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THE NEW REPUBLIC

April 2024

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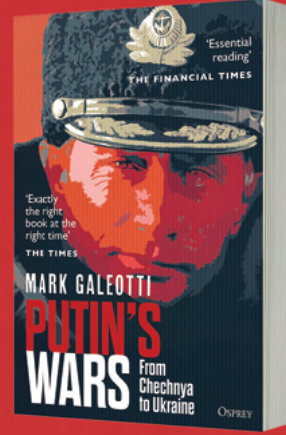
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Features

- 10 Trump's Cabinet of Horrors** Alexander Nazaryan
Team Trump is doing something this time around that it didn't think to do back in 2016: It's planning. And wait until you see what those plans include.
- 18 If Trump and His Heroes Ruled the World** Jordan Michael Smith
So long, Sunak, Macron, Trudeau. Hello, Vlad, Viktor, and Kim. What would happen to the United States, and the world, if Donald Trump made it back to the Oval Office? The "leader of the free world" would become a fanboy follower in the unfree one.
- 26 The Global Cost of the American Anti-Abortion Movement** Jodi Enda
Conservatives have not limited their attack on reproductive rights to the United States. They've been busy imposing their will on other countries, too—with disastrous consequences for millions of poor women.
- 34 Has Zionism Lost the Argument?** Aaron Gell
American Jews' long-standing consensus about Israel has fractured. There may be no going back.



26 The Global Cost of the American Anti-Abortion Movement

- 4 **Don't Panic!**
Democrats are freaking out about a Biden-Trump rematch. It's far too early to start worrying.
Walter Shapiro
- 6 **Blood and Thunder**
Why the UFC has become a centerpiece of Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign
Sam Eagan
- 8 **Going to the Mattresses**
An eccentric right-wing furniture magnate's quest to take over Texas politics
Sam Russek

Books & the Arts

SPRING BOOKS ISSUE

- 46 **Death by Algorithm**
Has tech plunged culture into an era of repetition and stagnation?
Aaron Timms
- 51 **In the Beginning**
Marilynne Robinson treats Genesis like a perfectly plotted historical novel.
Briallen Hopper
- 54 **Breaking Free**
Frantz Fanon's vision of liberation was forged in a life of serial reinvention.
Erik Linstrum
- 58 **Playing Changes**
Percival Everett's droll, laconic, uncategorizable fictions
Gene Seymour
- 62 **Faith No More**
Former evangelicals are growing in number. But are they a movement?
Sarah Jones
- 66 **Brand Collaboration**
The New Look wrestles with Coco Chanel's work for the Nazis.
Phillip Maciak

Poetry

- 57 *However Cool*
Rachel Hadas
- 60 *In the Tongue I Was Born Into*
Avia Tadmor
- 65 *Hide and Seek*
Daniel Halpern

Res Publica

- 68 **Drums Along the Potomac**
Should the left arm itself?
Win McCormack



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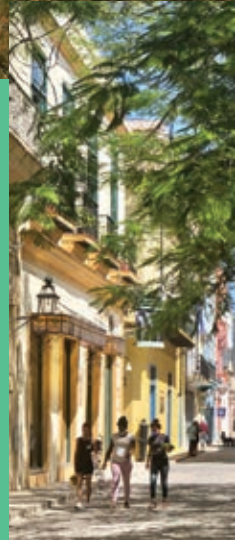
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STATE OF THE NATION



Don't Panic!

Democrats are freaking out about a Biden-Trump rematch. It's far too early to start worrying.

By Walter Shapiro

THIS IS SHAPING up as a presidential election designed to Donald Rumsfeld's specifications. At a 2002 press conference during the run-up to the disastrous Iraq War, George W. Bush's hawkish defense secretary began talking about "known unknowns," which he defined as things "we know ... we do not know."

In an election that offers the first rematch between an incumbent president and his predecessor since 1912, the campaign tactics and TV advertising blitz by both sides are likely to be dwarfed by a version of Rumsfeld's "known unknowns." These are the hard-to-handicap external events that could shape voting behavior and turnout. Examples: Will Donald Trump be wearing an ankle bracelet as a convicted felon on Election Day? What are voter perceptions in October and

November about the state of the economy and conditions on the border with Mexico? Will there be a cease-fire in Gaza or a wider war in the Middle East? And, perhaps crucially, what are the prevailing media narratives about the health and mental acuity of both Trump and Joe Biden?

It is not normally like this. Virtually all presidential elections involve a challenger who must be introduced to the wider public after prevailing in the primaries. But not

THE SCREAM: EDVARD MUNCH, MIXED MEDIA PAINTING, 1893/ALAMY

in 2024. The familiarity of the candidates (despite Donald Trump's ability to find new ways to signal his contempt for everything from NATO to democracy) offers the campaigns little latitude to define themselves. As a result, external events will loom so large and political gamesmanship will seem so small until the conventions—and maybe until the fall.

Ever since *The Making of the President 1960* dramatized the behind-the-scenes machinations of John Kennedy's successful presidential bid, Americans who care about politics have been caught up in the cult of the campaign strategist. James Carville (Bill Clinton 1992), Karl Rove (George W. Bush 2000), and David Axelrod (Barack Obama 2008) have all become familiar figures to the cognoscenti. Cable television—desperate to recapture the record ratings of the 2016 election cycle—will breathlessly chronicle every strategic move as if graduation from the Electoral College will pivot around a negative spot aired in Wisconsin in May.

But for all the media frenzy, little of this is likely to make a difference in an election defined by intense partisan certainty. The fact that the Constitution is on the line doesn't elevate the significance of the day-to-day political skirmishing, which University of New Hampshire political scientist Dante Scala likened to "trench warfare." A strong case can be made that nervous Democrats and frightened Never Trump Republicans could turn off the political news until the eve of the GOP convention in July and not miss anything. As Marquette University political scientist Julia Azari put it, "If ever there was a time for a three- or four-month presidential campaign, it would probably be now. Both candidates are known entities, and the issues are clear."

For all the glib talk of swing voters, they have become close to an endangered species. In their chronicle of the 2020 campaign, *The Bitter End*, political scientists John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck note that "about 95 percent" of Hillary Clinton and Trump voters in 2016 cast their ballots for the same party in 2020. That level of what the authors call "calcification" in political preference is unprecedented in modern history. In contrast, a little more than 80 percent of voters stayed with the same party allegiance between 2012 and 2016 presidential elections.

There is scant evidence from political science research that dive-bombing these up-for-grabs voters with TV spots in May or June has any effect other than padding the fees of

the campaign ad makers. Early indications suggest that the 2024 presidential cycle will break the record for campaign spending, topping the \$5.7 billion lavished on the 2020 presidential race. With the election pivoting around maybe seven swing states, voters in places like Arizona and Michigan will be shell-shocked from the fusillade of voice-of-doom negative spots from both sides.

Trump and Biden are such shopworn figures that it is hard to imagine that any up-for-grabs voter will gravitate to his or her eventual choice with enthusiasm. Most presidential elections are a battle between the political status quo and a candidate offering hope for something different. But Azari stresses, "We're in a situation where no one can depict themselves a change candidate." So it is a choice between the stability of the Biden status quo and the vengeful clamor of a return to the Trump status quo.

A strong case can be made that nervous Democrats and frightened Never Trump Republicans could turn off the political news until the eve of the GOP convention in July and not miss anything.

Democrats are back in their familiar state of fending off panic attacks as they read the polls showing waning support for Biden among Black, Hispanic, and younger voters. Some of the problem may be insoluble, as historically about half of eligible voters under 30 sit out presidential elections. "Turnout is a hard thing to move," said Christina Wolbrecht, a political science professor at Notre Dame. "And the things that drive it are things like enthusiasm for the candidates." That is not a plausible outcome with Biden and Trump on the ballot.

More encouraging for the Democrats is the reality that most apathetic voters eventually come home. Sides, who teaches at Vanderbilt University, explained, based on political science research, that "Democrats who are not enthusiastic about Biden will become more enthusiastic as time goes on. That's a very conventional finding." The key moment, if tradition holds, will be the Democratic convention in Chicago at the end of August, which will serve as a four-day informational ad for Biden. In similar fashion, the Republican convention in July is likely to

be the moment that reconciles Nikki Haley voters with the reality that the GOP is stuck with Trump for the third time.

In the silly season of breathless late winter political coverage, a dominant topic has become whether Taylor Swift will transform the election for Biden. The right-wing megaphone has been spewing crazed conspiracy theories that Swift's globe-girdling popularity was due to the intervention of the deep state, and the Super Bowl was rigged for her love interest, Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce. In truth, there is almost no political science research to support the thesis that celebrities can change political allegiance or motivate turnout.

Wolbrecht sees in the Swifties-will-reelect-Biden mania the kind of dismissive attitudes toward women voters—portraying them as shallow and flighty—that date back to the days of the suffragist movement. "It seems

to me," she said, "that the kind of person who won't vote for Biden over Gaza won't say that on one hand there is a human rights crisis and on the other hand say there is a pop star."

With so many reporters chasing so little meaningful political news, it was not surprising that the Trump vice presidential speculation was in full flower while the ground was still hard in early February. The veepstakes is normally a June media obsession, but with the GOP race all but over following Trump's New Hampshire primary victory in January, reporters began cannibalizing future stories in their desperation to have something to write.

Particularly dubious is that the idea Trump's running mate, who will almost certainly have to demonstrate lickspittle loyalty to the Great Man, will make a difference, even in a close election. It is not in Trump's nature to pick a veep who would ever dare upstage him. Even in normal campaigns (and nothing about 2024 with Trump on the ballot is normal), the unveiling of the second banana is one of those events continually overrated by the hyperactive press corps. Political

scientists Christopher J. Devine and Kyle C. Kopko, in their 2020 book, *Do Running Mates Matter?*, conclude, “running mates have a real, but *marginal*, effect on voting behavior.” But writing about Trump tapping Mike Pence in 2016, the authors describe his selection as “exceptionally ineffective.”

Even after the conventions, it is easy to exaggerate the likely significance of campaign gambits on both sides. The fall presidential debates are often when strategists prove their mettle by concocting devastating put-downs and emotional sound bites for their candidates. But, despite popular expectations, the odds are high that there will not be any Biden-Trump debates in September and October.

Acting at Trump’s bidding, the Republican National Committee voted unanimously in early 2022 to boycott all candidate face-offs arranged by the Commission on Presidential Debates. The commission has handled the arrangements for all post-convention debates since 1988. But GOP chair Ronna McDaniel claimed that (surprise) the bipartisan commission was “biased.”

Instead of actual debates, we will most likely have an enervating debate over debates. Both candidates will purport to be eager to face off, but negotiations will probably break down over the arrangements. It is easy to envision that the Trump campaign will demand their choice of moderators, with Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Maria Bartiromo as probable impartial candidates. The Biden camp, under this scenario, would make a reasonable counterproposal, which Trump would reject, screaming that “Senile Joe” is afraid to debate. And things would unravel from there.

Back in 2002, making the dubious case that Saddam Hussein had to possess weapons of mass destruction, Rumsfeld also spoke of “unknown unknowns,” which were black-swan events that no one could anticipate. Anyone with the temerity to handicap the Biden-Trump race should remember that over the last four years the nation has endured a once-in-a-century pandemic and a mob ransacking the Capitol for the first time since the War of 1812.

Until the conventions, skittish Democrats can take comfort in a “known known.” That is, none of the spring political news (as opposed to external events) is likely to be remembered in November. So, hard as it may be emotionally, political obsessives can relax ... for the moment. **IN**

Walter Shapiro is a staff writer at The New Republic.



Donald Trump watched the flyweight title fight between Brandon Royval and Alexandre Pantoja at UFC 296 in Las Vegas last December.

Blood and Thunder

Why the UFC has become a centerpiece of Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign

By Sam Eagan

IN MID-DECEMBER, the Ultimate Fighting Championship—by its own description the world’s “leading mixed martial arts organization”—put on one of its biggest events of the year: a matchup between welterweight champion Leon Edwards and challenger Colby Covington in Las Vegas, the fight capital of the world. But the biggest stars that night weren’t in the UFC’s trademark caged ring.

As UFC president and CEO Dana White made his entrance, the crowd erupted, less for White than for his entourage: Kid Rock and Donald Trump. With “American Bad Ass” blaring in the background, UFC commentator Jon Anik crowed about Trump’s love of the UFC. The fight itself quickly became a miniature political rally. In a ringside interview after being overwhelmed in five rounds, Covington—who rarely appears in public without a MAGA hat—heaped praise on Trump.

It was, in many ways, business as usual for the UFC, which, as it has risen to prominence over the last decade, has aligned itself with the right. But Trump’s presence at the fight

indicated a deepening alliance: The UFC is now a crucial campaign stop for the former president as he aspires to win over young men—and to win the 2024 election.

Where some mainstream sports organizations have mildly supported liberal politics, the UFC is unabashedly right-wing. White was one of the earliest supporters of Trump’s 2016 campaign and even spoke at that year’s Republican National Convention. “A company usually doesn’t want to get into politics and back one guy or another—I’m like, let me tell you what ... no matter who likes it or doesn’t like it, I care,” White said when asked about his decision to speak at the convention.

In 2023 alone, the UFC hosted Trump at three separate events, and the former president also appeared on the organization’s official podcast, *UFC Unfiltered*. White has appeared on Tucker Carlson’s new streaming show, *The Tucker Carlson Interview*, and is a vocal critic of President Joe Biden. One of Trump’s top campaign aides, Steven Cheung, previously worked as a communications director with the UFC.

The UFC’s comfortable relationship with Trump goes back decades. In 2001, when the struggling organization was being lambasted

SEAN M. HAFEEY/GETTY

by politicians like John McCain, who had once called it “human cockfighting,” Trump hosted two fights at his Atlantic City casino.

“Affiliation with Trump has a way of infiltrating or taking over every aspect of a person’s public life if they remain loyal to him,” said Brian Hughes, co-director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, or PERIL, an American University think tank. “As we see the leadership of UFC [growing] much more comfortable expressing far-right politics, you’re going to see fighters who express even further-right politics.”

Conor McGregor, one of the UFC’s biggest stars, has been accused of helping incite anti-immigrant riots in Dublin, Ireland. In April 2023, veteran fighter Jorge Masvidal used part of his in-ring retirement speech to praise the former president. And in January, former middleweight champion Sean Strickland launched into an anti-LGBT tirade when a reporter asked him about previous comments on gay marriage.

The UFC has “become more openly conservative,” said Nate Quarry, a former UFC fighter. According to Quarry, the election of Trump was a turning point for the organization’s politics. “In the past, they were in the closet with their beliefs, and now Trump gives them the permission to be as rude and as big [of] assholes as they want.”

Presidents have long utilized sports to connect with their constituents and project working-class appeal. Richard Nixon emphasized his fandom of both football and baseball to seem like a regular guy. George W. Bush threw out the first pitch of the World Series after 9/11 to signify a return to normalcy. Sports leagues, however, have typically gone out of their way to keep partisan politics at arm’s length so as to appeal to as many people as possible. That has shifted somewhat in recent years, as many athletes—most notably former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick—have embraced activism as a means of drawing attention to racism, mass shootings, and other issues, leading to tepid actions from the leagues themselves. This, in turn, has generated a furious backlash on the right, where gestures like the END RACISM message featured in the end zone of February’s Super Bowl are treated as evidence that the NFL has gone “woke.”

Enter the UFC, which is betting that it can leverage right-wing politics to become a massive sports organization. Trump, meanwhile, has embraced it as an extension of his own brash and violent brand—and as a means of reaching young men.

“What the UFC promises is an athletic outlet and a league that the far right can claim as its own,” said Hughes.

Mixed martial arts have recently become a keystone of far-right-wing culture in America and around the globe, particularly in Europe. Active Clubs, neo-Nazi social clubs built around a shared passion for fascism and combat sports, have taken root in as many as 17 states. A brutal, individual sport that emphasizes domination, MMA is vulnerable to co-option by demagogues and right-wing influencers.

In just three decades, the UFC has become a global juggernaut, selling out London’s O2 arena, Madison Square Garden, and the Sydney SuperDome. Last year, the company merged with World Wrestling Entertainment—itself long affiliated with Trump—to become TKO Group Holdings.

Today the UFC has a near monopoly on the sport of MMA: More than 90 cents of every dollar spent globally on the sport is spent with the UFC. As much as the organization

The only real threat to that stranglehold is a class-action lawsuit against the UFC, set to go to federal trial in Nevada in mid-April. The suit was introduced by Quarry and a handful of other fighters a decade ago. The plaintiffs allege that the UFC uses its market dominance to squash competition and suppress the wages of its athletes. UFC fighters are paid less than 15 percent of the UFC’s total profits, whereas players in other major sporting organizations like the NFL and NBA receive closer to 50 percent. Quarry, who fought for the UFC middleweight title in 2005 and retired in 2010, made as little as \$10,000 per fight during his 10-appearance career in the UFC.

“You see fighters who are begging for bonuses, fighters that have to go on GoFundMe or Kickstarter campaigns to pay for medical emergencies, hip replacements, treatments that they’ve needed from their fighting career in MMA because there’s no protection for them whatsoever,” Quarry said.

Even with a potentially bruising anti-trust trial on the horizon, the UFC remains a

Trump has embraced the UFC not only for its mainstream appeal, but as an extension of his own brash and violent brand.

is betting on its strategic alliances with the right, it’s also betting that its market dominance means moderate or liberal viewers simply have nowhere else to turn. Unlike the NFL or NBA, which sell broadcast rights to major networks, the UFC relies almost entirely on its own production team. This complete editorial control means it can dictate the tone and style of the content produced around its roster of fighters.

“Dana White has a real stranglehold over those fighters,” Northumbria University’s Solomon Lennox, whose research is focused on the intersection of combat sports and the right wing, told *The New Republic*. “If I was a professional boxer, and I didn’t like the promotional company I was with ... I could move to another promotional company quite easily and still get potentially the same level of fights that I could get with the other ones.

“You’re either with Dana and what Dana wants, or you’re not a part of the game.... If you don’t fit the mold and you’re not willing to toe the line, there’s no place for you in UFC, and there’s no right to respond to that. You’re just not there anymore.”

tantalizing target for the Trump campaign. Relatively new, openly confrontational, countercultural, with a flair for theatrics, the UFC is a perfect avatar for the MAGA brand—and a means of putting Trump in front of a massive audience that is both overwhelmingly male and disproportionately Black and Latino, two demographics among which Trump has gained ground in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election.

It’s still not clear whether Trump’s UFC gambit will pay off for him in November. Experts, meanwhile, are torn about the long-term viability of the UFC’s approach: Some argue that its willingness to embrace the right puts a ceiling on the company’s growth. Others, like Lennox, claim that, without disrupting the UFC’s death grip on the market for MMA, the sport’s rise will continue unabated—potentially putting its distinctly right-wing slant in front of millions of new fans around the globe.

“What does Dana have to lose?” Lennox said. “There’s nothing from a business sense at the moment that suggests that it’s not going to work for him.” **TNR**

Sam Eagan is a Brooklyn-based reporter and documentary producer.

Going to the Mattresses

An eccentric, right-wing furniture magnate's quest to take over Texas politics

By Sam Russek

Illustration by Kelsey Dake

IN LATE DECEMBER, I drove to Club Westside, a 17-odd-acre athletic facility in west Houston, to see the giraffes. I grew up coming here with family friends who were members back when it was mostly just tennis courts. Today, the club has expanded its offerings, including a lazy river and water park, a gym, an indoor driving range, a solid maple basketball court, saunas, steam rooms, something called “HydroMassage beds,” pickleball, a tiki bar, and—the main attraction—a collection of more than 40 exotic animals.

This club is a lesser-known endeavor of one prominent local family, the McIngvaes, founding owners of the regional retail chain Gallery Furniture. The family’s 73-year-old patriarch, James McIngvale, is better known as “Mattress Mack,” the Crazy Eddie-style persona he’s donned for local TV ads since 1983. His wife, Linda, is the animal lover: In 2021, when a Bengal tiger escaped from a residential property, prompting a weeklong neighborhood search mission, she helped facilitate its safe transfer to authorities. (She had also previously given the rogue tiger owner a couple of her Capuchin monkeys.) Together, the McIngvaes leaped into the national spotlight in 2022, when Mack won what is believed to be the largest sports bet in history—an estimated \$75 million—after the Astros won the World Series.

Many were taken with this eccentric multimillionaire, slight yet boisterous, a seeming everyman whose existence recalled the ’80s-era Sun Belt boom. Few outlets reported that he was one of the region’s most influential right-wing figureheads. Indeed, for nearly 40 years now, Mack and Linda have been Houston royalty, less endowed than some of the oil-rich financiers who prefer to burnish their names on Houston’s museums and think tanks, but far more prominent in the public imagination. One recent mural depicts Mack next to Beyoncé, another Houston native. He claims to be one of few men to have fought both Muhammad Ali (at a promotional event)

and the WWE’s “Stone Cold” Steve Austin (for charity). After 9/11, he gifted George W. Bush an American flag-themed couch; more recently, he stocked Mar-a-Lago with mattresses at Trump’s request. He’s today’s front man for the city’s right-wing—more immediately palatable than, say, his longtime friend Senator Ted Cruz—but equally haunted by “the radical left.”

Harris County, the most populous county in Texas and home to the city of Houston, is newly solid blue, and, as such, a major battleground in the state. Leading up to the 2022 midterms, Mack appeared on local TV to talk up rising crime. He threw nearly \$900,000—his largest ever local political contribution—into an upstart campaign to unseat Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, a young Democrat who had ridden the blue wave in 2018, eking her way into the county’s most powerful office. Rather than go quietly when his chosen candidate lost in 2022, Mack bankrolled a quixotic legal battle questioning the validity of the election before backing John Whitmire, a conservative Democrat and his longtime ally, who ran a “smart on crime” campaign for mayor and won by a landslide. “My generation, the ’60s hippies, Lyndon Johnson, the Great Society, and all that, has been an abysmal failure,” Mack said on the right-wing education nonprofit PragerU’s YouTube channel last year. “So before I go out, we’re going to change it.”

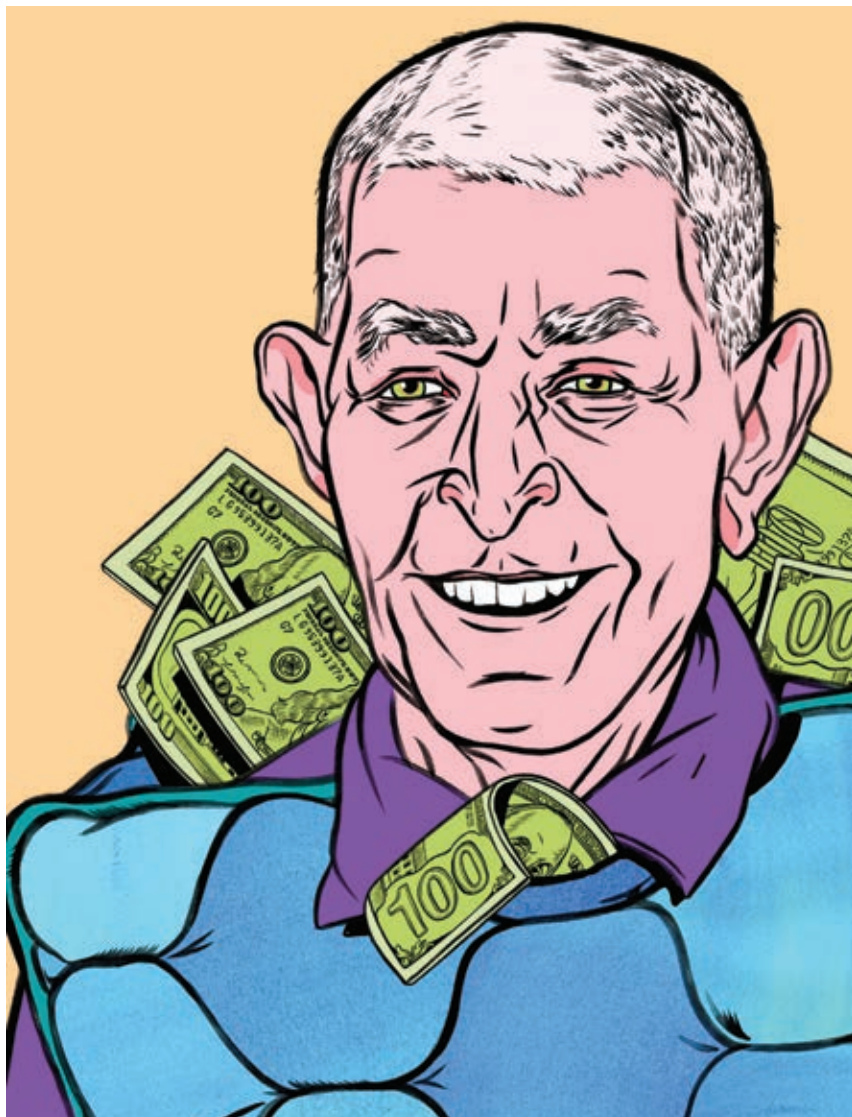
You’d be hard-pressed to find a Houstonian who won’t whisper rumors about Mack, but more publicly the ugly bits of his story are often obfuscated—or rather, drowned. The secret to Mack’s success has been his incessant barrage of advertising. “I like television to establish presence and I like radio as a device to close the sale,” he once wrote in a business memoir. (As for newsprint, he uses it to “make a lasting impression.”) “And I don’t like media where I can’t dominate.” In recent years, he’s taken the lessons he’s learned and applied them to right-wing politics.

With all the attention the Koch brothers, Harlan Crow, and oil magnates like Tim Dunn receive for their political spending, families

like the McIngvaes tend to slip through the cracks, but local fiefs like theirs have a long history of tipping the scales in the South. While not as large as their nationally focused counterparts, the firewall that they preserve comes down hard on workers’ rights and other local reforms, maintaining the unequal system they’ve benefited from the most. Mattress Mack once compared his political work to that of our country’s Founding Fathers: “Those were not just citizens, those were people who were landholders, who were all very prominent and had so much to lose,” he said. He’s fighting to keep it that way.

MACK WAS NEVER the everyman he claims to be. His father was, Mack says, an “entrepreneur/finance wizard” and philanthropist who owned and managed an insurance company. His mother came from the Alabama Shoals, where her father ran a cotton ginning company. He was born in Starkville, Mississippi, but raised in a wealthy suburb of Dallas. Shortly after Mack abandoned his studies at the University of North Texas, he expressed interest in starting a health club. In 1974, his father then purchased the rights to market Nautilus exercise machines in the Southwest for around \$210,000 (more than \$1 million today) and gave him and his five siblings a stake. With the help of his father’s contacts, Mack quickly accumulated 100,000 members in Dallas by promising steep group discounts. The only problem: Many of the discounts never materialized. Texas sued Mack for deceptive trade practices in 1978. As part of the settlement, he had to post \$40,000 in escrow to pay off former members. He declared bankruptcy and left Dallas with his wife, Linda, a former health club employee.

Deception, bankruptcy, a lawsuit—none of it mattered. During Houston’s oil boom in the 1980s, he sold “aspirational furniture,” to borrow from *Texas Monthly*’s Mimi Swartz, “furniture for all the blue-collar workers who made Houston what it was.” Mack regularly inflated his sales figures by 10 percent or so to the trade press; he insists he took \$5,000 and produced \$1 million in the first year. In less than a decade, he created and ran two large companies with his family’s help, bouncing from bankruptcy to unimaginable wealth in a matter of years. But it’s exceedingly unremarkable for a child of a wealthy



magnate to become one. Mack's story was hardly inspirational on its own, so he started spending big to gain the public's attention—and sympathy.

Mack first learned this lesson thanks to a court order. In 1988, after a 300-pound (but still malnourished) lion on one of Mack's subsidiary properties mauled an eight-year-old girl, fracturing her skull, a judge ordered a series of public service ads. If this was meant to draw penance, it backfired. Through these ads, Mack was able to cultivate a "good-guy image," per *Forbes*, and his annual sales rose nearly 70 percent in two and a half years. There were obvious benefits to maintaining this new persona. "Once you start spending advertising money, you can never spend enough," he once wrote. "There is no reservoir of public goodwill that maintains itself when you are not there in front of them."

Over and over, Mack spent big in charity auctions, gave away furniture and food,

and rushed with supplies into communities ravaged by hurricanes. These charitable gestures created their own local news cycles, what Mack has termed "accidental marketing."

For decades, Mack has been one step ahead of bad press, using his vast wealth to his own benefit and occasionally helping others along the way. But these efforts ring hollow when their ancillary benefits are taken into account. They're part of Mack's larger marketing apparatus and feel especially hypocritical, given his political spending on politicians hell-bent on punishing the poor. Nor does this charity extend to his employees, whom he once compared to "starving refugees" because they hid food in little corners of the store to eat in rare free moments. He once fired 20 percent of his workforce just before Christmas for flunking drug tests, and in 1990 he was sued for overseeing a hostile work environment, where at least one woman

claimed she faced sexual harassment. In another lawsuit, one former employee alleged he was fired for testifying on behalf of his wife, who faced sexual harassment. The lawyer who represented Gallery Furniture is today's mayor of Houston, John Whitmire.

ASMACK'S PROFILE within Houston grew, so did his political ambitions. He began calling himself a "capitalist with a minor in social work." In the 2010s, Mack fell in with the Tea Party movement, appearing to speak alongside Andrew Breitbart and Laura Ingraham to decry "handouts" from the Obama administration. A flashing marquee in his flagship channels Ayn Rand, reading: WE NEED FREEDOM TO SHAPE OUR FUTURE.... WE NEED PROFIT TO REMAIN FREE! More recently, in a belligerent ad targeting his current foe, Judge Hidalgo, Mack declared he had a "humanitarian legacy rivaled by none," which "won the hearts and minds of millions." He called Hidalgo "Biden-esque" (derogatory) and lambasted her "penchant for social justice and equity"—all because she referred to him as a "furniture salesman" in her victory speech.

Mack's political spending is part of an effort to prove he's more than that. In 2019, on a local right-wing radio station, Mack said he was "more interested in legacy now than" he was at age 20, which might explain his increased interest in local politics, where he can have the greatest impact. People will remember his unconventional ads, at least for a time. The politicians he bankrolled would sing his praises, too, until they've found a new financial backer. Mack's growing political influence is a tale as old as time: a rich man trying to shape a world that will live on without him.

But morbidly, as I strolled through Club Westside, I wondered who would inherit the giraffes when he's gone—his wife? One of his children? And those people who relied on his flashy charitable gifts—who would help them then? When the next hurricane inevitably hits, whose store will people sleep in? Why does it have to be a store, anyway? (I didn't, at this moment, remember that a Texas Republican had run the state agency that denied \$1 billion in flood relief to the city.) Houston was built on a swamp; it wouldn't be the first time that someone's little fiefdom sank, disappeared, became the stuff of memory. As Mack well knows, without constant preening, a popular image can only last so long. **IN**

Sam Russek is a reporter-researcher at The New Republic.



Team Trump is doing something this time around that it didn't think to do back in 2016: It's planning. And wait until you see what those plans include.

TRUMP'S CABINET OF HORRORS

BY ALEXANDER NAZARYAN

CHRISTOPHER RUFO, THE U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, watched the hearing with delight. It was early November 2025, almost exactly a year since Donald Trump had won his second term to the White House. Already, the nation had changed under his watch, with today's hearing on educational indoctrination only the latest evidence of the transformation at work.

Michelle Obama had not been president of Harvard University for six months, and if this grilling before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions stayed on track (and it would, because the staff of each Republican senator on the

committee had been coached by White House director of legislative affairs Madison Cawthorn on which questions to ask, when, and how; the afternoon producers on Fox News had been similarly prepped), she was going to make her predecessor Claudine Gay look like a long-termer.

