

Is Kamala Harris Ready
to Be President?

By Elaina Plott Calabro

Eight Years at
The Washington Post

By Martin Baron

Black Success,
White Backlash

By Elijah Anderson

Plus: New fiction
by Jesmyn Ward



The Atlantic

EST. 1857

The Patriot

What does a general do when
the commander in chief
undermines the Constitution?

By Jeffrey Goldberg



*Mark Milley at Fort Myer,
September 2023*



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Behind the Cover: In this issue's cover story, *The Atlantic's* editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, profiles General Mark Milley, the retiring chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For our cover image, the war photographer Ashley Gilbertson captured Milley outside Quarters Six, the chairman's residence in Arlington, Virginia. Quarters Six looks out onto the Capitol from Joint

Base Myer–Henderson Hall, originally built to defend Washington, D.C., from the Confederate army during the Civil War. Gilbertson was a finalist for a 2022 Pulitzer Prize for his photograph of the Capitol Police officer Eugene Goodman as he defended the building from insurrectionists on January 6, 2021.

— Bifen Xu, *Photo Editor*

THE

The Ones We Sent Away

Jennifer Senior's aunt Adele was institutionalized as a toddler because of an intellectual and developmental disability. For the September 2023 issue, Senior considered the life Adele could have lived.

Letters

J

Jennifer Senior's story about her aunt's institutionalization struck a deep chord with me. My family has a similar story, made worse when I found out that I was the reason my sister was sent to a state "school." My mother cared for her oldest child, who was developmentally delayed, for the first two years of her life. But in 1950, she surrendered her to the state under intense pressure from family members, who felt that my expectant mother wouldn't be able to handle a newborn—me—and a high-needs daughter at the same time. My sister languished at the "school" for many years and never learned to walk. She died shortly after the institution was closed; an exposé had made public its shortcomings. I

met my sister only once, when I was in college. I'll never forget how happy she seemed having somebody watch her eat lunch. She never took her eyes off me; it was like she knew who I was. Hardly anyone remembers her now, but I will, always. Her name was Cheryl.

Wayne April
Pasadena, Calif.

I felt tears welling up as I read Jennifer Senior's moving story about her aunt Adele, and by its conclusion, they ran freely.

My older brother, Larry, shares a birthday with Adele. He, too, was born with severe disabilities; in fact, at birth, the doctors told my parents that he would not survive more than a few weeks.

Larry proved them wrong—repeatedly. He recently celebrated his 47th birthday. My parents did not institutionalize him, but cared for him through dozens of complex surgeries, years of developmental frustrations, and countless instances of unfeeling relatives asking why they bothered to keep him. They had two more children after Larry: myself and my younger brother. Putting in the emotional, physical, and logistical labor to care for a child with special needs while maintaining the bandwidth to meet the needs of their other children was a significant challenge for them.

My younger brother and I have felt the repercussions of that challenge for decades now, for both good and bad. Larry, more than anyone else, has made me the man I am. But to this day, when I hear about a family raising a child with special needs, I feel obligated to stress the importance of making sure that their other children are given as much attention and love as possible.

Ryan Wagman
Northbrook, Ill.

I would like to share my family's experience, which cuts against the current prevailing sentiment that the best place for children with severe developmental and behavioral disabilities is their family's home.

My stepson J. has a number of diagnoses, all of which fail to describe the problems he lives with. I entered his life when he was a little over 2 years old. He'll turn 9 in a couple of months.

COMMONS



DISCUSSION
&
DEBATE

J. isn't nonverbal, but his ability to meaningfully communicate is quite poor. Lately, you can catch him sitting in the living room before dawn, wearing his headphones and singing along to the *Sesame Street* spin-off *The Furchester Hotel* at an ear-splitting volume. His ecstatic refrain fills the house over and over as he rewinds the clip to the bit he loves. Half of my heart floods with his joy, but the other half sinks with the woe of a mom whose babies are going to be up an hour early. He isn't potty-trained and uses diapers. Some days, he prefers to take off his clothes and use the floor.

J. has the highest highs and the lowest lows. He loves football. He loves going to church and, afterward, Runza ("But not the drive-through," he reminds us). No one loves a birthday party more than J., as long as he gets to blow out some candles. But, in general, it doesn't take long for him to grow frustrated, and for his frustration to turn into violence. He bites, scratches, punches, kicks. He pulls hair. He slams his head into the ground, the walls, the windows. He hurts the dogs. He's broken the glasses on a teacher's face and the television on the wall. He's sent two adults to the emergency room. Our nanny stopped caring for him after she was injured. He was dismissed from his specialized before- and after-school care program. He

can still attend school, but who knows how long that will last?

His older brother tries to keep quiet about the suffering he experiences. He will occasionally admit that a mark on his skin is a scratch or bruise from trying to escape J.'s aggression. He recently mentioned that he would like it if J. would wear clothes more often and stop going to the bathroom on the carpet. He prefers to stay home and avoid the gawking public. J.'s two younger half-siblings are frightened by the outbursts, but so far are too young to really understand. I often wonder what terrible choice I will have to make if one of them is severely hurt.

J. has progressed to a point where he no longer fits safely in the context of a family. We hold our breath, hoping each day that this won't be the time things really go bad. But at any suggestion that it might not be safe for J. to live in our family home, we are told that, no, the best place for any disabled child is in the family home. Because, you know, the Bad Old Days.

At first, this felt like it must be true. Over time, however, it has come to feel like a disingenuous strategy to keep care cheap. The conditions at many of the institutions where children like J. were once warehoused were horrific, as Jennifer Senior makes clear in her article. But that doesn't mean institutional care can't work, or be the right

solution for some children—which Senior also acknowledges.

J. needs specialized care. He needs an adult to make him their sole focus from when he wakes up until he goes to sleep. It's a full-time job—not something a parent can easily do while maintaining a career, a marriage, or a relationship with their other children. If there were a willingness to make the necessary investment, I imagine we could develop a system of high-quality care for children with serious behavioral disorders that meets each child and family where they are, providing the right care in the right setting at the right time. In the meantime, we feel like we are failing J. and our other children. The implied message we hear from many we encounter is that if we were able to love him better or be more dedicated, we could do it. We feel overwhelmed all the time, helpless and inadequate. We are old beyond our years and carry the special weariness of the chronically heartbroken.

Name Withheld by Request
Omaha, Neb.

I began volunteering with individuals with disabilities as a junior in high school in 1979. In 1982, it became my career. A significant part of my job in the early years was helping facilitate the deinstitutionalization of individuals with developmental disabilities in West Virginia.

I'm proud that West Virginia was among the first states in the nation to fully close its institutions; even so, I witnessed untold horrors in those places.

Then, in 1993, my son, Benjamin, was born with Down syndrome and autism-spectrum disorder. What had been a career choice suddenly became my life 24/7. Though the institutions no longer exist, significant perils remain: Individuals with disabilities are much more likely to be victims of abuse or neglect than nondisabled individuals. Across the country, disabled adults lack housing, meaningful jobs, and support services.

As long as we are able to care for Ben, he will reside with us. The day I can no longer care for him will be the worst day of my life. Even though Ben will go to live with his sister, I know I'll feel as though I failed him.

I'm now 60 and have been in the field for more than 40 years. I'm still working with the orneriest of the orneries, and I'm still loving it. We must never forget the evil that occurred and continues to occur to individuals with developmental disabilities, our most vulnerable population. A sincere thanks to Jennifer Senior for reminding us.

Kent Moreno
Shepherdstown, W.Va.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

BLACK SUCCESS, WHITE BACKLASH

*Black prosperity has provoked white
resentment that can make life
exhausting for people of color—and it
has led to the undoing of policies that
have nurtured Black advancement.*

BY ELIJAH ANDERSON

For more than half a century, I have been studying the shifting relations between white and Black Americans. My first journal article, published in 1972, when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, was about Black political power in the industrial Midwest after the riots of the late 1960s. My own experience of race relations in America is even longer. I was born in the Mississippi Delta during World War II, in a cabin on what used to be a plantation, and then moved as a young boy to northern Indiana, where as a Black person in the early 1950s, I was constantly reminded of “my place,”

and of the penalties for overstepping it. Seeing the image of Emmett Till's dead body in *Jet* magazine in 1955 brought home vividly for my generation of Black kids that the consequences of failing to navigate carefully among white people could even be lethal.

For the past 16 years, I have been on the faculty of the sociology department at Yale, and in 2018 I was granted a Sterling Professorship, the highest academic rank the university bestows. I say this not to boast, but to illustrate that I have made my way from the bottom of American society to the top, from a sharecropper's cabin to the pinnacle of the ivory tower. One might think that, as a decorated professor at an Ivy League university, I would have escaped the various indignities that being Black in traditionally white spaces exposes you to. And to be sure, I enjoy many of the privileges my white professional-class peers do. But the Black ghetto—a destitute and fearsome place in the popular imagination, though in reality it is home to legions of decent, hardworking families—remains so powerful that it attaches to all Black Americans, no matter where and how they live. Regardless of their wealth or professional status or years of law-abiding bourgeois decency, Black people simply cannot escape what I call the “iconic ghetto.”

I know I haven't. Some years ago, I spent two weeks in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, a pleasant Cape Cod town full of upper-middle-class white vacationers and working-class white year-rounders. On my daily jog one morning, a white man in a pickup truck stopped in the middle of the

road, yelling and gesticulating. “Go home!” he shouted.

Who was this man? Did he assume, because of my Black skin, that I was from the ghetto? Is that where he wanted me to “go home” to?

This was not an isolated incident. When I jog through upscale white neighborhoods near my home in Connecticut, white people tense up—unless I wear my Yale or University of Pennsylvania sweatshirts. When my jogging outfit associates me with an Ivy League university, it identifies me as a certain kind of Black person: a less scary one who has passed inspection under the “white gaze.” Strangers with dark skin are suspect until they can prove their trustworthiness, which is hard to do in fleeting public interactions. For this reason, Black students attending universities near inner cities know to wear college apparel, in hopes of avoiding racial profiling by the police or others.

I once accidentally ran a small social experiment about this. When I joined the Yale faculty in 2007, I bought about 20 university baseball caps to give to the young people at my family reunion that year. Later, my nieces and nephews reported to me that wearing the Yale insignia had transformed their casual interactions with white strangers: White people would now approach them to engage in friendly small talk.

But sometimes these signifiers of professional status and educated-class propriety are not enough. This can be true even in the most rarefied spaces. When I was hired at Yale, the chair of the sociology department invited me for dinner at the Yale Club

of New York City. Clad in a blue blazer, I got to the club early and decided to go up to the fourth-floor library to read *The New York Times*. When the elevator arrived, a crush of people was waiting to get on it,

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so I entered and moved to the back to make room for others. Everyone except me was white.

As the car filled up, I politely asked a man of about 35, standing by the controls, to push the button for the library floor. He looked at me and—emboldened, I have to imagine, by drinks in the bar downstairs—said, “You can read?” The car fell silent. After a few tense moments, another man, seeking to defuse the tension, blurted, “I’ve never met a Yalie who couldn’t read.” All eyes turned to me. The car reached the fourth floor. I stepped off, held the door open, and turned back to the people in the elevator. “I’m not a Yalie,” I said. “I’m a new Yale professor.” And I

went into the library to read the paper.

I TELL THESE stories—and I’ve told them before—not to fault any particular institution (I’ve treasured my time at Yale), but to illustrate my personal experience of a recurring cultural phenomenon: Throughout American history, every moment of significant Black advancement has been met by a white backlash. After the Civil War, under the aegis of Reconstruction, Black people for a time became professionals and congressmen. But when federal troops left the former Confederate states in 1877, white politicians in the South tried to reconstitute slavery with the long rule of Jim Crow. Even the Black people who migrated north to escape this new servitude found themselves relegated to shantytowns on the edges of cities, precursors to the modern Black ghetto.

All of this reinforced what slavery had originally established: the Black body’s place at the bottom of the social order. This racist positioning became institutionalized in innumerable ways, and it persists today.

I want to emphasize that across the decades, many white Americans have encouraged racial equality, albeit sometimes under duress. In response to the riots of the 1960s, the federal government—led by the former segregationist Lyndon B. Johnson—passed far-reaching legislation that finally extended the full rights of citizenship to Black people, while targeting segregation. These legislative reforms—and, especially, affirmative action, which was implemented via LBJ’s executive order in

1965—combined with years of economic expansion to produce a long period of what I call “racial incorporation,” which substantially elevated the income of many Black people and brought them into previously white spaces. Yes, a lot of affirmative-action efforts stopped at mere tokenism. Even so, many of these “tokens” managed to succeed, and the result is the largest Black middle class in American history.

Over the past 50 years, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, the proportion of Black people who are low-income (less than \$52,000 a year for a household of three) has fallen seven points, from 48 to 41 percent. The proportion who are middle-income (\$52,000 to \$156,000 a year) has risen by one point, to 47 percent. The proportion who are high-income (more than \$156,000 a year) has risen the most dramatically, from 5 to 12 percent. Overall, Black poverty remains egregiously disproportionate to that of white and Asian Americans. But fewer Black Americans are poor than 50 years ago, and more than twice as many are rich. Substantial numbers now attend the best schools, pursue professions of their choosing, and occupy positions of power and prestige. Affirmative action worked.

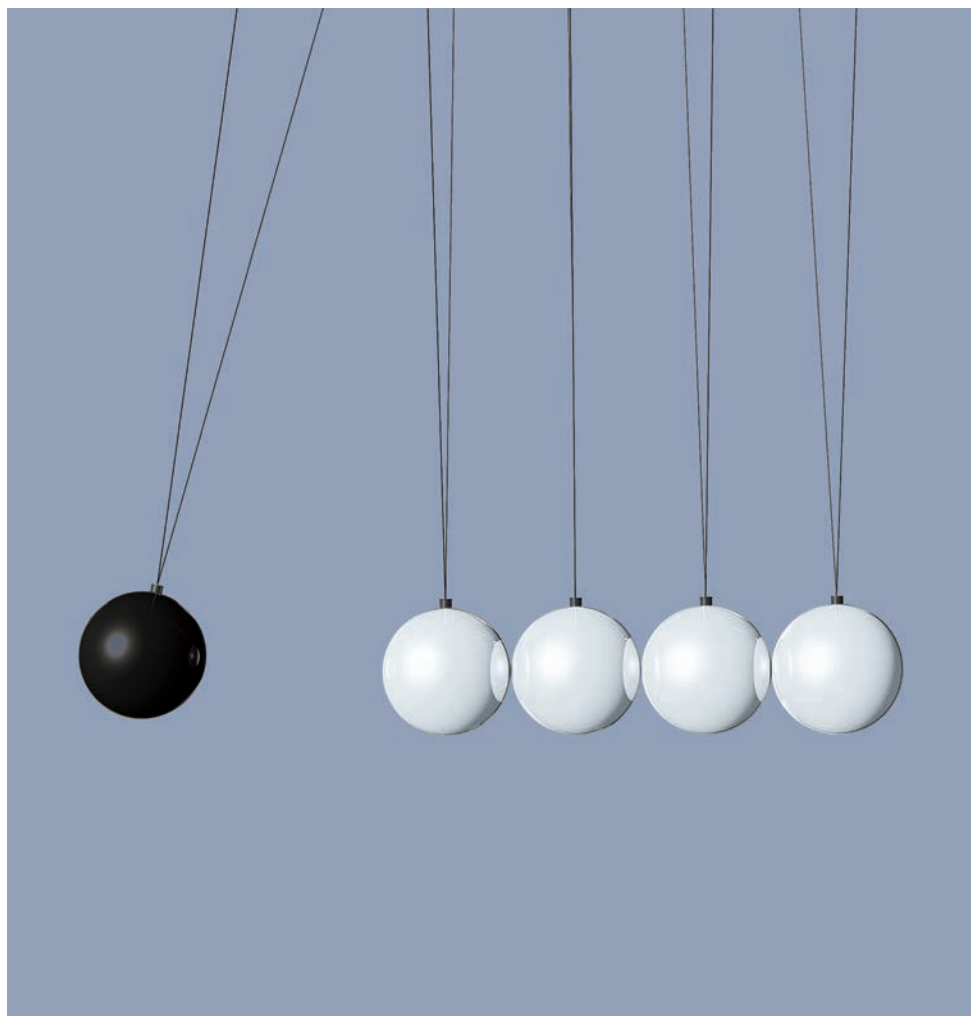
But that very success has inflamed the inevitable white backlash. Notably, the only racial group more likely to be low-income now than 50 years ago is whites—and the only group less likely to be low-income is Blacks.

For some white people displaced from their jobs by globalization and

deindustrialization, the successful Black person with a good job is the embodiment of what’s wrong with America. The spectacle of Black doctors, CEOs, and college professors

of interaction, in the guise of a casual watercooler conversation, the gist of which is a sort of interrogation: “Where did you come from?”; “How did you get here?”; and “Are

is required, a performance in which the worker must demonstrate their propriety, their distance from the ghetto. This can involve dressing more formally than the job requires,



“out of their place” creates an uncomfortable dissonance, which white people deal with by mentally relegating successful Black people to the ghetto. That Black man who drives a new Lexus and sends his children to private school—he must be a drug kingpin, right?

In predominantly white professional spaces, this racial anxiety appears in subtler ways. Black people are all too familiar with a particular kind

you qualified to be here?” (The presumptive answer to the last question is clearly no; Black skin, evoking for white people the iconic ghetto, confers an automatic deficit of credibility.)

Black newcomers must signal quickly and clearly that they belong. Sometimes this requires something as simple as showing a company ID that white people are not asked for. Other times, a more elaborate dance

speaking in a self-consciously educated way, and evincing a placid demeanor, especially in moments of disagreement.

As part of my ethnographic research, I once embedded in a major financial-services corporation in Philadelphia, where I spent six months observing and interviewing workers. One Black employee I spoke with, a senior vice president, said that people of color who wanted to climb the management ladder

must wear the right “uniform” and work hard to perform respectability. “They’re never going to envision you as being a white male,” he told me, “but if you can dress the same and look a certain way and drive a conservative car and whatever else, they’ll say, ‘This guy has a similar attitude, similar values [to we white people]. He’s a team player.’ If you don’t dress with the uniform, obviously you’re on the wrong team.”

This need to constantly perform respectability for white people is a psychological drain, leaving Black people spent and demoralized. They typically keep this demoralization hidden from their white co-workers because they feel that they need to show they are not whiners. Having to pay a “Black tax” as they move through white areas deepens this demoralization. This tax is levied on people of color in nice restaurants and other public places, or simply while driving, when the fear of a lethal encounter with the police must always be in mind. The existential danger this kind of encounter poses is what necessitates “The Talk” that Black parents—fearful every time their kids go out the door that they might not come back alive—give to their children. The psychological effects of all of this accumulate gradually, sapping the spirit and engendering cynicism.

Even the most exalted members of the Black elite must live in two worlds. They understand the white elite’s mores and values, and embody them to a substantial extent—but they typically remain keenly conscious of their Blackness. They socialize with both white and Black

people of their own professional standing, but also members of the Black middle and working classes with whom they feel more kinship, meeting them at the barbershop, in church, or at gatherings of long-standing friendship groups. The two worlds seldom overlap. This calls to mind W. E. B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness”—a term he used for the first time in this publication, in 1897—referring to the dual cultural mindsets that successful African Americans must simultaneously inhabit.

For middle-class Black people, a certain fluidity—abetted by family connections—enables them to feel a connection with those at the lower reaches of society. But that connection comes with a risk of contagion; they fear that, meritocratic status notwithstanding, they may be dragged down by their association with the hood.

WHEN I WORKED at the University of Pennsylvania, some friends of mine and I mentored at-risk youth in West Philadelphia.

One of these kids, Kevin Robinson, who goes by KAYR (pronounced “K.R.”), grew up with six siblings in a single-parent household on public assistance. Two of his sisters got pregnant as teenagers, and for a while the whole family was homeless. But he did well in high school and was accepted to Bowdoin College, where he was one of five African Americans in a class of 440. He was then accepted to Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, where he was one of 10 or so African Americans in an M.B.A. class of roughly 180. He got into

the analyst-training program at Goldman Sachs, where his cohort of 300 had five African Americans. And from there

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GHETTO.

he ended up at a hedge fund, where he was the lone Black employee.

What’s striking about Robinson’s accomplishments is not just the steepness of his rise or the scantness of Black peers as he climbed, but the extent of cultural assimilation he felt he needed to achieve in order to fit in. He trimmed his Afro. He did a pre-college program before starting Bowdoin, where he had sushi for the first time and learned how to play tennis and golf. “Let me look at how these people live; let me see how they operate,” he recalls saying to himself. He decided to start reading *The New Yorker* and *Time* magazine, as they did, and to watch *60 Minutes*. “I wanted people to see me more as their peer versus ... someone from the hood. I wanted

them to see me as, like, ‘Hey, look, he’s just another middle-class Black kid.’” When he was about to start at Goldman Sachs, a Latina woman who was mentoring him there told him not to wear a silver watch or prominent jewelry: “‘KAYR, go get a Timex with a black leather band. Keep it very simple ... Fit in.’” My friends and I had given him similar advice earlier on.

All of this worked; he thrived professionally. Yet even as he occupied elite precincts of wealth and achievement, he was continually getting pulled back to support family in the ghetto, where he felt the need to code-switch, speaking and eating the ways his family did so as not to insult them.

The year he entered Bowdoin, one of his younger brothers was sent to prison for attempted murder, and a sister who had four children was shot in the face and died. Over the years he would pay for school supplies for his nieces and nephews, and for multiple family funerals—all while keeping his family background a secret from his professional colleagues. Even so, he would get subjected to the standard indignities—being asked to show ID when his white peers were not; enduring the (sometimes obliviously) racist comments from colleagues (“You don’t act like a regular Black”). He would report egregious offenses to HR but would usually just let things go, for fear that developing a reputation as a “race guy” would restrict his professional advancement.

Robinson’s is a remarkable success story. He is 40 now; he owns a property-management company and is a multi-millionaire. But his experience makes clear that no matter what

professional or financial heights you ascend to, if you are Black, you can never escape the iconic ghetto, and sometimes not even the actual one.

THE MOST EGREGIOUS intrusion of a Black person into white space was the election (and reelection) of Barack Obama as president. A Black man in the White House! For some white people, this was intolerable. Birthers, led by Donald Trump, said he was ineligible for the presidency, claiming falsely that he had been born in Kenya. The white backlash intensified; Republicans opposed Obama with more than the standard amount of partisan vigor. In 2013, at the beginning of Obama's second term, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, which had protected the franchise for 50 years. Encouraged by this opening, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas moved forward with voter-suppression laws, setting a course that other states are now following. And this year, the Supreme Court outlawed affirmative action in college admissions. I want to tell a story that illustrates the social gains this puts at risk.

Many years ago, when I was a professor at Penn, my father came to visit me. Walking around campus, we bumped into various colleagues and students of mine, most of them white, who greeted us warmly. He watched me interact with my secretary and other department administrators. Afterward, Dad and I went back to my house to drink beer and listen to Muddy Waters.

"So you're teaching at that white school?" he said.

"Yeah."

"You work with white people. And you teach white students."

"Yeah, but they actually come in all colors," I responded. I got his point, though.

"Well, let me ask you one thing," he said, frowning his brow.

"What's that, Dad?"

"Do they respect you?"

After thinking about his question a bit, I said, "Well, some do. And some don't. But you know, Dad, it is hard to tell which is which sometimes."

"Oh, I see," he said.

He didn't disbelieve me; it was just that what he'd witnessed on campus was at odds with his experience of the typical Black-white interaction, where the subordinate status of the Black person was automatically assumed by the white one. Growing up in the South, my dad understood that white people simply did not respect Black people. Observing the respectful treatment I received from my students and colleagues, my father had a hard time believing his own eyes. Could race relations have changed so much, so fast?

They had—in large part because of what affirmative action, and the general processes of racial incorporation and Black economic improvement, had wrought. In the 1960s, the only Black people at the financial-services firm I studied would have been janitors, night watchmen, elevator operators, or secretaries; 30 years later, affirmative action had helped populate the firm with Black executives. Each beneficiary of affirmative action, each member of the growing Black middle class, helped normalize the presence of Black people in professional

and other historically white spaces. All of this diminished, in some incremental way, the power of the symbolic ghetto to hold back people of color.

Too many people forget, if ever they knew it, what a profound cultural shift affirmative action effected. And they overlook affirmative action's crucial role in forestalling social unrest.

Some years ago, I was invited to the College of the Atlantic, a small school in Maine, to give the commencement address. As I stood at the sink in the men's room before the event, checking the mirror to make sure all my academic regalia was properly arrayed, an older white man came up to me and said, with no preamble, "What do you think of affirmative action?"

"I think it's a form of reparations," I said.

"Well, I think they need to be educated first," he said, and then walked out.

I was so provoked by this that I scrambled back to my hotel room and rewrote my speech. I'd already been planning to talk about the benefits of affirmative action, but I sharpened and expanded my case, explaining that it not only had lifted many Black people out of the ghetto, but had been a weapon in the Cold War, when unaligned countries and former colonies were trying to decide which superpower to follow. Back then, Democrats and some Republicans were united in believing that affirmative action, by demonstrating the country's commitment to racial justice and equality, helped project American greatness to the world.

Beyond that, I said to this almost entirely white audience, affirmative action had helped keep the racial unrest

of the '60s from flaring up again. When the kin—the mothers, fathers, cousins, nephews, sons, daughters, baby mamas, uncles, aunts—of ghetto residents secure middle-class livelihoods, those ghetto relatives hear about it. This gives the young people who live there a modicum of hope that they might do the same. Hope takes the edge off distress and desperation; it lessens the incentives for people to loot and burn. What opponents of affirmative action fail to understand is that without a ladder of upward mobility for Black Americans, and a general sense that justice will prevail, a powerful nurturer of social concord gets lost.

Yes, continuing to expand the Black professional and middle classes will lead to more instances of "the dance," and the loaded interrogations, and the other awkward moments and indignities that people of color experience in white spaces. But the greater the number of affluent, successful Black people in such places, the faster this awkwardness will diminish, and the less power the recurrent waves of white reaction will have to set people of color back. I would like to believe that future generations of Black Americans will someday find themselves as pleasantly surprised as my dad once was by the new levels of racial respect and equality they discover. *A*

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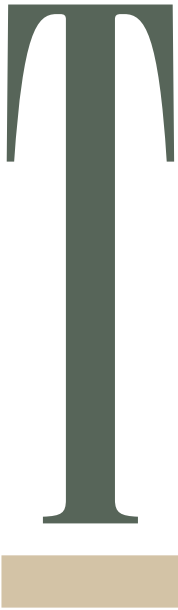


THE PATRIOT

What does
a general
do when the
commander
in chief
undermines
the
Constitution?

By
JEFFREY
GOLDBERG

*Photographs by
Ashley Gilbertson*



he missiles that comprise the land component of America's nuclear triad are scattered across thousands of square miles of prairie and farmland, mainly in North Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. About 150 of the roughly 400 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles currently on alert are dispersed in a wide circle around Minot Air Force Base, in the upper reaches of North Dakota. From Minot, it would take an ICBM about 25 minutes to reach Moscow.

These nuclear weapons are under the control of the 91st Missile Wing of the Air Force Global Strike Command, and it was to the 91st—the “Rough Riders”—that General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, paid a visit in March 2021. I accompanied him on

the trip. A little more than two months had passed since the January 6 attack on the Capitol, and America's nuclear arsenal was on Milley's mind.

In normal times, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the principal military adviser to the president, is supposed to focus his attention on America's national-security challenges, and on the readiness and lethality of its armed forces. But the first 16 months of Milley's term, a period that ended when Joe Biden succeeded Donald Trump as president, were not normal, because Trump was exceptionally unfit to serve. “For more than 200 years, the assumption in this country was that we would have a stable person as president,” one of Milley's mentors, the retired three-star general James Dubik, told me. That this assumption did not hold true during the Trump administration presented a “unique challenge” for Milley, Dubik said.

Milley was careful to refrain from commenting publicly on Trump's cognitive unfitness and moral derangement. In interviews, he would say that it is not the place of the nation's flag officers to discuss the performance of the nation's civilian leaders.

But his views emerged in a number of books published after Trump left office, written by authors who had spoken with Milley, and many other civilian and military officials, on background. In *The Divider*, Peter Baker and Susan Glasser write that Milley believed that Trump was “shameful,” and “complicit” in the January 6 attack. They also reported that Milley feared that Trump's “‘Hitler-like’ embrace of the big lie about the election would prompt the president to seek out a ‘Reichstag moment.’”

These views of Trump align with those of many officials who served in his administration. Trump's first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, considered Trump to be a “fucking moron.” John Kelly, the retired Marine general who served as Trump's chief of staff in 2017 and 2018, has said that Trump is the “most flawed person” he's ever met. James Mattis, who is also a retired Marine general and served as Trump's first secretary of defense, has told friends and colleagues that the 45th president was

“more dangerous than anyone could ever imagine.” It is widely known that Trump's second secretary of defense, Mark Esper, believed that the president didn't understand his own duties, much less the oath that officers swear to the Constitution, or military ethics, or the history of America.

Twenty men have served as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs since the position was created after World War II. Until Milley, none had been forced to confront the possibility that a president would try to foment or provoke a coup in order to illegally remain in office. A plain reading of the record shows that in the chaotic period before and after the 2020 election, Milley did as much, or more, than any other American to defend the constitutional order, to prevent the military from being deployed against the American people, and to forestall the eruption of wars with America's nuclear-armed adversaries. Along the way, Milley deflected Trump's exhortations to have the U.S. military ignore, and even on occasion commit, war crimes. Milley and other military officers deserve praise for protecting democracy, but their actions should also cause deep unease. In the American system, it is the voters, the courts, and Congress that are meant to serve as checks on a president's behavior, not the generals. Civilians provide direction, funding, and oversight; the military then follows lawful orders.

The difficulty of the task before Milley was captured most succinctly by Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, the second of Trump's four national security advisers. “As chairman, you swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, but what if the commander in chief is undermining the Constitution?” McMaster said to me.

For the actions he took in the last months of the Trump presidency, Milley, whose four-year term as chairman, and 43-year career as an Army officer, concluded at the end of September, has been condemned by elements of the far right. Kash Patel, whom Trump installed in a senior Pentagon role in the final days of his administration, refers to Milley as “the Kraken of the swamp.” Trump himself has accused Milley of treason. Sebastian Gorka, a former Trump White House official, has said that Milley deserves to be placed in “shackles and leg irons.” If a second Trump administration were to attempt this, however, the Trumpist faction would be opposed by the large group of ex-Trump-administration officials who believe that the former president continues to pose a unique threat to American democracy, and who believe that Milley is a hero for what he did to protect the country and the Constitution.

“Mark Milley had to contain the impulses of people who wanted to use the United States military in very dangerous ways,” Kelly told me. “Mark had a very, very difficult reality to deal with in his first two years as chairman, and he served honorably and well. The president couldn't fathom people who served their nation honorably.” Kelly, along with other former administration officials, has argued that Trump has a contemptuous view of the military, and that this contempt made it extraordinarily difficult to explain to Trump such concepts as honor, sacrifice, and duty.

Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, told me that no Joint Chiefs chairman has ever been tested in the manner Milley was. “General Milley has done an extraordinary job under the most extraordinary

of circumstances,” Gates said. “I’ve worked for eight presidents, and not even Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon in their angriest moments would have considered doing or saying some of the things that were said between the election and January 6.”

Gates believes that Milley, who served as his military assistant when Gates was Bush’s secretary of defense, was uniquely qualified to defend the Constitution from Trump during those final days. “General Milley expected to be fired every single day between Election Day and January 6,” he said. A less confident and assertive chairman might not have held the line against Trump’s antidemocratic plots.

When I mentioned Gates’s assessment to Milley, he demurred. “I think that any of my peers would have done the same thing. Why do I say that? First of all, I know them. Second, we all think the same way about the Constitution.”

Some of those who served in Trump’s administration say that he appointed Milley chairman because he was drawn to Milley’s warrior reputation, tanklike build, and four-star eyebrows. Senator Angus King of Maine, a political independent who is a supporter of Milley’s, told me, “Trump picked him as chief because he looks like what Trump thinks a general should look like.” But Trump misjudged him, King said. “He thought he would be loyal to him and not to the Constitution.” Trump had been led to believe that Milley would be more malleable than other generals. This misunderstanding threatened to become indelibly ingrained in Washington when Milley made what many people consider to be his most serious mistake as chairman. During the George Floyd protests in early June 2020, Milley, wearing combat fatigues, followed Trump out of the White House to Lafayette Square, which had just been cleared of demonstrators by force. Milley realized too late that Trump, who continued across the street to pose for a now-infamous photo while standing in front of a vandalized church, was manipulating him into a visual endorsement of his

martial approach to the demonstrations. Though Milley left the entourage before it reached the church, the damage was significant. “We’re getting the fuck out of here,” Milley said to his security chief. “I’m fucking done with this shit.” Esper would later say that he and Milley had been duped.

For Milley, Lafayette Square was an agonizing episode; he described it later as a “road-to-Damascus moment.” The week afterward, in a commencement address to the National Defense University, he apologized to the armed forces and the country. “I should not have been there,” he said. “My presence in that moment and in that environment created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics.” His apology earned him the permanent enmity of Trump, who told him that apologies are a sign of weakness.

Joseph Dunford, the Marine general who preceded Milley as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had also faced onerous and unusual challenges. But during the first two years of the Trump presidency, Dunford had been supported by officials such as Kelly, Mattis, Tillerson, and McMaster. These men attempted, with intermittent success, to keep the president’s most dangerous impulses in check. (According to the Associated Press, Kelly and Mattis made a pact with each other that one of them would remain in the country at all times, so the president would never be left unmonitored.) By the time Milley assumed the chairman’s role, all of those officials were gone—driven out or fired.

At the top of the list of worries for these officials was the management of America’s nuclear arsenal. Early in Trump’s term, when Milley was serving as chief of staff of the Army, Trump entered a cycle of rhetorical warfare with the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un. At certain points, Trump raised the possibility of attacking North Korea with nuclear weapons, according to the *New York Times* reporter Michael S. Schmidt’s book, *Donald Trump v. The United States*. Kelly, Dunford, and others tried to convince Trump that his rhetoric—publicly mocking Kim as “Little Rocket Man,” for instance—could trigger nuclear war. “If you keep pushing this clown, he could do something with nuclear weapons,” Kelly told him, explaining that Kim, though a dictator, could be pressured by his own military elites to attack American interests in response to Trump’s provocations. When that argument failed to work, Kelly spelled out for the president that a nuclear exchange could cost the lives of millions of Koreans and Japanese, as well as those of Americans throughout the Pacific. Guam, Kelly told him, falls within range of North Korean missiles. “Guam isn’t America,” Trump responded.

THOUGH THE SPECTER of a recklessly instigated nuclear confrontation abated when Joe Biden came to office, the threat was still on Milley’s mind, which is why he set out to visit Minot that day in March.

In addition to housing the 91st Missile Wing, Minot is home to the Air Force’s 5th Bomb Wing, and I watched Milley spend the morning inspecting a fleet of B-52 bombers. Milley enjoys meeting the rank and file, and he quizzed air crews—who appeared a little unnerved at being interrogated with such exuberance by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs—about their

**BEFORE MILLEY,
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roles, needs, and responsibilities. We then flew by helicopter to a distant launch-control facility, to visit the missile officers in charge of the Minuteman IIIs. The underground bunker is staffed continuously by two launch officers, who are responsible for a flight of 10 missiles, each secured in hardened underground silos. The two officers seated at the facility's console described to Milley their launch procedures.

The individual silos, connected to the launch-control facility by buried cable, are surrounded by chain-link fences. They are placed at some distance from one another, an arrangement that would force Russia or China to expend a large number of their own missiles to preemptively destroy America's. The silos are also protected by electronic surveillance, and by helicopter and ground patrols. The Hueys carrying us to one of the silos landed well outside the fence, in a farmer's field. Accompanying Milley was Admiral Charles Richard, who was then the commander of Strategic Command, or Stratcom. Stratcom is in charge of America's nuclear force; the commander is the person who would receive orders from the president to launch nuclear weapons—by air, sea, or land—at an adversary.

It was windy and cold at the silo. Air Force officers showed us the 110-ton blast door, and then we walked to an open hatch. Richard mounted a rickety metal ladder leading down into the silo and disappeared from view. Then Milley began his descent. "Just don't touch anything," an Air Force noncommissioned officer said. "Sir."

Then it was my turn. "No smoking down there," the NCO said, helpfully. The ladder dropped 60 feet into a twilight haze, ending at a catwalk that ringed the missile itself. The Minuteman III weighs about 80,000 pounds and is about 60 feet tall. The catwalk surrounded the top of the missile, eye level with its conical warhead. Milley and I stood next to each other, staring silently at the bomb. The warhead of the typical Minuteman III has at least 20 times the explosive power of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. We were close enough to touch it, and I, at least, was tempted.

Milley broke the silence. "You ever see one of these before?"

"No," I answered.

"Me neither," Milley said.

I couldn't mask my surprise.

"I'm an infantryman," he said, smiling. "We don't have these in the infantry."

He continued, "I'm testifying in front of Congress on nuclear posture, and I think it's important to see these things for myself."

Richard joined us. "This is an indispensable component of the nuclear triad," he said, beginning a standard Strategic Command pitch. "Our goal is to communicate to potential adversaries: 'Not today.'" (When I later visited Richard at Offutt Air Force Base, the headquarters of Stratcom, near Omaha, Nebraska, I saw that his office features a large sign with this same slogan, hanging above portraits of the leaders of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.)

