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NATIONAL REVIEW



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America's 250th Anniversary

National Review's 2026 regional event series will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of our nation, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the principles that have made America the greatest nation on earth. The American conservative movement exists to conserve these principles—and National Review has been at the forefront of that movement since its inception.

As we look toward the country's future, it is essential to continue advocating the principles that sustain a free and prosperous society and promoting civic education.

In 2026, we plan to host seven events in major cities across the country, each focusing on a distinct theme to explore these enduring ideas and their continued importance to America's future and prosperity.

LIMITED GOVERNMENT

MIAMI, FL | APRIL 17, 2026

James Madison warned in *Federalist No. 51* that because men are not angels, government must be structured not only to govern but also to restrain itself. The Founders understood that liberty precedes the state and that government exists not to grant rights but to secure them through carefully designed limits on power. Through the separation of powers, federalism, and constitutional boundaries, they sought to prevent the concentration of authority that inevitably leads to tyranny. Today, many of these principles appear tenuous and increasingly at risk. This program will examine why the principles of limited government remain essential to protecting freedom in modern America.

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ECONOMIC FREEDOM

DALLAS, TX | MAY 28, 2026

America's founders held that economic freedom is inseparable from political liberty and essential to human flourishing. Drawing on the insights of thinkers such as Adam Smith, they rejected state control and mercantilism in favor of private property, voluntary exchange, and free enterprise. The Constitution reflects this conviction by limiting the government's power to tax, regulate, and redistribute, thereby safeguarding economic liberty as a moral and practical necessity. This program will reaffirm the reasons why free markets and limited government remain the surest foundation for opportunity, innovation, and human flourishing.

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THE WEEK

■ **Maybe there's a reason** they don't call it the Straights of Hormuz.

■ **Since the beginning** of the war in Iran, we've had four separate Islamist terrorist attacks or attempted attacks against Americans on U.S. soil. First, in downtown Austin, Texas, Ndiaga Diagne killed four people and injured 15 more while wearing a shirt that said "Property of Allah." Then in New York City, Emir Balat and Ibrahim Kayumi hurled two explosive devices (which failed to ignite) during a protest near Gracie Mansion. A few days later, a gunman yelled "Allahu akbar" before opening fire in a classroom at Old Dominion University in Virginia, killing one and wounding two; students in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps subdued and killed him. The same day, Ayman Mohamad Ghazali rammed his car into a synagogue near Detroit and drove through a hallway before security officers fatally shot him. The perpetrators in all these attacks have no observable ties to the Iranian regime. But Balat and Diagne claimed that ISIS was their inspiration. While the Islamic State no longer controls countries, its ideology still appeals to some angry young men who are looking for a cause. When Iran is in a fight with the U.S. and Israel, most of the world's Muslim nations won't lift a finger for it. But self-identified terrorists come running.

■ **A stunning image,** as if composed by a painter from the Dutch Golden Age, shows Mahmoud Khalil as a guest at Gracie Mansion with the ever-smiling Mayor Zohran Mamdani and his stylish wife, Rama Duwaji. Khalil gained fame as a keffiyeh-bedecked leader of anti-Israel, pro-Hamas encampments and agitation at Columbia University. Last year, the Trump administration attempted to revoke his permanent residency and deport him, alleging that he had lied on his green card application. He's still here. The Gracie Mansion meeting followed revelations that Madame Mamdani had liked pro–October 7 social media posts that called the rapes of Israeli women by Hamas a "mass hoax" and had celebrated the terrorist group's mass-murder rampage as an act of "collective liberation." More revelations were to come: Duwaji, a freelance illustrator, had worked on a book by a writer who hailed the October 7 attacks as "spectacular" and who has been spewing antisemitic rhetoric both classic and novel. During New York Fashion Week, the *New York Times* wrote about "the complicated balancing act that Ms. Duwaji is facing as she assumes her new role as the de facto hostess of the city." Evidently, part of her role is to host terror supporters.

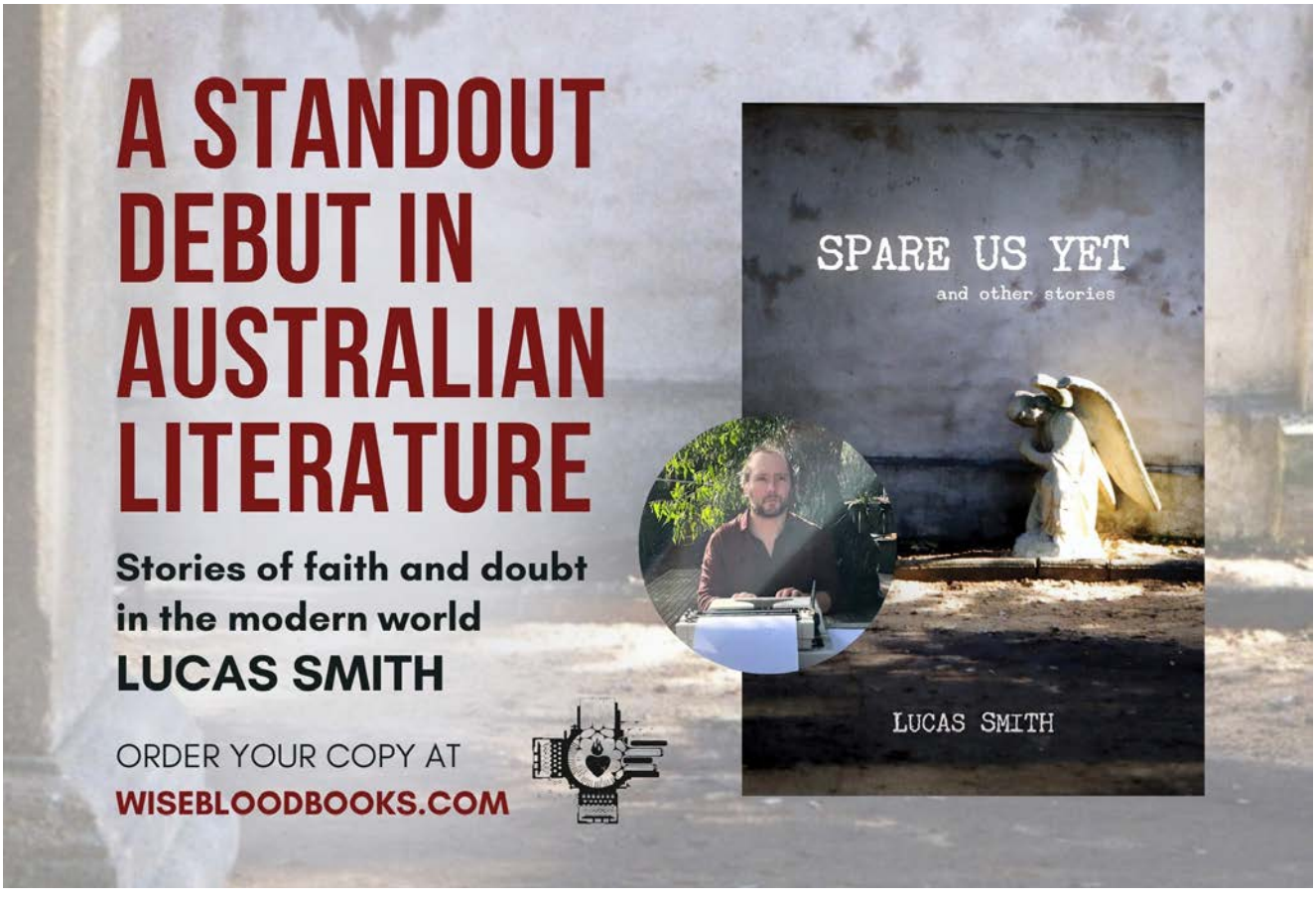
■ **"When anti-Semitism appears** today outside the restricted confines of the country club," NATIONAL REVIEW's John O'Sullivan wrote in his introduction to William F. Buckley's 1991 essay "In Search of Anti-Semitism," "it is almost invariably a left-wing phenomenon." But as Buckley's subsequent work would attest, those confines had loosened. One of his magazine's own writers, he conceded, as well as leading figures in the conservative movement such as Patrick Buchanan, appeared "inclined to anti-Semitism." The denunciation was an extension of the work that Buckley and NATIONAL REVIEW had done for decades, imposing hygiene on the movement during its grubbier moments. NATIONAL REVIEW's symposium on antisemitism, held in partnership with the Republican Jewish Coalition in Washington, D.C., in March, endeavored to continue that noble work. NR luminaries and other thinkers were joined by Senators Ted Cruz, Tom Cotton, and Jim Banks to denounce the immiserating persecution complex that is overtaking the fringes of American political life. This work, alas, is never done.

■ **Joe Kent,** director of the National Counterterrorism Center, resigned in protest of the war against Iran. Anyone unnerved by the abdication of a key national security official during a war, especially one against an adversary that doubles as the world's chief exporter of Islamist terrorism, should be heartened, though, by Kent's resignation letter. In it, he insisted that "Iran posed no imminent threat" to America, and that Israel filled President Trump's head with lies about the ease with which he could achieve victory. Those were the same lies "the Israelis used to draw us into the disastrous Iraq War," he wrote. They may be the same lies that drew America into a "manufactured" war against ISIS, Kent closed. The former director is allowing his biases to fill the gaps in his understanding of the historical record. The Israelis lobbied George W. Bush *against* a war in Iraq, preferring that he devote his focus to Iran instead. The Israelis did not manufacture the region-wide

Arab Spring revolts that flowered into the Syrian Civil War, in which Barack Obama only reluctantly intervened. And Israel did not drag the U.S. into a war against an adversary with which we have been in a constant state of conflict for 47 years. If these are the faulty assumptions Kent took with him into government, Americans should breathe a sigh of relief that he's taking his talents elsewhere. Liberals, glossing over the conspiracy-theorizing, touted Kent's letter as proof that Iran posed no threat to us. Trump greeted the resignation by saying, "I always thought he was weak on security," which raises the question of why he put him in a top security job.

■ **The February jobs report** showed a drop of 92,000, following January's surprisingly strong increase of 162,000. Most troubling, perhaps, were the continuing job losses within the information sector, which have been running at around 5,000 a month for a year. Could they be evidence that AI is beginning to take a toll? Other signs suggest the numbers are part of a broader trend extending beyond IT or the shrinking federal government. Average monthly job gains in 2025 were the lowest in any non-recession year for two decades. Some of the weakness in the labor market may reflect the lingering effects of a post-pandemic shakeout and the fact that the official unemployment rate had sunk so low that it could go in only one direction. But any account of the softness must include the blows inflicted indirectly and directly on business by "liberation day" tariffs and their chaotic aftermath. Consumer confidence, meanwhile, has been declining, and U.S. business sentiment (as measured by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) has been depressed, although the latter had shown some recovery before war intervened. Economic uncertainty is not an incentive to invest, spend, or hire. Nor is it a reason for many voters to back Republicans in the upcoming midterm elections.

■ **Kristi Noem** is out as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, with the president saying she will be replaced by Senator Markwayne Mullin (R., Okla.). Noem's departure was overdetermined. Her eagerness to court the cameras was matched only by her ineptitude, dishonesty, and ham-handedness, such as when she rushed to brand a woman killed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents as a "domestic terrorist." Congressional hearings were a debacle, with Noem not denying a widely rumored affair with top aide Corey Lewandowski. (Both are married to other people.) What angered President Trump more, according to reporting from our Audrey Fahlberg, was Noem's claim that ▶



the president had approved a $220 million DHS ad campaign that prominently featured her and was subcontracted to one of her allies. Firing her—sorry, reassigning her to be special envoy to a new security organization for Latin America—was the right call, but doing so now has discarded a bargaining chip that Democrats had demanded in exchange for resolving the impasse over DHS funding. A sustainable deportation policy will, in any case, require more than personnel changes.

■ **The first primaries** of the 2026 midterms have taken place. In Texas, Republicans conducted a circular firing squad. Dan Crenshaw lost his primary over his stances on foreign policy and immigration and his insufficient fealty to stolen-election conspiracy theories. John Cornyn, who has not won a statewide race by less than double digits in 30 years, will face a runoff against attorney general Ken Paxton. The Democratic establishment, meanwhile, got what it wanted: Its Senate nominee will be state representative James Talarico. He looked like a moderate compared with his primary opponent, Congresswoman Jasmine Crockett, one of the party's rhetorical bomb-throwers. National party power brokers such as Stephen Colbert pulled out all the stops for Talarico. A polite, clean-cut, avowedly Christian white male, Talarico offers a superficially more moderate face that may drive some Republicans to the safety of Cornyn. However, he should be nobody's idea of a moderate. He has compared white skin to a virus, claimed that the Gospel account of the Annunciation is actually a pro-abortion story, uses "Latinx" unironically, and professes to love "trans children" more than anything but his family and friends. He's a living lawn sign. Losing to him would be a spectacular act of malpractice.

■ **The SAVE America Act** pursues two worthy goals: establishing voter ID requirements and preventing noncitizens from registering to vote. Dubiously, it seeks to federalize these requirements rather than safeguard the power of states—the primary administrators of elections—to require them. More troublingly, Trump and some other proponents of the bill are insisting that the usual Senate practice of requiring 60 votes for cloture be evaded or abolished in order to bring the bill to a floor vote. Abandoning or watering down the Senate filibuster would rob conservatives of a vital defense against bad national legislation: a defense that we have needed before and will need again. The legislative filibuster promotes federalism, allowing states to be the primary lawmakers on most issues that don't produce a consensus among three-fifths of the Senate. There's a reason why leftists are so eager to destroy the filibuster; we should not give them this gift in exchange for the comparatively modest benefits of this bill. It is said that Democrats will abolish the filibuster at their next chance. Perhaps they will, but they should have to pay the political price for their radicalism. Last time they tried, they drove former Senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema out of their party, the former from a seat they won't soon get back. After Harry Reid scuttled the judicial filibuster in 2013, Democrats lost nine Senate seats, only one of which they've recovered. Because Democrats can build a majority only by winning seats in purple and red states, they will always face this challenge. Senators should have the self-respect to defend their prerogatives, and Republicans should have the savvy to avoid doing Democrats favors.

Abandoning or watering down the Senate filibuster would rob conservatives of a vital defense against bad national legislation: a defense that we have needed before and will need again.

■ **Overwhelming bipartisan majorities** on Capitol Hill can owe less to good sense than to its opposite. This seems to be the case with the housing legislation that is working its way through Capitol Hill, a version of which the Senate has approved. This bill is being promoted as a response to the unaffordability of housing—the flip side, in part, of earlier made-in-Washington ultralow interest rates. Even though that era has passed and its consequences will fade over time, this process needs to be accelerated by a substantial increase in the supply of new homes. This is more likely to happen if the federal government does as much as it sensibly can to get out of the way. With welcome exceptions here and there, that is not what is on the menu. The House is a lesser offender than the Senate, but much of what is proposed involves poorly directed spending, the scapegoating of institutional investors, and the opening up of opportunities for almost certainly counterproductive federal meddling. But Washington's incompetence should not be an excuse for local governments to do nothing. Their role as deregulators would be indispensable.

■ **Federal Communications Commission** Chairman Brendan Carr threatened to punish television news networks that "are running hoaxes and news distortions" in their coverage of the war with Iran. In a post on X, Carr declared that broadcasters "must operate in the public interest, and they will lose their licenses if they do not." This was music to the president's ears. The day after Carr's announcement, Trump took to Truth Social to celebrate. He praised Carr for cracking down on "Corrupt and Highly Unpatriotic 'News' Organizations." The press's Iran coverage has had errors of emphasis and fact. But the government cannot establish

itself as the arbiter of publishable truth. The fog of war ought not be compounded by the fog of censorship.

■ **We must be getting close** to the presidential-primary season: Democratic hopefuls are unveiling fanciful fiscal plans again. Their new idea is the same as their old idea: that middle-class Americans can enjoy a sprawling entitlement state without paying for it. The bombastic Senator Cory Booker (N.J.) wants to double the standard deduction on the federal income tax, exempting the first $75,000 of family earnings. His colleague, Chris Van Hollen (Md.), goes further, exempting $46,000 of income for individuals and $92,000 for married couples. The aim is to ensure that most American families pay no income tax at all, but that's mostly true already. Because of existing credits and deductions, those in the bottom half of U.S. households pay less than 5 percent of their earnings in federal income tax. Millions of low-income taxpayers receive refundable credits that exceed their income-tax liability. The main effect of raising the standard deduction would therefore be to reduce the tax burden on higher-income earners. To compensate, Representative Ro Khanna (Calif.) is championing a wealth tax on billionaires, which would raise only a fraction of the promised revenue even if it proved possible to administer. As European governments already know, the real money lies in soaking the middle class. If progressives really believed that Americans wanted more welfare spending, they wouldn't be so afraid of giving voters the bill.

■ **AI giant Anthropic** sued the Trump administration after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth designated the company a "supply chain risk." The dispute arises from the restrictions that Anthropic imposed on the Defense Department's use of its AI tool, Claude. The company sought to prevent the department from giving AI autonomous control over weapons systems (i.e., allowing it to operate without oversight by a human agent) and from employing Claude to conduct mass surveillance of Americans. As Andrew C. McCarthy argues in this issue, the restrictions are reasonable: Anthropic knows its AI best and fears it is not safe for fully autonomous use in lethal force missions, and the Defense Department has no business doing mass domestic surveillance. Moreover, Anthropic was under no obligation to do business with the government, and the government had accepted its services with the restrictions. Hegseth's designation of Anthropic as a supply chain risk was an attempt to punish Anthropic for resisting his pressure to drop the restrictions. Congress had created the designation for a different purpose: to prevent hostile foreign entities from corrupting U.S. manufacturing and stealing intellectual property. Hegseth's policy would bar all government contractors from working with Anthropic. The absurdity is underscored by the department's ongoing use of Claude in operations against Iran, which it would never do if the company truly posed a supply chain risk. Expect the court to see it that way. ▶

THE STAT

20%

20 percent—the proportion of federal Covid aid to state governments that still had not been spent by March 2025, according to the Government Accountability Office.

As part of the American Rescue Plan Act, state governments received $195 billion from the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) for Covid relief. Even though the pandemic is long over, they're still working on how to spend that money. States have until the end of this year to spend it all, and they've been pacing themselves: 60 percent had been spent by March 2024 and 80 percent by March 2025. The Treasury required states to categorize their spending. The most common category, accounting for 53 percent of all spending, was "revenue replacement." That's strange, because state tax collections rose during the pandemic and have remained strong in recent years. But the GAO report provides a hint as to why this category was so popular: "Revenue replacement provides recipients with the most flexibility in using SLFRF awards and streamlining reporting requirements." In other words, states can spend the money on whatever they want. States that undertook "revenue replacement" projects include Texas, which spent $159.5 million on grants for victims of crime; Wisconsin, which spent $5 million to turn a vacant building into a community center; Kentucky, which spent $5 million on workbooks for high school math classes; and North Carolina, which spent $4.2 million on sewer projects in state parks. Maybe those were worthwhile projects. But what did they have to do with Covid relief? Why were federal taxpayers picking up the tab? And why are they *still* picking it up for more projects until the end of this year?

by Dominic Pino

■ **After a humiliating rejection** of proposed charges by a federal grand jury in Washington, D.C., the Department of Justice has dropped its legally baseless investigation of the "seditious six"—a group of Democratic lawmakers, all veterans of the military or intelligence agencies, who produced a video admonishing our armed forces not to follow unlawful orders. The video was obnoxious and unhelpful: Our well-trained troops are schooled in the obligation to obey only legal orders, and the Democrats in their video did not specify which, if any, order they claimed was illegal. (They seemed to be referring to lethal strikes, directed by Trump without congressional authorization, against boats suspected of ferrying cocaine in the Caribbean.) But the video was constitutionally protected, notwithstanding Trump's unhinged description of it as "SEDITIOUS BEHAVIOR, punishable by DEATH." What was not harmless was the president's leveraging of government law enforcement processes against members of Congress—exacerbated by the Defense Department's simultaneous lawfare against Senator Mark Kelly (D., Ariz.), a retired naval captain still subject to military law. The administration's climbdown is welcome but should not have been necessary.

■ **The Justice Department** is continuing its manifestly pretextual investigation of Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell. Jeanine Pirro, the U.S. attorney for D.C., issued a pair of subpoenas to the Fed; James Boasberg, the Obama-appointed chief judge of the federal district court in Washington, D.C., recently quashed them. In a 26-page memorandum opinion, Judge Boasberg noted that the president has run a campaign to pressure Powell to lower interest rates and to step down so Trump can replace him—a campaign that has, naturally, involved social media trash talk. Powell's term as chairman will expire soon, and Trump has nominated Kevin Warsh to replace him, but Powell's term as a member of the Fed's board does not expire until January 31, 2028. Trump clearly wants Powell out while a Republican Senate majority is in place to confirm his preferred board member. The investigation may have made that scenario less likely. This is abusive; it is also folly.

■ **The Trump administration** continues to take a worrisome posture on the abortion pill. While abortion in general is regulated by the states, the majority of American abortions are carried out by a mifepristone-based pill that requires approval by the Food and Drug Administration and typically travels by mail or by interstate commerce, in violation of federal law. The pill's availability by mail without in-person medical supervision makes it more accessible to women in states that ban abortion, and also more dangerous. Yet this administration has done nothing to enforce federal laws against the practice. The FDA has not even restored the requirement for an in-person consultation, which was stripped during the Covid-19 pandemic by the Biden administration. Red states and groups of doctors have sued. Now, Trump's Justice Department is taking the same position as the Biden administration in arguing that the case should be dismissed for lack of standing or stayed while the FDA conducts a conspicuously slow-moving review of the pill. Pro-life groups are furious: Marjorie Dannenfelser, the president of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, thundered that "the Trump-Vance Justice Department is taking the side of abortion drug dealers and the radical Left." Republicans should stand for life and the rule of law, and not make pro-lifers feel as though they are being taken for granted.

The left's incuriosity when it comes to the living conditions of the men and women who serve is not new, but rarely has it been so proudly steamed, shelled, and doused in butter before being presented to the public.

■ **Pundits and politicians** on the left had a feeding frenzy upon learning that the Pentagon had spent a record amount of money at the end of the past fiscal year. Luxury line items they sank their teeth into included millions spent on lobster tails, steaks, crab legs, and a Steinway & Sons piano. This buffet of perceived corruption gave them all the necessary ammunition to mentally indict the Pentagon and Secretary Hegseth. Unfortunately for them, what the criticism mostly showed was that a long-standing suspicion on the part of service members and the right was correct: The American public—and the left, especially—has no idea why these items are a matter of course for deployed forces. The steak and lobster meal is a tradition in the armed forces. Morale-boosting fare usually corresponds with extensions, pending combat, and other hardships. The left's incuriosity when it comes to the living conditions of the men and women who serve is not new, but rarely has it been so proudly steamed, shelled, and doused in butter before being presented to the public.

■ **The Supreme Court,** in a triumph for textualism and the separation of powers, struck down the greater part of Trump's erratic tariff regime. It held that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act—a 1977 statute that does not mention tariffs—gives the president no authority to impose a duty of any rate on any import he pleases at any time. Tariffs are taxes on imported goods paid by American firms and consumers. The Constitution vests the power "to Lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposes and Excises" in Congress alone, and Congress cannot delegate this power without

clear and explicit authorization. The decision relieved domestic businesses, especially manufacturers, which could not plan investments with certainty under ever-shifting tariff rates. With his approval ratings where they are, Trump should have taken the off-ramp that the Court provided. Instead, he pivoted immediately to another statute, imposing a 10 percent universal tariff under Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act. This, too, has a questionable legal basis. Section 122 allows the president to raise tariffs for 150 days to address "large and serious" balance-of-payments deficits. Yet balance-of-payments deficits have been mathematically impossible since America abandoned fixed exchange rates. The best solution to the president's indiscriminate protectionism remains for Congress to finally reclaim its Article I taxing power.

■ **Trump coupled his replacement tariffs** with an attack on the justices in the majority. They were supposedly "very unpatriotic and disloyal to the Constitution," lacked "the courage to do what's right for our country," and had been "swayed by foreign interests." (Foreign dealings have helped Trump himself increase his net worth by $1.4 billion since resuming office, *Forbes* estimates.) The justices in the majority whom he had appointed, Amy Coney Barrett and Neil Gorsuch, were "an embarrassment to their families." A few weeks later, he accused the Court of having "RANSACKED" the country, adding to his tariff complaint its refusal to overturn a 2020 election he pretends has been "conclusively proven to be stolen." These unhinged rants will have two effects: unjustly lowering the reputation of the Court among those foolish enough to credit Trump's words, and lowering the political price for Democrats to trash the institution when it again becomes convenient for them.

■ In *Mirabelli v. Bonta*, the Supreme Court ruled against a California law that had led schools to adopt a gag rule against informing parents if their children were "gender transitioning." Two sets of parents who found out what was happening to their children sued. In one case, parents discovered the school's subterfuge only after their daughter attempted suicide and was hospitalized. As the Court observed, California "argues that its policies advance a compelling interest in student safety and privacy." Yet "those policies cut out the primary protectors of children's best interests: their parents." The ugly reality is that state authorities were propagandizing to children a particular view of gender and sexuality. Parents have every right to know about and put a stop to it.

■ **A Christian music teacher** received a $650,000 settlement after claiming that he was forced out of his job for refusing to use transgender-identifying students' preferred names and pronouns. John Kluge, formerly of the Brownsburg Community School Corporation, was fighting against a 2017 district policy that required teachers to use whatever name was listed for students in the school's online databases. According to the complaint filed by the Alliance Defending Freedom, the district gave Kluge two options: comply or quit. Kluge resigned and filed a lawsuit against the school district. A Supreme Court decision in a similar case—*Groff v. DeJoy* (2023)—set a precedent requiring the employer to meet a higher threshold to prove that it would suffer an undue burden if it accommodated an employee's religious convictions. Following the settlement with Kluge, the school district must now train senior staff on how Title VII protects employees from religious discrimination. A victory for teachers everywhere, as well as for good sense.

■ **Since 1970,** banknotes issued by the Bank of England have featured prominent figures from Britain's past. Currently, such figures include Winston Churchill, Jane Austen, J. M. W. Turner, and Alan Turing. It has now been announced that they will be the last to be so honored. Last year, the bank "consulted" the public—including children and (of course!) focus groups—about possible new themes, stipulating only that they must not be "divisive." Of the 44,000 who gave an opinion, 60 percent opted for "nature," which edged out architecture and landmarks, and ended up well ahead of historical figures and other also-rans. Probably delighted by the result, the bank declared "nature" the winner. It is to be represented by native "wildlife," which will give the whole exercise a suitably green if regrettably xenophobic tinge. However, there may be relief in Threadneedle Street that this will rule out lions, animals dangerously symbolic of a deep-rooted idea of Britishness for which many in the country's ruling class feel only disdain.

■ **Kim Jong-un,** the supreme leader of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, is spending quality time with Kim Ju-ae, his teenage daughter and heir apparent. He's only 42 or 43, but it's a hazardous line of work. Best have a plan. The pair recently attended a live-fire test of ultraprecision rocket launchers. They also planted trees, shot pistols at the range, and watched a military parade in matching leather jackets. The girl, probably 13, made her international debut in Beijing last September. South Korea's National Intelligence Service believes that she's already involved in policymaking. Nepotism is the least of their problems—and ours, where the Democratic People's Republic is concerned. At least we have the Western media headlines to look forward to when the glass ceiling of the communist totalitarianism industry is finally shattered.

■ **Entertainment powerhouse Netflix** finally dropped its bid to acquire legendary film studio Warner Bros. and its assets after being outbid by rival Paramount Skydance. While few will lament the failure of the streaming giant to win this battle—Chairman Reed Hastings is a joyless grinch who repeatedly promised to accelerate the end of ▶

the theatrical moviegoing experience in favor of his company's business model—there is also little to celebrate. One potentially alarming corporate media consolidation has been replaced with another, as the Warner Bros. and CNN brands prepare to merge with Paramount and CBS under the same global leadership. Trump is friendly with Paramount Skydance owner and donor David Ellison, and he has publicly declared himself willing to help his friends. Whether or not he did in this case, the president's friend won—and our media landscape became less competitive.

■ **For the first** time in 46 years, the U.S. men's hockey team won gold at the Winter Olympics, edging out a thrilling 2–1 victory over a Canadian team that spent most of the game relentlessly on the attack. Goalie Connor Hellebuyck faced 42 shots and let only one get through. Meanwhile, forward Jack Hughes had a substantial part of his smile knocked out of his skull by a Canadian high-stick to the face, but he returned to the ice moments later, finally scoring the game-winning goal in overtime. It was a deliriously joyful moment for the athletes as they joined the U.S. women's team as fellow Olympic champions, one made all the more poignant by the tribute the players immediately paid to their departed teammate Johnny Gaudreau, felled two years ago by a drunk driver. The attempts by some miserable journalists to politicize and sully this moment—to make it about Trump, or about some imagined slight to the women's team—are beneath contempt and deserve to be beneath notice. All Americans, regardless of political affiliation, should enjoy such moments of national pride.

■ **Jürgen Habermas** was the philosopher laureate of the post–World War II German left. He had been a student of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Frankfurt School critical theorists who believed that the Enlightenment was a failure. Habermas disagreed. Postmodern cynicism was fashionable then, as it is now. Throughout his seven-decade career, Habermas the meliorist maintained that modernity is a work in progress. Often accused of naïveté, and sometimes guilty of it, he proposed that "communicative reason"—sincere, uncoerced, good-faith debate—can lead to political consensus. Like many (perhaps all?) German philosophers, he struggled with opaque, turgid prose and inflicted it mercilessly on his readers. But he was clear-eyed and well-spoken regarding Israel's response to Hamas after October 7, 2023: "The standards of judgement slip completely when genocidal intentions are attributed to Israel's actions." Leftist academics were baffled, irate. Their intellectual insincerity made a good case for the absence of and need for rational debate. Dead at 96. R.I.P.

■ **Paul Ehrlich never repented.** The longtime professor of biology at Stanford University became the most famous academic proponent of the hypothesis of catastrophic overpopulation. The modern Malthusian's 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, posited that Earth had a finite "carrying capacity" and that it would slough off its excess population with violence. About 100 to 200 million people would die over the course of the 1970s, he predicted. Instead, about a billion people emerged from extreme poverty in the wake of the Soviet Union's implosion—a fact he refused to recognize. He insisted in one of his final interviews that the "kind of civilization we're used to" will end within the "next few decades." Any minute now. Ehrlich's recipe for depression immiserated his many followers, some of whom confessed to forgoing family formation based on his claim that reproducing was for the selfish and ignorant. He never admitted his folly or repudiated the population-control schemes it abetted. The world Ehrlich lived in but refused to recognize served as rebuke. Dead at 93. R.I.P.