It was delicious stuff, watching the former first lady squirm. Having already landed a couple of haymakers during the first round of questioning, the committee's chairman, Ohio Republican Senator J.D. Vance—President Trump's favorite bulldog on Capitol Hill and already a 2028 presidential favorite—was now launching

Illustration by Victor Juhasz

a stemwinder about “rooting out the cancer of wokeness.” Fox News turned its camera on Michelle, who looked as if she might kill Vance—or, if this continued, herself.

Secretary Rufo muted the television and rose. He was still getting used to his office, a plain room in a concrete building on Maryland Avenue, nothing like the sumptuous quarters overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue that Attorney General Laura Ingraham crowed about every time he saw her in one of the Old Ebbitt Grill back rooms, drinking what she claimed was a club soda, gossiping with special assistant to the president Chaya Raichik—better known as Libs of TikTok—about the latest West Wing intrigue. She really needed to get her ass in gear, Rufo thought. There was no time to waste. President Trump’s second term was flying by, and even if he managed to extend that term by a year or two—White House counsel Kimberly Guilfoyle was just polishing up her memorandum on how to postpone the 2028 election—there was too much work left for foot-dragging.

There was a noise on the street below. He went over to the window, chuckling as he remembered that today was the Federal Workers Fight Back march. Hundreds of dismissed government employees were marching down Maryland Avenue. The demonstration was supposed to shut down Washington but had only managed to snarl the district’s traffic, which had gotten worse since Trump’s Office of Management and Budget mandated a nonnegotiable five-day return to office for all federal employees, federal contractors, and any corporation employing more than 10 individuals that either had or intended to have any business with the U.S. government, which is to say pretty much every corporation in the United States.

In truth, those who still had a cubicle to return to could count themselves lucky. After his inaugural procession down Pennsylvania Avenue, Trump settled back into the Oval Office as if he had never left. This time, he knew what to do, and how to do it. His first order of business had been to sign an executive order, prepared by special assistant to the president Stephen Miller, that called for Immigration and Customs Enforcement to start rounding up undocumented immigrants already in the United States. After that, Trump had signed an executive order implementing Schedule F, which reclassified federal employees in a way that made it much easier to fire them and appoint political loyalists in their stead. With the stroke of a pen, the bloated administrative Leviathan had been deflated, with thousands of deep state bureaucrats headed for the unemployment line.

Rufo’s phone rang. He groaned when he saw the caller’s avatar. It was Elise. Again. Boredom and ambition were making for a toxic combination in her case. Couldn’t Trump send her on a fact-finding mission to Taiwan. Or maybe Mars?

“Madame Vice President,” he said without anything that could be interpreted as enthusiasm. Vice President Elise Stefanik launched into a long complaint about U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Vivek Ramaswamy, who she thought was positioning himself for a 2028 run (like most of the more ambitious members of the Cabinet, she publicly supported Trump’s plan to delay the election while privately hoping it would be struck down by the Supreme Court). His blustery Turtle Bay speech about a preemptive strike on China had been well-received in the Pentagon, where Defense Secretary Michael Flynn was spoiling for a fight.

She hated that, of course. “It’s my fucking turn,” Stefanik spat into the phone. “That little shit can wait until 2036.” Trump

had already told her that, as his second term came to an end, he would dramatically announce that he was stepping down, having accomplished everything he had wanted to, thus giving her the power of incumbency right as the next election, whenever that would be, approached. She was going to steamroll Kamala, or Mayor Pete, or whoever the Dems dredged up, especially if the new round of individual tax cuts passed Congress next year. And House Speaker Marjorie Taylor Greene had promised that they would. After all, she had ambitions of her own.

“Of course, Madame Vice President,” Rufo said.

Harvard graduates are the worst, he thought. Yes, he had a master’s degree from the Harvard Extension School, but this was different. *He* was different. Everything was different now. This time around, Trump had restrained his own obsessions with credentials. Finally, the boss had listened to special assistant to the president Stephen K. Bannon, who argued—just as he had during the first Trump term, only more effectively this time—that Ivy Leaguers were inherently prime suspects for membership in the deep state.

With Schedule F having cleared the bureaucratic deadwood, enormous swaths of the executive branch were subject to direct appointment from the president. No more Senate hearings, no more hand-wringing over whether he could fire the Anthony Fauci of the world. Of course he could! He could now fire just about everyone, making government both smaller and more loyal to him.

And despite what the critics were saying, Kid Rock was going to do a fine job at the Department of the Interior, once he got the hang of his division. It was only a matter of time. Same with Candace Owens at the Environmental Protection Agency. Besides, everyone knew they were just there to troll the libs and distract from the real work, which was being done by anonymous functionaries selected for the administration by the Heritage Foundation: shy ideologues who dressed in muted grays and blues and lived in Leesburg and knew the rulemaking process like it was the alphabet. They were the ones who were finally doing the work of dismantling the administrative state, returning power to the

TRUMP CABINET 2.0

CHIEF OF STAFF

The gray cardinal of Trump’s first term, **Stephen Miller**

is a Trump loyalist who relishes in partisan warfare, especially when it comes to immigration. Miller has remained steadfastly with Trump since 2021, but he prefers to work in the shadows.



OTHER CANDIDATES FOR TOP WHITE HOUSE

SLOTS: **Susie Wiles**, who has been one of the top advisers to his presidential campaign; **Steve Bannon**, whose *War Room* podcast routinely takes a blowtorch to the anti-Trump wing of the GOP.

TRUMP CABINET 2.0

ATTORNEY GENERAL

In the days leading up to January 6, **Jeffrey Clark** emerged as the foremost DOJ figure to endorse Trump's conspiratorial lies about electoral fraud. His fealty to the Big Lie could earn him the coveted position at Main Justice.

OTHER CANDIDATES: **Mike Davis**, an energetic activist who loves to own the libs; George Washington University legal scholar **Jonathan Turley**, a regular purveyor of pro-Trump commentary, by far the most important quality of a potential AG. And he does a lot of Fox News.



unitary executive, just as the Founding Fathers had intended. They didn't want to own the libs; they wanted to defeat them. And all was going to plan. So much winning.

“Extraordinarily Dangerous”

A CAVEAT IS IN ORDER: *The New Republic* cannot predict the future. Thing is, we don't really have to. Trump and his associates—still-loyal veterans from the first term, Washington think-tankers, Mar-a-Lago insiders, conservative TV pundits, lawyers imbued with “America First” fervor—have been telling us for months, years even, what a second Trump term would look like. And while the above is obviously a fiction (and, admittedly, we did get a little creative there), it is not at all a fantasy, sourced from publicly available plans being drafted in Washington and South Florida right now.

“There's excitement,” one former Trump administration official told me. Loyalists from the first term who held their tongues after January 6 and turned down book deals and CNN hits will likely find themselves in high-ranking positions. Meanwhile, conservative organizations like American Moment (its mission: to “identify, educate, and credential”) are training an entire cadre of young conservatives who could fill executive branch ranks thinned by Schedule F and voluntary departures.

Allies are also assembling an army of lawyers who aren't merely conservative but actively zealous about carrying out a radical MAGA agenda. “They need much stronger attorneys who do not care about elite opinion who will fight these key cultural battles,” judicial activist Mike Davis told *The New York Times* last fall. No retiring types this time, with their worries about the Constitution and the rule of law.

Many of the groups now building out a proto-Cabinet are run by former Trump staffers who know exactly what the boss will be looking for: Johnny McEntee, who is helping lead the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025—an especially ambitious initiative that

has already published a 920-page “manual” for Trump's second term—had come to be known as “deputy president” by late 2020. At the time, the former University of Connecticut quarterback with a gambling problem was improbably helming the White House personnel office, which he used to enforce loyalty to Trump across the executive branch, to the extent that he could. Now McEntee is doing something that Trumpworld is not generally known for: preparing.

Another former Trump administration staffer expressed annoyance at what he described as “jockeying” by some figures to be included on lists of potential Cabinet members like the one published by Axios in December, lists that will likely proliferate more aggressively as the general election nears. *Vanity Fair* reported that Jared Kushner is being considered for secretary of state; shortly thereafter, another report had him vowing to avoid Washington if there was a second Trump term. *Politico*, meanwhile, puts Senator Tom Cotton and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, among others, on a list of potential Pentagon chiefs.

“Too early to talk about Cabinet,” campaign spokesman Steven Cheung told me in a text message, declining to answer any questions. The Axios list may have driven web traffic, but some reporters in Washington grumbled that it was a little slapdash. The campaign appeared annoyed, too, maintaining its uncharacteristically professional demeanor to an almost uncanny extent. “Everyone should be suspicious of what's being put out there,” the second former Trump staffer said. “The campaign team is just focusing on winning.”

“President Trump has been straightforward about his goals and objectives for second term,” Bannon told me in a text message, describing a “mass deportation effort” targeting undocumented immigrants and disengagement from Ukraine and other global hot spots. Above all, a second Trump term would most likely be shaped by Trump's personal grievances, which are manifold—the 2020 election, January 6, his handling of classified documents after his term in office ended, the perceived leniency of the Justice Department when it comes to the financial dealings of the Biden family, Hunter Biden in particular—but centered around the overwhelming conviction that the federal law enforcement apparatus has been “weaponized” against Trump, Trumpism, and its adherents. He has done nothing to hide his intentions on this front. “The Biden regime's weaponization of our system of justice is straight out of the Stalinist Russia horror show,” Trump said at a campaign rally in Texas last year.

Good-government advocates see a highly politicized Department of Justice less concerned with enforcing the law than punishing enemies. We're talking the kind of stuff that would make Tricky Dick look like Honest Abe: nakedly political prosecutions, the full power of federal law enforcement crashing down on critics, the Bidens and Clintons above all. Liberals could well end up pining for the day when Jeff Sessions was the attorney general if either an election-denying lickspittle like Jeffrey Clark or an ideological firebrand like Mike Davis is in charge at Main Justice. “It would be extraordinarily dangerous and would undermine our democracy and our society,” said Max Stier, president of the nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service.

There are other risks in other departments. Rules may be less sexy than laws, but most of the federal bureaucracy thrives on the former. Rulemaking, on some basic level, is what government is all about. In a second Trump term, there will be a lot fewer of them—except in culture war hot spots, where rules will

TRUMP CABINET 2.0

CIA DIRECTOR

Speculation abounds that Trump will nominate **Kash Patel**, a former staffer for MAGA stalwart Devin Nunes, ex-U.S. representative from California. After mounting a defense of the then-president during the investigation into Russian electoral interference, Patel rose quickly through the national security establishment.



OTHER CANDIDATES: **John Ratcliffe**, who served as Trump's intelligence director—and who appeared to earn the position solely on the basis of political loyalty; **Darren J. Beattie**, one of the most zealously deranged promulgators of conspiracies about the deep state and other forms of Trumpist paranoia.

proliferate. And they will be implemented by Cabinet members far more capable than the first term's gang of misfits.

The First Term: Wait, We Won?

IN 2019, I WROTE a book, *The Best People*, about Trump's Cabinet: the people, what they did, what they wrecked, and, in many cases, what brought them down. The title was on the ironic side. When I interviewed Trump in the Oval Office, he needed an assistant to bring him a sheet with their names and accomplishments. hilariously, she inadvertently brought out a letter from Kim Jong Un, which Trump was probably not supposed to show me but, of course, very proudly did. Then the right papers materialized, and Trump mumbled through some names that did not seem entirely familiar, before turning to the topic of Jussie Smollett, the actor who'd faked a hate-crime attack against himself in Chicago.

You can't blame the big fella for having been less than impressed with figures like Health Secretary Tom Price or Veterans Affairs chief David Shulkin, both of whom, because of ethical scandals, had resigned by the time Trump and I spoke. It was never supposed to be an administration of Prices or Shulkins. But just who was supposed to serve Trump? That, they never quite figured out.

Few of the executive branch chiefs turned out to be the relentlessly capable, religiously dedicated populists envisioned by the likes of Bannon, the chief architect of Trump's 2016 win who was himself out of the administration by mid-2017. Instead, there were opportunistic oddballs like Environmental Protection Agency administrator Scott Pruitt, who did the Lord's work in feeding Washington's rumor mill on a near-daily basis; sycophants like Steven Mnuchin, the treasury secretary, and people who should never have been anywhere near a federal department in the first place. By the time genuinely competent, or at least outwardly

professional, figures like Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, budget director Russell Vought, and Health Secretary Alex Azar actually began to wield influence, it was too late to right the floundering ship that was the Trump presidency.

The disorder that would plague Washington for four unrelenting years originated in part during those delirious late-night hours of November 8, 2016. "They had no transition plan," said Republican operative Colin Reed. The presidential transition was nominally run by former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, but he had lost favor by joining in the criticism of Trump after the *Access Hollywood* recording was released in October (at least that is Bannon's version of events; Christie, naturally, disputes it). They had no plan because they figured there was nothing to plan for. Why plan for the demise of a glorious spectacle, a lark that had gone on for far too long? Then, the numbers from Michigan and Wisconsin started to come in.... *Oh shit, oh shit, oh fuck. FUCK.* "We were not jubilant," Bannon later told me. In his penthouse apartment, Trump was beginning to realize the significance of the moment, Bannon recalled. "It was like, 'This is real now.'"

The transition included a frenetic series of interviews in Trump Tower. Kanye West arrived to discuss "multicultural issues." Barry Switzer, the former Dallas Cowboys coach, showed up, though it wasn't clear if he and Trump actually had a face-to-face. Seeming to grasp and play into the surreal essence of the moment, he said he was going to serve as Trump's "secretary of offense," which was a funny enough quip but didn't answer the question of what, exactly, ol' Gunsmoke was doing in New York, and what role he had to play in the transfer of presidential power (the ultimate answer, thankfully: none). Also came Al Gore, the former vice president, who said he and the president-elect had "an extremely interesting conversation." No doubt they did.

With thousands of political appointments to fill, Trump's transition team needed all the help it could get. Many of the same establishment conservatives who had been denouncing Trump weeks, or even days, earlier, now saw an opportunity for immense advancement.

The executive branch—including the West Wing itself, as memorably captured in Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury*—played host to factional warfare between MAGA janissaries entirely unsuited to government work (see: Gorka, Sebastian), Republican National Committee functionaries who loathed Trump but pretended for now not to, Heritage Foundation wonks who had a mission to accomplish and didn't especially care about Trump's latest social media feud with a C-list celebrity. "Every day was a knife fight," Bannon remembered.

This time around, Trump and the establishment Republicans who find themselves beholden to him once again are determined not to repeat that mistake.

The Second Term: Experience Counts

REMEMBER WHEN Florida Governor Ron DeSantis was leading Trump in the Iowa polls? Shortly after his smashing reelection victory in 2022, a poll commissioned by the Club for Growth found the blustery young Floridian beating Trump by 11 points in the key battleground state of Iowa.

Trump left Iowa with the largest margin of victory in caucus history. Yes, DeSantis turned out to be one of the most incompetent

JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY

Allies are assembling an army of lawyers who aren't merely conservative but actively zealous about carrying out a radical MAGA agenda. "They need much stronger attorneys, who do not care about elite opinion, who will fight these key cultural battles," said one Trumpist. No retiring types this time, with their worries about the Constitution and the rule of law.

major political candidates in recent memory. But there was another, arguably more important component to Trump's astonishing win, one that gives clues to what his second term might look like: organization. Several days before the caucus, political scientist Barbara A. Trish, of Iowa's prestigious Grinnell College, observed that Trump's operation was nothing like the one she had witnessed in 2016, when he came in second to Senator Ted Cruz of Texas.

"Trump's caucus events are different," she wrote, describing a concerted effort to register prospective voters, explain caucus rules, and train caucus captains who would be deployed on Election Day to make the final push. Trish saw "some deeper meaning in the former president signing off on an effort to build an organization," a sign of things to come. "And it just might give Democrats even more cause for concern," she wrote. "A second term might be fueled with a little more political know-how to advance the Trump agenda."

The 2024 Trump campaign is hardly the freewheeling 2016 shit show that burned through campaign managers and moved with as much intention as a caffeinated hamster. This time, led by Chris LaCivita and Susie Wiles from South Florida, the campaign has been ruthlessly organized. "These are professional operators.

They run a tight ship," said Reed, who worked on a political action group that supported Christie in the 2024 primary cycle. Just like Grinnell professor Trish, Reed believes that if Trump wins, his presidency will mirror the professionalism of the winning campaign.

That is precisely what worries progressives. The one consolation of the first Trump term was that it was chaotic, farcical, and incompetent. To be sure, there was a lot of harm done, a lot of malice injected into the body politic. But it could have been much worse. This time, Reed said of Trump, "he'll have nothing holding him back."

The ambitions of a second Trump term are clearly, thoroughly outlined in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, a 920-page book published by the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. It's a hell of a playbook, one that should thrill conservatives and terrify liberals. It suggests a more focused, intentional Trump administration 2.0, one that realizes it has little time to waste if it wants to undo what it sees as the damaging developments—cultural, economic, diplomatic—of Biden's four years in office.

Each section of the book is concerned with a different department or branch of the federal government: the intelligence community, the Department of Education, et cetera. Together, the dozens of contributors who collaborated on *Mandate* have created something between a do-over and a wish list—right-wing fan fiction that could turn out to be all too real. Authors and advisers include familiar names like anti-voting rights activist Hans von Spakovsky; abortion foe Roger Severino; economists like supply-sider Stephen Moore and China hawk Peter Navarro; the nativist Ken Cuccinelli, who headed the Department of Homeland Security in an acting capacity; Trump's deputy chief of staff Rick Dearborn; and Gene Hamilton, who worked on the Trump administration's policy of separating migrants from their children at the border.

Mandate calls for pornography to be banned and deems the *Dobbs* decision, which nullified the federal protection for abortion rights guaranteed by *Roe v. Wade*, "just the beginning." The Transportation Security Administration would be privatized; transgender service members would be kicked out of the military; the current administration's "climate fanaticism" would be rolled back (a top priority of the right's energy revanchists); and National Public Radio, that dastardly purveyor of "leftist opinion," would lose its funding.

Heritage and its Project 2025 have a rival in the America First Policy Institute, another Washington think tank whose staff and board include former Trump staffers and surrogates. AFPI wants to give parents more say in secondary education, as DeSantis has done in Florida, empowering extremist groups like Moms for Liberty;

TRUMP CABINET 2.0

SECRETARY OF STATE

Don't laugh. Puke, maybe, but don't laugh. **Tucker Carlson** is apparently in the running. He represents pretty much everything Trump could want in his top diplomat: nationalism, protectionism, disdain for the international order. His interview with Vladimir Putin in Moscow demonstrates his immense cultural reach and influence. And he's good at doing television, and nothing could be more important to Trump.

IF HE GOES MORE CONVENTIONAL, Arkansas Senator **Tom Cotton**—fiery, intelligent—could be a contender.



Yes, he would serve in a second Trump administration either as education secretary or in another capacity, Christopher Rufo told me, though he said such conversations have not taken place. Still, Rufo is close enough to education policymakers in Trump's circle to have a good sense of what they intend to do should they come to power again.

increase oil and gas drilling; implement voter identification laws and take other steps that would make it more difficult for certain Americans to vote; and give gun owners “concealed carry reciprocity across all 50 states,” thus effectively invalidating state and local restrictions put in place mostly by Democrats.

These proposals have all been part of the conservative mantra for years. What’s striking about them is the work AFPI and Heritage and other institutions have done in systematizing their plans, preparing both people and policies for January 20, 2025, when they hope to see Trump back at the U.S. Capitol, his hand once more on the Lincoln Bible.

This time around, there won’t be any clueless wandering around the West Wing, searching for light switches, wondering where to get a midnight snack. It’s now or never. Move fast and break things, as the techies say. MAGA has its sledgehammers ready.

A Second-Term Bestiary

IT WAS AN AXIOM OF the Reagan years that “personnel is policy.” The best playbook won’t matter much if your quarterback can’t throw and your wide receiver can’t catch. To execute the ambitious plans outlined in *Mandate for Leadership*, Trump will need a cadre of highly capable, unimpeachably loyal functionaries. “He doesn’t want anybody in there with their own ideas. He just wants people who are going to do what he asks,” said Pat Dennis, president of Democratic research firm American Bridge 21st Century. “Authoritarians do not simply rule by diktat. They have people whom they need to maintain in their circle, and they do that by providing the spoils of government.”

Every executive branch department is a complex interplay among career public servants, midlevel political appointees, and the Cabinet secretaries themselves. There are 2.9 million federal employees, and the president has more than 4,000 political appointments at his discretion. Schedule F would make another 50,000 government workers subject to political whims.

How each of those factions wields power, and how those factions either join forces or clash is impossible to predict. It’s not especially easy to manage either; all the deep state fulmination from Bannon and his ilk was less an explanation than an excuse. The federal bureaucracy got the best of them, and they knew it.

“One has to wonder whether people in the Department of Justice or the military are really going to be willing to do Trump’s bidding when he is demanding things that are patently outside the law,” said Michael Isikoff, an investigative reporter who co-wrote *Find Me the Votes*, a book about Trump’s attempt to subvert

TRUMP CABINET 2.0

TREASURY SECRETARY



For all his supposed populism, Trump ran the economy like a traditional Republican, cutting taxes and regulations. True, he did place new tariffs on trade, and he made none of the cuts to entitlement programs some conservatives have long yearned for. Which is all to say that his next treasury secretary should be a yes-man with few original thoughts and few convictions beyond cutting taxes. He could hardly do better than Heritage’s **Stephen Moore**.

OTHER CANDIDATES: Few people have been as thoroughly misguided in their economic forecasts as **Larry Kudlow**, which naturally makes him a front-runner for Trump 2.0 (although he has lately been praising Biden-era jobs numbers). Don’t laugh if obeisant Fox Business host **Maria Bartiromo** ends up in Alexander Hamilton’s old post either.

the 2020 election, with Daniel Klaidman (they are both former colleagues of mine at Yahoo News). “They’ve got law licenses to worry about.” Not to mention reputations. One gets the sense that, this time, book deals and MSNBC contributorships are going to be much more scarce. Between all the former Trump staffers who want nothing to do with Trump, and how many establishment figures Trump wants nothing to do with, it is not entirely clear who is going to join his second-term administration.

Bannon told me that affirming the lie that Trump won the 2020 election will be crucial for anyone hoping to fill a high-profile post. “As President Trump prizes intelligence as a key factor in making great leaders, no smart person could possibly think the Biden Regime is legitimate. Impossible,” he said in a message passed along by his longtime publicist Alexandra Preate. Bannon is not affiliated with the campaign, but a high-ranking AFPI official told me he also believes that Trump and his inner circle are aware of which potential supplicants have denounced Trump’s lies—and which ones haven’t.

ANDREW HARRER/LOOMBERG/GETTY

The prospective list put out by Axios in December was instantaneously controversial and has been debated ever since. But most everyone believes that Stephen Miller, a loyal adviser who crafted Trump's immigration policy, will return to the West Wing. He would rather wield influence in the Oval Office, insiders say, than have a spacious Cabinet secretary's office of his own.

Besides, Miller is said to be aware that he could never pass confirmation by a Senate, even one narrowly controlled by Republicans. The same problem could bedevil prospective nominees like Tucker Carlson, who Axios said was being considered for secretary of state in a second Trump term.

Another common refrain is that Kash Patel, the former staffer to Representative Devin Nunes who curried favor with Trump by stoking his conspiratorial suspicions of the Justice Department and the intelligence community, could be rewarded with the directorship of the Central Intelligence Agency, or a similarly high-profile position. Patel is on the Axios list, too.

Democratic operative Will Ragland, who works on the political arm of the Center for American Progress, shared his own mock-up of a Trump second-term Cabinet. It goes without saying that Ragland does not have close ties to the Trump campaign, exactly, but his selections struck me as persuasive all the same, imbued with an understanding of what Trump values and why. It includes the discredited former White House doctor Ronny Jackson as the health secretary, the alleged sex trafficker Representative Matt Gaetz as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, embattled Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton as the director of national intelligence, and South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem at Interior. Representative Taylor Greene will have to make do with the Small Business Administration.

One former Trump official said that there were just enough capable people to fill the top ranks of the administration. But what of the many ranks below cleared through Schedule F? "The next level of people is worrisome," he acknowledged. He hoped that Doug Burgum, the North Dakota governor who launched a long-shot, short-lived presidential bid, got something: EPA, maybe, or Energy. That would soothe his worries. A little.

Rufo, the conservative activist, was working on his farm in the Seattle area when I reached out to him. Yes, he would serve in a second Trump administration either as education secretary or in another capacity, he told me, though he said such conversations have not taken place. Still, Rufo is close enough to education policymakers in Trump's circle to have a good sense of what they intended to do should they come to power again.

"The federal government is the single largest funder and supporter of woke ideology in the world," he lamented. It was a development he hoped Trump 2.0 would undo, investigating colleges for their admissions policies and equity initiatives while scrutinizing what K-12 schools teach and assign. He thought the goal of the federal Education Department during a second Trump term should be to "put the left's ideological apparatus in crisis" by cutting off funding, launching investigations, and applying pressure, more or less as DeSantis has done in Florida.

"Governor DeSantis has demonstrated year in and year out how power works, how institutions work, how the law works," he told me approvingly, hoping for something similar during a second Trump term.

Nobody has enjoyed the speculation more than Mike Davis, a former high-ranking adviser to Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa.

TRUMP CABINET 2.0

EDUCATION SECRETARY



The most obvious candidate for this position would be the architect of the right's war on "critical race theory" and "wokeness," **Christopher Rufo**.

Trump's only hesitation might be that Rufo could get more media attention than he does.

OTHER CANDIDATES: Virginia Attorney General **Jason Miyares**, a conservative who has used his post to stake out Fox-friendly positions on cultural issues like environmental regulations and coronavirus-related mandates. Then there's Libs of TikTok founder **Chaya Raichik**, a masterful provocateur. She has no education experience, but when has experience mattered to Trump?

The young and brash judicial activist helped shepherd Brett Kavanaugh through a brutal confirmation process and has been a MAGA loyalist. For the record, Davis does not think he will be the next attorney general, but he courts speculation all the same. He says what he'd really like is to become Washington's "viceroy" once Republicans do away with the district's home rule. He laughs into the phone, a hearty cackle I've come to sort of appreciate through the years. "I'm fucking with people," he told me.

NOT EVERYONE IS ALARMED by the prospects of another four years of Trump. Reed, the Republican consultant, thinks a lot of the anxiety is being peddled by left-leaning outlets like MSNBC in a cynical if-it-bleeds-it-leads ploy, knowing that nobody gets quite as many clicks and views as Trump. "The guardrails of democracy held last time," Reed said. And he believes they will hold again.

Isikoff, the investigative reporter, agreed, arguing that even with Schedule F in place, there will be too many midlevel officials, including some political appointees, who refuse to do Trump's bidding. "You'll have paralysis in the government. People will just refuse to do his bidding. There will be mass resignation. I can foresee civil disobedience," Isikoff predicted.

But others call this a Pollyannaish outlook, especially when it comes to Trump using the federal government to punish opponents, whether it's a Department of Energy staffer with pronouns in their email signature or Hunter Biden. After all, Trump has been nothing if not clear about why he is running, and what he will do if he wins.

"It's folly not to take Trump at his word on this one," the constitutional scholar Kim Wehle told me. "In 2016, Trump did not have the list of grievances he has now. It could get very ugly—and scary." **INR**

Alexander Nazaryan writes about politics and culture.

So long, Sunak, Macron, Trudeau. Hello, Vlad, Viktor, and Kim. What would happen to the United States, and the world, if Donald Trump made it back to the Oval Office? The “leader of the free world” would become a fanboy follower in the unfree one.

IF TRUMP AND HIS HEROES RULED THE WORLD

BY JORDAN MICHAEL SMITH

Illustration by Victor Juhasz



THEY WERE VICIOUS, THEY WERE HORRIBLE, BUT THEY PUT IT DOWN WITH STRENGTH.



2024

President Donald Trump walks astride Russian leader Vladimir Putin, the man he calls “the toughest guy in the world, someone who has done tremendous things for his country.” Since making Moscow his first foreign trip soon after being reelected president in 2024, Trump has met with Putin three times in two years. Today marks the first time their meeting has occurred on Ukrainian soil, in Bakhmut, as Russian troops have overrun most of central Ukraine and are poised to conquer Kyiv in the coming days. Trump and Putin are joined by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to shake hands and celebrate the lifting of U.S. sanctions against Russia, China, North Korea, and others.

At the press conference, Trump is the first to speak. “I am honored to be with, well, they were just saying I’m the greatest president in history, I don’t know if that’s true, Lincoln was OK, but that’s what they’re saying. And these guys,” he says, gesturing to the men sitting behind him, “they’re fighting to defend our freedom and our civilization. And they’re running their countries properly, they run it strong. With crime, with terrorism, they run it strong. And we’re replacing NATO with something much better today, much tougher.”

Traditional U.S. allies are uninvited to today’s event. Relations between the United States and the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Canada are strained after Trump called them “parasite countries” and referred to their leaders as “twits.” Australia recently recalled its ambassador to Washington after Trump insulted the country again by saying it should be “obliterated” for its trade policies. After he speaks, Trump takes a question from a reporter who asks about the absence of these long-standing friendly nations. “They’re losers,” Trump says. “Today, I’m happy to be standing with the winners.”

If this scenario seems impossible should Trump get reelected in November, then you haven’t followed Trump closely enough. About 25 years before he announced his first run for the presidency, Trump gave a revealing interview with *Playboy* magazine. Alongside his standard homages to the death penalty and fabrications about donating millions of dollars to charity, he talked in the 1990 conversation about a recent trip to the Soviet Union he had undertaken. He returned unimpressed with Mikhail Gorbachev, because the Soviet leader was weak. “Not a firm enough hand,” Trump said of the humane, courageous individual who ended 70 years of dictatorship and gave Russian democracy

a precious historic opportunity. Trump reserved praise instead for the Chinese government’s massacre of students in Tiananmen Square that occurred the year earlier. “The Chinese government almost blew it,” he said. “Then they were vicious, they were horrible, but they put it down with strength. That shows you the power of strength.” For Trump, brutality has always been a sign of strength, a trait to be admired and imitated. Conversely, things like respect for the rule of law, a free press, fair elections, compromise, and cooperation—all hallmarks of the democratic process—are despised.

Trump told *Playboy* he wasn’t seeking elected office, but of course, that determination changed in 2015. In between the interview and his presidential announcement, he switched his public positions on many things: abortion, health care, which of his wives he wanted to cheat on. But in a life filled with opportunism and prevarication, Trump has remained uncharacteristically consistent through the years in one belief: his affection for tyrants.

Of course, many American leaders have cooperated with autocrats, terrorists, and dictators throughout the country’s history, and even praised individual ones. Ronald Reagan once memorably termed the contras, Nicaraguan rebels known for

kidnapping and torturing civilians, “the moral equal of our Founding Fathers.” President Joe Biden has reneged on campaign promises to loosen America’s bonds with illiberal leaders in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. But Trump is unique among presidents in expressing outright adoration for despots and authoritarians—not because they can benefit American interests despite their cruelty, but because, whatever impact they may have on American interests, these leaders have the virtue of being cruel. As Henry Hill says of the gangster Jimmy Conway in *Goodfellas*, Trump is “the kind of guy who root[s] for the bad guys in the movies.”

As president, Trump realized his ambitions to befriend tyrants, praising North Korea’s Kim Jong Un (“great strength economically”), Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (“he’s doing a very good job”), China’s Xi Jinping (“a very, very good man”), and, of course, Russia’s Vladimir Putin (“very smart”). He saved his insults for NATO and countries like Denmark. During his post-presidency, and now in his campaign to become president again this November, Trump has continued gushing about leaders who expend copious resources repressing the basic freedoms of their peoples. He has brandished their endorsements as qualifications for his

reelection. In December, Trump said of Kim Jong Un: “He’s not so fond of this [Biden] administration, but he’s fond of me.” He was implying that voters should value the exceptional level of approval that he receives from someone overseeing maybe the world’s worst totalitarian state.