I used this moment in the silo to discuss with Milley the stability of America's nuclear arsenal under Trump. The former president's ignorance of nuclear doctrine had been apparent well before his exchanges with Kim Jong Un. In a 2015 Republican-primary debate, Trump was asked, "Of the three legs of the triad ... do you

have a priority?" Trump's answer: "I think—I think, for me, nuclear is just—the power, the devastation is very important to me." After this, Senator Marco Rubio, a foreign-policy expert who was one of Trump's Republican-primary opponents, called Trump an "erratic individual" who could not be trusted with the country's nuclear codes. (Rubio subsequently embraced Trump, praising him for bringing "a lot of people and energy into the Republican Party.")

I described to Milley a specific worry I'd had, illustrated most vividly by one of the more irrational public statements Trump made as president. On January 2, 2018, Trump tweeted: "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"

This tweet did not initiate a fatal escalatory cycle, but with it Trump created conditions that easily could have, as he did at several other moments during his presidency. Standing beside the missile in the silo, I expressed my concern about this to Milley.

"Wasn't going to happen," he responded.

"You're not in the chain of command," I noted. The chairman is an adviser to the president, not a field commander.

"True," he answered. "The chain of command runs from the president to the secretary of defense to that guy," he said, pointing to Richard, who had moved to the other side of the catwalk. "We've got excellent professionals throughout the system." He then said, "Nancy Pelosi was worried about this. I told her she didn't have to worry, that we have systems in place." By this, he meant that the system is built to resist the efforts of rogue actors.

Shortly after the assault on the Capitol on January 6, Pelosi, who was then the speaker of the House, called Milley to ask if the nation's nuclear weapons were secure. "He's crazy," she said of Trump. "You know he's crazy. He's been crazy for a long time. So don't say you don't know what his state of mind is." According to Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, who recounted this conversation in their book, *Peril*, Milley replied, "Madam Speaker, I agree with you on everything." He then said, according to the authors, "I want you to know this in your heart of hearts, I can guarantee you 110 percent that the military, use of military power, whether it's nuclear or a strike in a foreign country of any kind, we're not going to do anything illegal or crazy."

Shortly after the call from Pelosi, Milley gathered the Pentagon's top nuclear officers—one joined by telephone from Stratcom headquarters—for an emergency meeting. The flag officers in attendance included Admiral Richard; the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General John Hyten, who was Richard's predecessor at Stratcom; and the leaders of the National Military Command Center, the highly secure Pentagon facility from which emergency-action messages—the actual instructions to launch nuclear weapons—would emanate. The center is staffed continuously, and each eight-hour shift conducts drills on nuclear procedures. In the meeting in his office, Milley told the assembled generals and admirals that, out of an abundance of caution, he wanted to go over the procedures and processes for deploying nuclear weapons. Hyten summarized the standard procedures—including ensuring



General Milley outside his residence on Generals' Row at Fort Myer, alongside Arlington National Cemetery, in Virginia

the participation of the Joint Chiefs in any conversation with the president about imminent war. At the conclusion of Hyten's presentation, according to meeting participants, Milley said, "If anything weird or crazy happens, just make sure we all know." Milley then went to each officer in turn and asked if he understood the procedures. They all affirmed that they did. Milley told other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "All we've got to do is see to it that the plane lands on January 20," when the constitutional transfer of power to the new president would be completed.

I found Milley's confidence only somewhat reassuring. The American president is a nuclear monarch, invested with unilateral authority to release weapons that could destroy the planet many times over.

I mentioned to Milley a conversation I'd had with James Mattis when he was the secretary of defense. I had told Mattis, only half-joking, that I was happy he was a physically fit Marine. If it ever came to it, I said, he could forcibly wrest the nuclear football—the briefcase containing, among other things, the authentication codes needed to order a nuclear strike—from the president. Mattis, a wry man, smiled and said that I was failing to take into account the mission of the Secret Service.

When I mentioned to Milley my view that Trump was mentally and morally unequipped to make decisions concerning war and peace, he would say only, "The president alone decides to

launch nuclear weapons, but he doesn't launch them alone." He then repeated the sentence.

He has also said in private settings, more colloquially, "The president can't wake up in the middle of the night and decide to push a button. One reason for this is that there's no button to push."

During conversations with Milley and others about the nuclear challenge, a story from the 1970s came frequently to my mind. The story concerns an Air Force officer named Harold Hering, who was dismissed from service for asking a question about a crucial flaw in America's nuclear command-and-control system—a flaw that had no technical solution. Hering was a Vietnam veteran who, in 1973, was training to become a Minuteman crew member. One day in class, he asked, "How can I know that an order I receive to launch my missiles came from a sane president?" The Air Force concluded that launch officers did not need to know the answer to this question, and they discharged him. Hering appealed his discharge, and responded to the Air Force's assertion as follows: "I have to say I feel I do have a need to know, because I am a human being."

The U.S. military possesses procedures and manuals for every possible challenge. Except Hering's.

After we climbed out of the missile silo, I asked Milley how much time the president and the secretary of defense would have to make a decision about using nuclear weapons, in the event of a reported enemy attack. Milley would not answer in specifics, but

he acknowledged—as does everyone in the business of thinking about nuclear weapons—that the timeline could be acutely brief. For instance, it is generally believed that if surveillance systems detected an imminent launch from Russia, the president could have as few as five or six minutes to make a decision. “At the highest levels, folks are trained to work through decisions at a rapid clip,” Milley said. “These decisions would be very difficult to make. Sometimes the information would be very limited. But we face a lot of hard decisions on a regular basis.”

THE STORY OF Milley’s promotion to the chairmanship captures much about the disorder in Donald Trump’s mind, and in his White House.

By 2018, Trump was growing tired of General Dunford, a widely respected Marine officer. After one White House briefing by Dunford, Trump turned to aides and said, “That guy is smart. Why did he join the military?” Trump did not consider Dunford to be sufficiently “loyal,” and he was seeking a general who would pledge his personal fealty. Such generals don’t tend to exist in the American system—Michael Flynn, Trump’s QAnon-adjacent first national security adviser, is an exception—but Trump was adamant.

The president had also grown tired of James Mattis, the defense secretary. He had hired Mattis in part because he’d been told his nickname was “Mad Dog.” It wasn’t—that had been a media confection—and Mattis proved far more cerebral, and far more independent-minded, than Trump could handle. So when Mattis recommended David Goldfein, the Air Force chief of staff, to become the next chairman, Trump rejected the choice. (In ordinary presidencies, the defense secretary chooses the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and the president, by custom, accedes to the choice.)

At that point, Milley was Mattis’s choice to serve in a dual-hatted role, as NATO supreme allied commander in Europe and the head of U.S. European Command. Mattis has said he believed Milley’s bullish personality made him the perfect person to push America’s European allies to spend more on their collective defense, and to focus on the looming threat from Russia.

But a group of ex-Army officers then close to Trump had been lobbying for an Army general for the chairmanship, and Milley, the Army chief of staff, was the obvious candidate. Despite a reputation for being prolix and obstreperous in a military culture that, at its highest reaches, values discretion and rhetorical restraint, Milley was popular with many Army leaders, in part because of the reputation he’d developed in Iraq and Afghanistan as an especially effective war fighter. A son of working-class Boston, Milley is a former hockey player who speaks bluntly, sometimes brutally. “I’m Popeye the fucking sailorman,” he has told friends. “I yam what I yam.” This group of former Army officers, including Esper, who was then serving as the secretary of the Army, and David Urban, a West Point graduate who was key to Trump’s Pennsylvania election effort, believed that Trump would take to Milley, who had both an undergraduate degree from Princeton and the personality of a hockey enforcer. “Knowing Trump, I knew that he was looking for a complete carnivore, and Milley fit that bill,” Urban told me. “He checked so many boxes for Trump.”

In late 2018, Milley was called to meet the president. Before the meeting, he visited Kelly in his West Wing office, where he was told that Trump might ask him to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. But, if given a choice, Kelly said, he should avoid the role. “If he asks you to go to Europe, you should go. It’s crazy here,” Kelly said. At the time of this meeting, Kelly was engaged in a series of disputes with Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner (he referred to them acidly as the “Royal Couple”), and he was having little success imposing order over an administration in chaos. Each day, ex-administration officials told me, aides such as Stephen Miller and Peter Navarro—along with Trump himself—would float absurd, antidemocratic ideas. Dunford had become an expert at making himself scarce in the White House, seeking to avoid these aides and others.

Kelly escorted Milley to the Oval Office. Milley saluted Trump and sat across from the president, who was seated at the Resolute Desk.

“You’re here because I’m interviewing you for the job of chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” Trump said. “What do you think of that?”

Milley responded: “I’ll do whatever you ask me to do.” At which point, Trump turned to Kelly and said, “What’s that other job Mattis wants him to do? Something in Europe?”

Kelly answered, “That’s SACEUR, the supreme allied commander in Europe.”

Trump asked, “What does that guy do?”

“That’s the person who commands U.S. forces in Europe,” Kelly said.

“Which is the better job?” Trump asked.

Kelly answered that the chairmanship is the better job. Trump offered Milley the role. The business of the meeting done, the conversation then veered in many different directions. But at one point Trump returned to the job offer, saying to Milley, “Mattis says you’re soft on transgenders. Are you soft on transgenders?”

“KNOWING TRUMP,
I KNEW THAT
HE WAS LOOKING
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AND MILLEY FIT
THAT BILL.”

Milley responded, “I’m not soft on transgender or hard on transgender. I’m about standards in the U.S. military, about who is qualified to serve in the U.S. military. I don’t care who you sleep with or what you are.”

The offer stood.

It would be nearly a year before Dunford retired and Milley assumed the role. At his welcome ceremony at Joint Base Myer–Henderson Hall, across the Potomac River from the capital, Milley gained an early, and disturbing, insight into Trump’s attitude toward soldiers. Milley had chosen a severely wounded Army captain, Luis Avila, to sing “God Bless America.” Avila, who had completed five combat tours, had lost a leg in an IED attack in Afghanistan, and had suffered two heart attacks, two strokes, and brain damage as a result of his injuries. To Milley, and to four-star generals across the Army, Avila and his wife, Claudia, represented the heroism, sacrifice, and dignity of wounded soldiers.

It had rained that day, and the ground was soft; at one point Avila’s wheelchair threatened to topple over. Milley’s wife, Hollyanne, ran to help Avila, as did Vice President Mike Pence. After Avila’s performance, Trump walked over to congratulate him, but then said to Milley, within earshot of several witnesses, “Why do you bring people like that here? No one wants to see that, the wounded.” Never let Avila appear in public again, Trump told Milley. (Recently, Milley invited Avila to sing at his retirement ceremony.)

These sorts of moments, which would grow in intensity and velocity, were disturbing to Milley. As a veteran of multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, he had buried 242 soldiers who’d served under his command. Milley’s family venerated the military, and Trump’s attitude toward the uniformed services seemed superficial, callous, and, at the deepest human level, repugnant.

MILLEY WAS RAISED in a blue-collar section of Winchester, Massachusetts, just outside Boston, where nearly everyone of a certain age—including his mother—was a World War II veteran. Mary Murphy served in the women’s branch of the Naval Reserve; the man who became her husband, Alexander Milley, was a Navy corpsman who was part of the assault landings in the central Pacific at Kwajalein, Tinian, and Iwo Jima. Alexander was just out of high school when he enlisted. “My dad brought his hockey skates to the Pacific,” Milley told me. “He was pretty naive.”

Though he was born after it ended, World War II made a powerful impression on Mark Milley, in part because it had imprinted itself so permanently on his father. When I traveled to Japan with Milley this summer, he told me a story about the stress his father had experienced during his service. Milley was undergoing a bit of stress himself on this trip. He was impeccably diplomatic with his Japanese counterparts, but I got the impression that he still finds visiting the country to be slightly surreal. At one point he was given a major award in the name of the emperor. “If my father could only see this,” he said to me, and then recounted the story.

It took place at Fort Drum, in upstate New York, when Milley was taking command of the 10th Mountain Division, in 2011. His father and his father’s younger brother Tom, a Korean War veteran, came to attend his change-of-command ceremony. “My

father always hated officers,” Milley recalled. “Every day from the time I was a second lieutenant to colonel, he was like, ‘When are you getting out?’ Then, all of sudden, it was ‘My son, the general.’”

He continued, “We have the whole thing—troops on the field, regalia, cannons, bugle—and then we have a reception back at the house. I’ve got the Japanese flag up on the wall, right over the fireplace. It’s a flag my father took from Saipan. So that night, he’s sitting there in his T-shirt and boxers; he’s having probably more than one drink, just staring at the Japanese flag. One or two in the morning, we hear this primeval-type screaming. He’s screaming at his brother, ‘Tom, you got to get up!’ And I’ll say it the way he said it: ‘Tom, the Japs are here, the Japs are here! We gotta get the kids outta here!’ So my wife elbows me and says, ‘Your father,’ and I say, ‘Yes, I figured that out,’ and I go out and my dad, he’s not in good shape by then—in his 80s, Parkinson’s, not super mobile—and yet he’s running down the hallway. I grab him by both arms. His eyes are bugging out and I say, ‘Dad, it’s okay, you’re with the 10th Mountain Division on the Canadian border.’ And his brother Tom comes out and says, ‘Goddamnit, just go to fucking bed, for Chrissakes. You won your war; we just tied ours.’ And I feel like I’m in some B movie. Anyway, he calmed down, but you see, this is what happens. One hundred percent of people who see significant combat have some form of PTSD. For years he wouldn’t go to the VA, and I finally said, ‘You hit the beach at Iwo Jima and Saipan. The VA is there for you; you might as well use it.’ And they diagnosed him, finally.”

Milley never doubted that he would follow his parents into military service, though he had no plans to make the Army a career. At Princeton, which recruited him to play hockey, he was a political-science major, writing his senior thesis on Irish revolutionary guerrilla movements. He joined ROTC, and he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in June 1980. He began his Army career as maintenance officer in a motor pool of the 82nd Airborne; this did not excite him, so he maneuvered his way onto a path that took him to the Green Berets.

His first overseas mission was to parachute into Somalia in 1984 with a five-man Special Forces A-Team to train a Somali army detachment that was fighting Soviet-backed Ethiopia. “It was basically dysentery and worms,” he recalled. “We were out there in the middle of nowhere. It was all small-unit tactics, individual skills. We were boiling water we got from cow ponds, and breakfast was an ostrich egg and flatbread.” His abiding interest in insurgencies led him to consider a career in the CIA, but he was dissuaded by a recruiter who told him working in the agency would make having any kind of family life hard. In 1985, he was sent to Fort Ord, where he “got really excited about the Army.” This was during the Reagan-era defense buildup, when the Army—now all-volunteer—was emerging from what Milley describes as its “post-Vietnam malaise.” This was a time of war-fighting innovation, which Milley would champion as he rose in rank. He would go on to take part in the invasion of Panama, and he helped coordinate the occupation of northern Haiti during the U.S. intervention there in 1994.

After September 11, 2001, Milley deployed repeatedly as a brigade commander to Iraq and Afghanistan. Ross Davidson, a retired colonel who served as Milley’s operations officer in



Milley played high-school hockey at Belmont Hill School, in Massachusetts, in the mid-'70s.



Milley getting his ROTC commission at Princeton in 1980



Milley with his mother and father, both World War II veterans, at his ROTC commissioning ceremony in 1980

Milley (left) deployed in Somalia with the Green Berets of the 5th Special Forces Group in the 1980s.



Baghdad when he commanded a brigade of the 10th Mountain Division, recalled Milley's mantra: "Move to the sound of the guns." Davidson went on to say, with admiration, "I've been blown up, like, nine times with the guy."

Davidson witnessed what is often mentioned as Milley's most notable act of personal bravery, when he ran across a booby-trapped bridge at night to stop a pair of U.S. tanks from crossing. "We had

no communication with the tanks, and the boss just ran across the bridge without thinking of his own safety to keep those tanks from blowing themselves up," he told me. "It was something to see."

Davidson and others who fought for Milley remember him as ceaselessly aggressive. "We're rolling down a street and we knew we were going to get hit—the street just went deserted—and *bam, smack*, a round explodes to our right," Davidson said.



Returning home to Fort Ord, California, after the invasion of Panama, January 1990



In the late '90s, Milley (seated on truck) served in the 2nd Infantry Division in South Korea, the forward line against a North Korean invasion.



In 1994, Milley helped coordinate the U.S. occupation of northern Haiti.

Milley speaks to members of the 10th Mountain Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, which he commanded, in Iraq in 2005.



"Everything goes black, the windshield splinters in front of us, one of our gunners took a chunk of shrapnel. We bailed out and Milley says, 'Oh, you want a fight? Let's fight.' We started hunting down bad guys. Milley sends one Humvee back with the wounded, and then we're kicking doors down." At another point, Davidson said, "he wanted to start a fight in this particular area north of the city, farm fields mixed with little hamlets.

And so we moved to the middle of this field, just circled the wagons and waited to draw fire. He was brought up in a school of thought that says a commander who conducts command-and-control from a fixed command post is isolated in many regards. He was in the battle space almost every day."

Once, when the commanding general of the 10th Mountain Division, Lloyd Austin—now the secretary of defense—was visiting

Baghdad, Milley took him on a tour of the city. Milley, Austin, and Davidson were in a Humvee when it was hit.

“Mark has the gift of gab. I don’t remember what he was talking about, but he was talking when there was an explosion. Our second vehicle got hit. Austin’s window shattered, but we didn’t stop; we punched through,” Davidson said. “Wedged into Austin’s door was this four-inch chunk of shrapnel. If it had breached the door seam, it would have taken Austin’s head clean off. It was a ‘Holy shit, we almost got the commanding general killed’ type of situation. That wouldn’t have gone well.”

(When I mentioned this incident recently to Austin, he said, “I thought that was Mark trying to kill his boss.” That’s an elaborate way to kill the boss, I said. “You’ve got to make it look credible,” Austin answered, smiling.)

Dunford, Milley’s predecessor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was the four-star commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2013 when Milley, by then a three-star general, came to serve as the international joint commander of all ground forces in the country. He describes Milley as ambitious and creative. “He was very forward-leaning, and he set the bar very high for himself and others,” Dunford told me. “He puts a lot of pressure on himself to perform. There’s just a level of ambition and aggressiveness there. It would be hard for me to imagine that someone could have accomplished as much as he did in the role. Hockey was the right sport for him.”

SOON AFTER BECOMING CHAIRMAN, Milley found himself in a disconcerting situation: trying, and failing, to teach President Trump the difference between appropriate battlefield aggressiveness on the one hand, and war crimes on the other. In November 2019, Trump decided to intervene in three different cases that had been working their way through the military justice system. In the most infamous case, the Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher had been found guilty of posing with the corpse of an Islamic State prisoner. Though Gallagher was found not guilty of murder, witnesses testified that he’d stabbed the prisoner in the neck with a hunting knife. (Gallagher’s nickname was “Blade.”) In an extraordinary move, Trump reversed the Navy’s decision to demote him in rank. Trump also pardoned a junior Army officer, Clint Lorance, convicted of second-degree murder for ordering soldiers to shoot three unarmed Afghans, two of whom died. In the third case, a Green Beret named Mathew Golsteyn was accused of killing an unarmed Afghan he suspected was a bomb maker for the Taliban and then covering up the killing. At a rally in Florida that month, Trump boasted, “I stuck up for three great warriors against the deep state.”

The president’s intervention included a decision that Gallagher should be allowed to keep his Trident insignia, which is worn by all SEALs in good standing. The pin features an anchor and an eagle holding a flintlock pistol while sitting atop a horizontal trident. It is one of the most coveted insignia in the entire U.S. military.

This particular intervention was onerous for the Navy, because by tradition only a commanding officer or a group of SEALs on a Trident Review Board are meant to decide if one of their own is unworthy of being a SEAL. Late one night, on Air Force One, Milley tried to convince Trump that his intrusion was damaging

Navy morale. They were flying from Washington to Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, to attend a “dignified transfer,” the repatriation ceremony for fallen service members.

“Mr. President,” Milley said, “you have to understand that the SEALs are a tribe within a larger tribe, the Navy. And it’s up to them to figure out what to do with Gallagher. You don’t want to intervene. This is up to the tribe. They have their own rules that they follow.”

Trump called Gallagher a hero and said he didn’t understand why he was being punished.

“Because he slit the throat of a wounded prisoner,” Milley said.

“The guy was going to die anyway,” Trump said.

Milley answered, “Mr. President, we have military ethics and laws about what happens in battle. We can’t do that kind of thing. It’s a war crime.” Trump answered that he didn’t understand “the big deal.” He went on, “You guys”—meaning combat soldiers—“are all just killers. What’s the difference?”

At which point a frustrated Milley summoned one of his aides, a combat-veteran SEAL officer, to the president’s Air Force One office. Milley took hold of the Trident pin on the SEAL’s chest and asked him to describe its importance. The aide explained to Trump that, by tradition, only SEALs can decide, based on assessments of competence and character, whether one of their own should lose his pin. But the president’s mind was not changed. Gallagher kept his pin.

When I asked Milley about these incidents, he explained his larger views about behavior in combat. “You have accidents that occur, and innocent people get killed in warfare,” he said. “Then you have the intentional breaking of the rules of war that occurs in part because of the psychological and moral degradation that occurs to all human beings who participate in combat. It takes an awful lot of moral and physical discipline to prevent you or your unit from going down that path of degradation.

“I’ll use Gallagher as an example. He’s a tough guy, a tough, hard Navy SEAL. Saw a lot of combat. There’s a little bit of a ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ feeling in all of this. What happened to Gallagher can happen to many human beings.” Milley told me about a book given to him by a friend, Aviv Kochavi, a former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces. The book, by an American academic named Christopher Browning, is called *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*.

“It’s a great book,” Milley said. “It’s about these average police officers from Hamburg who get drafted, become a police battalion that follows the Wehrmacht into Poland, and wind up slaughtering Jews and committing genocide. They just devolve into barbaric acts. It’s about moral degradation.”

During Milley’s time in the Trump administration, the disagreements and misunderstandings between the Pentagon and the White House all seemed to follow the same pattern: The president—who was incapable of understanding or unwilling to understand the aspirations and rules that guide the military—would continually try to politicize an apolitical institution. This conflict reached its nadir with the Lafayette Square incident in June 2020. The day when Milley appeared in uniform by the president’s side, heading into the square, has been studied endlessly. What is clear is that Milley (and Mark Esper) walked into an ambush, and Milley extracted himself as soon as he could, which was too late.

The image of a general in combat fatigues walking with a president who has a well-known affection for the Insurrection Act—the 1807 law that allows presidents to deploy the military to put down domestic riots and rebellions—caused consternation and anger across the senior-officer ranks, and among retired military leaders.

“I just about ended my friendship with Mark over Lafayette Square,” General Peter Chiarelli, the now-retired former vice chief of staff of the Army, told me. Chiarelli was once Milley’s superior, and he considered him to be among his closest friends. “I watched him in uniform, watched the whole thing play out, and I was pissed. I wrote an editorial about the proper role of the military that was very critical of Mark, and I was about to send it, and my wife said, ‘You really want to do that—end a treasured friendship—like this?’ She said I should send it to him instead, and of course she was right.” When they spoke, Milley made no excuses, but said it had not been his intention to look as if he was doing Trump’s bidding. Milley explained the events of the day to Chiarelli: He was at FBI headquarters, and had been planning to visit National Guardsmen stationed near the White House when

he was summoned to the Oval Office. Once he arrived, Trump signaled to everyone present that they were heading outside. Ivanka Trump found a Bible and they were on their way.

“As a commissioned officer, I have a duty to ensure that the military stays out of politics,” Milley told me. “This was a political act, a political event. I didn’t realize it at the moment. I probably should have, but I didn’t, until the event was well on its way. I pee’d off before the church, but we’re already a minute or two into this thing, and it was clear to me that it was a political event, and I was in uniform. I absolutely, positively shouldn’t have been there. The political people, the president and others, can do whatever they want. But I can’t. I’m a soldier, and fundamental to this republic is for the military to stay out of politics.”

Trump, inflamed by the sight of protesters so close to the White House, had been behaving especially erratically. “You are losers!” the president screamed at Cabinet members and other top officials at one point. “You are all fucking losers!”

According to Esper, Trump desperately wanted a violent response to the protesters, asking, “Can’t you just shoot them?”



Left: Milley wears the patch of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on his sleeve, September 2023.

Right: Milley with the flag his father took from Saipan during World War II. Seeing it on Milley’s wall once plunged his father, who had PTSD, into a combat flashback.

Just shoot them in the legs or something?” When I raised this with Milley, he explained, somewhat obliquely, how he would manage the president’s eruptions.

“It was a rhetorical question,” Milley explained. “Can’t you just shoot them in the legs?”

“He never actually ordered you to shoot anyone in the legs?” I asked.

“Right. This could be interpreted many, many different ways,” he said.

Milley and others around Trump used different methods to handle the unstable president. “You can judge my success or failure on this, but I always tried to use persuasion with the president, not undermine or go around him or slow-roll,” Milley told me. “I would present my argument to him. The president makes decisions, and if the president ordered us to do X, Y, or Z and it was legal, we would do it. If it’s not legal, it’s my job to say it’s illegal, and here’s why it’s illegal. I would emphasize cost and risk of the various courses of action. My job, then and now, is to let the president know what the course of action could be, let them know what the cost is, what the risks and benefits are. And then make a recommendation. That’s what I’ve done under both presidents.”

He went on to say, “President Trump never ordered me to tell the military to do something illegal. He never did that. I think that’s an important point.”

We were discussing the Lafayette Square incident while at Quarters Six, the chairman’s home on Generals’ Row at Fort Myer, in Arlington, Virginia, across the Potomac from the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Capitol. Next door to Quarters Six was the home of the Air Force chief of staff, General Charles Q. Brown Jr., who was slated to become the next chairman. Generals’ Row was built on land seized by the Union from Robert E. Lee’s plantation. It is a good place to hold a discussion about the relationship between a democracy and its standing army.

I tried to ask Milley why Lafayette Square had caught him off guard, given all that he had seen and learned already. Only a few weeks earlier, Trump had declared to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a meeting about China, that the “great U.S. military isn’t as capable as you think.” After the meeting, Milley spoke with the chiefs, who were angry and flustered by the president’s behavior. (Esper writes in his memoir, *A Sacred Oath*, that one member of the Joint Chiefs began studying the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, which can be used to remove an unfit president.)

“Weren’t you aware that Trump—”

“I wasn’t aware that this was going to be a political event.”

I tacked. “Were you aware that this was”—I paused, searching for an artful term—“an unusual administration?”

“I’ll reserve comment on that,” Milley responded. “I think there were certainly plenty of warnings and indicators that others might say in hindsight were there. But for me, I’m a soldier, and my task is to follow lawful orders and maintain good order and discipline in the force.”

“You didn’t have situational awareness?”

“At that moment, I didn’t realize that there was a highly charged piece of political stagecraft going on, if you will. And

when I did, I peeled off.” (That evening, Lieutenant General McMaster texted Milley the well-known meme of Homer Simpson disappearing into a hedge.)

The lesson, Milley said, was that he had to pay more attention. “I had to double down on ensuring that I personally—and that the uniformed military—that we all stayed clear of any political acts or anything that could be implied as being involved in politics.”

The week after Lafayette Square, Milley made his apology in the National Defense University speech—a speech that helped repair his relationship with the officer corps but destroyed his relationship with Trump.

“There are different gradients of what is bad. The really bad days are when people get killed in combat,” Milley told me. “But those 90 seconds were clearly a low point from a personal and professional standpoint for me, over the course of 43, 44 years of service. They were searing. It was a bad moment for me because it struck at the heart of the credibility of the institution.”

The chasm dividing Milley and Trump on matters of personal honor became obvious after Lafayette Square. In a statement, referring to Milley’s apology, Trump said of the chairman, “I saw at that moment he had no courage or skill.”

Milley viewed it differently. “Apologies are demonstrations of strength,” Milley told me. “There’s a whole concept of redemption in Western philosophy. It’s part and parcel of our philosophy, the Western religious tradition—the idea that human beings are fallible, that we sin and that we make mistakes and that when you do so you own the mistake, you admit it, and then you learn from that mistake and take corrective action and move on.”

For his part, General Chiarelli concluded that his friend had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Quoting Peter Feaver, an academic expert on civil-military relations, Chiarelli said, “You have to judge Mark like you judge Olympic divers—by the difficulty of the dive.”

That summer, Milley visited Chiarelli in Washington State and, over breakfast, described what he thought was coming next. “It was unbelievable. This is August 2, and he laid out in specific detail what his concerns were between August and Inauguration Day. He identified one of his biggest concerns as January 6,” the day the Senate was to meet to certify the election. “It was almost like a crystal ball.”

Chiarelli said that Milley told him it was possible, based on his observations of the president and his advisers, that they would not accept an Election Day loss. Specifically, Milley worried that Trump would trigger a war—an “October surprise”—to create chaotic conditions in the lead-up to the election. Chiarelli mentioned the continuous skirmishes inside the White House between those who were seeking to attack Iran, ostensibly over its nuclear program, and those, like Milley, who could not justify a large-scale preemptive strike.

In the crucial period after his road-to-Damascus conversion, Milley set several goals for himself: keep the U.S. out of reckless, unnecessary wars overseas; maintain the military’s integrity, and his own; and prevent the administration from using the military against the American people. He told uniformed and civilian officials that the military would play no part in any attempt by Trump to illegally remain in office.

The desire on the part of Trump and his loyalists to utilize the Insurrection Act was unabating. Stephen Miller, the Trump adviser whom Milley is said to have called “Rasputin,” was vociferous on this point. Less than a week after George Floyd was murdered, Miller told Trump in an Oval Office meeting, “Mr. President, they are burning America down. Antifa, Black Lives Matter—they’re burning it down. You have an insurrection on your hands. Barbarians are at the gate.”

According to Woodward and Costa in *Peril*, Milley responded, “Shut the fuck up, Steve.” Then he turned to Trump. “Mr. President, they are not burning it down.”

I asked Milley to describe the evolution of his post-Lafayette Square outlook. “You know this term *teachable moment*?” he asked. “Every month thereafter I just did something publicly to continually remind the force about our responsibilities ... What I’m trying to do the entire summer, all the way up to today, is keep the military out of actual politics.”

He continued, “We stay out of domestic politics, period, full stop, not authorized, not permitted, illegal, immoral, unethical—we don’t do it.” I asked if he ever worried about pockets of insurrectionists within the military.

“We’re a very large organization—2.1 million people, active duty and reserves. Some of the people in the organization get outside the bounds of the law. We have that on occasion. We’re a highly disciplined force dedicated to the protection of the Constitution and the American people ... Are there one or two out there who have other thoughts in their mind? Maybe. But the system of discipline works.”

So you had no anxiety at all?

“Of anything large-scale? Not at all. Not then, not now.”

In the weeks before the election, Milley was a dervish of activity. He spent much of his time talking with American allies and adversaries, all worried about the stability of the United States. In what would become his most discussed move, first reported by Woodward and Costa, he called Chinese General Li Zuocheng, his People’s Liberation Army counterpart, on October 30, after receiving intelligence that China believed Trump was going to order an attack. “General Li, I want to assure you that the American government is stable and everything is going to be okay,” Milley said, according to *Peril*. “We are not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against you. General Li, you and I have known each other for now five years. If we’re going to attack, I’m going to call you ahead of time. It’s not going to be a surprise ... If there was a war or some kind of kinetic action between the United States and China, there’s going to be a buildup, just like there has been always in history.”

Milley later told the Senate Armed Services Committee that this call, and a second one two days after the January 6 insurrection, represented an attempt to “deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers that are armed with the world’s most deadliest weapons.”

The October call was endorsed by Secretary of Defense Esper, who was just days away from being fired by Trump. Esper’s successor, Christopher Miller, had been informed of the January call. Listening in on the calls were at least 10 U.S. officials, including

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representatives of the State Department and the CIA. This did not prevent Trump partisans, and Trump himself, from calling Milley “treasonous” for making the calls. (When news of the calls emerged, Miller condemned Milley for them—even though he later conceded that he’d been aware of the second one.)

Milley also spoke with lawmakers and media figures in the days leading up to the election, promising that the military would play no role in its outcome. In a call on the Saturday before Election Day, Milley told news anchors including George Stephanopoulos, Lester Holt, and Norah O’Donnell that the military’s role was to protect democracy, not undermine it. “The context was ‘We know how fraught things are, and we have a sense of what might happen, and we’re not going to let Trump do it,’” Stephanopoulos told me. “He was saying that the military was there to serve the country, and it was clear by implication that the military was not going to be part of a coup.” It seemed, Stephanopoulos said, that Milley was “desperately trying not to politicize the military.”

When the election arrived, Milley’s fear—that the president would not accept the outcome—came to pass. A few days later, when Acting Secretary Miller arrived at the Pentagon accompanied by a coterie of fellow Trump loyalists, including Kash Patel, senior officers in the building were unnerved. Patel has stated his conviction that the Pentagon is riddled with “deep state” operatives.

A few days after Esper’s firing, Milley gave a Veterans Day speech, in the presence of Miller, to remind the armed forces—and those who would manipulate them—of their oath to the Constitution. The speech was delivered at the opening of the National Army Museum at Fort Belvoir, in Virginia.



On June 1, 2020, Milley and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper (center) accompanied Donald Trump partway to St. John's Church after the clearing of Lafayette Square. Milley's apology for appearing to lend military support to a political photo op earned him Trump's enmity.

"The motto of the United States Army for over 200 years ... has been 'This we will defend,'" Milley said. "And the 'this' refers to the Constitution and to protect the liberty of the American people. You see, we are unique among armies. We are unique among militaries. We do not take an oath to a king or queen, a tyrant or dictator. We do not take an oath to an individual. No, we do not take an oath to a country, a tribe, or religion. We take an oath to the Constitution ... We will never turn our back on our duty to protect and defend the idea that is America, the Constitution of the United States, against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

He closed with words from Thomas Paine: "These are times that try men's souls. And the summer soldier and the sunshine Patriot will in this crisis shrink from the service of their country. But he who stands by it deserves the love of man and woman. For tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered."

When Miller followed Milley, his remarks betrayed a certain level of obliviousness; Milley's speech had sounded like a warning shot directed squarely at hard-core Trumpists like him. "Chairman, thanks for setting the bar very high for the new guy to come in and make a few words," Miller said. "I think all I would say to your statements is 'Amen.' Well done."

I asked Milley later if he'd had Miller in mind when he gave that speech.

"Not at all," he said. "My audience was those in uniform. At this point, we are six days or so after the election. It was already contested, already controversial—and I wanted to remind the uniformed military that our oath is to the Constitution and that we have no role to play in politics."

He would remain a dervish until Inauguration Day: reassuring allies and cautioning adversaries; arguing against escalation with Iran; reminding the Joint Chiefs and the National Military Command Center to be aware of unusual requests or demands; and keeping an eye on the activities of the men dispatched by Trump to lead the Pentagon after Esper was fired, men who Milley and

others suspected were interested in using the military to advance Trump's efforts to remain president.

Shortly after Esper was fired, Milley told both Patel and Ezra Cohen-Watnick, another Trump loyalist sent to the Pentagon, that he would make sure they would see the world "from behind bars" if they did anything illegal to prevent Joe Biden from taking the oath of office on January 20. (Both men have denied being warned in this manner.)

I asked Milley recently about his encounters with Trump's men. As is his on-the-record custom, he minimized the drama of those days.

I said, "You literally warned political appointees that they would be punished if they engaged in treasonous activities."

He responded: "I didn't do that. Someone saying I did that?"

"You warned Kash Patel and others that they were fucking around and shouldn't have been."

"I didn't warn anybody that I would hold them accountable for anything."

"You warned them that they would be held accountable for breaking the law or violating their oaths."

Suddenly, acquiescence.

"Yeah, sure, in conversation," he said. "It's my job to give advice, so I was advising people that we must follow the law. I give advice all the time."

Today Milley says, about Trump and his closest advisers, "I'm not going to say whether I thought there was a civilian coup or not. I'm going to leave that to the American people to determine, and a court of law, and you're seeing that play out every day. All I'm saying is that my duty as the senior officer of the United States military is to keep out of politics."

What is certain is that, when January 20 finally arrived, Milley exhaled. According to *I Alone Can Fix It*, by the *Washington Post* reporters Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, when Michelle Obama asked Milley at the inauguration how he was doing, he replied: "No one has a bigger smile today than I do."

THE ARRIVAL of a new president did not mean an end to challenges for Milley, or the Pentagon. Attempts to enlist the military in America's zero-sum culture war only intensified. Elements of the hard right, for instance, would exploit manifestations of performative leftism—a drag show on an Air Force base, for instance—to argue that the military under Biden was hopelessly weak and “woke.” (Never mind that this was the same military that Trump, while president, had declared the strongest in history.) And in an unprecedented act of interference in the normal functioning of the military, Republican Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama has placed holds on the promotions of hundreds of senior officers to protest the Defense Department's abortion policies. The officers affected by the Tuberville holds do not make such policies.

An even more substantial blow to morale and force cohesion came late in the summer of 2021, when American forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan against the advice of Milley and most other senior military leaders. The withdrawal—originally proposed by Trump, but ordered by Biden—was criticized by many veterans and active-duty soldiers, and the damage was exacerbated by the callous manner in which Biden treated America's Afghan allies.

This summer, Milley and I visited the War Memorial of Korea, in Seoul, where Milley laid a wreath in front of a wall containing the names of hundreds of Massachusetts men killed in that war. I asked him about the end of America's war in Afghanistan.

“I've got three tours in Afghanistan,” he said. “I lost a lot of soldiers in Afghanistan, and for any of us who served there and saw a considerable amount of combat in Afghanistan, that war did not end the way any of us wanted it to end.”

Do you consider it a loss?

“I think it was a strategic failure,” he answered, refusing to repeat the word I used. “When the enemy you've been fighting for 20 years captures the capital and unseats the government you're supporting, that cannot be called anything else.”