■ **Lewis Lehrman** helped turn a family-run chain of grocery stores into Rite Aid. After that feat, he ran for governor of New York in 1982, losing narrowly to Mario Cuomo and spending the astonishing sum of $10 million. (This century, that is what a Michael Bloomberg campaign spends on carfare.) He was then free at last to return to his first love, American history. (He had been a teaching fellow at Yale and earned a master's from Harvard.) Together with his friend and fellow philanthropist Richard Gilder, he amassed a collection of historical documents and made them available—via traveling exhibits, booklets, online links, and scholars' lectures—to tens of thousands of teachers and students nationwide. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History is like having the Library of Congress in your classroom with Gordon Wood to show you around. He was a lifelong admirer of Washington and Lincoln, and of Walter Scott's lines, learned in middle school: "Breathes there the man, with soul so dead, / Who never to himself hath said / This is my own, my native land!" Dead at 87. R.I.P.

FOREIGN POLICY

The New Gulf War

On February 28, the United States and Israel launched a series of air strikes on Iran, killing its leaders and crippling its air and naval forces.

The operation, named Epic Fury by the Trump administration, followed a long military buildup in the region, as carrier groups were posted to the eastern Mediterranean and the western Indian Ocean. It did not follow any action by Congress. President Trump



ROMAN GENN

apparently now has plenary power to dispatch America's military anywhere, to do anything. The need for surprise before the initial attack might seem to justify such unilateralism, though a farsighted executive would have sought an authorization for the use of force (or further force) after having bombed Iran's missile and nuclear sites last June. Iran's long history of attacks on Americans—from the seizure of our embassy in Tehran and its diplomats in 1979 to the massacre of Marines in Beirut in 1982 to the torture and murder of CIA agent William Buckley in 1985 to the deaths of numerous servicemen killed by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq—would provide compelling justification. The lack of initial consensus might hamper Trump's war-making down the road. The lack of sustained explanations of what we are doing confuses it now. This Gulf war has no Norman Schwarzkopf.

It has, however, America's fighters and tactical planners and their sterling performance. Iran is not Venezuela. It is a large, wealthy nation, made even wealthier by Obama-era largesse, that has devoted itself to developing drones and missiles. To have devastated its military to the degree we have as rapidly as we have is an achievement in the annals of war.

Iran's initial response was dictated in part by the decapitation of its senior leadership, which has left it at press time with a new supreme leader (who is, reportedly if jarringly, gay). The regime lashed out at the entire region, from Little Satan, Israel (we are the Great Satan), to side piece Qatar. More strategically, it has closed the Strait of Hormuz, sending oil prices worldwide soaring. Reports that the administration was unprepared for this may be correct to the degree that Trump and his advisers did not expect Iran to do it so soon. But numerous war games have studied this situation, and planners have surely thought of responses or work-arounds.

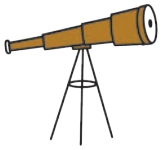
Iran has had more success mobilizing what *City Journal* has called the demonstration-industrial complex. Flag-waving bellowers assembled in Times Square to celebrate a holiday devised by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (it cheers the hoped-for Jew-cleansing of Jerusalem). Tucker Carlson, proving that there is always further to fall, alleges that the CIA was spying on his texts with Iranian officials, which somehow reflects badly on the CIA rather than on any other party. Trump finally kicked him out of MAGA, though his bullhorn remains.

Elsewhere, Trump has been clubfooted. Ukraine, which has years of experience combating Iranian-made drones sicced on it by Russia, offered to help Iran's victims. Trump was dismissive. He has tried bullying NATO into helping safeguard the Strait of Hormuz. What can NATO do? Britain had to rely on the French and Greek navies to protect its bases in Cyprus, targeted by Iranian drones. (Somewhere, Lord Nelson is writhing.) But what NATO can do, however slight, is more than nothing. Trump's boorishness will reap only ill will.

Trump's carelessness has most victimized the Iranian people. In January, he told anti-regime protesters that help was on the way. It wasn't then, and the regime's thugs massacred an estimated 30,000 of them, reportedly gang-raping nurses who had helped the wounded. Trump now seems to realize that, in the wake of such brutality, people hesitate to take to the streets. Late is not always better than never, but we can still hope.

BY ROB LONG

The Long View



NSA SURVEILLANCE
DOCUMENT EXTRACT
FILE #230-A-POTUS-INCOMING

(THE FOLLOWING IS UN-ENCRYPTED SMS/TEXT COMMUNICATION)

BEGIN EXTRACT

TO: RealDJT; MRubio
FR: VPOTUS

Hey there—I know u guys r focused on the Iran stuff now and honestly good luck with all of that doesn't seem 2 B going good but anyways, I know that especially u Marco have been super-confident it will all go great and I hope it turns around in time to save the midterms, I had my doubts all along as u know Mr. P, but on another topic a thought occurs that maybe if we do in fact move on the Cuba situation we will need a viable Cuban head of state to replace present leadership and maybe Marco is the right guy for that? He is Cuban or Cuban adjacent as I recall. Will mean of course moving out of USA and current job but maybe that's a win-win? I know u have a PAC up and running for 2028 which is weird b/c u keep saying u don't but u do but anyway that might mean you can't be a candidate for 2028 b/c ur busy in Cuba. Idk. Thots? JD

TO: RealDJT; VPOTUS
FR: MRubio

Hi JD, thanks for this, and I love the creativity here, but as you know I am pretty busy here helping lead a serous military operation while you I guess are preoccupied with giving Tucker Carlson back rubs and also not using proper spelling or punctuation which, frankly, is disrespectful to the President of the United States Donald J. Trump #MAGA but I have another idea. We will need a viable leader for a newly liberated Iran and maybe you're the right guy for that? It's a theocracy after all. Plus your wife is Iranian, or something, right? Not a normal American in any case, as I know you have noted Mr. President when we have been together in private one-on-one. Think it over and give us a call when you're done with your podcasts. We will be in the Situation Room making hard choices. Sincerely, the Secretary of State to President Donald J. Trump #MAGA

TO: RealDJT; MRubio
FR: VPOTUS

Hi Lil Marco, not sure IM the right guy for the Iran gig wuz thinkin u wd b better since it's clear they're OK with a leader who is a little lite in the loafers—JK JK—not really—LOL Mr. P know ur loving ur lace up shoes and tyvm for the Florsheims btw—but srsly Lil Marco u in Cuba or Iran 4 the 2028 elections wd be GREAT for the actual R '28 ticket which will deffo be me and DJT Jr. or possibly Ivanka or even in a pinch Eric but one of those three for sure. Not b/c they're kidz but b/c they r srsly the best choice for the job. Not sure I had made that clear Mr. P but yeah, gunna be me plus Trump to be named (by you) at a later date but that probs means Lil Marco needs to be in Habana or Tehran. Wd luv to announce this 2nite on Alex Jones. OK?

TO: RealDJT; VPOTUS
FR: MRubio

A group chat isn't really the appropriate venue for this kind of thing, as I know you agree Mr. President Donald J. Trump, sir, #MAGA, because you are sitting next to me in the Situation Room and it's unclear where you are at this moment, JD, but what's important is that you are not here, making the tough calls. Putting Iran and Cuba aside, the real question is what happens when it becomes clear to everyone that the VP is not a great choice? Does one remain weak like Biden and just let it slide or does one take masculine action? That's up to President of the United States Donald J. Trump #MAGA to decide but I know what counsel I'd be giving. Meanwhile, say hi to Tucker Carlson, JD. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

TO: RealDJT; MRubio
FR: VPOTUS

U know all about masculine action don't u lil Marco

TO: RealDJT; VPOTUS
FR: MRubio

Seriously?

TO: RealDJT; MRubio
FR: VPOTUS

U r the 1 with the 28 PAC u won't admit

TO: RealDJT; VPOTUS
FR: MRubio

I can't help it if the people prefer a candidate who doesn't wear eyeliner

TO: RealDJT; MRubio
FR: VPOTUS

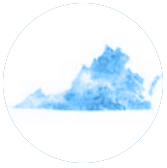
Oh it's on

TO: RealDJT; VPOTUS
FR: MRubio

Your mom, yes I know

END EXTRACT ●

No, Virginia, There Are No Moderate Democrats



The party becomes its fringe

BY JIM GERAGHTY



GOVERNOR ABIGAIL SPANBERGER

MIKE KROPF / GETTY IMAGES

Last year in the Northern Virginia suburbs, Democratic gubernatorial nominee Abigail Spanberger seemed omnipresent on television screens during commercial breaks. Her appearances reminded viewers that—with stints at the Central Intelligence Agency and in "law enforcement" at the U.S. Postal Inspection Service—she would make a good protagonist for a knockoff Tom Clancy novel or CBS prime-time drama.

One ubiquitous commercial featured Spanberger's father, Martin Davis. "You dream that your kids follow in your footsteps," he gushed. "And for me, that dream happened. My daughter Abigail went into law enforcement just like me. She worked drug cases and helped take child predators off the street. Then she joined the CIA to keep our country safe." In another ad, U.S. marshals and police chiefs called Spanberger "one of our own" and the child of "a military and law enforcement family."

Biographical ads are a fact of life in modern politics, and there's nothing inherently wrong with candidates for higher office assuring the public that their fathers are proud of them. But the Spanberger campaign was particularly soft-focus.

It wasn't that she *completely* ignored issues. The congresswoman, who had been in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2019, effectively hung the still-high cost of living around the neck of President Donald Trump, then less than a year into his second term. One of her ads contended that "the Trump budget raises health-care costs, raises mortgages, raises the price of electricity and gas." It also attacked her Republican rival, Lieutenant Governor Winsome Earle-Sears, whom Democratic groups deluged with negative ads. Combined with Trump's unpopularity, the strategy worked: Spanberger romped to victory with 57.5 percent of the vote, and Democrats won a 64–36 majority in the Virginia House of Delegates—their largest in decades.

But once Spanberger was in office, her moderate mask began to slip. After she ran on affordability and a traditional biography, Spanberger has served up pure culture-war fodder and let her party's left wing run wild during her first months in office. Let that be a warning to other states tempted by a Democrat who insists he's nothing like the fringe of his party.

As of this writing, Spanberger has signed four bills into law that will each be subject to a referendum. One would enshrine a right to ▶

abortion in the state constitution, another would enshrine same-sex marriage, and a third would automatically restore voting rights to an estimated 260,000 convicted felons upon their release. All three will be on the ballot in November.

A fourth referendum, scheduled for April 21, concerns a proposed state constitutional amendment that would allow Democrats to implement a new congressional map featuring ten Democratic-leaning seats and only one Republican-leaning seat.

This is a reversal of Spanberger's stance on the campaign trail.

"Virginia by constitutional amendment has a new redistricting effort that was put in place and first utilized in the 2021 redistricting," Spanberger told the Washington, D.C., ABC affiliate last August. "I've been watching with interest what other states are doing, but I have no plans to redistrict Virginia." On March 5, Spanberger declared from her official governor's account on X: "I'm voting YES on Virginia's redistricting amendment."

Spanberger ran on the high cost of living, but she is likely to sign tax increases into law this year. Since she took office, Virginia Democrats have introduced more than 50 new tax bills. They include: (1) a new top income tax bracket of 10 percent for millionaires, which would give Virginia the fifth-highest top income tax rate in the country; (2) a new tax on retail deliveries in Northern Virginia from companies such as Amazon, FedEx, UPS, and DoorDash; (3) a new 11 percent sales tax on the gross receipts from the retail sale of any firearm or ammunition; (4) a 10 percent tax on revenue earned by the operators of fantasy sports; (5) an extension of the state's sales tax to digital property such as Netflix subscriptions and cloud storage, and an extension of the state's retail sales tax to services such as dry cleaning and laundry services, companion animal care, and residential home repair or maintenance; and (6) an extension of the state's personal property tax to electric-powered landscaping equipment, including lawn mowers, edgers, trimmers, leaf blowers, and chainsaws.

Here we see the difference between Argentina and Virginia: Down in Buenos Aires, President Javier Milei wielded a chainsaw at political rallies to demonstrate how he wanted to dramatically chop state spending, bureaucracy, and taxes. In Virginia, Democrats want you to pay an annual tax on the chainsaw—forever.

Taxpayers in Virginia pay a "personal property tax" on vehicles, in addition to the sales tax paid at the time of purchase. For most people, that means their car—generally taxed at $3–$5 per $100 of assessed value. In fiscal year 2025, Fairfax County found that a "typical" household paid $1,266 and change in personal property taxes.

Spanberger campaigned on eliminating Virginia's personal property car tax; she called it the "most hated tax in all of Virginia." But Democrats in the state assembly blocked a proposed budget amendment to eliminate it. If Spanberger objected, she was silent about it.

Down in Buenos Aires, President Javier Milei wielded a chainsaw at political rallies to demonstrate how he wanted to dramatically chop state spending, bureaucracy, and taxes. In Virginia, Democrats want you to pay an annual tax on the chainsaw—forever.

Mind you, Virginia is not facing a budget crisis like the one Mayor Zohran Mamdani is using to justify steep tax hikes and delays to his campaign promises in New York City. Virginia ended the 2025 fiscal year with a surplus of more than $570 million and—according to Glenn Youngkin, Spanberger's predecessor—more than $900 million in rainy-day funds. Youngkin also claimed that the state enjoyed $10 billion in surplus revenue during the last four years.

Virginia used to rank in the middle of the pack on state tax burdens, but it's starting to slide down the list. The Tax Foundation ranked Virginia 30th in this year's State Tax Competitiveness Index, concluding that "many states have implemented significant income tax reforms in recent years, leaving Virginia behind." Moreover, "the state's progressive income tax has a top marginal rate higher than several of its neighbors, including Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia."

In addition to the proposed tax increases, Spanberger has announced that Virginia will rejoin the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. The RGGI sells a limited number of carbon allowances to energy producers, and the pool of allowances shrinks each year. This is supposed to spur energy producers to move to more carbon-friendly fuels. In reality, however, Dominion Energy, Virginia's largest electric utility, simply covers the costs of its allowances through bill riders—additional costs tacked onto customer bills and approved by state regulators. One study from the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy estimates that rejoining the RGGI means Virginians will pay about $500 million more per year for electricity.

Remember, Spanberger ran for governor contending that *Republicans* were making everything less affordable.

Lawmakers' dramatic veering to the left should make Virginians eager to march to the state capitol in Richmond and hurl rotten fruit at them.

Since taking office, the Virginia state government has shifted so far to the left at such speed that Virginians would be justified in showing up in neck braces and threatening to sue for whiplash.

Of course, state legislators may be gone by the time voters get there. Like many state legislatures, Virginia's meets only a fraction of the year. In even-numbered years, barring an emergency session, the session is held for 60 days. In odd-numbered years, the session is held for 30 days, although it is frequently extended to 45 days. This year's budget included a provision raising legislative salaries from $18,000 a year for senators and $17,640 for delegates to $50,000 each—not counting a $237 per diem for each day the legislature is in session and $1,250 per month to help maintain an office in their district. That's a 178 percent salary increase for senators and a 183 percent increase for delegates.

Remember those U.S. marshals and police chiefs who called Spanberger "one of our own"? Immediately upon taking office, the governor terminated all Virginia State Police and Virginia Department of Corrections assistance to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

That decision came under fire after Abdul Jalloh, an illegal immigrant from Sierra Leone, allegedly stabbed 41-year-old Fairfax County resident Stephanie Minter to death. Jalloh had previously been arrested more than 30 times for crimes including rape, malicious wounding, assault, and drug possession. In November 2023, he was convicted of malicious wounding; he was sentenced to two years in prison but was released after seven months.

In 2025, a Fairfax County police major wrote in an email to the chief deputy commonwealth's attorney that Jalloh's behavior was "escalating and becoming more violent and explosive. . . . I am concerned that it is not a matter of if, but rather when he will maliciously wound (or worse) again." But it's worth noting that according to Fairfax County jail officials, ICE never lodged a detainer or came to take Jalloh into custody during the nine times he was jailed between 2020 and 2025.

"There is a woman who is dead because ICE did not take action, and apparently they expect local law or state enforcement to do their jobs for them," Spanberger told the Washington, D.C., NBC affiliate in March. Maybe barring law enforcement from cooperating with ICE wasn't such a good idea after all.

Then there's Spanberger's friendship with Democrat Ralph Northam, Virginia's governor from 2018 to 2022. You may recall that in 2019, a photo featured on Northam's yearbook page from his time at Eastern Virginia Medical School surfaced. The infamous photo featured two young men—one in blackface and one in a Ku Klux Klan robe and hood—and listed one of Northam's nicknames as "Coonman," a Jim Crow–era racial slur.

Northam initially admitted he was one of the two figures in the photo, without saying which one; then he retracted that admission, claiming he wasn't in the picture at all. Still, Northam finished his term, in large part because his two prospective successors faced scandals of their own.

If Northam had resigned or been removed from office by the state legislature, Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax would have taken over, and he faced two serious accusations of sexual assault. (The Virginia House Democratic Caucus absurdly argued that the allegations, though "extremely serious," should not be investigated by the state legislature.) But if Northam and Fairfax resigned, then state Attorney General Mark Herring would have become governor—and Harring had admitted to wearing blackface to a college party in 1980. And if all three had resigned, the speaker of the House, Republican Kirk Cox, would have become governor. Democrats concluded that a GOP governor was the truly unacceptable scenario.

In January, Spanberger appointed Northam to the board of the Virginia Military Institute. Apparently, he is sufficiently disgraced for Spanberger not to have announced the move with any fanfare, but not disgraced enough to be denied such an honor. Maybe he can consult on photo selections for the VMI yearbook.

For a long time, conservatives scoffed whenever the mainstream media described a prominent Democrat as a "moderate" or a "centrist." While there have always been a few genuine articles, those terms have been promiscuously and erroneously applied to the likes of former President Barack Obama, New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, former Vice President Kamala Harris, and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz. Many inattentive political journalists and correspondents label Democrats "moderates" based on personality and speaking style rather than actual policy positions.

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"Campaign as a centrist, govern as a progressive" is the oldest trick in the book, and it might as well be the unofficial motto of the modern Democratic Party. Considering how Richmond is changing, we may want to nickname that bait-and-switch maneuver "pulling a Spanberger." ●

Mis-Anthropic



The Trump administration's ham-handed approach to AI

BY ANDREW C. McCARTHY

"The circumstances that endanger the safety of nations are infinite." Alexander Hamilton stated this incontestable premise nearly a quarter millennium ago, in *Federalist* No. 23. Hence, he concluded, "no constitutional shackles can wisely be imposed on the power" to safeguard national security.

The Framers were men of great foresight, but today's threat environment—a *global* environment thanks to technological advances that have made America a superpower—is beyond the 18th-century imagination.

What will never change is human nature. A government of the people reflects our flawed timber. If that government is sufficiently powerful to secure the nation, then such power, if abused, could eradicate the people's liberties—the preservation of which was the rationale for establishing America's government in the first place. There will always be, then, tension between Hamilton's postulate and the admonition of James Madison, in *Federalist* No. 51: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

The Trump administration is not controlling itself. That is manifest in many ways, but the most consequential may involve artificial intelligence.

AI has life-altering potential for our security, economy, and social relations. It is evolving so rapidly that we can barely take stock of where we stand before the ground shifts again.

The administration is determined to control the development of AI. What hubris. Government consistently proves itself incapable of mastering its own processes. These are naturally clunky: legislation and regulation move at a snail's pace; the lightning tempo of technological change renders them obsolescent, or at least impractical, in short order. Thus, for example, are commodities and securities governed by early-20th-century statutory schemes that today's bureaucrats strain to apply to such novel assets as cryptocurrencies, which didn't exist until decades later. Thus is the 1986 Electronic Communications Privacy Act—which itself was intended to address the inability of 1968 federal wiretapping law to keep up with the times—used to police a digital world of email, text, and social media platforms unknown to the lawmakers of the time.

Yet Trump officials nevertheless seek to shape the course of AI, a phenomenon conceived by and sprung from private ingenuity, methods, and capital. What's more, the "Department of War" (the president's tough-guy rebranding of what remains in statute the Department of Defense) has threatened to seize control of AI assets if the private companies that created them resist acceding to government demands.

To merge Hamilton and Madison, the question is: What shackles can wisely be placed on government *to protect the American people themselves* without undermining the government's proficiency at thwarting hostile foreign powers? Powers such as China: a totalitarian geopolitical rival that is unburdened by scruples about liberty and popular sovereignty as it races to exploit AI's potential, which could be as ferocious as it is glorious.

There is no satisfying, one-size-fits-all answer. There is the abiding tension between national defense, on the one hand, and freedom and private property, on the other. Trade-offs have always been necessary to manage that tension as technology changes conditions and assumptions. There is, moreover, the knowledge problem: unknowns of the present as well as the future hover over questions of whether and how to regulate.

In late February, just hours (it turned out) before American and Israeli armed forces began the aerial invasion of Iran, a Pentagon dispute with the tech giant Anthropic exploded into recriminations and dubious legal sanctions.

Though one wouldn't know it from the unhinged rhetoric to which Trump and his minions resort upon meeting resistance, Anthropic has made material national security contributions since 2024. That's when its AI tool, the commercially popular "Claude," was incorporated into the classified systems of the Defense Department and U.S. intelligence agencies. Both sides sought to continue this beneficial collaboration. In speed and comprehensiveness, the AI-driven prowess in mapping battlefields, identifying targets, protecting vulnerabilities, and increasing the efficiency and lethality of weapons systems is breathtaking. From the start, however, Anthropic prescribed restrictions on the government's use of Claude.

First, Anthropic forbade fully autonomous AI control of weapons. This is a fraught topic, so novel, owing to accelerating breakthroughs in technology, that there might not have been such a capability to argue about as little as 18 months ago. Increasingly, though, AI is able, for instance, to manage and target swarms of drones and missiles and to identify likely hostile enemy fire that could hit American targets before military personnel could detect and react to the threat.

Anthropic's stance on autonomous weapons is not progressive preening; it is a hardheaded calculation about legal liability and corporate reputation if a disaster were to occur.

To be sure, AI operations are based on human inputs; from that foundation, though, there are limits to the human understanding of how AI reasons. For now, in the military context, those operations proceed with a human agent in the loop, theoretically capable of directing matters and shutting them down if things go awry. As AI becomes more capable, however, human agency can be minimized. And such agents could become an impediment to exploiting AI's computing power on the battlefield if, for example, agency-dependent American AI is pitted against enemies who lack ethical qualms about the risks to their own forces and civilians if autonomous operations run amok.

These risks could be profound. In the lawsuit it ultimately filed against the Defense Department, Anthropic—which has a unique grasp of its AI tool's controls and limitations—says it lacks confidence "that Claude would function reliably or safely if used to support lethal autonomous warfare." Trump officials, in their habit of reducing even reasonable concerns to "woke" obsessions, deride Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei's paeans to "effective altruism" (a commodification of corporate giving fashionable on the center-left). But Anthropic's stance on autonomous weapons is not progressive preening; it is a hardheaded calculation about legal liability and corporate reputation if a disaster were to occur.

The second restriction involves mass domestic surveillance. In the information age, with its stress on personalized advertising, it is a commonplace for businesses to sell or purchase personal information in bulk: geolocation information generated by cellphones and data culled from web-browsing histories, consumer purchases, financial transactions, and so on. With as little fanfare as possible, arms of government, including the Defense Department and intelligence agencies, have begun purchasing these data, rather than obtaining them by warrant or other legal process as is typically done in government investigations.

Officials theorize that the Fourth Amendment does not apply because there is no expectation of privacy: People who use digital services know the service provider can monitor their activity. While some precedent supports this view, it is dated; there's real doubt about whether it would survive scrutiny under the Supreme Court's 2018 decision in *Carpenter v. United States* (which granted Fourth Amendment protection against "cell-site" tracking of people's locations by monitoring the movement of their phones).

For our purposes, the surveillance issue is twofold: (1) U.S. defense and intelligence operations are directed at foreign threats and have no business surveilling Americans in the homeland; and (2) Claude has what Anthropic describes as "unprecedented ability to accelerate and automate analysis of massive amounts of data," enabling government agencies to develop a comprehensive profile of almost any American.

Despite the success of its collaboration with Anthropic, the Defense Department began to object to these restrictions. As the controversy unfolded, Trump devotees lambasted the company for presuming to dictate to national security officials how weapons systems are used—as if this were analogous to, hypothetically, Boeing selling the government F-15s and then trying to veto their use against particular countries or targets. That misconstrues what happened.

A skewed argument from principle is being made by the government—essentially, "Who are they to tell us what to do?" Anthropic, however, was not obliged to contract with the government, which accepted its AI on the restricted terms Anthropic offered. The government then decreed that, because national security was at stake (isn't it always?), decisions about autonomous targeting and surveillance were policy issues to be decided by government officials politically accountable (through the president) to the people, not by the private company that developed and owns the technology—and that had contracted to provide it with usage restrictions. The administration demanded leeway to exploit Claude for "any lawful use."

When Anthropic balked, the administration resorted, as is its habit, to lawfare—the extortionate use of legal processes to punish political enemies and scapegoats. "War" Secretary Pete Hegseth first threatened to seize Anthropic's business under the Defense Production Act. Generally invoked only in true emergencies, the DPA triggers extensive due process and private-property protections, and requires establishing that a good or service is vital to national defense. In the end, Hegseth pulled up short of that extreme measure but did punitively designate Anthropic as a "supply chain risk"—the action that prompted Anthropic's ongoing lawsuit.

Both measures were absurd. In his haste to outdo Hegseth's public excoriation of the company, Trump pronounced that the government neither needed nor wanted Claude anymore; if that were true, then Anthropic's AI could not have been vital for DPA purposes. And it's not only that Anthropic does not fit the ▶

We don't fully understand AI, and if we regulate it prematurely we will stunt its growth, robbing ourselves of future prosperity and undermining the security it could offer.

statutory definition of a "supply chain risk." (Congress was concerned about foreign "adversaries" that might undermine systems that affect national security, not about American companies.) The Defense Department is still using Claude in ongoing operations, which it would stop doing if there were risk.

We'll see what happens with the litigation, and with the government's new deal, transitioning over the next six months from Anthropic's Claude to the ChatGPT tool developed by OpenAI. For now, let's focus on transcendent concerns for our constitutional republic.

What do we owe the government? To whom does private property, including the means of commercial production, belong?

By the Prohibition era, the government had developed crude techniques to intercept telegraph and telephone communications. When that was challenged, the Supreme Court held (in the 1928 *Olmstead* case) that the Fourth Amendment was essentially a safeguard against *trespass*—protecting only one's person, home, papers, and effects, not communications that the police intercepted by tapping into wires a distance away from the home or office. That was minimal protection, but at least no one was suggesting that early telecoms were obliged to make their services tappable.

As sensibilities changed, along with fears about government exploitation of technological innovations, the Court, in 1967, changed its Fourth Amendment theory from trespass to the woollier *expectation of privacy* test. More protection for the individual? Perhaps . . . but by then law enforcement was pressing AT&T to facilitate wiretaps and to refrain from notifying customers. Congress went along, theorizing that the phone giant—the monopoly successor of Bell Telephone—was a utility, in the nature of a common carrier, profiting from public rights-of-way and therefore duty-bound to assist the government.

With the communications revolution, when digital technology left the analog world behind, the public demanded privacy from government prying (even as it shared personal details on social media). Big Tech developed passwords, remote deletion, and scrambling technology. Government, citing national security as is its wont, has taken to pressuring telecoms to manufacture "back doors" into their communications services, "just in case" its investigators need to monitor or retrieve conversations. Agents want tech companies to design master keys to defeat passwords and passcodes that lock communications devices—as if the government were empowered to make such demands, as if technological science were required to evolve no faster than the capability of government investigators to defeat technological advance, and as if the public did not have a right to purchase privacy protection—and options to purchase it elsewhere if American companies can't or won't supply it.

Meanwhile, whither the Constitution? The narrow protection against trespassing at the dawn of wiretapping at least required the government to show probable cause of a crime before search or seizure. Now, with its modern capacity to capture oceans of digital data, government complains that showing individualized probable cause before seizing would be impractical; it would have us let agents seize everything and maybe ask for permission to search later—after all, national security is at stake.

Of course, sometimes it really is.

These are excruciating issues, pitting our veneration of property and privacy against security in a dangerous world. Yet AI is a frontier where the challenge is greater. We don't fully understand it, and if we regulate it prematurely we will stunt its growth, robbing ourselves of future prosperity and undermining the security it could offer—particularly against China, a hostile competitor that will press against us every advantage AI can provide. ●

ARTICLES

The Pro-Life Future



How to influence a changing culture

BY RACHEL LU

Let's start with the good news. The American people have not made their peace with abortion and may even be inching in a pro-life direction. The latest Marist Poll showed that 37 percent of Americans still identify as pro-life, which is not thrilling given that roughly half the country was pro-life only a

decade ago. Yet the complete picture gives real grounds for optimism. In the years since *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the Supreme Court ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, campaigns and interest groups have spent hundreds of millions on pro-choice messaging. Despite years of vilification, a formidable mass of pro-lifers have refused to budge. The movement has a remarkably stable core, and raw numbers are also misleading insofar as many people who now identify as "pro-choice" continue to support a range of pro-life goals, such as restrictions on late-term abortions and on mail-order abortion pills.

There are other encouraging data points, too. The pro-life movement seems to be regaining some momentum. A recent report from 19th News/SurveyMonkey, a left-leaning nonprofit that conducts online surveys on political issues, indicated that pro-lifers, for the first time since *Dobbs*, have re-emerged as the more energized camp among Americans who view abortion as a priority. That's a great relief after a few intense years in which the Democrats capitalized significantly on the post-*Dobbs* backlash. If that fury is now ebbing, pro-lifers may have a chance to regain their stride, especially given promising trends among young people, which really represent the best news of all. The latest Gallup data show a noteworthy uptick in the number of young adults (18–29) who identify as pro-life. The young also show increased support for restrictions on abortion. In the immediate aftermath of *Dobbs*, Zoomers appeared poised to become the most pro-choice generation in history, but that gap has effectively vanished in the space of just a few years. This should be a source of hope for pro-lifers. Young Americans are rethinking some things.