To be fair, this was a rare time when Trump was not lying: Many dictators, wannabe dictators, and assorted international miscreants are indeed fond of him. Some of them simply see a kindred spirit in him, understanding that, as he has admitted several times, he would himself like to be a dictator. Other autocrats grasp that he can be manipulated to their personal benefit. Still other tyrants understand that Trump’s assault on democracy in the United States makes their lives easier by weakening the leading liberal power, a country that represents freedom to many, even as it has sometimes undermined democratic forces around the world.

America’s connection with the global cause of freedom has always been rocky, like a celebrity relationship. Soon after the American Revolution demonstrated the power of anti-colonial republicanism, the young United States made efforts to snuff out the Haitian Revolution, lest the enslaved at home get any ideas. Ever since, the United States has pinballed between serving as an example of republicanism’s possibilities at home, acting in enlightened self-interest to support liberal forces abroad, and repressing huge numbers of people everywhere; between being the “well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all,” in John Quincy Adams’s imperishable words, and being “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world,” in Martin Luther King’s.

The foremost task of U.S. strategy is to secure the American system of government and the prosperity of its people, not to promote democracy elsewhere. As the journalist Walter Lippmann put it, the job of U.S. foreign policy is to act as a “shield of the republic.” But given our nation’s immense global importance, the actions that American leaders take (or fail to take) invariably have an impact on many, perhaps most, countries around the world. “You’re not going to export democracy, but at the same time, by creating an international environment that is favorable for authoritarianism or favorable for democracy—those things matter,” said Stonehill College professor Anna Ohanyan, author of several books on the Eurasian region.

Trump’s reelection campaign occurs at a vulnerable period for the cause of liberty. For nearly two decades, more countries have become less democratic every single year. According to the nonpartisan organization Freedom House, “authoritarians have gained ground during the past 17 years of global democratic decline.” In some cases during Biden’s tenure, such as Ukraine, the United States has played a vital role in supporting democratic forces that are resisting foreign tyranny. In other places, such as Israel and Egypt, the United States has provided instrumental aid to illiberal governments. But the mixed record at least offers reasons to believe that, in a second term, Biden could be pressured to take actions that strengthen a balance of power that favors freedom.

A second Trump administration, meanwhile, would embolden czars and caesars the world over and correspondingly diminish indigenous movements and institutions advocating for human rights and freedoms. Imagining another four years of Trump, five eminent European political analysts warned in February in *Foreign Affairs* that “the greatest risk Trump poses to Europe is to its values: multilateralism, care for the environment, the rule of law, and democracy itself. Through his rhetoric, Trump degrades the worth of these principles in public opinion.” The same is true on every continent. Trump may be the first post-democracy American president.

Given all that, here is a list of 11 tyrants and where they are likely to stand on the 2024 presidential contest, according to interviews with experts:



Vladimir Putin, Russia

FOR REASONS THAT are still mysterious, Trump has uniquely exempted Russia from the lengthy roster of nations he insults and scapegoats for America’s woes, countries that include China, India, Germany, and Canada. He has lauded Putin in particular, variously calling him “a genius,” “tough,” “savvy,” and, perhaps accurately, “nicer than I am.” As president, Trump publicly certified Putin’s verbal assurances of

his innocence, elevating them above the consensus of U.S. intelligence agencies, which declared that Russia had interfered in the 2016 presidential elections. And Trump’s first instinct after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 was to laud Putin’s supposed strategic smarts in launching the misbegotten war.

Despite Trump’s personal affection and friendly rhetoric for Putin, however, his administration was hostile to Russia in many ways, imposing sweeping sanctions in 2017, leaving a nuclear arms deal, and killing hundreds of Russian mercenaries in Syria. “I don’t think those were initiated by Trump, but he appointed people who were much harder on Russia than he was and didn’t do anything in particular to prevent them going down that course,” said Thomas Graham, a Russia expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. Kremlin hopes for a pliant United States under Trump were dashed and are not likely to be rekindled, according to Graham. In addition, the Russia-U.S. relationship might be so poisoned that it would be difficult for any president to repair it in the foreseeable future, even one, like Trump, oriented toward Putin.

And yet, Trump represents the wing of the Republican Party that is furious about the United States financing Ukrainian self-defense. Congress may prevent a cutoff of aid, but, at the very least, Trump’s return to the White House would boost Russian resolve and weaken Kyiv’s morale. Putin said in 2023 that he “cannot help but feel happy” about Trump’s promises to resolve the Russo-Ukrainian war “in 24 hours” if he becomes president again. Of course, as George Orwell said, the quickest way to end a war is to lose it. Putin may be salivating at the prospect of Trump managing to convince Congress to stop funding Ukrainian resistance, or even encouraging the Russian military to steamroll into Kyiv. Trump will undermine NATO, perhaps fatally wounding the alliance that has been essential to keeping Russia close to its post-Cold War borders.

Even if Russia does not hope to control Trump, having him in the public arena guarantees one thing: chaos. That at least offers something to Putin. The Kremlin generally prefers a predictable United States. “But they think political disarray in the United States, for a short period, would certainly prevent the United States from taking any coordinated, concerted effort that would undermine Russian interests,” Graham said.



Xi Jinping, China

DURING HIS RUN for the 2016 presidential election, Trump demonized China as no other major party leader had since the 1960s. But as was the case with his Russia policy, Trump's actions in office oftentimes contradicted his words. Scott Kennedy, author of numerous reports on China at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, argues that Trump pursued three different approaches to China: a futile initial charm offensive vis-à-vis President Xi Jinping, followed by a modestly successful unilateral pressure campaign focused on the bilateral trade balance, and, lastly, a pandemic era defined by sanctions across the board simply meant to punish Beijing. "Sometimes people just sort of lump them all into one, but they were really pretty clearly demarcated over time," Kennedy said. The tough talk and trade war were significant, but Trump simultaneously kneecapped key advantages the United States had over China by injuring America's alliance system in Asia and sapping U.S. soft power. In addition, Trump's catastrophic response to Covid and his incitement of the insurrection at the Capitol in January 2021 helped Xi portray the United States as an inept, declining power.

Biden, however, has upped the focus on China without offering any of the benefits Trump provided to Xi. He has cracked down on Beijing's access to vital technologies, particularly advanced computer chips. He repeatedly pledged to support Taiwan with U.S. troops if China invaded the island. Most importantly perhaps, Biden fashioned a trilateral agreement with Japan and South Korea, coordinating a strategy to deter China.

It is unclear what a Trump second term would look like for China, except that it would probably be erratic and bombastic. "We don't know whether we'll get Trump the negotiator or Trump the hawk," as Kennedy said. He said of Trump and Xi: "I think they both believe that they can manipulate and use the other." However, Trump's unpredictability means that China's leaders may favor remaining with Biden, who,

despite implementing severe measures to contain Beijing, has also de-escalated the inflammatory rhetoric, and frequently clarified that the competition between China and the United States should not deteriorate into violence anywhere. Chinese officials know that, whatever Biden's flaws, he is the only one of the 2024 presidential candidates they can be sure *won't* start a nuclear war impulsively. Diana Fu, a China specialist at the Brookings Institution, said, "To many in and outside of China, the elections already have a predetermined outcome: The United States will continue to view China as a competitor and a threat, regardless of who is in the White House."

And yet Xi seems to understand that Trump undercuts sources of America's appeal abroad and is personally vulnerable to wild emotional swings and flattery. "If Trump is reelected and pursues American isolationism, Beijing may actually stand to gain in terms of its influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond," said Fu. Trump may accede to China annexing Taiwan and claiming the South China Sea, hoping to sign a deal he imagines will bring him greatness. Perhaps he'll praise Xi's brutality toward the Uyghurs and suggest the United States should follow suit with our Muslim population.



Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel

LONG BEFORE HE became president, Joe Biden declared himself a Zionist and close friend of Israel. And indeed, now as president, Biden has given Netanyahu and his government, the most extremist in Israeli history, virtually unconditional support in its campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. His administration has sent huge amounts of arms to Israel, protected the Jewish state from diplomatic opprobrium at the United Nations, and given even less acknowledgment to the Palestinian cause than had previous Democratic Presidents Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter. For all these reasons, Yousef Munayyer, head of the Palestine/Israel Program at the Arab Center Washington DC, said: "I don't think Trump would

have handled it much differently. But that doesn't reflect well on Biden."

Yet Israel's longest-serving prime minister would clearly prefer to see Donald Trump return to the White House. For one thing, the Biden administration has warned Israel against initiating a wider regional war and insisted that a Palestinian state must one day materialize, opposing discussions in Netanyahu's government in both cases. More grandly, Netanyahu sees a similar spirit in Trump and has long had connections to the GOP. "Netanyahu is something of a patron saint in the Republican Party," as Munayyer said. Since Trump left office, he has called Netanyahu disloyal and chided him for being unprepared for Hamas's October 7 massacre inside Israel. But, despite these comments, Trump would likely permit Israel to unleash its formidable military capabilities beyond its borders, deeper into Lebanon, Syria, and perhaps Iran. The Palestinians would suffer even more, as Israel's hard-liners would understand they can kill civilians en masse without retribution and will openly foreclose any possibility of a state for them, ever. After all, while president, Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, rejecting the consensus of other world leaders. Finally, his most intense domestic endorsements come from evangelical Christians who are supportive for religious reasons of the most extremist parties of Israel and are often hostile to Muslims, and he may seek to reward their backing.



Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt

IN 2019, President Trump was waiting for a meeting with Egypt's president. "Where's my favorite dictator?" he asked aloud. *The Wall Street Journal* suggested that, "even if lighthearted, Mr. Trump's quip drew attention to an uncomfortable facet of the U.S.-Egypt relationship." But in fact, Trump was conveying admiration, not discomfort, for el-Sisi's authoritarianism. "Egypt has made tremendous progress under a great leader's leadership," Trump said on another occasion, although, of course, no such progress had been made. This rhetoric marked

QILAI SHEN/BLOOMBERG/GETTY (XI); GALI TIBBON/AFP/GETTY (NETANYAHU); ADAM BERRY/GETTY (EL-SISI)

Imagining another four years of Trump, five eminent European political analysts warned in *Foreign Affairs* that “the greatest risk Trump poses to Europe is to its values: multilateralism, care for the environment, the rule of law, and democracy itself.” The same is true on every continent. Trump may be the first post-democracy American president.

a shift from President Barack Obama, who had condemned el-Sisi on several occasions, withholding military aid for a time after he came to power in a coup in 2011.

Despite saying there would be “no more blank checks for Trump’s ‘favorite dictator,’” Biden has done the same two-step dance as Obama, approving the sale of nearly \$200 million in missiles to Egypt while criticizing the government’s human rights record. Israel’s assault on the Gaza Strip made Egypt more important to the United States than it had been, as the country mediates between Israel and Hamas. Given this extra incentive, it is difficult to imagine Biden taking a harder line against Egypt in a second term. Still, el-Sisi would opt for Trump to become president, given their shared distaste for civil liberties and democracy. Steven Heydemann, professor of Middle East studies at Smith College, said, “What would be significant, and I think it would be something we might expect from a Trump administration, would be to signal much more vocally and much more visibly its support for Sisi personally, its support for his regime.” That could push el-Sisi to transform Egypt into something more totalitarian, ending any potential opposition or dissent from emerging.



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey

ERDOĞAN HAS OVERSEEN Turkey during its transition from a democratic-leaning state to an authoritarian, Islamist-influenced one. As president, Trump acceded to Turkish expansionism, as the country

sent proxy forces to fight in Syria, met with members of Hamas, and intervened in Libya as a way of asserting power in the region. Congress blocked arms sales to Turkey for two years, which frustrated the Trump administration. Like other unsavory characters trying to get on his good side, Erdoğan savvily played to Trump’s bottomless capacity for vanity, leading Trump to once brag that world leaders he left unnamed had asked him to try to talk to Erdoğan on their behalf, since Trump was the only person he respected. Trump once told an American whom Turkey had locked up dubiously for two years that, to him, “President Erdoğan was very good.”

As a presidential candidate in 2020, conversely, Biden called Erdoğan an autocrat (a negative designation in Biden’s lexicon, refreshingly) and urged support for domestic opposition to his regime, leading the Turkish government to say the former vice president’s notions were “based on pure ignorance, arrogance, and hypocrisy.” Since taking office, Biden has kept Erdoğan at a distance, affirming that the Ottomans carried out a genocide against the Armenians early in the twentieth century, a historical fact the Turks have long denied. Biden also conspicuously excluded Erdoğan from his ill-fated Summit for Democracy, although the president in January urged Congress to approve the sale of fighter jets to Turkey to reward the nation for agreeing to let Sweden join NATO.

Turkey’s president would love a photo op with the U.S. president to enhance his credibility as a regional leader. Asli Aydintaşbaş, visiting fellow specializing in Turkey at the Brookings Institution, said, “Erdoğan would probably rejoice at the prospect of a second Trump administration.” Firstly, by embracing the Turkish leader, Trump would enhance his domestic profile as an international mover and shaker.

“He hasn’t been able to demonstrate that to the public over the past four years, in part because Western European governments and the Biden administration have held him at arm’s length,” said Aydintaşbaş. Any concerns about Turkey’s democratic regression would be scorned by Trump, who would surely once again be vulnerable to ridiculous compliments from ill-motivated suitors. Erdoğan might also like to see Trump remove U.S. forces from Syria and Iraq and could attempt to fill the void with personnel funded by Turkey. Stonehill College professor Anna Ohanyan said “Erdoğan would benefit tremendously” from a Trump presidential revival. “He got a lot out of Trump.” Next time around, he would get even more, permitting him to unleash violence on the Kurds and end Turkey’s democratic experiment for a generation.



Viktor Orbán, Hungary

OF ALL LEADERS in the world, Hungary’s president is perhaps the most open about his preference in the 2024 election. Just as in 2016 and 2020, Orbán is loudly proclaiming his desire to see Donald Trump as U.S. commander in chief. “Trump is the man who can save the Western world,” he told media personality Tucker Carlson in August. “Call back Trump!” As a global symbol of white male grievance working in alliance with Christian conservatives, Trump naturally appeals to Hungary’s leader, whom right-wing agitator Stephen Bannon once called “Trump before Trump.” To reward Orbán’s success in undermining

Hungary's independent judiciary and liberal freedoms, Trump invited Orbán for an Oval Office visit in 2019, which he had been denied since 1998. Biden, meanwhile, left Orbán out of his Summit for Democracy, leaving Hungary as the only country from the European Union unrepresented there. That led Budapest to block the E.U.'s formal participation in the summit.

As the head of a quasi-free state that he is leading in an authoritarian direction, Orbán has long been an inspiration for American conservatives and has looked to them, in turn, for legitimacy and support. "Orbán and Trump have a bromance going on," said Kim Lane Scheppele, an expert on Hungary at Princeton University. "There are lots of people who go back and forth between that Trump orbit or Orbán orbit. So, it's not just that they're kind of blowing kisses from a distance, but that they actually have people who work together, on a daily basis."

In 2022, Trump, out of office, said he wished for Orbán to triumph in upcoming elections, calling him a "strong leader" who has "done a powerful and wonderful job in protecting Hungary, stopping illegal immigration, creating jobs, trade, and should be allowed to continue to do so." With Trump in office, Orbán will solidify the authoritarian takeover of Hungary's once-promising liberal era.



Bashar al-Assad, Syria

BASHAR AL-ASSAD, responsible for killing hundreds of thousands of citizens of his own country, had high hopes for Donald Trump when he assumed the presidency in 2017. He imagined that Trump would be a "natural ally" in the fight against terrorism and rationalized the president's Muslim travel ban as an anti-terrorism measure. And indeed, Trump reduced the presence of American troops in Syria, which no doubt met with Assad's approval. But after Assad used chemical weapons to gas more than 100 people to death, Trump ordered that 59 missiles strike Syrian airfields, mused about assassinating Assad, and implemented sanctions against his cronies.

The Biden administration had continued the hostile policy against Syria and discouraged the Arab League from bringing Damascus back into the organization (the league did so anyway). "One of the interesting features of [U.S.] Syria policy has been its continuity, I think, across administrations," said Steven Heydemann. Even so, if he has a favorite, Assad is likely eager to see Trump take the White House again, since Trump may wish to further remove American troops from the Middle East. Said Heydemann: "That would be seen as a significant win by the Assad regime, but I don't think in and of itself that is sufficient to give the Assad regime a sense that its future relationship with the United States or its broader position in terms of its pariah status in the international system might be affected by the outcome of the election this November." What Assad might get is more open support from Russia and Turkey.



Kim Jong Un, North Korea

TRUMP IN OFFICE oscillated between thoughtless threats to "totally destroy" North Korea and equally hasty maneuvers to secure some pact by being the first U.S. president to visit the isolated country, and between calling leader Kim Jong Un "a maniac" and valorizing him as "very honorable." Most bizarrely, after receiving a letter from Kim in 2019, Trump said, "We fell in love." He clearly prizes the ostentatious displays of reverence North Korea's leader receives, saying that Kim "speaks, and his people sit up at attention. I want my people to do the same." (Trump later lied and said he was being sarcastic in that comment.)

In December 2023, *Politico* reported that Trump is considering a realistic approach to North Korea in a second term. Apparently, he would offer Kim a chance to get sanctions lifted and U.S. acquiescence to North Korea's nuclear program if the dictator refrained from adding further weaponry to his arsenal. Toby Dalton, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said that it's possible Trump would go further, declaring that he was pulling U.S. troops out of South Korea and Japan,

effectively ending the alliances. Kim "could assume there could be a huge change in U.S. policy," Dalton said, something that offers both risks and rewards for North Korea.

However, Trump's ambitions might get constrained by his advisers and his administration's bureaucracy. That is essentially what occurred in his first term. Refining the details of international agreements is beyond his attention span, and his incessant need for obsequiousness means that Kim could rupture relations simply by not flattering Trump's ego sufficiently. "I'm not sure that Kim Jong Un is as fascinated with Donald Trump as the other way around," said Dalton.



Ali Khamenei, Iran

UNLIKE MANY LEADERS on this list, Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, presides over a government that is deeply divided over whether to pursue better relations with the United States under any president. That was true even when Iran signed a deal concerning its nuclear enrichment program with President Obama and its allies in 2015, as mutual suspicions going back decades between the two sides remained severe. When Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the agreement in 2018 and imposed new sanctions on Khamenei and others, he not only reneged on a deal that was deeply favorable to U.S. interests—Iran revived its nuclear program in 2020—but confirmed the sentiments of the wing in Tehran that sees Washington as implacably hostile to the Islamic Republic.

Sadly, Biden, as president, said the United States would rejoin the deal only if Iran took the first step of shuttering its nuclear enrichment program. That didn't happen, and the agreement was not revived. In January 2024, Iran-backed militias killed three U.S. service members near the Jordan-Syrian border, one of 165 attacks (as of early February) targeting American troops in the Middle East since the Israel-Hamas war began.

Even though relations between Iran and the United States are horrible, they could

SASHA MORDOVETS/GETTY (ASSAD); AFP/GETTY (KIM); IRANIAN LEADER PRESS OFFICE/ANADOLU/GETTY (KHAMENEI)

be worse, as Republican senators such as South Carolina's Lindsey Graham and Arkansas's Tom Cotton are angling for direct strikes on Tehran. As president, Trump reportedly called off an attack on Iran, but his impulsivity and need to appear tough make his future actions unpredictable, given his perennial need to appear militaristic. Barbara Slavin, an Iran specialist at the Stimson Center, said, "Hard-liners in Iran would prefer Trump, because he will drag down the U.S. reputation internationally even more and make the U.S. more isolated." Conversely, "More reform-minded Iranians would prefer Biden, who, in a second term, might be more amenable to compromise, as second-term Democratic presidents have tended to be."



Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan

AZERBAIJAN IS ONE of those countries that receive little attention in the United States because it is small and arguably peripheral to American interests but is affected by decisions taken by Washington. President Ilham Aliyev has ruled the country for more than 20 years, succeeding his father, Heydar Aliyev. The leader is allied with Turkey and Russia and menaces neighboring Armenia. The Obama administration sporadically called out Aliyev's many human rights abuses and played an important role in negotiations between Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region that has been a flashpoint for war for decades.

Trump has a long history with Azerbaijan. In 2012, his company signed deals with a notoriously corrupt family there to build a tower in Baku, the capital, possibly in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, a law prohibiting U.S. companies from benefiting from foreign corruption. A *New Yorker* report called it "Trump's worst deal." While he was president, the United States was conspicuously absent from talks that eventually led to a peace agreement concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. Trump did not even grant ambassador status to his representative in the region, signaling his administration's detachment

from the conflict. "The impact of his foreign policy in the South Caucasus, especially on Armenia and Azerbaijan, was just devastating," said Ohanyan. In September 2023, Aliyev attacked Nagorno-Karabakh again, launching an ethnic cleansing campaign, and U.S. officials have affirmed support for the region's Armenian population.

If Trump comes to power again, he may again reduce the U.S. presence in negotiations, depriving Armenia of important leverage and greenlighting Azerbaijan's takeover. Aliyev "is banking" on Trump winning, said Ohanyan, adding that his position at the negotiation table has already hardened in anticipation of Trump's return. "Aliyev would benefit tremendously if Trump was elected."



Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia

REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTS have usually been closer to Saudi Arabia than Democratic presidents, and Trump was no exception. Whereas Obama had publicly derided the Saudis and suspended some arms sales, Trump embraced them on his first foreign trip as president and resumed the weapons sales. He called them a great ally soon after the CIA concluded that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey. He vetoed congressional attempts to end support for the brutal Saudi-led war in Yemen and to halt arms sales for the war. Madawi Al-Rasheed, professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, said of the crown prince and Trump: "They share a lot in common, especially personality-wise." She added, "They get on very well, because it's transactional. They only understand power and interest and money." Trump's relationship with Saudi Arabia didn't even conclude at the end of his term: Soon after Trump left office, bin Salman rewarded his friend by investing billions of dollars in a private equity firm headed by Trump's corrupt son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

Among the most disappointing areas of U.S. foreign policy under Biden has been

Saudi Arabia. He has kept intact the desert nation as the top recipient of U.S. military equipment and flirted with offering it security guarantees. But a Trump revival would advance these deepening ties further. Saudi Arabia wouldn't have to worry about any pressure on human rights in Yemen or anywhere else. Steven Heydemann said, "Among the most influential states in the Middle East, including in the gulf, the [United Arab Emirates], Saudi Arabia, even Qatar, there seems to be a sense that it would be easier for them to work with Trump, with the Trump administration, than with the Biden administration."

DONALD TRUMP WOULD be disastrous for the cause of freedom in the United States and in the world. For one thing, the country's ability to model itself as a functioning, just democracy, always its best and most underrated asset in foreign affairs, would be weakened beyond its already dismal state. Second, Trump appeals to authoritarian populists, corrupt kleptocrats, and white nationalists in ways unlike any other American leader, and his return to the presidency would energize these villains, giving them free rein to crush dissidents, defiance, and democracy. Third, Trump would take a hammer to America's alliances with other democratic countries, weakening them individually and collectively. Finally, Trump may simply shift U.S. foreign policy in the direction of the dictators and autocrats he so admires, with little regard for American interests. In a long life of lying and larceny, Trump's valentines to strongmen and tormentors have been among his few reliable and truthful statements.

America's domestic problems are severe and numerous, and it would be understandable if voters concentrated on matters at home. But the Biden-Trump match carries high global stakes, and not only for Americans. Internationalist-minded conservatives may wish to consider the fate of freedom around the world in casting their vote. And liberals and leftists who imagine that Biden's blunders cannot be exceeded in foreign affairs, even in the Middle East, are suffering from a severe failure of imagination. As Shakespeare put it in *King Lear*, "And worse I may be yet: the worst is not so long as we can say, 'This is the worst.'" **INR**

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THE GLOBAL COST OF THE AMERICAN ANTI-ABORTION MOVEMENT

Conservatives have not limited their attack on reproductive rights to the United States.

They've been busy imposing their will on other countries, too—with disastrous consequences for millions of poor women.

By Jodi Enda

BECAUSE EDITAR OCHIENG knew the three young men, she didn't think twice when they beckoned her into a house in an isolated area near the Nairobi River. One was like a brother; the other two were her neighbors in the sprawling Kenyan slum of Kibera.

Ochieng did not know the woman who performed her abortion. She and a friend scoured Nairobi until they found her, an untrained practitioner who worked in the secrecy of her home and charged a fraction of what a medical professional would. Mostly, what Ochieng remembers is the agony when this stranger inserted something into her vagina and “pierced” her womb. “It was really very painful. Really, really, really painful,” she told me. Afterward, Ochieng said, she cut up her mattress to use in place of sanitary pads, which she could not afford. She was 16 years old.

As traumatic as her experience was, Ochieng was more fortunate than many women in Kenya, which bans most abortions. She, at least, survived.



The lobby of Tabitha Medical Clinic in Kibera, an impoverished neighborhood in Nairobi, Kenya

Like Ochieng, most Kenyan women facing unwanted pregnancies have no good choices. They live in a culture that gives women little agency over their bodies; they experience high levels of poverty—two-thirds of residents live on less than \$3.20 a day—and they must contend with conflicts between abortion laws codified in the country’s 2010 constitution and an older, harsher penal code that remains on the books. Because the penal code criminalizes abortion, relatively few women are able to obtain the procedure legally, and then only if a health professional determines that their life or health is in danger or, technically, if their pregnancy was the result of rape. That final exception dates only to 2019—13 years after Ochieng’s three acquaintances raped her—and is rarely applied.

Despite the prohibitions, more than half a million Kenyan women have abortions every year. The small percentage with means might find a trained professional willing to perform a clandestine, but safe, abortion. All too often, women gamble on risky methods reminiscent of the coat-hanger days of pre-*Roe v. Wade* America. They insert knitting needles into their vaginas and ingest dangerous chemicals, abortion rights advocates in the country say. They turn to unskilled providers, who scrape their uteruses with wires, give them concoctions intended for animals, or tell them to ingest concentrated soap, said Nelly Munyasia, executive director of Reproductive Health Network Kenya, which represents nearly 600 private health care providers. The national hospital in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital and largest city, has an entire ward dedicated primarily to women suffering from the complications of botched abortions, the advocates said. (Post-abortion care is legal.)

If they can’t access abortion, some women resort to killing healthy newborns, tossing them in rivers or poisoning them with Coca-Cola. Ochieng told me that the dead infants and aborted fetuses pulled from Kibera’s drainage systems and pit latrines were an indication of women’s desperation. “They know when you do a safe abortion, you don’t come with the fetus. You only carry your fetus because you’re doing it at the backstreet,” she said. “And it is happening because of ... the condition of the women who are living in poverty, and they don’t have an option.”

When performed properly, abortion is considered extremely safe. But nearly half—45 percent—of the 73 million abortions performed worldwide each year are unsafe, the World Health Organization reported. Others suggest the proportion is even higher; in sub-Saharan Africa, three-fourths of abortions are considered unsafe. Globally, unsafe abortions cause 39,000 maternal deaths and millions of complications a year, a preventable scourge that almost entirely afflicts women in developing countries, WHO confirmed. “There are a huge number of lives being lost,” said Elizabeth Sully, principal research scientist at the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports sexual and reproductive health and rights.

One big reason: American anti-abortion policies.

FOR HALF A CENTURY, the United States has used the power of the purse to force poorer nations to abide by the anti-abortion values of American conservatives or forgo aid for family planning and, more recently, other health care. Of the several policies adopted over the years, two have been particularly onerous, according to

several studies and more than 20 interviews with researchers and reproductive rights advocates in the United States and abroad. Touted to reduce abortions, the policies actually have driven up their numbers sharply and led to tens of thousands of unnecessary maternal deaths. “Anything that happens in the U.S. has a huge impact on the rest of the world,” said Giselle Carino, director of Fòs Feminista, an international alliance that promotes sexual and reproductive health and justice. When Washington places restrictions on abortion, “we have a lot of evidence how it hurts, particularly the women who need the most care and services.”

That anti-abortion policies would lead to more abortions seems counterintuitive, except when you consider that the organizations that perform, counsel, and educate people about abortion are often those that provide condoms, pills, IUDs, and other forms of birth control. If health care providers so much as mention abortion, they can lose money for broader health care services, including contraceptives. Fewer contraceptives equal more unwanted pregnancies. More unwanted pregnancies equal more abortions. More abortions in countries that greatly restrict them equal more unsafe abortions. And more unsafe abortions equal more maternal deaths.

The United States is not to blame for all the internal political and cultural strife in other countries. But as the largest funder of health care in the world, what it does matters. Essentially, this nation has given women around the globe no alternative but to seek backstreet abortions that send some to emergency rooms and others to their graves.

This November, Americans will vote in the biggest election since the Supreme Court, in 2022, overturned the constitutional right to abortion, giving states the authority to decide whether and when people could terminate pregnancies. Millions of women now live in states that severely restrict access or ban abortion altogether, spawning great hardships as they are compelled to travel to get abortions, forced to carry nonviable pregnancies to term, or turned away from hospitals for fear their miscarriages will be construed to be abortions. Such suffering, relatively new to young women in the United States, is commonplace in countries that must abide by the abortion restrictions Washington places on them. Commonplace there, and commonly ignored here. Candidates rarely mention how U.S. foreign policies harm women or campaign on the torment caused by Congress and presidents.

This year, one candidate is singularly responsible for imposing the tightest restrictions affecting overseas abortion access to date. His name: Donald Trump.

THE WOMEN WHO BEAR the brunt of U.S. abortion-related restrictions are predominantly Black and brown. They live, most of them, in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. They are also the people who, in the middle of the last century, U.S. policymakers were uncommonly worried about—worried not about their well-being, but about their birth rates. Indeed, the government’s current involvement in funding family planning worldwide can be traced back to midcentury consternation about how a population explosion could deplete dwindling natural resources, said Yana Rodgers, faculty director of the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University. “Family planning was seen as a method by which to limit the growth of biologically and socially inferior

Nearly half—45 percent—of the 73 million abortions performed worldwide each year are unsafe. One big reason: U.S. anti-abortion policies.

racism,” Rodgers wrote in her 2018 book, *The Global Gag Rule and Women’s Reproductive Health*.

For reasons both racist and environmental, Democrats and Republicans alike supported population control programs internationally and domestically, Rodgers wrote. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, issued a call to action. Three years later, the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, started distributing birth control in developing countries. President Richard Nixon, a Republican, and his ambassador to the United Nations, George H.W. Bush, successfully pushed to establish the U.N. Fund for Population Activities, or UNFPA, which grew to be the world’s largest provider of donated contraceptives. As a Congress member in the 1960s, Bush was such a strong advocate for birth control that his colleagues called him “Rubbers.”

Soon, however, the politics of abortion overtook the politics of population growth in the power centers of Washington. Once the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, religious conservatives pressed politicians on both sides of the aisle to limit the procedure wherever they could.

Abortion opponents in Congress could do little about the ruling on the home front, where the women’s rights movement was in full swing. But they could appease conservative activists and the Roman Catholic Church by imposing anti-abortion policies on countries that relied on the United States for family planning money. Starting in December of that year, lawmakers adopted the first of several policies that attached ever-tightening restrictions to U.S. assistance—and that, ultimately, would outlive *Roe v. Wade*.

The first strike was the Helms Amendment, which prohibits foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations from using U.S. money “as a method of family planning” or to “motivate or coerce any person to practice abortions,” even in countries where abortion is legal. The law was adopted by a bipartisan group of Congress members, as were subsequent abortion-related rules that dictate what recipients of U.S. funds can and, more often, cannot do in foreign countries. There’s even a law called the Biden Amendment, a 1981 provision that prevents foreign assistance from being used for biomedical research related to abortion or involuntary sterilization. (The president, now a supporter of abortion rights, has acknowledged that his views on the subject have shifted.)