He continued, “We sunk a tremendous amount of resources, a tremendous amount of money and, most importantly, lives into helping the Afghan people and giving them hope for a better future. For 20 years we did that. And our primary goal for going there was to prevent al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organization from striking the United States ever again. That was the strategic promise President Bush made to the American people. And we have not, to date, been attacked from Afghanistan, so all the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines that served in Afghanistan should hold their heads high and should be proud of their contributions to American national security. But at the end of the day, the Taliban took the capital.”

Milley had recommended to Biden that the U.S. maintain a residual force of soldiers to buttress the American-allied government in Kabul. Biden, Milley said, listened to the military's advice, weighed it, and then chose another path. “It was a lawful order, and we carried out a lawful order,” Milley said.

But, I asked him, did you think Afghanistan was winnable?

“I think it would have been a sustainable level of effort over time,” he answered. “Take where we're at right now. We are still in Korea today, 70 years after the armistice was signed. When North Korea came across the border in the summer of 1950, the

South Korean military was essentially a constabulary, and we had a limited number of advisers here. And then we reinforced very rapidly from our occupation forces in Japan, and then we fought the Korean War. So we ended up preventing North Korea from conquering South Korea, and that effort led to one of the most flourishing countries in the world.”

He went on to say, however, that he understood why leaders of both political parties, and a majority of Americans, wanted U.S. troops pulled out of Afghanistan. “These operations aren't sustainable without the will of the people,” he said. “Would I and every soldier who served there wish that there was a better outcome? Absolutely, yes, and to that extent, that's a regret.”

“The end in Afghanistan didn't happen because of a couple of decisions in the last days,” he said. “It was cumulative decisions over 20 years. The American people, as expressed in various polls, and two presidents of two different parties and the majority of members of Congress wanted us to withdraw—and we did.”

IF THE WITHDRAWAL from Afghanistan was a low, then a continuing high point for the Defense Department is its enormous effort to keep the Ukrainian army in the fight against Russia. Milley and Lloyd Austin, his former commander and Biden's secretary of defense, have created a useful partnership, particularly regarding Ukraine.

The two men could not be more unlike: Milley cannot stop talking, and Austin is loath to speak more than the minimum number of words necessary to get through the day. But they seem to trust each other, and they sought, after Austin's appointment, to bring stability back to the Pentagon. When I met Austin in his office

**“I ABSOLUTELY,
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HAVE BEEN THERE,”
MILLEY SAYS OF
LAFAYETTE SQUARE.
“I'M A SOLDIER,
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in mid-September, he alluded to this common desire, and to the turbulence of the recent past. “We needed to make sure we had the relationship right and the swim lanes right—who is responsible for what,” he said. “The trust was there, so it was easy to work together to reestablish what we both knew should be the rules of the road.”

The massive effort to equip, train, and provide intelligence to Ukrainian forces—all while preventing the outbreak of direct warfare between the U.S. and Russia—must be considered (provisionally, of course) a consequential achievement of the Austin-Milley team. “We’ve provided Ukraine with its best chance of success in protecting its sovereign territory,” Austin told me. “We’ve pulled NATO together in a way that’s not been done, ever. This requires a lot of work by the Department of Defense. If you look at what he and I do every month—we’re talking with ministers of defense and chiefs of defense every month—it’s extraordinary.”

Milley has been less hawkish than some Biden-administration officials on the war with Russia. But he agrees that Ukraine is now the main battlefield between authoritarianism and the democratic order.

“World War II ended with the establishment of the rules-based international order. People often ridicule it—they call it ‘globalism’ and so on—but in fact, in my view, World War II was fought in order to establish a better peace,” Milley told me. “We the Americans are the primary authors of the basic rules of the road—and these rules are under stress, and they’re fraying at the edges. That’s why Ukraine is so important. President Putin has made a mockery of those rules. He’s making a mockery of everything. He has assaulted the very first principle of the United Nations, which is that you can’t tolerate wars of aggression and you can’t allow large countries to attack small countries by military means. He is making a direct frontal assault on the rules that were written in 1945.”

The magnitude of this assault requires a commensurate response, but with a vigilant eye toward the worst possible outcome, nuclear war. “It is incumbent upon all of us in positions of leadership to do the very best to maintain a sense of global stability,” Milley told me. “If we don’t, we’re going to pay the butcher’s bill. It will be horrific, worse than World War I, worse than World War II.”

THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP between Milley and Austin may help explain one of Milley’s missteps as chairman: his congressional testimony on the subject of critical race theory and “white rage.” In June 2021, both Milley and Austin were testifying before the House Armed Services Committee when Michael Waltz, a Republican representative from Florida (and, like Milley, a former Green Beret), asked Austin about a lecture given at West Point called “Understanding Whiteness and White Rage.” Austin said that the lecture sounded to him like “something that should not occur.” A short while later, Milley provided his own, more expansive views. “I want to understand white rage, and I’m white,” he said. And then it seemed as if the anger he felt about the assault on the Capitol spilled out of its container. “What is it that caused thousands of people to assault this building and try to overturn

the Constitution of the United States of America?” he asked. “What is wrong with having some situational understanding about the country for which we are here to defend?”

These comments caused a new round of criticism of Milley in some senior military circles, including from generals who agreed with him but believed that this sort of commentary was the purview of the political echelon.

Colonel Ross Davidson, Milley’s former operations officer, who was watching the hearing, told me he thinks Milley’s contempt for the January 6 insurrectionists was not the only thing that motivated his testimony. Seeing Austin, the first Black secretary of defense and his friend, under sustained criticism led Milley, as Davidson describes it, to “move to the sound of the guns.”

“That’s in his nature,” Davidson said. “Hey, man, my battle buddy Lloyd is being attacked.”

Today, Austin defends Milley’s statements: “In one instance, in one academic institution, a professor was exposing his students to this,” he said, referring to critical race theory. “If you are familiar with all of our curriculum and what we do in our various schools and how we train leaders, it’s kind of upsetting and insulting” to suggest that the military has gone “woke.”

When I asked Milley recently about this episode, his answer was, predictably, lengthier, more caustic, and substantially more fervent.

“There’s a lot of discourse around whether it’s a tough Army or a woke Army,” he said, referring to commentary on right-wing news channels. “Here’s my answer: First of all, it’s all bullshit. Second, these accusations are coming from people who don’t know what they’re talking about. They’re doing it for political purposes. Our military wasn’t woke 24 months ago, and now it’s woke?”

He continued, “You want woke? I’ll give you woke. Here’s what your military’s doing: There are 5,000 sorties a day, including combat patrols protecting the U.S.A. and our interests around the world. At least 60 to 100 Navy warships are patrolling the seven seas, keeping the world free for ocean transport.

“I’M NOT GOING TO SAY
WHETHER I THOUGHT
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COUP OR NOT. I’M GOING
TO LEAVE THAT TO
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TO DETERMINE, AND
A COURT OF LAW.”

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We have 250,000 troops overseas, in 140 countries, defending the rules-based international order. We've got kids training constantly. This military is trained, well equipped, well led, and focused on readiness. Our readiness statuses are at the highest levels they've been in 20 years. So this idea of a woke military is total, utter, made-up bullshit. They are taking two or three incidents, single anecdotes, a drag show that is against DOD policy. I don't think these shows should be on bases, and neither does the secretary of defense or the chain of command."

This table-pounder of a speech prompted an obvious question: What will Milley say publicly once he's retired? Donald Trump is the presumptive favorite to win the Republican nomination for president, and Trump represents to Milley—as numerous books, and my understanding of the man, strongly suggest—an existential threat to American democracy.

"I won't speak up in politics. I won't. You can hold me to it," he said. "I'm not going to comment on elected officials. I'll comment on policies, which is my purview. I have a certain degree of expertise and experience that I think enable me to make rational contributions to conversations about complex topics about war and peace. To make personal comments on certain political leaders, I don't think that's my place."

Never?

"There are exceptions that can be made under certain circumstances," he said. "But they're pretty rare."

It is hard to imagine Milley restraining himself if Trump attacks him directly—and it is as close to a sure thing as you can have in American politics that Trump will. At one point during his presidency, Trump proposed calling back to active duty two retired flag officers who had been critical of him, Admiral William McRaven and General Stanley McChrystal, so that they could be court-martialed. Mark Esper, who was the defense secretary at the time, says he and Milley had to talk Trump out of such a plan.

During one conversation at Quarters Six, Milley said, "If there's something we've learned from history, it's that aggression left unanswered leads to more aggression." He was talking about Vladimir Putin, but I got the sense that he was talking about someone else as well.

If Trump is reelected president, there will be no Espers or Milleys in his administration. Nor will there be any officials of the stature and independence of John Kelly, H. R. McMaster, or James Mattis. Trump and his allies have already threatened officials they see as disloyal with imprisonment, and there is little reason to imagine that he would not attempt to carry out his threats.

Milley has told friends that he expects that if Trump returns to the White House, the newly elected president will come after him. "He'll start throwing people in jail, and I'd be on the top of the list," he has said. But he's also told friends that he does not believe the country will reelect Trump.

When I asked him about this, he wouldn't answer directly, but when I asked him to describe his level of optimism about the country's future, he said: "I have a lot of confidence in the general officer corps, and I have confidence in the American

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people. The United States of America is an extraordinarily resilient country, agile and flexible, and the inherent goodness of the American people is there. I've always believed that, and I will go to my grave believing that."

I pressed him: After all you've been through, you believe that?

"There are bumps in the road, to be sure, and you get through the bumps, but I don't want to overstate this. What did I do? All I did was try to preserve the integrity of the military and to keep the military out of domestic politics. That's all I did."

These assertions will be debated for a long time. But it is fair to say that Milley came close to red lines that are meant to keep uniformed officers from participating in politics. It is also fair to say that no president has ever challenged the idea of competent civilian control in the manner of Donald Trump, and that no president has ever threatened the constitutional underpinnings of the American project in the manner Trump has. The apportionment of responsibility in the American system—presidents give orders; the military carries them out—works best when the president is sane. The preservation of a proper civil-military relationship is hugely important to democracy—but so too is universal acceptance of the principle that political officials leave office when they lose legitimate elections.

When Milley ceded the chairmanship, he also ceded Quarters Six. I visited him there on a number of occasions, and almost every time he walked me out onto the porch, he would look out theatrically on the city before us—on the Capitol that was sacked but not burned—and say, "Rome hasn't fallen!"

One time, though, he said, "Rome hasn't fallen—yet." *A*

Jeffrey Goldberg is the editor in chief of The Atlantic.

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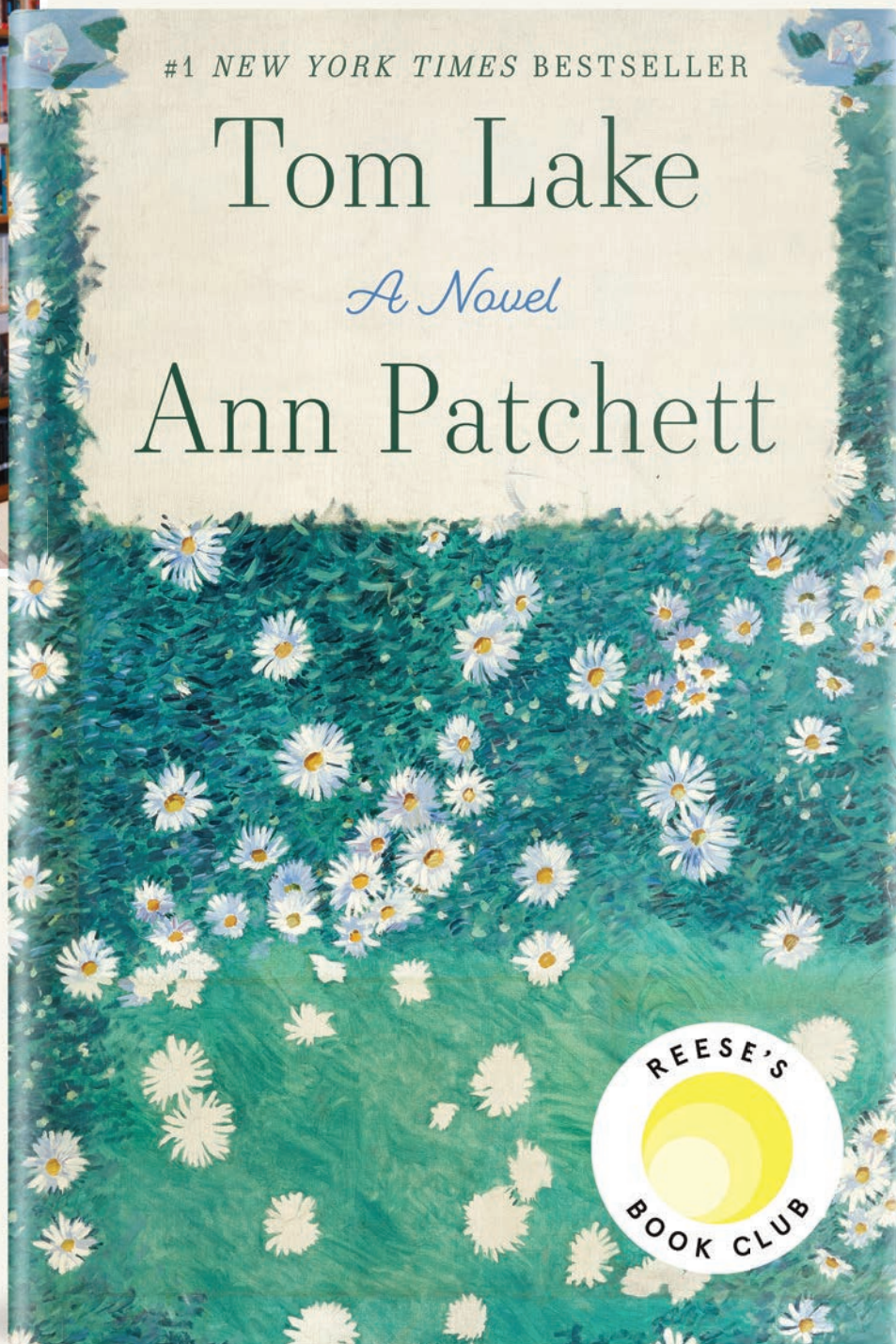


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***BY MARTIN
BARON***

**RUNNING *THE
WASHINGTON POST*
IN DONALD
TRUMP'S D.C.**



I should not have been surprised, but I still marveled at just how little it took to get under the skin of President Donald Trump and his allies. By February 2019, I had been the executive editor of *The Washington Post* for six years. That month, the newspaper aired a one-minute Super Bowl ad, with a voice-over by Tom Hanks, championing the role of a free press, commemorating journalists killed and captured, and concluding with the *Post*'s logo and the message "Democracy dies in darkness." The ad highlighted the strong and often courageous work done by journalists at the *Post* and elsewhere—including by Fox News's Bret Baier—because we were striving to signal that this wasn't just about us and wasn't a political statement.

"There's someone to gather the facts," Hanks said in the ad. "To bring you the story. No matter the cost. Because knowing empowers us. Knowing helps us decide. Knowing keeps us free."

Even that simple, foundational idea of democracy was a step too far for the Trump clan. The president's son Donald Trump Jr. couldn't contain himself. "You know how MSM journalists could avoid having to spend millions on a #superbowl commercial to gain some undeserved credibility?" he tweeted with typical two-bit belligerence. "How about report the news and not their leftist BS for a change."

Two years earlier—a month into Trump's presidency—the *Post* had affixed "Democracy dies in darkness" under its nameplate on the printed newspaper, as well as at the top of its website and on everything

it produced. As the newspaper's owner, Jeff Bezos, envisioned it, this was not a slogan but a "mission statement." And it was not about Trump, although his allies took it to be. Producing a mission statement had been in the works for two years before Trump took office. That it emerged when it did is testimony to the tortuous, and torturous, process of coming up with something sufficiently memorable and meaningful that Bezos would bless.

Bezos, the founder and now executive chair of Amazon, had bought *The Washington Post* in 2013. In early 2015, he had expressed his wish for a phrase that might encapsulate the newspaper's purpose: a phrase that would convey an idea, not a product; fit nicely on a T-shirt; make a claim uniquely ours, given our heritage and our base in the nation's capital; and be both aspirational and disruptive. "Not a paper I want to subscribe to," as Bezos put it, but rather "an idea I want to belong to." The idea: We love this country, so we hold it accountable.

No small order, coming up with the right phrase. And Bezos was no distant observer. "On this topic," he told us, "I'd like to see all the sausage-making. Don't worry about whether it's a good use of my time." Bezos, so fixated on metrics in other contexts, now advised ditching them. "I just think we're going to have to use gut and intuition." And he insisted that the chosen words recognize our "historic mission," not a new one. "We don't have to be afraid of the *democracy* word," he said; it's "the thing that makes the *Post* unique."

Staff teams were assembled. Months of meetings

were held. Frustrations deepened. Outside branding consultants were retained, to no avail. ("Typical," Bezos said.) Desperation led to a long list of options, venturing into the inane. The ideas totaled at least 1,000: "A bias for truth," "Know," "A right to know," "You have a right to know," "Unstoppable journalism," "The power is yours," "Power read," "Relentless pursuit of the truth," "The facts matter," "It's about America," "Spotlight on democracy," "Democracy matters," "A light on the nation," "Democracy lives in light," "Democracy takes work. We'll do our part," "The news democracy needs," "Toward a more perfect union" (rejected lest it summon thoughts of our own workforce union).

By September 2016, an impatient Bezos was forcing the issue. We had to settle on something. Nine *Post* executives and Bezos met in a private room at the Four Seasons in Georgetown to finally get over the finish line. Because of Bezos's tight schedule, we had only half an hour, starting at 7:45 a.m. A handful of options remained on the table: "A bright light for a free people" or, simply, "A bright light for free people"; "The story must be told" (recalling the inspiring words of the late photographer Michel du Cille); "To challenge and inform"; "For a world that demands to know"; "For people who demand to know." None of those passed muster.

In the end, we settled on "A free people demand to know" (subject to a grammar check by our copy desk, which gave its assent). Success was short-lived—mercifully, no doubt. Late that evening,

Bezos dispatched an email in the "not what you're hoping for category," as he put it. He had run our consensus pick by his then-wife, MacKenzie Scott, a novelist and "my in-house wordsmith," who had pronounced the phrase clunky. "Frankenslogan" was the word she used.

By then, we needed Bezos to take unilateral action. Finally, he did. "Let's go with 'Democracy dies in darkness,'" he decreed. It had been on our list from the start, and was a phrase Bezos had used previously in speaking of the *Post*'s mission; he himself had heard it from the *Washington Post* legend Bob Woodward. It was a twist on a phrase in a 2002 ruling by the federal-appellate-court judge Damon J. Keith, who wrote that "democracies die behind closed doors."

"Democracy dies in darkness" made its debut, without announcement, in mid-February 2017. And I've never seen a slogan—I mean, mission statement—get such a reaction. It even drew attention from *People's Daily* in China, which tweeted, "'Democracy dies in darkness' @washingtonpost puts on new slogan, on the same day @realDonaldTrump calls media as the enemy of Americans." Merriam-Webster reported a sudden surge in searches for the word *democracy*. The *Late Show* host Stephen Colbert joked that some of the rejected phrases had included "No, you shut up" and "We took down Nixon—who wants next?" Twitter commentators remarked on the *Post*'s "new goth vibe." The media critic Jack Shafer tweeted a handful of his own "rejected Washington Post mottos," among them "We're really full of ourselves" and "Democracy

Gets Sunburned If It Doesn't Use Sunscreen."

Bezos couldn't have been more thrilled. The mission statement was getting noticed. "It's a good sign when you're the subject of satire," he said a couple of weeks later. The four words atop our journalism had certainly drawn attention to our mission. Much worse would have been a collective shrug. Like others at the *Post*, I had questioned the wisdom of branding all our work with death and darkness. All I could think of at that point, though, was the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change."

But the phrase stuck with readers, who saw it as perfect for the Trump era, even if that was not its intent.

WE MUST HAVE BEEN AN odd-looking group, sitting around the dining-room table in the egg-shaped Blue Room of the White House: Bezos, recognizable anywhere by his bald head, short stature, booming laugh, and radiant intensity; Fred Ryan, the *Post's* publisher, an alumnus of the Reagan administration who was a head taller than my own 5 feet 11 inches, with graying blond hair and a giant, glistening smile; the editorial-page editor, Fred Hiatt, a 36-year *Post* veteran and former foreign correspondent with an earnest, bookish look; and me, with a trimmed gray beard, woolly head of hair, and what was invariably described as a dour and taciturn demeanor.

Five months after his inauguration, President Trump had responded to a request from the publisher for a meeting, and had invited us to dinner. We were joined by the

first lady, Melania Trump, and Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner. By coincidence, just as we were sitting down, at 7 p.m., the *Post* published a report that Special Counsel Robert Mueller was inquiring into Kushner's business dealings in Russia, part of Mueller's investigation into that country's interference in the 2016 election. The story followed another by the *Post* revealing that Kushner had met secretly with the Russian ambassador,

including hers. "Very Shakespearean," she whispered to Kushner. "Dining with your enemies." Hiatt, who had overheard, whispered back, "We're not your enemies."

As we dined on cheese soufflé, pan-roasted Dover sole, and chocolate-cream tart, Trump crowed about his election victory, mocked his rivals and even people in his own orbit, boasted of imagined accomplishments, calculated how he could win yet again in four years, and described *The*

mind of the president and those around him, that made us the opposition.

There was political benefit to Trump in going further: We were not just his enemy—we were the country's enemy. In his telling, we were traitors. Less than a month into his presidency, Trump had denounced the press as "the enemy of the American People" on Twitter. It was an ominous echo of the phrase "enemy of the people," invoked by Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Hitler's propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, and deployed for the purpose of repression and murder. Trump could not have cared less about the history of such incendiary language or how it might incite physical attacks on journalists.

Whenever I was asked about Trump's rhetoric, my own response was straightforward: "We are not at war with the administration. We are at work." But it was clear that Trump saw all of us at that table as his foes, most especially Bezos, because he owned the *Post* and, in Trump's mind, was pulling the strings—or could pull them if he wished.

At our dinner, Trump sought at times to be charming. It was a superficial charm, without warmth or authenticity. He did almost all the talking. We scarcely said a word, and I said the least, out of discomfort at being there and seeking to avoid any confrontation with him over our coverage. Anything I said could set him off.

He let loose on a long list of perceived enemies and slights: The chief executive of Macy's was a "coward" for pulling Trump products from

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Trump sought at times
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Sergey Kislyak, and had proposed that a Russian diplomatic post be used to provide a secure communications line between Trump officials and the Kremlin. The *Post* had reported as well that Kushner met later with Sergey Gorkov, the head of a Russian-owned development bank.

Hope Hicks, a young Trump aide, handed Kushner her phone. Our news alert had just gone out, reaching millions of mobile devices,

Washington Post as the worst of all media outlets, with *The New York Times* just behind us in his ranking in that moment.

Trump, his family, and his team had put the *Post* on their enemies list, and nothing was going to change anyone's mind. We had been neither servile nor sycophantic toward Trump, and we weren't going to be. Our job was to report aggressively on the president and to hold his administration, like all others, to account. In

store shelves in reaction to Trump's remarks portraying Mexican immigrants as rapists; he would have been picketed by only "20 Mexicans. Who cares?" Trump had better relations with foreign leaders than former President Barack Obama, who was lazy and never called them. Obama had left disasters around the world for him to solve. Obama had been hesitant to allow the military to kill people in Afghanistan. He, Trump, told the military to just do it; don't ask for permission. Mueller, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, fired FBI Director James Comey, and FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe were slammed for reasons that are now familiar.

Two themes stayed with me from that dinner. First, Trump would govern primarily to retain the support of his base. At the table, he pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. The figure "47%" appeared above his photo. "This is the latest Rasmussen poll. I can win with that." The message was clear: That level of support, if he held key states, was all he needed to secure a second term. What other voters thought of him, he seemed to say, would not matter.

Second, his list of grievances appeared limitless. Atop them all was the press, and atop the press was the *Post*. During dinner, he derided what he had been hearing about our story on the special counsel and his son-in-law, suggesting incorrectly that it alleged money laundering. "He's a good kid," he said of Kushner, who at the time was 36 and a father of three, and sitting right there at the table. The *Post* was awful, Trump said repeatedly. We treated him unfairly. With every such

utterance, he poked me in the shoulder with his left elbow.

A few times during that dinner, Trump—for all the shots he had taken during the campaign at Bezos's company—mentioned that Melania was a big Amazon shopper, prompting Bezos to joke at one point, "Consider me your personal customer-service rep." Trump's concern, of course, wasn't Amazon's delivery. He wanted Bezos to deliver him from the *Post's* coverage.

The effort quickened the next day. Kushner called Fred Ryan in the morning to get his read on how the dinner had gone. After Ryan offered thanks for their generosity and graciousness with their time, Kushner inquired whether the *Post's* coverage would now improve as a result. Ryan diplomatically rebuffed him with a reminder that there were to be no expectations about coverage. "It's not a dial we have to turn one way to make it better and another way to make it worse," he said.

Trump would be the one to call Bezos's cellphone that same morning at eight, urging him to get the *Post* to be "more fair to me." He said, "I don't know if you get involved in the newsroom, but I'm sure you do to some degree." Bezos replied that he didn't and then delivered a line he'd been prepared to say at the dinner itself if Trump had leaned on him then: "It's really not appropriate to ... I'd feel really bad about it my whole life if I did." The call ended without bullying about Amazon but with an invitation for Bezos to seek a favor. "If there's anything I can do for you," Trump said.

Three days later, the bullying began. Leaders of the technology sector gathered at the White House for a meeting

of the American Technology Council, which had been created by executive order a month earlier. Trump briefly pulled Bezos aside to complain bitterly about the *Post's* coverage. The dinner, he said, was apparently a wasted two and a half hours.

Then, later in the year, four days after Christmas, Trump in a tweet called for the Postal Service to charge Amazon "MUCH MORE" for package deliveries, claiming that Amazon's rates were a rip-off of American taxpayers. The following year, he attempted to intervene to obstruct Amazon in its pursuit of a \$10 billion cloud-computing contract from the Defense Department. Bezos was to be punished for not reining in the *Post*.

Meanwhile, Trump was salivating to have an antitrust case filed against Amazon. The hedge-fund titan Leon Cooperman revealed in a CNBC interview that Trump had asked him twice at a White House dinner that summer whether Amazon was a monopoly. On July 24, 2017, Trump tweeted, "Is Fake News Washington Post being used as a lobbyist weapon against Congress to keep Politicians from looking into Amazon no-tax monopoly?"

AS TRUMP sought to tighten the screws, Bezos made plain that the paper had no need to fear that he might capitulate. In March 2018, as we concluded one of our business meetings, Bezos offered some parting words: "You may have noticed that Trump keeps tweeting about us." The remark was met with silence. "Or maybe you haven't noticed!" Bezos joked. He wanted to reinforce a

statement I had publicly made before. "We are not at war with them," Bezos said. "They may be at war with us. We just need to do the work." In July of that year, he once again spoke up unprompted at a business meeting. "Do not worry about me," he said. "Just do the work. And I've got your back."

A huge advantage of Bezos's ownership was that he had his eye on a long time horizon. In Texas, he was building a "10,000-year clock" in a hollowed-out mountain—intended as a symbol, he explained, of long-term thinking. He often spoke of what the business or the landscape might look like in "20 years." When I first heard that timeline, I was startled. News executives I'd dealt with routinely spoke, at best, of next year—and, at worst, next quarter. Even so, Bezos also made decisions at a speed that was unprecedented in my experience. He personally owned 100 percent of the company. He didn't need to consult anyone. Whatever he spent came directly out of his bank account.

In my interactions with him, Bezos showed integrity and spine. Early in his ownership, he displayed an intuitive appreciation that an ethical compass for the *Post* was inseparable from its business success. There was much about Bezos and Amazon that the *Post* needed to vigorously cover and investigate—such as his company's escalating market power, its heavy-handed labor practices, and the ramifications for individual privacy of its voracious data collection. There was also the announcement that Bezos and MacKenzie Scott were seeking a

divorce—followed immediately by an explosive report in the *National Enquirer* disclosing that Bezos had been involved in a long-running extramarital relationship with Lauren Sánchez, a former TV reporter and news anchor. We were determined to fulfill our journalistic obligations with complete independence, and did so without restriction.

I came to like the *Post*'s owner as a human being and found him to be a far more complex, thoughtful, and agreeable character than routinely portrayed. He can be startlingly easy to talk to: Just block out any thought of his net worth. Our meetings took place typically every two weeks by teleconference, and only rarely in person. During the pandemic, we were subjected to Amazon's exasperatingly inferior videoconferencing system, called Chime. The one-hour meetings were a lesson in his unconventional thinking, wry humor ("This is me enthusiastic. Sometimes it's hard to tell"), and fantastic aphorisms: "Most people start building before they know what they're building"; "The things that everybody knows are going to work, everybody is already doing." At one session, we were discussing group subscriptions for college students. Bezos wanted to know the size of the market. As we all started to Google, Bezos interjected, "Hey, why don't we try this? Alexa, how many college students are there in the United States?" (Alexa pulled up the data from the National Center for Education Statistics.)

In conversation, Bezos could be witty and self-deprecating ("Nothing makes me feel dumber than a *New Yorker* cartoon"), laughed

easily, and posed penetrating questions. When a *Post* staffer asked him whether he'd join the crew of his space company, Blue Origin, on one of its early launches, he said he wasn't sure. "Why don't you wait a while and see how things go?" I advised. "That," he said, "is the nicest thing you've ever said about me."

Cochrane, who developed "warp drive," a technology that allowed space travel at faster-than-light speeds. "The reason he's earning so much money," his high-school girlfriend, Ursula Werner, said early in Amazon's history, "is to get to outer space."

From the moment Bezos acquired the *Post*, he made clear that its historic journalistic

that I sarcastically advised substituting "stuff." Journalists were recategorized as "content producers," top editors retitled "chief content officers." Bezos was a different breed.

He seemed to value and enjoy encounters with the news staff in small groups, even if they were infrequent. Once, at a dinner with some of the *Post*'s Pulitzer Prize winners, Bezos asked Carol Leonnig, who had won for exposing security lapses by the Secret Service, how she was able to get people to talk to her when the risks for them were so high. It had to be a subject of understandable curiosity for the head of Amazon, a company that routinely rebuffed reporters' inquiries with "No comment." Carol told him she was straightforward about what she sought and directly addressed individuals' fears and motivations. The *Post*'s reputation for serious, careful investigative reporting, she told Bezos, carried a lot of weight with potential sources. They wanted injustice or malfeasance revealed, and we needed their help. The *Post* would protect their identity.

ANONYMOUS LEAKING out of the government didn't begin with the Trump administration. It has a long tradition in Washington. Leaks are often the only way for journalists to learn and report what is happening behind the scenes. If sources come forward publicly, they risk being fired, demoted, sidelined, or even prosecuted. The risks were heightened with a vengeful Trump targeting the so-called deep state, what he imagined to be influential government officials conspiring against him. The Department of Justice had announced early in his term that it would become even more aggressive



Top: *The Post*'s publisher, Fred Ryan, speaks to the newsroom as the staff celebrates winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2016. Bottom: Baron's office at the *Post*.

Science fiction—particularly Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Larry Niven—had a huge influence on Bezos in his teenage years. He has spoken of how his interest in space goes back to his childhood love of the *Star Trek* TV series. *Star Trek* inspired both the voice-activated Alexa and the name of his holding company, Zefram, drawn from the fictional character Zefram

mission was at the core of its business. I had been in journalism long enough to witness some executives—unmoored by crushing pressures on circulation, advertising, and profits—abandon the foundational journalistic culture, even shunning the vocabulary we use to describe our work. Many publishers took to calling journalism "content," a term so hollow

in its search for leakers of classified national-security information. And Trump's allies and supporters could be counted on to make life a nightmare for anyone who crossed him.

Journalists would much prefer to have government sources on the record, but anonymity has become an inextricable feature of Washington reporting. Though Trump-administration officials claimed to be unjust victims of anonymous sourcing, they were skillful practitioners and beneficiaries as well. The Trump administration was the leakiest in memory. Senior officials leaked regularly, typically as a result of internal rivalries. Trump himself leaked to get news out in a way that he viewed as helpful, just as he had done as a private citizen in New York.

Trump had assembled his government haphazardly, enlisting many individuals who had no relevant experience and no history of previously collaborating with one another—"kind of a crowd of misfit toys," as Josh Dawsey, a White House reporter for the *Post*, put it to me. Some were mere opportunists. Many officials, as the *Post*'s Ashley Parker has observed, came to believe that working in the administration was like being a character in *Game of Thrones*: Better to knife others before you got knifed yourself. Odds were high that Trump would do the stabbing someday on his own. But many in government leaked out of principle. They were astonished to see the norms of governance and democracy being violated—and by the pervasive lying.

Trump's gripes about anonymity weren't based on the rigor of the reporting—or

even, for that matter, its veracity. Leaks that reflected poorly on him were condemned as false, and the sources therefore nonexistent, even as he pressed for investigations to identify the supposedly nonexistent sources. With his followers' distrust of the media, he had little trouble convincing them that the stories were fabrications by media out to get him—and them. Conflating his political self-interest with the public interest, he was prone to labeling the leaks as treasonous.

Though administration officials claimed to be unjust victims of anonymous sourcing, they were skillful practitioners and beneficiaries as well. The Trump administration was the leakiest in memory.

At the *Post*, the aim was to get at the facts, no matter the obstacles Trump and his allies put in our way. In January 2018, Dawsey reported that Trump, during a discussion with lawmakers about protecting immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries as part of an immigration deal, asked: "Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" In March, Dawsey, Leonnig, and David

Nakamura reported that Trump had defied cautions from his national security advisers not to offer well-wishes to Russian President Vladimir Putin on winning reelection to another six-year term. "DO NOT CONGRATULATE," warned briefing material that Trump may or may not have read. Such advice should have been unnecessary in the first place. After all, it had been anything but a fair election. Prominent opponents were excluded

legitimate news-gathering in the public interest. If any doubt remains as to why so many government officials require anonymity to come forward—and why responsible news outlets give them anonymity when necessary—the story of Trump's famous phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky offers an instructive case study.

In September 2019, congressional committees received a letter from Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the intelligence community. A whistleblower had filed a complaint with him, he wrote, and in Atkinson's assessment, it qualified as credible and a matter of "urgent concern"—defined as a "serious or flagrant problem, abuse or violation of the law or Executive Order" that involves classified information but "does not include differences of opinion concerning public policy matters."

Soon, a trio of *Post* national-security reporters published a story that began to flesh out the contents of the whistleblower complaint. The article, written by Ellen Nakashima, Greg Miller, and Shane Harris, cited anonymous sources in reporting that the complaint involved "President Trump's communications with a foreign leader." The incident was said to revolve around a phone call.

Step by careful step, news organizations excavated the basic facts: In a phone call with Zelensky, Trump had effectively agreed to provide \$250 million in military aid to Ukraine—approved by Congress, but inexplicably put on hold by the administration—only if Zelensky launched an investigation into his likely Democratic foe in the 2020 election, Joe Biden, and his



Baron and his Boston Globe colleagues react to winning the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the paper's coverage of sexual abuse by priests in the Roman Catholic Church.

alleged activities in Ukraine. This attempted extortion would lead directly to Trump's impeachment, making him only the third president in American history to be formally accused by the House of Representatives of high crimes and misdemeanors.

The entire universe of Trump allies endeavored to have the whistleblower's identity revealed—widely circulating a name—with the spiteful aim of subjecting that individual to fierce harassment and intimidation, or worse. Others who ultimately went public with their concerns, as they responded to congressional subpoenas and provided sworn testimony, became targets of relentless attacks and mockery.

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman of the National Security Council, who had listened in on the phone call as part of his job, became a central witness, implicating Trump during the impeachment hearings. He was fired after having endured condemnation from the White House and deceitful insinuations by Trump allies that he might be a double agent. Vindman's twin brother, Yevgeny, an NSC staffer who had raised protests internally about Trump's phone call with Zelensky, was fired too. Gordon Sondland—the hotelier and Trump donor who was the ambassador to the European Union and an emissary of sorts to Ukraine as well—was also

fired. He had admitted in congressional testimony that there had been an explicit quid pro quo conditioning a Zelensky visit to the White House on a Ukrainian investigation of Biden. The Vindmans and Sondland were all dismissed within two days of Trump's acquittal in his first impeachment trial. Just before their ousters, White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham had suggested on Fox News that “people should pay” for what Trump went through.

The acting Pentagon controller, Elaine McCusker, had her promotion rescinded, evidently for having merely questioned whether Ukraine aid could be legally withheld. She later resigned. Atkinson,

the intelligence community's inspector general, was fired as well, leaving with a plea for whistleblowers to “use authorized channels to bravely speak up—there is no disgrace for doing so.”

“The Washington Post is constantly quoting ‘anonymous sources’ that do not exist,” Trump had tweeted in 2018 in one of his familiar lines of attack. “Rarely do they use the name of anyone because there is no one to give them the kind of negative quote that they are looking for.” The Ukraine episode made it clear that real people with incriminating information existed in substantial numbers. If they went public, they risked unemployment. If

they chose anonymity, as the whistleblower did, Trump and his allies would aim to expose them and have them publicly and savagely denounced.

“WE ARE NOT at war with the administration. We are at work.” When I made that comment, many fellow journalists enthusiastically embraced the idea that we should not think of ourselves as warriors but instead as professionals merely doing our job to keep the public informed. Others came to view that posture as naive: When truth and democracy are under attack, the only proper response is to

be more fiercely and unashamedly bellicose ourselves. One outside critic went so far as to label my statement an “atroc-ity” when, after my retirement, Fred Ryan, the *Post’s* publisher, had my quote mounted on the wall overlooking the paper’s national desk.