Then there's the bad news. Politically, pro-lifers are frustrated. The movement may be picking up steam, but the Trump administration doesn't seem to have noticed. They've offered some symbolic gestures, such as pardoning pro-life activists and sending Vice President JD Vance to speak at the March for Life. That can hardly make up for the administration's willingness to facilitate the availability of mail-order abortion pills or to support technologies like in vitro fertilization, which involve the large-scale destruction of human embryos. Every dollar withheld from Planned Parenthood is good news, but that disruption in funding is only temporary, while the outcome of current debates about life issues could have much further-reaching consequences. Do today's Republican leaders view pro-lifers as an important voice in that conversation? Do they feel obliged to give them a meaningful role in shaping Republican policy? It doesn't look like it.

It's possible that could change, and certainly pro-lifers should continue applying pressure on this administration as they can. But they also need to look to the future. For the most part, the second Trump administration has simply placated social conservatives, treating them as sympathetic has-beens whose heyday has passed. There is no good reason to accept that. Social conservatives still are a sizable contingent of the American electorate; they hold deep convictions, are engaged with serious issues, and maintain a formidable network of institutions and organizers. This is not the end of the road. But the pro-life movement does need to pause, take stock, and position itself for the next chapter in American political life. Hopefully, what's yet to come is the formation of a more stable coalitional politics in which social conservatives can work toward their goals with greater success.

It will be an adjustment. The past decade has been volatile on the right, marked by giddy highs and wretched lows as Donald Trump's mercurial agenda sets the tone for the rest of the party. If the next chapter is less personality-driven, that might on balance be good for the right, for America, and for the pro-life movement. But coalitions have their own challenges. Many social conservatives still harbor hard feelings toward old coalitional allies (free-market economists or neoconservatives) who didn't always conceal their embarrassment at having to share a convention stage with so many Jesus freaks. A new coalition might have a different makeup, but we shouldn't fool ourselves. The same thing would happen in any plausible configuration. Coalitions build on shared interests, but that doesn't always imply a shared vision. Sometimes your allies just don't like you all that much. It should be worth tolerating a little disdain for the sake of political gains, but after years of populist politics, the muscle for toleration may have atrophied a bit.

Of course it *is* genuinely important to survey the electoral landscape and ask, "Whom can we work with? Who might be willing to work with us?" Those questions are hard to answer right now, in the face of so many shifting variables. Some elements on the right do seem relatively stable; for instance, one certainly hopes that originalists and other sober-minded constitutionalists will remain a significant influence. But it's anyone's guess where American foreign policy will go over the next few years. Economic policy is very much in flux. Immigration hawks will likely have some ▶

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At its best, the pro-life movement has shown a remarkable capacity to blend an inspiring, humanizing vision with grounded, incrementalist strategy. Both attributes will be needed in years to come.

role in a new right-wing coalition, but that issue is fast evolving, its trajectory hard to predict. A further fascinating question concerns the tech billionaires and their recent flirtation with right-wing politics. Where will they end up? How will their agenda change, and how will it affect the right's priorities and platform?

Perhaps the hardest question concerns the shape of Trump's shadow. Will we see the next incarnation of the American right building on Trump's legacy, or running from it? Most likely there will be some of each, since politics always has cyclical elements. For social conservatives, this means preparing for different possible scenarios. They need to distill their own priorities, craft their own message, and be alert to opportunities. At its best, the pro-life movement has shown a remarkable capacity to blend an inspiring, humanizing vision with grounded, incrementalist strategy. Both attributes will be needed in years to come.

In recent years, pro-lifers have discussed what achievable goals they should aim for, widely agreeing that strategy must vary by state in accord with local political realities. Reasonable goals might include conscience protections for physicians and other health-care professionals, bans on later-term abortions, and an end to taxpayer funding for providers of abortion and IVF. At the national level, pro-lifers should continue pressing for tighter restrictions on abortion-inducing drugs such as mifepristone and misoprostol, which can generally be obtained even in states with stringent restrictions on abortion. Incrementalism by nature involves a constantly shifting set of goals and objectives, but pro-lifers, unified by deep conviction and a driving vision, historically have been fairly adept at managing that.

Today, though, it may be the vision that needs the most work. Up front, that may seem surprising, because the movement's defining principles haven't changed; it's the culture that keeps moving. The pro-life cause was built from the beginning around the deep conviction that every person matters. Every single human being is precious, unique, and worthy of love. That has always been the core message, and the world still needs to hear it.

As culture changes, however, pro-life talking points may need some adjustment, too. Threats to prenatal life are arguably greater today than ever before, but for reasons somewhat different from those in the past. A few decades ago, abortion was viewed primarily through the lens of the "crisis pregnancy," an all-too-common occurrence thanks to sexual libertinism and family breakdown. Pro-lifers responded by advising the young to "wait until marriage" while also offering services for pregnant women in difficult circumstances. Today, unwanted pregnancies surely still happen, but "wait until marriage" is an awfully quaint-sounding message for young generations who are increasingly leery of marriage, pregnancy, and even sex. Meanwhile, self-described natalists include people who regard it as not merely ethical but even morally imperative to use reproductive technology to select the healthiest and fittest children while discarding the rest. More embryos are now lost through the IVF process than through induced abortions. Not everyone who makes use of IVF is equally callous about the loss of prenatal life, and certainly there is a moral difference between intentionally destroying human life and engaging in medical practices that foreseeably put it at great risk. But the reality is that efforts to *create* life are now a major source of concern for anyone who is consistently pro-life.

These are significant challenges for the pro-life movement. It's no longer enough to promote sexual discipline and a pro-family ethos; the movement needs a message and a vision that respond to these new realities. This is especially challenging given that the public is broadly supportive of IVF, particularly as a means of enabling infertile couples to have a family. Things were simpler back when the pro-life movement was clearly the "pro-baby" camp, lining up against hard-charging feminists in pantsuits. Today, it might be pro-lifers who get backed into arguing that there's more to life than parenting.

The landscape is daunting. The questions are hard. Ultimately, though, it's at this moment that we most need serious people to step up and offer a message worth hearing. That message should be rooted in the conviction that has guided the pro-life movement all along: human life is intrinsically precious. Children are not projects, pets, or utility maximizers. Their value is not dependent on their "quality of life" or how adults in their community feel about them. It's a message that applies to the impoverished woman coping with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy as well as the affluent couple looking to select the perfect embryo. The right to life has been a guiding star for social conservatives for many decades, and it can be still.

From the 1980s through the Trump revolution, that message helped to ground Reaganite conservatism, supplying both a core of voters and a hefty moral ballast. The pro-life

movement has been one of the most transformative political phenomena in American history, with deep roots in both Judeo-Christian tradition and the American political tradition. Prolifers need to draw courage from that and also from the very real signs that the young, in particular, are actively seeking better and richer answers to their own generation's defining questions. The American people have not made their peace with abortion. The debate about life issues continues. No matter what the future holds for the political right, social conservatives need to ensure that their voice is heard—firm, authoritative, and always pro-life. ●

ARTICLES

The Wrong Way to Fix Foster Care



More funding for early education isn't the answer

BY NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

Want to reduce the number of kids entering foster care? Put the ones who are at risk in Head Start. That's the advice of some advocates in Illinois, who say that children enrolled in early education are 93 percent less likely to go into foster care than those who are not. The research supporting this claim is shoddy at best, but the idea that expanding government safety-net programs like Head Start will reduce child maltreatment, which can lead to placement in foster care, has become ubiquitous. Sadly, the reason kids are in foster care is almost never a simple lack of material resources or other support. Using our limited child-welfare dollars on such blunt instruments targeted too broadly will only make it harder to help kids who are truly in danger.

The claim regarding Head Start comes from a 2017 study, published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, whose findings are hardly robust. First, the study includes children in "informal kinship care"—meaning kids who were living with relatives other than parents but who had never been legally removed from their homes—as being in foster care. Second, of the 1,995 kids in the study, only 29 percent of the sample had been enrolled in early childcare at all, and only 7 percent of those (about 40 kids) were enrolled exclusively in Head Start. Third, only 8 percent of children in the study entered foster care (including informal kin situations). It is very hard to model such a low-risk event with so few kids in the Head Start group.

Given the recent history of the Head Start program, though, it's hardly surprising that advocates are straining to justify its existence. The federal program, which has enrolled around 40 million children and cost Americans tens of billions of dollars since its launch in 1965, has been struggling to find a purpose. In 2012, a longitudinal study found that any improvement in academic outcomes for kids enrolled in Head Start disappeared by third grade. And last year, a study from the Government Accountability Office found widespread fraud and child-safety violations at many Head Start locations.

How does the program claim to reduce the need for foster care? Proponents point to vague, wraparound services such as "job and housing resources and referrals" that they say help parents keep custody of their children.

If that's all that's required, it's no wonder other groups also want to get in on the deal, claiming that they too can offer resources to families to prevent the need for foster care. Last year, for instance, a grant-making organization called New Allies gave $200,000 to libraries in Kentucky, ostensibly to help keep kids out of foster care. Libraries are places "people trust to get information, to get access to resources," according to Britany Binkowski of New Allies. "They don't carry the stigma, for example, of going to a child-welfare department and asking for resources in a way that might feel very vulnerable." Regarding the library's ability to help, the *Kentucky Lantern* notes that "preventable issues contribute to [child] removal . . . like a parent not being able to buy a car seat or access safe child care."

To be clear, the notion that children are removed from their homes because parents can't afford a car seat is not true. But this kind of myth is repeated by politicians and advocates across the political spectrum. Last year, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Jason Smith (R., Mo.) introduced a piece of child-welfare legislation by saying, "I think about the families separated in Missouri over the years, not because of abuse or neglect, but because they could not afford to pay a bill or [buy] new clothes for their kids."

It is true that families involved in the child-welfare system are disproportionately poor, but it does not automatically follow that poverty is what is causing their children to be removed to foster care. Indeed, there are millions of families in this country who are poor but do not neglect their children. Of the almost 12 million children living below the poverty line in the United States, there were 546,000 substantiated claims of abuse or neglect in 2023, according to the Children's Defense Fund and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. In other words, 95 percent of kids living in poverty did not have a substantiated claim. ▶

It seems that if you want to sell your favorite safety-net program, the way to elicit support is to claim that it will benefit victims of maltreatment.

Children who are neglected often lack resources. But more often than not, that neglect is a result of parents who suffer from mental illness or addiction and are unwilling or unable to care for them. (Such parents are often also unable to hold down a job or keep stable housing.) Up to 90 percent of the families involved in the child-welfare system are suffering from substance-use disorders. A 2022 study of 295 case files in California, for instance, found that 99 percent of physical neglect investigations "included concerns related to substance use, domestic violence, mental illness, co-reported abuse or an additional neglect allegation (i.e., abandonment)."

The American public understands the picture well. A poll conducted by the Bipartisan Policy Center in 2023 found that, when asked about the primary cause of neglect, 10 percent of Americans said it was lack of financial resources and 3 percent said lack of access to affordable housing, but a whopping 69 percent said it was parents' abuse of drugs or alcohol.

The issue of how to help families who are poor is not exactly simple, but we know the basic outline of a solution. It generally involves temporary financial assistance combined with the right incentives and training to get adults into the workforce. The question of how to help families who are abusing or neglecting their children and may be in danger of losing them to foster care is much more complex because solving mental illness and addiction is much more complex.

But now that various advocates have seen how "preventing foster care" can be used to elicit public and private support for their favorite programs, there will be no end to groups jumping on this bandwagon. A campaign by Prevent Child Abuse America last year presented a list of policies that would supposedly prevent abuse from occurring, including "affordable housing," "access to healthcare," "high-quality, affordable childcare," "school breakfast and lunch programs," and "paid family leave."

Similarly, there has been a growing chorus of policymakers and activists who want to provide cash assistance to needy families. Whether child tax credits or guaranteed-income programs will lift families out of poverty or encourage more stable family formation is an open question. But in recent years, some supporters of these policies have added the prevention of child abuse and neglect to the list of benefits they ascribe to such programs despite little evidence that they do anything of the sort. Nevertheless, it seems that if you want to sell your favorite safety-net program, the way to elicit support is to claim that it will benefit victims of maltreatment.

It is not clear whether these programs will prevent poverty, but there is no credible evidence that they prevent child maltreatment. Spending billions of dollars to offer more cash, health care, free meals, early education, and extended library hours to every family living below the poverty line is unlikely to move the needle on preventing children from entering foster care, but it will take much-needed resources away from children who are truly victims of maltreatment. Distractions have consequences. ●

ARTICLES

The Forgotten Urban Worker



And why conservatives should be paying attention

BY JARRETT DIETERLE

Who is today's "forgotten man"? In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt spoke of "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid." Nearly a half century earlier, Yale professor William Sumner had offered a different conception. As Amity Shlaes once summarized it, Sumner's forgotten man was "the man who pays, the man who prays, the man who is not thought of."

The forgotten man still exists—and in a sense, always will—but his face inevitably changes over time. Today, when politicians on the left and right are falling all over themselves to align with blue-collar workers—and specifically with Big Labor—a new, urbanized version of a forgotten working class has emerged.

By nature, these forgotten men and women defy tidy classification, but they can be seen in profile: the Uber driver who logs in over the weekend to earn extra cash to pay for community college; the single mother who waits tables at the local diner to save for her child's college fund; the recent immigrant who picks up freelance work as a language interpreter to make ends meet.

These forgotten workers comprise much of the lifeblood of the American working class. Coming from a wide

variety of backgrounds, they constitute a metropolitan, multiethnic, and meritocratic working class—one that is not easily reducible to checkmarked boxes on a form. They are disproportionately clustered in cities, since urban hubs provide the most in the way of job opportunities, side hustles, and gig work.

But to borrow Sumner's framing: Who thinks of them? More to the point, who speaks for them?

So far, rather than understanding these workers' actual needs, the political left has offered mostly 20th-century solutions to the problems faced by the 21st-century urban forgotten man. It has sought to convert gig workers and other freelancers into full-scale, unionized, 9-to-5 employees earning wages above $20 an hour and with access to an extensive array of employer-provided benefits—even though such policies often cause as much harm as they help and erode the very flexibility these workers most desire.

A progressive push to eliminate what's known as the tipped-wage credit—which is what allows restaurant servers to be paid below the minimum wage so long as their tips make up the difference—has also taken hold in large cities across the country. Eliminating the tip credit means that a traditional minimum wage is forced upon these workers, which evidence shows can lead to a reduction in tips and even overall take-home pay.

As tired and counterproductive as the left's policy solutions may be, the political right lags even farther behind. Prominent GOP politicians—such as Vice President JD Vance and Senator Josh Hawley (R., Mo.)—have sought to bear-hug organized labor in an effort to peel off blue-collar votes from Democrats. But the Republican Party's emergent pro-labor wing has overlooked the forgotten urban worker in favor of the archetypical Midwest steelworker or autoworker.

For its part, the GOP's more traditional wing, often referred to as "chamber of commerce" types, has long since written off the urban worker—and cities generally—as the exclusive province of the left. In the words of the Manhattan Institute's Reihan Salam and Charles Fain Lehman, "Republicans have spurned urban America as not worth their time."

But as the GOP becomes more diversified with new entrants to the party, in the form of an emerging multiethnic—and surprisingly more urban—voting bloc, it would be wise not to forfeit the urban worker to the political left.

In 2024, then-candidate Donald Trump made inroads in urban locales by paying attention to what Salam and Lehman call "the forgotten middle": those who want safer cities, better schools, and a saner culture. These voters also care about economic growth and the right to work, seeking policies that help them put food on the table and money in the bank. Trump's victory demonstrated that by speaking directly to these issues, conservatives *can* reach the metropolitan worker.

Doing so does not necessitate an abandonment of core principles nor a cribbing of the left's organized labor playbook. Instead, conservatives can offer innovative, forward-thinking labor policies that are pro-worker without being pro-union. To do so, conservatives need to understand these urban workers—both the challenges they face from progressive policy initiatives and the pain points they navigate on a day-to-day basis.

* * *

Surveys of modern workers show that the vast majority prioritize things like flexibility and autonomy in the workplace over concerns about salary and benefits. This is not merely a Millennial or Gen Z fad; nor is it entitled "privilege" emanating from the white-collar professional set. ▶



PETE RYAN

The left frames minimum wage policies as lifesavers for urban gig workers. But they've arguably hurt as much as they've helped.

Polling of shift and hourly workers shows a similar prioritization of scheduling flexibility. Freelance contracting and gig-economy roles have therefore become particularly attractive paths, and the nontraditional workers who pursue them are more likely than 9-to-5 workers to reside in cities.

Although the political left has proposed policies intended to benefit these workers, its solutions have mostly misunderstood what these workers actually desire. The left has erroneously portrayed gig and contracting work as a no-other-choice income source for down-and-out workers, even though most gig workers list gig roles as their first choice for employment, with few showing interest in more traditional work arrangements. Other types of freelancers, such as language interpreters, barbers, and manicurists, similarly prefer independent contracting.

Despite this reality, progressive politicians have continued to push to reclassify these workers from independent contractors to full-scale employees. Particular attention has been paid to the gig economy, where left-leaning government officials have sought to implement a minimum wage.

In 2018, New York became the first city in the country to enact a minimum wage rate for rideshare drivers, and in 2023, the city extended its minimum wage policy to app-based restaurant-delivery drivers. Just last year, the New York progressives advanced their wage agenda even more, with the city council voting to include grocery deliverers under the minimum wage policy.

The left frames these policies as lifesavers for urban gig workers, allowing them to be treated fairly by the large corporate gig companies which, in the left's telling, underpay and mistreat their workers. But minimum wage laws for gig work have arguably hurt workers as much as they've helped.

After passage of New York City's 2023 minimum wage, delivery-driver pay went up on paper—but such wage increases didn't account for the 8 percent drop in the city's delivery workforce. This is because gig platforms like Uber reacted to the change by capping the number of drivers that could be active on the platform at any one time, leading to a waitlist of 27,000 "forgotten" New Yorkers who wanted to work as drivers but who were suddenly locked out of the labor market entirely. In Seattle, which enacted a similar minimum wage, delivery orders plummeted in the aftermath of the law's passage and many drivers reported earning less than before.

Conservatives can step into this debate by offering more nimble solutions. While gig workers and freelancers appreciate the get-cash-quick nature of independent contracting, the biggest handicap such workers face is not necessarily low wages but the lack of employment benefits that come with these roles.

A promising approach has emerged in the form of portable-benefit models, which function similarly to Simplified Employee Pension Individual Retirement Arrangement (SEP-IRA) accounts in that companies, and workers themselves, contribute funds. Such contributions can, in turn, be used by the workers to purchase health insurance, fund a retirement account, or obtain other desired benefits.

This concept is not merely theoretical. States such as Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia, Tennessee, and Utah have implemented portable-benefit programs for gig workers in recent years. Early returns suggest that the programs are popular with these workers and have given them more financial security.

Although deep-blue states like Maryland were among the early adopters of the portable-benefit model, left-leaning politicians have largely panned the idea in favor of their preferred policy priorities: converting elastic contractors to full-scale employees, unionizing them, and subjecting them to the flawed and inelastic minimum wage policies mentioned above.

Importantly, the portable-benefit model retains the flexibility that urban workers most desire; in contrast, reclassification, minimum wage laws, and unionization often shoehorn contractors into "arranged scheduling" (set hours) or cost them their jobs entirely.

* * *

A similar dynamic exists in the restaurant industry, another cornerstone of the American urban working class. All told, more than 15 million Americans work in the broader food industry, accounting for around 10 percent of the nation's entire workforce. Restaurant work constitutes the closest thing to a robust urban manufacturing sector as exists in America today.

Restaurant workers "manufacture" food in their kitchens and then sell that food in their dining rooms—all by engaging in work that, with some minor exceptions, cannot easily be displaced by AI or digitization. Not only are restaurant jobs naturally more concentrated in urban locales, but the industry's workforce is highly diverse, with more women and minorities in management than in any other discrete sector of the economy.

In progressive-run locales, a concerted effort has arisen to eliminate the tipped-wage credit for restaurant and hospitality workers.

Progressives assert that this setup leads to subpar pay, and some even level allegations of wage theft.

Yet again, though, eliminating the tipped-wage credit seems to hurt workers more than it helps. In 2022, Washington, D.C., voters decided to repeal the district's tipped-wage credit, a move that was supposed to increase the minimum wage for restaurant servers from $5.35 an hour to just over $16 an hour.

In the wake of the repeal, full-service restaurant jobs in D.C. dropped by 5 percent, while total tipped worker earnings fell by $12 million. Waiters who before the repeal reported making $30 to $40 per hour (once tips were factored in) saw their tips decline and their hours cut. The fallout was so severe—and the policy so unpopular with district waiters—that the D.C. City Council voted last year to partially reverse the 2022 repeal.

Instead of forcing a traditional minimum wage on restaurant workers by eliminating the tipped-wage credit, conservatives can again draw on the portable-benefit concept and seek to extend it to the restaurant industry.

Another frequently cited issue for restaurant workers is the use of just-in-time scheduling, in which restaurant owners can call in employees to work with little to no notice. Unsurprisingly, the policy is favored by business owners, since it allows them to adjust to an unexpected dinner rush by spontaneously ramping up their workforce. For workers, however, it means never really having a free day and makes wages less predictable.

Here, conservatives could play a role in striking a potential grand bargain between different sides of this labor equation by experimenting with different tiers of wage structures. For instance, some restaurant workers might favor the tipped-wage credit and the possibility of making $40 an hour once tips are factored in, but only if they have the predictability of schedules set several days in advance. Other workers might prefer a higher base wage in exchange for just-in-time availability.

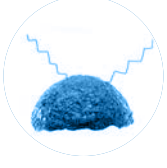
Innovative urban policymakers could find ways to allow restaurants and workers to experiment with a number of different arrangements, using an opt-in approach rather than forcing a one-size-fits-all solution. Depending on the arrangement, this could require potential amendments to state and federal wage and hour laws in order to provide restaurant owners and workers the flexibility needed for these alternative structures.

In the coming years, the media and political class will be focused on prominent disputes between Big Business and Big Labor. Politicians will preach, labor leaders will posture, and business representatives will threaten.

But beyond the political spotlight will be the DoorDash deliverer, the career waiter, and the immigrant interpreter. They will pay, pray, live, and largely be forgotten. Conservative political leaders should pay closer attention to these urban-dwelling Americans and learn how to speak for them. ●

ARTICLES

Happy Chemtrails



A conspiracy theory that aims for the sky

BY GUY DENTON

A sinister plot is unfolding in America's skies. Just ask Dane Wigington, a self-professed expert on climate science. In an interview with former Fox News host turned "truth-teller" Tucker Carlson last November, Wigington declared that the U.S. government is secretly dispersing poisonous "aluminum nanoparticles" from airplanes, "dismantling the planet's primary life support systems," and manipulating weather events such as hurricanes and blizzards. In short, a syndicate of shadowy figures is plotting our national destruction.

But how, you might ask, have these nefarious activities not been widely exposed? By Wigington's account, it's obvious: Meteorologists won't speak out for fear of losing their "paychecks and pensions," organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace are similarly afraid of sacrificing their nonprofit status, and the entire military is involved in the project under the direction of the Department of Defense.

Anyone who has ever stumbled across the more paranoid precincts of the internet has likely heard these claims before. The chemtrails conspiracy theory—which, broadly speaking, posits that toxic chemicals are regularly being released from American aircraft—has existed online in various forms since the 1990s. Recently, however, it has experienced a resurgence in popularity, including on the right. As belief in chemtrails grows within the Republican Party, it's important for conservatives to consider how we can prevent people from being enthralled.

Carlson's interview with Wigington racked up millions of views across YouTube and other social media platforms. "US Government Admits Chemtrails Are Real," the title declared. "(It's Worse Than You Think)." If you don't recall the government making this confession, that's because it never did. But that hasn't stopped the idea of chemtrails from infiltrating mainstream political discourse.

Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., for instance, has accused DARPA, ▶

a DOD research lab, of spraying noxious elements into the sky. "I'm going to do everything in my power to stop it," he told an audience last year during an interview with Dr. Phil. Marjorie Taylor Greene, meanwhile, repeatedly invoked the theory before her resignation from Congress. In a post on X last July, she claimed that a cabalistic "they" have admitted to "controlling the weather and spraying chemicals in our skies." The following month, South Carolina Representative Nancy Mace (R.)—who is currently running for governor—proclaimed that if elected, she will "support any action" to "ban chemtrails." Even among the public, belief is strong. One 2017 study from Harvard's Dustin Tingley and Gernot Wagner, published in *Nature*, found that roughly 10 percent of Americans believe in the chemtrails theory "completely," while a further 20–30 percent view it as "somewhat true."

Reality, however, is far less akin to an episode of *The X-Files* than the chemtrail cadre might think. The trails that planes often leave behind are simply a result of condensation that occurs when water vapor from jet exhaust freezes in the cold atmosphere. They even have a name that reflects their actual source: contrails.

"Contrails first became commented on during the Second World War because of exhaust trails from high-flying fighters and bombers," Ron Smith, a fellow of Britain's Royal Aeronautical Society, told me. "With the growth of air travel, there are more jet airliners than there were, so there are more contrails."

Depending on atmospheric conditions, contrails can linger for minutes or hours at a time. Occasionally, they will form in unusual patterns, or gaps will appear within them. Conspiracy theorists, Smith said, will often attribute these peculiarities to "pilots switching their chemtrail systems on and off." But "local variations in humidity and temperature . . . on the aircraft flight path" are the real cause.

Yet if the science behind contrails is so simple, why are so many people drawn to a fantastical explanation? To understand the appeal of the chemtrails theory, it's worth considering why conspiracy theories are attractive in general. Fundamentally, human beings feel a need to understand. They crave straightforward explanations for events or phenomena that are beyond their frame of reference, but those easy answers aren't always forthcoming. When we encounter things that are unfamiliar, our preconceptions about the world will often lead us to certain conclusions. In an era defined by social media—when falsehoods are rampant, algorithms provide an endless buffet of conspiracy content, and the like-minded can connect with one another on an unprecedented scale—it has never been easier for conspiracy theories to gain currency.

Dave Thomas, an adjunct professor at New Mexico Tech known for debunking chemtrails and other conspiracy theories, told me that before the internet, conspiracy theorists largely worked in isolation and tried to promote their ideas by sending "dense, multipage" letters to "a few selected reporters or scientists." Today, "the internet has spawned numerous discussion groups that have evolved into 'echo chambers' for all sorts of conspiracy theories. In such groups, members feel like they are insiders, helping the few brave pioneers who have discerned the only real path to the Truth."

The popularity of the chemtrails theory, in particular, is a creature of our online world. When it first emerged in the 1990s, message boards and mailing lists had made it possible for conspiracists to reach vast audiences with a few keystrokes.

"People started posting theories about military jet fuel being toxic," said Mick West, a science writer and expert on conspiracy theories. "And as evidence of that, they pointed to the fact that planes sometimes leave long trails that sometimes spread out and cover the sky. That's how it started."

West noted that chemtrail theory was "very much an underground thing for a long time," although it was occasionally acknowledged in local newspapers and radio stations. Fringe writers such as William Thomas and Michael J. Murphy attempted to promote it in books, speeches, and media appearances, but they received little commercial attention. Now, however, West believes that the theory is "making a little bit of a transition into the mainstream," thanks in large part to figures such as Carlson and Kennedy.

Belief in chemtrails can take a surprising variety of forms. Some advocates of the theory think that the government is experimenting with mind control. Others are convinced that it's an elaborate plot to control population growth. Even within the chemtrails community, there are those who seek to enforce certain standards of sanity. Amy Bruckman, a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology who co-authored a 2022 study of chemtrail believers, discovered as much when she interviewed

In an era defined by social media—when falsehoods are rampant, algorithms provide an endless buffet of conspiracy content, and the like-minded can connect with one another on an unprecedented scale—it has never been easier for conspiracy theories to gain currency.



ALEX NABAUM

the founder of an online chemtrails discussion group.

"He told us that his forum had rules," Bruckman told me. "It was okay to say, 'Chemtrails are being sprayed for deliberate depopulation.' But it's not okay to say, 'Chemtrails are sprayed for deliberate depopulation because aliens are coming.' He said, 'This is a science-based group, and we don't allow crazy stuff on our forum.'"

Whether the more prominent supporters of the chemtrails theory—such as Carlson, Kennedy, and Alex Jones, the founder of the conspiracy theory website *Infowars*—genuinely believe in it is a complicated question. In West's judgment, most of them are driven equally by sincerity and self-interest.

"If you have a worldview that is a certain way—you feel like there's this deep conspiracy in the world—then it's very easy for you to believe certain things," he said. "I think there's a degree of that with Tucker Carlson. Even people like Alex Jones, they don't believe half the stuff they say. A lot of it is for effect. But they do believe the other half."

Unlike UFOs, UAPs, or lizard people, contrails are observable in everyday life, and this visibility helps make the chemtrails theory appealing. For those who don't understand the cause of contrails, their presence can seem bizarre or alarming, particularly in a post-Covid world where trust in government and the scientific establishment has eroded. Yet the science behind contrails is easy to grasp, and common objections from conspiracy theorists are similarly easy to disprove.

A popular notion, for instance, is that contrails did not begin to appear until the 1990s. But an abundance of evidence from photographs, movies, and television shows proves otherwise. Thomas, the New Mexico Tech professor, points to the World War II documentary *The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress* (1944)—in which "long and long-lasting trails are shown, along with gaps in the contrails"—as a notable example.

In recent years, Wigington and other chemtrail advocates have made geoengineering—the idea that technology can be used to modify the atmosphere and reverse climate change—central to their theories. Wigington believes that geoengineering is merely a disguise for the deployment of chemtrails, and this idea has caught on in local politics. In 2024, Tennessee's state legislature passed a bill designed to ban geoengineering, and several of the bill's supporters seemed to reference the idea of chemtrails in their public remarks. Similar legislation has been considered in states such as Arizona, Louisiana, and Iowa.

But at present, large-scale geoengineering is entirely theoretical. David Keith, a geophysics professor at the University of Chicago, supports a proposed form of solar geoengineering that would lower the Earth's temperature by reflecting greater amounts of sunlight back into space. "There's no question it's doable," he said. "But the point is, it's not actually happening." Chemtrail believers will often emphasize that the number of applications and approvals for geoengineering patents has increased in recent years. "These patents are real, but you can patent anything," Keith said. "That doesn't mean that anybody's executing the patents."

The most blatant problem with the chemtrails theory is that it presumes that the perpetrators are almost supernaturally competent. It would take an extraordinary ▶

amount of planning and coordination to not only execute such a scheme but keep it secret for decades. Even in small groups, human beings are dysfunctional. For the chemtrails theory to be viable, thousands of people at every level of the government and aviation industry would need to be involved. And all of them—from the malevolent politicians orchestrating everything, to the crew of each flight, to the workers manufacturing the chemicals, manning the loading docks, and managing the supply chains—would need to willingly participate in harming the public without ever once speaking out or being detected by an independent party. If only airlines could use that same mastery of organization to make every flight arrive on time.