But Congress didn’t go far enough for many on the Christian right, which emerged as a powerful force during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In 1984, during a conference on population control in Mexico, the Reagan administration announced it would double down on foreign aid restrictions. Under the Mexico City Policy, foreign organizations that accept U.S. family planning assistance cannot perform abortions, provide abortion counseling, or advocate for abortion rights—even with *non-U.S.* money.

“If they counsel on abortion, if they say the word ‘abortion,’ it’s like a trigger, a switch,” said Bethany Van Kampen Saravia, senior legal and policy adviser for Ipas, an international organization that supports access to contraception and abortion. “If you flip the switch, you lose your U.S. funds.” Detractors dubbed the policy the “global gag rule.”

Before Reagan left office, the University of Michigan School of Public Health estimated that in just three years, the Mexico City Policy resulted in 380,000 unwanted pregnancies, 311,000 births, 69,000 abortions, and 1,200 maternal deaths. Nonetheless, every Republican president since Reagan has invoked the policy. Every Democrat has rescinded it. So while the Helms Amendment is always in effect, the Mexico City Policy ping-pongs back and forth depending on which party controls the White House.

Starting with Reagan, Republican presidents also stopped paying America’s annual bill to the UNFPA, now called the U.N. Population Fund.

Even “Rubbers” went along with that.

“I’M VERY PRO-CHOICE,” Donald Trump declared on NBC’s *Meet the Press* in 1999. “I hate the concept of abortion. I hate it. I hate everything it stands for. I cringe when I listen to people debating the subject. But you still—I just believe in choice.” That was not a winning position in a Republican Party that had been shifting rightward since the election of 1980, when the Reverend Jerry Falwell and his newly minted Moral Majority helped propel Reagan to victory. And it was not the stance Trump took when he sought the party’s presidential nomination in 2016. Instead, he aggressively courted religious conservatives, first pledging to nominate Supreme Court justices who opposed abortion rights, then suggesting they would “automatically” overturn *Roe*—which they ultimately did. What’s more, Trump—a coarse, thrice-married TV celebrity who was not conversant with the language of the church—chose as his running mate Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian with strong ties to the political right and an unyielding position on abortion. As a Congress member, Pence threatened to shut down the government if it didn’t defund Planned Parenthood; as Indiana’s governor, he signed what at the time was one of the strictest anti-abortion laws in the country.

Three days after his inauguration in 2017, Trump reinstated the Mexico City Policy, which had been rescinded by Barack Obama. That wasn’t all. With Pence’s help, Trump greatly expanded the policy’s reach and renamed it Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance. Rather than impose constraints solely on family planning money, as Reagan and both Bushes had done, Trump



A doctor specializing in reproductive health attends a patient at a clinic in Nairobi's Kayole neighborhood. The clinic provides services to victims of sexual violence.

applied them to all U.S. global health care assistance. Instead of affecting \$560 million in aid, the abortion restrictions now would apply to about \$12 billion in fiscal 2018 alone, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported. About two-thirds of that money went to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, America's largest and perhaps most successful foreign health program. The bipartisan program, known as PEPFAR, is widely considered to be one of George W. Bush's greatest legacies.

Trump didn't stop there: He extended the restrictions to sub-contractors of organizations receiving U.S. aid. In 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the Trump administration would prohibit contractors from paying any money (including their own) to subcontractors that provided abortion-related services—even if what they were paying for had nothing to do with abortion. "There's this notion that if you take U.S. money, you have to abide by the rules. This is different," said Bergen Cooper, chief operating officer of the Torchlight Collective, an international human rights consulting group that opposes the restrictions. "This is if you *don't* take U.S. money"—but contract with an organization that does—"you have to abide."

Never was the fallout so severe. Between 2017 and 2021, Trump's expanded restrictions "resulted in approximately 108,000 maternal and child deaths and 360,000 new HIV infections," according to estimates of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Trump broadened the restrictions so markedly that they impaired testing and treatment for HIV/AIDS, cancer, malaria, and tuberculosis,

according to multiple reports. "The fear was immediate," said Jedidah Maina, executive director of Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health, which supports sexual and reproductive health and rights in Kenya.

The Trump administration reasoned that it was tightening the rules to prevent U.S. money from trickling down through organizations that didn't provide abortion-related services to those that did. "We will enforce a strict prohibition on backdoor funding schemes and end runs around our policy," Pompeo said. "American taxpayer dollars will not be used to underwrite abortions." Never mind that the Helms Amendment had made it illegal to use U.S. money to directly pay for abortions overseas for decades.

Pompeo, who, like Pence, is an evangelical Christian, dismissed assertions that the tough rules were hurting women and leading to unwanted pregnancies and abortions. "They're just wrong about that," he told reporters. "The theory that somehow not protecting every human life is destroying human life is perverse on its face."

Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, also rejected arguments that the Trump restrictions were injurious. His beefed-up Mexico City Policy "has never reduced family planning funding or any other global health funding amounts by even a penny," she said in an emailed statement. "It simply ensures that U.S. taxpayer dollars fund foreign non-governmental organizations that offer real support without promoting abortion in countries that embrace a culture of life."

TONY KARUNBA/AFP/GETTY

Pompeo's State Department issued a report defending the new policies by noting that all but eight of more than 1,300 direct recipients of U.S. funding had accepted the restrictions. This stood to reason, because the United States underwrote the biggest chunk of many organizations' budgets. The 2019 report also said the United States was able to find other organizations to do the work of the eight groups that declined, though it acknowledged that there was "some impact on the delivery of health care, including for HIV/AIDS, voluntary family planning/reproductive health, tuberculosis, and nutrition programming."

Just weeks before the 2020 election, Trump joined a group of largely repressive countries in co-sponsoring a nonbinding directive called the Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family, which supported human rights for women while decrying abortion access. After Trump lost, his administration told the United Nations that "there is no international right to an abortion."

President Joe Biden withdrew from the Geneva Consensus Declaration, saying it undermined U.N. efforts to advance gender equality and global health. Valerie Huber, president of the Institute for Women's Health and an architect of the declaration, has urged 2024 presidential candidates to pledge that, if elected, they would rejoin the coalition of countries that signed it. Trump was the first to agree.

THERE IS A COMMON THEME among the countless studies that have examined the effects of the Helms Amendment and the Mexico City Policy over the years: The rules have backfired. One of the most widely quoted studies, which came out of Stanford University and was published by *The Lancet* in 2019, found that during the eight years of the George W. Bush administration, abortions increased a whopping 40 percent in countries that were "highly exposed" to the Mexico City Policy. The same study reported that use of modern contraceptives declined by 14 percent and pregnancies rose 12 percent.

"It's one of these classic unintended consequences of policies that policymakers don't consider or anticipate," said Rutgers University's Rodgers. She analyzed data from 51 countries from 2001 to 2008 and found that women in Latin America were three times more likely to have an abortion during the Bush administration than during the Clinton administration before it. The difference: Bush invoked the Mexico City Policy, and Clinton did not.

"If the rule's objective is to prevent abortions, it fails miserably," said Carino, of *Fòs Feminista*. "What has happened is that abortions happen anyway, the rule just makes it unsafe, and particularly unsafe for those women who are already in the most difficult circumstances in life."

Repealing Helms alone and using U.S. aid to ensure that abortions are safe would reduce abortion-related maternal deaths by a colossal 98 percent, saving the lives of 17,000 women a year in 33 countries, according to a study by the Guttmacher Institute. It would prevent 19 million unsafe abortions annually.

Abortion is no longer the bipartisan issue it was 50 years ago. Now, Democratic politicians almost uniformly support abortion rights, just as their Republican counterparts oppose them. The GOP presidents and Congress members who champion the abortion restrictions don't talk about the deadly repercussions. But they

have been made aware of them by researchers and reproductive rights advocates, not to mention all those studies. Still, they have blocked attempts to reverse course.

"We certainly are out there talking about the serious and wide-ranging harms" of U.S. policies, said Caitlin Ryan Horrigan, senior director of global advocacy for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Horrigan and others are particularly enraged by the Mexico City Policy because, when imposed, it is layered on top of the Helms Amendment, making the effect that much more intense. "All the research that exists on the global gag rule points to harm," she said. "That is clear; whether they choose to admit it or act on it is another thing."

Not one of the Republican officials or other abortion rights opponents contacted for this story agreed to an interview. Most failed to respond to repeated messages. That includes spokespeople for Trump's presidential campaign; Pence; Bush; Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey, who for decades has been Congress's de facto leading abortion opponent; and Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith of Mississippi, who chairs the Senate Pro-Life Caucus.

Two anti-abortion leaders—Dannenfelser, of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, and Huber, of the Institute for Women's Health—emailed me, confirming their continued support for the abortion restrictions. Neither responded to my questions about the many studies that found the policies increase abortions and maternal mortality. Nor did they provide research that came to different conclusions, as I invited them to do.

"We hold that U.S. taxpayer dollars should never be used to provide or promote abortion in the United States or abroad," wrote Huber, who held high-ranking positions on women's health in the Trump administration and, previously, was an advocate of abstinence-only education. "With regard to the Helms Amendment, it is worth highlighting that a recent poll revealed the majority of Americans oppose their tax dollars being used to fund abortions globally, including those who identify as 'pro-choice.'"

In that 2023 poll, conducted by the Marist Poll for the Catholic fraternal organization Knights of Columbus, 78 percent of respondents said they opposed using taxpayer money to pay for "abortion services" overseas. That runs counter to a 2019 poll by Hart Research Associates on behalf of Ipas, which found that 54 percent of respondents favored overturning Helms, while 33 percent opposed doing so. Likewise, polls conducted in 2018 and 2020 for abortion rights advocates found that nearly 60 percent of respondents opposed the Mexico City Policy; one poll found that 70 percent wanted to end it altogether.

Meanwhile, Republicans in Congress, led by New Jersey's Smith, have been trying to impose the Mexico City Policy on PEPFAR, the HIV/AIDS program credited with saving 25 million lives.

WOMEN DYING FROM botched abortions is hardly a new development. They die whether the Mexico City Policy is on or off, whether a Republican or a Democrat is in the White House. But sometimes the ramifications are more profound, and Trump's four-year term was one of those times. Some health care facilities ran out of contraceptives, some began charging for birth control that they formerly distributed for free, and more women became unintentionally pregnant, Columbia University found. Clinics that provided safe abortions or abortion-related counseling

Rather than impose constraints just on family planning money, as Reagan and both Bushes had done, Trump applied them to all U.S. global health care assistance. In 2018, the abortion restrictions affected \$12 billion in aid.



and referrals had to decide whether to continue doing so, and lose money from the United States, or whether to stop, and lose money from other governments or organizations. Some had to choose between providing abortion-related care or HIV services. And many organizations feared that their mere affiliations with groups that provided abortion-related services would cost them their lifeblood—U.S. dollars.

Advocates for women's health say the fallout was far greater than the Trump administration let on, a position supported by outside research. "The gag rule tore apart health systems," said Terry McGovern, senior associate dean for academic and student affairs at the City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy. Most organizations couldn't afford to say no to the Goliath of health care funding. But some did. Some survived by accepting fewer patients, advocates said, but a number closed altogether.

Nelly Munyasia experienced firsthand the pain of losing U.S. assistance at the organization she runs, Reproductive Health Network Kenya, which is supported in part by Planned Parenthood Global. The network includes clinics that perform legal abortion (under the rare circumstances where it's allowed) and provide post-abortion care, contraceptives, HIV treatment, cancer screening, and other medical care. Munyasia said the network never accepted U.S. money for abortion-related care, but it did receive about \$1 million a year, approximately half its budget, for other services. Under Trump, the network lost that money and had to stop serving 200,000 women and men a year—two-thirds of its clientele. One-third of those were HIV patients. It had to shutter some 25 clinics, most of which were "one-stop shops" that provided comprehensive health care in remote areas reachable only by unpaved roads. Often, Munyasia said, the closures left entire communities without medical care. "People have to walk half a day before they access a health care facility," she told me.

Even the largest organizations reported taking big financial hits. The London-based family planning organization MSI Reproductive Choices, which works in 37 countries, received about 17 percent of its annual budget from the United States before the Trump presidency, said Bethan Cobley, director of external relations. When it refused to agree to his rules, it lost \$30 million in 2017 alone. During the four years Trump was in office, MSI estimated that the money it lost could have prevented six million unintended pregnancies, 1.8 million unsafe abortions, and 20,000 maternal deaths.

Because Trump's severe restrictions cast a wide net, they endangered people who needed all kinds of health care. Advocates said that, though there are no statistics to date, there is anecdotal

evidence that the rate of HIV infections rose among women and men because the restrictions applied to PEPFAR.

Even sanitary napkins were on the chopping block. When the Kenya Legal and Ethical Issues Network on HIV and AIDS lost about half its \$900,000 U.S. grant, it could no longer provide free menstrual pads, said Nerima Were, a former official there who is now the legal director at the Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa. This exacerbated a "phenomenon" commonly called "sex for pads," in which young women and girls have sex with older men who give them money to buy the products, Were said. The women and girls "weren't able to negotiate safe sex," she explained, "and that's why there was an increase in the incidence in HIV amongst our population."

In other countries, too, the HIV/AIDS population was hit especially hard, said Beirne Roose-Snyder, a senior policy fellow for the Council for Global Equality, a coalition that advocates for LGBTQI rights around the world. "In many communities, there is one safe clinic, there's one clinic that isn't going to out you, who isn't going to make you feel terrible," she said. "That is also likely to be the place that is providing abortion care, or, in restrictive environments, at least counseling, referrals, and information."

In Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, a local nonprofit lost so much money that it had to stop performing voluntary male medical circumcision, a technique PEPFAR funded to prevent HIV infections, said Jennifer Sherwood, director of research, public policy, at amfAR, the Foundation for AIDS Research. For heterosexual men, circumcision reduces the risk of HIV by up to 60 percent, according to several studies. "A large portion of the population is living with HIV. And so we really need every tool that we have to prevent HIV," Sherwood told me. The Family Life Association of Eswatini provided services for women, and when their male partners accompanied them to appointments, they were offered circumcisions, she said, "and many men were taking this up." When the association quit offering the procedure, another group tried to step into the void. But "they were starting from scratch, trying to go out and convince men to get this service," Sherwood said. "And they were really unsuccessful."



EIGHT DAYS AFTER taking the oath of office, Biden revoked Trump's version of the Mexico City Policy. "It is the policy of my Administration," he declared, "to support women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights in the United States, as well as globally."

On the ground, though, progress has been slow. "When you shut down facilities, when the gag rule is lifted, they don't magically

reappear,” said Maina, the head of Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health in Kenya. “They are gone for good.” Munyasia said that her network has reopened some mobile health facilities to reach remote villages, but the health care system remains hobbled. “Every day, we hear of women that died even trying to deliver because they were not able to access services,” she said.

After Trump left office, foreign health organizations funded by the U.S. struggled to resume the family-planning services they had been forced to cut. But problems lingered, in part because communications from Washington were unclear, and for most of 2021 some women were unable to access legal abortions, *Fòs Feminista* reported. To this day, the stigma of abortion has remained, as has a chilling effect on medical providers who know all too well that the next GOP president is likely to reinstate restrictions, advocates told me. It is not lost on them that that president could be Trump.

“If there’s a Republican president, we’re screwed,” said Elisa Slattery, a human rights researcher who specializes in reproductive health, rights, and justice. Slattery pointed to Project 2025, a road map for the next Republican administration drafted by the conservative Heritage Foundation, which recommends expanding the Mexico City Policy to all foreign assistance, going far beyond the restrictions imposed by Trump.

It doesn’t help that, for 13 years, Congress has failed to increase the amount the United States contributes to international family planning, which has stagnated at about \$600 million a year, said Craig Lasher, a senior fellow at Population Action International, an advocacy and research organization that supports reproductive health and rights. “We feel like the one sibling who comes down on Christmas morning and finds coal in the stocking,” he told me. Biden proposed a \$70 million increase for family planning assistance and UNFPA in fiscal 2024. But his administration ran headfirst into House Republican proposals to slash the family planning budget by nearly one-quarter, codify Trump’s Mexico City restrictions, and block any payment to UNFPA. Given that possibility, a fourteenth year of stagnation “might qualify as a victory right now,” Lasher said. (As of this writing, Congress has not finalized a budget for the current year.)

Abortion rights advocates argue that spending on family planning saves lives and reduces costly post-abortion care following unsafe procedures. The Guttmacher Institute reported in January that, currently, U.S. assistance prevents about 14,000 maternal deaths a year. If the United States nearly tripled its investment, Guttmacher figured it could save an additional 35,000 lives a year.

That kind of budget increase is a pipe dream in the current political environment. Another likely pipe dream in 2024: convincing Congress to repeal the Helms Amendment and block future presidents from ever implementing the Mexico City Policy again. Congress members didn’t even attempt to repeal Helms until 2020, 47 years after it was adopted. The House, then led by Democrats, stripped the amendment from foreign assistance legislation, but it crept back in during negotiations with the Republican-controlled Senate. Last year, Democrats in both chambers reintroduced the bill. One lone Republican—Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska—joined Democrats in co-sponsoring legislation to ban future presidents from enacting the Mexico City Policy. Murkowski declined to comment for this article, and spokespeople for Biden would not say whether he supports the two bills.

Representative Barbara Lee, one of Congress’s leading women’s rights advocates, has been working for years to permanently abolish the Mexico City Policy. The policy “kills women in many ways around the world, and we should not be party to that,” the California Democrat told me. “What you see is the Republicans using American foreign assistance to be weaponized as a tool of oppression and a tool to turn the clock back on women’s rights.”

With the House controlled by Republicans, the Senate by Democrats, and an election looming, there is virtually no chance either bill will become law.

EDITAR OCHIENG DIDN’T TELL her parents about her rape and pregnancy and didn’t go to a hospital. The stigma of abortion was too great, she told me, noting that even songs characterized the procedure as a crime. As a high school student, Ochieng couldn’t afford the 20,000 Kenyan shillings—roughly \$280 in 2006—to pay for a safe abortion, or even the 3,000 shillings—less than \$43 at the time—for an unsafe abortion. She borrowed money from a close friend, who took it from her college fund.

Now 35, Ochieng is no longer secretive. She’s a social justice advocate and feminist leader who strives to improve the lives of women and girls who are victims of poverty, violence, and inequality. In 2016, she founded Feminist for Peace, Rights and Justice Centre, which works to empower young women by developing their leadership skills. She shares her personal story in an attempt to change how Kenyans perceive abortion and to prevent others—including her two daughters—from going through the trauma she endured.

If she doesn’t, she believes, “the violence will be a circle every day, and it will make all of us vulnerable.” So she turned her life into “a public school.” “When I decided to share my story with the women around me, it has really shifted the way they think about abortion, and they don’t judge people.... I get calls like every week from women who want to abort, and I have a number that I will give them so that they can access a safe abortion.” She tells the women to say that Editar sent them so that the cost will be subsidized.

Her activism has elicited enemies—often men who instruct their wives or partners not to associate with her—but Ochieng remains steadfast. To this day, she said, she knows “so many” women who have died from unsafe abortions. But because of the patriarchal culture, strict prohibitions, and very real fear of punishment, she said, families often conceal the cause of death and strain, or even decline, to eulogize their loved ones.

Things could be different, Ochieng and other abortion rights advocates said, if Washington would end the restrictive policies that placate American conservatives but jeopardize the health and lives of women outside U.S. borders. The effect would be most pronounced in countries with broad abortion rights. Even in places like Kenya, it would shrink the number of unsafe abortions and maternal deaths and, potentially, begin to change the oppressive culture, women there said. “When the U.S. is making any decision, the reality is it affects directly a woman who is on the ground and a woman who is very, very poor,” Ochieng said. “We cannot wait for so many women to die to have change.” **IN**

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HAS ZIONISM LOST THE ARGUMENT?

American Jews' long-standing
consensus about Israel has fractured.
There may be no going back.

By Aaron Gell

Illustration by Alex Nabaum

Dissident is an unpaid position,

Steve Naman told me this fall. The 77-year-old resident of suburban Atlanta is the long-time president (and accountant, webmaster, and proofreader) of the American Council for Judaism—for decades the lonely standard-bearer of the Reform movement's beleaguered anti-Zionist wing. In its heyday, the group boasted as many as 20,000 members, and its combative director, Rabbi Elmer Berger, was a reliable thorn in the side of the Zionist establishment. Berger was a devoted advocate of American Jewish assimilation—a fulfillment, in his view, of the universalism espoused by the Hebrew prophets. Perhaps more important, he was a fierce opponent of Jewish nationalism, which he considered an invitation to catastrophe.

"Regrettably, all the predictions that the council made have pretty much come true," added Naman, a retired paper company executive, who also volunteers for his daughter's hunger nonprofit, Bagel Rescue. Several weeks before, Palestinian militants had mounted a surprise assault on Israeli communities and military installations near the Gaza border, slaying some 1,200 Israelis, most of them civilians. Though negotiations were ongoing, around 240 hostages were still held by Hamas. Northern Gaza was under heavy Israeli bombardment. An estimated 10,000 Palestinians had been slaughtered, the majority civilians, and 100,000 displaced, numbers that have multiplied considerably since then. Naman pointed to the Palestinians' plight over the past 75 years. "What did people think was going to happen?" he said. "They were just gonna say, 'Oh, yeah, put us in a ghetto, and we'll just live here in poverty for the rest of our lives?'"

If anti-Zionist Judaism has long sounded like an oxymoron, chalk it up to two factors: the Shoah, which convinced many Jews that they could never again entrust their welfare to a non-Jewish majority; and a remarkably effective effort by the Zionist establishment to weave the nation-state project into the fabric of Jewish life. But things change: A few days after October 7, I was biking along Brooklyn's Prospect Park when I came upon a demonstration in front of Senator Chuck Schumer's apartment building. I'd spent the week absorbed in the news, struggling to take in the immensity and cruelty of the Hamas attack and horrified by the ruthlessness of Israel's military response. As demonstrators, many carrying signs reading NOT IN MY NAME, marched down the road to Grand Army Plaza, I noticed that some were wearing tallitot and yarmulkes, and I found myself overcome with emotion. This, the first post-October 7 protest by Jewish Voice for Peace—a group I had never even heard of—struck me as a welcome response to what we'd been seeing, and a deeply Jewish one. I ditched my bike and joined the throng.

I mention this in the spirit of full disclosure: I'm hardly an objective observer. I'm a secular Jew, with my own particular set of feelings about Israel—a confusing mix of esteem, curiosity, anguish,

and sometimes shame. I have never before considered myself anti-Zionist. But lately, viewing the images of lifeless children, listening to the dehumanizing rhetoric of Israeli politicians and soldiers, and noting the censorious response of the American Zionist establishment to pro-Palestinian advocacy, I'm not quite sure.

For years, Naman told me, Rabbi Berger was vilified for his anti-Zionist stance; eventually, he was ignored. ACJ membership nose-dived following Israel's triumph in 1967's Six-Day War. Suddenly, however, Naman has company. Young American Jews are showing a newfound willingness to publicly question—and sometimes to loudly condemn—the very idea of a Jewish state. Groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow have been at the forefront of some of the most effective anti-war demonstrations we've seen in decades. (The tableau of hundreds of Jews in black T-shirts occupying Grand Central Station is particularly indelible.) They're still far from a majority, of course. "It's basically noise," a PR executive at a newly launched pro-Israel PR shop insisted. Gil Troy, a professor of North American history at McGill University and the author of *The Zionist Ideas*, agreed. "I just say, as a historian, put it in proportion," he suggested, comparing the reported 290,000 people who attended the March for Israel rally on the

National Mall in November with the 150-strong demonstration organized by JVP and IfNotNow the following night outside Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington, D.C.

For Derek Penslar, director of Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies and author of *Zionism: An Emotional State*, it's not about numbers. "These young people do matter," he said, adding that the Jews most critical of Israel are concentrated in elite institutions, like the Ivies. "They tend to be privileged and very bright and successful, and they will go on to have positions of power and visibility. And so, you know, there'll be quite a multiplier effect of their views."

This small contingent has already served as a powerful rejoinder to the notion that, as Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt put it recently, "anti-Zionism is antisemitism. Full stop." His comments calling pro-Palestinian advocacy groups like Students for Justice in Palestine and JVP the "photo inverse of the extreme right" drew sharp criticism, not least from his own staff. If Greenblatt's fierce response betrayed a hint of panic, it's not hard to see why: This incipient movement has already loosened the Israel lobby's famous grip on the political establishment. (Note, for example, the House Democratic leadership's defiance of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, in endorsing incumbent progressive Summer Lee of Pennsylvania.)

Some 75 years since Israel's founding, the Zionist consensus, what Oberlin Jewish studies professor Matthew Berkman has wryly described as the era of "two Jews, one opinion," is dead. Even before the current round of hostilities, a survey found that fully a quarter of Jews in the United States considered Israel an "apartheid state," and 22 percent believed the country was committing genocide. "I think American Jewry is kind of broken, it's generationally fractured," Shaul Magid, distinguished fellow of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College and author of *The Necessity of Exile*, told me. The change isn't limited to American Jews. Last March, a poll found for the first time that U.S. Democrats as a whole were more sympathetic to Palestinians than Israelis. (The margin was 49 percent to 38 percent.) For Rashid Khalidi, professor of modern Arab studies at Columbia and author of *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, the shift reflects a "thirst for justice among young people." Israel, Khalidi pointed out, is a prosperous, white-dominated country: "They think of it as they think of the United States in terms of injustice and in terms of inequality." As former Anti-Defamation League director Abe Foxman put it in the hotly contested 2023 documentary *Israelism*, "When we talk about 'We're losing the kids'—we lost them!"

A number of pro-Israel commentators have sought to blame TikTok—a dubious charge (OK boomer) that nonetheless contains a grain of truth. Seemingly blindsided by the waning authority of traditional news sources, Zionist advocacy groups that once displayed a formidable knack for shaping public opinion are plainly losing the digital battle for hearts and minds. "For all of the criticisms from the right of ... the mainstream media, I think they have been an enormously important pillar of a largely Israeli narrative over the years, and younger people are much less likely to pay any attention" to them, Khalidi said. "Many students I know watch livestreams from Gaza, from people they know and have come to trust."

Ironically, Israel may have become a victim of its longtime messaging prowess: Even as treasured *hasbara* chestnuts ("The most moral army in the world," "No partner for peace," "They

never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity," etc.) have grown stale, the suppression of the Palestinian narrative has given its sudden emergence via alternative channels a revelatory force.

As the conflict has gone on, other aspects of the Zionist story have come under increased scrutiny. Anti-Zionists can cite the diary of Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, outlining his plan to "spirit the penniless population across the border." Or that of Yosef Weitz, a leader of the Jewish National Fund, who argued, "The only solution is a Land of Israel devoid of Arabs. There is no room here for compromise." They can parse the language of the Balfour Declaration, the 1917 letter that led to the establishment of Israel, including its pointed defense of "the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." They can read the prescient warnings by Hebrew University founder Judah Magnes, Albert Einstein, and others. They can dig into the revelations of Israeli "New Historians" like Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé, which exposed the less palatable aspects of the nation's founding. And they can encounter anti-Zionist Haredi sects like the Satmars and Neturei Karta, and watch unfiltered interviews with Peter Beinart, Noam Chomsky, and Norman Finkelstein.

Israel's inexorable rightward lurch over the past two decades has further tarnished the Zionist brand. While supporters are fond of pointing out that the country is the only democracy in the Middle East, it's not a secret that the long-standing primacy of the left-wing Labor Party ended with a political assassination, nor that the vitriolic atmosphere in which the killing took place was created, in part, by the man who would win the next election. Benjamin Netanyahu went on to become the dominant figure in Israeli politics, with dire consequences. Even while battling corruption allegations, he pushed the adoption of the 2018 nation-state law, which declared citizens' "right to exercise national self-determination" to be "unique to the Jewish people." He crusaded for a controversial "judicial reform" law that many observers liken to a political coup. He threw the nation's support behind Donald Trump along with nationalists like Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Andrzej Duda. And he ushered reprehensible characters like Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich into the political mainstream. Meanwhile, the lobby group AIPAC has charted a similar path to the right, alienating liberals by supporting more than 100 Republican candidates despite their votes to overturn Joe Biden's election. Given the political inclinations of American Jews, who vote Democratic by greater than a two-to-one margin, a rupture was probably inevitable.

It certainly seemed so on a Philadelphia highway overpass in December, where several hundred JVP protesters celebrated the eighth night of Hanukkah by blocking traffic. Having abandoned the idea of erecting a nine-foot menorah in the road, due to an overwhelming police presence, the group made do with a small wooden toy instead. According to the Talmud, the menorah should be lit at a time and place where the most people can "benefit from the light," a member of Rabbis4Ceasefire explained via bullhorn, "and so we offer gratitude to the helicopters above who are helpfully participating in this ritual" and "spreading our call for the miracles of a cease-fire now." A cheer went up. Watching as another rabbi led the group in song, I recognized the lyrics from Hebrew school: "*Lo yisa goy el goy cherev*." It's from Isaiah 2:4: "Nation shall not lift sword against nation." Meanwhile, below us on I-76, all three lanes of westbound rush-hour traffic came to a standstill as another contingent of activists ran onto the roadway and locked arms.

Dusk brought a pinkish hue to the stone walls of the nearby Philadelphia Museum of Art, and I recalled something Steve Naman had said. After decades in the wilderness, ACJ's message finally seemed to be breaking through. Maybe the council's role had been to part the waters, he suggested, so that other Jews could follow.

U PWARD OF 40 YEARS AGO, I was a *chanich*, a camper, at Moshava, a sleepaway camp. Mosh was the mid-Atlantic outpost of Habonim (now Habonim Dror), a progressive Jewish youth movement devoted to creating, as its website states, "a personal bond and commitment" to Israel. If my own biggest takeaway from the experience was a fondness for cigarettes that bedevils me to this day, that's hardly the organization's fault. The older kids who turned me on to "smoking cloves" were probably no more aware than I was that their colorful packets of Indonesian imports, sweet-tasting and filterless, were mostly tobacco.

Habonim, which means "the builders," was established in the United Kingdom in 1929 in an effort to spread the doctrine of Labor Zionism, an uneasy synthesis of two strains of nineteenth-century European Jewish thought: socialism and Jewish nationalism. The former, although rarely referred to directly, was central to the camp's design. Campers gardened and took care of chickens; they mopped the mess hall, served the meals, washed the dishes, and scrubbed the toilets. I signed on for garbage duty, a taste of collective labor that soon, however perversely, became a favorite activity.

Meanwhile, camp sought to inculcate the spirit of Zionism. Mornings began with the singing of "Hatikva," the Israeli national anthem; hours of Israeli dancing followed Shabbat dinners. And then there was Aliyah Bet. A long-standing camp tradition, it took place late one night a few weeks into the session. I remember being wakened by instructions shouted in Hebrew, flopping groggily from my sleeping bag, and being hustled out into the humid night. "*Sheket*," we were told. "Be quiet." The woods were dark. Only the counselors, gruffly playacting as Jewish paramilitaries, had flashlights. At some point, I was hoisted into a tree fork and instructed to jump down to the grass. I doubt it was more than three or four feet, but in the dark, exhausted, I hesitated. "Go, go, go!" someone whispered, and I complied, rising unharmed and giddy. Eventually we made our way to the dock, climbed into canoes, and were piloted around the silent lake before arriving back at shore. After cups of hot chocolate, we slipped into bed, hearts racing.