I believe that responsible journalists should be guided by fundamental principles. Among them: We must support and defend democracy. Citizens have a right to self-governance. Without democracy, there can be no independent press, and without an independent press, there can be no democracy. We must work hard and honestly

to discover the truth, and we should tell the public unflinch-ingly what we learn. We should support the right of all citizens to participate in the electoral process without impediment. We should endorse free speech and understand that vigorous debate over policy is essen-tial to democracy. We should favor equitable treatment for everyone, under the law and out of moral obligation, and abundant opportunity for all to attain what they hope for themselves and their families. We owe special attention to the least fortunate in our society, and have a duty to give voice to those who otherwise would

not be heard. We must oppose intolerance and hate, and stand against violence, repression, and abuse of power.

I also believe journalists can best honor those ideals by adhering to traditional profes-sional principles. The press will do itself and our democracy no favors if it abandons what have long been bedrock standards. Too many norms of civic dis-course have been trampled. For the press to hold power to account today, we will have to maintain standards that dem-onstrate that we are practic-ing our craft honorably, thor-oughly, and fairly, with an open mind and with a reverence for



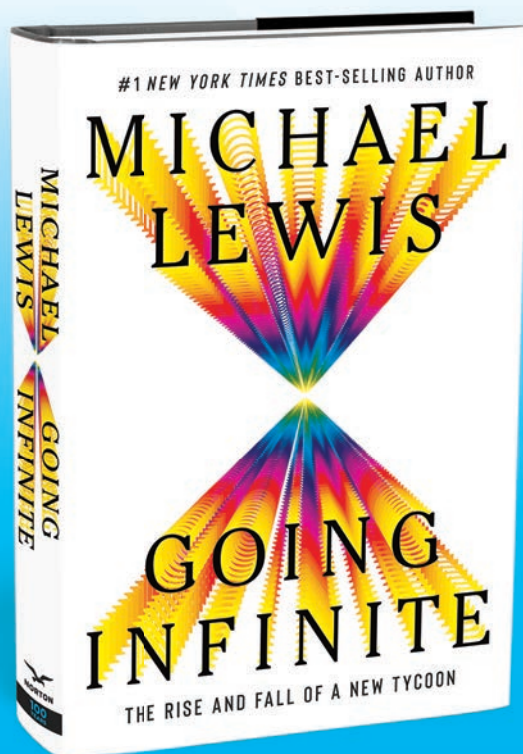
THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY

Baron and the Post’s owner, Jeff Bezos, in 2016

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evidence over our own opinions. In short, we should practice objective journalism.

The idea of objective journalism has uncertain origins. But it can be traced to the early 20th century, in the aftermath of World War I, when democracy seemed imperiled and propaganda had been developed into a polished instrument for manipulating public opinion and the press during warfare—and, in the United States, for deepening suspicions about marginalized people who were then widely regarded as not fully American.

The renowned journalist and thinker Walter Lippmann helped give currency to the term when he wrote *Liberty and the News*, published in 1920. In that slim volume, he described a time that sounds remarkably similar to today. “There is everywhere an increasingly angry disillusionment about the press, a growing sense of being baffled and misled,” he wrote. The onslaught of news was “helter-skelter, in inconceivable confusion.” The public suffered from “no rules of evidence.” He worried over democratic institutions being pushed off their foundations by the media environment.

Lippmann made no assumption that journalists could be freed of their own opinions. He assumed, in fact, just the opposite: They were as subject to biases as anyone else. He proposed an “objective” method for moving beyond them: Journalists should pursue “as impartial an investigation of the facts as is humanly possible.” That idea of objectivity doesn’t preclude the lie-detector role for the press; it argues for it. It is not an idea that fosters prejudice; it labors

against it. “I am convinced,” he wrote, in a line that mirrors my own thinking, “that we shall accomplish more by fighting for truth than by fighting for our theories.”

In championing “objectivity” in our work, I am swimming against what has become, lamentably, a mighty tide in my profession of nearly half a century. No word seems more unpopular today among many mainstream journalists. A report in January 2023 by a previous executive editor at

more ferociously than during Trump’s presidency and its aftermath. Several arguments are leveled against it by my fellow journalists: None of us can honestly claim to be objective, and we shouldn’t profess to be. We all have our opinions. Objectivity also is seen as just another word for neutrality, balance, and so-called both-sidesism. It pretends, according to this view, that all assertions deserve equal weight, even when the evidence shows they don’t, and so it fails to deliver the plain

We must be more
impressed by what we
don’t know than
by what we know,
or think we know.

The Washington Post, Leonard Downie Jr., and a former CBS News president, Andrew Heyward, argued that objectivity in journalism is outmoded. They quoted a former close colleague of mine: “Objectivity has got to go.”

Objectivity, in my view, has got to stay. Maintaining that standard does not guarantee the public’s confidence. But it increases the odds that journalists will earn it. The principle of objectivity has been under siege for years, but perhaps never

truth to the public. Finally, critics argue that objectivity historically excluded the perspectives of those who have long been among the most marginalized in society (and media): women, Black Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Indigenous Americans, the LGBTQ community, and others.

Genuine objectivity, however, does not mean any of that. This is what it really means: As journalists, we can never stop obsessing over how to get at the truth—or, to use

a less lofty term, “objective reality.” Doing that requires an open mind and a rigorous method. We must be more impressed by what we don’t know than by what we know, or think we know.

Journalists routinely expect objectivity from others. Like everyone else, we want objective judges. We want objective juries. We want police officers to be objective when they make arrests and detectives to be objective in assessing evidence. We want prosecutors to evaluate cases objectively, with no prejudice or preexisting agendas. Without objectivity, there can be no equity in law enforcement, as abhorrent abuses have demonstrated all too often. We want doctors to be objective in diagnosing the medical conditions of their patients, uncontaminated by bigotry or baseless hunches. We want medical researchers and regulators to be objective in determining whether new drugs might work and can be safely consumed. We want scientists to be objective in evaluating the impact of chemicals in the soil, air, and water.

Objectivity in all these fields, and others, gets no argument from journalists. We accept it, even insist on it by seeking to expose transgressions. Journalists should insist on it for ourselves as well. *A*

Martin Baron retired as the executive editor of The Washington Post in 2021. He was previously the editor of The Boston Globe and the Miami Herald. His book, Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and The Washington Post, from which this article was adapted, was published in October.

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Her?

No one seems to think Kamala Harris is ready to be president. Here's what they're missing.

*By Elaina Plott
Calabro*

Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden at the White House, 2022

On a Thursday morning in April, I met with Vice President Kamala Harris at Number One Observatory Circle, the Victorian mansion that, for the past two and a half years, she and the second gentleman, Doug Emhoff, have called home. She can be a striking presence when she walks into a room, with a long stride and an implacable posture that make her seem taller than she is (about 5 foot 2). By the time I saw Harris at the residence, I had already traveled with her to Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles, and Reno, Nevada, as well as to Africa, trips on which she had carried herself with ease and confidence.

Ease and confidence have not been the prevailing themes of Harris's vice presidency. Her first year on the job was defined by rhetorical blunders, staff turnover, political missteps, and a poor sense among even her allies of what, exactly, constituted her portfolio. Within months of taking office, President Joe Biden was forced to confront a public perception that Harris didn't measure up; ultimately, the White House issued a statement insisting that Biden did, in fact, rely on his vice president as a governing partner. But Harris's reputation has never quite recovered.

Harris is intensely private, so I was somewhat surprised to be invited to her home. The residence had been redecorated, and in keeping with past practice the work was done without fanfare. There have been no photo spreads, and the designer, Sheila Bridges, signed a nondisclosure agreement. But Harris seemed to enjoy showing me around. In the turret room, she pointed to the banquette seating built along the curve. ("I just love circles," she said.) She gestured at some of the art she'd brought in, on loan from various galleries and collections, describing each piece in terms of the artist's background rather than its aesthetic qualities—Indian American woman, African American gay man, Japanese American. "So you get the idea," she said. We moved into the library, with its collection of books devoted to the vice presidency. (Who knew there were so many?) The green-striped wallpaper pattern that the Bidens had favored when they lived here was gone. Now there was bright, punch-colored wallpaper—chosen, Harris explained, in order to "redefine what power looks like."

She said this with a laugh, but it was a studied phrase. Redefining what power looks like has been the theme of every chapter of Kamala Harris's political career. She is the U.S.-born daughter of immigrants—her mother a cancer researcher from India, her father an economist from Jamaica. As Biden's running mate, she became the first woman, first Black American, and first South Asian American to be elected vice president. Before that, she was the first South Asian American and only the second Black woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. Before that, she was the first woman, Black American, and South Asian American to serve as attorney general of her native California. Before *that*, she was the first Black woman in California to be elected as a district attorney.

When Biden underwent a colonoscopy in November 2021, Harris served as acting president, becoming the first woman (and first South Asian American) to officially wield presidential authority. If vice presidents have historically been tormented by the question of legacy—compelled to wonder not how they will be remembered but whether they will be remembered at all—Harris was assured of a mandatory nod in the history books the moment she was sworn in.

But after nearly three years in office, the symbolic fact of Harris's position has proved more resonant than anything she has actually done with it. From almost the beginning, Harris's vice presidency has unfolded in a series of brutal headlines: "Exasperation and Dysfunction: Inside Kamala Harris' Frustrating Start as Vice President" (CNN, November 2021). "A Kamala Harris Staff Exodus Reignites Questions About Her Leadership Style—And Her Future Ambitions" (*The Washington Post*, December 2021). "New Book Says Biden Called Harris a 'Work in Progress'" (*Politico*, December 2022). "Kamala Harris Is Trying to Define Her Vice Presidency. Even Her Allies Are Tired of Waiting" (*The New York Times*, February 2023).

The hazy nature of Harris's responsibilities has made for easy satire—"White House Urges Kamala Harris to Sit at Computer All Day in Case Emails Come Through," read an early *Onion* headline. Clips of Harris sound bites gone wrong have ricocheted across social media, and not just right-wing sites. A *Daily Show* feature in October 2022 paired clips from various Harris speeches ("When we talk about the children of the community, they are a children of the community ...") with clips from the fictional vice president Selina Meyer, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, on *Veep* ("Well, we are the United States of America because we are united ... and we are states").

In June 2023, an NBC News poll put Harris's approval rating at 32 percent. While Biden's own approval numbers, in the low 40s, are hardly inspiring, the percentage of those who disapprove of Harris's performance is higher than for any other vice president in the history of the poll.

Ordinarily, as people around Harris like to remind reporters, a vice president's approval rating does not warrant notice. But if Biden—already the country's oldest president—wins reelection, he would begin a second term at age 82. And although Democrats recoil at any mention of Biden's mortality, it's hardly a coincidence that, as the 2024 campaign gathers pace, people have begun to contemplate the possibility that Harris could become president. In the campaign's announcement video and at events across the country for the past few months, Harris has been enlisted more prominently as a spokesperson for the administration's accomplishments—more visible, often, than the president himself. But unlike Biden, Harris does not simply need Americans to agree that she deserves four more years in her current job. She needs them to trust that she is ready, should the moment require it, to step into his.

Republicans may offer a mandatory "God forbid" when raising the prospect of some presidential health crisis, but they are already pushing the idea that "a vote for President Biden is a vote for President Harris." They are doing so in large part because they see her as a more inviting target than the president himself: a woman of color whose word-salad locutions turn themselves into campaign ads, and whose outspoken advocacy on social issues makes her easier to paint as an ideologue lying in wait.

Harris and I talked at the residence for an hour. Toward the end of the conversation, she patted the cushion between us. "No reporter has sat here ever," she said. It was a small moment, but it seemed to represent a recognition that something had to

change—if not about the way Harris actually does her job, then about the way she presents herself, and her role, in public.

EVEN TODAY, people who have worked for Harris make a point of telling you where they were during the Lester Holt interview. Usually, it is because they want to make clear that they were not involved.

In June 2021, at the end of a two-day trip to Guatemala, the vice president sat down with the NBC anchor to discuss Biden's immigration agenda. Harris had recently become the administration's lead on the so-called root-causes element of border policy, working with Central American countries to alleviate the violent and impoverished conditions that lead many migrants to flee north to the U.S. in the first place. The questions should have been easily anticipated—such as whether Harris had any plans to visit the border itself, where crossings had surged. Yet when Holt did ask that question, Harris threw up her hands in evident frustration. “At some point, you know, I—we are going to the border. We’ve been to the border. So this whole, this whole—this whole thing about the border. We’ve been to the border. We’ve been to the border.” Holt corrected her: “You haven’t been to the border.” Harris became defensive. “And I haven’t been to Europe,” she snapped. “I don’t understand the point you’re making.”

The exchange became the subject of headlines and late-night monologues. (“Well, *that* escalated quickly,” Jimmy Fallon said on his show the same night.) Afterward, Harris shied away from the camera for months.

For many Americans, the Holt interview was the first real exposure to Harris as vice president. She had spent the better part of her career as a “smart on crime” prosecutor who won her first election—district attorney of San Francisco, in 2003—by positioning herself as a pragmatic reformer. As California's attorney general, she targeted transnational gangs and cartels and won billions in extra relief from big banks at the center of the foreclosure crisis. She had been the state's junior senator for just over two years when she launched a bid for the presidency, in 2019, buoyed by the brief but bright flashes of stardom she'd earned from her tough, courtroom-style questioning of Trump-administration officials, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions (“I’m not able to be rushed this fast; it makes me nervous,” Sessions complained to her at one point), and of the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. And although she was an early favorite for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, raising millions in donations as she promised to “prosecute the case against Donald Trump,” her campaign fell apart before the Iowa caucus, beset by uneven messaging, disorganization, and low morale.

Throughout her time in national politics, Harris has repeated some advice imparted to her by her mother: “You don’t let people tell *you* who you are. You tell *them* who you are.” Yet a consistent theme of Harris's career has been her struggle to tell her own story—to define herself and her political vision for voters in clear, memorable terms. The result, in Harris's first months as vice president, was that high-profile mistakes assumed the devastating weight of first impressions. Verbal fumbles (“It is time

for us to do what we have been doing. And that time is every day”) became memes and were anthologized online. Shortly after the Holt interview, White House aides began leaking to various news outlets about top-to-bottom dysfunction in Harris's office and Biden's apparent concern about her performance. In her first year and a half as vice president, Harris saw the departure of her chief of staff, communications director, domestic-policy adviser, national security adviser, and other aides. Her current chief of staff, Lorraine Voles—formerly Al Gore's communications director, who has expertise in crisis management—was brought on initially to help with, as Voles put it, “organizational” issues with the team still in place.

Ron Klain, Biden's first chief of staff, told me that after her initial missteps, Harris became highly risk-averse: “She's always nervous that if she does something that doesn't go well, she's setting us back.” David Axelrod, a former senior strategist for President Barack Obama, noticed the same trait. “I think it's one of the things that plagued her in the presidential race,” he told me. “It looked as if she didn't know where to plant her feet. That she wasn't sort of grounded, that she didn't know exactly who she was.” He went on: “People can read that. When you're playing at that level, people can read that.”

Harris in 1997, when she was a deputy district attorney of Alameda County, California



Those closest to Harris have tried to make sense of why the vice president's positive qualities—her intelligence, her diligence, her integrity—have failed to register with Americans. It is impossible, of course, to talk about perceptions of Harris without laying some of the blame on racism and sexism. The briefest glance at the toxic comments about Harris on social media reveals the bigotry that motivates some of her most fervent detractors. But the vice president's allies also acknowledge that she has struggled to make an affirmative case for herself. Judging from what has gone viral online, she is better known for her passion for Venn diagrams than for any nugget of biography; right-wing personalities enjoy mocking this predilection almost as much as they enjoy mocking the way she laughs.

Harris may understand intellectually the imperative to seem “relatable” to a broad audience—to condense her background to a set of compelling *SparkNotes* to be recited on cue—but she hasn't made a habit of doing so. In smaller settings, she can be funny at her own expense. When I asked her what advice she would give to a successor, she referred back to some of those social-media reviews: “Don't read the comments.” In our conversation at the residence, she touched briefly on how her “first woman” status shapes even the most workaday elements of the job: “I'm not going to tell you who said to me—it's a previous president of the United States. He said, ‘Wow, women—I get up, I go work out, I jump in the shower, and I'm out the door. *You guys ...*’” (I suspect she was quoting Obama, a friend of hers who has spoken about his efficient morning routine.) Harris told me that she has to let the Secret Service know a day in advance if she is going to be wearing a dress instead of a pantsuit, because agents have to pick her up in a different kind of car.

But she prefers a discreet distance from topics like these. A friend of Harris's advised me before our first interview to avoid “small talk” or “diving immediately into personal matters.” The friend explained: “She appreciates the respect in that way.” Minyon Moore, a Democratic strategist with long-standing ties to Harris, made a related point: “She's not a person—which I kind of like, but it doesn't do her any good—she's not a person that's going to brag on herself. In fact, she's very uncomfortable, say, beating her own chest. She just wasn't raised that way.” Lateefah Simon, a former MacArthur fellow and now a candidate for Congress, was in her mid-20s when Harris hired her to run a program for young people convicted of nonviolent felonies, mostly involving drugs. Simon remembers Harris telling her she could either stand outside with a bullhorn or come push for change from the inside. “If you know Kamala Harris, she's *stern*—she was a stern 38-year-old,” Simon recalled. But she could also be more than that: Harris gave Simon her first suit after she showed up on day one in Puma sweats.

Nearly three years after Harris's swearing-in, her current and former staff still seem to be unearthing pertinent elements of her life story. Twice while I was reporting this article, aides highlighted an experience in Harris's adolescence—one that had informed her decision to become a prosecutor—that they'd learned about only after joining her team. In high school, a friend confided in Harris that she was being molested by a family member, so Harris insisted that the friend move in with her own family (and she

did). The outrage Harris felt in that moment would help define her path to the Alameda County district attorney's office, where much of her work as a deputy involved prosecuting sex crimes against children.

I understood why her aides wanted me to hear that story, which is not widely known. I wondered why—when I'd asked about her decision to become a prosecutor—Harris hadn't mentioned it herself. When we spoke at the residence, she did acknowledge the “request, sometimes the demand,” for personal revelation. “I guess it's a bit outside of my comfort level,” Harris said, “because for me, it really is about the work. You know, I am who I am. I am who I am. And I think I'm a pretty open book, but I am who I am.” She went on a little longer, making clear that she understands that people want to know more. And then, in a softer tone, she said: “And I just, you know, yeah. I don't know what to say about that.”

BUT WHAT IS “THE WORK”? For the first time in her career, Harris holds a job devoid of any clear benchmarks of success. She was a transformational figure by the mere fact of her election, but the office to which she was elected doesn't lend itself to transformational leadership.

After settling into Observatory Circle, Harris made a point of gathering historians for dinners—to discuss not just American democracy but also the history of the vice presidency itself. “You're not supposed to be visible,” Heather Cox Richardson, who attended one dinner, told me, referring to the nature of the vice president's job. “So there's that really fine tightrope you walk, between how do you make people understand that you're qualified without looking like you're unqualified because you don't understand your role.”

Neither Biden nor Harris arrived in Washington with a particular vision for Harris's vice presidency. Harris had issues in which she was interested—racial justice, climate change, gun violence, maternal mortality—and as vice president she has explored these and others. But America imposed its own urgent agenda: Getting the pandemic under control absorbed much of everyone's attention. With a 50–50 partisan split in the Senate, Harris was also compelled to spend much of her time in her old place of work, exercising the vice president's constitutional duty to cast the deciding vote in the case of a tie. “We couldn't make plans for me to be outside of D.C. for at least four days of the workweek,” she recalled.

More fundamentally, Biden and Harris came into office with few instructive models for their partnership, despite Biden having once held the job himself. For nearly half a century, with occasional exceptions, the vice president has been a creature of the capital. The president, in contrast, has been a relative outsider. Walter Mondale, the archetype of the modern American vice president, had 12 years in the Senate under his belt when he was sworn in. He became Jimmy Carter's anchor to Washington. George H. W. Bush did the same for Ronald Reagan, as did Al Gore for Bill Clinton, Dick Cheney for George W. Bush, Joe Biden for Barack Obama, and Mike Pence for Donald Trump. But Harris and Biden flipped the script: a comparative newcomer

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Bismark Appiah started working at Amazon just two weeks after moving to the U.S. More than 10 years and several promotions later, he's still working at the company.

“There are a lot of jobs around here. But there are not a lot of good jobs around here.”

For one New Jersey employee, Amazon offers opportunities for growth, day-one health care, and a path to the American dream.

When Bismark Appiah immigrated to the United States from his home country, Ghana, in August 2012, he needed to get a job quickly. Pretty much any job would do, as long as it covered his share of the rent.

Appiah's roommate knew a job that fit the bill. He had just applied for a seasonal job at Amazon, and so Appiah applied, too. Two weeks later, he reported for work as an associate at an Amazon fulfillment center in Phoenix.

Everyone he knew told him it wouldn't last, that it was just a temporary stop on the road to another opportunity. But more than a decade later, he's still working at Amazon—now, several promotions later, as an area manager at the company's fulfillment center in Edison, New Jersey. That's because, for Appiah, the job at Amazon hasn't been like any other job. Rather, it's been a good job, one that has invested in his growth and opened a door to the kind of life he's long imagined for himself and his two sons.

“At first, I just wanted a paycheck. But now I see this as a career,” he says. “If you take care of your people, the people are going to take care of the business. That has always been my mantra and that's why I work so hard.”

In 2016, Appiah saw his hard work pay off in big ways. It was the year he unlocked new growth opportunities, first becoming a certified ambassador with the ability to train new associates, and then getting his first promotion, to the role of process assistant. It was also the year when his infant son, Benjamin, demonstrated a delay in speech development and was diagnosed with autism. As an Amazon employee, Appiah had

health insurance that fully covered his son's therapy visits. Now Benjamin is a happy and talkative 7-year-old.

“As an immigrant, the one thing that I used to hear a lot was that it's hard to get health insurance in this country. But I take my son to all these therapists and I don't pay anything, when other people are paying like



Appiah's son Benjamin was diagnosed with autism at an early age. Amazon's health insurance got him the care he needed.

\$1,000 every month,” says Appiah. “Without the insurance, my son wouldn't have been able to get the help he needed.”

Providing for his family is a strong motivator for Appiah at work, where he spends his time overseeing more than 40 associates and ensuring that thousands of packages per day make it out the door at his

local Amazon fulfillment center. He's also motivated by a desire to help his co-workers make strides in their own careers. In coordination with his manager, he started a first-of-its-kind mentorship program, where he helps fellow employees build the skills necessary to get promoted.

“Since 2020, we've been able to get almost 50 associates promoted from entry-level roles. And we've helped about 15 more get promoted to area managers,” says Appiah. “It's something that gives me a lot of pride, knowing that I've helped people take the next step.”

Appiah's own promotions have set him up for the kind of life he could only dream of back home in Ghana—a life where he's able to buy a house, and save up for his kids' college education. The opportunities at Amazon have been transformative for not only Appiah, but the entire Edison community. The 900,000-square-foot warehouse where he works was once an air-conditioner manufacturing plant whose owner was the town's second-biggest employer. When it closed in 2003, the site sat vacant for more than a decade, and residents feared Edison would become a ghost town. Now the fulfillment center employs 2,500 full-time workers with all the same benefits Appiah enjoys—including day-one health care, free on-the-job skills training, and prepaid college tuition. Edison remains one of the state's largest municipalities, and an increasingly popular home for immigrants.

Amazon isn't the only place in Edison one can find a job. But it's certainly unique among them. As Appiah describes it: “There are a lot of jobs around here. But there are not a lot of good jobs around here.”



As an area manager, Appiah (center) oversees more than 40 associates and ensures that thousands of packages leave his local Amazon fulfillment center on time every day.

Amazon creates 4,400 jobs on average in communities with an Amazon facility.

Employment is the backbone of every economy. But healthy communities don't merely need a large quantity of jobs; they need high-quality jobs.

Today, many Americans struggle to find growth, prosperity, and fulfillment at work. At Amazon, however, employees across the country have access to the pay, benefits, time, and skills training needed to build a solid career and a good life.

Roughly 26 million Americans are uninsured.

At Amazon, full-time and part-time employees get health insurance on day one.

Only 24% of American private-sector workers have access to paid family leave.

At Amazon, hourly employees get up to 20 weeks of fully paid parental leave.*

More than half of American workers want to update their skills for the jobs of tomorrow.

Amazon is investing more than \$1.2 billion to provide free on-the-job training opportunities to over 300,000 of its U.S. employees.

*20 weeks fully paid leave for birthing parents; six weeks fully paid leave to supporting/adoptive parents. More info: aboutamazon.com/benefits



Find out what a good job means to Amazon employees TheAtlantic.com/TheDifference

serving as vice president to a man who'd launched his Senate career before she reached her tenth birthday.

In our interviews, Harris spoke of her relationship with Biden largely in generalities. When I asked how she and the president complement each other, she said, "Well, first of all, let me just tell you, we really like each other," and then went on to talk about shared values and principles. When I asked Harris what aspects of her skill set Biden depends on, she was more direct: "You'll have to ask him." (When I did, a spokesperson for Biden sent this statement: "Kamala Harris is an outstanding vice president because she's an outstanding partner. She asks the hard questions, thinks creatively, stays laser-focused on what we're fighting for, and works her heart out for the American people. She inspires Americans and people around the world who see her doing her job with skill and passion and dream bigger for themselves about what's possible. I trust her, depend on her, admire her. And I'm proud and grateful to have her by my side.")

Current and former aides to both say Harris and Biden have a good friendship. The president made the relationship a priority early on, setting up weekly lunches with Harris, like the ones he himself had valued with Obama. She still has lunch with him, she says, "when he's not traveling, when I'm not traveling." Given that Harris loves to cook—and regularly has friends and family over for meals—I asked whether she and her husband had hosted the Bidens for dinner. She said that they hadn't, and seemed momentarily stuck in a feedback loop: "We have a plan to do it, but we have to get a date. But he and I have a plan, we have a plan to do it. And yeah, no, we actually have a plan to do it."

As vice president, Harris has been unfailingly loyal to Biden. For West Wing staff, especially at the beginning, this was no small thing. During Harris's vetting for the job, some of those close to Biden—reportedly including his wife, Jill—struggled with the memory of her sharp attacks on him during the presidential primary. In a televised debate, Harris had brought up the subject of Biden's past opposition to busing, leading to one of the most withering exchanges of the race. "There was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools, and she was bused to school every day," Harris told Biden. "And that little girl was me."

Perhaps in recognition of this history, Harris has been an unwavering advocate of Biden and his policy priorities. Ultimately, she told me, that is what she sees as the core of her mandate as vice president. Building out the rest of the mandate has proved more complicated.

THE PATH TO the Lester Holt interview began with tension over Harris's policy portfolio. During one of the administration's early multiagency meetings about the surge of unlawful crossings at the Mexican border, Biden was impressed as Harris outlined ideas for engaging the Central American countries that many of the migrants were coming from.

According to Ron Klain, the president turned to Harris and said, "Well, why don't you do that?"—meaning, become the point person on the morass of root-cause elements. Harris approached the chief of staff after the meeting. "And she said," as Klain recalled, "Well, I wasn't really looking for that assignment—my idea was, this is what we should do, and someone *else* should do it." Klain told Harris he understood but, as vice president, Biden had worked on this aspect of immigration policy for Obama, and they needed her to take it on as well.

It wasn't that Harris lacked relevant experience; as attorney general of California, she had worked extensively with law enforcement in Mexico on drug and human trafficking. But the politics of the issue were radioactive. Harris knew this, and so did Klain. "It was obviously a controversial assignment," he acknowledged to me. "It wasn't necessarily anyone's idea of a glory assignment." (Asked about this, the vice president's office responded that Harris had "plunged into the issue with vigor.") Harris broke the news of the task to her staff on a mordant note, opening a meeting with the announcement that she was "going to oversee the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," according to a person who was in the room, then dialing back to the slightly less grim reality.

As Klain saw it, Biden intended the appointment—to the same role he had once held—as a show of respect. But it also suggested obliviousness to Harris's need, early in her term, for a measure of stability and success. Of course, as the Holt interview showed, Harris could make the task harder all on her own. Republican lawmakers and Fox News personalities relished the prospect of pinning the border crisis on Harris. She may have been responsible for just one sliver of U.S. policy, but they used her proximity to border issues to fuel the image of Harris as Biden's "border czar."

In the first year of his presidency, Biden did little to present Harris as essential to the administration; neither did the Democratic Party more broadly. Indeed, there was a sense that Harris might be a liability more than anything else. Less than two weeks into office, Harris appeared on a West Virginia news station to pitch the Biden administration's coronavirus stimulus package—which Joe Manchin, the state's conservative Democratic senator, was not yet sold on. In an interview on the same station the next day, Manchin said he was shocked that Harris had given him no notice of the appearance. "I couldn't believe it," he said.

*WHEN I ASKED HARRIS WHAT
ASPECTS OF HER SKILL SET
BIDEN DEPENDS ON, SHE SAID:
"YOU'LL HAVE TO ASK HIM."*

Harris and her husband,
Doug Emhoff, as they
arrived in Accra, Ghana,
in March 2023



“That’s not a way of working together.” Later that year, as my colleague Franklin Foer has reported, Biden invited Manchin to the Oval Office to discuss the stimulus package; Harris was there initially, but after pleasantries was sent on her way. Biden had once said that Harris’s would be “the last voice in the room” during important conversations. Not this time.

In June 2021, Biden asked Harris to take the lead on voting rights for the administration. The House had recently passed the For the People Act—a massive overhaul of election law that addressed voter access, gerrymandering, campaign finance, and other matters—and Democratic leaders were eager to see movement in the Senate. That was unlikely. Mitch McConnell, the Senate GOP leader, promised that no Republican would support the bill; not all Democrats were on board either. The legislation would likely die by filibuster—a procedure that Biden, despite calls from many in his party, was almost certainly not going to try to undermine.

Harris’s allies would later characterize voting rights as one of those impossible issues—*intractable* is the word they often use—that the president had saddled her with. Yet it was Harris herself who had lobbied for the assignment. Her personal background made her a natural spokesperson, and as attorney general of California, she had signed on to an amicus brief urging the Supreme Court to uphold the protections against discrimination in the Voting Rights Act—the protections eventually struck down in *Shelby County v. Holder*. But the bill’s death by filibuster was virtually inevitable. And Harris didn’t do much to stave it off.

Harris’s aides once described her to reporters as potentially a key emissary for the administration in Congress—helping coral votes by way of “quiet Hill diplomacy.” But she lacked the deep relationships needed to exert real influence. Congressional

officials told me that Harris rarely engaged the more persuadable holdouts on either side of the aisle. At a key moment in the negotiations, Biden went to talk with the two resistant Democrats, Joe Manchin and Arizona’s Kyrsten Sinema. Harris did not go with him. A White House official declined to get into details and said only that Harris was “interested and engaged” in conversations with Democratic lawmakers during this period. Harris shifted the terms of the discussion when I asked how her Senate background had proved useful in the administration’s push for legislation: “I mean, I think the work we have to do is really more in getting folks to speak loudly with their feet through the election cycle”—an unusual image, though the point was clear enough: Electing more Democrats might be more effective than trying to twist more arms.

For now, Senate Democrats are not fighting for time with Harris when she’s on the Hill. “You’d be hard-pressed to find a Democratic office that actually engages with her or her team on a regular basis,” one Democratic senator’s chief of staff told me. Traditionally, this person said, officials from the executive branch who visit the Capitol are cornered by lawmakers hoping to get their priorities before the president. But few people are “scrambling to make alliances” with Harris—not because of any dislike, as this person and other congressional officials told me, but simply because of uncertainty about the nature of her role. “In her case,” the chief of staff said, “it’s kind of like, ‘Hey, good to see you.’ And that’s kind of the end of it.”

THIS PAST SPRING, I traveled with Harris to Los Angeles, where she was scheduled to appear on Jennifer Hudson’s daytime talk show. When Hudson asked Harris what she missed most about her old life, before the White House, the vice president

replied, “Have you watched *The Godfather*?” I was in the green-room with her staff as they looked apprehensively at the screen, wondering where their boss was going with this. Harris went on to describe the scene in which Michael Corleone is out for a quiet walk in Sicily with his fiancée, “and then the shot pans out, and the whole village is on the walk with them.”

There’s no escaping the reality that her every move is probed and dissected. During our conversation at the residence, Harris pointed to the veranda. “Sometimes in the summer, I’ll come and sit out with my binders and a cup of tea, and it’s just really nice and quiet,” she said. It wasn’t until later, when I listened again to the tape of the conversation, that I remembered what she’d said next: “You almost forget that there are 5,000 people around here.”

Having worked in politics and government for the better part of her life, Harris is accustomed to a certain amount of scrutiny. But in her past jobs—as a prosecutor, as attorney general—people were looking at her actual accomplishments. That was how it seemed to her, at least. A friend of Harris’s told me that her professional yardstick was “outcome driven.” Campaigning for district attorney of San Francisco, Harris criticized the incumbent’s low conviction rate for felonies; running later for reelection, she talked about how she had improved it by 15 percentage points. Communication wasn’t a matter of rhetoric. It was just laying out the facts.

This is still, in some ways, how Harris tends to perceive her job. She is always asking aides to get to the point: *Show me the data; show me the metrics*. And for some things, this works. But success in national politics involves gauzier, more emotional elements. It’s not an accident that the single utterance by Harris that most people can call to mind—“That little girl was me”—drew on searing personal experience.

Go to enough of Harris’s events and you’ll notice a pattern. Many of them—conversations with community leaders at, say, a college campus or a civic center—begin shakily. The moderator opens by asking Harris a sweeping question about the state of the country, or the administration’s approach to some major issue—the sort of question that a seasoned politician should be able to spin her way through on autopilot. And yet Harris often sounds like she’s hearing the question for the first time.

During a discussion at Georgia Tech focused on climate change, I listened as Harris was asked to speak about the administration’s progress over the past two years in addressing the crisis. Her baroque response began: “The way I think about this moment is that I do believe it to be a transformational moment. But in order for us to truly achieve that capacity, it’s going to require all to be involved . . . and I will say, on behalf of the administration, a whole-of-government approach to understanding the excitement that we should all feel about the opportunity of this moment, and then also thinking of it in a way that we understand the intersection between so many movements that have been about a fight for justice and how we should see that intersection, then, in the context of this moment . . . And so I’m very excited about this moment.”

This is not Churchill. It’s not even Al Gore. Only when Harris assumed the role of interrogator herself did she seem to find her rhythm, pressing the moderators on the stage—two scientists—to

discuss their personal journey toward an interest in climate issues. She then leveraged one moderator’s story to explain the administration’s plan to replace lead pipes across the country—using \$15 billion from the bipartisan infrastructure deal, one of the Biden administration’s marquee victories. The communities that have been suffering from contamination “have been fighting for years and years and years,” Harris noted. “It didn’t take a science degree for them to know what was happening to their children.” The audience responded as if at a church service, with murmurs of affirmation.

Hillary Clinton told me that she has met with Harris at the White House and the vice president’s residence, and has talked with her numerous times by phone. “I’ve tried to be as helpful and available to her as possible,” Clinton said, adding, “It’s a tough role.” She noted that Harris isn’t a “performance” politician, a comment she intended not as a criticism but as an acknowledgment that Harris’s skills mainly lie elsewhere. (Clinton isn’t a performance politician either.) Harris doesn’t dispute the point: “My career was not measured by giving lovely speeches,” she told me.

Harris communicates most effectively when she can shift the focus away from herself. The first two conversations I had with the vice president, both while traveling with her, felt stilted and strained, as if I were tiptoeing around glass. But at the residence, alone, Harris was warm, inviting, at times even maternal. “You’re newly married,” she said. (“Yes,” I responded, though it wasn’t a question.) “Pay attention to your marriage,” she counseled. “Friendships, marriage require that you pay attention. Because life has a way of sweeping you up.”

Harris has configured many of her public events to resemble a back-and-forth conversation rather than a standard Q&A: She likes talking with people. The grassroots settings that Harris enjoys represent a mode of retail politics that rarely grabs national attention. But such events have given her a good read on what voters care about. They have also allowed her to inhabit her own space. As Klain observed, in Washington, you’re “just the vice president.” In the rest of the country, you’re “the *vice president*.”

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which overturned the abortion protections embodied in *Roe v. Wade*, Harris had a strong sense of American public opinion on the issue. Amid a crush of headlines predicting a so-called red wave in the upcoming midterm elections—with the economy as the central issue—Harris was steadfast in her view that abortion rights would shape the contest. She spent much of 2022 on the road, hosting conversations on reproductive rights in red and blue states alike. Women, she told me, “won’t necessarily talk loudly” about an issue like abortion. “But they will vote on it.” In this respect, Harris understood the mood of the country, and the potential impact at the ballot box, better than most people in Washington. In the midterms, the Democrats did far better than expected, even winning a majority in the Senate; there was no red wave. Harris has continued to travel and talk about abortion rights ever since. It is a central issue for the Democratic base and one that Biden—a devout Catholic who, in his own words, isn’t “big on” abortion—has been reluctant to press himself.

AFTER DOBBS, HARRIS UNDERSTOOD THE MOOD OF THE COUNTRY BETTER THAN MOST PEOPLE IN WASHINGTON.

Fighting *Dobbs* will be a long battle. But it's the kind Harris may be suited for. In one of our conversations, she spoke about "the significance of the passage of time"—a line that featured in one of her more unwieldy speeches as vice president. I remember steadying myself when the phrase surfaced. But what followed was a revealing commentary about the diligence and patience that are required to produce real change. Harris told me about a commencement speech she had given at the law school of UC Berkeley. She spoke to the new graduates about *Brown v. Board of Education*—about how, after the ruling, integration largely took place on a creeping, county-by-county basis, and only in response to continual pressure. Exerting that pressure meant building a legal foundation, erecting a structure brick by brick, and laboring over the details, all in return for progress that was often measured in inches. This is a truth, Harris noted, that Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston and Constance Baker Motley all knew. "And I just got up there and I was like, 'You want to be a lawyer?'" she recalled. If you do, she told them, then you must learn to "embrace the mundane."