"I think governments can do a good job of keeping operational secrets on a short time," Keith, the geophysicist, said. "So like, the mission to capture Osama Bin Laden, when you're just talking a small SEAL team, you can keep the secret of where you're going." Of course, governments have lied to the public in the past. "But I think what they don't do is sustained lies that involve huge numbers of people. There's no precedent for it. And even less when there's no justification."

Even so, many chemtrail believers remain wedded to the theory, and helping people who have fallen down the rabbit hole find a way out is no easy task. One potential tactic, said Bruckman, the Georgia Tech professor, is for "recovering believers" to perform outreach: "Look, I was there too. Let me tell you how I learned that I was confused."

Another method, according to West, is to steadily provide people with clear information that disproves the theory—for instance, by demonstrating that the ballast tanks used in certain planes contain water rather than chemicals. Still, West said, "these things take a long time. You can't just show them stuff and have it immediately work."

Most of the experts who spoke to me suggested that the answer lies in harnessing the internet to guide people to the truth rather than to fantasy. For instance, the algorithms that often feed conspiracy content to social media users are "adjustable," Keith said. He cites Wikipedia as an example of an algorithm that seeks to promote evidence and reliable sources, while the Facebook algorithm often amplifies misleading or inflammatory content. "I think you could imagine an algorithm that, in different ways, ties people together and does try to anchor closer to reality." Who would decide what it actually means to anchor the public to reality, however, remains an open question.

Bruckman, meanwhile, recognizes a singular solution: metadata. She contends that as artificial intelligence grows more sophisticated, it will soon be impossible to distinguish real videos from those generated by AI, and canards will flourish. But if every video on social media were labeled with certain details, "people could make informed choices about what to believe and what not to believe," Bruckman said. Such details could include: "By the way, this is AI. By the way, this has been disproven; here's the data if you want to see it." (The Community Notes tool on X, which allows users to fact-check deceptive posts, is one example of how such a guardrail could be implemented without infringing on users' rights.)

Despite the potential of technological innovation and stronger online guardrails, the conspiratorial instinct will remain ingrained in human nature. "I think a lot of the debunking stuff that gets done deteriorates over time," West said. "There's some chemtrail explanation sites that just don't exist anymore. It's a never-ending battle because you get people who weren't even born when I started investigating chemtrails, who are now believing in chemtrails."

It seems some of us are destined to keep watching the skies. ●

ARTICLES

The Meaning of Saint Dismas



The good thief on Good Friday

BY TIMOTHY DOLAN

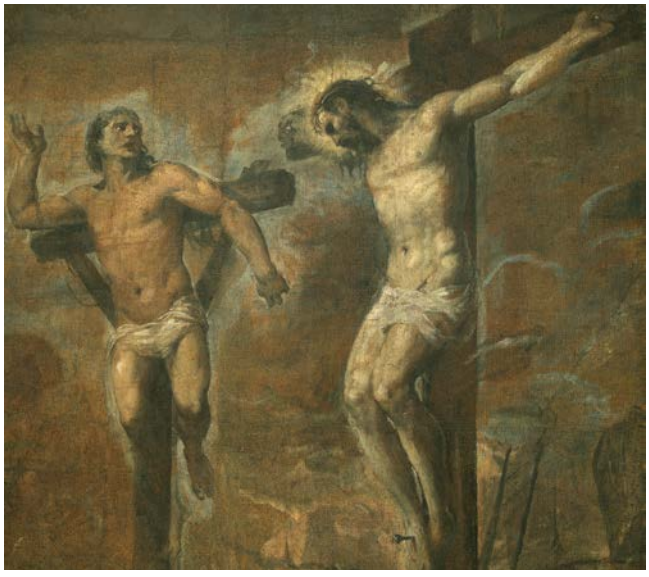
Sometimes, in a reflective mood, I wonder what final words I would hope to hear before the Lord calls me home. The answer I return to is: "This day you shall be with Me in paradise!" Those, of course, are the consoling words of Jesus on the cross to the thief on the cross to His right. Not a bad meditation this Lent, as Holy Week and Easter near.

We actually don't know the name of the "good thief." Tradition, dating back 1,500 years, calls him "Dismas." Often do I look at his icon to the right of the crucifix while stumbling through prayers in my little oratory at home.

This touching incident is told only in Saint Luke's Gospel (Luke 23:39–43). How typical of Luke, who ever displays a tenderness for the suffering, the poor, the forgotten, the sinners.

Here are some lessons we can learn from this moving episode for that Friday weirdly called "good."

For one, while we may not know the name of this good thief from the Bible, he surely knows the name of the one in agony next to him: *Jesus*. To Him he turns in desperation, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" Pope Benedict XVI observed that this is the single time in the Gospels that we hear someone call the Savior by only His first name. Sure, others



CHRIST AND THE GOOD THIEF, BY TITIAN (C. 1565)

MONDADORI PORTFOLIO / GETTY IMAGES

have addressed him, "Jesus, son of David." But, most often, they call Him "Rabbi," "Master," "Lord," "Sir." Of course, Mary and Joseph would have called their child by His first name, although we do not have accounts of that in the Scriptures. Yet here, this penitent crook feels close enough to the Redeemer to be familiar, informal, simply calling Him "Jesus." So can we, of course. So should we, for He considers us "friends," and we are among His kin. Besides, the name "Jesus" is in itself an act of faith—a prayer, actually, since it means "Savior," so fitting since here He is on Calvary, saving us, as Saint Dismas calls Him by that name.

A second lesson is about the nature of prayer itself. Recall that there's a bad guy on Golgotha, to the left of our Lord. Neither do we know his name. He, too, pleads with Jesus—that's prayer—even before Dismas does, and his prayer goes something like this: "Hey, you! I hear you claim to be divine. Well, start acting like it. Get down off that lumber. And, while you're at it, get me off mine."

We can agree that's a rather selfish oration. It's a plea for a miraculous rescue right here and now, a demand to escape the cross, probably then to go back to his life as a criminal. It's a prayer, I admit, very often like my own: I want a miracle, on my terms, right away, usually to get out of some difficulty.

How different the words of Saint Dismas! He defends Jesus, reminding his fellow robber that Jesus is in fact innocent. Then, still lecturing his "thick as thieves" buddy, Dismas admits his own crime, repents, and acknowledges his own guilt. Contrition! Conversion of heart! Only at that point does he speak this to Jesus: "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" This condemned man believes that Jesus is a king, with a realm not of this world.

The good thief seems to sense that this cross might, as a matter of fact, be cleansing and saving, that to be close to the cross of Christ, on one of his own, is a towering grace as he nears his end. He goes for the long game, with the goal of eternal life in mind. "I've made a mess of this life," he seems to say, "thank God I've still got a chance for mercy and true happiness forever, through this innocent, good man next to me."

While we tend to presume heaven is a sure thing, we can only trust divine mercy that eternity is ours, never taking it for granted. The reward for Dismas, though, is guaranteed, as we have the assurance of the crucified Christ that he's going right to paradise.

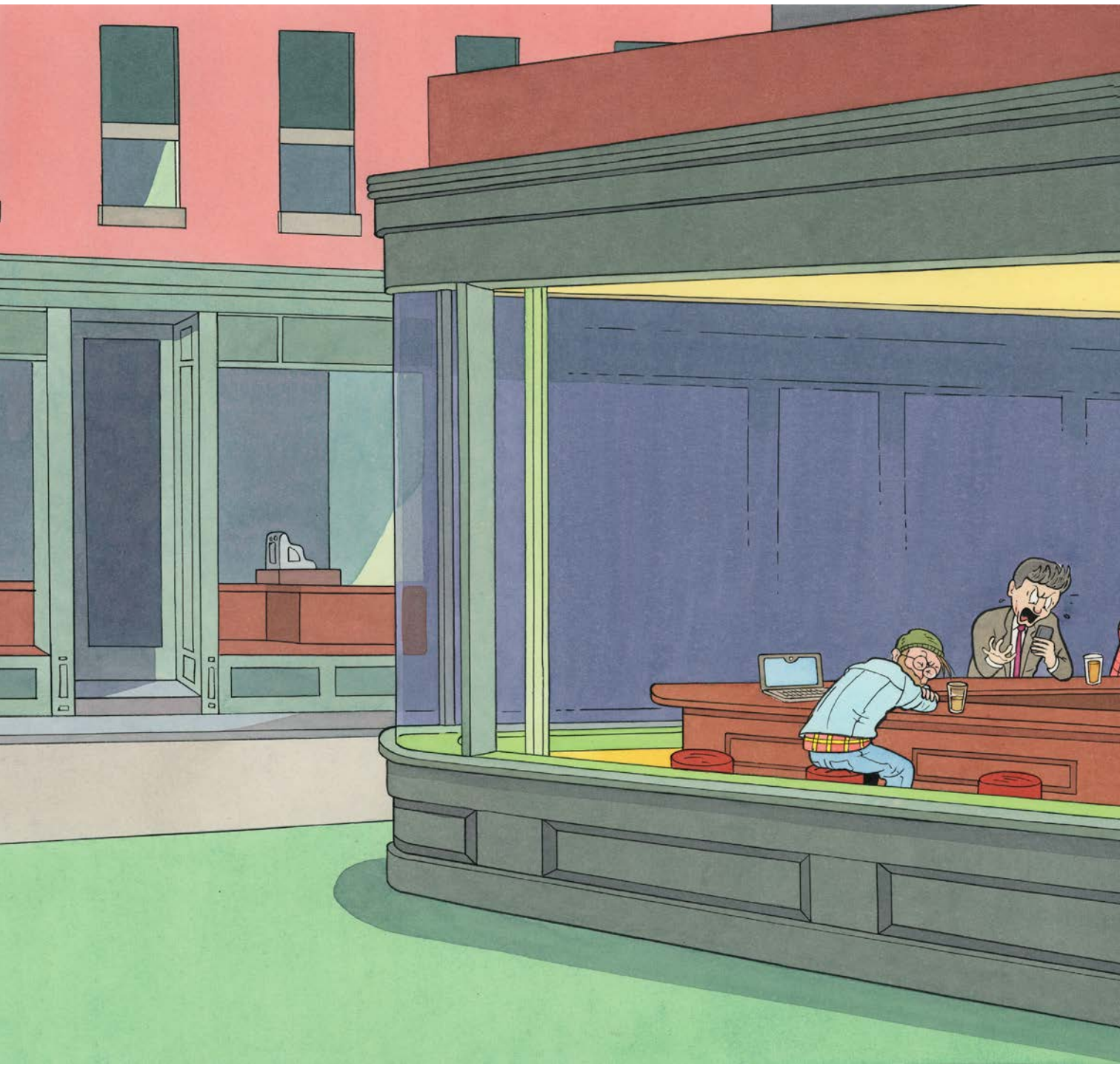
A third lesson we can discern from the Good Friday prayer of Dismas is this: how consoling the words of the robber to His right must have been to the suffering Christ! Here, finally, at the end of an earthly ministry that seems to have failed, Jesus encounters a repentant, humble man of faith. He had spent His public life inviting people to conversion of heart. Not many seemed to have listened. Even His chosen disciples, except His mother and Saint John, abandoned Him, betrayed Him, denied even knowing Him, at this crucial moment. All around Him were thugs who mocked Him and laughed at Him. Then this desperate criminal soothes His broken, soon-to-be-pierced Sacred Heart, with words of trust and a longing for eternal life that He, the savior, in fact had come to bring. At last someone gets it! At least Jesus encountered some believers that dreadful day: Veronica, who soothed His swollen face; Simon of Cyrene, who helped Him drag His cross . . . and now Dismas.

In our prayers, we usually ask Jesus to console *us*. Fine. But sentiments of praise to the Lord, gratitude for the salvation won by His suffering and death, should find a place in our prayers as well. True enough, He hardly needs to be consoled by us. When we do so, though, He's able to help us even more. Dismas is one who brought solace to Jesus when He needed it most.

To confess the power and goodness of Jesus, to admit our own sins, to acknowledge the value of the cross and our share in it, to console Christ—all of this is purifying and medicinal; to look to the eternal goal line and not just the "right now" is an appeal to Jesus. That's the power of Saint Dismas's prayer. A model indeed for our own.

We may not know his name from the Bible. But we sure know the name of Jesus. And the humble prayers of Dismas can give us the assurance that we, too, like Dismas, will hear the Lord whisper to us: "This day you will be with me in paradise!"

That's why I have written down in my funeral instructions that one of the hymns will be "Jesus, Remember Me When You Come into Your Kingdom." ●



Against Misery



ERIC SAILER

Enough with the long faces

by Charles C. W. Cooke

"Cheer up," the British like to say. "It might never happen."

To which the comedian Jack Dee once retorted: "Actually, I think you can tell by the chisel coming out of my knee that, on this occasion, it has in fact happened."

If, indeed, you have a chisel coming out of your knee, what follows is not for you. At no point in human history would a man with a chisel sticking out of his body have been expected to stop being miserable, and there is nothing about our age that ought to alter that expectation. Now, as ever, a chisel in the knee serves as a presumptive Get Out of Happiness Free card, whose holders may moan, complain, grumble, cavil, and bitch to their heart's content.

But the rest of us? Could we perhaps dial down our angst just a little? If, as is mercifully common, you have been spared one of the handful of genuine problems that your grandparents might have recognized as such, then "Cheer up" is pretty solid advice, all told. I know, I know. You don't like the president? Neither do I. And you wish that some of the laws that bind you were different? Me too. And you think that things could be better than they are? You're right. They could. But is that really a reason to be so down on your country? Surely one doesn't need to be a Stoic to conclude that doom and gloom are to be avoided until avoiding them proves impossible rather than embraced as a lifestyle choice.

And yet, for quite some time now, the default mood of our politics has been depressed, even as Americans remain pretty darn happy with how things are going for them ▶

personally. Per Gallup, 81 percent of Americans are either "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with their lives, while just 20 percent are either "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with the way things are going in the United States in general. And why wouldn't they be, when, day in and day out, our leaders declaim and condemn and lament the awful state of things. They point to the dastardly villains who are screwing us; cite figures that suggest that our lifestyles are precarious; deliver rhetoric designed to make us believe that we are unfortunate; and, increasingly as a matter of habit, look backward rather than forward when waxing lyrical about the American dream. When, rarely, one hears optimism, it is laden with caveats: The United States *could* be great, if only it were altered wholesale. Our future *would* be bright, if only those who disagree with us were vanquished for all time. If only this politician were to win, or this one policy were to be passed into law, or this one constitutional change were to be made, then we *might* attain the sunlit uplands that our forefathers promised us.

I think that this inclination is *bonkers*. The United States has many problems at present. But this was also true in 1980, 1950, 1920, 1890, and at each and every earlier juncture. Pick a date at random since 1776, and one will invariably discover all manner of cultural, social, political, and economic issues attached to it. Why? Because America is run by people, and because people are flawed. Because there are no solutions in statecraft, only trade-offs. Because democracy is a process, not a guarantee of perfection. It is, of course, virtuous for a free people to attempt to improve the country they inherited. But it is a grave mistake to believe that anything short of the establishment of heaven on earth represents failure. What we have in the United States right now—it's not a matter of *if* or *when* or *after* or *before*, but right now—is a miracle. *This* country—as it is. *This* economy—as it is. *This* culture—as it is. *This* constitutional order—as it is.

A baby who is born in America today would have been envied by pretty much every other human being who came before. Without having done anything to earn it, that baby is the beneficiary of thousands of years' worth of other people's effort, experimentation, and pain. For that baby to grow up and look around this country and disdain all that he sees would be ungrateful. But for the political class to cultivate such a sentiment? That is a sin. Having strong political views does not require one to descend into despair. As a polity, we appear to have forgotten that.

What we have in the United States right now—it's not a matter of *if* or *when* or *after* or *before*, but right now—is a miracle.

Lest I be accused of Pollyannaism, allow me to list the major challenges we face. The federal government is massively in debt, spends more than it takes in each year, and has no plan to reverse this trend. Our entitlement programs are unaffordable but cannot be touched for fear of angering the electorate. We are still suffering the lingering effects of the worst bout of inflation in 40 years. The housing market remains too expensive for many, and interest rates, while historically normal, are higher than they have been for two decades. China is a serious geopolitical threat that is arguably on the same scale as that once posed by the Soviet Union. Our higher-education system has left millions of students in debt but without the prospects that they believed would be unlocked by incurring that debt. Our K–12 education system is, in many areas, producing students who can't read, write, count, or think straight. And mass immigration—which has been turbocharged by a persistent unwillingness to enforce our laws—has left many voters angry and unsettled.

These challenges are all real, and they are all serious. But 'twas ever thus. Fire up the random date selector again and consider a decade that you are tempted to romanticize. The 1990s? Fun, except that crime was higher than at any point in the 20th century. The 1980s? Great, except that everyone was scared of an imminent thermonuclear war, and the abortion rate was astronomical. The 1970s? Nice, except for stagflation, oil crises, Watergate, and the rocketing number of divorces. The 1960s? Exciting, except for the political assassinations, race riots, domestic terrorism, Vietnam War, and Cuban Missile Crisis. Yes, in hindsight, we know that most of these problems were solved or reduced. But the people living through them did not know that they would be. And, not knowing that, they faced the same alternatives that we do: to understand—to acknowledge—that the United States is great in spite of its issues or to collapse into nihilism.

I am not making the case here for a given president or party. Indeed, given the low quality of our current crop of politicians—including, for two decades now, our commanders in chief—I will not pretend to be upset that Americans have given low marks to their leaders

since at least the late 1990s. Still, I will confess to being a touch worried that the electorate has adopted a worldview that renders satisfaction philosophically unattainable. Ultimately, the split between the Americans who are satisfied with their own lives (81 percent) and the Americans who are satisfied with the state of their country (20 percent) is absurd. Americans live *in America*. Certainly, life is more than mere politics, but if "the way things are going" in America really were unsatisfactory to a supermajority, one would not expect that same supermajority to say that their personal lives were A-OK. Given the considerable size of the gap, it seems likely that, when asked about "the country," most people are answering on behalf of other supposedly unhappy people—many of whom probably do not exist. Logically, it is possible for 80 percent of the population to believe that their lives are good *and* to be so worried about the fate of the minority that they hold a negative opinion of the country as a whole. But I am skeptical that this is what is actually going on. All things considered, it seems far more probable that, egged on by commentators, journalists, and politicians, Americans have become convinced that, outside of their own enclaves, the United States is a hellscape.

Which is a problem because, in the year of our Lord 2026, the United States is no such thing. In fact, it is the best place in the world by far. It has a durable constitutional order that, more than two centuries since it was ratified, continues to protect individual rights to an extent that remains unique in the West. It has the largest and most dynamic economy and the highest standard of living of any large nation. It has the most impressive higher-education sector; the best scientists, engineers, and doctors; and the lion's share of the global technology industry. It boasts massive natural resources, including enough oil to remain energy-independent, vast tracts of arable land, and abundant fresh water. It has the most fearsome military, the world's reserve currency, and the most important financial markets on earth.

Better still, most trends are in America's favor. In 2008, the combined economies of the EU slightly exceeded the economy of the United States. Today, the United States' economy is one and a half times the size of the EU's. In 1990, the United States' share of the global stock market was 30 percent. Today, that share is 65 percent. In 1980, the United States imported 40 percent of its petroleum. Today, it is the world's largest producer of oil and a net exporter of energy. And, of course, the United States' ability to project military power remains unmatched.

These advantages do not wipe out the challenges that the U.S. faces. But they do prompt the question, "As opposed to what?" Or, to put it more bluntly: If the reflexive pose of the American political class is to be melancholy, then what in the name of all that is holy ought the rest of the world to feel? Please believe me when I say that I do not begrudge this Republican and that Democrat their gripes. In a freewheeling republic, the expression of grievances is ubiquitous, inevitable, and sometimes even valuable. But it might be nice if the complainers' jeremiads were more often interspersed with heartfelt praise for the United States as it actually exists. Negativity sells, no doubt. But there is more to being a statesman than perpetually provoking the citizenry into disgruntlement. After all, if we Americans, of all people, cannot strike a better balance between cheering our country's successes and addressing its deficiencies, then nobody else has a chance. And despondency has never solved a problem anyway.

Negativity sells, no doubt. But there is more to being a statesman than perpetually provoking the citizenry into disgruntlement.

There have, in the long history of this country, been a handful of years in which remaining optimistic proved a tall order: among them, 1862, when it looked as if the country might split apart; 1930, when the economy was in unprecedented free fall; and 2020, when a once-in-a-century pandemic ground the nation to a halt. We are not living in those years. Rather, we are living in a normal time, facing normal problems, and contriving normal solutions. A century hence, few people will be interested in what happened in 2024 or 2025, and those who do bother to think about it will presumably be confused as to why our conversations about quotidian current affairs were so often eschatological in timbre.

William Wordsworth once asked, "Who is the happy Warrior? Who is he / That every man in arms should wish to be?" Today, I might instead ask *where* the happy warrior is. Despite having been given more than our ancestors could ever have imagined, many of us seem determined to interact with our peers from under a cloud, to pull them in tight so that they, too, end up damp, miserable, and inexplicably despondent about the prospects of the place they call home. ●

AL GORE'S FALSE PROPHECY

An Inconvenient Truth at 20

by Bjorn Lomborg

Two decades have passed since Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* hit theaters, in May 2006, catapulting climate change into the global spotlight. The film, with its dramatic visuals and dire warnings, transformed the issue from a niche ecological concern into a front-page crisis. World leaders in rich countries began labeling it an "existential threat," and it dominated international agendas. Gore's message especially resonated with the elites who travel by private jet to attend global conferences, and it inspired a generation of influencers, activists, and policymakers.

As we approach the film's 20th anniversary, it's a time to reflect on not just its impact but its accuracy. The film's predictions of escalating catastrophes have largely failed to materialize, its policy prescriptions have fallen short, and the $16 trillion currently spent in pursuit of its vision has delivered scant benefits. *An Inconvenient Truth* encapsulates the past two decades of climate debate: heavy on emotion and costs, light on evidence and benefits.

Let's start with the film's core narrative: that climate change is driving ever-worsening disasters. Gore painted a picture of a world besieged by floods, droughts, storms, and wildfires, with humanity on the brink.

The data tell a different story. Over the past century, as the global population quadrupled, deaths from climate-related disasters have plummeted. In the 1920s, an average of nearly half a million people died annually from such events. Today, that number is under 10,000—a decline of more than 97 percent. This isn't because disasters have vanished. It's because wealthier, more resilient societies have adapted through better infrastructure, early warnings, and disaster management. Richer, smarter societies have made us dramatically safer, proving that adaptation and resilience work far better than alarmists suggest.

Gore's movie famously warned of vanishing polar bears, using poignant computer-generated images to suggest they were drowning because of melting ice. Again, reality is starkly different: Polar bear populations have increased from around 12,000 in the 1960s to more than 26,000 today, according to the best available evidence, including from the Polar Bear Specialist Group under the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The primary historical threat was overhunting, not climate change. While future warming poses risks, the apocalyptic narrative is undermined by the data.

Hurricanes were another bogeyman. The film notably claimed that we would see more frequent and stronger storms; its poster cunningly showed a hurricane coming out of a smokestack. But global data from satellites actually show a slight decline in hurricane frequency since 1980. While Al Gore blamed Hurricane Katrina on climate change, just one year later, the U.S. began an unprecedentedly long streak of eleven years without major hurricane landfall. Indeed, the longest reliable data series for landfalling hurricanes in the U.S. has shown a decline since the year 1900, and major hurricanes are about as frequent as they were in the past. When adjusted for more people and more houses, the damages from U.S. hurricanes have declined, not increased.

Wildfires follow a similar pattern. Media hype suggests a planet ablaze, but global burned area has decreased by 25 percent since 2001, according to NASA data. Each year, the reduction spares from the flames an area larger than Texas and California combined.

In the U.S., while recent years have seen large fires, the 1930s Dust Bowl was five times worse. Fires are down everywhere else in the satellite era: They're trending lower in Australia, Europe, and South America; Asia hit its third-lowest annual burned area, and Africa (the biggest burner by far) posted its all-time low in 2025. North America's woes to a large extent stem from mismanagement: We've skipped the prescribed burns that lower long-term fire risk; a century of this fire suppression has built up undergrowth fuel and created tinderboxes. Yet this is spun as "climate change," not policy failure.

Even CO_2 emissions from wildfires are plummeting. The year 2025 saw the lowest-ever-recorded emissions in the satellite era, down 3 gigatons from early-2000s levels—equivalent to wiping out the annual emissions of Brazil and Indonesia combined. This undercuts the core argument that rising global temperatures are supercharging fires and feedback loops of carbon release.

This decline isn't new; it's a century-long pattern driven by human adaptation. People hate fires, so we prevent them. In the early 1900s, nearly 4 percent of global land burned yearly—two Indias' worth.

We're constantly bombarded with the narrative that solar and wind are the cheapest energy sources around—an idea that Gore did much to sell. But look at the real-world data.

Today, it's nearly halved, to 2.2 percent, sparing almost one India ablaze annually. Better land management, farming practices, and fire suppression have tamed blazes worldwide.

Air pollution from fires follows suit. Globally, reduced burning means cleaner air. The risk of death from fire-related pollution has dropped significantly, likely saving tens of thousands of lives yearly, especially among vulnerable infants.

Global fires are dramatically down, with lower emissions, pollution, and intensity—all facts that challenge the alarmism. In the wake of Gore's film, media and activists have worked overtime to amplify every weather event as "unprecedented," but the evidence shows that humanity is safer than ever from climate disasters. Climate change is real, but its impacts on extreme weather are dramatically overstated.

Now consider the policy fallout. Gore's call to action spurred trillions of dollars in spending to reduce emissions. Yet global fossil-fuel emissions have set records nearly every year since 2006, and they again set a record in 2025. Fossil fuels still dominate because countries want cheap and reliable power.

In 2006, the world got 82.6 percent of its total energy (not just electricity) from fossil fuels, according to the International Energy Agency. Annual fossil-fuel consumption rose 26 percent between then and 2023, the last year with global data. Even though renewables had also grown spectacularly, the world was still overwhelmingly dependent on fossil fuels delivering 81.1 percent of global energy. On current trends, it will take until the year 2708 to reach zero.

Gore explicitly claimed that the solutions to climate change were already at hand—especially solar and wind. Implementing these technologies swiftly and decisively, he said, required only sufficient political will from especially rich nations. This missed the fact that solar and wind are still not cheap and that much of the non-rich world has leaned even more into fossil fuels.

Although solar and wind technologies have become dramatically cheaper in recent years, they remain fundamentally intermittent: They generate power only when the sun shines or the wind blows, not satisfying demand around the clock. Modern societies require reliable, 24/7 electricity, which means any heavy reliance on renewables necessitates substantial backup systems—typically fossil-fuel plants (like natural gas) that can ramp up quickly to fill the gaps during extended periods of low generation. People think that batteries can play a large role, but almost everywhere, we have battery backup for just tens of minutes, whereas weeks or months would be needed—which would entail a prohibitive cost.

The result is that citizens and economies end up paying nearly twice. While we save on fossil-fuel costs, we have to pay once for the renewables themselves (including their installation, grid integration, and subsidies) and again for the reliable backup infrastructure that will keep the lights on.

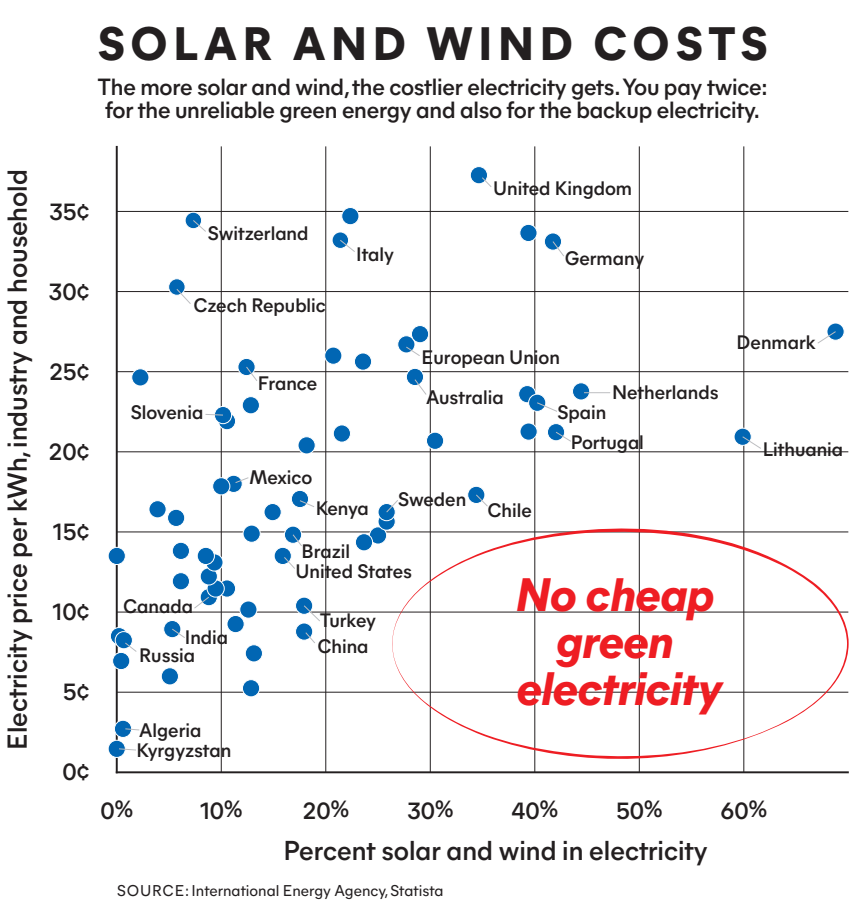
Studies examining real-world grids in places such as China, Germany, and Texas show that, after properly accounting for these backup costs, the true all-in price of solar and wind power often turns out to be significantly higher than claimed—sometimes twice as expensive as coal, and many times more than fossil fuels when reliability is factored in.

We're constantly bombarded with the narrative that solar and wind are the cheapest energy sources around—an idea that Gore did much to sell. But look at the real-world data: As nations ramp up their share of these intermittent renewables, electricity prices soar. Countries such as Denmark and Germany, for instance, get more than 40 percent of their power from solar and wind, but they face electricity costs double or triple those in China or the U.S., which use these renewables far less.

And it turns out that even China, which is often rumored to be going green, is really overwhelmingly fossil-fuel-based. The solar panels and wind turbines China sells the rest of the world are mostly made with fossil fuels.

An Inconvenient Truth's naïve framing—that we already possess affordable, scalable solutions and merely lack the resolve to deploy them—ignored these practical engineering and economic realities.