As exhilarating as the exercise was, I didn't pick up on its larger significance. It was only as I began thinking about this story that I reflected on what the experience had been designed to teach me. For all its left-leaning ideals, Mosh was and still is part of a sprawling and well-financed ecosystem of committees, federations, lobbying groups, educational nonprofits, and other entities that work together to nurture Jewish culture and promote Zionist politics. Aliyah Bet was the code name that the Haganah militants used for their yearslong effort to spirit European Jewish refugees past a British naval blockade and into Mandatory Palestine. What I remembered merely as a hazy nighttime escapade had been intended as a living history lesson: a simulation of the Jewish settlement of the Promised Land.

At a moment when many liberal Jews find their emotional attachment to the Jewish state challenged as never before, when

the word "Zionism" is as liable to conjure images of ruined Gaza neighborhoods and broken young bodies as of plucky Jewish kibbutzniks in bucket hats, that night in the woods has taken on a haunting metaphorical significance for me. I think of the drowsy American kids excitedly restaging one of the most heavily romanticized episodes in Jewish history, unwitting conscripts in a geopolitical power struggle. I think of the so-called Arab Question, conspicuously unasked. And I think of the crisp reflection of the moon on the lake, of the paddles thumping the boat's hull as they stirred the glassy surface, and of the depths beneath.

It makes sense that of all the chapters of Israeli history, this was the one selected for reenactment, and not only because some American members of Habonim had actually served as crew on Aliyah Bet transport ships. It's an uplifting adventure story, in which a downtrodden and terrorized population emerges from its intended annihilation, cleverly outsmarts its adversaries, and embarks on the grueling but estimable undertaking of building a new nation. That the bad guys in this tale are the British, unambiguously an imperial power, offers the bonus of framing Israel's founding as one of the century's great anti-colonial triumphs. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean voyage symbolized an almost mystical renewal, when Jews transformed themselves from passive victims, meekly submitting to their own extermination, into a ruddy new race of pioneer-warriors, at last standing unbowed among the free peoples of the world. And conveniently, it's a soothing ideological fairy tale in which Palestinian Arabs—some 300,000 of whom had been expelled even before May 1948, with 450,000 soon to follow—play no role whatsoever.

This stirring redemption story, which became the basis for not only a summer-camp romp but a succession of Hollywood movies—including the epic *Sword in the Desert* (released in 1949, while the ink was still drying on Israel's Declaration of Independence); the Kirk Douglas psychodrama *The Juggler* (1953); and 1960's Paul Newman blockbuster *Exodus*, based on Leon Uris's bestselling novel—owes its broad outlines in part to the reporting of I.F. Stone. In 1946, the radical Jewish American journalist embedded with a group of Jewish "displaced persons" from Poland as they traversed war-torn Europe, boarded a decommissioned Canadian naval ship in Italy, and made their way to Palestine. Originally published in the newspaper *PM*, Stone's dispatches were collected in the 1946 book *Underground to Palestine*, in which the author states plainly, "I did not go to join them ... as a newspaperman merely in search of a good story, but as a kinsman, fulfilling a moral obligation to my brothers." Stone favored the establishment of a binational Arab-Jewish state, noting that Jews and Arabs coexisted peacefully in the city of Haifa and that "there is no such ill feeling in Palestine between Jew and Arab as exists in Czechoslovakia between Czech and Slovak." Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, and many others agreed. The elusive "two-state solution" nonetheless became the prevailing diplomatic objective for decades, and it remains so for the Biden administration and many liberal Jews, despite its waning popularity among Israelis.

Reservations about defining Israel as a Jewish state were largely forgotten as the fledgling nation pulled off a succession of victories. Assailed from all sides as the last British troops left Haifa, the newly minted armed forces vanquished five adversaries. The nation established a democratic system; corralled a disparate, polyglot, trauma-stricken population into a single society with a common language; farmed and cultivated areas that had been

Even before the current round of hostilities, a survey found that fully a quarter of Jews in the United States considered Israel an “apartheid state,” and 22 percent believed the country was committing genocide.

fallow—and many others that had not—and gradually built one of the world’s most successful economies. (Meanwhile, it brought the world drip irrigation, Waze, Mastermind, and the Epilady hair-removal system, among other innovations.)

To many onlookers, and not only Jews, such developments seemed altogether miraculous. By the time Saul Bellow visited Israel in 1975, the Jewish novelist who’d opened his *Adventures of Augie March* with the bold assimilationist avowal, “I am an American, Chicago born,” was practically swooning for the ancient motherland, where “the stunned remnant that had crept from Auschwitz had demonstrated that they could farm a barren land, industrialize it, build cities, make a society, do research, philosophize, write books, sustain a great moral tradition, and, finally, create an army of tough fighters.”

One can grant, certainly, that the Israeli story—or rather part of it—was indeed a tale of enormous triumph over unimaginable adversity. In his 1979 book, *The Question of Palestine*, no less an advocate of Palestinian self-determination than Edward Said readily acknowledged “the intertwined terror and the exultation out of which Zionism has been nourished,” going on to allow that the country “has some remarkable political and cultural achievements to its credit, quite apart from its spectacular military successes.”

The fact that these successes were as braided as a challah with the subjugation, dispossession, and violent abuse of Said’s compatriots—a people with its own aspirations, tragedies, human rights, flawed politics, and undeniable connection to the same land—was for Bellow and many others an unfortunate footnote at best. While this elision can mostly be attributed to a deliberate program of political propaganda and Western anti-Arab sentiment, Jewish exceptionalism no doubt played a role. By virtue of our reputed “chosen-ness,” the Jews have been at once sanctified and stricken with the most acute case of main-character syndrome in world history. Our victimhood is ordained. So is our exile and redemption. It’s all part of a grand narrative that for many of the world’s billions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is a matter of religious faith. Perhaps that helps explain why a secular American Jew like me is writing this story about the questionable legacy of Zionism, rather than one of the countless Palestinians who have suffered its effects. For better or worse, Jews remain at the center of the story; as such, we’re the ones busy rewriting it.

I.F. Stone began doing so as far back as 1967. Even as Jews around the world were giddy with millennial zeal after Israel seized East

Jerusalem and the West Bank, the iconoclastic journalist was tartly observing in *The New York Review of Books* that “those caught up in Prophetic fervor soon begin to feel that the light they hoped to see out of Zion is only that of another narrow nationalism.” Jewish treatment of Palestinians, he adjudged, “will determine what kind of people we become: either oppressors and racists in our turn like those from whom we have suffered, or a nobler race able to transcend the tribal xenophobias that afflict mankind.”

IT TURNS OUT all the original Zionists were Christians. As early as the seventeenth century, Puritans and Calvinists seized on the idea of reestablishing Jews in Palestine as a necessary precursor to the Messiah’s return. Champions of the concept included the prominent Massachusetts Bay Colony minister John Cotton and Sir Isaac Newton.

While “proto-Zionism,” as it is now known, made little practical headway, its influence in the United Kingdom helped pave the way for that country’s eventual promotion of the Zionist project, just as American evangelicals are among Israel’s greatest boosters today. It was under the sway of this eschatology that English nobleman Lord Shaftesbury in 1853 wrote a letter to the British prime minister. Employing a construction that would be repeated for decades to come—to the justifiable outrage of the Palestinian people—he insisted that the Holy Land was “a country without a nation” in need of “a nation without a country.” As it so happened, Shaftesbury added, there was just such a nation awaiting its divinely ordained restoration: “the ancient and rightful lords of the soil, the Jews!”

These “rightful lords” needed some convincing, however. Their reluctance took a variety of forms. Most considered the idea wildly fanciful. Indeed, it would take the demise of three empires, two world wars, and a genocide to make the plan even vaguely workable. Jewish communists and socialists opposed nationalism of all kinds as a bourgeois plot to divide the working class. And Orthodox spiritual leaders objected that only divine providence could bring about redemption, and that Zionism was therefore a sin against God that would lead to ruin. It didn’t help that many of Zionism’s early proponents were atheists. Finally, even in an era when colonialism was viewed, at least in Europe, as an unalloyed good, there were those who objected to the notion of creating a Jewish nation on Arab-populated land. The Russian Jewish writer

Ahad Ha'am began visiting Palestine in 1891 and spent years writing reports critical of the settlement project. Decrying a widespread belief that "the only language that the Arabs understand is that of force" (a time-tested rationale for violence routinely employed by both sides of the current conflict), he accused the Jewish colonists of treating "the Arabs with hostility and cruelty," attributing the behavior to resentment "towards those who reminded them that there is still another people in the land of Israel that have been living there and does not intend to leave." Nonetheless, Ha'am, the forefather of so-called Cultural Zionism, which promoted a linguistic and cultural Jewish renaissance with Palestine at its center but downplayed the necessity of an exclusively Jewish nation, eventually emigrated to Palestine himself.

By contrast, writer, politician, and militant Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of so-called Revisionist Zionism, advocated a hard line toward the Arabs. Unlike other Zionist leaders, who kept their goal of creating a Jewish majority largely under wraps (Theodor Herzl wrote in his diary of doing so "discreetly and circumspectly"), Jabotinsky said the quiet part out loud: Palestinians were a people; they were a majority in the land that would become Israel, and they wouldn't yield—why would they?—unless forced to do so. "There is only one thing the Zionists want, and it is that one thing that the Arabs do not want," he wrote in his famous essay "The Iron Wall." To create a Jewish state, he said bluntly, would necessitate turning the Arabs into a minority—"and a minority status is not a good thing, as the Jews themselves are never tired of pointing out." Jabotinsky's prescription was simple: Exercise power without apology, and wait them out. Naturally, the Palestinians will relent only when there is "no longer any hope of getting rid of us, because they can make no breach in the iron wall," he explained. (Interestingly, the Iron Wall was also the nickname given to the billion-dollar border fence with which Israel encircled Gaza—the one unceremoniously felled by Hamas bulldozers on October 7.)

Cold-blooded though it may sound today, Jabotinsky's philosophy was a reasonable response to his own hard experience with antisemitism: As pogroms swept Russia, he established militias devoted to Jewish self-defense. Foreseeing a looming disaster for the Jews of Europe as early as 1936, he devised an elaborate evacuation plan. Though he clashed with Israel's founders David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, his conviction that the only guarantor of survival was power—a view soon validated by the Holocaust—became tremendously influential, and in time the Revisionists evolved into the Likud Party.

Rashid Khalidi views Jabotinsky as "the only honest one" of the early Zionists. His mistake, Khalidi said, was that he "assumed that he was operating in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, when you could get away with this stuff, an era when colonialism was seen as a good thing." Native Americans certainly fought back, as did other aboriginal groups, "but they were crushed," he added. "That didn't work in the twentieth century. Libya didn't work. Algeria didn't work. Kenya didn't work. South Africa didn't work."

Meanwhile, there's a powerful irony here that is often overlooked: Palestinian national identity owes no small part of its vitality and resilience to the decades of collective suffering that Zionism has imposed. Palestinians have "experienced a trauma that other Arab peoples haven't," Khalidi pointed out. "And if anybody should be able to understand that, it's Jews, who suffered repeated bouts of persecution and trauma over centuries, which bind them together, obviously."

An interesting quality of Jabotinsky's dispassionate realpolitik is that it's so fundamentally apolitical—indeed, one can scarcely read his follow-up essay, "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," without seeing in it an endorsement of the Palestinian, rather than the Israeli, cause. "The principle of self-determination does not mean that if someone has seized a stretch of land it must remain in his possession for all time," he wrote, "and that he who was forcibly ejected from his land must always remain homeless."

ON OCTOBER 11, as the Israeli military ramped up its counterattack on Gaza, a box truck circled Harvard's campus, its exterior walls covered with digital screens displaying students belonging to groups that opposed the war; these it termed HARVARD'S LEADING ANTISEMITES. The "doxing truck," which was sponsored by the right-wing Accuracy in Media and later turned up at Yale and other institutions, signaled a troubling new stage in the effort of Zionist advocacy groups to smother, rather than engage with, debate about the conflict. To Derek Penslar, a Zionist who has lived and taught in Israel and suffers from what he calls "Israel attachment disorder," these attempts at intimidation and repression—including the long-standing ban by college campus organization Hillel International on any speakers at its events who support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement—are a mistake. "I think we are actually harming ourselves," he said, "by not allowing a wide range of viewpoints" to be expressed.

That's not to say advocates aren't keeping busy. They seem to direct most of their efforts to those who are already on-board, however, providing palliative talking points to an older generation—fervent supporters with money to donate—that rarely pushes back. This represents not only "an intellectual failure," Penslar said, but also "a tactical mistake": "Using the language from the 1970s or '80s to try to motivate young Jews in the 2020s is simply not going to work." Such organizations "are unelected" and "responsible to no one," Penslar added. "They speak for no one but themselves."

A few weeks after we spoke, Penslar himself became the unlikely subject of a cancellation campaign. After being tapped to co-chair Harvard's presidential task force on antisemitism (an initiative that began after the ugly takedown of the university's former president, Claudine Gay), Penslar was denounced by a number of high-profile Israel supporters, including the economist Lawrence Summers, Republican Representative Elise Stefanik, and hedge-funder-turned-plagiarism expert Bill Ackman. More than 200 Jewish studies professors promptly issued an open letter of support, and Penslar's new assignment seems safe for now.

In reporting this story, I reached out to a variety of mainstream Zionist organizations, including AIPAC and the ADL, for interviews. Despite maintaining well-financed communications teams, most didn't bother to reply. Two asked to speak off the record.

That's not to say there aren't still partisans who are willing to make the case. On a late afternoon in January, I paid a visit to Ruth Wisse, professor emerita of Yiddish literature at Harvard, columnist for *Commentary*, and author of the 2021 memoir, *Free as a Jew*. Wisse received me in her tidy apartment on the Upper East Side. Wry and grandmotherly, she wore a cardigan and a sling on her arm, a consequence of recent carpal tunnel surgery. She



Criticism of Israel has been increasing among American Jews for some time. In March 2017, protesters gathered at Washington Square Park in New York City for a Bubbies for Palestine rally.

immediately offered me a drink. I had bourbon (“Like my kids,” she said); Wisse sipped vodka.

Earlier that day, South Africa had delivered its genocide case against Israel at the United Nation’s International Court of Justice, and I wondered if Wisse had watched the hearing. She wasn’t interested. The United Nations “had already become the leading forum for antisemitism when it passed Resolution 3379 calling Zionism—the reclamation of Jewish sovereignty—a form of racism,” she explained. “Its court has no legitimacy. The United Nations charter grants all nations equal rights, irrespective of their size. How dare Arab countries remain members of the United Nations if they did not accept the legitimacy of another member state?”

Israel’s mistake, she offered, was to appear in court at all. “Jews are always being accused,” she said. “You should never step into the defendant’s box voluntarily in a trial that is rigged.”

At age four, in 1940, Wisse fled Romania with her family, boarding the last passenger ship to cross the Atlantic, she told me. Antisemitism is not an abstract concept for her. The family settled in Montreal, but her mother regularly warned her not to let her guard down. Life is a war, she’d tell her. Wisse has been fighting it, without apology, ever since. “Do you know how much

restraint it has taken over these thousands of years to create a Jewish people, and to keep it alive?” she asked. “Don’t step out of line, because you’ll trigger collective punishment against us.’ But now we’re no longer a diaspora people. We have a nation to defend, a national homeland. We have to change our thinking of 2,000 years and to stand up for Israel’s rights, wherever we live, and expect all good people to join us.”

While resistance to Zionism might have seemed reasonable in the 1920s or 1930s, she said, “the creation of the state changes the entire picture, because now to be anti-Zionist is a genocidal concept. If you’re an anti-Zionist, you’re against the existence of Israel, which is no longer a movement of self-liberation but the realized homeland of nine million people, Jews and their fellow citizens.”

Wisse wasn’t surprised to hear of young Jews adopting anti-Zionist ideas. “It is always tempting to blame the Jews for the aggression against them,” she pointed out. “Oh, if only Israel didn’t ‘occupy’ the West Bank, then they wouldn’t be against the Jews.’ Many Jews buy into that.... German Jews famously said, ‘If only we shaved our beards, if we started speaking German.’”

Wisse’s defiant tone is noteworthy—“There’s a war on, my friend,” she told me when I gently pushed back on one point—but

her views are far from unique. The author Joshua Cohen won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2021 novel, *The Netanyahus*, a savage takedown of young Bibi and his family. Cohen, who holds Israeli citizenship and speaks Hebrew fluently, considers the current prime minister a disaster. “Everyone I know in Israel rejects Netanyahu and would strangle him on the street if they could,” he told me. “And yet they’re also Zionists who believe Israel should exist and should thrive. There’s a vast middle ground between condemning Netanyahu to history’s judgment and condemning the state he governs to destruction.”

Cohen thinks most countries would react as Israel has to the October 7 attack, and that Hamas’s savagery has been unfairly excused by the left. “America uses Israel, and I’d even say uses Jews, to fight its own proxy wars about race and privilege,” he argued. Bellow had made a similar observation: “What Switzerland is to winter holidays and the Dalmatian coast to summer tourists,” he wrote, “Israel and the Palestinians are to the West’s need for justice—a sort of moral resort area.”

As for the protesters in JVP and similar groups, Cohen was sharply dismissive. “Most anti-Zionists are not going to be Jews in a generation,” he predicted. “The vast majority of these Jews don’t speak any of the Jewish languages. They don’t know the Jewish texts or live in Israel. And if they’re going to have children, there’s nearly a 50 percent chance they’re not going to have them with Jews or raise them as Jews. For these Jews to oppose Zionism, for these Jews to have reserved for themselves as the final expression of their Jewishness the condemnation of Israel—I have to salute them, I might even bow down to them. That’s ultimate chutzpah.”

Anti-Zionist Jews are regularly subjected to personal attacks like this. They’re accused of sucking up to the goyim, of being naïve and ill-informed, self-hating apologists or radical chic wannabes. Gil Troy, the McGill historian, suggested that members of IfNotNow, whose protests often include Jewish symbols and rituals, have an “almost Maoist genius for understanding what’s going to drive their parents crazy.” Responding to an IfNotNow announcement of a cease-fire rally at the White House, David Friedman, Trump’s ambassador to Israel, declared: “Any American Jew attending this rally is not a Jew—yes I said it!”

Cohen’s point was a shade subtler. Frankly, I doubt it was true for a lot of the members of JVP and IfNotNow and Rabbis4Ceasefire I’d met reporting this story, many of whom considered the protests a deep expression of their Jewish values, viewed their comrades as the sort of community they’d never found in traditional Jewish settings, and saw anti-Zionism as a form of religious renewal. Many considered the Jewish state spiritually lost and thus were delivering a warning—the kind of prophetic admonition that is found throughout the Torah.

Not that I’ve read a lot of Torah. To be honest, what Cohen said about Jews who “are not going to be Jews in a generation” probably applies to me all too well. I speak neither Hebrew nor Yiddish. My wife is not Jewish. We raised our children Jewish, but with loads of ambivalence. I don’t belong to a shul, let alone a temple, and I often work through the High Holidays. Sometimes I think I’m the ultimate product of Jewish exile, oddly at home on the margins, more observer than participant. I consider myself Jewish, I feel Jewish, but by any definition except the one reliant on blood—the one favored by our greatest enemies—I may not really be.

And yet, here I am, daring to pass judgment on Cohen, a writer I greatly admire; on the state of Israel; and on the many members

of the worldwide Jewish community, my own relatives among them, who remain committed to this ancient tradition and determined to carry it forth, and who, when their brothers and sisters were massacred, insisted on fighting back, ferociously, without apology, even when the moral cost was unimaginably high and the world roared in disapproval.

I imagine a lot of Zionists these days have been reflecting on the famous words recounted in the Mishnah: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?* It’s a resonant line, the first in a neat little triad of questions attributed to Hillel the Elder. Ruth Wisse borrowed it for the title of one of her books. IfNotNow takes its name from the third of this ancient rabbi’s questions. Less frequently cited is the remaining leg of Hillel’s stool, the second query. It’s the deepest, most existential of the three. It’s the one that cuts to the very essence of what it means to be human—by far the hardest to answer: *If I am only for myself, who am I?*

IN DECEMBER 2019, the two strands that had defined the Habonim Dror youth movement since its founding half a century before I went to camp—social justice and Jewish nationalism—began to unravel. During a biennial governing assembly, three movement members advanced a proposal to reevaluate one of the movement’s pillars. “Although Zionism has historically meant many things, many of them moral and beautiful, it has also meant many other things, many of them not moral nor beautiful,” they wrote, according to Mica Elise Hastings, a longtime participant who wrote about the organization in her 2021 college thesis. “The liberation of all people is tied together and therefore Palestinian liberation & Jewish liberation are not at odds, but are one and the same!” The motion fizzled, but according to a camper I spoke to, whom I’ll call Leah, such disputes are likely to continue; now 17, she has been attending a West Coast Habonim camp—her “favorite place in the world”—since she was eight. Leah and her cohort have been talking a lot lately, sorting out their politics amid a welter of conflicting emotions. Several Habonim stalwarts, including Ofir Libstein, chair of the board of directors of Habonim Dror’s international umbrella organization, and peace activist Vivian Silver, were murdered on October 7. But for the most part, the attacks have reinforced Leah and her friends’ commitment to social justice, she told me. While participants differ as to the particulars, they “came to a pretty base-level agreement that the Israeli government is committing atrocities towards the people living in Palestine,” she said. “I also feel a lot of sympathy for the people currently living in Israel, and I feel a lot of fear for my cousin, who’s in Gaza in the military right now. I don’t agree with his views on the situation, but I also understand where he got them from.”

Leah hopes to work as a counselor this summer. She said she’s looking forward to Aliyah Bet—“Kids don’t really understand what it’s about,” she laughed—but plans to sit out another activity, the annual Israel Theme Day.

“A lot of left-wing Jews I know make all of these exceptions for Israel ... because we feel afraid, and we think we know everything,” she continued. “But the writing’s been on the wall, and it’s really time to open your eyes. What Israel is doing to people in Gaza is genocide. And I think as Jews who have been through something like the Holocaust, we of all people should be able to stand against that.”

American Jews owe our well-being, our prosperity, and perhaps our existence to the tolerance, openness, and egalitarianism of our system of government and our neighbors. No wonder we shudder at Israel's chauvinism. It's all too obvious how we'd fare if the United States followed Israel's lead, reserving power for a religious majority.

IN THE BEGINNING (you should pardon the expression), Zionism made a lot of sense. "Europe was falling apart," Dartmouth's Magid pointed out. "You can understand Jews saying, you know, I'm fucking done with this. This exile is not good. And I'm going to take agency upon myself and adopt some Western European nationalist idea and go create this country. I totally get that. Had I been alive in the 1920s in the Pale of Settlement, it may have looked like a really good idea. It created a state, and it saved a lot of lives—and now it's persecuting a lot of people."

"A Jewish state, in and of itself, is actually no different than any other national project, and in principle no more objectionable," Khalidi noted. "The problem is the settler colonialism that was involved in planting these Eastern European beings who were fleeing persecution in a country with a population that would not allow itself to be superseded. That's the problem."

Has Zionism lost the argument? Yes and no. It certainly won when it mattered most—when Jews in Europe were being slaughtered en masse, and when the nations of the world, including the United States, refused them sanctuary. It won when the U.K. was at last abandoning its imperial vision, drawing borders, and bestowing nationhood. And it won again, in a squeaker, when the United Nations gave the nod to partition.

And then, gradually, it began to lose. Nation-states—and, yes, armed resistance movements—exercise power in ways that often shock the conscience. And to the extent that they ask our assent, or perhaps our complicity, we all grant or withhold it as our own spirit dictates. When so moved, we can hit the streets in protest. But that's about it. If countries just curled up and died—dissolved their parliaments, folded up their flags—because they'd committed actions that were immoral, indecent, or murderous, the world map would be unrecognizable. Israel isn't going anywhere, whatever its enemies hope or its supporters fear.

"The way Israel is spoken of, especially by protesters, reminds me of the old Soviet joke: It works in practice, but does it work in theory?" Cohen said. "Israel works in practice, for Israelis. It doesn't need to justify itself theoretically. The country is there. On the maps. On the ground. And social media is not going to change that. Iran might, but social media, no."

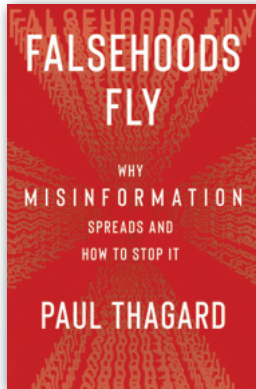
Facts on the ground, in other words. This might well serve as the Zionist creed, fitting for a place that was for most of its history more mental construct than physical reality. This notion-turned-nation survived, and in many ways thrived. It has the strength now to turn Gaza to dust; to create unimaginable bloodshed; to rebuild its iron walls, real and figurative; to defy world opinion, and carry on. It's also strong enough, I humbly submit, to chart a different, better course.

I've spoken to dozens of anti-Zionists over the past few months, and not a single one thought Israel should cease to exist. Most, convinced that ethnic discrimination and democracy were fundamentally incompatible, seemed to favor a return to the binationalist ideal advocated by Stone and others. And why wouldn't they? American Jews are justifiably proud to live in a successful multiethnic democracy, imperfect though it is. As citizens of a nation in which Jews are a distinct minority, we owe our well-being, our prosperity, and, yes, perhaps our existence to the tolerance, openness, and egalitarianism of our system of government and our neighbors. No wonder we shudder at Israel's chauvinism, its exclusionary nationalism, its oppression. It's all too obvious how we'd fare if the United States followed Israel's lead in reserving power for an ethnic or religious majority. Seen in this light, what's surprising isn't that some American Jews are anti-Zionists; it's that many more aren't.

Israelis, of course, tend to view the one-state solution as a death sentence, insisting that only a Jewish demographic majority, maintained in perpetuity and already at a terrible price, will guarantee Jewish survival. The Middle East is a "rough neighborhood," as they often point out. Maybe they're right. Maybe Palestinians and Jews, having lived together peacefully for centuries, will never again reach a fair accommodation. Maybe coexistence is a fantasy, and the bloodshed will be repeated again and again, each time with more deadly weaponry, until the iron wall finally holds. Then again, the wildest dreams have come true before. Sometimes, they arise out of the most brutal circumstances. "If you will it," as Theodor Herzl famously said, "it is no dream." **INR**

Aaron Gell is a writer living in upstate New York.

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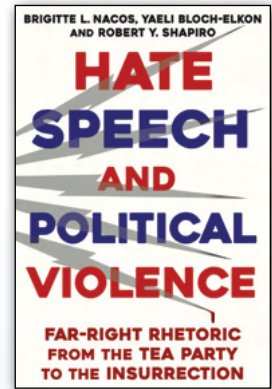
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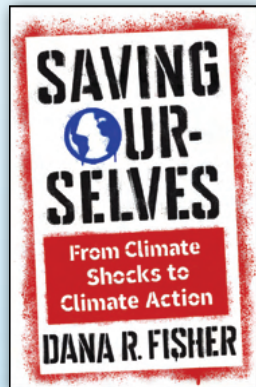
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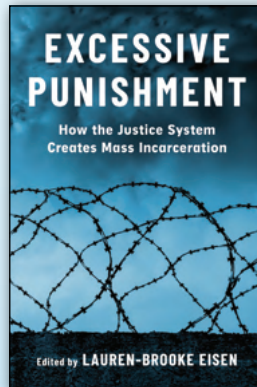
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—Louis L. Reed, Film Producer,
Council of Criminal Justice Trustee,
Executive Vice President of The Frederick Douglass Project for Justice



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—Reuben Jonathan Miller, author of *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*





1 I will not stay in a place with a "dining nook."
2 I will not stay in a place with a sectional.
3 I will not stay in a place with a stack of Taschen art books
4 on the coffee table.
5 I will not stay in a place with a stack of guidebooks to
6 Athens and Greece.
7 I will not stay in a place whose hosts begin their apartment
8 description with "Ahoy there, travelers!"
9 I will not stay in a place with a fruit display.
10 I will not stay in a place with images of a TV screen
11 displaying the Netflix logo.
12 I will not stay in a place with a rectangular bathroom sink.
13 I will not stay in a place that has a walk-in shower with
14 no door.
15 I will not stay in a place with an internal staircase that
16 has no railing.
17 I will not stay in a place that has more than two layers of
18 pillows or cushioning at the head of the bed. I will not
19 stay in a place with a wingback accent chair.
20 I will not stay in a place with marble accents. I will not
21 stay in a place with any kind of accent.
22 I will not stay in a place with a "fun" chesterfield.
23 I will not stay in a place whose couch is decorated with
24 cushions that "riff" on the design motifs of different
25 national flags.
26 I will not stay in a place with a pinball machine.
27 I will not stay in a place with wall hangings from past
28 gallery or museum exhibitions in Paris. I will not stay
29 in a place with a black-and-white image of Manhattan on
30 the wall.
31 I will not stay in a place that suggests its landlord
32 holds an interest in living in or visiting Berlin.
33 I will not stay in a place that could be described, in any
34 way, as "industrial chic." I will not stay in a place
35 with pots hanging from the kitchen ceiling.
36 I will not stay in a place whose kitchen is decorated

Death by Algorithm

Has tech plunged culture into an era of repetition and stagnation?

By Aaron Timms

IT IS THE age of signing open letters, then issuing apologies for signing them a few days later; of fretting about the effect of AI on human creativity, then boring anyone who will listen with “hilarious” responses generated from ChatGPT prompts; of whining about binge TV, then blasting through a whole season of *The White Lotus* in one night; of quitting Twitter with a melodramatic flourish, then slithering back a few months later to promote a new job or book or cause or spouse; of decrying IP’s corrosion of cinema while maintaining that *Rogue One* was “probably the best Star Wars film ever”; of ironizing about the pretentiousness of café culture while obsessing over the barista’s imperfect manipulation of the steam wand; of ritual complaints about the commodification of everything that reach their natural conclusion in the purchase of a new Eames chair for the living room. Contradictions abound; those of us who consume and participate in culture today—with our wallets, our words, our eyeballs, and our sneers—are all, at some level, hypocrites, complicit in the fortification of our own aesthetic prison.

Grousing about the state of culture in this poutily attentive mode has become something of a specialty in recent years for the nation’s critics. The professional critic takes the signature posture of the age—that curious mixture of derision and addiction, indifference and engagement, nausea and engorgement before the buffet of contemporary culture—and turns it into a career. “The present state of culture feels directionless,” wrote *The New York Times*’s critic at large Jason Farago in a

recent piece. “When I was younger, I looked at cultural works as if they were posts on a timeline, moving forward from Manet year by year. Now I find myself adrift in an eddy of cultural signs, where everything just floats, and I can only tell time on my phone.” Stagnation is said to have spread to every corner of culture: music, film, literature, even clothing. *New York* magazine fashion critic Cathy Horyn recently wrote of a “sharp slowdown in both risk and innovators” throughout the world of haute couture: “All this accounts for a feeling of sameness, that things are stuck in place.”

Farago’s *Times* colleague, columnist Ross Douthat, has gone even further, publishing an entire book on the subject of cultural sclerosis. “From the academic heights to popular bestsellers, from Christian theology to secular fashion, from political theory to pop music, a range of cultural forms and intellectual pursuits have been stuck for decades in a pattern of recurrence,” he writes in *The Decadent Society*. From the streaky heights of media tenure, the culture has been assessed and found wanting.

Cast your eyes across this burgeoning literature of cultural stagnation—now so voluminous it counts as an authentic subgenre in its own right—and you won’t find much acknowledgment of the critic’s role in all this. Is the critic’s job simply to diagnose and decry, or to point toward a more invigorating alternative? Stagnation criticism has become every bit as repetitive—in its themes and obliviousness—as the very culture it’s critiquing, reproducing some version of the same complaint from piece to piece and book to book: that today’s

movies, songs, haircuts, fonts, tables, and chairs are somehow a disappointment, that everyone now is living in some jumped-up version of an aesthetic 1993 or 1983 or 1973 or 1963, only with more trips to Portugal thrown in, a bunch of unbundled streaming subscriptions to maintain, and the need to develop an opinion on Harry Styles for some reason. We are stuck, progress has stopped, culture is bad, and it’s someone else’s fault. But whose?