She laughed at the memory of that line. "And the parents are like, *Ooh, this is good*," she recalled. "And the kids are like, *Oh, fuck*."

HARRIS'S ENGAGEMENT WITH abortion rights has broken through to voters more than anything else in her vice presidency, according to the Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. But Harris has been effective in another arena—diplomacy—that to the public is hardly visible at all.

During his two terms as vice president, Joe Biden traveled to 57 countries—and before that, as a senator, he had decades to acquire experience abroad. In the past two years, Harris has traveled to 19 countries, including France, Germany, Poland, Guatemala, Mexico, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia, and Indonesia. She has met with 100 or so foreign leaders. They have tended to appreciate, as more than one White House official told me, how fact-based and direct she is. She has "very little patience," one of them said, for the euphemisms and platitudes of routine diplomacy. Harris's risk aversion appears to stop at the water's edge.

Her first major diplomatic test came during a five-day trip to France in November 2021. For some time, Harris had been considering an invitation to attend the Paris Peace Forum, whose purpose was to discuss global inequalities exacerbated

by the pandemic. But in the weeks before the event, relations between Washington and Paris had been pitched into tumult after the announcement of a lucrative joint U.S.-British submarine deal with Australia that nullified France's own submarine deal with Australia. French President Emmanuel Macron was furious, recalling his ambassador from Washington; Biden soon admitted that his handling had been "clumsy." For Harris,

the trip to Paris went from optional to crucial.

In front of the cameras, Harris and Macron both said what they were expected to say about a positive long-term bilateral future. The atmosphere was one of chilly civility. But behind the scenes, Harris was helping lay the groundwork for cooperation on the looming crisis in Ukraine. She used her nearly two-hour meeting with Macron at the Élysée Palace to present an array of U.S. intelligence. Harris urged the French president to take seriously the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Three months later, Biden asked Harris to represent the administration at the high-visibility Munich Security Conference. It was a sign of Biden's confidence—on a personal level (Biden had attended the conference many times) and also because of the timing. The U.S. now knew that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent, and Harris was tasked with helping press allies and partners to develop a coordinated response. Five days before the invasion, Harris met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to share U.S. intelligence and plans for military support. Publicly, Zelensky still seemed uncertain about Russia's intentions and the scale of the threat. "The vice president directly and very clearly conveyed to Zelensky and his team that this was going to happen," an official on the trip told me, "and they should really be planning on that basis and not waste any time."

Harris returned to the Munich Security Conference this past February. Speaking for the administration, she formally declared the U.S. view that Russia had committed "crimes against humanity" in Ukraine.

A month later, I joined Harris on a multicountry tour of Africa. China's deepening presence on the continent provided the geopolitical backdrop. But Harris was bringing with her more than \$7 billion in commitments, largely from the private sector, to promote climate-resilience initiatives, money she had raised herself through months of tree-shaking phone calls to companies and individuals. The trip was a seven-day sprint, and logistically taxing. On one occasion, the American advance team had to upgrade an entire road from dirt to gravel; the vice president's Secret Service code name may be "Pioneer," but there are limits to what her motorcade can handle.

In Cape Coast, Ghana, Harris walked through the Door of No Return, where enslaved people had taken their final steps in Africa before being forced onto ships. She discarded her prepared remarks—something she had almost never done before—and spoke

powerfully about the legacy of the diaspora in the Americas. In Lusaka, Zambia, she was driven to the rural outskirts of the capital to visit Panuka Farm, powered entirely by renewable energy. The vice president had spent time on a farm as a child; wearing jeans and Timberlands, she seemed at home inside the netted enclosures of sweet peppers and iceberg lettuce. Washington felt very far away.

Harris's allies touted the Africa trip as a historic effort to deepen ties with the fast-growing continent. But it hardly registered back home. Terrance Woodbury is a Democratic pollster who focuses on young and minority voters; he saw the Africa trip as a "pivot" in terms of Harris's self-presentation. Yet when I asked whether the trip had made any difference politically, he said, simply, "No."

The trip also offered a reminder of Harris's ongoing struggle when it comes to telling her own story—and of the *Veep* comparison. The vice president's visit to Zambia had been billed as a kind of homecoming. As a young girl, Harris spent time in Lusaka with her maternal grandfather, P. V. Gopalan, who had been dispatched there in the 1960s from India to advise Zambia's first independent government on refugee resettlement. Now, decades later, she was returning to Zambia as one of the most prominent public figures in the world. Harris's scheduled stop at her grandfather's old home in the capital, where she was expected to speak about his work and how his career as a civil servant had shaped her own ambitions, promised to be a special moment.

Instead, dozens of reporters and others looked on as Harris laughed somewhat awkwardly in front of a concrete-and-stucco office building. Greeting her near the doorway was a U.S.-embassy official, who explained that, after a year of combing through public records, researchers had managed to locate the plot of land on which Gopalan's house had stood. The house itself, however, had

been replaced by the headquarters of a Zambian financial-services group. Seeming not to know what else to do, Harris accepted an offer to tour the building. Reporters and cameramen, who had been anticipating a press conference at the end of the event, were ushered away. When I asked why the press conference had been scrapped, an aide said, "She needed a private moment." Life has a way of sweeping you up.

MY CONVERSATION WITH HARRIS at the residence came three weeks after our return from Africa. She took me through her herb garden, just off the driveway, crouching to examine the state of her oregano, dill, rosemary, thyme, and sage. Washington's springtime pollen was at its worst, and my eyes were red-rimmed and watery as we made our way inside. After finding a box of tissues, Harris sympathized, referring to D.C. as "a toxic swamp of pollen." People from outside the area, she went on, "are not acclimated to this mix." It was a botanical comment, but it reminded me of something one of Harris's old friends had told me about the vice president's seeming discomfort in the capital, and how much happier she appeared when traveling to other parts of the country.

Perceptions of Harris appear to be frozen in 2021. A recent op-ed in *The Hill*, largely sympathetic to the vice president, urged the Biden campaign to get her "off the sidelines"—this during a week when she traveled to Indianapolis; Jacksonville, Florida; and Chicago. (Many weeks, she is on the road at least three days out of seven.) At one point during my conversation with David Axelrod, he wondered why Harris hadn't become more of a champion for the administration's most significant achievements, such as the infrastructure package. But much of her cross-country travel is focused exactly on that.



*Harris marking the
50th anniversary
of Roe v. Wade
at an event in
Tallahassee, Florida, in
January 2023*

GIVEN BIDEN'S AGE, THE WORDS HEARTBEAT AWAY CONNOTE A REAL POSSIBILITY.

Of course, Harris is not alone in having trouble breaking through. “I mean, why do only a third of voters know what the *president* has done?” Celinda Lake, the pollster, asked when we spoke. “My God, they spent millions of dollars on it. They’ve got ads up now.” If voters don’t know what the president has done, Lake said, “they sure as heck aren’t going to know what the *vice* president has done.”

This summer, I asked Jeff Zients, the current White House chief of staff, if he could recall a moment when Biden had noticeably leaned on Harris for guidance, or when her input had meaningfully changed the administration’s approach to an issue. He had mentioned earlier in our interview that Harris had been instrumental in putting “equity” at the forefront of the administration’s COVID response—ensuring that public-health efforts reach the underserved. Other examples? “Let me think of a specific anecdote, and I’ll have somebody follow up,” he said. His spokesperson texted after the call to confirm that the office would get back to me. Despite my follow-ups, that was the last I heard.

Vice presidents are chosen mainly for political reasons—as Harris was—and not actuarial ones. In most of the presidential elections during the past half century, the possibility that the candidate at the top of the ticket might die in office was not a significant issue. (It was an issue for John McCain, in 2008, with his history of multiple melanomas, which was one more reason McCain’s selection of the erratic Sarah Palin as his running mate had such negative resonance.) This time around, given Biden’s age, the words *heartbeat away* connote a real possibility.

When I asked Zients what he’s observed in Harris that makes him confident about her abilities as a potential chief executive, he at first started chuckling in what seemed to be discomfort at the subtext of the question. (“Well, I want to, you know, make sure we’re not talking about anything—but, you know, she’s prepared.”) But after that he went on thoughtfully: “You know, the first thing I go to is when you’re president, there are so many issues, and understanding what’s most important to the American people, what’s most important to America’s position in the world—it takes experience, which she has, and it takes a certain intuition as to what matters most, and she’s very good at quickly boiling it down to what matters most, and focusing on those issues, and then within those issues or opportunities, understanding what’s most important, and holding the team accountable.”

That’s a sharp assessment of what a vice president can bring to the table, and not a bad way to make important observations about Harris that seem matter-of-fact and not tied to the prospect of a sudden transition.

So I was surprised when another White House official, who knows both Harris and Biden well, treated the topic of readiness as if it were somehow illegitimate—a ploy by desperate Republican candidates. “People who are polling near the bottom do things and say things to try and be relevant and get oxygen.” Was it ridiculous to ask about Harris’s constitutional closeness

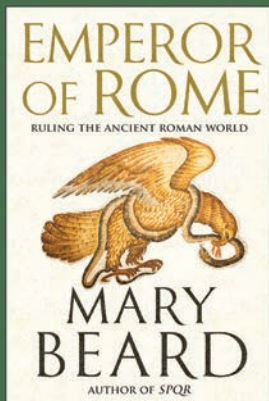
to the presidency? “She is the closest to the presidency, as all of her predecessors have been.”

Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Chris Christie, and Ron DeSantis, all of them presidential candidates, have explicitly raised the specter of a “President Harris.” So have other Republicans. The probable GOP nominee, Donald Trump, who habitually belittles women, will likely do so too. He has referred to Harris as “this monster” and has questioned her citizenship. On one occasion, he made fun of her name—“Kamala, Kamala, Kamala,” repeating it slowly with various pronunciations. Harris called him childish for that, but has largely declined to take the bait. Perhaps not surprisingly for a former prosecutor, she has become more publicly outspoken than anyone else in the White House about the indictments that Trump faces and the need to hold lawbreakers accountable.

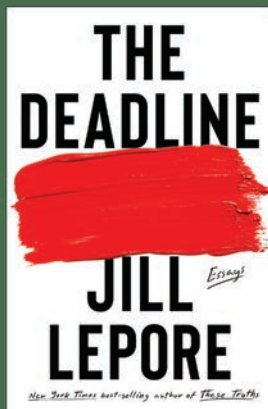
The Biden administration has every incentive to embrace Harris. Why does addressing preparedness seem so difficult? Harris has affirmed that she is ready, if need be, but there’s a limit to what she herself can say. It’s not unusual for a president, any president, to take pains to demonstrate his vice president’s readiness for the top job, if only by regularly referencing their closeness—the notion that the person is briefed on everything and has an opportunity to weigh in on major decisions, even if the fingerprints aren’t always visible. And no president comes to the Oval Office with every necessary skill. Harris is an uncomfortable fit in the vice president’s role, whatever that is, and she cannot speak or act independently; the job makes every occupant a cipher. But she has been a successful public servant for more than three decades. She ran the second-largest justice system in America, in a state that is the world’s fifth-largest economy. By virtue of her position, she is among those who represent the future of her party, and she represents its mainstream, not its fringe. Of course Kamala Harris is ready for the presidency, to the extent that anyone can be ready. This should not be hard for her own colleagues to talk about. Not talking about it leaves the subject open for political exploitation—by opponents whose own likely candidate makes the idea of readiness absurd.

And yet the topic is treated as a trip wire. In a brief conversation after an abortion-rights rally in Charlotte, North Carolina, on the first anniversary of the *Dobbs* decision, I asked Harris herself: Had she and Biden discussed how to address questions about her readiness to step in as president, should circumstances ever require it? “No,” she said. And that was the end of the conversation. *A*

Elaina Plott Calabro is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



From “the world’s most famous classicist” (*Guardian*) and author of *New York Times* bestseller *SPQR* comes a panoramic history of Roman emperors.



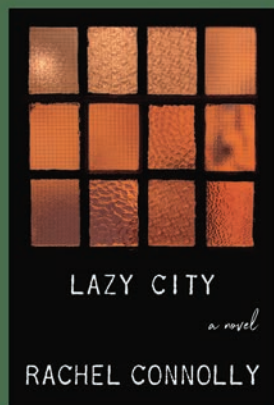
“[Jill Lepore is] the finest practitioner of historical extrapolation working today.... [The Deadline is] a riveting survey of America, a vital reminder that ‘history isn’t a pledge, it’s an argument.’”

— Sloane Crosley, *New York Times Book Review*

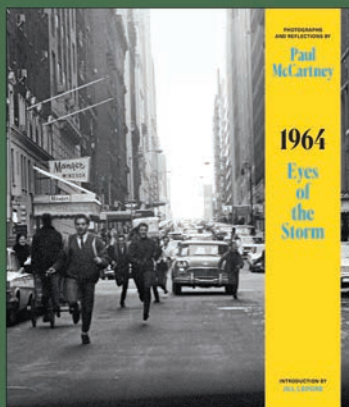


“I watched all the movies. I devoured all the articles. I listened to all the pods. I thought I knew everything there was to know about the [Marvel Cinematic Universe] . . . and then I read this magnificent book.”

—Damon Lindelof

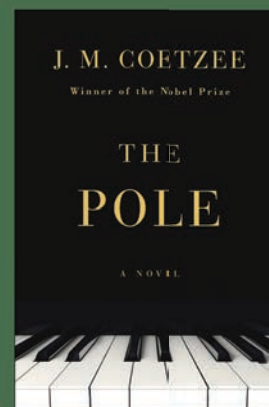


A “truly extraordinary” (Bassey Ikpi) debut novel of modern Belfast that sings a tender hymn to messy love, quiet grief, and the hangovers in between, *Lazy City* is “witty and profoundly moving” (*Bookseller, Editor’s Choice*).

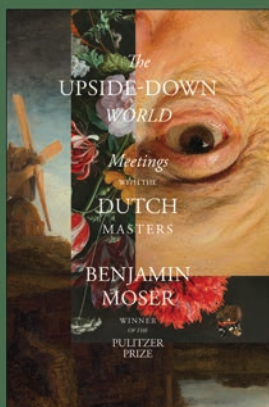


New York Times Bestseller

Taken with a 35mm camera by Paul McCartney, these largely unseen photographs capture the explosive period in which The Beatles became an international sensation and changed the course of music history.

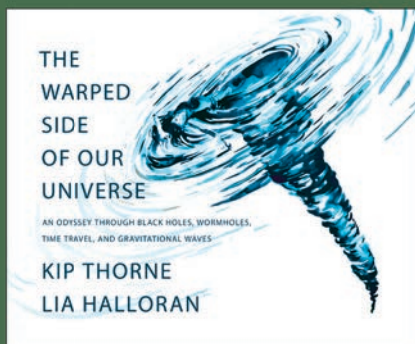


From J.M. Coetzee—“one of the last great novelists” (*The Nation*) and the Nobel Prize-winning author of *Disgrace* — *The Pole* is a psychologically probing novel of music, love, and the instability of human relationships.



“In a luminous, splendidly illustrated melding of art history and memoir, Pulitzer Prize–winning biographer, translator, and essayist Moser pays homage to 17th-century artists whose works he discovered when he first settled in the Netherlands 20 years ago.”

—Kirkus Reviews, starred review



Nobel Laureate Kip Thorne and award-winning artist Lia Halloran present epic verse and pulsating paintings to shed light on time travel, black holes, and the birth of the universe.



“An incisive guide to the tangle of race, politics, and business that Anna May Wong encountered.... Mr. Huang turns the spotlight back onto an important but largely forgotten film icon.”

—Julia Flynn Siler, *Wall Street Journal*

IT'S TIME TO PUT ON YOUR SANTA HAT

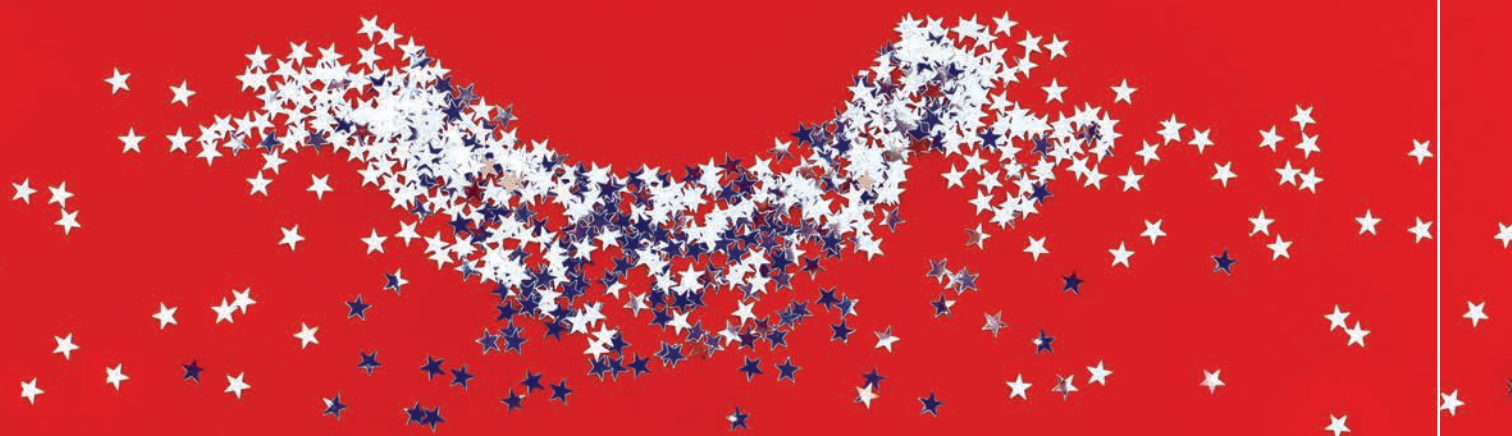
Christmas is a time of magic, hope and belief. Around the world, children anxiously create their wish lists.

While some wish for new doll houses and toy cars, others wish for necessities like food and water. This year, join an incredible team of everyday Santas and Heifer International to ensure these wishes come true.

*Right now, make twice as many wishes
come true with our special holiday match!*

**BE SOMEONE'S SANTA AT
[HEIFER.ORG/ATLANTIC](https://heifer.org/atlantic)**





Subekchay from Nepal
wants her parents to not
worry about money.



Misheck from Malawi
wants breakfast
every morning.



Samata from
Honduras wants
school supplies.

W H A T
M I T T R O M N E Y
S A W
I N T H E
S E N A T E

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS,
THE HYPOCRISY AND CYNICISM ARE
EVEN WORSE THAN YOU THINK.

By

M c K A Y
C O P P I N S



Photograph by Yael Malka

FOR MOST OF HIS
LIFE, MITT ROMNEY
HAS NURSED A
MORBID FASCINATION
WITH HIS OWN
DEATH, SUSPECTING
THAT IT MIGHT
ASSERT ITSELF
ONE DAY SUDDENLY
AND VIOLENTLY.

He controls what he can, of course. He wears his seat belt, and diligently applies sunscreen, and stays away from secondhand smoke. For decades, he's followed his doctor's recipe for longevity with monastic dedication—the lean meats, the low-dose aspirin, the daily 30-minute sessions on the stationary bike, heartbeat at 140 or higher or it doesn't count.

He would live to 120 if he could. “So much is going to happen!” he says when asked about this particular desire. “I want to be around to see it.” But some part of him has always doubted that he'll get anywhere close.

He has never really interrogated the cause of this preoccupation, but premonitions of death seem to follow him. Once, years ago, he boarded an airplane for a business trip to London and a flight attendant whom he'd never met saw him, gasped, and rushed from the cabin in horror. When she was asked what had so upset her, she confessed that she'd dreamt the night before about a man who looked like him—exactly like him—getting shot and killed at a rally in Hyde Park. He didn't know how to respond, other than to laugh and put it out of his mind. But when, a few days later, he happened to find himself on the park's edge and saw a crowd forming, he made a point not to linger.

All of which is to say there is something familiar about the unnerving sensation that Romney is feeling late on the afternoon of January 2, 2021.

It begins with a text message from Angus King, the junior senator from Maine: “Could you give me a call when you get a chance? Important.”

Romney calls, and King informs him of a conversation he's just had with a high-ranking Pentagon official. Law enforcement has been tracking online chatter among right-wing extremists who appear to be planning something bad on the day of Donald Trump's upcoming rally in Washington, D.C. The president has been telling them the election was stolen; now they're coming to steal it back. There's talk of gun smuggling, of bombs and arson, of targeting the traitors in Congress who are responsible for this

travesty. Romney's name has been popping up in some frightening corners of the internet, which is why King needed to talk to him. He isn't sure Romney will be safe.

Romney hangs up and immediately begins typing a text to Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader. McConnell has been indulgent of Trump's deranged behavior over the past four years, but he's not crazy. He knows that the election wasn't stolen, that his guy lost fair and square. He sees the posturing by Republican politicians for what it is. He'll want to know about this, Romney thinks. He'll want to protect his colleagues, and himself.

Romney sends his text: “In case you have not heard this, I just got a call from Angus King, who said that he had spoken with a senior official at the Pentagon who reports that they are seeing very disturbing social media traffic regarding the protests planned on the 6th. There are calls to burn down your home, Mitch; to smuggle guns into DC, and to storm the Capitol. I hope that sufficient security plans are in place, but I am concerned that the instigator—the President—is the one who commands the reinforcements the DC and Capitol police might require.”

McConnell never responds.

I BEGAN MEETING WITH ROMNEY in the spring of 2021. The senator hadn't told anyone he was talking to a biographer, and we kept our interviews discreet. Sometimes we talked in his Senate office, after most of his staff had gone home; sometimes we went to his little windowless “hideaway” near the Senate chamber. But most weeks, I drove to a stately brick townhouse with perpetually drawn blinds on a quiet street a mile from the Capitol.

The place had not been Romney's first choice for a Washington residence. When he was elected, in 2018, he'd had his eye on a newly remodeled condo at the Watergate with glittering views of the Potomac. His wife, Ann, fell in love with the place, but his soon-to-be staffers and colleagues warned him about the commute. So he grudgingly chose practicality over luxury and settled for the \$2.4 million townhouse instead.

He tried to make it nice, so that Ann would be comfortable when she visited. A decorator filled the rooms with tasteful furniture and calming abstract art. He planted a garden on the small backyard patio. But his wife rarely came to Washington, and his sons didn't come either, and gradually the house took on an unkempt bachelor-pad quality. Crumbs littered the kitchen counter; soda and seltzer occupied the otherwise-empty fridge. Old campaign paraphernalia appeared on the mantel, clashing with the decorator's mid-tone color scheme, and a bar of “Trump's Small Hand Soap” (a gag gift from one of his sons) was placed in the powder room alongside the monogrammed towels.

In the “dining room,” a 98-inch TV went up on the wall and a leather recliner landed in front of it. Romney, who didn't have many real friends in Washington, ate dinner alone there most nights, watching *Ted Lasso* or *Better Call Saul* as he leafed through briefing materials. On the day of my first visit, he showed me his freezer, which was full of salmon fillets that had been given to him by Lisa Murkowski, the senator from Alaska. He didn't especially like salmon but found that if he put it on a hamburger bun and smothered it in ketchup, it made for a serviceable meal.

Sitting across from Romney at 76, one can't help but become a little suspicious of his handsomeness. The jowl-free jawline. The all-seasons tan. The just-so gray at the temples of that thick black coif, which his barber once insisted he doesn't dye. It all seems a little uncanny. Only after studying him closely do you notice the signs of age. He shuffles a little when he walks now, hunches a little when he sits. At various points in recent years, he's gotten so thin that his staff has worried about him. Mostly, he looks tired.

Romney's isolation in Washington didn't surprise me. In less than a decade, he'd gone from Republican standard-bearer and presidential nominee to party pariah thanks to a series of public clashes with Trump. What I didn't quite expect was how candid he was ready to be. He instructed his scheduler to block off evenings for weekly interviews, and told me that no subject would be off-limits. He handed over hundreds of pages of his private journals and years' worth of personal correspondence, including sensitive emails with some of the most powerful Republicans in the country. When he couldn't find the key to an old filing cabinet that contained some of his personal papers, he took a crowbar to it and deposited stacks of campaign documents and legal pads in my lap. He'd kept all of this stuff, he explained, because he thought he might write a memoir one day, but he'd decided against it. "I can't be objective about my own life," he said.

Some nights he vented; other nights he dished. He's more puckish than his public persona suggests, attuned to the absurdist humor of political life and quick to share stories that others might consider indiscreet. I got the feeling he liked the company—our conversations sometimes stretched for hours.

"A very large portion of my party," he told me one day, "really doesn't believe in the Constitution." He'd realized this only recently, he said. We were a few months removed from an attempted coup instigated by Republican leaders, and he was wrestling with some difficult questions. Was the authoritarian element of the GOP a product of President Trump, or had it always been there, just waiting to be activated by a sufficiently shameless demagogue? And what role had the members of the mainstream establishment—people like him, the reasonable Republicans—played in allowing the rot on the right to fester?

I had never encountered a politician so openly reckoning with what his pursuit of power had cost, much less one doing so while still in office. Candid introspection and crises of conscience are much less expensive in retirement. But Romney was thinking beyond his own political future.

Earlier this year, he confided to me that he would not seek reelection to the Senate in 2024. He planned to make this announcement in the fall. The decision was part political, part actuarial. The men in his family had a history of sudden heart failure, and none had lived longer than his father, who died at 88. "Do I want to spend eight of the 12 years I have left sitting here and not getting anything done?" he mused. But there was something else. His time in the Senate had left Romney

worried—not just about the decomposition of his own political party, but about the fate of the American project itself.

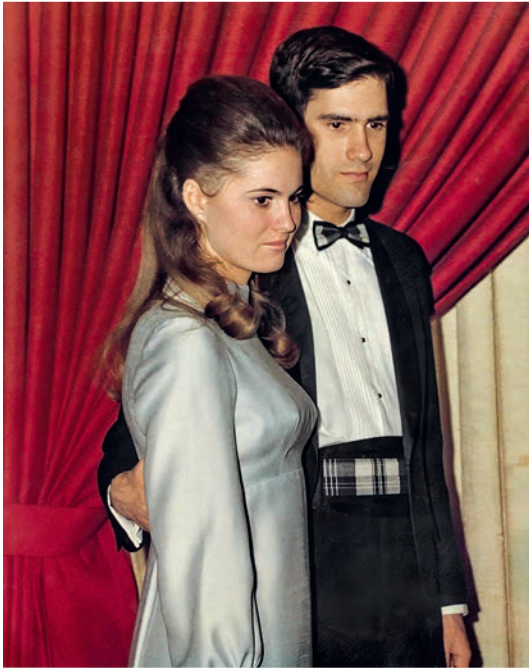
Shortly after moving into his Senate office, Romney had hung a large rectangular map on the wall. First printed in 1931 by Rand McNally, the "histomap" attempted to chart the rise and fall of the world's most powerful civilizations through 4,000 years of human history. When Romney first acquired the map, he saw it as a curiosity. After January 6, he became obsessed with it. He showed the map to visitors, brought it up in conversations and speeches. More than once, he found himself staring at it alone in his office at night. The Egyptian empire had reigned for some 900 years before it was overtaken by the Assyrians. Then the Persians, the Romans, the Mongolians, the Turks—each civilization had its turn, and eventually collapsed in on itself. Maybe the falls were inevitable. But what struck Romney most about the map was how thoroughly it was dominated by tyrants of some kind—pharaohs, emperors, kaisers, kings. "A man gets some people around him and begins to oppress and dominate others," he said the first time he showed me the map. "It's a testosterone-related phenomenon, perhaps. I don't know. But in the history of the world, that's what happens." America's experiment in self-rule "is fighting against human nature."

"This is a very fragile thing," he told me. "Authoritarianism is like a gargoyle lurking over the cathedral, ready to pounce."

For the first time in his life, he wasn't sure if the cathedral would hold.

OPTIMISM—QUAINT IN RETROSPECT, though perhaps delusional—is what first propelled Romney to the Senate. It was 2017. Trump was president, and the early months of his tenure had been a predictable disaster; the Republican Party was in trouble.

*I had never
encountered a
politician so
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pursuit of power
had cost.*



Romney's friends were encouraging him to get back in the game, and he was tempted by the open Senate seat in Utah, a state where Trump was uniquely unpopular among conservative voters. On his iPad, he typed out the pros and cons of running—high-minded sentiments about public service in one column, lifestyle considerations in the other. Then, at the top of the list, he wrote a line from Yeats that he couldn't get out of his mind: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

To Romney, this was the problem with the Trump-era GOP. He believed there were still decent, well-intentioned leaders in his party—they were just nervous. They needed a nudge. A role model, perhaps. As the former nominee, he told me, he felt that he "had the potential to be an alternative voice for Republicans."

Five years earlier, while running for president, Romney had accepted Trump's endorsement. At the time, he'd rationalized the decision—yes, Trump was a buffoon and a conspiracy theorist, but he was just a guy on reality TV, not a serious political figure. Romney now realized that he'd badly underestimated the potency of Trumpism. But in the summer of 2017, it still seemed possible that the president would be remembered as an outlier.

Two days before he was sworn in as a senator, Romney published an op-ed in *The Washington Post* designed to signal his independence from Trump. "On balance," Romney wrote, the president "has not risen to the mantle of the office." He pledged to work with him when they agreed on an issue, to oppose him when they didn't, and to speak out when necessary. He thought of this as a new way to be a Republican senator in Trump's Washington.

His colleagues were not impressed. A few days after Romney was sworn in, *Politico* ran a story about the "chilly reception" he was receiving from his fellow Republican senators. The story quoted several of them, on the record or anonymously, griping about his unwillingness to get along with the leader of their party.

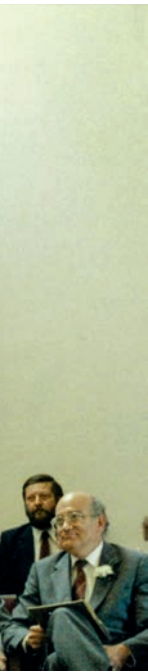
Romney emailed the story to his advisers, describing himself as "the turd in the punch bowl." "These guys have got to justify their silence, at least to themselves."

Romney had spent the weeks since his election typing out a list of all the things he wanted to accomplish in the Senate. By the time he took office, it contained 42 items and was still growing. The legislative to-do list ranged from complex systemic reforms—overhauling immigration, reducing the national deficit, addressing climate change—to narrower issues such as compensating college athletes and regulating the vaping industry. His staff was bemused when he showed it to them; even in less polarized, less chaotic times, the kind of ambitious agenda he had in mind would be unrealistic. But Romney was not deterred. He told his aides he wanted to set up meetings with all 99 of his colleagues in his first six months, and began studying a flip-book of senators' pictures so that he could recognize his potential legislative partners.

In one early meeting, a colleague who'd been elected a few years earlier leveled with him: "There are about 20 senators here who do all the work, and there are about 80 who go along for the ride." Romney saw himself as a workhorse, and was eager for others to see him that way too. "I wanted to make it clear: I want to do things," he told me.

He quickly became frustrated, though, by how much of the Senate was built around posturing and theatrics. Legislators gave speeches to empty chambers and spent hours debating bills they all knew would never pass. They summoned experts to appear at committee hearings only to make them sit in silence while they blathered some more.

As the weeks passed, Romney became fascinated by the strange social ecosystem that governed the Senate. He spent his mornings in the Senate gym studying his colleagues like he was an anthropologist, jotting down his observations in his journal. Richard Burr walked on the treadmill in his suit pants and loafers; Sherrod



Left: Mitt and Ann Romney at a dinner in Washington for Richard Nixon's inauguration, January 1973. Center: Romney speaking to a Mormon congregation in the Boston area, 1980s. Right: Romney and several of his sons.

Brown and Dick Durbin pedaled so slowly on their exercise bikes that Romney couldn't help but peek at their resistance settings: "Durbin was set to 1 and Brown to 8. :) :). My setting is 15—not that I'm bragging," he recorded.

He joked to friends that the Senate was best understood as a "club for old men." There were free meals, on-site barbers, and doctors within a hundred feet at all times. But there was an edge to the observation: The average age in the Senate was 63 years old. Several members, Romney included, were in their 70s or even 80s. And he sensed that many of his colleagues attached an enormous psychic currency to their position—that they would do almost anything to keep it. "Most of us have gone out and tried playing golf for a week, and it was like, 'Okay, I'm gonna kill myself,'" he told me. Job preservation, in this context, became almost existential. Retirement was death. The men and women of the Senate might not need their government salary to survive, but they needed the stimulation, the sense of relevance, the power. One of his new colleagues told him that the first consideration when voting on any bill should be "Will this help me win reelection?" (The second and third considerations, the colleague continued, should be what effect it would have on his constituents and on his state.)

Perhaps Romney's most surprising discovery upon entering the Senate was that his disgust with Trump was not unique among his Republican colleagues. "Almost without exception," he told me, "they shared my view of the president." In public, of course, they played their parts as Trump loyalists, often contorting themselves rhetorically to defend the president's most indefensible behavior. But in private, they ridiculed his ignorance, rolled their eyes at his antics, and made incisive observations about his warped, toddlerlike psyche. Romney recalled one senior Republican senator frankly admitting, "He has none of the qualities you would want in a president, and all of the qualities you wouldn't."

This dissonance soon wore on Romney's patience. Every time he publicly criticized Trump, it seemed, some Republican senator would smarmily sidle up to him in private and express solidarity. "I sure wish I could do what you do," they'd say, or "Gosh, I wish I had the constituency you have," and then they'd look at him expectantly, as if waiting for Romney to convey profound gratitude. This happened so often that he started keeping a tally; at one point, he told his staff that he'd had more than a dozen similar exchanges. He developed a go-to response for such occasions: "There are worse things than losing an election. Take it from somebody who knows."

One afternoon in March 2019, Trump paid a visit to the Senate Republicans' weekly caucus lunch. He was in a buoyant mood—two days earlier, the Justice Department had announced that the much-anticipated report from Special Counsel Robert Mueller failed to establish collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia during the 2016 election. As Romney later wrote in his journal, the president was met with a standing ovation fit for a conquering hero, and then launched into some rambling remarks. He talked about the so-called Russia hoax and relitigated the recent midterm elections and swung wildly from one tangent to another. He declared, somewhat implausibly, that the GOP would soon become "the party of health care." The senators were respectful and attentive.

As soon as Trump left, Romney recalled, the Republican caucus burst into laughter.

FEW OF HIS COLLEAGUES surprised him more than Mitch McConnell. Before arriving in Washington, Romney had known the Senate majority leader mainly by reputation. With his low, cold mumble and inscrutable perma-frown, McConnell was viewed as a win-at-all-costs tactician who ruled his caucus with an iron fist. Observing him in action, though, Romney realized

that McConnell rarely resorted to threats or coercion—he was primarily a deft manager of egos who excelled at telling each of his colleagues what they wanted to hear. This often left Romney guessing as to which version of McConnell was authentic—the one who did Trump’s bidding in public, or the one who excoriated him in their private conversations.

In the fall of 2019, Trump’s efforts to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into investigating the Biden family’s business dealings were revealed in the press. Romney called the scheme “wrong and appalling,” and Trump responded with a wrathful series of tweets that culminated with a call to #IMPEACHMITTROMNEY. A few weeks later, Romney read in the press that McConnell had privately urged Trump to stop attacking members of the Senate. Romney thanked McConnell for sticking up for him against Trump.

“It wasn’t for you so much as for him,” McConnell replied. “He’s an idiot. He doesn’t think when he says things. How stupid do you have to be to not realize that you shouldn’t attack your jurors?”

Romney had come to dread the GOP caucus meetings. They had a certain high-school-cafeteria quality that made him feel ill at ease.

“You’re lucky,” McConnell continued. “You can say the things that we all think. You’re in a position to say things about him that we all agree with but can’t say.” (A spokesperson said that McConnell does not recall this conversation and that he was “fully aligned” with Trump during the impeachment trial.)

As House Democrats pursued their impeachment case against the president, Romney carefully studied his constitutional role in the imminent Senate trial. He read and reread Alexander Hamilton’s treatise on impeachment, “Federalist No. 65.” He pored over the work of constitutional scholars and reviewed historical definitions of “high crimes and misdemeanors.” His understanding was that once the House impeached

a president, senators were called on to set aside their partisan passions and act as impartial jurors.

Meanwhile, among Romney’s Republican colleagues, rank cynicism reigned. They didn’t want to hear from witnesses; they didn’t want to learn new facts; they didn’t want to hold a trial at all. During an interview with CNN, Lindsey Graham frankly admitted that he was “not trying to pretend to be a fair juror here,” and predicted that the impeachment process would “die quickly” once it reached the Senate.

On December 11, 2019, McConnell summoned Romney to his office and pitched him on joining forces. He explained that several vulnerable members of their caucus were up for reelection, and that a prolonged, polarizing Senate trial would force them to take tough votes that risked alienating their constituents. McConnell wanted Romney to vote to end the trial as soon as the opening arguments were completed. McConnell didn’t bother defending Trump’s actions. Instead, he argued that protecting the GOP’s Senate majority was a matter of vital national importance.

He predicted that Trump would lose reelection, and painted an apocalyptic picture of what would happen if Democrats took control of Congress: They’d turn Puerto Rico and D.C. into states, engineering a permanent Senate majority; they’d ram through left-wing legislation such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. Romney said he couldn’t make any promises about his vote. (McConnell declined to comment on this conversation.)