Estimates vary, but climate policies since 2006 have cost more than $16 trillion globally, including subsidies, regulations, and infrastructure. In the U.S. alone, the Inflation Reduction Act poured hundreds of billions into green tech. Yet emissions climb because the rich world's efforts ignore the developing world's realities. Here's the crux: *An Inconvenient Truth* focused on what rich countries should do: cut emissions drastically. But rich nations (OECD countries) will account for only ▶



about 13 percent of remaining 21st-century emissions. Emerging giants including China, India, and Africa drive the rest. Even if all rich countries achieved net-zero by mid-century, it would avert less than 0.2 degrees Fahrenheit of warming by 2100, using the U.N. climate panel's own model. That's negligible.

This missing sense of proportion from Al Gore continues to stoke climate agitation, with activists happily glueing themselves to roads and vandalizing paintings in the U.S. and Europe, blaming Western countries for not reducing their carbon footprint enough. Meanwhile, the agitators ignore the real elephants in the room.

As other global challenges—poverty, disease, education—demand attention, the costs of climate policy must be weighed. The best economic evidence suggests that unmitigated warming might shave 2–3 percent off global GDP by 2100. That's not trivial, but context matters: Under baseline growth, the average person's income globally would rise 450 percent by this century's end; taking into account the impact of climate change, it would feel as if that person would be "only" 435 percent richer. We're talking about being vastly richer, just slightly less so.

Current net-zero policies, however, are fantastically expensive with minimal benefits. One set of analyses pegs global net-zero costs at $27 trillion annually across the 21st century, yielding just $4.5 trillion in annual avoided damages. That means for every dollar spent on today's climate policies, we waste over 80 cents.

Where Gore's movie failed most was in neglecting to make the case for smarter approaches. Instead of panic-driven mandates, we need to prioritize innovation. R&D into green tech—better batteries, advanced nuclear, carbon capture—could slash costs, making a transition affordable or even desirable for all. Adaptation saves lives cheaply: seawalls, drought-resistant crops, early warnings. And finally, development lifts billions out of poverty, building resilience.

If we're actually going to tackle climate change, we will need to pivot from Gore's alarmist playbook to evidence-based strategies that deliver results. Central to this is ramping up innovation through green research and development. History shows that humanity solves big problems not by rationing or banning but by inventing breakthroughs. We didn't end air pollution by banning cars; we innovated the catalytic converter. Hunger wasn't curbed by telling people to eat less; it was the Green Revolution—developing and spreading high-yield crop varieties alongside modern inputs like synthetic fertilizers, irrigation, and improved farming techniques—that dramatically boosted harvests and helped feed billions.

But governments have neglected climate R&D for decades. In the 1980s, rich countries spent nearly 8 cents per $100 of GDP on low-carbon tech. Today, it's less than 4 cents. Nations promised to double this in 2015 but fell far short. Economists, including Nobel laureates, estimate that boosting global green R&D to $100 billion annually—still far less than the $2.3 trillion spent on green energy last year—could make future decarbonization cheap enough for everyone, including the developing world. This would accelerate advancements in fission, fusion, advanced geothermal, and efficient storage, outpacing the costly rollout of current, inefficient renewables.

Adaptation must complement innovation, as it's often the most cost-effective way to build resilience and save lives and livelihoods. We're already adapting successfully, which is why wildfire deaths are down; flood deaths have likewise plummeted with adaptation and warnings. In low-lying nations such as Bangladesh, cyclone mortality has fallen sharply with shelters and better forecasts: from the global record death toll of more than 300,000 in 1970 to fewer than 200 dead per year since 2008. Investing in resilient infrastructure—such as the Netherlands' seawalls, which protect against rises far beyond current projections, or adaptations like drought-resistant seeds—could avert damages at a fraction of mitigation costs. Adaptation gets just a fraction of climate funding, overshadowed by a drive for cuts in emissions that yield tiny temperature benefits.

Finally, we need to prioritize development to build inherent resilience. Poverty is the real killer in disasters: A hurricane hitting rich Florida causes economic damage but few deaths, while the same hurricane hitting poor Haiti will kill hundreds and devastate the economy.

Lifting billions out of poverty through education, health, and economic growth creates societies that can withstand warming. Much more important, such advances also create huge humanitarian and quality-of-life benefits. In Africa and Asia, where emissions will surge, affordable energy fuels this progress; forcing expensive green energy will stall progress. Gore's vision ignored all these factors; 20 years later, it's time to embrace them.

Climate policy must ultimately serve people, especially the billions facing poverty, hunger, and preventable disease. Green policies can help a tiny bit, though they come at a huge cost, but the greatest threats to human welfare remain those immediate killers. We should allocate our limited resources in proportion to how effectively they can mitigate suffering—tackling malaria, malnutrition, and lack of access to basic energy first, while advancing clean innovations that make reliable power affordable for everyone. This shift in focus, particularly in the world's poorest places, will create far more resilient societies than rigid emissions targets alone ever could.

Two decades on, *An Inconvenient Truth* reminds us that claiming to care about the planet and future generations is not enough. Alarmism has cost trillions but achieved little. We need to embrace the evidence: Climate change is a challenge, not a catastrophe. And there are cost-effective solutions such as innovation, adaptation, and development, even if they are not as morally satisfying as the exhortations in Gore's movie. ●



IRAN DREAMS

How the country could fulfill its enormous potential

by Shay Khatiri

Nowruz, the traditional new year celebrated by Iranians, marks the precise start of spring. On most holiday tables, the Koran has been replaced with Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*, the epic poem about the mythical history of Iran that revived the Persian language three centuries after Arab conquest. This year, Iranians will observe the new year, a cultural inheritance from an ancient nation, with rubble outside and the hope that they can build a modern and free future.

Iran's medieval era began with the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Iranian identity—the language and Zoroastrianism, the first monotheistic religion—was reduced to a regional ethnicity in the northwest of modern Iran. The area was named Azarpayegan (now Azerbaijan), meaning "protector of fire" (fire being sacred to Zoroastrians). It took two centuries for Iranians to recover their identity by way of a religious compromise: Iranians became Muslims, but Muslims adopted Zoroastrian customs and thought. By the 16th century, having expanded their government's autonomy, Iranians were formally but not practically under Arab control, and the Safavid dynasty made Iran fully independent. Iran became the only nation to fully undo Arabization.

Modernity came to Iran from Europe. Iranian intellectuals learned new concepts of government, became interested in the scientific method, encouraged the establishment of structured markets, and began questioning religion. ▶

They even established chapters of Freemasonry. But as in much of Europe, modernity had its excesses.

The legacy of this long history is often paradoxical. Iranians practice religion secularly. They take pride in being an ancient people while emphasizing their "Western" modernity. They look to the government as the source of and solution to all their problems, not unlike Americans. They love talking about what a great nation they are and complaining about what a terrible culture they have. They are politically active and unlettered. Nowruz is itself a Zoroastrian concept, as is the Festival of Fire that takes place the week before, yet Iranians honor those traditions to protect their secular customs. Though they go on pilgrimage to the Tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae and visit their hallowed grounds in Persepolis, and call their Lion and Sun flag (the sun is a reference to Zoroastrianism) "the sacred flag of Iran." They take pride in irreligion. The few practicing Muslims would not be caught dead in a mosque lest they be mistaken for a regime supporter.

IRANIANS NOW REJECT ISLAM AS AN ARAB SETTLER-COLONIAL IMPOSITION.

But the greatest paradox, remarkable in human history, has come just recently: Iranians measure each other's patriotism by enthusiasm for the recent foreign attacks. They spend their evenings on the rooftops, barbecuing and raising a glass to the foreign aircraft flying over their heads, excitedly listening to the explosions of bombs and drone hits.

Iranians have a narrative about themselves that, though not entirely accurate, will guide them to emerge from the ravaging decades of the Islamic Republic. Only 50 years ago, they were Muslims, more or less—kind of Muslim but not too much. They would fast and pray but drink alcohol, and women would show their hair. According to a 2020 survey by GAMAAN, a Netherlands-based research foundation, fewer than a third call themselves Shiite.

Iranians now reject Islam as an Arab settler-colonial imposition. Because Iranians could not overcome totalitarianism in practice, they instead rejected its Islamic underpinnings. The great institution of organized religion, the bedrock of civil society, is now seen as public enemy No. 1 and dismissively referred to as *erteja'i*, regressive—a turning away from the modern to the medieval.

Iranians reject totalitarianism in the name of modernity, even though modernity made totalitarianism possible by giving it intellectual force and, through bureaucracy and wealth, enabling its structure. For the Germans and Italians, the might of the U.S. military brought the fruits of liberty before fascist totalitarianism utterly savaged their institutions; for Iranians, it has taken 47 years to get lucky. In the Soviet Union and other communist-bloc countries, religion was associated with and gave a platform for dissent; in Iran, theocratic rule has destroyed it.

Iranians are drawn to the idea of Iran, but they cannot fully explain it. They love their country not simply because it is theirs but because it is truly magnificent. Yet that love lacks a moral base without religion and philosophy, both of which the state has co-opted and therefore destroyed. Two generations after their terrible mistake of overthrowing the monarchy, Iranians now have no means of self-government.

Secularism was a by-product of the Islamic Revolution. The destruction of the rest of Iran's civil society was intentional. The regime co-opted the market, allowing only small businesses to remain. If a business grew large enough to be profitable, a government crony confiscated it. Public subsidies and other government policies have sustained the rest of the economy, mostly resulting in annual losses. The best example is Ayandeh Bank, run by a business associate of Mojtaba Khamenei (named to succeed his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who recently met his end in the military strikes, as supreme leader); the currency collapse that sparked this winter's protests triggered the bank's collapse. Iranians, unlike people in free societies, have a legitimate grievance that big business colludes with the government to oppress them. Sustaining big business, though necessary for a healthy economy, will be financially difficult and politically impossible in post–Islamic Republic Iran.

Even more than big business, Iranians hate the military for its role in their oppression. Keeping the armed forces in a post–Islamic Republic Iran will be a threat to liberty, as the old guard can always plot a coup against whatever new regime takes shape. Downsizing it suddenly, though, could result in disorder and insurgency, as happened in Iraq following the dissolution of its military in 2003 by the U.S.-led coalition that had prosecuted the war. Khamenei filled the military's top echelons with those who hate America and Jews. Downsizing the force will require simultaneous and significant economic growth, so that those

who take off their uniforms can find employment in the private sector. It will take a decade before officers ideologically aligned with the new regime can be promoted. Ensuring that the armed services will become servants of the new regime, not a threat to it, will be Iran's greatest challenge.

DESPITE THE CENSORS, IRANIANS HAVE BEEN CONSUMERS OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE AND ARE DESPERATE TO INTEGRATE WITH THE WORLD.

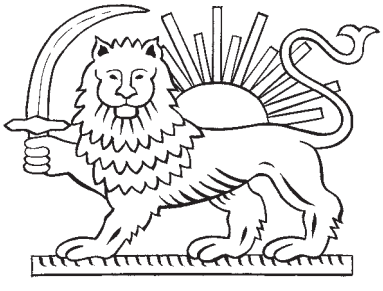
In Iraq, the United States eventually found a civil society to work with. Tribal leaders led the "Sunni awakening" in the late 2000s—encouraging their people to turn against al-Qaeda and fight for the United States—and Iraqis responded positively to their trusted elders. Iranians, by contrast, are urbanites; four out of five live in a city. They lack informal institutions, with hierarchies and leaders, to guide them. A simple fact can explain this problem: there is no Persian word for "community."

Another problem is anxiety on the part of the Persian majority regarding possibly separatist minorities. Other than around the Caspian Sea and the Khorasan area in the northeast, ethnic minorities dominate Iran's border areas. Analysts exaggerate the secessionist tendencies of these minorities; most Iran "experts" studied the Arab Middle East and look at Iran with the same biases, even though Iran, unlike many Arab states, is not an artificially created nation. Minority groups have always been a part of Iran and view themselves as Iranians. Yet these anxieties—that federalism would lead to secession—persist. Iranians may favor centralized government, but in a country of 90 million people with diverse values, this would hamstring the growth of the economy and civil society.

Where do Iranians go from here? They lack political education and all the necessary institutions of republican government, but they also possess all the qualities that complicate leading them. There was a brief Iranian enlightenment movement in the late 19th century, influenced by European thought, and it peaked with the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11). The brief democratic experience ended in 1908, when Mohammad Ali Shah, backed by the Russians, shelled the parliament and executed the intellectuals. The Pahlavi dynasty, which came to power in 1925, also cracked down on intellectual movements. The shahs were interested in economic progress, though, which led them to encourage technical education, and that culture persists. Ambitious young Americans go to law school; Iranians become engineers. This tendency persisted under the Islamic Republic, leading to a highly educated population that is also therefore highly opinionated—yet politically illiterate.

Iranians are historically minded and patriotic. They are also a relatively young population. They look to the United States and, increasingly, Israel as friends. Many are fluent in English. Despite the censors, they have been consumers of American popular culture and are desperate to integrate with the world. A large, wealthy Iranian diaspora would help end their isolation and bring investment into the country. Most prominently, Dara Khosrowshahi, the CEO of Uber, regularly mentions his desire to bring investors into a free Iran.

Civil society and political institutions will also need time to take root. The mosque will not recover its lost status for a long time, but that is not the end for religion. The most important story in Iran is the growth of underground Evangelical churches, likely initiated by diaspora converts who smuggled translated Christian Bibles into Iran. Iranians will need to learn how to hold free political debates, participate in partisan politics, and ensure free elections. But first, they will have to discover just how much their isolation has cost them and how much they will need to learn. Half a century of totalitarianism has made the regime the only political issue. What do they think of taxes and health-care services? Nobody has spent a day thinking about them. What will candidates in the first round of elections argue about—who hates the previous regime more? ▶



The future regime will need to end Iran's oil curse. Since the time of the last shah, Iranians have had terrible ideas and funded them with oil money. The shah's industrialization program set off massive social disruption that led to the Islamic Revolution. The current regime has used that money for the nefarious purposes that brought the current war. The alternative to funding bad ideas with oil money is not funding good ones; it is privatizing the oil. Because the government ran on oil money, Iranians have been relatively indifferent to questions of economic policy. Taxation, which will be needed for government revenue, will encourage political action, a prerequisite for republican government.

Iranians will need time to learn about ideas. Marxists and Islamists dominated political thought before the Islamic Revolution, with liberals entirely absent. In a radical departure from 1979, Iranians are now liberal-curious. The Iranian diaspora has in recent years led a classical liberal, free-market intellectual movement, producing podcasts on politics and history; Persian satellite networks have given Iranians a jump start in political ideas. One popular history podcast tells the story of the Constitutional Revolution amid the 19th-century Great Game between Britain and Russia; its subtle pro-British bias is a shocking twist for a historically Anglophobic nation.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon dispatched Vernon Walters to Spain to ask the ailing Francisco Franco about Spain's future after his death. In his memoir, *Silent Missions*, Walters wrote that the dictator was optimistic that Spain would be a liberal democracy. In the last decade of his rule, Franco had taken steps toward liberalization by creating the necessary institutions for such a democracy. There is a solution to the problem of what comes next in Iran, though some won't like to hear it: the country can thrive under a liberalizing semi-strongman, one who is strong enough to maintain order without standing in the way of the formation of institutions, intellectual life, and political practice. Pick your favorite to emulate, Frederick the Great or late-stage Franco.

The greatest paradox of Iran is that it is a hollowed-out society with extraordinary promise. Iranians need time to set up their institutions and allow them to take root. An attempt to skip straight to liberal democracy, especially a republican one, would be unwise. The optimal future for Iran is to become a crowned republic like the European monarchies: a crown, according to Iran's ancient tradition, and a liberal republic, according to American values. But before there can be a liberal regime, Iran needs a liberalizing period. Sentimentality will only impede the creation of an enduring, free, self-governing Iran. ●

PRINCIPLE AND ITS LIMITS

The opposite errors of two American statesmen

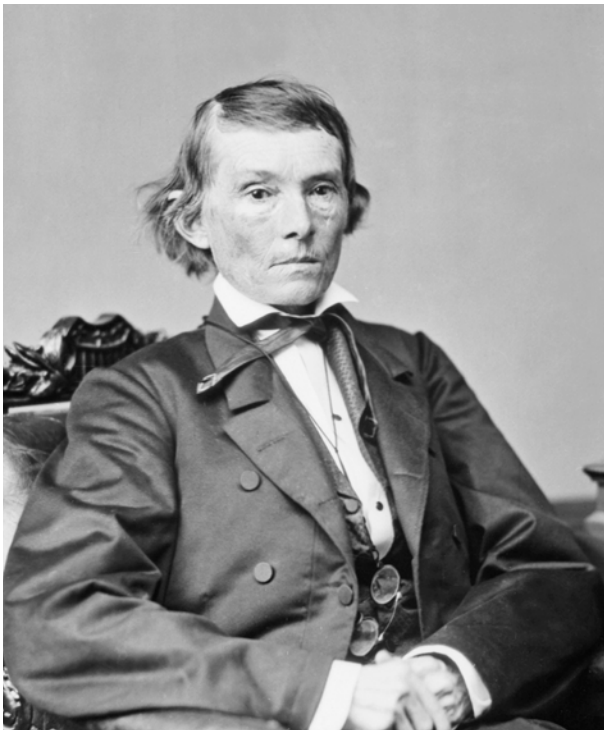
by Dan McLaughlin

In politics, principle plays a vital role. But it has never been everything. For the statesman as for the democratic politician, principle guides, persuades, prioritizes, and justifies. Applied prudently, it is a compass, not a straitjacket. We can see the limits of principle in the competing careers of two mid-19th-century American statesmen: Alexander Hamilton Stephens, born on a Georgia farm in 1812, and Charles Sumner, born in Boston in 1811.

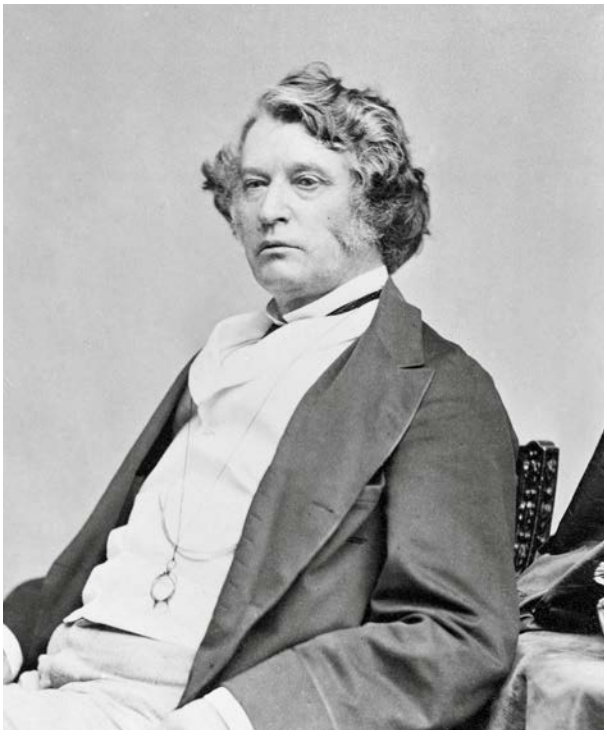
Stephens was born to play the intellectual in politics. Pallid and skeletal, he drew comparisons to an animated corpse. He dosed himself with whiskey to endure an assortment of debilitating ailments. Orphaned at 14, trained as a Presbyterian minister, he never married and partook of none of the pastimes of Southern manhood. He was drawn to the life of the mind.

From his election to Congress in 1842, through the vice presidency of the Confederacy, to his death in office as governor of Georgia in 1883, Stephens cultivated a self-image of a man of principle. Even his middle name was self-chosen for his Hamiltonian ideology, in honor of a mentor. He repeatedly took principled stands at odds with his party in Washington, his government in Richmond, and his own political self-interest. As he wrote after the Civil War: "Times change, and men often change with them, but principles never!"

Stephens was a fervent admirer of Edmund Burke, who argued that men of principle should choose the "honourable connection" of party even at the cost of disagreeable compromises in order to see their ideas put into practice—but that men could leave their party over great questions. The Georgian's commitments had a clear hierarchy. When facing a conflict with higher principles, nothing got in his way—he lost friendships, abandoned policy positions, changed parties, and betrayed his country. Yet he never did so for what Jefferson called "light and transient causes." For principle,



ALEXANDER STEPHENS



CHARLES SUMNER

he fought and compromised, sought war and peace, and went to prison.

Nearly a beau ideal of principled politics, Stephens rigorously thought through his ideas and took pains to defend his positions. He didn't seek personal advantage and made no enemies except over matters of principle. Following the code of Southern honor, he challenged four men to duels (all declined, but one stabbed Stephens, almost fatally)—never over personal slights but to defend political stances against charges of dishonor or disloyalty.

Raised in the traditions of American politics, he did the job the right way. From time to time, he stood bravely for good causes. Yet, in the end, nearly everything he fought for came to wrack and ruin. His name is a blot in the history books because his highest principles were wicked and wrong.

At 22, Stephens joined the new Whig Party. A devotee of John Marshall and the rule of law, he was horrified, upon meeting Andrew Jackson, at Jackson's disinterest in legalities. He rejected state nullification of federal laws and vigilantism. In an early sign of his character, when Georgia elected him to the House as part of an at-large slate, he argued that the House should not seat the state's delegation—*including himself*—because it violated federal law requiring single-member districts. He treasured a note of praise from John Quincy Adams, with whom he got on well despite profound differences on slavery.

Stephens tried to keep sectional divisions from dissolving the country or his party. He supported the annexation of Texas but opposed the Mexican War for seeking territory that would destabilize sectional balance—distinguishing the two because Texas already had slavery, so annexation did not raise the question of whether to spread it there. He labored in 1852 to craft a pro–Compromise of 1850 Whig platform. When presidential nominee Winfield Scott repudiated the platform, Stephens cast a protest vote for a dead man.

In 1854, Stephens not only crossed party lines to back Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, he became its floor leader in the House, deploying his mastery of House rules to break an impasse and drag the bill to victory. It was a triumph of his political skill but also the most destructive legislation in American history. Finding his stance rejected by his party, he became a Democrat. He led the floor fight for the fraudulent proslavery Lecompton Constitution in Kansas—opposed by Douglas—out of desperation to prove that staying within the system was worth it.

A staunch defender of constitutional liberty, Stephens was repelled by the anti-immigrant Know-Nothings. But his vision of liberty entirely excluded black Americans. On his plantation, Liberty Hall—named without apparent irony—he treated his own slaves comparatively well. But he unblinkingly defended the peculiar institution in all its brutality. ▶

HISTORICAL (STEPHENS), BETTMANN (SUMNER) / GETTY IMAGES

In the end, we may regard Alexander Stephens, as we do Robert E. Lee, as a moral tragedy. Like Lee, he lent good gifts and good instincts to a terrible cause.

He retired to Georgia in 1859, warning of the coming crisis. He backed Douglas in 1860, scorning the "rule or ruin" Southern extremists and cautioning that slavery was "much more secure in the Union than out of it." Stephens spoke eloquently that fall against secession, on the Burkean ground that it was "revolution" by "demagogues" against accepting election results: "Revolutions are much easier started than controlled." He would await instead some overt provocation by his old friend Abraham Lincoln. He expected Lincoln to govern well; Lincoln considered him for his cabinet. Unlike Sam Houston, whose conscience led him to leave public life rather than aid secession, Stephens felt honor-bound to aid Georgia: "My destiny is with the South; whatever awaits her people, awaits me." He was key to persuading wavering Virginia to join the Confederacy, with vast consequences for the war.

Stephens declared his philosophy of the Confederacy in a now notorious speech, branding America's founding ideas "fundamentally wrong":

> They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation. . . . Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.

The speech undermined Confederate diplomacy, laying bare to anti-slavery Europe what others would have concealed.

As vice president, Stephens had better strategic sense than Jefferson Davis, who ignored his counsel. But he would not stay quiet on civil liberties. He objected to conscription, to requisitions, to suspensions of habeas corpus, and to suppression of dissent as violations of "ancient liberties" and state sovereignty. "Away with the idea of getting independence first, and looking for liberty afterwards," he said; better defeat by enemies than to lose liberties to "professed friends." He led the peace commission in February 1865, where he and Lincoln reunited warmly, but neither man would budge from his convictions. After the war, he returned to Congress and wrote didactic defenses of his stances. His final years were spent embittered by failure.

In the end, we may regard Stephens, as we do Robert E. Lee, as a moral tragedy. Like Lee, he lent good gifts and good instincts to a terrible cause. His devotion to his "corner-stone," however sincere, undermined all else. Standing earnestly for principle is not enough. To leave the world a better place, one must stand not only for conscience but for right and truth.

Sumner was tall, handsome, gifted with an orator's voice, and possessed of the noblest principles of pure classical liberalism. He wanted liberty and full legal equality for black Americans and for women. He tried to strike "white" from the naturalization laws. He was against aggressive war and imperialism. He abhorred secession and excoriated slavery and its apologetics ceaselessly and without patience for cant.

But Sumner was utterly lacking in prudence or tact, and his preening, humorless self-regard endlessly undermined his principles. Despite his own reverence for Burke, he was so impatient with the existing order that he often declared that "nothing can be settled which is not right." Sumner was effective at driving wedges into the existing parties and settlements of the 1850s, but he was wholly unsuited to practical leadership.

Sumner was said to be the only man Lincoln truly disliked, regarding him as pompous and preachy. The easygoing Grant detested him: "He has not the manliness ever to admit an error. I feel a greater contempt for him than any other man in the Senate." Told that Sumner didn't believe in the Bible, Ulysses S. Grant quipped, "Well, he didn't write it." And those were Sumner's political allies. No family man, he married for the first time at 55 but divorced his wife for abandonment.

In 1848, Lincoln backed the slaveholder Zachary Taylor for president, seeing him (correctly) as less apt to expand slavery than the Democrats. Sumner rallied the "Conscience Whigs" who cast protest votes for Martin Van Buren. He sought "a new crystallization of parties, in which there shall be one grand Northern party of Freedom." Elected to the Senate from Massachusetts as a political novice in 1851, Sumner never learned to be an effective legislator.

He had much in common, in temperament, with his contemporary William Gladstone, the British

Charles Sumner preached a purer classically liberal philosophy but without the conservative virtues of prudence, pragmatism, humility, and civility.

statesman, whom he admired. But Gladstone, a Christian family man, entered politics early, cultivated key mentors, and made himself indispensable with his command of public finances. Sumner did none of this. He was better at dividing: he helped Salmon P. Chase and Joshua Giddings pen the "Appeal to the Independent Democrats" in January 1854 that rallied opposition to Kansas-Nebraska, helping lay the foundation for the birth of the Republican Party.

Sumner's 1856 "Crime Against Kansas" speech was in a righteous cause, but Sumner—who told Chase beforehand, "My soul is wrung by this outrage, & I shall pour it forth"—let his dudgeon get the best of him. As one journalist said of his customary speaking style, "He works his adjectives so hard that if they ever catch him alone, they will murder him." This day, he laid on the personal invective, mocking his elderly South Carolina colleague Andrew Butler. Douglas muttered, "That damn fool will get himself killed by some other damn fool." He almost did, beaten senseless by Butler's cousin on the Senate floor. The assault radicalized the North and galvanized the South. The most consequential thing Sumner ever did in Congress was to be so obnoxious that he was almost murdered.

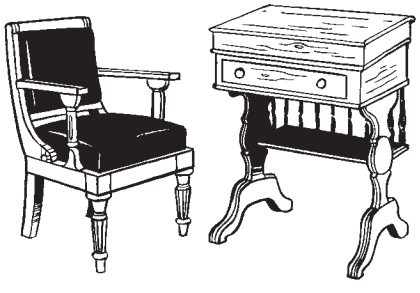
The psychological trauma kept Sumner out of Washington for years. Returning to chair the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he spent years in a guerrilla campaign to sabotage his onetime ally, Secretary of State William Seward. He goaded his close friend Chase into undermining Lincoln and tried to seize control of foreign policy after Seward was stabbed during the Lincoln assassination. An Anglophile who corresponded widely with British elites and a dove during the 1861 *Trent* war scare with Britain, Sumner turned on a dime into the loudest hater of England over its sales of commerce-raiding ships to the Confederacy.

Sumner's rectitude was considered so immovable that Lincoln wouldn't even approach him to make concessions on a railroad bill to win votes needed to pass the 13th Amendment and ban slavery. His subsequent breach with Grant was exacerbated by his criticisms of corruption and nepotism. Yet he could be selective. Early in the war, he was successfully courted by the notoriously corrupt Secretary of War Simon Cameron, who posed as a stauncher abolitionist than the pragmatic Lincoln. He also tried to get Grant to rescind the firing of a friend in exchange for supporting a treaty.

Predictably, Sumner took the hardest-line Radical Republican view of every controversy in Reconstruction and the failed impeachment of Andrew Johnson. Restoring his prominence with maximalist demands for Britain to evacuate the Western Hemisphere and pay the whole cost of the Civil War (outraging Gladstone), Sumner swiftly fell out with Grant as bitterly as with Seward. He sank Grant's plans to annex the Dominican Republic, held up even minor ambassadorial appointments out of pique, and compared the conquering Union general to a "Ku Klux" and his secretary of state to "Mephistopheles." An embarrassed bipartisan Senate voted 33–9 to strip him of his committee chairmanship. His departure cleared the way for Grant's 1871–72 rapprochement with Gladstone, which laid the foundation for the U.S.-U.K. "special relationship."

Sumner reverted to his 1848 form, backing Horace Greeley's campaign against Grant and even appealing to black voters to abandon Grant while Greeley was running against Reconstruction and defending the Klan. An appalled Frederick Douglass, once Sumner's friend, declared, "If Mr. Sumner shall persevere in his present policy, I shall . . . regard him as the worst foe the colored race has on this continent." Sumner got his dying wish when the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was enacted months after his death. Once again, he was a more effective lawmaker as a symbol.

Sumner did more good as a political revolutionary who helped drive the nation's confrontation with slavery than as a lawmaker. Stephens modeled many conservative virtues, but he spoiled them by embracing an evil as his highest good. Sumner preached a purer classically liberal philosophy but without the conservative virtues of prudence, pragmatism, humility, and civility. Both men tried to live by their principles. But statesmanship requires both sides of the coin. ●



RESCUING CHILDHOOD FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

How law can support parents

by Christine Rosen

In the past few years, the United States has witnessed a significant shift in public opinion and policymaking about children's use of social media platforms. Thanks in large part to the well-deserved popularity of Jonathan Haidt's 2024 book, *The Anxious Generation*, which gathered reams of social science data about the harms of a screen-based childhood, the national conversation about children's use of social media has entered a new and more productive phase.