THE LATEST STAFF critic to lend his voice to this chorus of cultural doom is *The New Yorker*’s Kyle Chayka. With *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture*, Chayka argues that globalization and Big Tech have stripped cultural production and consumption of their vitality and individuality. This aesthetic trampling is managed and extended, Chayka contends, through the tyrannical mechanism of the algorithm. For an artistic work to achieve commercial success, it must be engineered to maximize engagement on a digital platform, which leads to the creation of lots of things that look and sound very similar. The algorithm’s deflavorizing hold over contemporary culture caps the international flows of capital and information that followed the end of the Cold War, according to *Filterworld*: “The world is flat, per Thomas Friedman, but flatness has revealed itself to be stultifying.”

Chayka has spent much of the past decade devising labels for various aspects of algorithmic culture. In 2016, he introduced “AirSpace” as a term for the stripped-down, generic interior design aesthetic advanced by lifestyle platforms like Airbnb and Instagram; more recently, he’s written about “ambient TV,” the intellectually untaxing, Muzak-like programming of the streaming platforms (symbolized most potently by the Netflix series *Emily in Paris*), and has claimed that the widespread use of moisturizer is proof that we live in a “culture of negation.” “Filterworld” is the latest addition to the lexical roster, and it’s not entirely clear why he chose it, since algorithmic recommendations, rather than filters, are the real object of the book’s ire.

“Filterworld,” Chayka explains, “is my word for the vast, interlocking, and yet diffuse network of algorithms that influence our lives today”—and it’s the reason for our cultural immobility, for “the perception that culture is stuck and plagued by sameness.” Since they’re designed to feed the user new cultural products similar to those

already consumed, Chayka's argument goes, algos are engines for the perpetuation of homogeneity. And since most of us are addicted to our phones and the big platforms that control the social internet (Google, Amazon, Facebook, TikTok, Spotify, Airbnb, Twitter; sorry, I refuse to call it X), the version of culture we encounter daily is one that's accessible, replicable, unobtrusive, and unchallenging.

Culture today is uninteresting because that's what the algos are optimized to produce. The brilliant and restless civilization that rampaged through the second half of the twentieth century, the culture whose genius spanned the wrestling guitars of "I Saw Her Standing There" to the shoulder pads of Yves Saint Laurent, has come to a standstill. At some point over the past 30 years, we passed from a world in which Ezra Pound's old command to "make it new" held real currency to one that makes it moo: Culture today is an endless repackaging of tested tropes into the technological equivalent of chaff, mere filler to keep the grazing consumer content.

HOW DID WE get here? The story is well known: From the early 2000s onward, platforms like Facebook and YouTube opened the world of cultural production and distribution, previously a closed domain patrolled by the tastemakers of established media, to anyone with a working internet connection. As information was "democratized," to use Silicon Valley's smugly emancipatory lingo, it became cheap, indeed free—thereby destabilizing the economic relations that had traditionally underpinned cultural production.

If Chayka's "filterworld" has anything like an original artifact, it is South Korean rapper Psy's 2012 hit "Gangnam Style," a song that riffed on a series of established musical trends (the MTV-style music video, the synth-driven beats of European dance music, the global popularity of Korean pop) and found unexpected cross-cultural success via the distributional power of the YouTube algorithm. "Suddenly, via digital platforms, much of the world was watching the same thing," Chayka writes.

The point of these platforms has never been to create interesting art or nudge culture in an adventurous direction, but to attract users. Big Tech's only concept of creative value is a quantifiable one: What's good is what "does numbers," generating likes, views, shares, reactions. "Engage, engage, engage" is the mantra of platform

capitalism, where so much of what passes for culture is designed for the snap judgment, the jolt of dopamine, and the hyperemic rush rather than the contemplation, transcendence, or deep feeling that great art can unchain. The algorithm's success is to reduce the assessment of cultural quality to a question of culture's popularity: "The rule of culture in Filterworld is: Go viral or die."

Filterworld devotes several pages to discussion of the generic industrial-chic template that Instagram has helped popularize across café interiors from Kyoto to Reykjavik. Other examples of the Live-Laugh-Love-ification of aesthetics that social media has engineered are not hard to come by. Over the past 12 months, I've seen neon signs used to create "feature walls" at a potato-focused restaurant in Sydney (IT'S POTATO TIME), a gelato bar in Istanbul (GELATO YES / YOU MAYBE), and a vegan ramen stall in Los Angeles' Grand Central Market (#RICHASSBROTH: a strong candidate for the world's most unappetizing hashtag, broth-themed or otherwise).

Observations of this nature can often seem like a series of small design gripes, the online era's answer to "The food at this place is terrible—and such small portions!" But these daily infelicities contribute to a broader sense that we're living in a monoculture. Scrambling to find a place to stay on a monthlong trip to Athens in 2021, I was so repulsed by the options available on Airbnb that I made a list of reigning visual clichés I would not buy into, a liturgy of the cultural rejectionist (*I will not stay in a place with a sectional. I will not stay in a place with a stack of Taschen art books on the coffee table. I will not stay in a place with Edison bulbs, string lights, Tibetan prayer flags, or a Peloton. Etc.*). Needless to say, this did not leave me with a lot of options.

**Filterworld: How
Algorithms
Flattened Culture**
by Kyle Chayka
Doubleday,
304 pp., \$28.00

In the end, I gave up on Airbnb and spent four weeks staying at a 45 euro a night hotel whose manager offered every guest a free glass of whiskey at the start of each night. I did not regret my decision.

Algorithms don't simply shape the way culture is created; they've also established sad rituals of consumption, propelling the extremely online into undiscovered provinces of personal humiliation. Many of us are familiar with the pathetic, gnawing social need to "have a show" to discuss with friends, with the daylong festival of cowardice and shame that is the annual release of Spotify Wrapped, with the ritual of falling asleep, then much later waking, laptop open but fallen from its former perch atop the gut, to the most embarrassing words in the English language: "Are you still watching?"

CHAYKA'S BASIC THESIS is hard to dispute. Anyone who's spent time on the internet over the past decade will recognize the effects that vampiric tech platforms, with their power to structure reality both online and off, have had on culture. But culture also still exists beyond social media, a point it's easy to forget when reading *Filterworld*. Since Chayka, as a cultural critic, is professionally invested in the digital realm's numbers-to-value proposition—and reliant on it to some extent to attract readers—he's naturally inclined to regard the online realm as culture's principal arena of combat. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok all count more than one billion active monthly users, but other platforms are much smaller: Netflix and Spotify, for instance, have only 247 million and 226 million subscribers, respectively. Most of the world is not on the platforms that *Filterworld* places at the center of culture, and not every user of those platforms is addicted to them. People can and do consume traditional, nondigital culture in conventional ways all the time, a fact that *Filterworld's* framing ignores.

In the supposedly troubled waters of traditional culture, there are identifiable buoys, reasons for hope. The lunar dramas of Joanna Hogg and Claire Denis, Cyprien Gaillard's *Nightlife* and anything by Pierre Huyghe, Vladimir Sorokin's mongrel follies and the demonic prose lashings of Patricia Lockwood, the snorkeling soundscapes of Traumprinz: Are these not, in their own fields, advancing the frontiers of form? The mobile, immersive mode in which culture can be consumed today supplies its own element of novelty to these works, opening

avenues for the collision of consciousness and material reality: Anyone who's spent three hours crossing a big city by foot while feeding gauzy sheets of sound directly into their ears will know that there is something about the experience that feels utterly unique to our own time.

Some of the culture that the filterworld system has produced is also, in fact, new. We may be far from the peaks of the moon landing or *Mean Streets*, but now we have easy access to a gif of Gordon Ramsay screaming, "WHERE'S THE LAMB SAUCE!" Ours is an age of the "low" image and the degraded tape: Culture today is circular, relational, and collaborative, not teleological and hostage to the belligerent dreams of great men. The podcast, the meme, the horny chain text, and the supercut: These are among the most popular cultural forms of the era, and they're genuinely different from what's come before.

BEYOND THE UGLINESS of algorithmic culture, Chayka's problems with the digital platforms fall into roughly three categories: They make it difficult for people to develop original or unique interests, leaving them "surrounded by superabundant content, but inspired by none of it"; they reproduce gender and racial biases that are already endemic throughout society (a critique that's articulated only half-heartedly); and they induce unhealthy emotions among their users, ranging from obsession to alienation and ennui, the seemingly hypnotized lassitude that greets the next song or show or post coughed up by the feed for mindless consumption.

Chayka seems particularly exercised by the lack of transparency around the components of individual tech companies' algorithms, and there are many earnestly detailed pages setting out the injuries wrought by "algorithmic anxiety" on the platforms' users, all those algo-bruised influencers and creators of digital value unfairly bumped down the story and search rankings. We hear from café owners in Bucharest and Berlin who tailored their businesses' aesthetics to meet the demands of Instagram but have seen engagement drop following sudden and unexplained changes to the platform's algorithm. We hear from Chayka himself, bewildered and virtually aphasic one morning, after an overnight change to Spotify's user interface leaves him unable to locate a favorite album from his own music library. ("A new 'Your Library' tab in Spotify's moody black-and-green interface

Those of us who consume and participate in culture today—with our wallets, our words, our eyeballs, and our sneers—are all, at some level, hypocrites.

hinted at everything I was trying to find, but instead it opened a window of automatically generated playlists that I didn't recognize," he writes. "Nothing made sense.") We hear of the "superstitious tricks" that hosts on Airbnb have resorted to in order to stay ahead of platform updates and maintain their prominence at the top of the search feed. Won't someone think of the landlords?

"The aim of this book is not just to diagram Filterworld and discover its consequences but to deconstruct it," Chayka declares at the outset. Yet he's much more comfortable as a writer when describing the aesthetic sins of filterworld than prescribing a path out of the 'grammable morass. His ideas on this front are somewhat underdeveloped: In the book's final chapters, he calls for tighter regulation of Big Tech and a return to the "slow" pleasures of human curation, exhorting the reader to embrace local radio DJs and subscribe to digital film library the Criterion Channel, which he confusingly describes as "a vision of how the internet could work if we decided it should." (Doesn't the internet already work like this?)

Even though *Filterworld* is careful to underscore the cultural now's "general state of ennui and exhaustion, the sense that nothing new is forthcoming," Chayka does not exactly lead the charge for a wholesale reboot of contemporary culture. Instead, he often simply appears nostalgic for a bygone era of superior taste. In the book's most telling passage, Chayka describes the plot of Georges Perec's 1965 novella, *Things*, a gentle satire of consumerist trend-chasing. The novella's protagonists, a couple in their early twenties, work as marketing researchers and assemble their lives as if in response to a survey. "Perec's sketch of their fictional aspirational apartment includes jade ashtrays, cane-seated chairs,

Toile de Jouy wallpaper, Swedish lamps, and Paul Klee drawings," Chayka writes. "I admit, it still sounds nice to me today."

Is the real trouble with algorithmic culture that it's unimaginative and risk-averse, or that it's not sending us its best wallpaper? What could have been a structural critique of the material and political conditions that have dulled culture instead becomes, in *Filterworld*, a map of hurt feelings: The book's real aim is to imagine friendlier conditions for the individual consumption of tech-mediated culture rather than a better culture tout court. *Filterworld* begins as cultural criticism and ends as self-help, with its author offering himself as lifestyle coach to the world's millions of hapless culture-wanters unmoored by the savage plenty of Online, a guru of the bottomless feed.

I SHARE CHAYKA'S love of the Criterion Channel, but dropping 11 bucks a month to go deep on Chantal Akerman and John Cassavetes won't, of course, be enough to shake loose the bonds of cultural entrapment. Nor will "regulating Big Tech," that fever dream of the antitrust center left. That's not to say we shouldn't do it, but calling for a better form of platform capitalism, without other measures, seems roughly akin to halting business on the scaffold, removing the hood, and requesting a kinder executioner.

The main defect with *Filterworld* is diagnostic: A focus on Big Tech's colonization of culture obscures both the additional forces driving stagnation and the way those forces interact with technology to make the social media platforms such a formidable obstacle to cultural renewal. Is tech responsible for everything? Hollywood, the MFA industry, and America's unequal education system, which makes

the kind of deep instruction needed to engage meaningfully with the canon today available to only the very rich, surely bear just as much responsibility for our intellectually flattened times as the warped incentives of the BookTok reel do.

The big platforms have benefited from good timing, planting their flags in cultural terra firma at the exact moment when economic inequality and the distance between political elites and voters are at their widest since the Gilded Age, and the misalignments of rentier capitalism—handing a greater and greater share of wealth to asset owners—mean those gaps are only likely to grow. The collision of asset inflation with consumer technology’s incomparable distributional powers makes culture, as it’s exhibited online, both a powerful motor of social emulation (we want what they have) and a kind of consolation prize, a false democratizer for an unequal age. The playing field in actually existing capitalism may be scandalously uneven, but the online mediation of culture (in truth more an interruption) helps us all nourish a fantasy of equality at the level of creation. *Il faut être absolument online.*

Cultural stagnation does not spring solely from Silicon Valley’s manipulation of our habits of thought and action. It reflects much deeper issues at work in politics, the economy, social mores, and demographics, a point that Douhat makes convincingly in *The Decadent Society*. America today is a paranoid, senescent old monster. Life expectancy and birth rates are falling; our governing institutions are as leaky and unreliable as the New York City subway; cheap rent, the historic precondition of artistic adventure, has all but disappeared from the country’s major urban centers; productivity growth is stuck in first gear; and for all the blather about “de-risking” and the return of industrial policy, the state remains a passenger in the economic life of the nation, which remains overwhelmingly market-first and corporate-tender.

The Stagnation Generation (anyone under 30, let’s say) is simultaneously overpoliced and unbound from almost all the taboos that shackled its generational predecessors. This strangely unfree freedom deprives young people of the social friction that gave culture much of its edge and momentum through the closing decades of the last century, while saddling them with a pervasive insecurity that’s damaging to whatever instincts to artistic bravery might

have survived the great migration online. You only have to look at the recent revival of smoking, postwar America’s most timid, normie lifestyle vice, as a form of youthful transgression to understand that we live in a culture that has no gods left to slay.

SO: NOWHERE TO go? I’m not so sure. Reading the stagnationist literature can often make us feel as if tech has won the future, that software really has, as Silicon Valley’s resident fluffer Marc Andreessen once predicted it would, eaten the world. But the success of companies like Facebook and Snapchat and Uber and Airbnb surely illustrates the opposite: that Big Tech is an industry with few genuinely innovative ideas, forced by falling rates of profit and the slowdown in research and development to hunt small game among the incumbents of the TV, media, taxi, and hotel industries.

Silicon Valley’s sequestration of cultural life is not preordained. Culture has felt stuck before; indeed, there’s a version of cultural history since the nineteenth century that could be told as the chronicle of various artists’ encounters with—and eventual defeats of—supposedly insuperable creative barriers. So intimidating and massive was the symphonic output of Beethoven that the generation of composers who came after him felt, as Richard Wagner declared in 1849, that “the last symphony has already been written.” But history tumbled on, nationalism and bourgeois liberalism took the stage, and the symphony did not wither away but reinvented itself, multiplying through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into an exotic variety of guises that served ideologies as divergent as socialist realism and Finnish revivalism. Culture is always made, and never given.

At the core of cultural stagnation is “entanglement,” writes Douhat—“meaning the way that the economic, demographic, intellectual, and cultural elements of our predicament are all connected, so that you can’t just pick out a single cause or driver of stagnation or repetition, or solve the problem with a narrow focus on one area or issue.” Stagnation is an omnibus phenomenon requiring omnibus solutions—a flooding of the political, economic, and intellectual zone. This totalizing strategy feels appropriate to our interstitial times, caught in a wasting neoliberalism and rocked by exogenous shocks (the pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the death

of George Floyd) that have accelerated new forms of action and thought (work from home, decarbonization, the cross-examination of the carceral state and liberal interventionism). The escape from cultural inertia will inevitably respond to policy, but more important than any bullet-point program will be a revival in culture’s own sense of self, its charisma—precisely the quality whose absence makes the work of stagnationist critics like Chayka feel so wan and underseasoned.

Culture, in the literature of stagnation, can often feel subordinate to higher forces, a mere appendage to whatever’s going on in government or the tech sector or the economy. But if the past two centuries teach us anything, it’s that politics, material reality, and culture are co-constitutive, that new forms of sociality and meaning owe as much, possibly more, to the freaks and haircuts of the artistic scene as they do to the suits and adults of the establishment. The utopian experiments of the twentieth century are inconceivable without the social awakening touched off by works like Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s 1771 novel, *The Year 2440*, or Edward Bellamy’s 1888 fantasy, *Looking Backward*. Italy’s postwar passage from laboratory of the left to neoliberal retirement home is a story told through the transition from Nanni Balestrini to Italo disco. Shinzo Abe springs, seemingly fully formed, from the work of Yukio Mishima; dad rock and reality TV invented Javier Milei. Culture is not the ward of technology; it *is* technology, a miracle of transformation that allows us to see and experience a different world.

How can culture escape the doldrums of algorithmic capitalism? Through social housing, an expanded role for the state, the energy transition, fresh imagination in political thought, a new spirit of conflict between society’s owners and nonowners: all of that, yes, and (why not?) through stiffer regulation of the tech platforms as well. But what’s needed more than anything else, I think, is for culture—in the way that critics discuss it, institutions present it, and artists produce it—to recover a sense of its own historical importance. That means complete immersion in culture, the culturization of everything, the rediscovery of culture’s vocation as the motor of history rather than the scenery we all pass on the way to whatever is next. **IN**

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In the Beginning

Marilynne Robinson treats Genesis like a perfectly plotted historical novel.

By Briallen Hopper

WHAT IS THERE still to say about a text that is thousands of years old and has been translated into over 700 languages? That has been painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, carved in marble, filmed on celluloid, and built in Lego? That has perplexed Kant and Kierkegaard? That has given rise to several world religions and countless books and articles and sermons, not to mention the Flood Experience, an Illinois tourist attraction where visitors can climb aboard a replica of Noah's ark to learn more about "the chaos flooding the world today"?

Grappling with the vast cultural legacy of Genesis is a potentially infinite task, and in *Reading Genesis*, Marilynne Robinson doesn't attempt it. Instead of positioning herself amid the crowded field of Genesis readers throughout the ages, she writes almost as if she is alone in the formless void that preceded the first day of Creation. For well over 200 pages, she doesn't mention a single other modern reader of Genesis by name. Not one translator, theologian,

historian, or biblical scholar from the past thousand years; not even a fellow novelist. At first, I thought she was going to make it all the way through without citing anyone since late antiquity, but then a few pages from the end she briefly mentions Melville and Shakespeare.

In a way, *Reading Genesis* can be seen as a tour de force demonstration of the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*—the belief that Scripture is the only infallible authority, and any believer is equipped to read it for themselves without undue deference to external authorities or sources. There is a kind of self-reliant, unapologetic grandeur in Robinson's declaration on the first page that the Bible "is a work of theology, not simply a primary text upon which theology is based"—in other words, the Bible interprets itself—and her subsequent assertion that the so-called books of Moses are not (as scholars believe) a patchwork of distinct, divergent source texts but instead are a stable and unified whole characterized

by "a profound coherency." These claims are neither argued for nor bolstered with sources but simply stated as truth. Like "Let there be light," they aim to evoke illumination through the sheer creative power of a well-wrought sentence.

In another way, though, *Reading Genesis* is the opposite of *sola scriptura* in that it is literally Scripture bound to human commentary. Each copy consists of a 228-page essay by Robinson followed by the entire 112-page text of Genesis in the King James Version, a commentary to text ratio of nearly two to one. Her extended reflection on Genesis functions as a long and reverent introduction, taking on some of the sanctity of Scripture from its intimate proximity to it. Robinson is the opening act for God.

This is a role she has been preparing to play for a while. As a work of biblical commentary, *Reading Genesis* might be a departure from the historical novels and collections of essays that she is known for, but it is also a natural next step. *Housekeeping*, her first novel, is shot through with biblical allusions, and her four Gilead novels are explicitly religious, revolving around the family, friends, and spiritual musings of John Ames, a Congregationalist pastor in midcentury Iowa. Robinson herself is a lay preacher, and her essays often have a sermonic quality. As a highly acclaimed, commercially successful literary writer who identifies strongly and publicly as a Christian and whose books are suffused with religious belief, she occupies a unique place in American culture today. Her work attracts a set of audiences that seldom converge: secular or non-Christian fiction-lovers, who often read her quiet, meditative novels with something like religious reverence; mainline liberal Protestants like herself, members of a once dominant but now declining demographic increasingly sidelined since the rise of the religious right; and theologically traditional evangelicals, who find a lot to relate to in her Calvinist preoccupations and her loving depictions of Midwestern ministers.

All these readers look to Robinson for a certain kind of book that no one else provides—gracious, grave, radiant, and revelatory, with a distinctly anachronistic tinge. She has been writing semisacred texts for over 40 years, and her take on the ultimate sacred text in her tradition, the origin of it all, is fervent and expansive yet also remarkably unyielding, even dogmatic.

BEHOLDEN NEITHER TO scholars nor fundamentalists (two groups explicitly

dismissed in the jacket copy), Robinson fashions a version of Genesis that fits beautifully with her own fiction. Of course, in some ways it fits so beautifully because her fiction has so clearly been written under its influence. Like Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*, Robinson revels in the realism of much of the Hebrew Bible compared to other ancient tales. Its family stories are not epics, and its humans are not heroes; its primary settings are not legendary battlefields or idealized pastoral retreats but the domestic dwellings and workplaces of ordinary daily life: tents, cooking fires, watering holes. Yet its narratives are no less significant on this account. On the contrary, as Auerbach observes, “The sublime influence of God here reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable”—a claim that many critics have made almost verbatim about Robinson’s novels.

But Robinson’s version of Genesis—like the patriarchal family story she tells in the Gilead books—is much milder than most versions of the Hebrew Bible. Robinson writes that “these tales of the patriarchs are notably human in scale, gentle, even domestic,” an emphasis on gentleness that sets her apart. Whereas Auerbach describes the Old Testament as obscure, abrupt, with gaps and ambiguities giving rise to a multiplicity of interpretations, Robinson is more likely to discern a quietly understated truth. She even succeeds in giving these Middle Eastern stories a hint of Midwestern flavor. I was especially struck by her repeated use of the words “tact” and “restraint” to describe the behavior of God and the patriarchs—not terms I had previously associated with them.

This placidity extends even to her accounts of the less realistic, more mythical tales of the Creation and the Flood. Robinson favorably contrasts the “infinite serenity” of the biblical Creation myth, with its calm proclamation of “let there be ... and there was,” to the terror and violence of Babylonian origin stories. And instead of reading the Flood as a tale of divine anger à la *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, she reads it as a life-affirming second creation—an occasion when God could have ended humankind entirely but instead mercifully promised to preserve us in perpetuity. In other ancient stories, she claims, gods are “volatile, impulsive, but also needy” (a description that sounds a lot like many readers’ experience of the God of the Hebrew Bible). But in her gentle Genesis, God is good, and so is the world.

This is not to say that Robinson ignores the darkness and complexity of Genesis. On the contrary, she foregrounds it, making it central to what she sees as the purpose of Genesis and the Bible as a whole. She opens her book with a series of bold statements about the theological work that she sees the Bible—including Genesis—as doing:

The Bible is a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil. This being true, it must take account of things as they are. It must acknowledge in a meaningful way the darkest aspects of the reality we experience, and it must reconcile them with the goodness of God and of Being itself against which this darkness stands out so sharply.

There is a lot to grapple with here. A resistant reader might balk at the coercive quality of “This being true,” which asserts rather than persuades, and the series of “musts” that follow. (Since when is the Bible a single unified text with one overarching theological preoccupation? Must a meditation on a famously intractable problem result in a successful reconciliation of opposites? When did we agree that God and Being itself are good? Or, for that matter, that God exists?) For some of us, it’s easy to get caught up in objections. But once disbelief is suspended, *Reading Genesis* can be appreciated on its own terms as a serene and stalwart statement of faith, and perhaps as a kind of ancient prequel to the Gilead novels, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as distant ancestors of the Ames family.

Robinson believes that Genesis responds to the problem of evil by subordinating evil to goodness. In her words, it “establishes a profound and essential assertion of the sacred good, making pangs and toil a secondary reality, likewise the pu-

nitive taking of life.” She sees this gracious message in the narrative sequence of the Fall, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel, as well as in the stories of the patriarchs and their descendants. Her summary of the book’s message has a downright New Testament flavor: “Grace modifies law. Law cannot limit grace.”

MAKING THE CASE for God, grace, and goodness with Genesis might seem like an uphill battle. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* presents its retelling of the first few chapters of Genesis as an attempt to “justify the ways of God to men,” but readers often see Satan as the sympathetic breakout star of the poem. It’s often easier to root for an underdog, and an overwhelmingly powerful God will never be that. But Robinson is determined to tell biblical stories in a way that presents God in a glowing light—even the famously fraught story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah.

This story has been a stumbling block for generations of readers—a classic dramatization of the problem of evil. Why would a good God command Abraham to sacrifice his son? Why would he make Abraham go through the agonizing process of binding Isaac and laying him on the altar and raising a knife to kill him? Why torture the father; why terrorize the child? Granted, God relents before Isaac is murdered, but why is any of it necessary?

Existentially inclined readers have interpreted the story of the Binding of Isaac as a model of utter submission to divine authority, even when that authority seems inscrutable or immoral. In contrast, Robinson chooses to follow the more comfortable tradition of interpreting it as a pointed condemnation of child sacrifice that demonstrates God’s superiority to the kind of gods who would *actually* demand a dead child. Despite appearances, the God of Genesis is not cruel but kind—not just better than the Babylonians but more compassionate than the Carthaginians:

If the story of the binding of Isaac is cruel, the cruelty it exposes plagued the lives of those who felt compelled to sacrifice children, whether Carthaginians or those unspecified others who are mentioned among the idolators of that world. The one God, Elohim, might have mourned this suffering and chosen to correct this misapprehension of His nature and His will.

Reading Genesis
by Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
352 pp., \$29.00

This tenderhearted God intervenes to provide not only an alternative sacrifice—the ram in the bush—but an alternative and merciful ethic: “The plain statement of the tale is that the Lord does not want the sacrifice of a child.” Zooming out to what she calls “a God’s-eye view,” Robinson focuses not on a temporarily traumatized Abraham and Isaac but on the thousands of parents and children who were “spared a profound, self-inflicted misery” of child sacrifice because of the story: “the seeming cruelty toward Abraham is compassion toward those great nations who learned from him or modeled their piety on his.”

Robinson’s interpretation here exemplifies two literary approaches to Genesis she relies on throughout her book. First, she reads Genesis as a carefully constructed “counterstatement” and corrective to non-biblical narratives. (At times, her repeated insistence on the exceptionalism and superiority of Hebrew versus non-Hebrew texts verges on a troubling chauvinism.) And second, she reads individual stories in the context of what she calls “providential history,” an overarching view in which, for example, the enslavement of the Hebrew tribes is “divinely intended,” and slavery’s attendant sorrow and cruelty are part of a larger purpose that becomes clear only when it is told as part of a longer story, generations later:

Over time, the biblical narrative inverts the apparent meaning of the suffering.... Grueling misfortune prepares for singular favor, difficult favor, whose main product and proof might be the narratives that record and interpret this history.

Robinson’s redemptive account of predestined suffering is a standard Calvinist doctrine, but I was struck by the self-referential, self-contained, almost wholly literary quality of how she phrases it. A biblical character’s singular, difficult reward for suffering is that ... they end up in the Bible! “The text itself,” she tells us, “is a gracious and divine act.”

There’s a smoothness and elegance in Robinson’s view of biblical narrative, if perhaps also a slightly claustrophobic quality. The Bible is like a perfectly plotted historical novel. Nothing is unintended; nothing is wasted; everything tends toward the same predestined end. At times, I found Robinson’s readings fascinating to watch as feats of consummate control, like

dressage. Other times I wanted to cut the reins and watch the text gallop away.

Perhaps it makes sense that some of my favorite parts of the book are the rare occasions when the Sunday school voice slips a little: when Robinson casually disses Isaac as “the least interesting of all the patriarchs,” or when she gives into her unrestrained exasperation with Rebekah, whom she sees as a whiner. Robinson writes with apparent disapproval that “Rebekah, alone in Scripture, laments the discomforts of her pregnancy”; “But she was pregnant with twins!” I want to protest. I was stunned when I read, “Though the text says that Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob, there is really no evidence that she loved anyone.” Robinson’s dislike of Rebekah trumps her faith in the reliability of Scripture! But not for long. Perhaps feeling she has gone too far, Robinson defensively allows that, although it might be “bad feminism” to criticize Rebekah, her role in the story was nonetheless providential, and that “should give hope to us all.”

The most frustrating parts of the book are places where Robinson is so committed to her version of Genesis that she cannot allow an iota of room for any other interpretation, no matter how urgently it is needed. This is especially evident in her reading of Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian woman who is impregnated by Abraham when her mistress, Sarah, Abraham’s wife, can’t conceive. Sarah abuses her, and she flees, but God sends her back into servitude. Later, after Sarah has her own child, Isaac, Abraham sends Hagar and her son, Ishmael, into exile in the desert where they face death alone, but God saves their lives. For decades, feminist and womanist scholars have claimed Hagar as an anti-patriarchal figure. Phyllis Trible reads her story as a “text of terror” showing the evil at the heart of the patriarchal narrative; Delores S. Williams sees it as a revelation of “the faith, hope, and struggle with which an African slave woman worked through issues of survival, surrogacy, motherhood, rape, homelessness and economic and sexual oppression.... Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side.”

Without directly engaging these scholars, Robinson strenuously resists such readings, insisting that Ishmael’s conception was not rape (“this was a recognized form of surrogacy at the time, formally and properly arranged”), and that

Hagar’s Egyptianness is irrelevant to her mistreatment (“there is no reason to think of Hagar’s ethnicity as stigmatizing”). “Readers can feel that Hagar is unvalued because she is a woman, a maid, a foreigner....,” Robinson writes dismissively, “but what actually matters is the value the *text* finds in her.” The value that the text finds in her, according to Robinson, is that she shows the laudable inclusivity of God’s covenant with Abraham: Hagar and Ishmael are part of Abraham’s family tree, proving that “it can absorb and naturalize outsiders.” In passages like these, I wondered what *Reading Genesis* would have been like if Robinson had allowed herself to open up her project to more secondary sources: to the attention to Genesis’s heterogeneity, history, politics, and poetics that scholarship could supply.

Ultimately, though, Robinson requires a coherently good Genesis, and in *Reading Genesis* that is what she delivers: a throwback text that puts on critical blinders to single-mindedly defend the much-maligned “Old Testament God.” Though it is an illuminating read for any Robinson fan, it will probably be most satisfying to readers who share her theological commitments. Others may prefer to find Genesis in her novels instead: in the fateful flood in *Housekeeping*; in the mark-of-Cain scar on Jack’s face in *Jack*; in Glory’s wistful musings about Scripture in *Home*:

During the years she lived alone she had read the Bible morning and evening ... to remember who she was, to remember the household she came from, to induce in herself the unspecific memory of a comfort she had not really been conscious of until she left it behind.... What a strange old book it was.