A week later, Republican senators met for their regular caucus lunch. Romney had come to dread these meetings. They had a certain high-school-cafeteria quality that made him feel ill at ease. “I mean, it’s a funny thing,” he told me. “You don’t want to be the only one sitting at the table and no one wants to sit with you.” He had always had plenty of friends growing up, but his religion often made him feel like he didn’t quite fit in. At Cranbrook prep school, in Michigan, he was the only Mormon on campus; at Stanford, he would go to bars with his friends and drink soda. Walking into those caucus lunches each week—deciding whom to sit with, and whether to speak up—Romney felt his differentness just as acutely as he had in his teens.

The meeting was being held shortly before Christmas break, and Romney hoped the caucus would get some guidance on what to expect from the trial. Instead, he was dismayed to learn that the featured guest was Vice President Mike Pence, who was there to talk through the White House’s defense strategy. “Stunning to me that he would be there,” Romney grumbled in his journal. “There is not even an attempt to show impartiality.” (Romney had long been put off by Pence’s pious brand of Trump sycophancy. No one, he told me, has been “more loyal, more willing to smile when he saw absurdities, more willing to ascribe God’s will to things that were ungodly than Mike Pence.”)

At the next meeting, McConnell told his colleagues they should understand that the upcoming trial was not really a trial at all. “This



Romney leaves the Trump National Golf Club after meeting with the president-elect, November 19, 2016.

is a political process,” he said—and it was thus appropriate for them to behave like politicians. “If impeachment is a partisan political process, then it might as well be removed from the Constitution,” Romney recalled muttering to Ted Cruz and Mike Lee, who were seated near him. The senators politely ignored him.

Two articles of impeachment arrived at the Senate on January 15, 2020, and the trial began. Romney did his best to be a model juror—he took notes, parsed the arguments, and agonized each night in his journal over how he should vote. “Interestingly, sometimes I think I will be voting to convict, and sometimes I think I will vote to exonerate,” he wrote on January 23. “I jot down my reasons for each, but when I finish, I begin to consider the other side of the argument . . . I do the same thing—with less analysis of course—in bed. That’s probably why I’m not sleeping more than 4 or 5 hours.”

The other members of his caucus didn’t seem quite so burdened. They mumbled dismissive comments while the impeachment managers presented their case. He heard some of them literally cheer for Trump’s defense team. Maybe Romney was naive, but he couldn’t get over how irresponsible it all seemed. “How unlike a real jury is our caucus!” he wrote in his journal.

And yet, to at least some of his fellow Republicans, the case against Trump was compelling—even if they’d never say so in public. During a break in the proceedings, after the impeachment managers finished their presentation, Romney walked by McConnell. “They nailed him,” the Senate majority leader said.

Romney, taken aback by McConnell’s candor, responded carefully: “Well, the defense will say that Trump was just investigating corruption by the Bidsens.”

“If you believe that,” McConnell replied, “I’ve got a bridge I can sell you.” (McConnell said he does not recall this conversation and it does not match his thinking at the time.)

By the time the defense wrapped up its arguments, on January 28, Romney was privately leaning toward acquittal. In his journal, he rationalized the vote—Trump hadn’t explicitly told Zelensky he would withhold military aid *until* an investigation

was open—but he also admitted a self-interested motive. “I do not at all want to vote to convict,” he wrote. “The consequences of doing so are too painful to contemplate.”

When he informed his senior staff of his thinking the next morning, he detected a palpable sense of relief. Maybe their boss still had a future in Republican politics after all. Romney’s wife, though, seemed less elated by the news. Ann didn’t argue with him. She didn’t render any judgment at all. She just said she was “surprised.” Romney, who’d organized much of his life around winning and keeping Ann’s respect, couldn’t help but wonder if she meant something more.

On January 30, the senators were allowed to question lawyers on both sides of the impeachment case. Late in the day, a question submitted by Graham caught Romney’s attention: Even if Trump really had done exactly what the House accused him of, he asked, “isn’t it true that the allegations still would not rise to the level of an impeachable offense?” Trump’s lawyers concurred.

The answer stunned Romney. Until then, Trump’s defense had been that he wasn’t really trying to shake down a world leader for political favors by threatening to withhold military aid. Now, it seemed to Romney, Trump’s lawyers were effectively arguing that such a shakedown would have been fine. Allowing that argument to go unchallenged would set a dangerous precedent. When the Senate recessed, Romney returned to his office to go over the facts of the case again. The gravity of the moment was catching up to him. Finally, Romney knelt on the floor and prayed.

A few days earlier, Romney had paid a visit to Senator Joe Manchin’s houseboat, *Almost Heaven*—the West Virginian’s home in Washington. The impeachment trial had presented a serious political quandary for Manchin, a moderate Democrat whose state Trump had carried with 68 percent of the vote in 2016. While the voters there liked Manchin’s independence, they wouldn’t be happy if he voted to convict. After listening to Manchin describe his predicament, Romney offered his take: “We’re both 72. We should probably be thinking about oaths and legacy, not just reelection.”

Now it was time for Romney to follow his own advice. Writing in his journal, he once again laid out the facts of the case as he understood them. Hundreds of words, page after page, he wrote and wrote and wrote, until finally the truth was clear to him: Trump was guilty.

Romney slept fitfully that night, rising at 4 a.m. to review the case one more time. Still convinced of the president's guilt, he opened up a laptop at his kitchen table and wrote the first draft of the speech he'd eventually give on the Senate floor.

After that, he made his way to the Russell Building, where he broke the news to his senior staff. Some were surprised but approving; others were distressed. One staffer simply put her head in her hands. She didn't speak or look up again for the rest of the meeting.

Shortly before 2 p.m. on the day of the vote, Romney left his office and walked to the Capitol, where he waited in his hideaway for his turn to speak. Minutes before going on the floor, he received an unexpected call on his cellphone. It was Paul Ryan. Romney and his team had kept a tight lid on how he planned to vote, but somehow his former running mate had gotten word that he was about to detonate his political career. Romney had been less judgmental of Ryan's acquiescence to Trump than he'd been of most other Republicans'. He believed Ryan was a sincere guy who'd simply misjudged Trump.

And yet, here was Ryan on the phone, making the same arguments Romney had heard from some of his more calculating colleagues. Ryan told him that voting to convict Trump would make Romney an outcast in the party, that many of the people who'd tried to get him elected president would never speak to him again, and that he'd struggle to pass any meaningful legislation. Ryan said that he respected Romney, and wanted to make absolutely sure he'd thought through the repercussions of his vote. Romney assured him that he had, and said goodbye.

He walked onto the Senate floor and read the remarks he'd written at his kitchen table. "As a Senator-juror," Romney began, "I swore an oath before God to exercise impartial justice. I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am—" His voice broke, and he had to pause as emotion overwhelmed him. "I take an oath before God as enormously consequential."

Romney acknowledged that his vote wouldn't change the outcome of the trial—the Republican-led Senate would fall far short of the 67 votes needed to remove the president from office, and



*Romney's
Senate office*

he would be the lone Republican to find Trump guilty. Even so, he said, "with my vote, I will tell my children and their children that I did my duty to the best of my ability, believing that my country expected it of me."

He would never feel comfortable at a Republican caucus lunch again.

EARLY ON THE MORNING of January 6, 2021, Romney slid into the back of an SUV and began the short ride to his Senate office, with a Capitol Police car in tow. Ann had begged him not to return to Washington that day. She had a bad feeling about all of this. In the year since his impeachment vote, her husband had become a regular target of heckling and harassment from Trump supporters. They shouted "traitor" from car windows and confronted him in restaurants. Romney had tried to make light of her concern: "If I get shot, you can move on to a younger, more athletic husband." A special police escort had been arranged for

him that morning. But now, as he looked out the window at the streets of D.C., he found himself wondering about its utility. *If somebody wants to shoot me*, he thought, *what good is it to have these guys in a car behind me?*

He tried to go about his morning as usual, but he struggled to concentrate. Two miles away, at the White House Ellipse, thousands of angry people were gathering for a “Save America” rally.

The Senate chamber is a cloistered place, with no television monitors or electronic devices, and strict rules that keep outsiders off the floor. So when the Senate convened that afternoon to debate his colleagues’ objection to certifying the 2020 electoral votes, Romney didn’t know exactly what was happening outside. He didn’t know that the president had just directed his supporters to march down Pennsylvania Avenue—“We’re going to the Capitol!” He didn’t know that pipe bombs had been discovered outside both parties’ nearby headquarters. He didn’t know that Capitol Police were scrambling to evacuate the Library of Congress, or that rioters were crashing into police barricades outside the building, or that officers were beginning to realize they were outnumbered and wouldn’t be able to hold the line much longer.

At 2:08 p.m., Romney’s phone buzzed with a text message from his aide Chris Marroletti, who had been communicating with Capitol Police: “Protestors getting closer. High intensity out there.” He suggested that Romney might want to move to his hideaway.

Romney looked around the chamber. The hideaway was a few hundred yards and two flights of stairs away. He didn’t want to leave if he didn’t have to. He’d stay put, he decided, unless the protesters got inside the building.

A minute later, Romney’s phone buzzed again.

“They’re on the west front, overcame barriers.”

Adrenaline surging, Romney stood and made his way to the back of the chamber, where he pushed open the heavy bronze doors. He was expecting the usual crowd of reporters and staff aides, but nobody was there. A strange, unsettling quiet had engulfed the deserted corridor. He turned left and started down the hall toward his hideaway, when suddenly he saw a Capitol Police officer sprinting toward him at full speed.

“Go back in!” the officer boomed without breaking stride. “You’re safer inside the chamber.”

Romney turned around and started to run.

He got back in time to hear the gavel drop and see several men—Secret Service agents, presumably—rush into the chamber without explanation and pull the vice president out. Then, all at once, the room turned over to chaos: A man in a neon sash was bellowing from the middle of the Senate floor about a security breach. Officials were scampering around the room in a panic, slamming doors shut and barking at senators to move farther inside until they could be evacuated.

Something about the volatility of the moment caused Romney—a walking amalgam of prep-school manners and Mormon niceness and the practiced cool of the private-equity set—to lose his grip, and he finally vented the raw anger he had been trying to contain. He turned to Josh Hawley, who was huddled with some of his right-wing colleagues, and started to yell. Later, Romney would struggle to recall the exact wording of his rebuke. Sometimes he’d

remember shouting “You’re the reason this is happening!” Other times, it would be something more terse: “You did this.” At least one reporter in the chamber would recount seeing the senator throw up his hands in a fit of fury as he roared, “This is what you’ve gotten, guys!” Whatever the words, the sentiment was clear: This violence, this crisis, this assault on democracy—this is your fault.

Soon, Romney was being rushed down a hallway with several of his colleagues. The mob was only one level below, so they couldn’t take the stairs; instead, the senators piled into elevators, 10 at a time, while the rest loitered anxiously in the hallway.

When they reached the basement, Romney asked a pair of police officers, “Where are we supposed to go?”

“The senators know,” one of the officers replied.

Marroletti, Romney’s aide, spoke up: “These *are* the senators. They don’t know. Where are we supposed to go?”

Romney was mystified by the ineptitude, but he knew the situation wasn’t the police’s fault. He thought about the text message he’d sent to McConnell a few days earlier explicitly warning of this scenario. How were they not ready for this? It was, in some ways, a perfect metaphor for his party’s timorous, shortsighted approach to the Trump era. As a boy, he’d read *Idylls of the King* with his mother; now he could understand the famous quote from Tennyson’s Guinevere as she witnesses the consequences of corruption in Arthur’s court: “This madness has come on us for our sins.”

Eventually the senators made it to a safe room. There were no chairs at first, so the shell-shocked legislators simply wandered around, murmuring variations of “I can’t believe this is happening.” When someone wheeled in a TV and turned on CNN, the senators got their first live look at the sacking of the Capitol. A sickened silence fell over the room as anger and outrage were replaced by dread. To Romney, the Senate chamber was a sacred place. Watching it transform into a playground for violent, costumed insurrectionists was almost too much to bear.

The National Guard finally dispersed the crowd and secured the Capitol. As the Senate prepared to reconvene late that night, Romney took solace in assuming that his most extreme colleagues now realized what their ruse had wrought, and would abandon their plan to object to the electors. Romney had written a speech a few days earlier condemning their procedural farce, but now he was thinking of tossing it. Surely the point was moot.

But to Romney’s astonishment, the architects of the plan still intended to move forward. When Hawley stood to deliver his speech, Romney was positioned just behind the Missourian’s right shoulder, allowing a C-SPAN camera to capture his withering glare.

What bothered Romney most about Hawley and his cohort was the oily disingenuousness. “They know better!” he told me. “Josh Hawley is one of the smartest people in the Senate, if not the smartest, and Ted Cruz could give him a run for his money.” They were too smart, Romney believed, to actually think that Trump had won the 2020 election. Hawley and Cruz “were making a calculation,” Romney told me, “that put politics above the interests of liberal democracy and the Constitution.”

When it was Romney’s turn to speak, he wasted little time before laying into his colleagues. “What happened here today was an insurrection, incited by the president of the United States,”

Romney said. “Those who choose to continue to support his dangerous gambit by objecting to the results of a legitimate, democratic election will forever be seen as being complicit in an unprecedented attack against our democracy.” His voice sharpened when he addressed the patronizing claim that objecting to the certification was a matter of showing respect for voters who believed the election had been stolen. It struck Romney that, for all their alleged populism, Hawley and his allies seemed to take a very dim view of their Republican constituents.

“The best way we can show respect for the voters who are upset is by telling them the truth!” Romney said, his voice rising to a shout.

Before sitting down, he posed a question to his fellow senators—a question that, whether he realized it or not, he’d been wrestling with himself for nearly his entire political career. “Do we weigh our own political fortunes more heavily than we weigh the strength of our republic, the strength of our democracy, and the cause of freedom? What is the weight of personal acclaim compared to the weight of conscience?”

FOR A BLESSED MOMENT after January 6, it looked to Romney as if the fever in his party might finally be breaking. GOP leaders condemned the president and denounced the rioters. Trump, who was booted from Twitter and Facebook for fear that he might use the platforms to incite more violence, saw his approval rating plummet. New articles of impeachment were introduced, and McConnell’s office leaked to the press that he was considering a vote to convict. Federal law enforcement began sifting through hundreds of hours of amateur footage from January 6 to identify and arrest the people who had stormed the Capitol. Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States, and Trump—who skipped the inauguration—flew off to Florida, where he seemed destined for a descent into political irrelevance and legal trouble.

But the Republicans’ flirtation with repentance was short-lived. Within months, Fox News was offering a revisionist history of January 6 and recasting the rioters as martyrs and victims of a vengeful, overreaching Justice Department. The House Republican leader, Kevin McCarthy, who’d initially blamed Trump for the riot, paid a visit to Mar-a-Lago to mend his relationship with the ex-president.

Some of the reluctance to hold Trump accountable was a function of the same old perverse political incentives—elected Republicans feared a political backlash from their base. But after January 6, a new, more existential brand of cowardice had emerged. One Republican congressman confided to Romney that he wanted to vote for Trump’s second impeachment, but chose not to out of fear for his family’s safety. The congressman reasoned that Trump would be impeached by House Democrats with or without him—why put his wife and children at risk if it wouldn’t change the outcome? Later, during the Senate trial, Romney heard the same calculation while talking with a small group of Republican colleagues. When one senator, a member of leadership, said he was leaning toward voting to convict, the others urged him to reconsider. You can’t do that, Romney recalled someone saying. Think of your personal safety, said another. Think of your children. The senator eventually decided they were right.

As dismayed as Romney was by this line of thinking, he understood it. Most members of Congress don’t have security details. Their addresses are publicly available online. Romney himself had been shelling out \$5,000 a day since the riot to cover private security for his family—an expense he knew most of his colleagues couldn’t afford.

By the time Democrats proposed a bipartisan commission to investigate the events of January 6, the GOP’s 180 was complete. Virtually every Republican in Congress came out in full-throated opposition to the idea. Romney, who’d been consulting with historians about how best to preserve the memory of the insurrection—he’d proposed leaving some of the damage to the Capitol unrepaired—was disappointed by his party’s posture, but he was no longer surprised. He had taken to quoting a favorite scene from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* when he talked about his party’s whitewashing of the insurrection—twisting his face into an exaggerated expression before declaring, “Morons. I’ve got morons on my team!” To Romney, the revisionism of January 6 was almost worse than the attack itself.

In spring 2021, Romney was invited to speak at the Utah Republican Party convention, in West Valley City. Suspecting that some in the crowd might boo him, he came up with a little joke to defuse the tension. As soon as he went onstage, he’d ask the crowd of partisans, “What do you think of President Biden’s first 100 days?” When they booed in response, he’d say, “I hope you got that out of your system!”

But when Romney took the stage, he quickly realized that he’d underestimated the level of vitriol awaiting him. The heckling and booing were so loud and sustained that he could barely get a word out. As he labored to push through his prepared remarks, he became fixated on a red-faced woman in the front row who was furiously screaming at him while her child stood by her side. He paused his speech.

“Aren’t you embarrassed?” he couldn’t help but ask her from the stage.

Afterward, Romney tried to reframe it as a character-building experience—a moment in which he got to live up to his father’s example. When he was young, Mitt had watched an audience stacked with auto-union members vociferously boo his dad during a governor’s debate. George had been undeterred. “He was proud to stand for what he believed,” Romney told me. “If people aren’t angry at you, you really haven’t done anything in public life.”

But there was also something unsettling about the episode. As a former presidential candidate, he was well acquainted with heckling. Scruffy Occupy Wall Streeters had shouted down his stump speeches; gay-rights activists had “glitter bombed” him at rallies. But these were Utah Republicans—they were supposed to be his people. Model citizens, well-behaved Mormons, respectable patriots and pillars of the community, with kids and church callings and responsibilities at work. Many of them had probably been among his most enthusiastic supporters in 2012. Now they were acting like wild children. And if he was being honest with himself, there were moments up on that stage when he was afraid of them.

“There are deranged people among us,” he told me. And in Utah, “people carry guns.”

“It only takes one really disturbed person.”

He let the words hang in the air for a moment, declining to answer the question his confession begged: How long can a democracy last when its elected leaders live in fear of physical violence from their constituents?

IN SOME WAYS, Romney settled most fully into his role as a senator once Trump was gone. He joined a bipartisan “gang” of lawmakers who actually seemed to enjoy legislating, and helped pass a few bills he was proud of.

He even tried to work productively within his caucus. Romney drew a distinction between the Republican colleagues he viewed as sincerely crazy and those who were faking it for votes. He was open, for instance, to partnering with Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, the conspiracy-spouting, climate-change-denying, anti-vax Trump disciple, because while he could be exasperating—once, Romney told me, after listening to an extended lecture on Hunter Biden’s Ukrainian business dealings, he blurted, “Ron, is there any conspiracy you don’t believe?”—you could at least count on his good faith. What Romney couldn’t stomach any longer was associating himself with people who cynically stoked distrust in democracy for selfish political reasons. “I doubt I will work with Josh Hawley on anything,” he told me.

But as Romney surveyed the crop of Republicans running for Senate in 2022, it was clear that more Hawleys were on their way. Perhaps most disconcerting was J. D. Vance, the Republican candidate in Ohio. “I don’t know that I can disrespect someone more than J. D. Vance,” Romney told me. They’d first met years earlier, after he read Vance’s best-selling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*. Romney was so impressed with the book that he hosted the author at his annual Park City summit in 2018. Vance, who grew up in a poor, dysfunctional family in Appalachia and went on to graduate from Yale Law School, had seemed bright and thoughtful, with interesting ideas about how Republicans could court the white working class without indulging in toxic Trumpism. Then, in 2021, Vance decided he wanted to run for Senate, and reinvented his entire persona overnight. Suddenly, he was railing

against the “childless left” and denouncing Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a “fake holiday” and accusing Joe Biden of manufacturing the opioid crisis “to punish people who didn’t vote for him.” The speed of the MAGA makeover was jarring.

“I do wonder, how do you make that decision?” Romney mused to me as Vance was degrading himself on the campaign trail that summer. “How can you go over a line so stark as that—and for what?” Romney wished he could grab Vance by the shoulders and scream: *This is not worth it!* “It’s not like you’re going to be famous and powerful because you became a United States senator. It’s like, really? You sell yourself so cheap?” The prospect of having Vance in the caucus made Romney uncomfortable. “How do you sit next to him at lunch?”

By the spring of 2023, Romney had made it known to his inner circle that he very likely wouldn’t run again. He’d been leaning this way for at least a year but had kept it to himself. There were practical reasons for the coyness: He didn’t want to start hemorrhaging staffers or descend into lame-duck irrelevance. But some close to Romney wondered if he was simply being stubborn. Several Utah Republicans were already lining up to run for his seat, and the talk in political circles was that he’d struggle to win another primary. Romney, who couldn’t stand the idea of being put out to pasture, insisted that stepping down was his call. “I’ve invested a lot of money already in my political fortunes,” he told me, “and if I needed to do so again to win the primary, I would.”

But he was now at an age when he had to ruthlessly guard his time. He still had books he wanted to write, still dreamed of teaching. He wanted to spend time with Ann while they were both healthy.

Yet even as he made up his mind to leave the Senate, he struggled to walk away from politics entirely. Trump was running again, after all. The crisis wasn’t over. For months, people in his orbit—most vocally, his son Josh—had been urging him to embark on one last run for president, this time as an independent. The goal wouldn’t be to win—Romney knew that was impossible—but to mount a kind of protest against the terrible options offered by the two-party system. He also wanted to ensure that someone onstage was effectively holding Trump to account.



Romney glares at Missouri’s Josh Hawley as he addresses the Senate on January 6, 2021.



*Romney leaves
the Senate chamber
after a vote,
May 4, 2023.*

“I was afraid that Biden, in his advanced years, would be incapable of making the argument,” he told me.

Romney relished the idea of running a presidential campaign in which he simply said whatever he thought, without regard for the political consequences. “I must admit, I’d love being on the stage with Donald Trump ... and just saying, ‘That’s stupid. Why are you saying that?’” He nursed a fantasy in which he devoted an entire debate to asking Trump to explain why, in the early weeks of the pandemic, he’d suggested that Americans inject bleach as a treatment for COVID-19. To Romney, this comment represented the apotheosis of the former president’s idiocy, and it still bothered him that the country had simply laughed at it and moved on. “Every time Donald Trump makes a strong argument, I’d say, ‘Remind me again about the Clorox,’” Romney told me. “Every now and then, I would cough and go, ‘Clorox.’”

Romney almost went through with it, this maximally disruptive, personally cathartic primal scream of a presidential campaign. But he abandoned it once he realized that he’d most likely end up siphoning off votes from the Democratic nominee and ensuring a Trump victory. So, in April, Romney pivoted to a new idea: He privately approached Joe Manchin about building a new political party. They’d talked about the prospect before, but it was always hypothetical. Now Romney wanted to make it real. His goal for the yet-unnamed party (working slogan: “Stop the stupid”) would be to promote the kind of centrist policies he’d worked on with Manchin in the Senate. Manchin was himself thinking of running for president as an independent, and Romney tried to convince him this was the better play. Instead of putting forward its own doomed candidate in 2024, Romney argued, their party should gather a contingent of like-minded donors and pledge support to the candidate who came closest to aligning with

its agenda. “We’d say, ‘This party’s going to endorse whichever party’s nominee isn’t stupid,’” Romney told me.

He acknowledged that this plan wasn’t foolproof, that maybe he’d be talked out of it. The last time we spoke about it, he was still in the brainstorming stage. What he seemed to know for sure was that he no longer fit in his current party. Throughout our two years of interviews, I heard Romney muse repeatedly about leaving the GOP. He’d stayed long after he stopped feeling at home there—long after his five sons had left—because he felt a quixotic duty to save it. This meld of moral responsibility and personal hubris is, in some ways, Romney’s defining trait. When he’s feeling sentimental, he attributes the impulse to the “Romney obligation,” and talks about the deep commitment to public service he inherited from his father. When he’s in a more introspective mood, he talks about the surge of adrenaline he feels when he’s rushing toward a crisis.

But it was hard to dispute that the battle for the GOP’s soul had been lost. And Romney had his own soul to think about. He was all too familiar with the incentive structure in which the party’s leaders were operating. He knew what it would take to keep winning, the things he would have to rationalize.

“You say, ‘Okay, I better get closer to this line, or maybe step a little bit over it. If I don’t, it’s going to be much worse,’” he told me. You can always convince yourself that the other party, or the other candidate, is bad enough to justify your own decision to cross that line. “And the problem is that line just keeps on getting moved, and moved, and moved.” *A*

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of Romney: A Reckoning, from which this article was adapted.

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Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

What Is Comedy For?

The question has never been harder to answer.

By James Parker

What do you get if you give a whale a cellphone? Moby Dick pics.

I made that one up. Is it funny? I don't think so. Nonetheless, it's a joke. Or what Jesse David Fox, in his compendious, deeply considered, provoking, and rather dizzying new *Comedy Book*, calls a "joke-joke." A verbal-conceptual circuit, an abstract frivolity. "Joke-jokes," Fox writes, "are jokes you find in joke books. They're free-standing, authorless, utilitarian tools to produce laughter." Or if not laughter, then perhaps just a faint tickle in the forebrain, as of a very tiny problem, solved.

Fox, a comedy critic at *New York* magazine, is explaining joke-jokes to distinguish them from what comedians mean when they say "jokes"—comedy jokes—which are bits, stories, ideas, images, moods, themes, words, basically anything that produces the comedy feeling, that does the thing that comedy is supposed to do.

Which is what, exactly? What's comedy for? Ah, well, now we're in it. Comedy is for jabbing us in our pleasure centers. For being nice by being nasty. For puncturing grandiosity. For relieving tension, creating tension, living in tension. It's for making us laugh, but then again—is it?

We are in a moment, comedy-wise. On the one hand, there's never been more of it—more specials, podcasts, comedy-generated discussions and debate and cultural flare-ups. There's a rhythm and an expertise about comedy criticism

DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS / GETTY; SCOTT CAMPBELL / GETTY; MIKE COPPOLA / GETTY

right now (Fox's very much included) that reminds me of good jazz writing from the '50s and '60s: savvy, insidious, immersed, excited, with its own developing vocabulary.

On the other hand, comedy, like everything else, is in bits. Online, it has shattered into memes and trolls and culture warlords and goats singing Bon Jovi. Laughter itself has fragmented. Just listen to it: You've got your gurgling, impotent *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* laughter over here; you've got your harsh and barking energized Trumpist laughter over there; you've got your free-floating Joe Rogan-podcast yuks; and then you've got the private snuffling and seizure-like sounds that you yourself make when you're watching Jay Jurden Instagram clips alone, on your phone, with your earbuds in. And for most of us, behind all of this, the feeling that we're whistling past the graveyard: that the sludge is rising, politically; that the bullyboys are cracking their knuckles; that we're "just kind of half-waiting," as Marc Maron put it in a recent HBO special, "for the stupids to choose a uniform."

How did we get here? How did we arrive at a place where Jordan Peterson, who wouldn't know a good joke if it ran him over, is instructing us on the importance of comedy as a defense against totalitarianism, while Dave Chappelle—one of the funniest men alive—burns up his comic capital defending his right to be mean about trans people?

Not laughing. That's big right now too. Laughter withheld by the audience, out of disapproval, but also laughter withheld by the comedian: laughter checked, thwarted, confused, made to think about itself. Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, which debuted on Netflix in 2018, was the supreme exhibition of stopped laughter. Fox calls it "the most revolutionary piece of stand-up of my lifetime." Having carefully, and with many chuckles along the way, explained and deconstructed the primal mechanism of stand-up comedy for their audience—the building of tension, the controlled release—Gadsby then refused to do the second part. They built the tension, horrendously, via a story about a homophobic assault they'd suffered, and then left it there, held it there, undischarged. "This tension," they said. "It's yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like."

More recently, Jerrod Carmichael used his intimate, small-venue special, *Rothaniel*, to publicly come out as gay, fragilizing and tenderizing the whole exchange between a comedian and his audience. *Rothaniel*, by leaving the performer so exposed, made the audience wonder about the eagerness and vulgarity of its laughter.

Fox has thought long and hard about all of this—about TikTok, memes, sadness, Adam Sandler movies, Maria Bamford, bombing onstage, and the ultimate joke, which is death. He shares his own grief at the

Comedy, like everything else, is in bits. Laughter itself has fragmented.

COMEDY BOOK:
HOW COMEDY
CONQUERED
CULTURE—AND
THE MAGIC THAT
MAKES IT WORK

Jesse David
Fox

FARRAR, STRAUS
AND GIROUX

loss of his brother, and wonders whether comedy, in the end, might simply be for helping us get through this difficult and sorrow-filled life.

DONALD TRUMP, the stand-up at the gates of hell, is obviously a massive problem for comedy. Clinically humorless, destitute of jokes, too strange to be hacky, and with the comic precision of a broken bicycle chain, he still—as the comedians say—destroys. He *kills*, night after night. He gives people, by God, that comedy feeling, or his version of it: gaseous, loopy, sneering, idolatrous, incipiently violent. Fascist levity. He's almost a prop comic, but his prop is human weakness. Is he, in his dark-side-of-the-moon way, teaching us something about comedy? What if the breakthrough comedy event of the past five years was not *Nanette* or *Rothaniel* but the Trump rally where he said, "I can be more presidential than any candidate that ever ran, than any president, other than maybe Abraham Lincoln when he is wearing his hat?"

"The sense of what is funny," Fox writes in a chapter titled "Funny," "is so subjective—so completely built into your persona—that it feels objective." What's funny to you? What's funny to me? I worship Sarah Silverman. I can't understand Bo Burnham. Meanwhile, YouTube keeps suggesting that I watch interview clips of Theo Von. I still enjoy the comedy of Louis C.K., but I want a bit more from him. For two minutes he was the world's pariah; he's been busted and disgraced at a level granted to few mortals, a near-cosmic level, and he should tell us about it. Not just in a couple of jokes, which he's already done; not just with a lit-up SORRY sign behind him—but in a full set, a full blinded-by-the-darkness artistic reckoning with who he was and who he is now. Is that too much to ask?

Well, yes it is. There's no *should* in comedy. Louis C.K. will do what he wants. A bonus side effect of reading *Comedy Book*, of reading about all these comedians and their processes, was that I was cured, finally, of my sentimental attachment to the idea of the stand-up as truth-telling philosophe. Comedians love comedy. They love it more than anything else: more than truth, or people, or the vision of a more just society. That's what makes them comedians. It's a gift, a faulty chip, or a quirk of evolution. As Steve Harvey put it, talking to Jerry Seinfeld: "Tragedy strikes. I got news for you. We have the jokes *that night*." Comedy goes where the pain is—yours, mine, the comedian's, the world's—straight to it, because that's where the laughs are; because the laughs are pain, transmuted. Simple as that. Comedy has no responsibility. It never will. And we need it like air. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

BOOKS

Madonna Forever

Why the artist keeps scandalizing each generation anew

By Sophie Gilbert

We like our female icons, as they age, to go quietly—to tiptoe backwards into semi-reclusion, away from our relentless curiosity and our unforgiving gaze. Tina Turner managed this arguably better than anyone else, holed up for the last decade of her life in a gated Swiss château with an adoring husband and a consulting role on the hit musical about her life, watching a younger performer step nimbly into her gold tassels. Joni Mitchell retreated to her Los Angeles and British Columbia properties for so long that when she reappeared for a full set at the Newport Folk Festival last year, it was as though God herself was suddenly present, ensconced in a gilded armchair, her voice still so sonorous that practically every single person onstage with her wept.

If you age in private, the deal goes, you can reemerge triumphantly as royalty in your silver era. But Madonna never signed up for dignified placating. At 47, as sinewy as an impala in a hot-pink leotard and fishnets, she moved with such controlled, physical sensuality in the video for “Hung Up” that the 20-something dancers around her seemed bland by comparison. At 53, she headlined a Super Bowl halftime show—part gladiatorial circus, part intergalactic ancient-Egyptian cheerleading meet—while 114 million people watched. At 65, Madonna regularly uploads videos of herself to TikTok, her face plumped into uncanny, doll-like smoothness, strutting to snippets of obscure dialogue or electronica in psychedelic outfits categorized by one commenter as “colorful granny.”

What’s most striking to me about the videos is how Madonna retains the power to scandalize each generation anew—even teenagers nourished on a cultural diet of *Euphoria* and hard-core pornography—with her adamantly sexual self-presentation. “Lost her mind,” one TikTok commenter wrote as Madonna, wearing a black lace fetish mask, simply stared confrontationally at the camera. About a clip of her waving her arms in a

diamanté cowboy hat, her chest festooned with chains, a cheerful-looking boy posted, “Someone come get Nana she’s wandering again.”

This is, mark you, almost 40 years after Madonna rolled around on the floor at the MTV Video Music Awards in a corseted wedding dress, her white underwear and garters fully visible to the cameras, in an early TV appearance that an outraged Annie Lennox called “very, *very* whorish ... It was like she was fucking the music industry.” At the time, Madonna’s manager, Freddy DeMann, told her she’d ruined her career. One of the few who approved was Cyndi Lauper, perpetually compared to Madonna in those days. Lauper seemed to recognize what her contemporary was trying to do, and what she’s been doing ever since, often operating just beyond the frequency of comprehension. “I loved that,” Lauper said. “It was performance art.”

People have argued about Madonna from the very beginning. That people are still arguing about her—over whether she’s too old, too brazen, too narcissistic, too sexual, too deluded, too Botoxed, too shameless—underscores the scope and endurance of Madonna’s oeuvre. She makes music, but she’s not a musician. She’s not an actor either, or a director, or a children’s-book author, even though she’s embodied each of these roles (with varying degrees of success). She is, rather, an artist. More than that, she’s a living, breathing, constantly metamorphosing work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—her life, her physical self, her sexuality, her presence in the media interweaving and coalescing into the totality of the spectacle that is Madonna. “My sister is her own masterpiece,” Christopher Ciccone told *Vanity Fair* in 1991, the year *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, a movie capturing her Blond Ambition tour, became the then-highest-grossing documentary in history.

In her reverent, 800-page *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, the writer Mary Gabriel offers the argument that Madonna’s entire biography is an exercise in



reinventing female power. She crystallizes this mission of masterful defiance in a chapter about Madonna's *Sex*, a 1992 coffee-table collection of photographic erotica that sold more than 1.5 million copies and almost torched her career. A decade into her stardom, Madonna had already

inhabited all the stereotypes that patriarchal society concocted for women—dutiful daughter, gamine, blond bombshell, adoring wife, bitch—in her pursuit of a new woman, a person who exercised her power freely, joyously, even wantonly, if that's what she wanted. Her quest was what the French philosopher Hélène Cixous described as the search for a “feminine imaginary . . . an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine.”

Before long, Madonna had broken multiple records for a female solo artist, having sold more than 150 million albums around the world. She had also “transformed the traditional pop-rock concert format into a full-scale theatrical experience,” Gabriel writes, “raised music video from a sales tool to an art form, and put a woman—herself—in control of her own music, from creation to development to distribution.”

All of this is true, and yet the volume of evidence that Gabriel amasses reveals something even greater: not just a cultural phenomenon, or even a post-modern artist transforming herself into the ultimate commodity, but a woman who intuits and manifests social change so far ahead of everyone else that she makes people profoundly uncomfortable. We may not understand her in the moment, but rarely is she wrong about what's coming.

TO TRY TO WRITE about Madonna is to stare into an abyss of content: the music, the videos, the movies, the books, the fashion, but also the responses that those things generated, a corpus almost as significant to the construction of Madonna as the work itself. More than 60 books have been devoted to her, encompassing biography, critical analysis, comic books, sleazy profiteering, and even a collection of women's dreams about her. “With the possible exception of Elvis, Madonna is without peer in having inscribed herself with such intensity on the public consciousness in multiple and contradictory ways,” Cathy Schwichtenberg wrote in *The Madonna Connection*, a 1993 book of essays summarizing the growing academic field known as Madonna Studies.

Gabriel's biography is astonishingly granular in its attention to biographical detail, and also to historical context. You could, if you wanted, read the book as a kind of late-20th-century history of women's ongoing fight for liberation, filtered through the lens of

someone whom Joni Mitchell variously derided as “manufactured,” “a living Barbie doll,” and “death to all things real” and Norman Mailer described as “our greatest living female artist.” More often, *A Rebel Life* reads like a Walter Isaacson biography of a Great Man, a thorough life-and-times synthesis of a world-changing, civilization-defining genius—only with a lot of cone bras and syncopated beats.

Gabriel's attention to context is key, because trying to understand Madonna as a flesh-and-blood person—the biographer's traditional endeavor—is a trap. Self-exposure, for her, is about obfuscation more than revelation. Every new identity she disseminates into the world is just a different layer; the more you see of her, the more the “truth” of her is obscured. *Truth or Dare* famously includes a contretemps between Madonna and her boyfriend at the time, the actor Warren Beatty, while Madonna is having her throat examined by a doctor mid-tour. “Do you want to talk at all off camera?” the doctor asks. “She doesn't want to live off camera, much less talk,” Beatty interjects. “Why would you say something if it's off camera? What point is there of existing?”

Beatty was then the embodiment of Old Hollywood, square-jawed and restrained, while the considerably younger Madonna supposedly represented the MTV generation, coarse and venal, willing to trade even her most intimate moments for hard profit. (*Truth or Dare* premiered a full year before *The Real World* ushered in a new realm of “reality” entertainment.) What Beatty, along with many others, missed was that exposure wasn't about selling out in any conventional sense. For Madonna, the construction of her public-facing persona was about spinning masquerade, fantasy, and fragments of self-disclosure into mass-media magic that confounded, again and again, efforts to categorize her.

She teased ideas about gender fluidity and bisexuality; she declared herself to be a “gay man”; she played up her friendship with the comedian Sandra Bernhard as rumors flew that the two were sleeping together. The main constant through her kaleidoscopic permutations was the response they elicited: As the cultural theorist John Fiske once put it, her sexuality was perceived as a new caliber of threat—“not the traditional and easily contained one of woman as whore, but the more radical one of woman as independent of masculinity.” (No wonder Beatty, the most masculine of screen stars, chafed at it.)