Uncritical techno-enthusiasm is giving way to a robust skepticism, long overdue, about the technology companies that, through deliberate design choices and a failure to confirm the age of users, encourage ever-younger children to spend hours every day on these platforms. The advent of more-sophisticated artificial intelligence tools, notably chatbots that draw users into intimate conversations about their lives and often dispense questionable mental health advice, has added urgency to the debate over regulating technology use for children. New risks posed by these platforms have been highlighted by recent episodes, such as when users of Grok, the X platform's AI chatbot, generated millions of nonconsensual, sexual, deepfake images of real people, including children.

Internationally and in the U.S., this has ushered in a flurry of proposed and enacted legislation; new lawsuits against social media companies alleging that they knowingly hosted young children on platforms they knew to be harmful to them; and a range of civic efforts by parents, schools, and researchers to limit children's use of social media and smartphones.

The most sweeping piece of legislation took effect in late 2025, not in the U.S. but in Australia; it enacted the first nationwide age limit for social media use by children. Australians must be 16 years old to open a social media account, and the law places the responsibility on platforms to enforce this age limit or face significant penalties. Australia's eSafety commissioner reported that in the first month of the law's enactment, more than 4 million accounts were deactivated because they did not comply with the age-limit requirement.

One of my American Enterprise Institute colleagues, Bronwyn Howell, a thoughtful critic of the Australia legislation, notes that, not surprisingly, many teenagers have found work-arounds by using VPNs (virtual private networks), or they've moved their attention to alternative platforms not included in the social media ban. She argues for fewer sweeping bans and "a new paradigm for social media safety with shared, not unilateral, responsibility." Yet the public seems largely enthusiastic about age limits such as the one Australia enacted. Other countries have also passed strict age limits for social media, including France (age 15), Brazil (16), Indonesia (16), Malaysia (16), the United Arab Emirates (13), and Vietnam (16). Many more countries have laws currently under consideration.

In the United States, the only federal law regulating social media use by children stems from the 1998 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which prohibits personal data-harvesting from children younger than 13 without a parent's consent. Passed long before the creation of social media platforms, COPPA does not require age verification, so platforms can rely on users' self-declaration of age, which is why platforms such as Instagram, since their inception, have knowingly hosted millions of underage users. The Federal Trade Commission recently issued guidance about COPPA, announcing its intention to review the COPPA Rule "to address age verification mechanisms." There are many new tools available: temporary "token" technology that can confirm age without storing private information or disclosing an individual's identity, and selfie-technology that can accurately assess a user's age via photo analysis, among many others.

In Congress, Senator Ted Cruz (R., Texas) announced on March 12 that he will advance several key pieces of legislation to protect children online: a COPPA 2.0 bill; the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), which includes a "duty of care" that places the burden on platforms to prevent foreseeable harms to children; and the Kids Off Social Media Act (KOSMA), which would ban anyone younger than 13 from social media and limit algorithmic recommendations for those younger than 17, among other features.

Similar efforts are underway nationwide. At the end of 2025, more than 300 bills related to social media and technology use by children were pending in state legislatures. Eight states now have some form of ban for minors on social media or require parental consent;

many more states are considering such laws. Pending a case in federal appeals court, Florida is moving forward with bipartisan legislation that Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law in 2024 that would ban anyone younger than 14 from having a social media account, and Virginia passed a law limiting social media use to one hour per day for anyone younger than 16, although a federal judge recently blocked its implementation.

Nebraska has one of the strictest laws, which requires parental consent for any minor to open a social media account. And the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Texas law requiring websites with a significant amount of sexual content to verify the age of users. Other states, including California and New York, have proposed legislation to target addictive design features of social media platforms; several states have also passed laws requiring social media warning labels.

A 2023 STUDY DISCOVERED THAT SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES MADE $11 BILLION IN 2022 JUST FROM ADVERTISING AIMED AT CHILDREN.

The biggest challenges to these laws are on First Amendment grounds. Federal courts have been sympathetic to the argument that it's a violation of children's speech and expression rights to restrict access to social media platforms; courts permanently blocked state laws in Ohio and Arkansas on these grounds. In Georgia, Florida, and California, courts have temporarily blocked state laws while litigation continues.

The industry's failure to take seriously the harms they know their platforms enable is why popular support is increasing for these kinds of legal protections. It's notable that during a time of extreme political partisanship, many of these bills are exemplars of bipartisan agreement: A version of KOSA passed in the Senate in 2024 by a vote of 91–3, for example, though it remains stalled in the House. Critics of these laws and well-funded lobbyists for technology companies like to argue that denying children access to social media platforms will drive them toward even more questionable, unregulated places on the internet, so why not just continue to trust the platforms to regulate themselves, since they claim to offer effective "parental controls"? This is like the Wolf, dressed as Grandmother, telling Little Red Riding Hood that it's much safer to snuggle up with him, within reach of his fangs, than to walk back into the woods.

Such half measures and public relations palaver come only after these companies have faced years of scrutiny by Congress and regulatory agencies and amid a proliferation of lawsuits about the serious damage done to children, undermining their attempts to paint themselves as proactive protectors of children.

New research also challenges technology companies' claims that the tools they make available do enough to protect children from harm. Consider the design choices of these platforms, which effectively hijack children's attention. Researchers Daniel Frost, Sarah Coyne, and Jane Shawcroft, writing on Haidt's *After Babel* Substack, note how "features like infinite scroll, autoplay, incessant notifications," and the like are "intentional design choices" that "keep kids online much longer than is healthy." They continue targeting children because they make a lot of money doing so: A 2023 study from Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health discovered that social media companies made $11 billion in 2022 just from advertising aimed at children.

As the researchers note, parental controls "place a heavy burden on parents" to master and monitor them, which "would be difficult even if the tech companies wanted wholeheartedly to help parents place reasonable limits on their children's media consumption, which they do not." They argue, persuasively, that the burden should be on the companies "to build safety features into the products so the digital environment is not so dangerous and addictive in the first place."

Shifting the burden from individual parents to the companies that design these platforms is also at the heart of the many lawsuits making their way through the legal system. A multistate lawsuit against Meta in federal court in California alleges that the company, while having access to age-verification tools, "chooses not to use" them, even though it knows that children are on its platforms. As an internal company memo acknowledged, age verification would "impact growth" among under-13 users (who are, by law, barred from being on the platforms at all).

The most interesting activity related to social media, smartphone, and technology use and children—and the most appealing if one is a conservative—is at the level of civic engagement. ▶

New nonprofit and research organizations are springing up to meet the need for rigorous research about the long-term effects of technology use on children. Public and private schools are enacting "bell-to-bell" smartphone bans during the school day. Parents continue to sign "Wait Until 8th" (meaning eighth grade) and other pledges to delay their children's use of social media technology, and local community groups are promoting "analog experiences" to lure children and young adults away from screens and out into the real world.

TEST SCORES ARE IN STEEP DECLINE, AND KIDS' SOCIAL MEDIA USE HAS BEEN LINKED TO LOWER READING AND MEMORY SCORES.

All of this will be crucial for combating harm from the newest technologies, notably AI chatbots used by children. We need basic guardrails such as age limits, risk-based audits, and privacy protections for these tools, since they are already in widespread use by children. As Amina Fazlullah of Common Sense Media told *Tech Policy Press* recently, "We found 70% of teens are already using what we've described as [an] AI companion. . . . About 50% of them were regular users and 30% were already preferring conversations with the chatbot over, or similarly to, other humans." Last year, Senator Josh Hawley (R., Mo.) introduced the bipartisan Guidelines for User Age-Verification and Responsible Dialogue (GUARD) Act to address concerns about AI chatbots. The bill would ban AI companions for children and require AI chatbots to disclose their nonhuman status to users, among other provisions.

What these federal and state laws, lawsuits, and civic efforts all suggest is a pushback on the idea that, when it comes to children, adoption of these technologies is a welcome inevitability and that the responsibility to deal with the impact these have on children lies entirely with parents. Many Americans understand that, when it comes to safety, the burden of proof should be on the companies making these platforms and tools and on the school districts uncritically adopting them.

Why is this important? Because children still come to know the world by living in it, in physical bodies. Haidt and other researchers have given us a portrait of a childhood spent staring at screens. Many recent lawsuits have been brought by heartbroken parents whose children died by suicide after being blackmailed by other social media users or emotionally manipulated by an AI "companion."

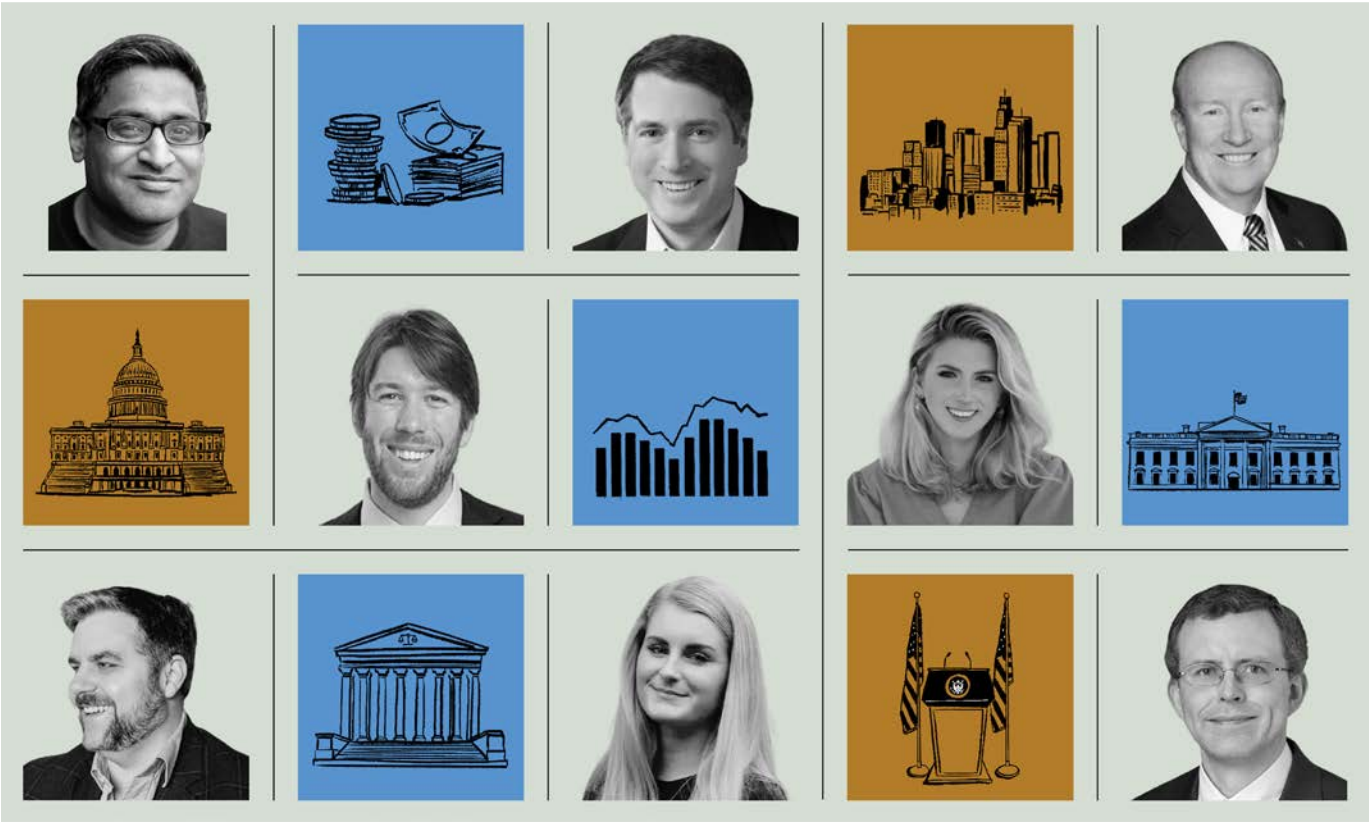
But we should also consider the depletion of physical reality for children who spend most of their time in mediated environments.

In a recent post on his Substack, critic Ted Gioia compiled some startling facts about modern childhood. A few highlights: The average child today plays outside only four to seven minutes every day. (As Gioia noted, "Even inmates in top security prisons get more outdoor time than this.") During the past decade, children have spent half the time with their friends that they used to. Children are "entering school with autism-like symptoms due to the use of devices," including lack of emotional expression and speech delays. Their bodies show evidence of excessive screen use and lack of physical activity, with poor fine motor skills, higher rates of obesity, and too little "strength in their fingers to hold a pencil or even a knife or fork." Many students cannot read or do math at a basic level, they lack core knowledge such as the name of the state they live in, and they cannot read a clock. Test scores are in steep decline, and kids' social media use has been linked to lower reading and memory scores.

Social media platforms, smartphones, and the internet are not entirely to blame for these transformations, but they're implicated in nearly all of them. For more than a decade, technology companies insisted that users should trust them as they "move fast and break things." It's becoming increasingly evident that they are breaking childhood, and it's time to slow them down. ●



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BY JAMES LILEKS

Athwart



Unexploded Ordnance

The obituaries for Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*, brought back merry memories for late-era Boomers who came of age in the '70s. He was just one more voice in the chorus of imminent disaster. Here's how we figured our miserable future would play out:

It would begin with global cooling. Vast blocks of ice would push down from Canada and probably scrape our town of Fargo right off the map. Maybe we could outrun them. We had a vision of Mom and Dad throwing things in a suitcase as the glaciers crushed the grocery store up the street, then all of us jumping in the car and peeling out, heading south for northern Iowa, where we could catch our breath.

Then again, the U.S. was going to run out of oil, so the car might not start. The Arabs, those meanies, wouldn't let us have any. But even if they turned the spigot back on, we would run out of liquefied dinosaur corpses in a decade and have to revert to rickshaws or horse-drawn carriages.

But even if we did make it to relative safety in Iowa and the relatives took us in, we would have to wonder about the Book of Revelation coming true as we were promised in *The Late Great Planet Earth*: the seven seals cracking open, wormwood—whatever that was—falling everywhere. And then everyone dies and we go to heaven, which would be great, but maybe not yet? It would be nice to finish high school and maybe have a girlfriend first.

But even if none of that stuff happened, there would be about 476 million people in Iowa because of the Population Bomb. There wouldn't be enough food for everyone, so you'd have famine, then pestilence, then civil collapse. And Iowans would fight Illinoisans in vast pitched battles over a box of Ritz crackers or some expired Cream of Wheat.

Of all these scenarios, the Population Bomb seemed the most likely because it came from a Very Serious Book, and all the people who were worried about the world were talking about it. Mind you, it is a testament to media-driven eschatology that we were worried about overpopulation in North Dakota, where you can drive for an entire day and not see another human being. But it fit the narrative of planetary peril that saturated the education system and the culture. As junior-high students, we celebrated Earth Day, which always had the same false-cheer feeling as bringing flowers to someone on their deathbed. Even if you went to the Howard Johnson's restaurant for ice cream, you got an ecology pamphlet—just for kids!—that had a story about how pollution could block all the rays of the sun and then everyone would die from hunger. Here's your fried clams—enjoy!

It seemed perfectly likely that Africa and Asia would be overrun with people because there were just so many of them already. Then America would teem as well, just like in the movie *Soylent Green*, a vision of the future where everyone's so hungry that they have to eat Edward G. Robinson (who was actually snack-sized and pretty gristly). How could you not worry about this? Ehrlich appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* with warnings, and Cavett nodded gravely!

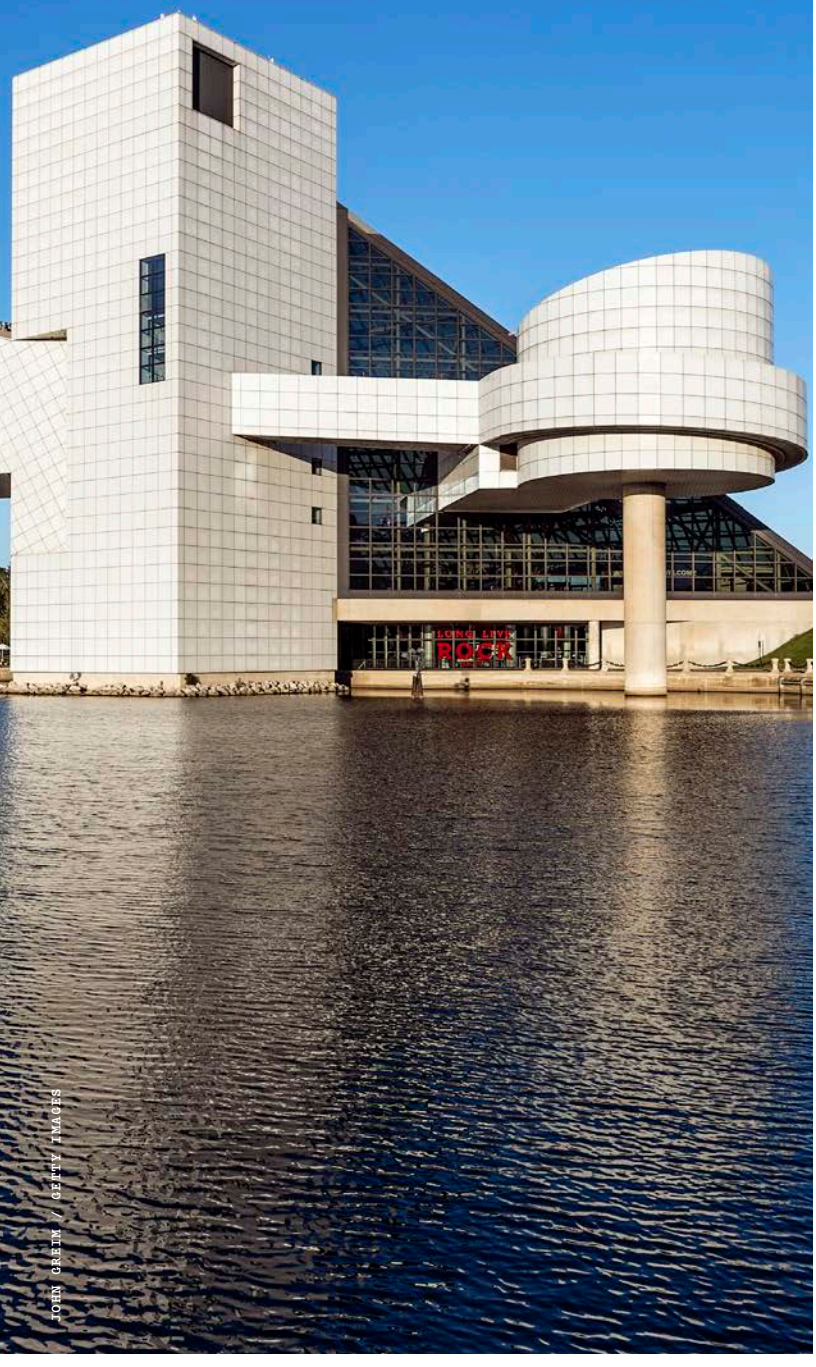
The subhead of Ehrlich's *New York Times* obituary was amusing: "His best-selling 1968 book, which forecast global famines, made him a leader of the environmental movement. But he faced criticism when his predictions proved premature." *Premature*. As in, "It'll surely happen eventually, and we hope so because people are a pestilence and Mother Earth weeps every time a baby is born." Optimism, of course, is for fools who just don't know how bad things are—and who can actually close their eyes at night without thinking about microplastics.

As populations crash all over the world, the specter of numberless hordes clashing over the last pack of peanuts no longer haunts the leftist imagination. It might occur to them that societies could suffer from population decline, particularly in places where the system is set up to extract money from one small group and give it a much larger one. Well, if it comes to that, we can just turn to incompatible cultures and import grand quantities of sullen dudes who are disinclined to adapt. If they vote correctly, what's the downside? Okay, well, some of them might blow themselves up at a Christmas celebration, but that's the price you gotta pay. The metaphorical Population Bomb was horrible! The literal population bomb, well, we can work with that. ●

A JOURNEY to the END of POPULAR CULTURE

Reliving our lost youth at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

by Jeffrey Blehar



JOHN GREIM / GETTY IMAGES

ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME

Cleveland

'Outside of OD'ing, there ain't a more rock and roll way to go," I reasoned as our tiny Embraer jet juddered and shook amid a fierce windstorm that (I would later learn) sent multiple tornadoes spiraling across western Michigan. We slid sickeningly from side to side—swooning with sharp drops and course-corrective ascents—as we attempted landing at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport less than an hour later. I queasily gripped my armrests in silent prayer as wisdom from Baseball Hall of Famer Ichiro Suzuki floated through my head: "If I ever saw myself saying 'I'm excited' going to Cleveland, I'd punch myself in the face—because I'm lying."

Which brings us to the point: Why on earth would any sane man—especially a Chicago man—voluntarily fly to Cleveland, unless it was to pay off shady ransomers? What kind of Our Spacious Skies installment is this, dedicated as it is to postindustrial Ohio? Truth is, I did it because I had to. I felt a *calling*. Yes, much like my fellow Chicagoans Jake and Elwood Blues, I was on a mission from God: I solemnly informed my editors that the time had finally come for me to make my required pilgrimage to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—ideally on their dime.

Why in 2026, of all years? For one thing, because I love rock and roll. I suppose that's not much of a credential, given that most people my age have at least a casual connection to the popular music of their youth. But my interest goes well beyond mere amusement and into obsession: I have been podcasting about music (and only music) for nine full years at National Review Online, long before I ever thought to write here. My love of the vast sprawling variety of popular music from the past 75 or so years is so all-encompassing as to once have been the stuff of private self-definition.

I am also acutely aware that rock is dead—not just dying but well and truly dead—as a form of art and of mass musical expression, and nothing will ever fill the culturally resonant space it occupied when I was a young man. (If you disagree: What is the last universally hailed *rock* album you can remember? How many decades ago was that?) Chart music nowadays feels like little more than a roster of beats, beeps, bleeped words, and whatever Taylor Swift is currently selling; AI-created pop artists now top the Billboard Hot 100 without making so much as a dent in popular consciousness—or what's left of it. The death of rock also signals the death of unified American popular culture. Ours is an age of siloed micro-cultures. So I was flying out to do more than just visit the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame; I wanted to pay my respects and maybe lay some flowers on rock's grave. ▶

But before the tour, a confession: I was wrong about the City of Cleveland in a lot of ways, and that's entirely down to my big-city prejudice. The people, the food, and the feel were refreshingly straightforward. (Grab a corned beef sandwich at Slyman's!) I found myself constantly in pleasant chats with Clevelanders. An Uber driver—who immediately marked me as a tourist by the way I gave directions—put it well: "People don't get a big head about stuff around here; at the end of the day, buddy, you live in Cleveland."

While it may be true that "Cleveland Rocks," I didn't quite expect the concept to be illustrated with such concrete-slabbed drear: the first thing you notice about the façade of the Rock Hall is that it's frankly shabby. The entire exterior of the museum was walled off with temporary construction barriers on which torn rock and roll posters had been posted, all grimly directing visitors toward an entrance hallway covered in graffiti and random splotches of paint. I suppose this was partly intentional imposture, partly an effort to make the best of a bad situation and give tourists an "authentic rock" feel—you know, that rough-and-tumble CBGB New York club vibe—but it simply felt cheap.

Matters didn't improve when I showed my ticket, descended to the "0th Floor" (don't ask, I didn't label the place), and saw a CBGB-branded concession stand beside the entrance to the main gallery. "Truly now, we are journeying into the rebel heart of rock and roll," I wistfully mused as I grabbed a room-temperature hot dog and strolled into the Ahmet Ertegun Exhibition Hall. I could not have felt more like a tourist about to fall flat-footedly into a trap. But then all those old ancestral emotions came back, and I didn't even have time to worry that I was a sucker before I was hooked and reeling in the years. The Rock Hall's "featured gallery" this season was the exhibition *SNL: 50 Years of Music.* As jaded as I am, I could not help but thrill to this blast of nostalgia, a revisiting of the greatest popular music moments of *Saturday Night Live*.

Each exhibit conjured one great TV musical and/or comedic memory after another, with their attendant chimes of emotion ringing in my head like notes long forgotten. Behold: the T-shirt worn by Eddie Vedder during an infamously surly Pearl Jam performance of "Not for You" in 1994! Genuflect before Devo's authentic banana-yellow jumpsuits from a 1979 performance! Here lie the original Blues Brothers outfits, briefcase and all! Why, I got a fever and practically hit my knees in reverent awe when I found the display case containing the outfit of the nonexistent Blue Öyster Cult percussionist Gene Frenkle—including the *actual cowbell* we all must have more of. A layering of great music *and* great laughs.

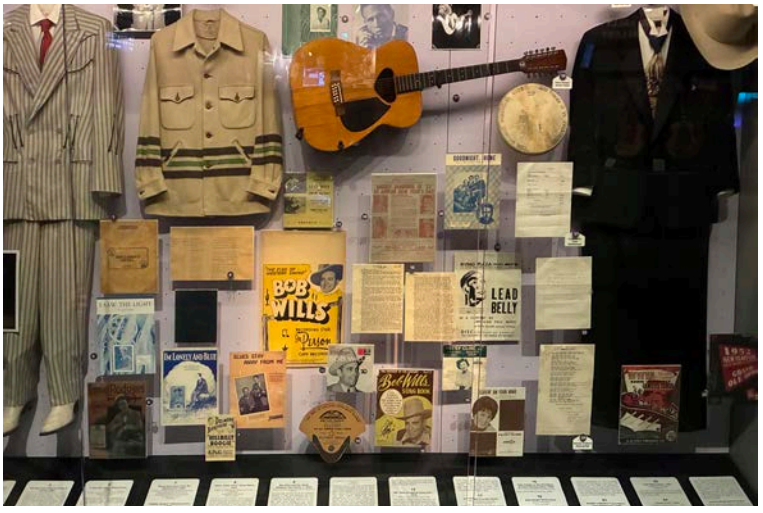
After the *SNL* gallery, the history lesson began, and here the feeling changed. The exhibits at the Rock Hall deal with the origins of American popular music studiously but awkwardly—in sepia tone, so to speak. To the Rock Hall's credit, it acknowledges blues and country music as equal progenitors. (The obvious temptation would have been to overplay rock's blues origins without giving proper due to its folk Americana roots.) Then, in narrative fashion, we move on to displays about Sun Records, Elvis, Chuck Berry, and the '50s origins of rock. All of this is handled dutifully—and illustrated with a remarkable collection of memorabilia—but with inevitable bloodlessness. One can watch only so many short video clips of Jerry Lee Lewis shakin' on the piano or Elvis rockin' in the jailhouse before that era's madness is reduced to cliché. (That said, Elvis's gold-lamé-covered copy of the Holy Bible was worth a snapshot.)

From that point on, the Rock Hall tells an inevitably subjective story. *This* version of rock's history is no master narrative; its almost exclusively American focus reflects its curators and (one imagines) its American audience. The British Invasion is treated as an unavoidable blip. You can't really write the Beatles and the Stones out of rock's history, but, as it turns out, you can write out The Who. And the massive creative and commercial influence of U.K. pop and rock disappears from the Rock Hall's story almost entirely after that. Anyone who is looking for a celebration of how glam, punk, and postpunk affected popular music from the '70s onward must look elsewhere.

Instead, the Rock Hall devotes itself primarily to various American "scenes." San Francisco psychedelia is contrasted with Los Angeles studio perfection. New York's story is told through the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, and the new-wave movement of the late '70s. The Seattle scene is depicted in an oversimplified way that will naturally cause grunge fans to groan. The Midwest is agglomerated: Chicago's '60s blues and '90s alternative scenes are placed against Detroit Rock City, with the Twin Cities and Cleveland getting their own obligatory annexes.

The compression of time and geography necessarily leads to narrative incoherence: The Chicago of Muddy Waters has little do with the Chicago of Wilco, but at the Rock Hall they are both included in the same area. That makes no sense to anyone familiar with the very different sorts of music each made. Nevertheless, it was nice to see Jay Bennett's busted-up axe next to Jeff Tweedy's, and not too far from Howlin' Wolf's.

Yet I found myself wondering: *What is the point of this place?* The excitement of rock music—not just the immediacy of its beats and melodies but the emotions and memories we all add to the music of our lives—is impossible to capture in a museum. You can't reduce it to a 30-second video clip or a series of explanatory captions. As Frank Zappa (famously yet apocryphally) once said: "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." You just have to listen to it and experience it for yourself. So I found it sadly telling that a significant number of the Rock Hall's exhibits were just "writing about music": contemporary concert posters and reviews, copies of *Rolling Stone*—markers and echoes of past cultural relevance. Combing through this material felt vaguely





LEFT: A COLLECTION OF '50S ROCK MEMORABILIA;
RIGHT: WILCO FRONTMAN JEFF TWEEDY'S GUITAR

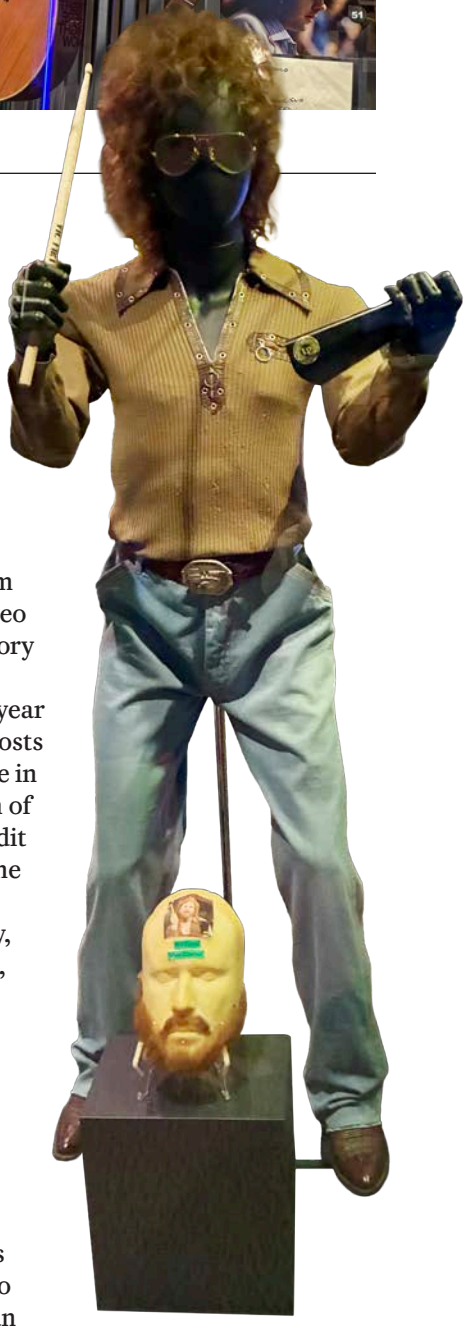
unnerving, as if I were walking through an old graveyard, or visiting the River Acheron with Odysseus to conjure the strengthless shades of long-departed heroes. The place felt like a tomb. Something great may have happened here, but it's over now.

