiti* album should be worth far more. It was *there*, man!

And, of course, autographs can be faked. Just watch any episode of the show *Pawn Stars* in which someone asks a fortune for an autographed copy of “The Raven,” only to become crestfallen when it turns out to have been signed by Edgar Allan Faux. In our political life, the auto-pen, used by presidents to sign a variety of official documents, has suddenly become a thing. Anyone who’s dragged a finger across the little window on the deliveryman’s handheld device or clicked to e-sign a document has had to wonder about what a signature even means anymore.

Yet there is still something appealing about the permanence of a written autograph. It’s a memorial to the personality of the signer, its flourishes or lack thereof suggesting flamboyance or reserve. And these signatures have held the country together for almost 250 years, in a way a selfie with the Declaration of Independence couldn’t. Especially with that drama queen Hancock hogging the lens. ●

SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest—but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

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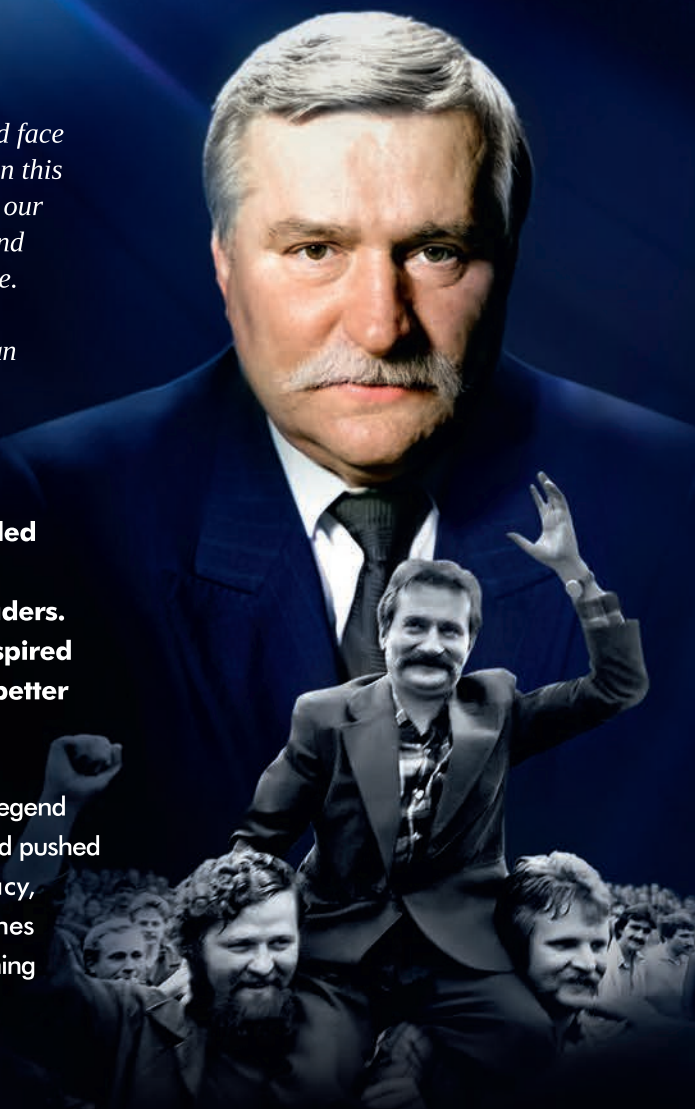
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