AND YET, believe it or not, Madonna is human, and she was born—to a woman also named Madonna and a man named Silvio “Tony” Ciccone—in Bay City, Michigan, in 1958. When she was 5 years old, her mother died, a fact that seems as fundamental to

We may not understand Madonna in the moment, but rarely is she wrong about what's coming.

the arc of her career as music or sex or religion. Tony, Gabriel writes, struggling alone with a houseful of unruly children, simply raised Madonna in the same way that he raised her two older brothers. (At the time of her mother's death, Madonna had three younger siblings; two more followed when Tony married the family's housekeeper.) She played as they played; she fought and bit and belched and yelled just as they did. When we think about Madonna later, effortlessly disrupting conventions of feminine sexual presentation and power dynamics, this upbringing makes perfect sense. (In one of my favorite photos from *Sex*, Madonna stands by a window, facing outward, wearing just a white tank top, motorcycle boots, and no underwear, her buttocks exposed as she appears to scratch an imaginary pair of balls.)

Gabriel, from the start, is alert to signs of Madonna's self-transfiguring urges: how, in elementary school, she put wires in her braids to make them stick up like those of her young Black friends; how, in eighth grade, she scandalized her junior-high-school audience with a risqué, psychedelic dance sequence set to the Who's "Baba O'Riley"; how, at 15, she first presented herself to her dance teacher and mentor, Christopher Flynn, as a childlike figure carrying a doll under her arm, as if to signal that she was a blank slate for him to work on.

But the years that seem most crucial are the ones she spent in New York City trying to make it as a modern dancer after dropping out of the University of Michigan. In 1978, when she arrived, the city was experiencing ungovernable urban blight and a simultaneous creative renaissance. Modes of artistic expression were becoming ever more fluid; the Warholian creation of a persona, and the postmodern appropriation of original ideas and images into new art forms, expanded performance possibilities. After quickly realizing her limitations as a dancer, Madonna did a stint as a drummer in a New Wave band called the Breakfast Club. She did nude modeling to pay for a series of truly scuzzy apartments. When her father begged her to come home, she'd say, "You don't get it, Dad. I don't want to be a doctor. I don't want to be a lawyer. I want to be an artist."

Her desire to make art was tied up with her ferocious ambition, her early comprehension that celebrity could be its own kind of art form. A friend of Madonna's recalls to Gabriel that when she first met her, in a club in New York in the early '80s, Madonna said, "I'm going to be the most famous woman in the world." By 1982, she had redirected her focus toward music and become embedded in what Gabriel describes as "a radical art kingdom" that melded high and low culture, where punk kids and street artists were suddenly the new creative aristocracy. The previous year, MTV had

transformed music into a visual medium. Madonna started writing songs, and seems right from the start to have had a sweeping conception of what pop music could provide: not the kind of plastic, bubblegum stardom that jeering critics believed she was after, but a global canvas on which she aimed to project her vision.

Kim Gordon, of the band Sonic Youth, once wrote that "people pay to see others believe in themselves." Madonna's earliest fans were girls, gay men, queer teenagers of color who found community in the same spaces where her own sense of self was honed. In the video for her first single, "Everybody," in 1982, Madonna dances onstage at a nightclub in a strikingly unsexy, punk-esque outfit: brown leather vest, plaid shirt, tapered khaki pants, theatrical makeup. The camera keeps its distance; you can hardly see her face. But by the video for her second, "Burning Up," a year later, she's unmistakably Madonna, with teased blond hair, armfuls of rubber bracelets, the mole above her lip and the slight gap between her teeth underscoring her confrontational, intent gaze. This was the moment when the product of Madonna seems to have coalesced. She wasn't just making music (one critic famously described her vocals on her early albums as "Minnie Mouse on helium"). Provocation was part of her act—her second record, 1984's *Like a Virgin*, was clear on that front—but not the point of it.

Rather, what her fans immediately recognized in Madonna was the animating spirit of her work: complete certainty in her worth, and a pathological unwillingness to give credence to anyone other than herself. Everything else about Madonna may change, but this fundamental self-conviction is always there. And for anyone who's been raised to be or to feel like a modified, shamed, incomplete version of themselves, it's intoxicating. At 7, in 1990, I wore out my cassette tape of *I'm Breathless*—the concept album Madonna recorded to accompany her role in *Dick Tracy*—thrilled by the unthinkable bravado, the cockiness of "Sooner or Later." At 40, I keep coming back to her "Hung Up" video, stunned at the visual evidence that a middle-aged mother of young children could be so strong, so strange and charismatic and compelling.

THIS KIND OF POWER is unnerving to observe in women; instinctively, we're either drawn to it or driven to destroy it. *A Rebel Life* sometimes feels excessively boosterish, noting and then brushing over criticism of Madonna's more questionable acts over the years—her decision to forcibly kiss Drake at Coachella in 2015, to his apparent distress, among them. But Gabriel's useful goal is perhaps to get beyond a debate that's been stoked by an extraordinary amount of vilification. Madonna, the most successful female artist of all time, is also indubitably the most loathed. And

MADONNA: A
REBEL LIFE

Mary Gabriel

LITTLE, BROWN

her haters often respond to the same quality in her self-presentation that her most ardent fans do: her confidently incisive mockery of the way culture prefers women to be portrayed. People reacted to *Sex*—a work that constantly identifies and then undercuts how people want to see her—with the pearl-clutching faux horror that tends to accompany Madonna’s provocations, as though she had done something utterly novel and irredeemably graceless.

In fact, the book was right in step with contemporaneous art-world forays into hard-core erotica. *Sex* scandalized a mainstream audience that had presumably never seen Cindy Sherman’s *Sex Pictures* (the artist was one of Madonna’s inspirations) or Jeff Koons’s *Made in Heaven* series, in which the artist created explicit renderings of himself having sexual intercourse with the porn performer Ilona Staller, who was briefly his wife. Madonna has said she intended her book to be funny (in more than one photo, she outright laughs). But *Sex* also asserts her engagement with a lineage of artists who helped shape her, and highlights her determination to unsettle the conventional gaze.

Madonna’s videos and live shows, Gabriel argues, tend to be where you get the most complete sense of her vision, “a new kind of feminism, a *lived* liberation” that pointed the way for a woman to be captivating “not because she was so ‘pretty’ but because she was so free.” In her 1986 video for “Open Your Heart,” which features a giant Art Deco nude by the Polish painter Tamara de Lempicka, Madonna struts in a black corset in front of an audience that watches her—sneeringly, or with feigned lack of interest—but doesn’t see anything more than surface-level sexuality. At the video’s end, Madonna (dressed now in a suit and a bowler cap, with cropped hair) dances away with a preteen boy who’s been waiting for her outside. The spectators in the club want to possess and objectify Madonna; the boy wants to be her, recognizing her as an artistic kindred spirit, not just a sex object. (The video has long been interpreted by Madonna’s queer and trans fans as a gesture of affirmation.)

Three years later, in “Express Yourself,” directed by David Fincher, Madonna stages a riff on the 1927 Fritz Lang movie *Metropolis*, in which she rides a stone swan through a dystopian cityscape. She’s a kind of Ayn Randian femme fatale in a green silk gown, holding a cat; later, dressed in an oversize suit, she flexes her muscles and grabs her crotch; in another scene, she lies naked, in chains, on a bed. (“I have chained myself,” she later clarified in an interview with *Nightline*. “There wasn’t a man that put that chain on me.”) Madonna moves fluidly from subject to object, man to woman, captor to captive, skewering misogynistic Hollywood tropes. Her potent allure, whatever her guise, is unexpectedly disconcerting.

Her haters often respond to the same quality that her most ardent fans do: her confidently incisive mockery of the way culture prefers women to be portrayed.

The video also has almost nothing whatsoever to do with the song, which is a totally generic, upbeat pop confection encouraging women to pick men who validate their mind and their self-worth. The discrepancy is, I think, purposeful: It begs us to notice the different registers her work is operating in, and to observe how “pop star,” for her, is just another chameleonic guise. I love Madonna’s music, which functions at a level that enables her to be stupendously successful, ridiculously wealthy, a public figure of a sort no one has ever seen before. But those accomplishments are so much less interesting than everything else her music allows her to do through the performance she choreographs around it: blast through boundaries of sexuality and presentation; explore the permeability of gender; expose the hypocrisy of a music-video landscape in which, as she said in that same *Nightline* interview, violence against women is readily portrayed but sex gets you banned from MTV.

Thirty years later, in a culture where bombastic, sexless superhero movies now dominate mass entertainment and where erotica—as opposed to porn—has been all but banished to the nonvisual realm of fiction, her explorations of sexuality feel as radical as ever. And we continue to resist them, to reflexively recoil. When I told people I was writing about Madonna, they invariably responded with some dismayed version of “Her face!!!” It’s easy to assume that she’s just another woman navigating the horror of aging in plain sight via an overreliance on cosmetic enhancements, just another former bombshell who won’t concede that her time as the ultimate sex object has ended.

But Madonna has never seemed to think of herself as a sex object. An objectifier who greedily prioritizes her own pleasure, yes; an alpha, absolutely; but never a sop to someone else’s fantasy. And the AI-esque strangeness of her appearance now suggests something else, too. I keep thinking about bell hooks’s argument, in a 1992 essay, that Madonna “deconstructs the myth of ‘natural’ white girl beauty” by exposing how artificial it is, how unnatural. She bends every effort, hooks notes, to embody an aesthetic that she herself is simultaneously satirizing. One might deduce that Madonna senses better than anyone where female beauty standards are heading, in an era of Facetune, Ozempic, livestreamed TikTok surgeries, and Instagram face. And that she knows what she’s doing: Her current mode of self-presentation is Madonna supplying yet another dose of what the media want from women—sexiness, youth, erasure of maturity—distorted just enough to make us flinch. *A*

Sophie Gilbert is a staff writer at The Atlantic. She was a finalist for the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism.

On a Clear Day

By Victoria Chang

Agnes said her grids came	from the <i>innocence of</i>	<i>trees</i> . I've always	thought trees were guilty.
They never have an alibi,	can never say they were	somewhere else or that	they didn't witness the
murders. Is this why I desire	to cut out Agnes's grids	and dismantle them? Each	morning, I enter the yard
and wait for the trees to	speak back to me. This is my	50th year doing so. I	finally realize that the trees
won't tell me. That	there is no first draft of	a life. It is only and always	a final draft, the rectangles
drawn as we go. Each one	the same as the others,	though some years may have	tried to be like a circle. This is
by design, so that when one	looks back at a life, all we	remember are the equal and	divided sadnesses.

Victoria Chang is the Bourne Chair in Poetry at Georgia Tech. Her forthcoming book of poems is With My Back to the World. The gridlike form of this poem is inspired by the paintings of Agnes Martin.



The Smartest Man Who Ever Lived

A novelist transforms the physicist John von Neumann into a scientific demon.

By Adam Kirsch

If the most dangerous invention to emerge from World War II was the atomic bomb, the computer now seems to be running a close second, thanks to recent developments in artificial intelligence. Neither the bomb nor the computer can be credited to, or blamed on, any single scientist. But if you trace the stories of these two inventions back far enough, they turn out to intersect in the figure of John von Neumann, the Hungarian-born polymath sometimes described as the smartest man who ever lived. Though he is less famous today than some of his contemporaries—Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Feynman—many of them regarded him as the most impressive of all. Hans Bethe, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1967, remarked: “I have sometimes wondered whether a brain like von Neumann’s does not indicate a species superior to that of man.”

Born in Budapest in 1903, von Neumann came to the U.S. in 1930, and in 1933 he joined the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey. Like many émigré physicists, he consulted on the Manhattan Project, helping develop the implosion method used to detonate the first atomic bombs. Just weeks before Hiroshima, he also published a paper laying out a model for a programmable digital computer. When Los Alamos National Laboratory got its first computer, in 1952, it was built on the design principles known as “von Neumann architecture.” The machine was jokingly christened MANIAC, and the full name followed, devised to fit the acronym: Mathematical Analyzer, Numerical Integrator, and Computer.

And that’s not all. Von Neumann also established the mathematical framework for quantum mechanics, described the mechanism of genetic self-replication

before the discovery of DNA, and founded the field of game theory, which became central to both economics and Cold War geostrategy. By the time he died of cancer, in 1957, possibly due to radiation exposure at Los Alamos, he was one of the American government’s most valued advisers on nuclear weapons and strategy. His hospital bed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center was guarded by a security detail, to make sure he didn’t reveal any secrets in his delirium.

In his new novel, *The MANIAC*, the Chilean writer Benjamín Labatut suggests that the name of the computer von Neumann helped invent fits the physicist himself all too well. If our world often seems mad—if we are unable to distinguish the real from the virtual, avid for technological power we can’t use wisely, always coming up with new ways to destroy ourselves—then perhaps the great minds that invented our world could not have been entirely sane. But did the man who helped create nuclear weapons and artificial intelligence know that he was putting the human future in jeopardy? Or was the thrill of scientific discovery so intense that he didn’t care?

The MANIAC sets out to penetrate this mystery with imaginary testimonies by real people—siblings and teachers, colleagues and lovers—who knew von Neumann at different stages of his life. Labatut mingles biographical facts with fictional episodes and details to take us through each stage, from the child prodigy in Budapest to the dying man in Washington, D.C., raging as his mind erodes. Along the way, the scientific and mathematical background of von Neumann’s work is sketched in for a lay audience.

From the very beginning, Labatut makes it clear that von Neumann is no ordinary human being. His mother jots down notes on his development, as in a baby book: “Did not cry after doctor’s slap / Unnerving / Looked more like middle-aged man not newborn.” His math professor tells the class about an “exceedingly difficult” theorem that no one has been able to prove, only to see the boy raise his hand, go to the chalkboard, and write down a complete proof: “Years, all my years of work, passed by in a second ... After that, I was afraid of von Neumann.”

Even as the novel trains its focus on von Neumann, however, its structure keeps him at a distance; he is not a person we come to know so much as a problem we need to solve. The problem, all of the narrators agree, is that his genius was exhilarating and frightening in equal measure. “What he could do. It was so rare and beautiful that to watch him was to weep,” his math tutor says. “Yes, I saw that, but I also saw something else. A sinister, machinelike intelligence that lacked the restraints that bind the rest of us.”

Labatut is intent on casting von Neumann as a Faustian figure, a man who transgressed the limits of

knowledge to become something more and less than human. This idea may be Labatut's greatest departure from biographical fact. In reality, the "maniac" seems to have impressed people with his cheerfulness and zest for life. In Ananyo Bhattacharya's 2022 biography, *The Man From the Future*, von Neumann is described by his friend and fellow physicist Eugene Wigner as "a cheerful man, an optimist who loved money and believed firmly in human progress." By contrast, the Wigner who narrates several sections of *The MANIAC* speaks of von Neumann as a "luciferin" figure who "ranged beyond what was reasonable, until he finally lost himself."

LABATUT'S DARK VISION of modern science, and the way he skillfully distorts von Neumann's biography to communicate that darkness, will be familiar to readers of *When We Cease to Understand the World*, his first work to be translated into English, in 2020. Blending biographical facts with outrageous fables, that novel offered miniature portraits of five 20th-century geniuses, including Fritz Haber, a chemist who invented both new fertilizers and chemical weapons, and Werner Heisenberg, the pioneer of quantum mechanics. The narrative technique owes a good deal to W. G. Sebald, who loved to ruminate on strange and troubling episodes from history, blurring the boundary between fact and fiction.

Labatut, however, is far freer in his distortions, which become more flamboyant and surreal with each section of the book. He depicts some of the most important figures in 20th-century science as haunted men, driven to madness by their pursuit of total knowledge. By the time we read that the French physicist Louis de Broglie, traumatized by the suicide of his best friend, commissioned an insane artist to create a replica of Notre-Dame Cathedral made of human feces, we are clearly in the realm of fable.

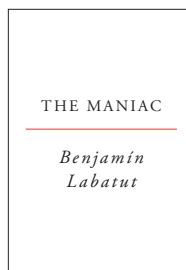
Yet the truly shocking thing is how many of the horrors described in *When We Cease to Understand the World* are entirely factual. The first gas attack in history, during the Battle of Ypres in 1915, actually did make "hundreds of men [fall] to the ground convulsing, choking on their own phlegm, yellow mucus bubbling in their mouths, their skin turning blue from lack of oxygen." And Haber's wife, Clara, really did shoot herself in the heart, bleeding to death in the arms of her young son, possibly out of guilt over her husband's role in creating gas warfare. When Labatut tells the story of 20th-century science as a dark parable, he is extrapolating from history but not entirely falsifying it.

The MANIAC opens with a short, third-person narrative that has no explicit connection with the life of John von Neumann, but would have fit perfectly in

the earlier book. It is the true story of Paul Ehrenfest, an Austrian physicist who was a friend of Einstein's, and whose life ended in an act of horror: In 1933, he killed his 15-year-old son, Wassik, who lived in an institution for children with Down syndrome, and then himself. Though Ehrenfest lived in the Netherlands, Labatut suggests that he may have been motivated by fear of the Nazis, who had come to power in Germany earlier that year and passed a new law mandating the forced sterilization of people with disabilities. In Labatut's telling, Ehrenfest's act was a premonition not just of Nazi crimes, but of the terrifying development of modern science. He could think of no better way to keep his son "safe from the strange new rationality that was beginning to take shape all around them, a profoundly inhuman form of intelligence that was completely indifferent to mankind's deepest needs." For Ehrenfest, the most disturbing thing about this monstrous spirit is that it springs from within science itself, "hovering over his colleagues' heads at meetings and conferences, peering over their shoulders ... a truly malignant influence, both logic-driven and utterly irrational, and though still fledgling and dormant it was undeniably gathering strength, wanting desperately to break into the world."

Ehrenfest's response is an act of madness, but Labatut suggests that von Neumann's failure to be disturbed by the rise of the "inhuman" betrays an even deeper madness. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, von Neumann helped the malignant spirit of modern science "break into the world" without thinking about the price the world would pay. "The problem with those games, the many terrible games that spring forth from humanity's unbridled imagination," his wife, Klara, muses, "is that when they are played in the real world ... we come face-to-face with dangers that we may not have the knowledge or the wisdom to overcome."

The MANIAC drives this point home in a variety of ways, starting with an early-childhood memory shared by von Neumann's brother Nicholas. One night, their banker father brought home a Jacquard loom, which could be "programmed" to weave different patterns using sets of punch cards—a kind of primitive ancestor of the computer. The young János—his original Hungarian name, later Americanized to John—grows obsessed with the device, refusing to eat or sleep while he tinkers with it, trying to learn how it works. Soon the boy panics, fearing that he won't be able to put the loom back together and it will be taken away: "He said that he simply could not part with the machine." The details of János's experience are imaginary, but the episode allows Labatut to offer a tidy preview of von Neumann's fatal flaw, as well as a little lesson in computer history.



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This is a much tamer kind of fictionalizing than in *When We Cease to Understand the World*, and in general *The MANIAC* feels like a more accessible and conventional treatment of its predecessor's basic idea—the moral corruption at the core of modern science. This is partly because Labatut has set himself a more difficult narrative challenge by focusing on a single life at greater length. He has to convey biographical details about von Neumann to readers who have never heard of him, introduce complex concepts from a range of scientific fields, and simultaneously weave all this information into a moody allegory about knowledge and transgression.

This means the literary spell is often broken by sentences that sound like they could have come from a textbook (“In 1901, Bertrand Russell, one of Europe’s foremost logicians, discovered a fatal paradox in set theory”), and others that could be intoned in a movie preview (“He was the smartest human being of the 20th century . . . His name was Neumann János Lajos. A.k.a. Johnny von Neumann”). The fact that *The MANIAC* is Labatut’s first book written in English, rather than Spanish, may also play a role in this tonal unevenness.

THE MANIAC describes von Neumann’s work on the atomic bomb, but it strongly suggests that his most troublingly inhuman achievement was laying the groundwork for artificial intelligence. Late in the novel, we learn about von Neumann’s work on cellular automata, which combined two of his major interests: computing and game theory. In his book *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata*, he imagined a grid of cells in which each cell changed its state—say, from “on” to “off,” or from one color to another—according to inputs received from its neighbors. Essentially, this was a way of modeling how systems could evolve from simplicity to complexity based on what we now call an algorithm, the iterative application of a set of rules. The concept has been highly influential in the study of both biological life and artificial intelligence.

In addition to explaining the basics of cellular automata, Labatut turns the idea into a symbol of von Neumann’s failure to respect the difference between the gamelike abstractions of mathematics and the messy seriousness of human life. So it is poetic justice when Klara, infuriated by her husband’s “pigheadedness,” takes a printout of his work—“gorgeous filigrees of dots and lines that intermingled, fused, and then tore apart like the teeth of a broken zipper”—and sets it on fire in a trash can. It is another episode invented to point a moral: When science is inhumane, humanity has the right to take its revenge.

Yet in the long term, Labatut suggests, it may be humanity that has to submit. After bringing von Neumann’s story to a close, *The MANIAC* pivots to

a lengthy postlude about Go, the ancient Chinese board game in which players take turns placing black and white stones on a board, capturing an opponent’s territory by surrounding it. In 2016, Lee Se-dol of South Korea, one of the world’s top-ranked Go players, was challenged to a match against AlphaGo, an AI developed by Google’s DeepMind. Garry Kasparov had lost a chess match to IBM’s Deep Blue 20 years earlier, but Go players were confident that their game was so much more complex that no machine could master it. Like so many skeptics before and since, they were proved wrong; AlphaGo won the match, taking four games to Lee’s one.

After telling von Neumann’s life story in about 200 pages, *The MANIAC* devotes its last 80 pages to this match. The effect is anticlimactic, but clearly Labatut sees the episode as the culmination of the book’s tragic arc. Ehrenfest dreaded the emergence of an inhuman intelligence, von Neumann made that emergence possible, and now Lee sees it taking place in front of him.

“When future historians look back at our time and try to pin down the first glimmer of a true artificial intelligence,” Labatut writes, “they may well find it in a single move during the second game between Lee Sedol and AlphaGo.” That move was so radically unexpected that it seemed to throw thousands of years of Go tradition out the window; no human watching the game could understand the justification for it, yet it led to the computer’s victory. By the end of the fifth game, Lee no longer hoped to win, only to postpone defeat. Labatut imagines one Go official’s view on the matter, saying, “There’s no point in playing out the endgame if you know you’re going to lose, right?” Today, when AI is on the cusp of making everyone from coders to truck drivers obsolete, that question feels more uncomfortably relevant than ever.

The MANIAC doesn’t quite say that this is all John von Neumann’s fault, and of course it isn’t. The really frightening thing is that even such a great mind can do relatively little to hasten or slow the progress of science. If von Neumann had never lived, someone else would likely have made his discoveries at about the same time, the way Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton both invented calculus and Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace both came up with the theory of evolution. “It is not the particularly perverse destructiveness of one specific invention that creates danger,” an observer in the novel says of von Neumann. “The danger is intrinsic. For progress there is no cure.” *A*

Adam Kirsch is an editor of The Wall Street Journal’s weekend Review section and the author of The Revolt Against Humanity: Imagining a Future Without Us.



BOOKS

The *Iliad* We've Lost

Emily Wilson's new translation is inviting to modern readers, but doesn't capture the barbaric world of the original.

By Graeme Wood

Early in Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, perhaps the greatest novel about an American bureaucracy, the narrator describes a most unbureaucratic figure, a Maine fisherman named Snowman Dyer who died in 1870 in his sister's home. Dyer once "bartered five lobsters for a small Greek tome that belonged to a classics scholar at Harvard." The English translation, which was printed between the lines of Greek, so intrigued Dyer that he decided to read the original. Having no teacher other than the dead page before him, he assigned the letters sounds at random. "As he grew older, he grew bolder, and used to recite aloud from this unique tongue while wandering over the rocks," Mailer writes. "They say that to spend a night in the dead sister's house will bring Snowman Dyer's version of Greek to your ear, and the sounds are no more barbaric than the claps and groans of our weather."

As knowledge of Greek has become more exotic—the mark of pedants, nerds, and graduates of expensive schools—capturing the barbarism of ancient Greek, and of the ancient Greeks themselves, has become harder. The ghost of Snowman Dyer would be a helpful tutor. Classical Greece is often thought to be a pillar that holds up modern civilization, and that impression is not wrong. Take away the tradition that begins with Greece, and everything political from Cicero to Machiavelli to Thomas Jefferson to Barack Obama tumbles down, and along with it a literary inheritance extending through Virgil to Wole Soyinka.

Learned men and women carried Greek civilization into the present. Where did the barbarism go? In *The Iliad*, Homer refers to the Carians, allies of the Trojans, as *barbarophonoi*—"barbarophones," or speakers of gobbledygook. (The Greek adjective *barbaros*, whence came the English *barbaric*, is imitative of foreign speech, like our meaningless *blah-blah-blah*.) Homer contrasts the barbarians with the civilized Greeks. But any modern account of the ancient Greeks—particularly the marathon of homicide in the Trojan War—has to capture both the heights of poetry and civilization, and the total, savage negation of what we recognize today as civilized. They are in the same people; they are in the same poem.

That poem has been slowly replaced in the popular imagination by a child's storybook version of the Trojan War that bears only vague resemblance to *The Iliad*. This version involves a kidnapped queen, battles, a wooden horse, and the fall of a great city. Elementary schools teach about Greece and the Trojan War, but if they taught the rape- and gorefest that is the actual *Iliad*, I daresay parents would complain. *The Iliad* starts in the middle of the war, when the Greek King Agamemnon confiscates Briseis, the favorite sex slave of Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior. Achilles pouts over his loss for most of the poem and refuses to fight.

Then, when the Trojans kill Achilles's friend Patroclus, he stirs to action and slices through the Trojan ranks for more than 1,000 sanguinary verses, culminating in the slaying of the Trojan warrior Hector and desecration of his corpse. Troy still stands when the poem concludes. *The Iliad*'s plot is built on honor and dishonor, the hacking of flesh, and the grief of men and gods. We should not be surprised that this unrelenting premodern carnage is not the story most people know. There is no clever trickery with a wooden horse, no tossing of a golden apple inscribed "To the fairest!" to get the goddesses squabbling. The average reader can take these Disney-ready touches but can stand only so many minutes at a time in the true Homeric abattoir of antiquity.

EMILY WILSON'S TRANSLATION of *The Iliad* is an *Iliad* for the masses, written in English verse legible to people who do not normally read verse. Some readers expecting Disney will find themselves ankle-deep in viscera. Her *Iliad* follows her translation of *The Odyssey* six years ago, which was overpraised for having been written by a woman—women have been translating Homer for centuries—and praised just the right amount for having revived Homer and made that poem readable to a new generation. Many of the most commonly read English translations had begun to sound fusty, she said, and it was time for an update. Other recent translations, of course—by Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Fagles—were heralded in their time as having chased away the previous generation's archaisms. The bell of fustiness: It tolls for thee.

When the classicist David Grene praised early excerpts of Lattimore's *Iliad*, before its final publication in 1951, he called the translation "studiously simple," with words that are "not literary." What was simple then has ceased to be simple, and Fitzgerald garnished his translation, published in 1974, with literary language that Lattimore had avoided. The demands of reading poetic language, even at the high level of skill displayed by Fitzgerald, are excessive for many readers today. (In the opening lines, Lattimore

*The Iliad's
plot is built
on honor and
dishonor, the
hacking of
flesh, and the
grief of men
and gods.*

writes that Achilles dispatched many a warrior to the "house of Hades," which is the Greek word as well as the English. Fitzgerald writes "the undergloom.")

Fagles's translation, published in 1990, moved from "Hades" to "House of Death," which I believe is an underground Norwegian heavy-metal club. Hades is Death as well as death's domain, and the choice is defensible. It is also a sign of Fagles's drift away from the demands of knowing context: A reader will stumble if she doesn't know which god Hades is, but "House of Death" is legible to all English speakers. In the same spirit, Fagles drifted consistently toward phrases that were modern rather than archaic. His Homer is comprehensible because his language is tediously familiar, and indeed so saturated with modern cliché that the effect must be intentional.

Take the translation of the notoriously slippery word *polytropōn*, used in the first line of *The Odyssey* to describe Odysseus. It is among Homer's most famous epithets, and therefore a helpful benchmark. It connotes cleverness, versatility, and movement. *Many-turning* would be the straightforward translation, although it is plainly unsatisfactory as a matter of English style. Lattimore went with: "the man of many ways." Better, if a little cryptic. Fitzgerald allows himself more syllables: "skilled in all ways of contending." Fagles, faced with this untranslatable word, resorts to cliché: "the man of twists and turns." As a translation of a single word, this choice, too, is defensible, but as poetry it is a leadoff grounder to first.

Confronting the same problem, Wilson calls Odysseus a "complicated" man. I doubt the irony is lost on her: The word *complicated* is a simple solution to a complicated, even insoluble, problem of translation. The word isn't perfect (Odysseus's epithet should not sound like his relationship status on Facebook), but its clarity and concision make her predecessors seem dithering and stuck. Little is known about Homer—whether he was one man or many, whether he was blind, whether he had a scribe—but we can be sure he didn't pause with his audience to mull word choice. Wilson doesn't either. Her choices do not call attention to themselves. They let the poem proceed.

In 1860, Matthew Arnold argued that Homer's translator should be like Homer: "rapid in movement, simple in style, plain in language, natural in thought." Wilson is here to answer that call. Many previous translations, she writes in her translator's note, ended in "a reading experience that mirrors how first-year language students labor valiantly through each word," unlike the "quick energy" of the original.

Here is the Trojan warrior Hector, after his wife, Andromache, has complained that by heading into battle, he could get himself killed; their son, Astyanax, orphaned; and Andromache raped and enslaved:

“Strange woman! Come on now,
 you must not be too sad on my account.
 No man can send me to the house of Hades
 before my time. No man can get away
 from destiny, first set for us at birth,
 however cowardly or brave he is.
 Go home and do the things you have to do.
 Work on your loom and spindle and instruct
 the slaves to do their household tasks as well.
 War is a task for men—for every man
 born here in Troy, but most especially, me.”

So Andromache is the “strange” one, for objecting to these fates! (Hector says the rape and enslavement are not really his concern, because he’ll be gloriously dead by then.) Fitzgerald renders the first line as “Unquiet soul, do not be too distressed”; Lattimore, as “Poor Andromache! Why does your heart sorrow so much for me?” Fitzgerald’s Hector—like all characters in his translation—is a poet *manqué*. Lattimore’s Hector pities his soon-to-be-widow, also poetically. (Even in 1951, people didn’t “sorrow” for one another, except in poetry.) Wilson’s Hector, I would say, is an affectless psychopath, shifting topics abruptly from grief to neglected housework. Her translation meets only the minimal definition of metrical verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter, the business casual of English prosody), and in the bareness of her rendering, we get a refreshingly direct impression of this warrior’s unsentimentality.

THE CRITIC Guy Davenport, in a pan of Lattimore, wrote that translation is a game of two languages, and that “the translator is in constant danger of inventing a third that lies between.” By this standard—and avoiding invention is more demanding than it sounds—Wilson is a prodigy. Her characters speak not like orotund Shakespeare imitators but like people talking in their native languages and registers. Wilson’s language does not challenge anyone’s idea of what English can be. When she is given a chance to coin a new and unusual phrase and free into English a word hitherto trapped in the amber of Greek, she unfailingly chooses the ordinary and imperfect English word. *Strange*, for example. *Daimonie*, the Greek word applied to Andromache by Hector (and also, a few lines earlier, by Andromache to Hector), implies both endearment and nuttiness. *Strange* lacks the vigor and color of “unquiet soul,” but it is something spouses might actually call each other, and anyway, the poem must go on.

I can think of few poems that are less patient, more eager to proceed toward the inevitable, than *The Iliad*. Much of it is about appointments with fate. Impeding progress toward that end would seem wrong, although

Homer himself does so, with stunning dramatic effect. Much of the poem is spent waiting for the sulking Achilles to be roused to action. When the wrath of Achilles appears, like the monster in a horror film, its anticipation has ratcheted up the effect.

Before Achilles starts his rampage, his beloved fellow warrior Patroclus borrows his weapons and armor for an opening spree of death, a preview of the blood to flow. Wilson’s translation is at its minimal best:

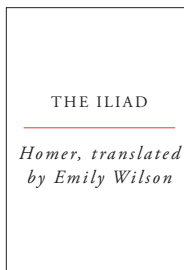
Patroclus came in close, speared [Thestor’s] right jaw
 and drove the wooden spear shaft through his teeth,
 to hook and drag him over the chariot rail,
 as when a man sits on a jutting rock,
 and hooks a holy fish with shining bronze
 and fishing line, and drags it from the sea—
 just so he dragged him from the chariot,
 mouth gaping round the shining spear, and hurled him
 face downward on the ground and as he fell,
 life left him.

Ezra Pound claimed that Homer wrote with such anatomical precision that one might wonder whether he was an army doctor. A few lines later, Patroclus sends a spear through the torso of the Lycian warrior Sarpedon, a son of Zeus. “It struck Sarpedon’s lungs and throbbing heart”:

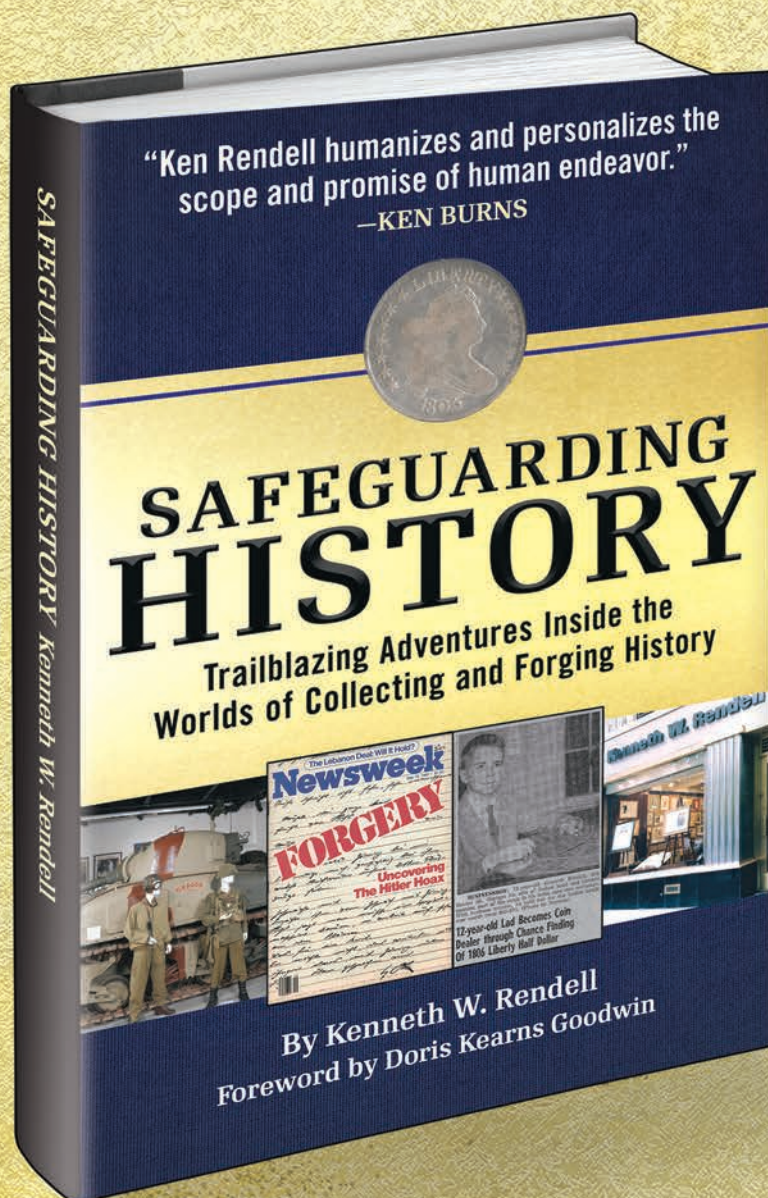
Death veiled his eyes
 and blocked his nose. Patroclus set his foot
 onto the dead man’s chest and tugged his spear
 out of the flesh, and with it came the lungs.
 He pulled out both the weapon and the life.

In every line of Homer, a feast of choices is laid before the translator. But every dish chosen means a dozen others left uneaten. Ask a hoplite pikeman, if you have one handy: When you impale a man, and your spear doesn’t come out clean, is it your victim’s “diaphragm” (as Fitzgerald has it), heart sac (as some have suggested), or lung that’s likely to be clinging to your weapon? The Greek word for this mass of epigastric sinew is *phrenes*—the source of the English *phrenology* and *frenzy*—a word connected in ancient Greece to the idea of respiration and of the soul. It is the spirit within us that is alive as long as we breathe. In goes the spear, and out comes a chunk of lung or Lycian hanger steak, soul and flesh on the same skewer. (Fagles opts for *midriff*, which once meant “diaphragm” in English but today makes it sound like Sarpedon was speared somewhere between his low-rise jean shorts and his crop top.)

Wilson opts for *lungs*, which is simple and speeds the action right along. It is folly to try to pack all knowledge of Greek medicine and etymology into one line.



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But we lose something in the simplicity. Compare the choice of Homer's first English translator, George Chapman. In 1611, he rendered the same word as *the film and strings of his yet panting heart*, a lovely and horrid phrase worth every one of the nine extra syllables it cost.