Near the end of the main gallery, I was led along the garden path toward a final, "seasonal" exhibition: *1984—Pop Music's Greatest Year Ever*. While I'd rate 1979 higher, I was hardly going to argue with the glories of 1984 and my childhood memories of MTV. It was a genuinely impressive collection. All the famous gear of the era: Prince's purple jacket and high-heeled boots from the *Purple Rain* era, the dress Madonna wore on the cover of *Like a Virgin*, handwritten Bruce Springsteen lyrics from the *Born in the U.S.A.* sessions, Michael Jackson's orange jacket from the "Thriller" video (recorded in 1982, I might point out, but who's keeping track?). This was more than history for me: I had *lived* it.

In that brief moment, something unexpected happened: I felt young again. The year 2026, with all of its burdens, fell away. The past became the present, all the old ghosts came alive, dancing and singing once more, rushing back to fill a long-deserted space in my heart. I was once again a wide-eyed kid with a Walkman. Here was my pantheon of musical heroes, in all their strength and greatness, belting out timeless tunes. (To credit *Saturday Night Live*: "It was not unlike watching Atlantis rise again from the sea, the bones of its kings new-covered with flesh.")

It's easy enough to stack up the Rock Hall's demerits. Its déclassé location. (Tellingly, induction ceremonies have been held usually in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Nashville.) Its refusal to acknowledge its status as a *museum*. "Rock and roll will never die!" went the old cliché, but we now know better; only at the Rock Hall does anyone bother to maintain such a pretense. In the same way that the Art Institute of Chicago exhibits 19th-century Impressionists, or the Field Museum displays dinosaur bones, the Rock Hall pays tribute to a cultural phenomenon largely confined to the mid- to late 20th century.

But every now and then, when you're least expecting it, those ancient bones start to move. The museum comes alive, your hardwired memories fusing with the physical reality of the displays. And in those moments, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame justifies itself, as musical legends rise from the dead to sing their songs, and we are invited to pass on their greatness to a new generation, just as I will. This story shall the good man teach his son. ●



MORE COWBELL

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS



BOOK REVIEW

Under Pressure

DAN McLAUGHLIN

The Political Vise: How the Radical Left Controls America and the Path to Regaining Our Liberty, by John Tillman (RealClear Publishing, 272 pp., $30)

As a conservative in Illinois, John Tillman is tired of losing. Not content to accept this fate meekly, he has been in the arena for two decades, founding and leading a variety of activist organizations. Now, he poses his favorite question in book form: "Why is it that when conservatives are elected, they immediately begin moving to the left, and when progressives are elected, they simply move further left?" Why does no one move to the right once in office, and can we change this?

The Political Vise is named for a metaphor Tillman has been using for years. In his visualization (sketched out in illustrations in the book), politicians are squeezed from three sides: by the voters, the media, and the "influencers." The latter term may reek of Instagram lifestyle accounts, but Tillman refers more broadly to the universe of businesses, unions, lobbies, and nongovernmental organizations.

The author's focus is largely on legislative decision-making, which is less and less frequently how policy is made in Washington. But legislatures remain an active part of lawmaking in the states and localities. As Tillman notes, 96.3 percent of America's elected officials are in local government, and only 0.1 percent are in the federal government. For every one of those elected officials, there are another 33 government employees. Moreover, Congress may not be too concerned with lawmaking anymore, but it still sets the federal budget. The executive is susceptible to outside influences, too—even the president, as Tillman illustrates in a chapter discussing Donald Trump's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Tillman's telling, most politicians aspire to act on principle, but they do so on a vanishingly small number of occasions. Instead, most decisions are made on the basis of political expediency (e.g., logrolling and horse-trading) or fear (of losing elections or losing primaries). If the percentages that Tillman assigns to how often each of these factors triumphs, derived from his years watching legislators at work, are unduly cynical, the dynamics he identifies are quite real.

For this analysis, Tillman's framework—based on the education he received from the late, great

WESTEND61 / GETTY IMAGES

Oklahoma Senator Tom Coburn—is the size of government. The author walks through the incentives for ever-increasing public spending, which obtain even when avowedly conservative Republicans rule the roost. Although he identifies Trump as an example of a politician who broke the vise, Tillman grapples with Trump's abandonment of small government only in two instances: his surrender to big, pandemic-era spending packages, and the Beltway swamp's devouring of many of the efforts of the Department of Government Efficiency.

The author presents DOGE as a case study in which media narratives, professionally organized protesters, and public relations firms converged—topped, in this case, with violence: a series of arsons at Tesla dealerships aimed at pressuring Elon Musk to abandon efforts to cut spending and public payrolls. Tillman also features as case studies the confirmation hearings of Justices Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh, President George W. Bush's failed campaign for Social Security reform, and the orchestrated gun control push after the Parkland high school shooting in Florida in 2018. Tillman argues that we entered a new age in 1987, after the Senate hearings on the nomination of Robert Bork (an early radicalizing event for many conservatives). In this new age, the escalating power and cohesiveness of progressivism has put not only politicians but also ordinary citizens in this three-jawed vise. The events following Covid and the killing of George Floyd provide additional illustrations of the pattern.

How to fight back? Tillman first got involved in political activism in 2004 after selling his business. He tells the story of his initial stumbles and of how he gradually learned the ropes. He even experienced the inside of the vise during a brief tenure in local government. He ended up founding a string of conservative groups in Illinois and around the country, including the Illinois Policy Institute, the Liberty Justice Center, the Franklin News Foundation, and MediaPedia, a more recent effort to track bias among journalists and their publications.

There were bitter setbacks along the way. His high hopes were dashed when Republican Bruce Rauner was elected as governor of Illinois in 2014 and ended up on the cover of National Review as America's "Worst Republican Governor." As Tillman ruefully notes, Rauner wasn't just crushed by the vise; he ended up defenseless when he allowed its pressures to separate him from his natural allies.

We may have terrible elites, but 'there will always be elites.' Instead, 'the question is which elites emerge to control institutions.'

The greatest success story, which Tillman recounts with relish, was the Liberty Justice Center's case—helped by Rauner, in the more ambitious early days of his term—against forced exactions by public sector unions that were used to pay for political influence. That ended with *Janus v. AFSCME* (2018), the Supreme Court decision that found that such exactions violate the First Amendment rights of workers. The swing vote in *Janus* hinged precisely on the case's implications for political power. Justice Anthony Kennedy asked the union lawyer, "If you do not prevail in this case, the unions will have less political influence. Yes or no?" When the lawyer said yes, Kennedy shot back, "Well, isn't that the end of this case?" Power, after all, should come from the people's consent. Tillman summarizes his case: "Politics is about pressure. If you cannot apply pressure, you have no power."

A brisk read, *The Political Vise* is at its best when the author uses charts, statistics, and anecdotes to trace the sinews of left-wing power. He dives into *The Hill*'s lists of movers and shakers in Washington lobbying and breaks down how many of them are on the left or have arisen from segments of the left (the environmentalists, the trial bar, the unions) and have attached themselves parasitically on the productive sectors of society. Tillman understands leftist activism and where power resides, and that sensibility pervades the book.

Some readers may cringe, as I did, at Tillman's asides about the 2020 election and January 6. He endorses the view that the 2020 election was "rigged" (rather than outright stolen) by a variety of unfair tactics, and his complaint about January 6 concerns the deployment of the vise to elevate the riot as a political issue and basis for overreaching prosecutions. In any event, the author rightly notes that Trump deserves a share of the blame for the right's tendency to consume itself in recriminations rather than take defeat in stride and move forward.

Tillman calls for a "grand strategy" on the right, to match that of the left. His recommendations are mostly commonsense and require hard, thankless work of the sort to which Tillman has long been devoted. He recommends, in particular, efforts such as list-building, microtargeting messages to specific audiences, and reaching traditionally underserved markets with conservative arguments. He is realistic that populism alone will not do the trick: We may have terrible elites, but "there will always be elites." Instead, "the question is which elites emerge to control institutions." ▶

That's a clarion call at least as old as *God and Man at Yale*. Like so many conservative observations, it is truer for its lengthy pedigree. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Master Mind

JOHN MAC GHLIONN

A World Appears: A Journey into Consciousness, by Michael Pollan (Penguin Press, 320 pp., $32)

Michael Pollan has spent much of his writing life persuading readers to take another look at the things they think they already understand: food, plants, psychedelics, even their own habits. *A World Appears* pushes that impulse to its limit. Pollan attempts a guided tour of the human mind—where it came from, what it does, and why a world "appears" behind our eyelids at all. Many writers have entered the consciousness arena only to lose themselves in abstraction or technobabble. Pollan avoids both. His prose is crisp, his pace steady, his structure tight. And though the subject is cosmic, the tone stays grounded.

For readers wary of fashionable mysticism or Silicon Valley soul-searching, this book may seem suspicious. But Pollan never asks you to suspend common sense. He begins by recounting the scientific cold war around consciousness, which includes bar bets between neuroscientists, the almost obligatory cameo of René Descartes, and the maddening truth that you can blueprint the brain like a luxury condo and still have no idea why thoughts insist on arriving with feelings attached.

The "hard problem," as philosopher David Chalmers famously put it—the puzzle of why our thoughts *feel* like anything at all—hangs over every chapter like a stubborn cloud. Pollan treats the problem with respect but never reverence. He walks readers through the two leading theories: integrated information theory—which claims that consciousness arises when information in a system becomes tightly bound together—and global workspace theory—which pictures the brain as a stage full of competing signals, with only one winning the spotlight and becoming conscious. Pollan points out these theories' strengths, blind spots, and occasionally comic rivalry. This rivalry culminated in a Templeton-funded showdown—a series of joint experiments between 2019 and 2025—the losing side of which had to publicly abandon its theory. (The outcome was inconclusive.) Pollan enjoys the drama, but he doesn't confuse it with progress. If anything, the duel simply shows how far the field remains from a final answer.

The book becomes distinctively Pollanesque in its insistence that experience, rather than brain circuitry, is the starting place. He reminds readers that consciousness isn't an abstract riddle but a daily miracle: *You open your eyes, and a world appears*. That line, quoted from neuroscientist Anil Seth, anchors Pollan's entire project. Many argue that the real mystery lives only in the laboratory. Pollan disagrees. He thinks it's parked just behind your eyes, waiting to be noticed.

POEM

BY E.J. HUTCHINSON

"He Being Dead Yet Speaketh" (after Homer, *Iliad* 10.454–57)

For C.K.

For Diomedes, Dolon had outlived
His use. He begged for mercy; mercy did
Not come. His legs gave way, and, looking up,
He reached out for the chin of his assassin
With shaking fingers, nauseous, blank despair
In eyes that swam. Once more he begged for mercy,
But mercy did not come. While yet he spoke,
The sword ripped through his throat. It sliced the tendons,
As when a reaper mows grass with a scythe;
Before the swinging blade the green falls down
And disappears, returning to the earth.
You would not think a living thing could be
Undone so easily. Just so, the head
Of Dolon fell toward earth, still speaking, still
Begging for mercy. Mercy had not come.

He was, like me, afraid to die. Not all
Are so. Not all are so. Not all are so.

In a scientific age that often treats guesswork as gospel, Pollan's self-restraint feels almost radical.

The author then pulls a surprising move. He begins not with the human mind but with plants. Plant life, after all, is the exception to our assumptions: ancient, silent, immobile, yet astonishingly capable. Pollan walks the reader through the intellectual history that led the West to treat plants as lifeless props instead of living, responsive beings. Galileo's division of the world into measurable facts and everything else, along with Descartes's blunt dismissal of animal consciousness, helped create a worldview according to which subjectivity is a rare human luxury rather than a natural part of life. To be clear, Pollan does not suggest that your ficus is writing poetry or questioning its place in the universe. Rather, he's asking whether our inherited definition of consciousness is too narrow, too human, too flattering to us. His exploration of plant sentience is provocative not because it's mystical but because it's methodical. He doesn't preach animism but reminds us that humility isn't heresy. He uses plants to force a larger question: Have we overlooked consciousness in other beings because we've built a scientific vocabulary incapable of detecting it?

Pollan also writes passionately about psychedelics—not as spiritual cheat codes but as tools capable of briefly shaking loose the "natural attitude," that quiet conviction that our perspective is the whole story. What he underplays, though, are the darker consequences: the terror, the confusion, and the occasional spiritual hangover that make some journeys feel less like enlightenment and more like emotional whiplash. The author mentions these risks only in passing before returning to his larger argument. For him, altered states don't distort reality so much as they expose how unsteady our sense of it is.

The book's middle chapters—on feeling, thought, and the emergence of the self—are its strongest. Pollan argues that consciousness likely began not with reason but with feeling, in the ancient brain stem rather than the vaunted cortex. This reframes human exceptionalism without diminishing human dignity. The self, he suggests, may be less monarch than manager. Useful, yes, but not eternal. Religious readers may recognize echoes of older traditions that distinguish between the soul and the restless mental chatter we mistake for identity. Pollan never pushes theology, but he leaves room for readers whose understanding of personhood rests on something other than neurons.

What elevates *A World Appears* above other books on consciousness is its refusal to pretend certainty. The author doesn't proclaim a grand theory or deliver a final answer. Instead, he cultivates wonder. Not the naïve kind but the disciplined variety that admits limits and still leans forward. In a scientific age that often treats guesswork as gospel, his self-restraint feels almost radical. Readers who sometimes tire of the self-congratulatory spirituality that passes for "mindfulness" will find in Pollan a more grounded guide. He writes like a man interested in everyday life, not transcendence-for-sale.

This is Pollan's most ambitious book and perhaps his best. It will frustrate readers who crave resolution, but it will reward those who value curiosity and a bit of conceptual adventure. The world appears, and Pollan asks us to pay attention. It's an invitation worth accepting. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Whence Comes Love?

TERENCE SWEENEY

Why I Am Not an Atheist: The Confessions of a Skeptical Believer, by Christopher Beha (Penguin Press, 432 pp., $30)

We live in a culture of singles. Fewer of us get married; those who do, get married later in life. The number of children born in the United States each year keeps declining. Americans report having fewer friends, less community engagement, and rarer social outings. Amid a deficit of relationships that leaves us spouseless, childless, and friendless, more of us are also finding ourselves godless: Our lack of relationships with each other parallels the absence of a relationship with God. Without others, we are without God; without God, we are without others. Every person, it seems, is becoming an island.

Christopher Beha broaches this relationship deficit in his most recent book, *Why I Am Not an Atheist: The Confessions of a Skeptical Believer*. Beha has established himself as a talented novelist, especially with *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts*, a literary presentation of our human brokenness and of the grace that sometimes shines through the cracks. *Why I Am Not an Atheist* is as much about the need for relationships as it is an apologia for faith. It describes Beha's discovery of the centrality of personal relationships, which opened him up to his need for a communal relationship with God.

Beha was a young adult when the books of the so-called New Atheists filled bestseller lists, which coincided with the beginning of a steep decline in American religiosity. In his early twenties, he experienced the nearly ▶

fatal accident of his brother, and then he struggled with cancer. It was in this time that he "faced down death without God" and became determined to face life without God, too. Like Bertrand Russell in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, he committed to look "the world frankly in the face" without the crutch of religion. His aim, in this book, is to tell the story of his "passage into and out of atheist belief."

As a young, depressed adult, he read his way through tomes of philosophy, and he drank a lot alone. He was also asking the right questions: "How am I to live?" and "What, if any, meaning is there?" As any educator knows, if you start with the right questions, you have a good shot at landing on the right answers.

Beha journeyed through two broad worldviews in search for answers. The first was scientific materialism, which holds that only empirical knowledge is real and that all that exists is matter. The belief that we are merely collections of atoms explainable by physicists does not offer much guidance on how to live, however. The best that scientific materialists can do with the fundamental questions is explain them away. In so doing, they explain away our humanity, as though we are merely organic computers without inner lives. Beha asks, "What is it that we know, when we know ourselves *as selves*?" For scientific materialists, the answer is basically nothing, since consciousness is potentially epiphenomenal to our evolution. If we're not beings with souls and inner lives, the possibility of real relationships disappears. Two automata do not relate; they just happen to be near each other.

Faced by the vapidity of scientific materialism, Beha turned to what he calls romantic idealism: the idea of making one's own meaning and forging an authentic life. "The greatest ethical good is personal freedom and this personal freedom is absolute," according to this view. Beha finds that this tradition is a rich source of art and personal reflection but does not really answer the fundamental questions, either. A wholly individual and self-made meaning, Beha argues, is meaningless. Words, actions, or events are meaningful *for and between us and others*. A life of self-directed authenticity would leave us with little to live for. A lot of godless or irreligious people are stuck somewhere between scientific materialism and romantic idealism. The problem is that this is "making us miserable . . . in part by making us feel alone." Certainly, all this left Beha isolated. While the variety of thinkers he encountered in his reading helped, it would take a real relationship for him to see our essential need for relationships, human and divine.

What Beha discovered, partly through reading but mostly through falling in love, is that there is no meaning unless it is shareable.

In the case of Dorothy Day, it was the discovery of natural happiness that made her realize that she needed happiness with God. C. S. Lewis, too, found a window into the divine when he was surprised by joy. Similarly, Beha found God not in his suffering or need but in love. Having addressed his loneliness, he realized that the most important gap that he needed to fill was the divine one. He discovered that if you are looking for human meaning, you should start not with science or personal authenticity (both good things) but with love. Beha compares love to the experience of the warmth and light of the sun. When we feel warmth and light, we look for their source. When he felt the warmth and light of love, Beha looked for its source and found that "to deny its reality seems just as willful and obtuse as denying that the sun out there causes warmth." This is not your standard proof of the existence of God, of course, but it is something of a sign. If life is about love and relationships, then why wouldn't all our relationships be grounded in a deeper relationship with God?

What Beha discovered, partly through reading but mostly through falling in love, is that there is no meaning unless it is shareable. No meaning without relationship. And this could not be an isolated relationship with God. Rather, Beha felt called to the rich communal relationship with God and with others through the Catholic Church.

For all the beauty of Beha's conclusions, I could not help but sometimes wish that he had written a different version of this book. His wrestling with scientific materialism and romantic idealism involves a couple of hundred pages of engaging philosophical discussion, featuring thinkers from Baruch Spinoza to Daniel Dennett. This discussion is genuinely insightful but makes it easy for the reader to forget that Beha is writing about his personal search for God. The book shines particularly in its opening and closing, which are its most narrative-driven parts. It made me wish that the author, a great storyteller, had told more of his own experiences, integrated with intellectual history, and offered fewer of his admittedly good philosophical exegeses.

Why I Am Not an Atheist is a valuable contribution to our modern search for meaning. Religious readers should buy the book not only for themselves but also for their intellectually inclined friends and family. In a society scourged by a deficit of relations, we need to recover the religious truth that God is love, that God is ▶

THE BOOKSHELF

NEW AND UPCOMING RELEASES

by Vahaken Mouradian



The Mighty Continent: A Candid History of Modern Europe (Creed & Culture, 466 pp., $38) begins in the Mediterranean. Without Mycenae and Moses and Rome, argues Walter A. McDougall, there would be no Catholic Church and no medieval Europe. Without medieval Europe, there'd be no Renaissance and no scientific revolution. Without the Renaissance, no Age of Discovery, no Protestant Reformation, and no modernity. "Europeans invented the modern world," as we know it, by variously synthesizing what the Greeks called *techne* and *themis*: science and culture.

Obviously, the aperture of the lens that McDougall uses is enormous; its depth of field must be commensurately shallow. The reader is catapulted over the ages and can take only snapshots of the rapidly changing scenery below. It's the price of covering such a great distance. But McDougall is an expert guide. What you might miss in detail you'll gain in understanding of Europe's almost dialectical evolution. The might of the continent had begun to diminish by the start of the First World War; it was depleted by the end of the Second. Just as her birth was in the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe's afterlife, too, is likely beyond her shores.

Were history taught as a story, Rudyard Kipling guessed, it wouldn't be forgotten. McDougall proves him right.

When Martin Shaw says he's a storyteller, he means only that he's human. Naturally we all see and seek narrative order in our lives. A beginning, a (hopefully dense) middle—here's blessing, adversity, friction, loss, epiphany, triumph—a fitting (and hopefully distant) end. But, Shaw warns, the farther we depart from tradition and ritual and nature, the more the threads of our lives slacken. Plot holes can fray a good story.

Shaw's ***Liturgies of the Wild: Myths That Make Us*** (Sentinel, 256 pp., $30) is a collection of closely related essays intended to re-mystify human existence. The author is a Christian eccentric who dislikes the indoors, hangs out with Sioux shamans, and once counseled a retired hit man who wanted to pray but couldn't motivate himself to do so. Each chapter features some fairy tale, an anecdote, a memory, a dream. Shaw has had extraordinary dreams. The matter of whether he has gifts beyond that of fine prose I'll leave to another reader. We might all be storytellers, but he's a good one: Aren't you curious how he once ended up at a Rhode Island airport with a bagful of torn-up banknotes?

Shaw would agree with Emma Sharp that "the trail brings up what you've buried." Emma, the protagonist of ***How to Survive in the Woods*** (Harper, 320 pp., $30), encounters guilt and ghosts, bears and men, and other dangerous creatures during her hike through Maine's Hundred-Mile Wilderness, arguably the most hazardous section of the Appalachian Trail.

Kat Rosenfield, a onetime contributor to these pages, has been publishing thrillers since 2012. This is her sixth and best. Once Emma, her lunatic husband Logan, and their inscrutable friend Taylor have left the trailhead, they're in a Hobbesian state of nature. Lies, guile, cruelty, camouflage. Murder is their invisible companion. Everybody wants to survive; not everybody will.

The author and her characters sometimes lose their footing. All would've benefited from fewer instances of "rummaging" in backpacks, for example. (That verb in this context is a fearsome cliché.) In a later chapter, there are three rummagings in as many pages before Rosenfield regains her balance and agility: "Nature is indifferent to whether you live or die—but once you are dead, it certainly takes an interest." This is very fine. If the rights to a miniseries haven't been sold yet, HBO should certainly take an interest.

Himself a unity of relations, and that He founded the church as a community. Beha reminds us that "love is the cause of the world, . . . the thing that brought the world about, and . . . the end or purpose for which the world exists." His religious discovery coincides with recent sociological evidence that religious people have more friends, are more likely to be married, and tend to have more children and deeper social connections. Turns out that grounding your existence in a relationship with God might make you more likely to have more and better relationships with other people. As Beha discovered, this also goes the other way. His love for his wife made him realize that he needed an even more powerful love, that offered to and received from God. More of us need to acknowledge this truth. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Silicon Selves

GRAHAM HILLARD

The Problem of Personhood: Giving Rights to Trees, Corporations, and Robots, by Lisa Siraganian (Verso, 224 pp., $26.95)



Most critiques of the nascent "AI personhood" movement have come from the right. Writing for NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE in 2017, Wesley J. Smith concluded that artificial intelligence programs are "machines, without any 'eternal' significance." The president of Asbury University, Kevin Brown, pursued a similar line more recently, asserting in the *Christian Scholar's Review* that consigning our personhood to AI "risks a disfigurement of God's image." Even criticism from outside of conservatism has tended to borrow our language and values. In *The Atlantic* in 2023, Stephen Marche declared that AI is no "closer to artificial consciousness than a car is." Were a truly sentient AI program to arise, Marche argued, we would discover that human beings had only ever been soulless "series of instructions."

Given this uniformity of perspective, scholar Lisa Siraganian's new book holds out the possibility of a welcome change. Composed unapologetically from the left, Siraganian's polemic argues that we have erred by designing a legal system in which "'person' and 'human being' are not synonyms." Because so-called expansive personhood requires "an impoverished notion" of what it means to be a moral or legal being, attempts to employ it liberally have undermined our thinking and discourse. "Granting personhood to nonhumans," Siraganian warns, "is not an incremental step forward; it is a dangerous leap off a cliff."

Perhaps surprisingly for those of us who have forgotten how badly the case still rankles progressives, Siraganian traces the roots of this evil to *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), in which the Supreme Court held that even groups of people have the right to free speech. As the author tells it, *Citizens United* used the law to "remove political issues from the political realm and bury them in legal technicalities." Consequently, the corporate "person" began to displace the individual in political life not only by increasing the scale of "his" election-season spending but also by crowding out, in law and the public square, "those ever-increasing numbers" of individuals "without capital."

In service of this argument, Siraganian dedicates a chapter to quoting and synthesizing the thought of such leftist luminaries as Karl Marx and Evgeny Pashukanis, the Soviet scholar who was denounced as a Trotskyite in the late 1930s and executed. Alas, the prose is not as smooth as one might like. An abstract and often unlovely stylist, Siraganian fills this part of the book with highly theorized musings. It is only through painstaking attention that one discovers her practical conclusion: However much good expansive personhood has done for "racial, disability, queer, trans, or women's rights," it is a tool of the capitalists and should be dismissed as such immediately.

Other parts of the book are, if nothing else, easier to follow. In a chapter

ERIC SAILER

on fetal personhood, charmingly titled "Unborn Fictions," the author complains that pro-lifers have adopted the logic of *Citizens United* and added "some patriarchal premises of their own" to advance their cause. Though she decries "speciesism," she notes with displeasure that the goal of the animal rights movement, "animal personhood," also "follows the path that corporate persons have laid down." Far better to protect our pets with legal trusts: a strategy that would "not only give more animals standing but might force law to deal with animals' interests more often and more robustly."

Given contemporary anxieties, however, it is Siraganian's chapter on "ePersons" that is likely to attract the greatest attention. Observing with dismay the European Parliament's 2017 resolution on "the autonomy of robots," the author dismisses AI "rights" as one more manifestation of corporate personhood. Moreover, she reminds us, developing so-called ePersonhood "is not an inevitability" or "a moral demand." It is instead "a choice we are actively making now about what we value." We may still choose differently.

Siraganian's argument against robot rights is frequently Marxist, but many conservatives will find themselves agreeing with her assertion that robot personhood would be an abomination in a world where "actual human beings and their labor" are often disdained. Like her introduction to the (alleged) problems of *Citizens United*, the author's chapter on robots is unnecessarily dense, citing at stultifying length the philosophers, lawyers, and polemicists who have waded into these waters. Yet real wisdom ultimately does emerge. To give "some amount of decision-making power to an entity that cannot share our interests and values," she writes, would be "profoundly misguided." More than that: It would be to surrender part of our human identity.

The careful reader will note here that we have come full circle. Despite her warm embrace of dialectical materialism, Siraganian can't help but posit the existence of some irreducibly human essence that even the most ingenious robot can never share. It is no surprise that the word "soul" appears in the book at least half a dozen times. Perhaps a shrewder writer could have pulled off a critique of AI personhood without resorting to such gestures—perhaps, but I doubt it. A purely reasoned assessment might never break the illusion that they, silicon and bytes, can be like us. The spirit must be summoned to the fight.

Is Siraganian equipped to aid in the battle? Her occasional grace notwithstanding, I think not. Too opaque, too disagreeable, and wed to partisan grievances, *The Problem of Personhood* largely fails. For humanity's sake, one might wish it didn't. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Invisible Man?

JOHN WILSON

The Ballad of the Last Guest, by Peter Handke, translated by Krishna Winston (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 176 pp., $26)

Last December, just four days before Peter Handke's 83rd birthday, his short novel *The Ballad of the Last Guest* was published in English. (The original, in German, was published in 2023.) To my knowledge, only one other American publication, *World Literature Today*, has reviewed it. (There were a handful of prepublication notices, in *Publishers Weekly* and the like.) On the back cover of the English edition, there's a bit from John Updike, taken from an old piece in the *New Yorker*: "The best writer altogether, in his language." High praise, and that was written before Handke quite justifiably received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2019.

Ah, that Nobel Prize. You may recall that as soon as the award was announced, a torrent of denunciation poured forth, almost as if it had been prepared in advance, just in case. Handke, we were told, in terms brooking no dissent, was an unrepentant supporter of genocide (not mere persecution—bad enough—but *genocide*) against Bosnian Muslims in Yugoslavia.

Was this true? No. What was true was that, in his response to such claims, Handke was guilty of unwise rhetorical excess. "I prefer waste paper," he replied, "to your empty and ignorant questions," when an interviewer asked him whether he acknowledged the Srebrenica massacre of 1995. (His equally unwise appearance at the funeral of former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević in 2006 had already caused controversy.) But Handke's rejoinder was on a level quite different from the wild denunciations that prompted it. Besides, he soon after apologized and clarified, "In 2006 I wrote: 'The Srebrenica massacre was the worst crime against humanity in Europe since World War II.'" The lingering effects of this campaign to discredit Handke certainly account in part for the failure of the American literary press to reckon with his splendid new book.

Whether you are an oldster like me, who's been reading Handke since the mid-1960s, or are contemplating a first foray into his work, you should check out the interview with him conducted last July by Amaury da Cunha for *Le Monde* (available online in English at a small cost). It is delightful and could serve as an appetizer. If you are put off—irritated, for instance, by Handke's preternatural self-assurance—you won't enjoy his fiction.

The Ballad of the Last Guest covers one week during which the protagonist, Gregor Werfer, returns as he does each year to the home in ▶

which he was raised, in an unspecified locale. (Handke was born and raised in Austria. Often, especially in his later fiction, he eschews place names.) He visits his aging parents and his younger sister, whose baby boy, born out of wedlock, is due to be baptized during Gregor's visit. En route to his family, Gregor receives a message that his younger brother, Hans, a member of the French Foreign Legion, has been killed in action. (His unit was "fighting in the tropics.") Gregor can't bring himself to tell the family what has happened. The second and longest part of the book is a narrative of Gregor's week at "home" (very little of it actually spent with his family). The final, brief section is a tumbling sequence of memories of his visit.

"So," you may be thinking. "Let me get this straight: Are you trying to tell us *not* to read this book?" On the contrary! I greatly enjoyed it, and I've read it twice—in the bound galley and again when the finished book appeared. Speaking of that bound galley, the publicity copy on the back cover reads: "A novel about a man who returns home, only to find that home is now unrecognizable." Whoever wrote this obviously hadn't read the book. As I've already said, Gregor has been making *annual* visits home! But it is true that an important aspect of the novel is its rendering of an experience familiar to people in many parts of the world. What was once a small town with a distinct identity is now surrounded by an "agglomeration" ("*the* agglomeration"—italics mine—as it is referred to repeatedly in the novel, an ugly word that captures the feeling of urban sprawl). Hence Gregor's excursions to the outskirts, to the "woods," even, to spend the night in a bomb crater.