Robinson’s fiction makes some space for the strangeness of Scripture, even as her biblical commentary attempts to domesticate it, offering the cold comfort of consistency in lieu of awe. But despite her best efforts, her readers may still find themselves unsettled by the cryptic power of these ancient stories. In *Reading Genesis*, Robinson’s voice eventually gives way to the Bible, and the “strange old book” gets the last word. **IN**

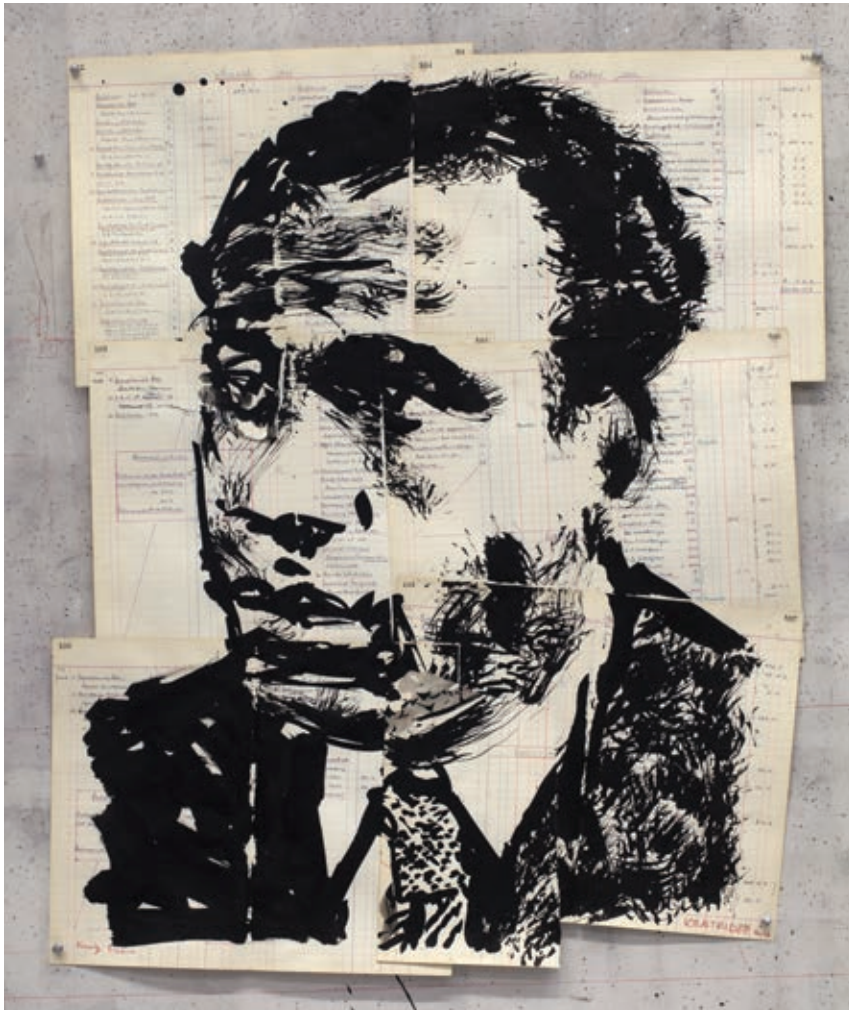
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Breaking Free

Frantz Fanon's vision of liberation was forged in a life of serial reinvention.

By Erik Linstrum

ARTWORK BY WILLIAM KENTRIDGE



NEAR THE END of *The Battle of Algiers*, the 1966 film directed by Italian leftist Gillo Pontecorvo, crowds waving flags and chanting slogans surge into the streets of the Algerian capital. The scene is set on December 11, 1960. President Charles de Gaulle was visiting France's prized Mediterranean colony, when apparently spontaneous demonstrations revived an anti-colonial movement that had seemed on the verge of military defeat. Confronted with the persistence of popular support for the National Liberation Front and facing a rising tide of criticism at the United Nations, de Gaulle soon afterward opened negotiations that would lead, eventually, to Algerian independence in 1962.

Pontecorvo's fluid camerawork in the protest scenes conveys a sense of irrepressible movement, in contrast with the restricted mobility earlier imposed by French forces. Counterinsurgency in *The Battle of Algiers* is above all a matter of keeping people in place: maintaining checkpoints and barbed-wire borders between the European and "native" quarters; driving insurgents into ever more constricted, often underground hideouts; and, most literally, shackling bodies in prison cells and torture chambers. The triumph of anti-colonialism is, conversely, a festival of free movement. In Pontecorvo's version of December 11, protesters flood into the well-ordered neighborhoods inhabited by European settlers and dance joyously in the face of menacing soldiers. Reclaiming space, dissolving boundaries, and breaking free from physical constraint are portrayed as prerequisites to political independence.

Pontecorvo's vision owed a great deal to the radical psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon. In some of the most famous passages of his most famous work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon wrote of the colonial subject as "a being hemmed in."

The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing.

Decolonization for Fanon was a process of transforming dreams of mobility into reality. It was also, inevitably and not entirely regrettably, a violent process. The stark dichotomy of the colony—"a world cut in two,"

UNTITLED (FRANTZ FANON), 2016; INDIAN INK ON FOUND PAGES, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GOODMAN GALLERY

between the tightly circumscribed zones of the colonizer and the colonized—was defended by force and could only be dismantled by force. Although the fast-moving coda of the film elides the body count, more than 100 people were killed and hundreds more injured in the events of December 1960. Writing at just this moment, Fanon observed that the violence of colonial rule “will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters” and brings about the abolition of the colonial world.

No one did more than Fanon (and, perhaps, Pontecorvo) to make decolonization the new master narrative of the left in the 1960s. At a moment when European radicals, losing patience with the reactionary tendencies of the working classes at home, shifted their hopes to the masses of the so-called Third World, Fanon succeeded in refashioning the Algerian story into a universal fable of revolutionary possibility: dispossessed against privileged, slave against master, Black against white. As Adam Shatz traces in his new biography of Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* spread across the world within a few years of its appearance, “read in Spanish by Latin American guerrillas in a Cuban translation commissioned by Che Guevara; in English, by ANC rebels in South Africa; in Portuguese, by anti-colonial fighters in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique; in Farsi, by Iranian Marxists and Islamic revolutionaries; and, not least, in Arabic, by Palestinian fedayeen in training camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.” Even Black Panthers in the United States would take inspiration from Fanon, finding parallels between the casbah and the ghetto.

Unlike many of the thinkers read by insurgents half a century ago, Fanon remains hugely influential today. When radicals (and would-be radicals) issue calls for “decolonization,” they are invoking Fanon’s vision of liberation through the dismantling of privileged enclaves. One reason for his continuing appeal is that he can be read in so many different ways: as a proponent of political violence and a chronicler of its destructiveness; as a spokesman for Black identity and a critic of its limitations; as a visionary of postcolonial utopia and a Cassandra of postcolonial failure.

But there is another explanation for Fanon’s durability. While some of his contemporaries made similar arguments about the lived experience of oppression and the warping effects of colonialism, Fanon did

so from the perspective of a practicing psychiatrist. In treating patients who were often severely disturbed, he was able to see abstractions about the harm inflicted by racism and empire as flesh-and-blood realities. It was the imperative to heal that infused his politics with such urgency. We still read Fanon because he diagnosed the disease and worked for a cure.

FANON’S IDEAS WERE forged in a life of serial self-reinvention. From the Caribbean, to Europe, to North Africa, to sub-Saharan Africa, he sought new identities out of frustration with the limits imposed by old ones. Resisting the blood-and-soil nationalisms and sectarian tribalisms that loomed large in his lifetime, he treated identity as plural and changeable. With varying degrees of ambivalence at different stages of his life, he considered himself West Indian, French, Algerian, and African, making him a conspicuously cosmopolitan or postmodern subject.

The Caribbean island colony of Martinique provides the starting point for Fanon’s journey not only in the obvious sense that he was born there in 1925, but also because he was haunted from an early age by a sense of his country’s political inadequacy. In contrast to Haiti, where slaves freed themselves by force in the great revolution of 1791–1804, emancipation came to Martinique in 1848 at the hands of a white savior, the liberal French minister Victor Schoelcher. A statue of him loomed over Fanon’s hometown, the capital, Fort-de-France (until it was torn down amid the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020).

Fanon’s fear of a failed or incomplete decolonization grew after 1946, when—with the support of the Martinican poet-statesman Aimé Césaire—Martinique and three other “old colonies” were not granted independence, but rather reclassified as “overseas departments” with the same political status as mainland France. Eventually breaking with Césaire and several West African leaders who saw a continued French connection as a lifeline for needed resources, Fanon resented the persistence of paternalism.

But even though he would fault Martinique for failing to liberate itself from France and Frenchness, he remained personally attached to both. Commitment to republican ideals prompted him to volunteer for Free French forces during World War II, when a Vichyite regime, the Tan Robé, intensified the racism and brutality of colonial rule on the island. Military service brought Fanon’s first exposure to

the world-shattering violence of combat; his first glimpse of North Africa, where the anti-Black prejudices of the Arab population presaged future tensions; and the first fruits of his status as an *évolué*, an educated Caribbean subject who ranked higher in the imperial hierarchy than the West African soldiers known as *tirailleurs sénégalais*. Rather than resettling in his “native land,” as the title of Césaire’s 1939 poem *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* had it, Fanon after the war returned to Martinique only briefly before deciding to pursue medical studies in France. His cauterizing wartime encounters with French racism—including, most painfully, the refusal of local women to dance with Black soldiers at a Liberation celebration in Toulon—only sharpened his determination to claim the rights and privileges of French citizenship. “We refuse to be treated as outsiders,” Fanon wrote a few years later. “We are well and truly part of French history and its drama.”

One of the more provocative elements of Shatz’s account is the suggestion that a residue of republican universalism, overlaid with existential and Marxist universalisms, left Fanon with a lasting “defiance of identity’s claims.” Fanon was, of course, well aware of the hypocrisies lurking within high-flown rhetoric of equality, and disdainful of naïvely color-blind ideologies that ignored the necessity of racial struggle. His first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), contained a searing indictment of misguided Francophilia, hopeless mimicry, and pathological self-loathing among his fellow West Indians. But Fanon also insisted on defining race as a product of material inequality rather than as an innate condition: “The black problem is not just about Blacks living among Whites, but about the black man exploited, enslaved, and despised by a colonialist and capitalist society that happens to be white.” Fanon would come to reject the *Négritude* espoused by Césaire and others, because it risked essentializing Blackness as a comfortable, even nostalgic, refuge rather than mobilizing it as a weapon of the weak.

A strength of *The Rebel’s Clinic* is the meticulous charting of the schools and figures that influenced Fanon’s thought. Fanon was an intellectual bricoleur, and his eclectic tendencies are especially conspicuous in *Black Skin, White Masks*, with its abundant references to *Négritude* as well as phenomenology, clinical psychiatry, psychoanalysis (in its Freudian, Jungian, Lacanian, and Adlerian variants), films, novels, folktales, and comic books. Perhaps most significant,

Decolonization for Fanon was a process of transforming dreams of mobility into reality. It was also, inevitably and not entirely regrettably, a violent process.

he interpreted his experiences of everyday racism while a medical student—including the famous incident in a Lyons train carriage when a little boy shouted, “Look, *maman*, a *nègre*!”—through the prism of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings on the embodied nature of perception. Blackness, according to Fanon, was constructed through the hostile gaze of others. He argued that Black people internalize the fear, loathing, and fascination that their appearance provokes in white onlookers, substituting an inherited burden of racial alienation for the freedom of authentic selfhood.

This argument bore close affinities to two contemporary accounts, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), which both traced the identities of oppressed groups to the stereotypical projections imposed on them. These parallels underscore the capacious possibilities of solidarity in Fanon’s thought—though, as Shatz notes, Fanon was always far more generous about acknowledging his debts to Sartre than to de Beauvoir.

Fanon was not alone, either, in asking what colonialism did to the unconscious mind. Two other Francophone writers in the 1950s—a colonial official in Madagascar turned Lacanian analyst, Octave Mannoni, and a left-wing Tunisian Jew, Albert Memmi—produced their own binary narratives of the colonizer and the colonized locked in a psychological drama shaped by fantasy, insecurity, and the drive to dominate. What set Fanon on a more radical path was his encounter with North African migrant workers as patients in France. Voicing fears of imminent death, they reported diffuse aches and pains, fluttering heartbeats, splitting headaches—ailments dismissed by white doctors as imaginary. Fanon, rather than ascribing these complaints to hysteria or malingering, observed that Arab workers

in France had to endure “a perpetual state of insecurity”: separated from their families and other meaningful relationships, isolated from French society, and offered little support or sympathy from the French state whose citizenship they nominally enjoyed. Their symptoms were the symptoms of a thoroughgoing dehumanization, a plight both exemplified and compounded by the callous incomprehension of the French medical establishment. Just as the Algerian independence movement gained much of its strength from Algerians based in France, Fanon first came to appreciate the insidious trauma of colonialism during his time there, at the center of empire.

EVEN SO, THERE is no reason to think that Fanon and his wife, a white Frenchwoman named Josie, had revolution on their minds when they left mainland France for Algeria in 1953. While he could be counted a successful example of “assimilation” in many ways, neither his psychiatric nor his literary career had achieved overwhelming success. His prospects, like those of many

other upwardly mobile Frenchmen, simply looked brighter on the other side of the Mediterranean. “Few people in France,” Shatz observes, “imagined at the time that a war of national liberation was imminent.” Here was the origin of the jibe, which circulated later among his comrades in the National Liberation Front, or FLN, who were resentful of his celebrity, that Fanon owed more to the Algerian Revolution than it owed to him. While he would eventually put his life in the service of the uprising that broke out in 1954, running grave risks as doctor, publicist, and ambassador for the FLN, he would always remain something of an outsider. As a French-educated Black man and secular intellectual who spoke little Arabic, he stood at odds with the Islamic and Arab nationalist currents within the independence movement and tended to overlook their significance in his writings.

Yet it was his anomalous background that made him both a perceptive observer of and a creative participant in the Algerian struggle. Steeped in the Caribbean heritage of plantation slavery, he saw that the extraction of labor and accumulation of wealth by force lay at the heart of empire everywhere. Used to challenging authority figures as he moved from place to place—his own father; Césaire; Sartre—he set about dismantling the authoritarian customs of the Blida-Joinville mental hospital outside Algiers, loosening patients’ isolation from the outside world and from one another. He encouraged them to socialize and engage in culturally meaningful pastimes as part of what he called “social therapy,” even installing a Moorish café for the use of his Muslim patients. He also set up a covert clinic for the treatment of FLN fighters and allowed FLN leaders to use the hospital for meetings.

Shatz is perhaps a bit too eager to cast Fanon as a forerunner of anti-psychiatry, the later movement that saw madness as a form of tragic knowledge and aimed at emptying out the asylums. He was, after all, an enthusiastic practitioner of electroshock therapy (a grim irony in light of the French army’s use of torture by electrocution on Algerian prisoners). More persuasive is the suggestion that shock therapy came to function as a political metaphor for Fanon, an extension of his faith in self-making through physical action. Like the jolts from the electrode, Shatz writes, violent resistance could offer “an exhilarating rush of self-confidence and energy that exploded the North African syndrome of depression and helplessness.” Later, in exile in Tunis,

The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon

by Adam Shatz
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
464 pp., \$32.00

Fanon would employ equally heavy-handed methods—administering large doses of insulin and neuroleptics to induce comalike sleep—to restore insurgents to health in advance of their return to the battlefield.

The oracular status Fanon retains among academics and activists today has a way of obscuring his more questionable pronouncements. The relentless Manichaeism of *The Wretched of the Earth* is in many ways a misleading guide to a conflict that saw deep and violent divisions *within* the colonized camp: between the FLN and rival anti-colonial movements; between FLN insurgents on the ground, “the forces of the interior,” and the exiled FLN command who amassed “an army of the frontiers” in Tunisia and Morocco; between Arabs and Berbers; between Algerians fighting on the French side (known as the *harkis*) and those fighting against it. Of course, Fanon was writing a manifesto, not history or journalism; he simplified in order to dramatize and expose any quest for compromise as illusory. Yet other parts of *The Wretched of the Earth*—including, most notoriously, his ode to landless peasants as the messianic vanguard of world revolution—have aged even less well.

The book is perhaps best read today not as a playbook for revolt but as a conflicted reflection on it. Beginning with an argument for the cathartic and constructive possibilities of violence, it ends with a series of psychiatric case studies that examine its devastating effects on French torturers and Algerian fighters alike. As Shatz notes, the tension mirrors Fanon’s cross-pressured role within the movement: “In his role as a spokesman for the FLN, Fanon dutifully presented a heroic image of the Algeria Revolution. But as a doctor, he was dressing the psychic wounds of Algeria’s soldiers, bearing witness to the kinds of horror that nationalist fables are designed to make us forget.” It is bleakly unsurprising that conservative elements in the FLN could co-opt his ideas about the peasantry into an official ideology while discarding his warnings about the authoritarian potential of anti-colonial movements.

FANON DID NOT live to witness the extraordinary global career of his book. He died of leukemia in a Bethesda, Maryland, hospital at the age of 36, a few weeks after *The Wretched of the Earth* was published. He was thus deprived of the opportunity to enjoy his ever-growing stature in the years that followed. He was also spared seeing many of his bleakest premonitions for a world after

empire come true: the self-serving enrichment of postcolonial elites, the repressive redirection of insurgent discipline, the retreat into ethnic and sectarian exclusivism.

The Rebel’s Clinic does not reveal a strikingly different Fanon than does David Macey’s deeply researched *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (2000). But it delivers a smoother, often engrossing, narrative, one that deserves to be the first stop for anyone looking for an introduction to Fanon’s life and work. Calls to “decolonize” today are Fanonian in the sense that Fanon understood decolonization as a process, not an event, and one of such world-historical significance that hierarchies and inequalities of all kinds would be called into question. For Fanon, struggles against racial subjugation,

economic exploitation, and military occupation were necessarily linked. But—and this is an irony Shatz underlines—Fanon never wanted to see the heroic moment of the independence struggle frozen in amber. A modernist by temperament and ideology, he prized liberation from the burdens of the past in service of a higher goal: as he put it in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “to invent the total man whose triumph Europe has been incapable of realizing.” Whatever a Fanonian future might look like, it has not arrived yet. **NR**

Erik Linstrum is an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Age of Emergency: Living With Violence at the End of the British Empire and Ruling Minds: Psychology in the British Empire*.

However Cool

by Rachel Hadas

However cool X may have thought he was
made very little difference in the end.
We are transformed as we approach the close.

Everyone is subject to these laws.
Ozymandias collapsed in sand,
however cool he may have thought he was.

We live in structures—marriage, job, or house—
steered steadily toward an unknown land,
slyly transfigured as we near the close,

additions and subtractions dealt by whose
enormous unseen hand?
However cool Y may have thought Z was,

her freshness faded like a poet’s rose,
malady no medicine can mend
disguising her before she reached the close.

Think of it as time; a veiled command;
a principle: *I do not give. I lend.*
However cool we might have thought A was,
we all are changed as we approach the close.

Rachel Hadas is author, most recently, of *Ghost Guest: Poems*. Her next book, *From Which We Start Awake*, will be published in 2025.



Playing Changes

Percival Everett's droll, laconic, uncategorizable fictions

By Gene Seymour

PERCIVAL EVERETT IS a compulsive problem solver who doesn't care much whether he ultimately arrives at a solution. As he told *Paris Review* seven years ago, "I start with something that bugs me, some philosophical problem, and then I look for a way to explore it." Many readers and not a few reviewers have found this tendency exasperating, especially those who find Everett's fiction inscrutably, even perversely, unresolved. Process is what matters most to him, and even if the jokes he tells don't always carry a punch line, the poker face he maintains throughout the telling is transfixing. If you can hang with him, the open-endedness of Everett's philosophical novels is an added dividend, if not a major attraction.

Come to think: Are they *philosophical novels*, or are they *novels with philosophy in them*? Don't expect an easy answer, because such questions, whether raised by the author or the reader, are part of the point—and the fun—of Everett's fiction. His novels are laconic and droll in tone, but that's almost all they have in common with one another. He has, in jazz parlance, played changes on Greek mythology, as in 1990's

For Her Dark Skin, a witty rejiggering of the Medea and Jason story, and 1997's *Frenzy*, an up-close-and-personal view of the wild man of the gods, Dionysos, as told from the perspective of his assistant, Vlepo. His 1994 Western spoof, *God's Country*, was followed two years later by a more straightforward contemporary Far West-set thriller, *Watershed*, about minority activists, the FBI, and toxic waste. A small, narrow sample of a massive, wildly diverse body of work.

A career academic in his sixties who's taught English literature for decades at the University of Southern California, Everett is also an avid outdoorsman whose expertise in fly-fishing and breaking horses frequently emerges in his fiction. We got quite the anomaly here: a formidably intellectual cowboy professor, conversant in mathematics and semiotics, producing dry-witted, breathtakingly quirky novels at a rapid rate, as if he were a gunslinger from the Old West; the very notion of a Percival Everett is a reproach to conventional expectations of what an African American writer can be.

This seemingly haphazard disclosure of Everett's Blackness here is my own (semi-ironic) way of calling attention to his complex, subversive, and even impudent relationship with the concept of race. Everett's engagement with the subject—whether in the 2009 metafictional picaresque, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, whose lead character is actually named Not Sidney Poitier, or the 2021 zombie burlesque, *The Trees*, in which Black detectives investigate whether lynching victims are rising from their graves to wreak bloody vengeance—comes across as an inquiry into the nature of identity itself. Put simply, racial identity by itself isn't as problematic as the language used and the expectations imposed to define identity, racial or otherwise. Think of how Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of Everett's intellectual touchstones, asserted that misconceptions in language were at the bottom of most philosophical problems, and you can begin to understand, maybe even endorse, Everett's take on Blackness, or "Blackness."

To pluck one example among many: *Glyph*, his tour de force from 1999, which is told from the point of view of a Black infant boy named Ralph with an IQ of 475 (!). He can't speak, but his tiny hands can write up a storm and his brain sponges up "philosophy books and history tomes and volumes of poetry." He tells us, "I was a baby fat with words, but I made no sound." ("Baby." "Fat." See what he did there?) He quotes Ezra Pound, can write his

James
by Percival Everett
Doubleday,
320 pp., \$28.00

own poems and algebraic equations, pose ontological riddles, and weave imaginary dialogues between James Baldwin and Socrates. As the reader struggles along with the rest of the people in Ralph's world to come to grips with this phenomenon, the phenomenon-in-question is kidnapped by a crazed child psychologist and her henchman, and he wonders if police will notice the discrepancy of a baby-of-color traveling with two white people. It's at this perilous plot turn that Ralph takes the opportunity to ask the reader:

Have you to this point assumed that I am white? In my reading, I discovered that if a character was Black, then he at some point was required to comb his Afro hairdo, speak on the street using an obvious, ethnically identifiable idiom, live in a certain part of town, or be called a n-----r by someone. White characters, I assumed they were white (often because of the way they spoke of other kinds of people), did not seem to need that kind of introduction, or perhaps legitimization to exist on the page. But you, dear reader, no doubt, whether you share my pigmentation or cultural origins, probably assumed I was white. It is not important unless you want it to be and I will say no more about it.

At this point, some of the more perceptive of my own dear readers may correctly suspect that this is, indeed, *that* Percival Everett, whose 2001 novel *Erasure* inspired the award-winning 2022 feature film *American Fiction*, starring Jeffrey Wright as Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a Black college professor and author of critically acclaimed-but-less-than-popular novels who contrives to write, under the

assumed name of "Stagg R. Leigh," a cliché-infested Black underclass melodrama, *My Pafology*, that becomes his biggest publishing success, much in the same manner that *Erasure* became, up till that point, the most trenchant and devastating of Everett's dissections of race's rhetorical booby traps.

The critical success of writer-director Cord Jefferson's adaption (which softens the serrated edges in Everett's novel, though it dares to apply its own "meta" endings to its narrative) has raised Everett's public profile. But at this writing, it's hard to determine the degree to which the movie will guide its audiences toward Everett's more intellectually demanding work; even to coy, quirky contraptions like 2022's *Dr. No*, a spoof on James Bond movies (like the one whose title Everett cheekily borrows), in which Baby Ralph has grown up to become a math professor renamed Wala Kitu, two words that mean "nothing" in Tagalog and Swahili, respectively. Ralph/Wala, who has devoted his academic career to the study of nothing ("I work very hard and wish I could say I have nothing to show for it"), is recruited by an African American billionaire named John Sill to help him break into Fort Knox to steal a shoebox containing a small amount of nothing, thus elevating Sill to the status of Bond Villain. And what, you might ask, is this "nothing" supposed to do? Why, reduce America to nothing, to negate its existence, to....

It's as I said before: You either enjoy playing ontological pitch-and-catch with Everett without any expectation of winning, losing, or even understanding the rules of the game he's playing—or you don't. And some of *Dr. No*'s reviewers expressed irritation or bemusement with its puns and double entendres around the notion of nothing. At some point, especially when coming across those moments of sharp observation and curveball witticism even in one of Everett's knottier works, one must simply throw up one's hands, as does a character in *Dr. No* when confronted with Sill's stratagem of nothing: "Damn it, I don't understand it, but I love it!"

CALL IT A hunch, but I think *James*, Everett's newest novel, will likely be his most accessible and, thus, most successful, even if its premise, like those of its predecessors, emits strong resonances of the academic and postmodern. It's a reimagining of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the point of view

In the Tongue I Was Born Into

by Avia Tadmor

The word for husband

means *owner*, for wife means *woman* and woman
is *man* housed with *god*

which is to say, I hear him some mornings

stirring among the leaves in the garden, restless
as every animal gone too long unsatisfied

which is to say, we can't always localize

anguish, but I know the smell
of semen, how it wafts from the carob tree,

Pods packed with brown pulp and seeds; I know

what he tells me: chemists would sell the ripe fruit
to singers so their voices would be soothed

by which he meant, some of me could learn to like it,

some of me is thinking of war-women, how they press
vinegar-rags into wounds

to survive them. Some of me says survival is seeing

only the peak of our wake: him, strangely
angled and high-pitched; me in my sudden hunger,

the old glass factory swarming with gulls—one of us quick, the other one

quicker, both of us stunned, as all dying things,
by desire fading out unevenly

which is to ask, how holy is holy, how can I be a man

housed with god when this union,
this tongue, this poem even, has failed me, what good

are the gulls, is the man, are the words

are the singers, their gullets
this morning, unhousing in me—

of Jim, the Black slave with whom Twain's eponymous young hero runs away from their Missouri home via raft along the Mississippi River. As Everett's been teaching literature for decades now, I can only imagine the myriad reactions to *Huck Finn* and all the novel's anachronisms he has encountered from generations of students, white, Black, and other. And deconstructing whatever constitutes that "other" would make for a lovely Everett novel, if he could find the right story.

Twain's masterpiece remains, almost 140 years after its publication, a troublesome presence in American culture, even with its unqualified repudiation of slavery and racism. The use of the N-word as a preface to Jim's name bothered contemporary readers and educators so much that in 2011, a new edition was published with the N-word edited out and the word "slave" inserted in its place. The revised text created its own discontents with some, like the late film critic Roger Ebert, protesting that calling somebody "slave" before their name wasn't much better than the word it was replacing.

Everett's *James* isn't out to displace Twain's book. It's carrying out a bolder, more ingenuous, and, characteristic of its author, more subversive agenda. *James* is out to fill in the blank spaces left in Twain's characterization of Jim and, in doing so, accomplishes something far more meaningful for Jim than excising an offensive word. Though Jim is just as vulnerable to the humiliation and danger that plagued every enslaved Black person in the antebellum border state of Missouri, Everett endows Jim with greater dimension and nuance than his original creator did. *Huckleberry Finn* provided Jim with courage, dignity, and virtue. *James* bestows upon him the greater, if more complicated, privilege of full (if not yet unfettered) humanity.

Everett's revisionist approach begins with the thick dialect Twain used for his Black characters, which along with that damnable N-word has been an impediment to contemporary readers' appreciation of *Huckleberry Finn*. It turns out, in Everett's telling, that the minstrel-show patois ("I doan' hanker for no mo' un um," Twain's Jim says to Huck, which translates loosely to "I want nothing more to do with them.") isn't how the slaves really speak, but more of a put-on, a tactic of diversion, concealment—and survival. "White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them," Jim tells one

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of his children, who asks why they need lessons in this “language,” He adds: “The only ones who suffer when they are made to feel inferior is us. Perhaps I should say, when they don’t feel superior.” Earlier, Jim even corrects his daughter Lizzie on the “correct, incorrect grammar” when instructing her on how to lie to Miss Watson, Jim’s callous owner, about how good her cornbread is. (In case you’re wondering, “Dat be sum of cornbread lak neva I et,” turns out to be incorrectly correct.)

As craftily as this plot device works as parody, something more in sync with Everett’s body of work is going on here. For as he did in *Erasure*, *Glyph*, and similar novels, Everett is right from the jump tossing out a pointed challenge to modern readers’ own presumptions of African American potential and intellect. He has not only played a slick move on however the nineteenth century believed Black Southerners spoke, but made another hard, incisive point about the myths behind identity and how they are enforced—and challenged.

More of Everett’s previous books seep into this one, not the least of which is the range of reading and knowledge of his protagonist. Everett’s Jim, it turns out, has been sneaking into the library of Judge Thatcher, the kindly, if (in Everett’s telling) somewhat clueless, local magistrate, and reading volumes by, among others, Voltaire and John Locke. At various points in Jim’s escape from Miss Watson’s attempts to sell him “down the river” to New Orleans, he dreams himself into dialogue with Voltaire and Locke about the nature of both slavery and freedom. During one such hallucination that comes upon Jim after he’s bitten by a snake, Voltaire tells Jim that he “shouldn’t be a slave,” while adding, “you must realize that climate and geography can be significant factors in determining human development,” and that factors such as “biological differences ... stop you from achieving the more perfect human form found in Europe.” To which Jim, through his delirium, manages to rebut Voltaire’s presumptions of human equality by suggesting a distinction between “natural liberties” that we all have by virtue of being human. “But when those liberties are put under societal and cultural pressure, they become civil liberties and those are contingent on hierarchy and situation. Am I close?” Then, as Jim comes to, the dream goes away, and the waking nightmare of his and Huck’s flight from whatever passes for civilization continues.

You either enjoy playing ontological pitch-and-catch with Everett without any expectation of winning, losing, or even understanding the rules—or you don’t.

Later, in another dream, Jim will meet up with Locke to discuss the “hypocrisy” of drafting a constitution that justified slavery. One must admit that Baldwin and Socrates never got as deep in the moral weeds in their *Glyph* debates as Jim and his “enlightened” muses do here.

IF EVERETT’S ACCOUNT of the same odyssey chronicled by Twain is leaner and meaner than the older version, it may owe to the greater urgency Jim is feeling as a Black slave on the run with a white boy who faked his own death to get away from an abusive father. “Huck was supposedly murdered, and I’d just run away. Who did I think they would suspect of this heinous crime?” Jim muses.

While some of the more lyrical interludes of Jim and Huck’s odyssey are shortchanged in Everett’s retelling, there is far more suspense and blunt-edged violence along the way. The Duke and Dauphin, the confidence men Jim and Huck encounter along the way, are just as duplicitous and pompous as Twain depicted, but far more malign, especially toward Jim, who in a plot twist never invented by Twain is separated from Huck at one point and sold to a slave trader who in turn sells him to Daniel Decatur “Dan” Emmett, minstrel performer and composer of “Dixie’s Land.” Emmett enjoins Jim to put on blackface and become part of his singing troupe. At one performance, Jim’s impersonation of a white man impersonating a Black man is almost discovered by someone in the audience. But the ruse holds up, causing Emmett to laugh in relief and ask, “What would they have done to you if they had figured out that you were exactly what you pretended to be?” Once again, Ever-

ett assaults the flimsy pillars holding up people’s determination of their identity, collective and individual.