Wilson offers an *Iliad* that a modern reader can consume without excessive mental interruption—perhaps like an Ionian peasant would have, as part of the poem's original listening rather than reading audience. Her method yields what to my ear are some infelicities—she expresses concern about how best to translate *o popoi*, a Greek interjection a bit like *holy crap* or *sweet Jesus*. After the *Iliad*'s climactic duel between Hector and Achilles, the Greeks touch Hector's once-fearsome corpse, find it softly human, and say, "*o popoi*." "Look at this!" writes Wilson—a little too *Well I'll be* for my taste. (Lattimore has "See now.") Her modern language sometimes feels distractingly modern. She has Menelaus chide Antilochus, who has been driving his chariot maniacally fast, by yelling "You are the worst! Reckless endangerment!"—a phrase bizarrely transported to antiquity from American criminal law. But in general this *Iliad* is judicious and, yes, easy, at the expense of being poetic in the grand manner.

THE MODERN READER can have all of this. But he cannot have everything. The ease brings us back to the question of barbarity. The skewered lungs and fishhooked faces will strongly suggest to the reader that these ancient Greeks did not exactly share our modern values. To the warriors of antiquity, life has no point but to seize others' booty and women, then die heroically and be sent on a glorious pyre to the undergloom. Anyone who hesitates in embracing this order of things is reproached. When Zeus himself wonders whether he should intervene to save Sarpedon, Hera tells him to quit being such a softy and cheer on noble Sarpedon's death. The poem does not entertain the modern view that old age, surrounded by loved ones and beeping hospital equipment, is the death devoutly to be wished. Even in the grand duel between Achilles and Hector, the winner is the warrior less modern in his habits and predilections. Achilles has no life outside a military encampment. Hector has a wife and son and lives in a city. He dies, and his face is ground into the mud.

For these homicidal aliens to speak in a crystal-line modern idiom feels truer than for them to speak in a high literary style. But to sound modern at all feels, in its way, inescapably false. The older the work of literature, the tighter the translator's bind: The authors' and characters' eras are gone, and the more they sound like modern men and women, the less they sound like the wild selves preserved in the Greek. Rendering them into approachable modern language,

as Wilson has, brings them closer to us. But this exercise must always fail. Making them into speakers of contemporary English is like lifting up to sea level the bizarre creatures scuttling in the deepest ocean. They cannot survive the journey. You can see their ruptured remains. You cannot see *them*.

I am aware of no literary solution to this problem, although some approaches make it worse. One way to handle it, I suppose, would be to defy Guy Davenport and invent what he warns against, a third language between the Greek and the English—"a treacherous nonexistent language suggested by the original and not recognized by the language into which the original is being transposed." Call this the Snowman Dyer solution. Lean hard into the inhumanity, the weirdness, the foreignness. Make them speak some language never heard by man or lobster. Taking the opposite approach, Wilson no doubt pleases Norton, her publisher, which hopes that many students will buy this book as a novice-friendly *Iliad*. (They should.)

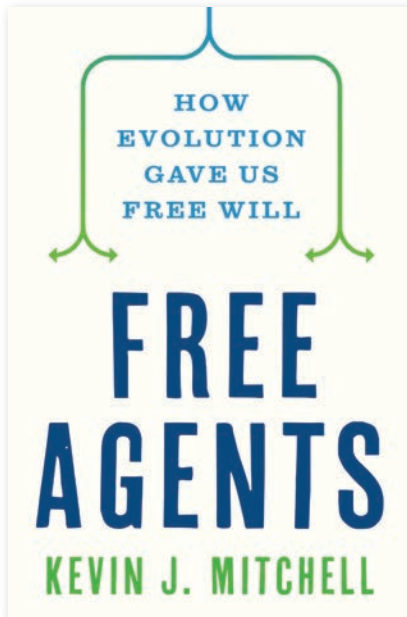
Maybe the needed perspective is less literary than anthropological. In the early 2000s, I hiked around Afghanistan and tribal areas of Pakistan. Violence was ubiquitous, and Pashtuns spoke of friends and relatives who'd had their brains dashed out with rocks, or died valiantly in battle. They spoke about concepts that exist only vestigially in the cultures in which I was raised but that are the warp and weft of Homer's world: feuds, vendettas, the offering and acceptance of hospitality as a solemn bond. I told them I would prefer not to have my head crushed, and they understood. They were not stupid or savage. But they lived in more Homeric social worlds than my own. They said that because I was their guest, they would protect me even if it meant fighting, possibly to the death, their friends and neighbors. This bond is integral to Pashtun culture and is called *melmastia*. It is a theme in Homer, who called it *xenia*. I had memorized Greek verb forms and read *The Iliad* during my own expensive education, but the poem never felt more present than when I was listening to my Pashtun host vow to repay blood with blood.

Short of getting some very nasty paper cuts, however, one can't reasonably expect a mere book to deliver such vivid evocations of a blood culture. The next best thing is to make the text flow, to make the story proceed, and to conserve as much as possible of the direct, savage beauty of Homer. That will help a new generation understand why for thousands of years, readers have discovered that time spent reading Homer is never wasted or regretted. The original text will still retain its awful secrets. *A*

Graeme Wood is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

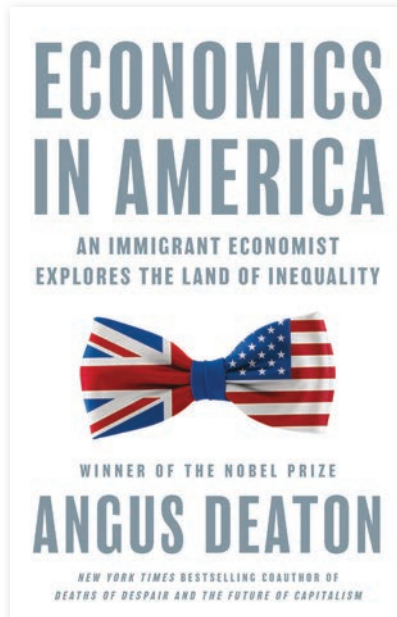
*In every line
of Homer, a
feast of choices
is laid before
the translator.
But every dish
chosen means
a dozen
others left
uneaten.*

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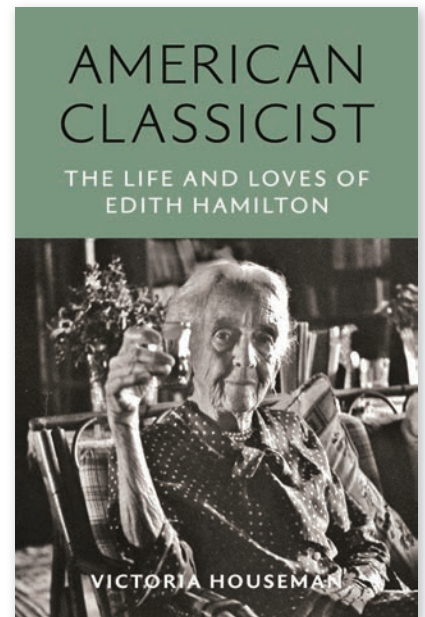
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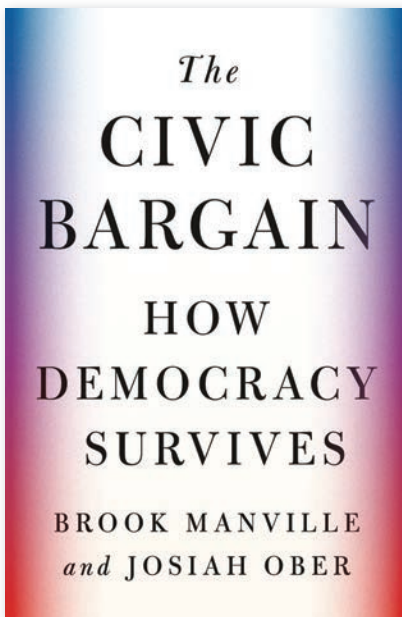
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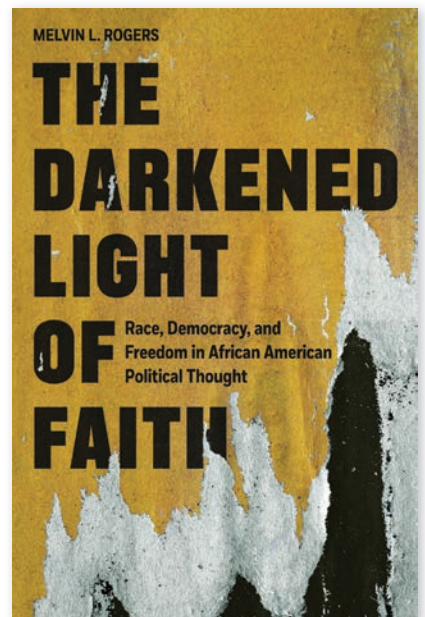
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FICTION



She Who
Remembers

By
Jesmyn
Ward

The Georgia men wake everyone in the drenched dark. The pain of the march simmers through me, and I wipe at my mud-soaked clothing, swipe at the threads of soil in my wounds—all of it futile. We are tired. Even though the Georgia men threaten and harass and whip, we chained and roped women plod. “Aza,” I say, sounding the name of the spirit who wore lightning: “Aza.” Every step jolts up my leg,



my spine, my head. Every step, another beat of her name: Aza.

We walk down into New Orleans, and each step is a little falling. We leave the lake and the stilted houses behind; the trees reach, swaying and nodding on all sides, and us in the middle of a green hand. When the hand opens, there is a river, a river so wide the people on the other side are small as rabbits, half-frozen in their feed in the midmorning light. Aza disappears. The boat that carries us over this river is big enough that all the women fit. There is no reprieve from our rope here. This river is wordless, old groans coming from its depths. After we cross, there are more houses, one story, narrow and long, and then two stories, clustered close together, sometimes side to side, barely space for a person to stand between them. The grandest are laced with wrought iron and broad balconies: great stone palaces rising up and blotting out the sky. Long, dark canals cut the city at every turn. The air smells of burning coffee and shit.

People crowd the streets. White men wearing floppy hats coax horses down rutted roads turned to shell-lined avenues. White women with their heads covered usher children below awnings and through tall, ornate doorways. And everywhere, us stolen. Some in rope and chains. Some walking in clusters together, sacks on their backs or on their heads. Some stand in lines at the edge of the road, all dressed in the same rough clothing: long, dark dresses and white aprons, and dark suits and hats for the men, but I know they are bound by the white men, accented with gold and guns, who watch them. I know they are bound by the way they stand all in a row, not talking to one another, fresh cuts marking their hands and necks. I know they are bound by the way they wear their sorrow, by the way they look over an invisible horizon into their ruin.

But some brown people look like they ain't stolen. Some of the women cover their hair in patterned, shimmering head wraps, and they walk through the world as if every step they take is their own. They are fair as I am, some of them even fairer, as milk-hued and blue-veined as

the white women in their bonnets and hats. I slide close to Phyllis, lean away from the caravan of wagons rumbling past. A handful of women snake by; their head wraps are bright and glittering as jewels, and they look everywhere but at our bound line: stooped, bleeding, and raw from the long walk.

"They're free," I tell her.

"Who?" Phyllis asks.

"Them." I point with my chin.

Phyllis sneezes and wipes her nose on her arm.

*I know they are
bound by the
way they wear
their sorrow,
by the way they
look over an
invisible horizon
into their ruin.*

Three boys, heads shaved, follow behind an olive-skinned woman in a cream head wrap. The boys stare at us, their eyes wide and wondering, and the woman, who must be their mother, grabs the closest by his shoulder and herds the boys in front of her.

"Non," the woman says. She hurries them to a trot that matches the horses pulling the wagons. "Allons-y." One of the boys trips, but she bears him up with her hand on the back of his collar.

Phyllis watches them until they disappear around a tree-lined bend. I try not to, but I still search for more head wraps, more quick walkers with averted eyes who wear deep, brilliant colors. More who are free.

"Move," the Georgia Man says, shouting us deeper into this warren of a city until he stops outside a wooden fence high as two women standing on each other's shoulders. Haphazard roofs, tiled and patched, show over the top. There is a gate at the center of the fence, and as it swings wide, the sound of someone wailing in the enclosure swoops outward.

"In," says the Georgia Man.

We walk in a knot through the door. I look back at the two-story houses and stone businesses. A white man with a bushy mustache stands on the porch of a home, his hands shoved in his pockets, watching us being herded. His face as blank as the windows.

"In, girl," the Georgia Man says. The man across the street rubs one hand down his black-vested chest and tips his hat. The gate closes, ill-fitting wood scraping, and we are inside.

WE ENTER into a courtyard clustered with buildings: Two are tall and white-washed brick. The rest are short and windowless, their bricks dark as the river. The ground beneath us is beaten to dirt and sand, nearly as even as a wooden floor. But there are footprints in it, so many footprints: the dimples of five toes, the smooth ball of heels, sometimes ringed by the mark of a horse's hooves. The Georgia Man enters one of the tall buildings, and his men dismount their horses and lead them to a stable. Laughter echoes from inside the buildings. Dogs yip and bark at the noise.

"Come," says one of his men, short and burnt red at the forehead. His hair snakes below his collar. We women follow to one of the long, low, dark-brick buildings, while a white man leads the chained men to another building—this shack's twin. We women stoop to enter, and when I stand, my hair brushes the ceiling. The taller women stoop and shuffle into the close darkness. There are no windows, and the only light comes from cracks between the bricks. The man takes

his time untying us; the first woman he unbinds limps to the farthest corner of the room and sits. One woman drops to her knees right as the rope is taken off. Another hunched woman holds her hands in front of her like she has an offering, listing side to side. Phyllis slides down the closest wall. When my length of rope falls, I step backwards, slowly, as I did with my bees on days when it took time for the smoking moss to calm them. For a moment, the longing for my hive feels so strong, it makes me stumble to remember: the clearing, the old char of the tree, the honey, amber and heavy.

"Annis," Phyllis says.

The Georgia Man closes the door. I sink to the floor next to Phyllis, lean my head back against the brick, close my eyes, and try to recall how beekeeping taught me to hold myself still, my mirth muted. How once, in my breathing, there was joy.

WE SLEEP HUNGRY, wrapped in rags. Phyllis's rasping breath has turned to a hard, hacking cough. Some of the women snore, but most of them are still and silent as fallen trees. Snakes of smoke coil on the ceiling, and I wonder if this is where my mama came, if she slept on this floor too. If she laid in the close, hot darkness and thought of me. I scratch my scalp and imagine the press of my fingers as my mama's the last time she washed my hair, oiled it, and braided it. I scoot so that my back grazes Phyllis's, and for one minute, I let myself pretend she's my mama, warm and whole.

A tendril of smoke winds through the crack of the bricks, gathers to sooty coils under the seam of the roof. Aza takes shape in a darker black.

"You came back," I say.

"Others called."

"Did you follow my mama here? To a pen?" I whisper.

Lightning rings Aza's neck before sizzling to darkness. She does not descend to the floor.

"Yes."

"What happened to her?" I ask.

The lightning arcs across her head in an electric halo. She frowns before speaking.

"The same that will happen to you," Aza says. Her face changes. A softening around her eyes could be sympathy, but

then it is gone, fast as the zip of a flitting hummingbird over her cheek. "You will sorrow. One will come and take you away."

"You know?" I ask. "You know where my mama went?" Hope foams up my throat, and I do my best to swallow it all, the feeling, the hope, down.

"Out of this place," Aza says. "She was taken away, north and inland."

The feeling, the hope, is a heavy cream now, and it sinks down to my stomach.

"Did you follow her?" I ask.

Aza finally descends in a blanketing mist.

"She was ill, but she wouldn't call me."

I reach out a finger. At the edge of Aza's smoky garments is a pepper of cool rain. Her face is placid, still water. "Spirits need calling," Aza says. "That's the last I saw of her."

I ball my hand into a fist and rub it against my stomach: It aches with cold.

"You knew she needed you," I say, and wish I hadn't. My hope gone rancid, bubbling up to eat at the back of my tongue like acid.

What I don't say: *You did nothing.*

Aza is sharp and beautiful in the darkness. She looks away from me, beyond the brick walls, and her profile, for one perfect moment, is my mother's. She seems near, near in the night, and longing clangs through me.

"Yes," Aza says. "Sleep."

I turn to my side, wondering how cold can soothe one moment and sear the next.

THEY MAKE US WASH in a trough before they dress us in sack dresses, all the same color brown. They take the first woman away midmorning while we are crouching in the low, dark building. When the first woman returns, she stumbles into the room before slinking into a corner. She refuses to speak, even when the other women crowd her, asking after her. Men come to the door and take us away, one at a time, calling us by name: Sara, Marie, Elizabeth, Aliya, Annis.

When the white man, featureless in the blotted-out doorway, calls me, I follow him into the bright, hot day. The slave pen is dusty and barren, but over the gate that separates us from the outside, the treetops lining the street sway.

Clouds, with the underbellies of doves, float in the sky. The horses roped to poles shuffle and neigh. Men's voices tangle into one rope, loop around me, squeeze. I can't breathe. The white man leads me through the door of the grand building that the Georgia Man entered yesterday, but the Georgia Man is gone. There is a fireplace and a mantel inside, candlesticks to light the room, glowing before mirrors edged in gold. There is a desk, a table with ornate scrolling at the corners, and high-backed wooden chairs. There are five white men, clean-clothed, their hair smashed flat in indents left by the hats they've hung at the door. They are white-whiskered, tall and short, paunchy and lean, pale. They wear watch fobs. Their teeth gleam in the candlelight.

"Come here, girl," says the shortest and paunchiest of them. He is red at the edges: his hands, his hairline, his cheeks all mottled red, as if he has slashed some animal's throat and been splashed with blood. Another white man, lean and bald, stands next to him.

"Good gait," the short man says. "Bright eyes."

"She looks healthy enough, given you feed her," says the lean man to his paperwork.

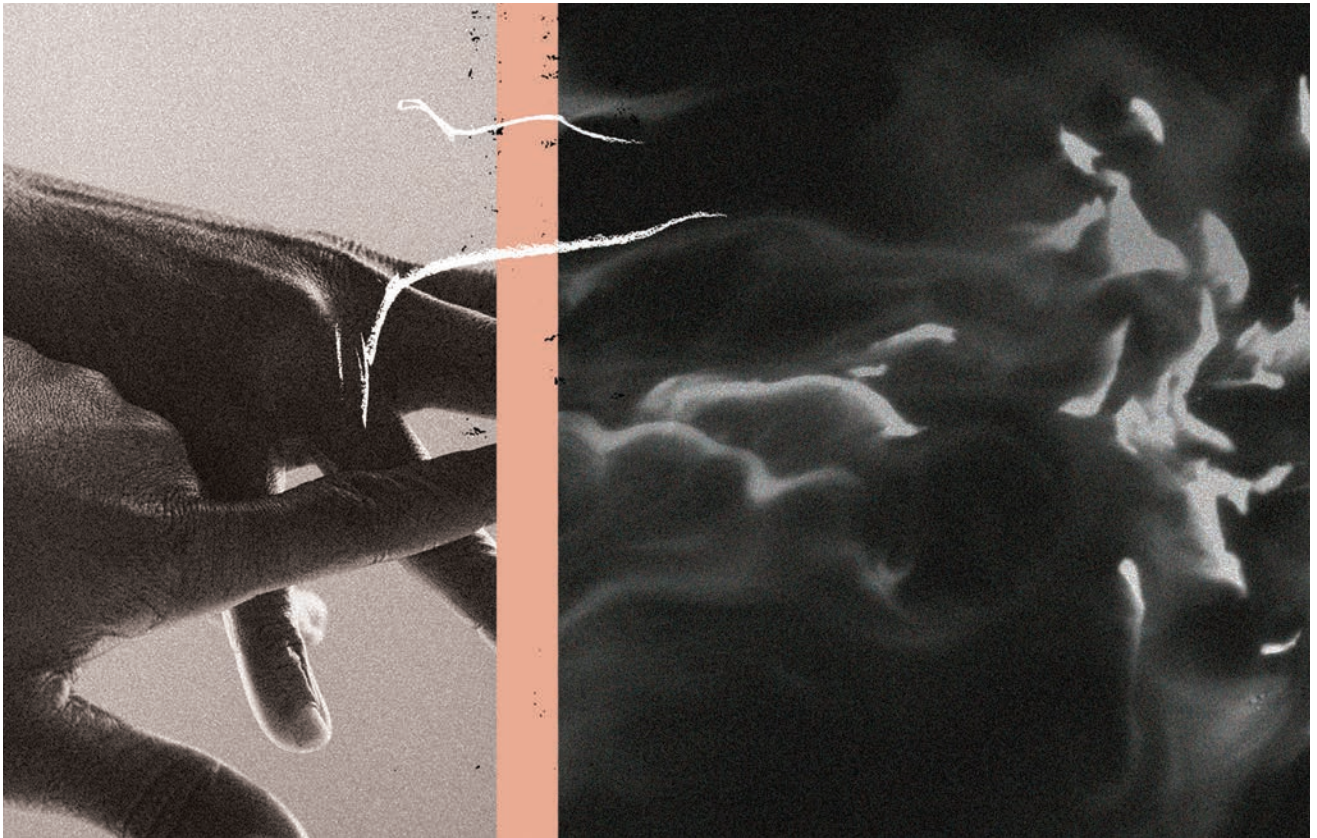
"As I will," the short man says.

The lean man scribbles and talks over his shoulder.

"Take her in."

"Yes, sir," a voice says, and it is only then that I notice the brown woman, her hair covered and wrapped, her eyes on the floor, who stands from her seat and walks toward us, her shirt and skirt loose and plain. She puts out her hand to me but doesn't take mine, and she turns, expecting me to follow her, before disappearing through a small door. The men are all watching me, but they say nothing. Inside, there is a low table with a stained cloth on it. I don't want to go anywhere near it, but she points and says, "Please, sit." I perch on the edge so the wood cuts into my legs.

"That's the doctor, and he's going to examine you. Ensure you're healthy, and if something wrong, he'll treat it." She talks, but she looks beyond me, as if there is another me behind me, floating mid-air, ascending through the ceiling. *Aza*, I think. *Aza, you said you would stay.*



“You understand? Nod if you understand.”

I look at her, right at her: the splash of freckles across her high forehead, the mole at the side of her nose, the crooked set of her canine teeth.

“You understand,” she says.

Aza, I think. This woman free. Who spare her?

The doctor walks in.

“Undress,” the woman says.

Aza, look, I think. Look at her.

I pull my sack dress over my head. I swallow a small sound when the air touches my skin with a chill hand.

Aza. There is a shimmering at the side of my eye.

“He’s a doctor,” the woman says. She glances toward me and her eyes stick for a moment, and then she looks away. Shame like a frown on her. “He’ll ... examine you,” she whispers, and she looks past her folded hands and down to her feet.

Aza, I think. Please.

The waxy string bean of a doctor walks in and measures: height, hands, feet, waist, legs, arms, and head. He looks in my

open mouth, my ears, peers into my eyes. I jump when he palms my skull, presses down onto the plates of my head, rubs across my closed eyes. I keep them shut when his hand works its way from my crown to my neck and crawls downward, a walnut-knuckled, pale spider.

“Delicate features from some admixture. She shows no marks from childbearing. Slender waist,” the doctor murmurs. “And wide hips.” The head-wrapped woman scribbles his notes, her gaze fixed to the page. “Would probably sell best as a fancy girl,” he says. I imagine myself like Aza, floating above the head-wrapped woman, above the doctor, above the little worms of pain burrowing into me with the doctor’s fingers as he works them over me, into me, into sleeves and pockets ever more tender, even softer. But knowing that my mama endured this, and worse, snaps me back, back into my body. For all the fighting she knew, she prized, she could not rebuke this.

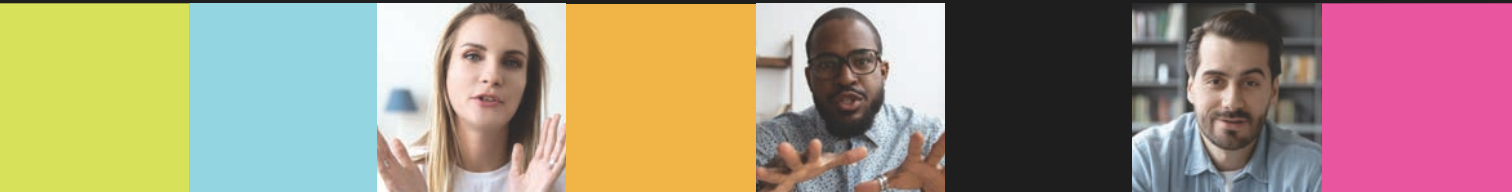
Oh, Mama.

ONE OF THE MEN leads me back to the low brick building. It is hot and close,

and I want to warn Phyllis before she follows the same man back out, tell her of the woman, the thin doctor, his stabbing hands. But I can’t. I sit next to her and hug myself, every part of me wet: my head, my face, down the middle of my shoulder blades, my stomach, my wrists, between my legs where the doctor probed, and down to my red, open feet. I lean into the wall. I squint against the sharp threads of daylight coming in at the seams; there are etchings in the brick. Some letters. A shape that looks like a sun. And further down, a straight long line with a little triangle across the top. I touch it, trace it; it looks like a spear. I wonder if my mother might have carved this, put her mark here since she could never write her name.

I wonder if she left this for me.

When Phyllis returns, she tilts to a fall next to me. Her sobs, soft as they are, come out of her like pulled teeth. I wait for her to still, and then I take the ivory awl from my hair, from where it is hidden in my scalp, from where I have worn it every day since my mother was taken, and



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I scrape into the wall next to the mark that could be my mother's. I scratch a circle, draw a straight line down the center of it, and then draw a little oval on one side of the circle, and on the other side, another: wings. When I squint, it could be a bee.

WE ARE AWAKE when the next white man comes to the squat building, unlocks the door, and directs us into the courtyard, where he lines us up before the seller, the short blotchy man laden with gold over his big-knuckled hands. The doctor stands off to the side with the woman who looks like us. Phyllis, next to me, crosses her arms over her stomach, as if she could protect her soft parts, those parts not bound by bone. The woman at the end of the line is short, shorter than most of us but muscled where the rest of us are thin as ribbon. The seller stands in front of the first woman and reaches out, grabbing her face.

"You a full hand. If a buyer asks, you say, 'Yes, sir.'"

The doctor writes.

"Don't, and you'll be lashed. Understand?"

The woman trembles, shivering like a horse run too long. Then she nods. The seller moves down the line, studies each woman's arms, fingers, legs, and back before speaking. "You a lady's maid," he tells a woman with one drooping eye. "You a prime hand," he tells the big woman. "You a sick nurse," he tells another who lurches with a limp. "You a child's nurse," he tells another with knotted hair falling down her back. "You a cook," he tells the one whom the walk didn't pare to nothing. "You a seamstress," he tells Phyllis. She doesn't even nod; her chin falls into her chest.

"And you ..." He brushes one knuckle up my arm. "You don't speak," he says. "The buyers'll know."

He echoes the doctor, telling me that I am a fancy girl, my only worth between my legs.

A finger of fog curls over his head, encircles it, and grows fat. Aza rises from it. She shines in the sun: river water lit from above. Her arms hang loosely from her sides, and her mouth moves.

"See," Aza says, and points to the seller's back, where there is a flame, narrow as a candle, in the air. The thief moves to the

*"She is the witness
to your suffering,
to all suffering,"
Aza says. "She
witnesses and
remembers. That
is her power."*

next woman, speaks to her, but his words are muffled. The flame blooms to a fire. A molten head rises from it, then shoulders, then a torso, then a blazing gown. The face turns dark, and a nose appears, then a mouth, and then eyes. The spirit's hair is a conflagration. Her head and shoulders crackle with definition, her visage a log fire, banked and blackened. Hovering over the man, over all of us, is a smoldering cloud of a woman, a burning spirit.

"See," Aza says. "She Who Remembers."

The seller steps to the next woman in our sad line and tells her how she will be sold.

The blazing spirit flexes her arms, which have turned black as her face. The seams in the wood of her forearms curl and move, form lines, form script. The fire at her heart slides into words. These words flow up her arms, over the hills of her shoulders, and into the valley of her black, black mouth.

"She is the witness to your suffering, to all suffering," Aza says. "She witnesses and remembers. That is her power."

The other spirit crackles and spits embers as the accounting scrolls up her arms, over her face, her whole body, only to disappear and make way for more as the women of our line nod at their narratives.

"This world makes us all anew. Calls new spirits, feeds the old. Gives us followers, offerings," Aza says. "Us a piece," she says.

I clench my hands, as if I could choke the seller's words back into his mouth, back down his throat. I look over the other women in the line, past Aza, to the spirit who remembers. She looks back, her gaping mouth swallowing the last word, and smoke rises from her. There, the smell of an old fire, an ancient fire, a fire prodded and fed and blazed and stoked for generations. I wish I could speak; I want to ask Aza: *What she going to do with it? What her remembering going to do?* Aza's fog obscures her hands, her arms, her gown, her neck, until all of her is wreathed, and with a crack, she disappears. She Who Remembers looks down at me, and her legs disintegrate, then her hips, her torso, her arms, and last, her face, all of it raining ash.

I would bury the awl in this short man's eye. *A*

Jesmyn Ward is the author of four novels. This story was adapted from her most recent, Let Us Descend, published in October.

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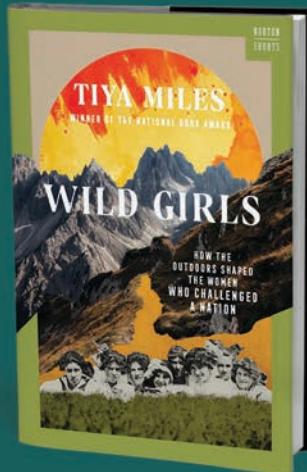
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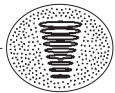
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ACROSS

- 1 Vehicle like a Nissan or a Honda
- 4 Furniture for sleeping
- 7 Time travel forward at the normal speed
- 8 ____ the day (have a ton of regrets)
- 9 Egg ____ (holiday quaff)
- 10 Anger
- 11 "Shining" protection for a knight
- 13 Digging
- 15 Information for a statistician
- 19 High-end tablet you might use an Apple Pencil with
- 20 Fortune
- 21 Cookie created to imitate a Hydrox
- 22 So-called betrayer of the Church of England
- 24 Sissy played her in *Coal Miner's Daughter*
- 25 Cause of some pleasant tingling, briefly
- 26 Initial cutter at a mill
- 30 Issue
- 31 Horndogs of myth
- 32 "____ you"
- 33 Union buster?
- 36 Flier to Seeb
- 37 Small volume, briefly
- 38 "2 busy 2 text"
- 39 He played the Sam of "Play it, Sam"

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SOLUTIONS, VISIT:

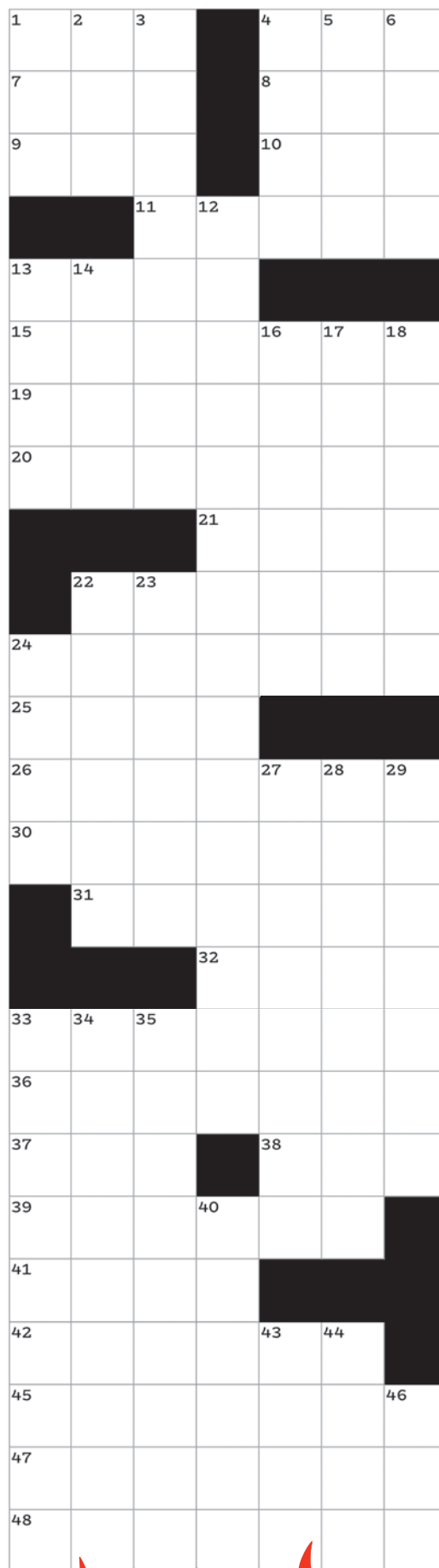


TheAtlantic.com/inferno

- 41 A ____ perro con ese hueso ("You can't fool me!")
- 42 Hit music?
- 45 Bad space for a DJ set?
- 47 First name in pop?
- 48 Young pop fan, perhaps?

DOWN

- 1 "Yes, we ____" (2008 Obama slogan)
- 2 In the past
- 3 Yacht races
- 4 Edge of a fedora, say
- 5 Currency that replaced the peseta, the mark, and the lira
- 6 Does or bucks
- 12 2002 Newman-Hanks drama about a mob enforcer
- 13 "Already accomplished that!"
- 14 Where a mullet may rest
- 16 Joie de vivre
- 17 First name in terse, masculine fiction
- 18 Maker of the world's all-time best-selling car
- 22 Impersonate
- 23 Fleeting association?
- 24 1939 co-star of Garland, Haley, and Bolger
- 27 Make some biting opening remarks?
- 28 Awful act
- 29 Ford feature?
- 33 Speaking elliptically?
- 34 Party line?
- 35 Aesthetic that features '90s graphic design
- 40 Stow the equipment
- 43 Keeping it requires staying cool
- 44 A milli milli-
- 46 Unconscious cycle, briefly





For the 257 million women with no access to contraception, unwanted pregnancies can lead to desperate choices.

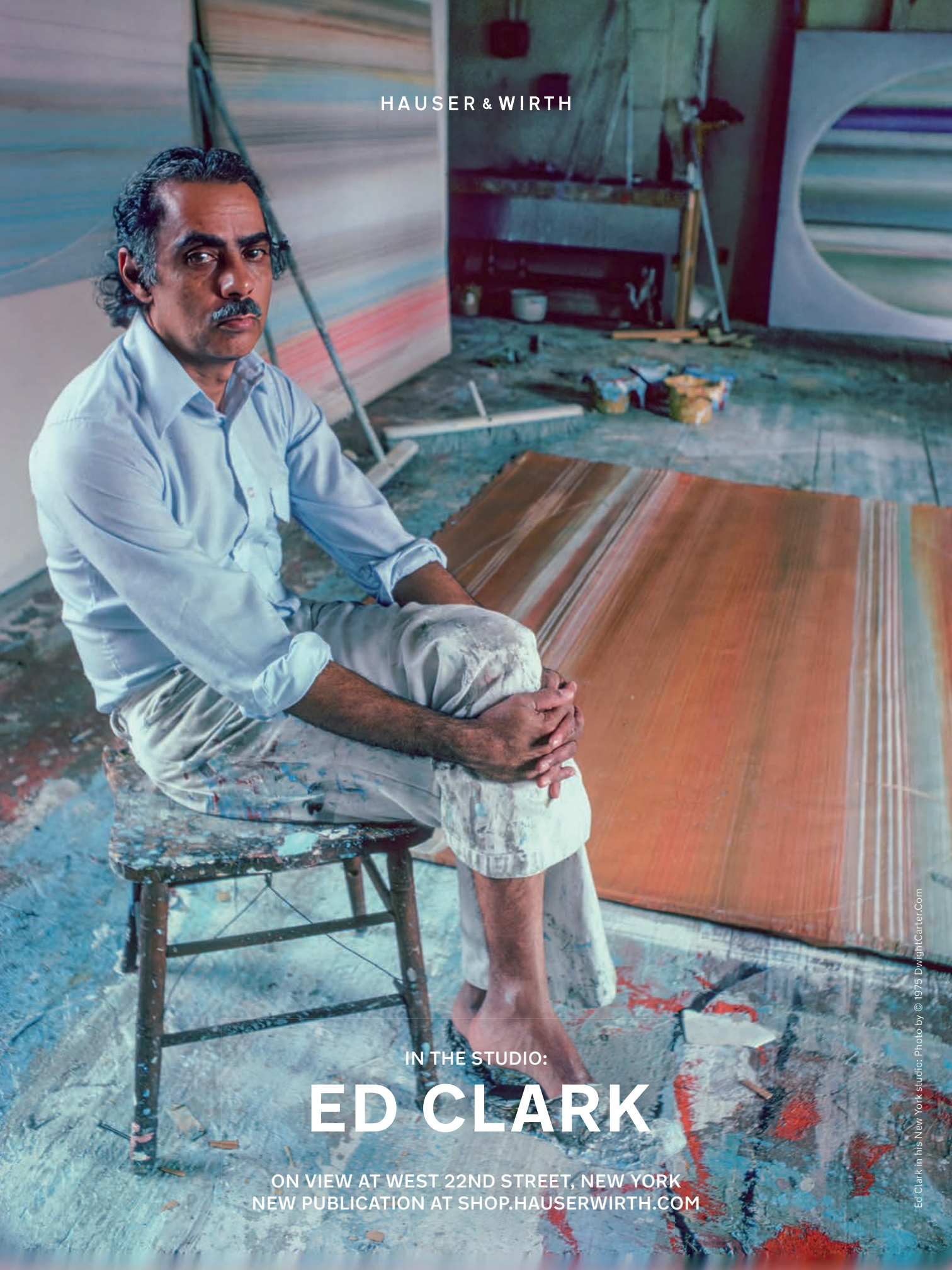
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A photograph of Ed Clark in his New York studio. He is a middle-aged man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and light-colored trousers. He is sitting on a wooden stool, looking directly at the camera. The studio is filled with large-scale abstract paintings, some leaning against the wall and others on the floor. The floor is covered in paint splatters and brushes. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the paint and the man's features.

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