What about the "last guest," a phrase that (not by accident) has a biblical flavor and is occasioned by Gregor's evenings spent in the pubs of the old town? Or Gregor's friend, the retired priest who administers the baptism of Gregor's baby nephew? For that and more, you will need to read the novel. If you do, I hope you relish it as much as I did. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Starman Waiting in the Sky

GUY DENTON

Lazarus: The Second Coming of David Bowie, by Alexander Larman (Pegasus Books, 384 pp., $29.95)

When I awoke on January 11, 2016, to find that David Bowie had died, I was incredulous. Three days before, Bowie had released *Blackstar*, an album so audaciously experimental that it hardly evoked a man in physical decline. I was consumed by an intense grief whose sting has never truly faded. For many devotees, Bowie was as emotionally significant and influential as a parent or best friend. Alexander Larman shares that attachment. In his new book, *Lazarus: The Second Coming of David Bowie*, he captures the pain of Bowie's death with precision and clarity: "I felt adrift."

Lazarus offers what no other biography of Bowie has attempted: a study of the later years of the artist's career. The book follows Bowie's life from the end of the 1980s to its extraordinary conclusion with *Blackstar*. Even among dedicated Bowiephiles, most of the albums from this period are frequently neglected or outright ridiculed. A common narrative is that from *Space Oddity* (1969) to *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* (1980), Bowie produced a transcendent body of work that transformed fashion and popular music. Then, on *Let's Dance* (1983), he surrendered to the allure of conventional pop stardom. Afterward, he could only follow trends rather than create them—at least until he rediscovered himself in the 2010s.

Larman is unsatisfied with this thesis. In the book's introduction, he notes his "frustration" with other biographers who have failed to "treat Bowie's latter-day career with the gravitas that it merits." His goal is to reappraise Bowie's later work, but his affection isn't blind. Though Larman's passion is evident throughout *Lazarus*, he can be merciless in his criticism.

Lazarus begins in 1991. We find Bowie restlessly touring Europe as a member of Tin Machine, a band he formed in 1988 with Reeves Gabrels and the Sales brothers, Hunt and Tony Fox. The quartet functioned as a democratic unit and played stripped-down rock 'n' roll. Bowie's reputation among critics had declined throughout the '80s, and he hoped that the experiment would reinvigorate him creatively. Instead, Tin Machine came across as a very public midlife crisis. Critics reacted with scorn. "Hot tramp! We loved you so," proclaimed one especially vituperative review in *Melody Maker*. "Now sit down, man. You're a f***ing disgrace." According to hearsay, Bowie cried when he read the article—Larman is unable to substantiate that claim. His own perspective on Tin Machine is only somewhat less harsh. He demeans the band's debut album as "an ugly, hectoring, noise devoid of melody and subtlety" yet recognizes it as a "regrettably vital" first step toward Bowie's artistic rebirth.

After Tin Machine's dissolution, Bowie attempted to recover his artistic purpose and commercial appeal. In most instances, he failed, as Larman explores in unsparing detail. On *Black Tie White Noise* (1993) and *Hours* (1999), Bowie returned to the introspective songwriting that had defined him at his peak, but both albums flopped on the charts. *Outside* (1995) and *Earthling* (1997) experimented with more contemporary sounds, but they failed to attract a new fan base.



DAVID BOWIE, 1993

LESTER COHEN / GETTY IMAGES

Larman mordantly observes that Bowie had formed a habit of producing comeback albums. Each new release initially would be praised by critics as "his best since *Scary Monsters*" before being promptly forgotten once sales figures failed to reflect that optimism.

Yet *Lazarus* is not a catalogue of mistakes. While Bowie seemed to lose his musical foresight, he remained decades ahead of his contemporaries in his understanding of the internet and its vast commercial potential. His 1996 song "Telling Lies" was the first single by a major artist to be released exclusively as a digital download. In 1998, meanwhile, he launched BowieNet, his own internet service provider. In return for a monthly fee of $19.95, it offered interactive web chats, fan contests, and livestreams.

By 2000, Bowie had been rejuvenated by his marriage to the model Iman and the birth of his daughter, Lexi. That year, he delivered a triumphant headliner performance at Britain's Glastonbury Festival. In Larman's estimation, it transformed him from a man out of time to a "peerless performer" in the eyes of a new generation. Over the next four years, Bowie recorded two studio albums—*Heathen* (2002) and *Reality* (2003)—and toured extensively until he suffered a heart attack onstage. After this incident, he ceased interviews, live performances, and new releases until 2013, when he released *The Next Day*.

Larman is an agreeable guide through the tempest of Bowie's life. His prose is compelling, and his wry humor brings an appropriate levity to some of the book's less cheerful chapters. Along the way, he incorporates interviews with a broad cast of Bowie collaborators. The worth of a new biography of a popular subject is largely defined by the new information it contains. Figures such as bassist Gail Ann Dorsey and pianist Mike Garson provide a surfeit of fresh stories about Bowie that supplement Larman's rigorous research. We learn, for instance, that Fred Astaire wanted Bowie to portray him on film—Bowie's acting career receives careful attention—and that Bowie's band adopted a particularly aggressive sound on *Reality* because they were collectively struggling to quit smoking. Interviewees are candid about some of Bowie's less pleasant traits: He sometimes abandoned friends and collaborators once their usefulness had expired. But almost all of them affirm that he was, at his core, thoroughly kind and generous.

The final few chapters of *Lazarus* are uniquely fascinating. Larman cannot explain what motivated Bowie's sudden return to music, but he chronicles the making of *The Next Day* in exhaustive detail. The recording of *Blackstar*, which began as an avant-garde jazz project and evolved into a concept album about Bowie's impending death after he was diagnosed with liver cancer in 2014, receives only a few pages of analysis. But Larman's heart-wrenching account of Bowie's final days is powerful enough to justify the entire book.

Larman critiques each of Bowie's later albums forcefully. He is never supercilious, but some of his conclusions are questionable. He lauds *Heathen* for cementing Bowie's return to "public prominence and regard" after the Glastonbury performance and for inaugurating a new era in his career, but it seems more accurate to say that Bowie had harnessed the power of nostalgia. All but two of the songs he performed at Glastonbury were recorded before the 1990s, and the average set list during his lucrative final tour in 2004 consisted mostly of '70s and '80s material. For as much as Larman wants to celebrate Bowie's later work, *Lazarus* sometimes does more to affirm the timeless genius of his classic period.

A major exception, however, is *Blackstar*. Larman is rightly effusive in his praise for Bowie's final masterwork. Conceived as a rock album performed by jazz musicians, its innovative soundscapes continue to dazzle, while its conceptual layers have lost none of their emotional heft. "More than ever before," Larman writes, "Bowie was recording for himself and nobody else." This is the ultimate point of *Lazarus*: Only Bowie could have turned his physical death into an artistic resurrection.

Hot tramp! We miss you so. ●

TV REVIEW

Backstage at the Revolution

MARTHA BAYLES

The art of intelligence in *TURN: Washington's Spies*



"Drama represents the most democratic side of literature." This comment, by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, was not meant as a compliment. It is what any French aristocrat of the early 1800s would have said about theater, especially in America. Tocqueville elaborates: "The crowd can enjoy sights on stage more easily than in any other form of literature. No preparation and no study are needed to take them in. It is they that carry you off your feet, however preoccupied and however ignorant you may be."

It is perhaps no accident that George Washington, the least educated of the upper-class Virginians who shaped the American founding, loved theater. Owing to his father's early death and his mother's insistence that he manage the family farm, he never received a formal education. To compensate, he read many books, especially plays. On a trip to Barbados at the age of 19, he saw his first performance. He followed London's theater scene and attended plays in Alexandria, Williamsburg, and Baltimore. And while commanding the Continental Army at Valley Forge, he staged *Cato, a Tragedy*, by the British essayist Joseph Addison. Washington was, in the words of Richard Brookhiser, the "most theatrical and theater-loving of presidents."

Cato depicts the last days of Cato the Younger, the Roman senator whose stalwart defense of the Roman republic's ancient virtues and liberties ended when he chose to fall on his sword rather than submit to a would-be emperor, Julius Caesar. First performed in 1713, *Cato* was a hit throughout England and its colonies. By mid-century, its lofty language had melded with the rhetoric of American patriots. Washington carefully modeled his public persona on Cato as he is extolled in the opening scene of Addison's play: "While good, and just, and anxious for his friends, / He's still severely bent against himself; / And when his fortune sets before him all / The pomps and pleasures that his soul can wish, / His rigid virtue will accept of none."

Another passage in *Cato* speaks to something Washington came to know all too well: the mental agonies of war waged against not only external enemies but also neighbors, friends, and family. In that passage, Portius, one of Cato's sons, warns: "The ways of Heav'n are dark and intricate, / Puzzled in mazes, and perplex'd with errors; / Our understanding traces them in vain, / Lost and bewilder'd in the fruitless search; / Nor sees with how much art the windings run, / Nor where the regular confusion ends." It's possible that Washington had this in mind in October 1778, when, lacking information about the British troops that occupied New York City and were garrisoned on Long Island, he created an espionage ring worthy of republican Rome.

That ring is described in a book published by Alexander Rose in 2006. It was later dramatized in *TURN: Washington's Spies*, a series that ran on AMC between 2014 and 2017 and is now available on Netflix. As in all good spy yarns, the plot is tortuous, the characters colorful, and the ending satisfying—even though we "trace in vain" what really happened.

The Culper Ring was centered on three childhood friends from Setauket, Long Island. These are Benjamin Tallmadge (played by Seth Numrich), a dragoon officer and aide to Washington; Caleb Brewster (Daniel Henshall), a fearless whaleboater adept at water crossings; and Abraham Woodhull (Jamie Bell), a farmer whose father is Setauket's Tory magistrate. Other characters pile on as the series proceeds: some based on real people, others invented. Most prominent are Anna Strong (Heather Lind), also of Setauket, and Washington himself (played with great subtlety by Ian Kahn).

In a powerful scene in episode 6 of season 1, we come to understand why the Setauket connection was so crucial. In a meeting between Washington, Tallmadge, General Charles Scott (Michael Gaston), and a spycraft expert named Nathaniel Sackett (Stephen Root), the group agrees that "traditional reconnaissance is the way forward." Tallmadge has been arguing for a ring, or "chain of agents," but, sizing up the others, he demurs. That approach "would require trust, and in that resource, I'm afraid we find ourselves lacking." Taken aback, Washington asks, "You're speaking now of your men on Long Island?" "No sir," Tallmadge replies, "I'm speaking of the men in this room." He explains: "For a conspiracy like this one to function,



SETH NUMRICH AS BENJAMIN TALLMADGE IN *TURN: WASHINGTON'S SPIES*

AMC

we would need to be keeping secrets from the enemy, from Congress, even from our own army." Tallmadge then coolly elucidates why none of the others, including Washington, trusts him. Washington ponders for a moment and asks to speak with Tallmadge alone. And with that, the Culper Ring is born.

In an interview published in NATIONAL REVIEW, author Rose described the three classes of spies in 18th-century Europe: "the uniformed soldiers who ranged ahead of the armies, probed the enemy's fortifications and strength, and reported back to base"; the diplomats who "spied on each other, steamed open the diplomatic mails, and tried to break each other's codes"; and the "paid agents of no fixed loyalty who infiltrated the enemy" in ways "universally regarded as ignoble and embarrassing." Ostensibly, the Culper Ring belonged in the third class. As both the book and the series make clear, however, the ring's members were neither mercenaries nor indifferent to the reasons for the war.

Equally clear is the series' depiction of the turncoat Benedict Arnold (Owain Yeoman) and his honorable British contact, the spymaster Major John André (JJ Feild). As Eric Felten observes in his book *Loyalty: The Vexing Virtue* (2011), "The Americans admired the British spy and hated to have to hang him," while "the British hated the traitor who helped them." It's an irony worthy of the best spy stories, which, unlike tragedies, can end on a hopeful note.

Gordon Wood has suggested that Washington's interest in *Cato* had less to do with the protagonist than with the character of Juba, the exiled Numidian prince who is an ally of Cato and an admirer of Roman civilization. After all, Cato was making a desperate last stand against the devolution of a great republic into an empire ruled by a tyrant. Washington was leading a revolution against an imperial tyrant in the hope of founding a great republic. A quarter of a millennium later, it's worth remembering the difference. ●

MOVIE AWARDS

Between the Oscar-Worthy Lines

ROSS DOUTHAT

Signals clear and subtle from the 98th Academy Awards

The Academy Awards are not what they were; the movies are not what they were. Yet apart from memes and TikTok clips, cinema remains the only mass art form capable of giving us a window into the American psyche, a spiritual temperature check, a foretaste of the future. The death of the rom-com is connected to the decline of sex and marriage; the entire woke era was anticipated when *The Shape of Water* won Best Picture; the age of AI is rolling down tracks laid by *The Terminator* and *The Matrix*. So when the Oscars come round, I can't help myself: I sift through the nominees and winners, ponder the non-nominees, and try to cast an augury.

This year it felt easier than usual, since the leading Best Picture contenders were embodiments of America's contending ideological worldviews. The most explicit was the ultimate winner, *One Battle After Another*, Paul Thomas Anderson's Trump-era revision of Thomas Pynchon. It embodies "resistance" liberalism, which is really Boomer liberalism, in a pure and illuminating form.

Anderson's depiction of aging Weather Underground–esque radicals who take up arms against an immigration crackdown is superficially timely—that's why it won—but it really belongs to an eternal 1970s, playing out the same cycle of radicalism and reaction as in the days of Boomer youth and glory. In its vision of ▶

generational recurrence, you can see the two competing impulses that define the Boomer liberal response to the Trump era: a fervent desire to renew the ancient battle against fascism, and a sense of futility shading into despair at the inability to climb out of history.

Meanwhile, Trumpism itself also found embodiment in the Oscar nominees, through the intense mid-century Americana of *Marty Supreme*, in which Timothée Chalamet's titular character is a champion Ping-Pong player who is also a philanderer, a serial liar, a hustler, and mountebank who manages to get a number of people beaten up or even killed. And yet, like a certain impossible-to-suppress president, he is also a figure of great power and charisma, an American original, a New Yorker whose self-belief makes the world bend to his ambitions, and whose energy brings people along even when they have good reasons to resist him.

For Academy voters, handing the Best Picture statue to a story like this—or even giving Best Actor to the vaulting, self-aggrandizing Chalamet—probably would have felt way too much like a victory for Trump himself. But if you watch *Marty Supreme* and *One Battle After Another* back-to-back (or flip between them on your television), the contrast between Marty's irresistible version of the American spirit and Anderson's stoned and self-destructive Boomers makes it seem inevitable that Trumpism ended up triumphing politically.

The desire on the left to respond to that defeat, meanwhile, helped animate Ryan Coogler's racism-and-vampires melodrama *Sinners*, which set a record for nominations and won the Best Actor award for Michael B. Jordan. If *One Battle After Another* is a film about a Boomer liberalism that feels trapped by history, *Sinners* is a movie for a younger progressivism that wants to move forward and doesn't mind if darkness lies ahead. Indeed, it might be willing to embrace the darkness, trading in the uptight piety of wokeness 1.0 for the impious raunch of so-called dark woke, and pushing past the secular "I love science" paradigm toward a post-Christian supernatural.

With that supernaturalism, *Sinners* makes a connection between the surface of our culture and its depths. *One Battle After Another* and *Marty Supreme* define the formal political-cultural battle lines of 2026, but the vampires who show up midway through Coogler's movie are helpful for understanding our moment's subterranean anxieties—which are more fully expressed in films that weren't really in the running for Best Picture.

Here I have in mind Yorgos Lanthimos's *Bugonia*, nominated but not a real contender, in which we follow two paranoiacs who become convinced that a powerful female CEO is really an extraterrestrial invader. Or Ari Aster's neglected *Eddington*, a pandemic story in which the war between Covidians and populists, the woke and the anti-woke, turns out to be a stage play obscuring the real danger, the inexorable AI takeover. Or *Weapons* (which nabbed Amy Madigan a Best Supporting Actress victory), a horror movie about kidnapped kids that seems as if it's going to address guns or class or cultural division but turns out to be an old-fashioned fairy tale in which the threat is witchcraft and black magic.

These are the movies that really get at where our culture is going, I suspect. We are formally committed to seeing Trumpism versus liberalism (whether in Boomer or progressive shape) as the great conflict of the age. But our subtler filmmakers sense a different form of conflict lurking, in which the enemy is something else—the vampire in the dark, the malignant corporation, the nonhuman intelligence, or the devil. ●



ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER WINS BEST PICTURE, MARCH 15

HANDOUT / GETTY IMAGES

BY RICHARD BROOKHISER

Country Life



Earth Felt the Wound

"You know you have a dead deer back there."

I didn't. The young man who looks in on the house when we are not there pointed to a shape on the ground behind the carport, dark against the snow still remaining at the end of winter.

The local biweekly newspaper reprints items from local newspapers of the past. One from the late 19th century reported, as a curiosity, that deer were seen on the streets of the area's big town. Numerous farms and ubiquitous guns had made the creatures a rarity. Not so now. We have learned to recognize their dark winter coats and their light warm-weather ones, their scat, their successful browsing of the lower branches of trees that simply are not there. A few years ago, trading the bosom of nature for reality, we put a deer fence around the corner of our lot where we actually live. It was either that or give up gardening. The fence is not foolproof. Fallen trees make breaches. I once spent what seemed like an hour chasing a successful intruder: me in boots that kept slipping off in the muck, it on fleet feet, around and around until it finally exited by the gate that I had left open for it.

The latest intruder had entered by the driveway gate, left open by some deliverer. (Not through carelessness; the latch is a tricky one.) I could see by the prints pocking the snow on the lawn that a deer must have been there for a while. Or more than one. Possibly it, or they, had gone out and come back in repeatedly.

When I went to look at the remains myself, I could not tell how this deer had died. There was snow all around, but I am neither Leatherstocking nor Holmes; there was no track record that I could read. In fact, there seemed to be hardly any tracks at all. So what had been the killer? Exhaustion? Disease? An injury received elsewhere? Cold case.

The undertakers had been at work, evidently by air. Vultures are common here. From the hammock in the summer you see them circling, scanning the menu of the ground for servings. They have upturned wing tips; hawks don't. Crows may have helped. The deer's head was entire, without antlers, so it was a doe, or a buck that had shed. There was gray hair all around, unmoored from skin, which I imagine will find its way into songbird nests. Then there were bones, some still fur-covered, most bare. Ribs stood up like a sketch for the hull of a ship. Poor thing.

I asked a neighbor if any removal by humans was possible. She suggested yet another neighbor, "to see if he is willing to cart it out to the road." "Once by the road, you can call town hall and they will usually send someone from the road crew to remove it, but even that is not guaranteed this time of year, as it's considered more of a nuisance and health hazard in the warmer months." She added, "I usually tell people to hope the vultures find it as they can pick it clean in a couple of days." Since that had already happened, there the matter, and the deer, rests.

I am not a vegetarian. Among the meats I have eaten is venison. So I have no aversion in principle. If I had, it would be futile since, even if Homo sapiens switched to fruits and nuts, the rest of nature would continue to feed. Years ago there was a Japanese man who regularly took out full-page ads in the paper of record, outlining how the world could be made ideal. The last item of his program was to wean all creatures from each other. Good luck.

And yet. In *Paradise Lost*, Death and his mother Sin follow the path from Hell to the "now fenceless world" opened by their progenitor, Satan, and by our parents' fall. "I shall not lag behind, nor err / The way," Death declares, "such a scent I draw / Of carnage . . . from all things there that live." Then Milton, dropping the hammer to ring the bell, adds in his own voice: "So saying, with delight he snuff'd the smell / Of mortal change on Earth." The fact that it happens to all of us and to everything makes it bearable. The fact that it happens to all of us and to everything makes it sad. ●

BY BRYAN A. GARNER

Garner the Grammarian



Defense Against the Demagogue

Although words are our main tools for thinking about the world, in public life they're used most relentlessly to keep us from thinking at all. As we discussed last month, demagogues twist language until it no longer helps us track reality but only stirs our emotions. In the mid-20th century, an idiosyncratic thinker named Alfred Korzybski invented a discipline he called general semantics—an attempt at "mental hygiene," a way to restore the link between words and the world to enable effective thinking. In a climate of weaponized slogans and endless "news," its core insights feel astonishingly current.

In the 1930s, Korzybski and his followers described a pattern they called the IFD disease: idealization, followed by frustration, ending in disillusionment or despondency. They didn't have to look far for an illustration. In that decade, Adolf Hitler was converting the genuine hopes of many otherwise decent people into a cult of national redemption, promising to restore an imagined ancestral magnificence. Those hopes, warped by delusions, led many to commit horrific acts.

People around the world have since followed a similar script. They start by projecting their hopes onto a leader who promises redemption and a return to some glorified past. The slogans are simple. Villains are clearly named. The future sparkles. Then reality bites. The economy doesn't transform. Crime and disorder don't vanish. Political opposition doesn't disappear—so it's demonized. The result is frustration, which can harden into rage or sink into resignation. People see their hopes exploited as mere political expedience. As with an abusive partner, the initial infatuation operates as bait, and the more intense the infatuation, the nastier the hook it hides. Demagogues count on the early swell of starry-eyed enthusiasm and ride it as long as they can.

General semantics tries to interrupt this pattern by teaching people how language fuels each stage. Korzybski's signature claim is that "the map is not the territory." The phrase denotes a disciplined mode of thought. Our sentences, slogans, and theories are maps. They point toward events and objects, but they're never identical to them. The word isn't the thing. The symbol isn't the thing symbolized. A phrase like "real Americans" or "the silent majority" doesn't describe a concrete, uniform group. It vaguely evokes some traits, ignores others, and bundles them into a usefully amorphous fiction that nonetheless feels real. Demagogues speak as if such abstractions were literal objects. When a crowd chants about "enemies of the people," the words work on the nervous system as if they'd pinpointed a fixed, dangerous species rather than a shifting collection of critics, journalists, or judges.

General semanticists liked to expose this move with simple, almost comic examples. A child says, "Pigs are rightly named because they're such dirty animals." The name and the trait have fused. Adults do something similar when they say, "Illegal immigrants are vermin" or "People on welfare are leeches." A legal or economic category turns into an essence, something that seems built into the kind of person named. Once that happens, evidence about individuals loses force. Demagogues know how to exploit these thought-stopping clichés. They repeat a nickname or stigma until it feels as though it is a fact about the target.

Meanwhile, fact—hard, verifiable fact—tends to shrink in public discourse. The institutions that supply it lose funding and public trust. Experts become objects of suspicion; statistics are dismissed as biased or irrelevant. Once credibility crumbles, language turns self-referential, feeding on emotion instead of verification. A claim like "Job creation is down 7.3 percent" can't compete with the surge of confidence one might derive from "Jobs are way up!" In such exchanges, excitement replaces accuracy as the test of truth. Demagogues rely on that reflex. They don't need to ban facts—only to make them seem dull or dubious.

General semantics brings out the distinction between fact, inference, and value judgment. It sounds like schoolroom hair-splitting until you watch the three levels at work in political talk. "This train is going 20 miles per hour" reports an observable condition. "At this rate we'll be two hours late" is an inference. It might prove right or wrong. "This lousy railroad is never on time" is a sweeping judgment, a global verdict that far

outruns the specific data. Demagogues nearly always speak at that third level. "The old policies failed" becomes "My predecessors hated you." "Some rules were broken" becomes "The system is totally corrupt." Listeners who've never practiced sorting these levels slide quickly from fragments of evidence to moral condemnation. They aren't just misinformed. They have been trained to make the leap.

Korzybski blamed part of this jumpiness on what he called "Aristotelian evaluative habits," especially the drive to think in rigid either/or terms. Something is true or false, in or out, loyal or treasonous. Demagogues thrive in this bipolar climate. They split the world into friends and enemies, patriots and traitors, believers and heretics. Under that pressure, nuance looks like cowardice. Saying "I don't know yet" feels like betrayal. General semantics pushes in the opposite direction. It encourages people to talk about "more or less," "so far as we know," "in these conditions," "for these purposes." Those small qualifiers don't weaken thinking. They strengthen it by keeping the map adjustable. They also allow a person to revise an opinion without humiliation, which weakens the grip of the IFD cycle.

If mental hygiene in this sense could be distilled into one word, it's *accuracy*. A general semanticist aims to have fewer and fewer misconceptions about more and more things—to let the structure of language reflect the structure of events more closely. Demagogues, by contrast, traffic in mass delusions. They depend on blurred distinctions between words and things, on uncontrolled signal reactions in which a phrase triggers anger or fear without reflection. The more people can delay those reactions, even for a moment, the less power slogans have over them. That small delay, for checking the map against the territory, is where education comes in.

In a serious classroom, the principles of general semantics translate into eminently practical exercises. Students can take a campaign speech, a viral video, or an editorial and mark each sentence as report, inference, or judgment. They can list the labels used for different groups and ask what each label highlights, what it hides, and how it nudges emotion. They can track how loaded phrases such as "law and order" and "real Americans" have been used at different times, noticing how the map keeps shifting even as the words stay the same. They can compare two news stories about the same event and ask what each one omits. None of this requires students to adopt a particular ideology. It requires them to practice more exact noticing.

Media-literacy efforts already do much of this work, with nary a mention of Korzybski. Teachers ask where a statistic came from, what it measures, and what falls outside its frame. They draw attention to images, cropping, and headline verbs. They encourage students to ask, "What would count as evidence against this claim?" That question alone forces a shift from pure judgment to testable inference. Over time, students start to feel the difference between reacting to words as if they were things and treating them as provisional tools for inquiry. They begin to recognize when language invites them to think and when it orders them to stop.

Where, then, does general semantics stand today as a discipline? As an organized movement with its own institutions and jargon, it no longer occupies the place it held in the mid-20th century. Some of its language feels dated. Some of its grander promises, including hopes to transform human conflict, have lost credibility. (IFD?) In that narrow sense, it's fair to call it passé. It's no longer a fashionable banner under which many scholars gather.

Yet the substance has outlived the label. Ideas central to general semantics have seeped into fields such as linguistics, communication studies, cognitive psychology, and critical-thinking pedagogy. When a communications course teaches that language frames perception, that metaphors guide reasoning, and that levels of abstraction matter, it's reworking old general-semantics insights in a new vocabulary. When a media-literacy program drills students in separating observation from evaluation and in recognizing spin, it's repeating Korzybski's map–territory warning. The name may have faded, but the habits are built into much of today's education about rhetoric and propaganda.

General semantics lives on as a caution and a resource. The caution is against imagining that any single method will immunize us against demagogues. There's no vaccine for IFD. The resource lies in its insistence that effective thinking about the world depends on more honest talk about the world. We can't clean up public life without cleaning up the way we use words, move from facts to inferences to judgments, respond to labels, and revise our maps when the territory refuses to cooperate. That's not a task for some bygone school of thought. It's the ongoing work of education in any society that wants citizens rather than a mob. ●

BY A. M. JUSTER



Happy Warrior

Where Is It Now, the Glory and the Dream?

I **feel blessed** to have lived in a golden era of poetry. My mother read poetry to me, mostly A. A. Milne and Dr. Seuss, in our yard. All my elementary school teachers taught poetry, and my third- and fifth-grade teachers assigned poetry writing. My third-grade poem appeared in the local newspaper—an ode to Arbor Day that is, fortunately, lost to posterity.

The great Anglo-American poets T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden were alive, as was the Harlem Renaissance's great poet, Langston Hughes; the deaths of Robert Frost and Sylvia Plath were recent. Poets invested in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and E. A. Robinson were coming into their own, including Richard Wilbur, Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Poets in the free verse tradition of Walt Whitman, such as Allen Ginsberg and Anne Sexton, were attracting large audiences. Each Sunday the *New York Times Book Review* came alive with debates over the merits of these poets.

Some were pop celebrities; light-verse poet Ogden Nash was a game show panelist, and Dante translator John Ciardi made two appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Magazines often included poetry, and the so-called women's magazines, such as *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*, paid their poets well and helped to launch the literary careers of Sylvia Plath, Maxine Kumin, and Rhina Espaillat.

The American poetry world started failing in the 1970s. The first corrosive force was modernism. The same people who brought you unlistenable atonal music and Brutalism's bleak, concrete, prisonlike buildings stripped poetry of craft, music, spiritual content, and other qualities that people have always loved. The second corrosive force was the woke ideology of this century, which blesses unintelligible poems that check the politically correct boxes.

The academy's flight from traditional prosody and craft expanded its influence and improved its finances; the number of creative-writing programs increased from about 15 in 1965 to over 250 today. During the boom years, these master of fine arts programs operated like a Ponzi scheme; recent graduates often could find work teaching in new MFA programs. Today, MFA students learn what the poetry establishment vaguely wants to see, obtain a credential that might slip them past a screener on the way to publication in a little-read literary journal, and gain a few helpful contacts in a stunningly inbred culture—not much value for two years of tuition.

Surprisingly, huge amounts of money have solidified this literary establishment that produces reams of unreadable politicized poetry, praise for which is surely cynical and self-serving. A $200 million bequest from the philanthropist Ruth Lilly eventually stimulated a nasty woke takeover of *Poetry* magazine, founded in 1912 and long regarded as one of the most coveted places to publish, and its influential Poetry Foundation. Moreover, *The Atlantic* recently documented how Elizabeth Alexander, the Obama-inauguration poet, has channeled huge sums from the $8 billion Mellon Foundation endowment into "social justice" in the humanities. Almost all of the past century's greatest poetry would flunk the Mellon Foundation's social justice standard.

Academics have also smothered the few initiatives within the academy that support traditional poetic techniques. Pennsylvania's West Chester University for many years sponsored a conference on formal and narrative poetry. This Woodstock of New Formalism became the country's largest conference dedicated solely to poetry. Shortly after one of the co-founders retired, the university transformed it into exactly the sort of conference its English department always wanted: laden with identity politics and stripped of rhythm, rhyme, and poetry that could move a broad audience. Almost no one came, so WCU shut it down.

Unfortunately, few academic institutions would support a poetry counterrevolution. Houston's University of St. Thomas has a terrific MFA program that stresses prosody and Great Books, but the numbers make working within higher education a doomed crusade.

Progress must come from outside academia, so here's a start: (1) Demand accessible poetry in newspapers, magazines, and journals. (2) Since our thin-skinned literary establishment kills off poetry criticism, build more online venues devoted to it. (3) Excite the public with more social media recitations of the great works of our greatest poets.

Let's hope it is not too late for American poetry. ●

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