One strand from Twain’s novel that Everett teases out with even greater ingenuity is the bond between Huck and Jim, which over decades has been the subject of critics’ speculation. (Notably the controversial 1948 essay by Leslie Fiedler, “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey,” suggested there was a homoerotic element in Huck and Jim’s friendship.) Toward the beginning of *James*, some of the other slaves are baffled by how protective and solicitous Jim is regarding Huck, the only white person in the area to whom Jim shows any true congeniality, as opposed to the false kind he shows Miss Watson, Judge Thatcher, and others like them. “That boy’s all right,” Jim says. “He’s just trying to figure things out. Like the rest of us, I guess.” Everett, showing his undervalued skill in plotting, weaves this mystery throughout Huck and Jim’s saga with delicacy and even some sleight of hand. When the answer is revealed at the end, it makes so much sense that you wonder why generations of readers, Fiedler and his scholarly peers included, never figured it out.

Perhaps it was the kind of mystery that needed nearly a century and a half to be resolved. And it figures that the one who came up with the solution was a Black cowboy philosopher who delighted in the process of solving problems without caring whether he reached the solution. This time, he did. And it’s exactly the kind of solution that *you* should care about, though I’ll go to hell, as Twain’s Huck once famously vowed, rather than tell you what it is. **TR**

Gene Seymour last wrote for *The New Republic* on Bob Dylan.

Faith No More

Former evangelicals are growing in number. But are they a movement?

By Sarah Jones

WHEN SARAH MCCAMMON was a child, the evangelical church was her world, and the world was on fire. As she writes in her new book, *The Exvangelicals*, her parents married in 1976, which was, *Newsweek* reported, the “year of the evangelical.” She was born five years later, not long after white evangelical Christians helped elect Ronald Reagan. Despite that victory, evangelicals were afraid—of persecution, and irrelevance. Of losing. After watching a dramatic reenactment of the Crucifixion at church, she remembers coming to “understand that of course the violence I believed I was witnessing on that day was not real.”

Still, she took the intended lesson. The violent scenes, she saw, were “meant to illustrate a deeper reality”:

that lurking beneath the veneer of our comfortable, suburban, midwestern American lives was a threat so severe that God had to send his only son to brutally suffer and die to save us from it. The blood might be fake, but the danger was not.

ILLUSTRATION BY EVA VÁZQUEZ



By the time McCammon became an adult, evangelicals had won unquestionable power. They wielded great influence over the George W. Bush administration, and the presidency of Barack Obama was a temporary defeat. But white evangelicals had always believed they were under assault from the forces of progress, and now they had fresh proof, in the form of a liberal Black president and the legalization of same-sex marriage. McCammon, an NPR reporter who covered the Trump campaign, knows what happened next, and at this point so does everyone else. In Donald Trump, white evangelicals found their strongman. They helped put him into power once and could do so again.

But there are signs of turbulence. If 1976 was the year of the evangelical, 2024 could be something else: the year of the heretic. Though a majority of Americans are Christians, the religiously unaffiliated, or Nones, are on the rise. A study from the Public Religion Research Institute says the Nones accounted for 27 percent of the American population in 2022, up from 16 percent in 2006. Major Christian traditions are declining. Twenty-three percent of Americans identified as white evangelical Christian in 2006, PRRI says, a share that declined to 14 percent in 2022. Ethicist David Gushee estimates that “some twenty-five million American adults who had been raised evangelical had left the faith,” McCammon writes.

Post-evangelical stories are becoming more common, and the publishing world has taken notice. Part-memoir, part-reportage, McCammon’s book joins an emerging genre. In recent books like *Heretic* by Jeanna Kadlec, or *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next* by Bradley Onishi, the post-evangelical recalls life in and out of the church, and often warns of political danger. “The violence wrought by Trump supporters storming the Capitol is anti-epiphany. It is dark and based in untruth. The symbols of faith—Jesus’ name, cross, and message—have been co-opted to serve the cultish end of Trumpism,” argues political journalist Jon Ward in *Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation*. The Trump presidency whet an appetite for post-evangelical stories. Liberals still want an explanation for his popularity among white evangelicals; in theory, the heretic can offer one.

Cue McCammon. In *The Exvangelicals*, she capably describes the fear and

shame that trammelled her for years. When light does break in, she follows it. She embraces LGBTQ rights against her parents’ wishes and forges a relationship with her grandfather, a gay man. She later writes movingly of the end of her marriage to a man she’d met at her evangelical college. These personal reflections are broken up by interviews with other post-evangelicals, whose experiences often resemble her own. McCammon depicts a subculture that merits careful attention. By the end of *The Exvangelicals*, though, that portrait is far murkier than it should be. Exvangelicals may share many distinctive experiences, but are they a movement?

LIKE MCCAMMON, I was raised by devout parents who named me Sarah Elizabeth and educated me mostly at home or in Christian schools. McCammon describes her mother as a follower of Phyllis Schlafly, who campaigned against the ERA and founded the conservative Eagle Forum; my own mother was not so political. As I grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s, I didn’t protest abortion clinics or volunteer at crisis pregnancy centers, the way McCammon did. Ours was a quieter conservatism, though it was still all I knew. Then the Bush administration invaded Iraq. I opposed this and began to move left. Soon political conviction gave rise to religious doubts. Halfway through my time at an evangelical college in the Midwest, I stopped attending church. By graduation, I was an atheist. Not just a heretic, then, but an apostate, and perhaps something else, too: an exvangelical.

McCammon borrows the term “exvangelical” from Blake Chastain, a podcaster who also grew up evangelical and later left the church. The term “particularly resonates” for McCammon, she writes, as it signals “that the culture and identity of our communities of origin shapes each one of us, and the active decision to separate and leave that world behind.” Exvangelicals, in McCammon’s portrayal, are united by past upbringing and present trauma, rather than by any shared conviction. Some are still religious, others are not, and their political views are rarely specified.

In an evangelical upbringing, McCammon notes, there is an overwhelming emphasis on what a person truly believes. Of her sister’s infant dedication, she writes, “In our belief system, while my sister’s dedication was important, it was only a symbol. For us, the central question was what we

believed in our hearts, not whether we’d participated in the proper rituals.” She adds, “There were frequent warnings against insincere belief, reminders to look deep within and be certain, absolutely certain, that your ‘heart is right with God.’” McCammon was “saved” at age two and a half; I was “saved” at the relatively advanced age of five. Afterward, I asked God to “save” me many times over because I feared my initial prayer wouldn’t stick. Fear shaped everything we did, and everything we thought. Childhood, for McCammon and her subjects, is “characterized by the push and pull of fearing eternal punishment from God while embracing his love, which was the theme of every church service, every prayer meeting, every hymn.”

Fear can be a useful political tool, and a vehicle for hatred. McCammon reflects on the racist fear that shaped her own education in a Christian school, one of many “initially opened by white churches in the 1960s and 70s in a revolt against school integration.” The Christian homeschool movement went a step further, as it cut off “white Christian students from the outside world and reinforced a nostalgic vision of an America once dominated by (mostly white) Christians,” McCammon writes. By the late 1970s, a robust media network conditioned the evangelical mind. Media juggernauts like James Dobson of Focus on the Family taught evangelicals how to educate their children, how to have sex in a God-honoring way, and how and whom to fear. Over time, evangelicals constructed a predominantly white and exclusively heterosexual country within a country, whose territories they sought to not only defend but expand.

Youth were key to this mission. McCammon herself was a foot soldier in training, interning for the Eagle Forum and becoming a page for a Republican senator. As I learned in my own upbringing, worldly interests—in politics, or culture—were suspect among evangelicals, especially when they appeared in girls, so they were weaponized rather than nurtured. A girl could never preach, but she could be political as long as her role models were women like Phyllis Schlafly or Margaret Thatcher. She could write like Elisabeth Elliot, a former missionary who was known for her anti-feminism. A well-funded infrastructure existed to train her. Historian Molly Worthen describes “Christian worldview” material promoted through “publications, camps, and curricula focused on evangelical

Movements can be loosely organized, they can even be largely online, but they require shared conviction and purpose. An ideology, even.

youth,” McCammon writes, adding that the men behind this material “approached this endeavor by framing their vision of a ‘Christian worldview’ against any secular one that might challenge it”—for example, by popularizing a revisionist American history. As Worthen writes, evangelicals could thus “dismiss opposing interpretations of the evidence.... They insist upon their own worldview as the only clear window on reality.” (Worthen has since converted to evangelical Christianity.)

MCCAMMON WRITES THAT she may have been an “exvangelical” before she knew it was a word. I suppose that’s also true of me, although I dislike the term. It assumes that I define myself primarily against what I used to believe. Nevertheless, exvangelical writers have produced valuable work, much of it informed not just by experience but by research and reporting. Does that mean exvangelicalism is a “loosely organized, largely online movement of people,” as McCammon says? Movements can be loosely organized, they can even be largely online, but they require shared conviction and purpose. An ideology, even. Without that, “exvangelical” is just a hashtag.

Because exvangelicalism is defined only by what it is not, it offers a fitful counter to evangelicalism itself, which is as much a political movement as it is a religious tradition. Ideology is baked into the theology. There is a lot of money, for example, invested in efforts to keep evangelical youth in line. But the question of class goes unexamined in *The Exvangelicals*. Holy war is class war, too, waged by far-right wealth against the rest of us. The alliances evangelicals have built with right-wing Roman Catholics and other conservative activists funnel millions into institutions, organizations, and think tanks like the Council for National

Policy, the Heritage Foundation, and the Alliance Defending Freedom.

Yet communal trauma, not ideology or power, remains McCammon’s principal subject. This is a mistake. The pain experienced by exvangelicals is actually more potent if the perpetrators are fully understood. It would be easier, also, to grasp the rise of Trump, whose campaign McCammon covered in 2016, had she considered the financial and ideological interests behind his successful campaign. Instead, her observations about Trump can feel shoehorned in, and ultimately that’s a disservice to her subjects.

Exvangelicals are experts on what evangelicalism taught us, but we aren’t necessarily experts on everything else. One exvangelical artist says that she had expected her former peers to break with Trump. When they didn’t, she explains, “That brought into crystal-clear focus that a lot of this evangelical culture has been about political power since the beginning. And I didn’t even realize that.”

**The Exvangelicals:
Loving, Living,
and Leaving the White
Evangelical Church**
by Sarah McCammon
St. Martin’s Press,
320 pp., \$30.00

Exvangelicalism seems nearly as white as the movement it rejects, and as a subculture, it may be ill-equipped to address or critique racism in the church. That requires ideology, or at least a shared sense of history. Support for slavery—and Christian slave owners—helped give white evangelicalism its distinct political identity. Take the Southern Baptist Convention, which formed in 1845 “to safeguard the institution of slavery,” as Eliza Griswold wrote in a 2021 piece for *The New Yorker*. Founders claimed that “slavery was ‘an institution of heaven,’” she added, and they backed the Confederacy. McCammon writes that the SBC approved a resolution apologizing for its past in 1995. As the election of Trump shows, however, there is still a chasm between white evangelicals and many Christians of color. There are other evangelicalisms, though McCammon and I were cut off from them as children, and the white variation still dominates headlines. In part, this is because white evangelicals could help reelect Trump, for whom racism is an important selling point. When Trump won the presidency, Jemar Tisby, a historian of race and religion who is Black and Christian, didn’t feel comfortable attending his white evangelical church the following Sunday. As he recounts to McCammon, “it’s clear that this church I have been going to, they clearly don’t understand my reality if they are celebrating the election of Trump.”

Exvangelicals may not understand that reality any better. Though a number of Black Christians have left white evangelical churches since the election of Trump, they aren’t necessarily exvangelicals, Tisby tells McCammon. “There’s a sense in which we were never evangelical because of race, so the hashtag and movement is a very white one,” he says, adding, “I think there are a lot of people who call themselves ‘exvangelicals’ who have also erased the Black church. Because what they’re essentially saying is, the only way to be Christian is the way white evangelicals have been Christians, and I don’t want any part of that, without ever deeply considering Black Christians.” While exvangelicals speak, often, of “deconstructing” their faith, or unlearning what they once thought they knew, McCammon says that Tisby’s circles speak instead of decolonizing it. Tyler Burns, a Black pastor, tells her that by turning so often to white, progressive theologians, exvangelicals are “kind of replacing one problem for another, the problem of whiteness at the center.”

I'M NOT CONVINCED, however, that there is a center to exvangelicalism. If it exists, McCammon hasn't discovered it, which is unfortunate. The heretic has a critique to offer, and a critique is not the same thing as a complaint. Anyone can come up with the latter; the former requires politics. Pain has a role, even a central one, in any post-evangelical awakening, but it is not the end of the story. Evangelical Christians hurt me deeply before I left the faith, and I considered suicide. Leaving evangelicalism was as difficult as it was necessary, and the fallout lasted a long time. A prominent fundamentalist said he hoped my parents "went to be with Jesus" before they learned of my leftist politics. Because of my pain, and the pain I saw inflicted on others, I sought a liberatory alternative to far-right Christianity. Leaving wasn't enough, nor was "deconstruction," a nebulous term for a process seemingly without end. I had to arrive somewhere, too. That arc is common among the post-evangelicals I know, even if they haven't landed precisely where I did. But it's rare in *The Exvangelicals*.

What emerges instead is a rudderless subculture. White evangelicalism is strong stuff, political to its core; exvangelicalism can appear pseudo-therapeutic in contrast. McCammon interviews a former evangelical named Rebekah Drumsta, who, she says, offers life coaching and "deconstruction" services. Here's what McCammon doesn't mention: Four 50-minute "mentoring calls" with Drumsta cost \$400 out of pocket. If this is deconstruction, who can afford it? Moreover, why should anyone buy it?

Drumsta isn't alone. McCammon mentions Joshua Harris, a celebrity pastor turned ex-evangelical who offered a "Deconstruction Starter Pack" priced at \$275 until outrage shut him down. But McCammon leaves a broader ecosystem untouched. Less-famous "life coaches" and "deconstruction coaches" are becoming somewhat common in the exvangelical world, where they operate with little oversight or transparency. (At least Drumsta openly lists her prices.) Onishi, the author of *Preparing for War*, offers coaching on his website. Some coaches are trained mental health professionals, but many aren't, and the definition of "coaching" varies wildly from practitioner to practitioner. Professional therapy is no panacea. But when personal experience is the only credential a coach needs, clients are vulnerable to grift and abuse. A skeptical edge is in order.

Without it, exvangelicals—including McCammon—will remain in the wilderness.

We cannot afford the lack of clarity. "To be an American evangelical is to be often at war—a Christian soldier, moving ever onward into an invisible battle with the highest possible stakes," McCammon writes, and she is correct. White evangelicals are at war, and they are formidable. The courts are packed with far-right judges who will shape law and policy for decades to come. *Roe v. Wade* is already gone. Conservatives have their sights set on the abortion pill, birth control, and civil rights for LGBTQ people. Trump may win a second term. Although that context haunts *The Exvangelicals*, I don't know what McCammon believes about any of it beyond her generic acceptance of LGBTQ people.

A bullet-point list isn't necessary, but in a work that is also a memoir of belief, the ambivalence is misplaced, and leads to odd places. In purity culture, which teaches women and girls that they are dangerous sexual objects, McCammon somehow finds a silver lining. "When purity culture was at its worst, it left many young women feeling

distant from our bodies, and ashamed of our natural sexual desires," she writes. "But at its best, it could offer a vision of a woman's body as something more than an object for men to use. In a culture where women lacked power, it also provided a framework for women to insist on more than a transient physical connection with men." Feminism does that, too, without the cultural and political restraints of purity culture. Surely that's worth consideration.

The alternative is authoritarianism. As a child in the church, I heard adults speak of our "witness," the way we showed Christ to the fallen. Later I saw the truth: They had long ago sacrificed whatever witness they possessed. Now is the time for heresy, and truths plainly spoken. That may come from exvangelicalism, or not. The blurriness of *The Exvangelicals* can be explained in part by the subculture's youth; it is still taking a shape. But it will have to work faster, and much more decisively, if it is going to matter. **IN**

Sarah Jones is a senior writer for *New York magazine*. Her first book, *Disposable*, is forthcoming from Avid Reader Press.

Hide and Seek

by Daniel Halpern

I'm going to die before you return,
he wanted to write her, becoming
an authority on suffering, of wanting to share
some of it with those he loved. Not unkindly,
but to dilute the deepened passion that hid
half exposed in him, like a young child
behind a tree, impatient to continue
the game, of invisible and discovery.

Just a few hours, her perfume on his white shirt
and a dark wine from Basilicata in a glass,
terroir and that particular fragrance scenting her,
between them. What is the content
of talk in that place, the hands held in place,
and their open eyes? Open your eyes,
he wanted to write her, her eyes just on him.

Daniel Halpern is the author of nine books of poetry and an editor at Knopf.

Brand Collaboration

The New Look wrestles with Coco Chanel's work for the Nazis.

By Phillip Maciak

MIDWAY THROUGH THE new miniseries *Masters of the Air*, a young airman named Quinn bails out of his crashing bomber and lands somewhere in the countryside of Nazi-occupied Belgium. He's able to take shelter in a farmhouse, where a small family hooks him up with the resistance. The few scenes in which we follow Quinn on his journey are among the most compelling in the series, in part because they give us a tantalizing glimpse of the high-stakes covert operations of the resistance itself. But after a handful of riveting scenes, including one long set piece on the train to Paris, Quinn's adventure is over. I can't be the only viewer who'd hoped we were about to split off and follow the resistance on its exploits. Tales of valiant, spectacular battle are chockablock in American media; tales of resistance are few.

Apparently, Apple TV+ felt the same way, and so, just a few months later, the resistance is back, in a somewhat unexpected context: *The New Look*, a sweeping biopic of couture designers Christian Dior and Coco Chanel in the 1940s. For most American viewers, likely most contemporary French viewers as well, Dior and Chanel are famous logos, famous silhouettes, famous scents. Their existence as public figures, the faces of their brands, is largely over. It may then come as some small surprise that their histories are inextricably tangled up with the same history that *Masters of the Air* parachutes into.

The New Look, created by TV veteran Todd Kessler, is a star-studded, visually sumptuous, morally pretzeled epic about the rise and fall of these great fashion houses during and after the war. And while Dior (Ben Mendelsohn) and Chanel (Juliette Binoche) are the show's primary focus, it's actually a relatively unknown character who provides the show's gravity: Catherine

Dior (Maisie Williams), the younger sister of the designer, who happened to be an active resistance fighter in Paris during the Nazi occupation. Following Christian and Coco, we bump into a shocking number of characters whose surnames we already recognize (Balmain and Balenciaga, Schellenberg and Himmler...), but following Catherine, we step into a world of secret messages, guerrilla attacks, and improvised assassinations, as we witness the bravery and mercilessness of France's freedom fighters.

In ways both ingenious and stilted, the show attempts to intertwine this political drama with the high-fashion revolution of Dior's own house. (The opening credits make this parallel brutally clear, intercutting sewing machines and machine-gun fire.) What sacrifices does freedom require? Which compromises are too dear to protect family? What's the cost of collaboration? *The New Look* doesn't so much answer these questions as let us feel their weight for 10 episodes. An opening title card before the first episode says, "This is the story of how creation helped return spirit and life to the world" after the end of the war. I mean it as a compliment when I say that *The New Look* does not ultimately manage to achieve the level of sentimental, celebratory fizz this card might suggest. This show maps a much harder road to inspiration, a more harrowing journey toward renewal. Its romance is a melancholy one, and the "creation" that first episode foretells has a hard time outweighing all the destruction that leads up to it. *Vive la résistance*, I guess.

THE NEW LOOK opens toward the end of the Nazi occupation of Paris. At this moment, Coco Chanel is already an icon, the charismatic public face of high fashion. Her looks are everywhere, and her scent—Chanel No. 5—is a global sensation. She

lives, unharassed, in the Paris Ritz, the social hub of the Nazi brass, largely, it's implied, because the aesthetics-obsessed Nazis like having her around.

We meet her at the moment when her association with her German neighbors goes from casual to official, from ambient to active. Her beloved nephew is captured fighting for the French army, and Chanel takes on a debt of service to the Nazis—particularly SS spymaster Walter Schellenberg—in order to help him. By the end of that first episode, she's freed her nephew, but she's also literally and figuratively in bed with the Reich. Chanel's love affair with her handler, a British German agent named Spatz (Claes Bang), provides a way into the show's ambiguities and a spectacular showcase for Binoche's talent. Her Coco is always acting on the precipice of shrewd improvisation and panicked flailing. Is Chanel collaborating out of love for her nephew or for Spatz? Is Spatz using her, or is it the other way around? How much is her compliance a performance, and how much does that matter?

Meanwhile, Christian Dior is designing ball gowns for the girlfriends of Nazis under the direction of his kindly boss, Lucien Lelong (John Malkovich). Dior insists on turning a blind eye to the men who pay his bills, but, at the same time, he allows his apartment to be a center of operations for his sister's resistance activities and routes much of his salary to them as well. While Binoche's Chanel projects comfort and ease in every setting, Mendelsohn's Dior is never comfortable. He speaks in a barely audible baritone mumble, his hands are in a constant state somewhere between a fidget and a spasm, and even his posture makes him seem as if he's always on the verge of tipping over. He is settled neither with his complicity in the Nazi occupation nor with his involvement in the resistance, especially inasmuch as he—rightly—expects that both have put his beloved sister in grave danger.

By the end of the first episode, Catherine is captured by the Nazis. The first several episodes linger to tell the story of the war's end from the perspective of Dior, desperately trying to locate his sister and secure her release; Catherine being tortured and eventually transported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp north of Berlin; and Chanel, caught up in an escalating series of capers as a secret agent of the Reich, aiding a faction of the Nazi high command in their own desperate endeavor to negotiate an end to the war before the



Juliette Binoche and Emily Mortimer are Coco Chanel and Elsa Lombardi in *The New Look*.

fast-approaching Allied forces end it for them. The remainder of the series takes place after the end of the war in Europe, as all our characters have to learn how to live with what they did, what they didn't do, and what was done to them.

"**THE NEW LOOK**" is the name that *Harper's Bazaar* editor Carmel Snow gave to Dior's debut collection—which replaced the liberated lines of the '20s and '30s with a padded, sculpted femininity—and so the arc of the show really belongs to him as well as to his sister. Her coming to terms with life after Ravensbrück is the most important parallel to Dior's heroic acts of "creation." Catherine's story gives her brother's art its meaning while forcing us to understand his art as, in some sense, meaningless.

But Chanel is the dramatic center of *The New Look*, which ultimately rises and falls with Juliette Binoche's titanic performance. It would be easy to play her as either a monster or a victim of circumstance. But Binoche is cagey and versatile enough to let her almost always be both, especially in the scenes she shares with the equally extraordinary Emily Mortimer, who plays her longtime frenemy and adult collaborator Elsa Lombardi. There is a tenderness to Binoche's Chanel that belies both her expansive charisma and deadly defensiveness—a character fragile enough that she might shatter, but sharp enough to cut if she does.

We see, in close-up, the slippages that allow her to survive but also allow her to

justify her betrayals. She protests, but her protestations do not read as protestations to the Nazis. In fact, the high command is charmed rather than irked by Chanel's brazen informality. Kessler and his writers are excellent at creating rooms—luxurious hotel suites, gaudy Nazi offices—in which the very air is controlled by the Reich, in which Chanel can talk herself into capitulations the Nazis barely even have to suggest, but in which Chanel can also always imagine herself two steps ahead, a traitor in service to the enemy, but also a woman who's been wronged all her life, too strong and too cool to be morally liable.

So we see how Chanel collaborated, not as the work of a true believer, but as the arrogant negotiation of someone desperate to live and live well. But the show holds on to those crimes, just as it holds on to Catherine's trauma and Dior's guilt. They become heavier and heavier as the episodes go on. The war is never over.

FOR A SHOW about the creative process, *The New Look* features relatively few detailed scenes of that creative process. Dior designs in fits of inspiration. We watch as he crumples up drafts and tears down old designs, but the moments when we actually watch him create play out as romantic fantasies of genius, a dress tailored to perfection in an overnight effusion, the famous "bar suit" that anchored his first collection flowing out of his pencil in a moment of grief, as if vouchsafed unto him by the gods. Dior made dresses for the Nazis,

but he also, we are meant to understand, became the conduit through which French culture reemerged after the war. And, rather than saddle our picture of him with too many extended scenes of anguished design work—the labor of that genius—we are given a portrait of a tortured man channeling his pain into art, presto chango.

Chanel, on the other hand, makes nothing. We never see her so much as doodle a dress or hold a needle in the entire series. She wheels and deals and brands and steals the work of others, but never imagines and makes anything of her own. In this act of mythmaking, this genesis narrative of modern fashion, Chanel is a big personality, a looming name, an iconic style, but she's not an artist, not a creator.

It's a question why so didactic a series would go so far out of its way to find a female villain to anchor its story of artistic renewal after the violence of war. By and large, this is a show filled with elegant male ciphers who revolutionize haute couture in the shadow of a larger-than-life fallen woman. Chanel's misdeeds are indisputable, but I did occasionally ask myself why Kessler chose this particular history to blazon in these particular tones. Especially since the House of Chanel did not fall. In fact, despite her commission of crimes worse than even the show represents, it's unlikely you even think of the Nazis when you see those interlocking Cs on a bag or a belt.

While the show would like us, explicitly, to be filled with optimism by this story, it is a credit to Kessler and his writers that they do not fully succeed. As sanguine as this show can be about its celebration of art and creativity, it is a show that formally insists on every experience of that art being compromised. Whether it's trauma or guilt or regret, no beautiful object can ever feel quite right. Art, fashion, can fill us with hope, it can make us cry, it can make us feel seen, but it doesn't save our souls. **TNR**

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Drums Along The Potomac

Should the left arm itself?

Some years ago, a woman friend of mine and I journeyed to a rustic hotel in Wyoming. The hotel offered various outdoor activities for guests. One of them involved going to a shooting range with a professional marksman for target practice and, more to the point for us, to learn the basics of shooting guns. Our guide drove us to the range, unpacked the weapons, then turned to us. “If someone broke into your house with a gun and you had one available,” he asked, “would you defend yourself?” A series of thoughts ran through my mind in response to this question, to wit: This guy, indubitably an NRA fanatic, has read us as liberals, and he believes that all liberals are gutless loonies intent on abolishing the Second Amendment. Feigning astonishment, I responded, “Of course we would. Are you kidding?”

Looking skeptical, he went and placed the guns on a long table in front of the firing range. It was a whole panoply of weapons, ranging from small pistols to long rifles to AR-15s. Handling and shooting them was a lot of fun. My companion, who had not expected to, loved it. At the end, the instructor strung a long wire between two trees. The wire had little pieces of tin dangling from it, and he invited me to try my luck at shooting them. Here I will inject parenthetically that, when I was a little boy, I spent a lot of time in those small shooting galleries they have at county fairs and became quite skilled at hitting their targets. In this moment, it seemed, my childhood skills returned to me, and using the AR-15 I hit every last one of those metal targets. I looked over at our guide and saw that his face had turned bright red. He was furious. He had planned for me to miss most of my shots, and that then he would go up and achieve a clean sweep of the targets to show off his expertise. As he drove us back to the hotel, I sensed how dangerous a person he might actually be.

I have another story. When I was a teenager, also because of my very good hand-eye coordination, I was a competitive tennis player. The father of a friend owned an indoor tennis court, where we would practice in the winter and sometimes play doubles against his father and his father’s close friend, Charlton Heston. We would always lose, and Heston would always console us in an avuncular manner and give us tips on how to do better next time.

He seemed an exceptionally kind man. Years later, when I saw the infamous clip of him up onstage as head of the NRA, proclaiming (in a deep, menacing voice), “I’ll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hands,” I was shocked. What had happened to the kindly man I knew as a child and looked up to?

Recently I participated in a webinar that was part of a series called *In This Moment*. The guest speaker was Miles Taylor, who, as a government official in the Trump administration, wrote an exposé book titled *A Warning* under the name Anonymous, an expanded version of which was issued under the title *Blowback: A Warning to Save American Democracy From the Next Trump* after Taylor revealed his identity. He was interviewed by the political consultant Paul Begala, to whom he described the harassment and intimidation he had experienced since going public. He said a wealthy friend had kindly offered to pay for expensive security to help keep him safe. He noted that Mitt Romney had reportedly been spending \$5,000 a day for security for himself and his family (almost \$2 million a year).

In the question-and-answer period, I said to Miles: “For about a year now, I’ve been debating with myself and a few friends whether I should write a column advocating for American liberals to take up arms. The crazies on the right have guns, and we on the whole don’t. Most of us don’t even know how to shoot a gun. We’re sitting ducks. Do you think I should write that column?”

Miles answered: “You should write that column! If only as a provocation. It would be an interesting debate, and we need to have that kind of debate. Why is it important? Because it is so jarring. Fifteen years ago, the subject would have been shouted down, it would have sounded so hyperbolic. In this moment, though, people are thinking exactly what you are thinking. Write the column!”

An article in *The New York Times*, dated November 26, 2022, brought to light the burgeoning alliance between

right-wing Republican politicians and right-wing militias as it had developed from 2000 up to that point. The headline read, “PROTESTERS TURN TO GUNS TO SHOUT OVER THEIR RIVALS” and “A TOOL TO INTIMIDATE,” with a subhead stating, “OPEN-CARRY LAWS WARP DISCOURSE IN NATION’S PUBLIC SQUARES.” Many of the Republican political figures attending the rallies worked to legalize open-carry in their states. Sometimes they toted weapons themselves. Some form of open-carry without a permit is legal in 38 states, and that number is likely to increase. Local election officials in several states have requested bulletproofing for their offices, a particularly worrisome development. The Proud Boys and Oath Keepers were involved in the January attack on the Capitol, and the latter had a substantial cache of weapons across the Potomac in Virginia. The potential for violence surrounding the coming elections strikes me as considerable—in fact, much more likely than not.

The way I see it, if Trump loses, he will stage an attempted coup, and if he wins, his followers will be out for revenge. We would not shoot first. But either way, shouldn’t we be prepared for self-defense? **IN**



From his cold, dead hands

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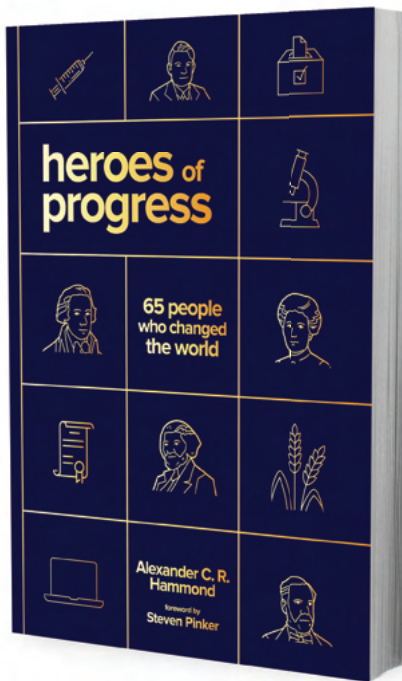
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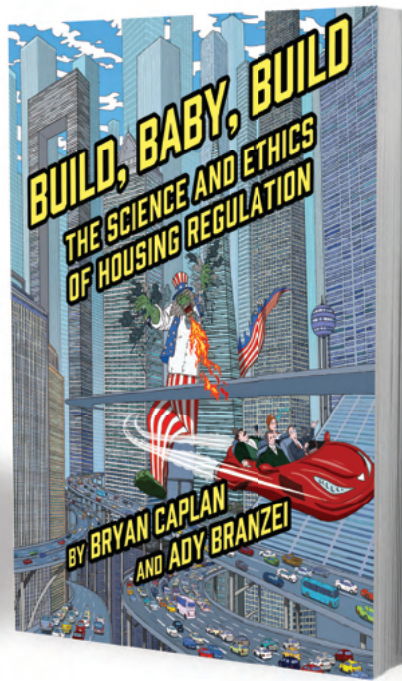
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